

GABROVO: TRENDS IN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.



EXCHANGE OF **CULTURAL** LIFE-LONG SUPPORT
TRADITION EXPERIENCES INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING
SOCIAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION SUSTAINABLE

1. Context

When one analyses the culture of a town, it makes sense to start with its citizens, the people who have chosen to share its good or bad spaces, to be a part of the processes to change it... The analyst wants to find out how many of them participate in the culture life – as actors or as audience? What kind of specific products do they need? Are there established findings showing an interesting peculiarity of the locals, and which should be taken into consideration? We will begin precisely with this point:

According to several different statistics, Bulgaria is among the highest-ranking countries in terms of having the unhappiest population in the world. Scientists have recently drawn a map of happiness, in which Bulgarians are the grumpiest Europeans. It turns out that Gabrovo is the global capital of humour and a geographical centre of one of the saddest countries in the world. This could probably explain why satire is a cultural approach in Gabrovo – it includes both laughter and tears... Therefore, the people of Gabrovo are grumbles with a sense of humour and this is confirmed by the specifics of Gabrovo humour – a mixture of self-irony and a way of thinking based on frugality and the skill to survive under difficult conditions.

A paradox or a challenge?



If we attempt to apply the happiness index (Bhutan's national pride) here, under these local conditions, what would the results be? Is there an index of happiness acquired by consuming “x” amount of cultural life? Could culture make people happier and improve their quality of life? How long would they smile? How often would they do it? Could culture fill in the gap opened by material problems? Could it bring back pride and dignity? Is there a study on this issue?

Somewhere here we discover the value added: culture + social integration, culture + education, culture + transformed urban spaces. Perhaps these relations create some of the most sustainable hybrid urban models for “better,” “cleaner,” “healthier,” “better educated,” and probably - “happier” people...

Another layer of facts: if the money-happiness ratio is leading in this ranking, and this seems logical, however these rankings are global and the people of Latin America are among the happiest people, although they are definitely not the richest. It is exactly in this “aha” and the three dots that follow it that the Culture factor is hidden: as a way of thinking and self-expression, as well as an attitude towards life. Enjoying life is also a part of a nation's culture, the way we perceive the world and people, especially the way we express it.

This is why the fact that grumbling Gabrovo being on the team of Pilot cities for the new Agenda 21, along with the happy Latin Americans, is particularly interesting and symbolic. This selection can be seen as a Cultural experiment. Why not?

Another of those curious non-random things is the fact that the President of Brazil (one of the happiest countries in the world) – Dilma Rousseff has Gabrovo roots, as her father came from Gabrovo. These are just some small discoveries...

THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN GABROVO WOULD BE SYMBOLIC FOR THE SYSTEM OF CITIES, WHICH HAVE SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEMS.

2. Gabrovo and culture

Gabrovo is the geographic centre of Bulgaria, located within the central area of the Balkan Mountains. Population is about 56,000 people and there are 133 villages in the surrounding area, which boast an impressive natural environment. In fact, the nature of this mountainous region is the nuance that softens up the town's features, turning industrial inhospitality of the neighbourhoods into dimensions with good potential, while the cultural life happens within this naturally green, bubbling and flowing environment. The mountain and the river are important as parts of the town's history, being closely related to its emergence centuries ago, while today the nature is translated in the language of cultural life in the form of messages and practices for an environment-friendly and healthy way of life and thinking.

Other important markers of Gabrovo's cultural life are: the crafts and traditions, the industry, the humour and satire. One of the most significant crafts centres in Bulgaria was located here during the 18th and 19th century, and the spirit of traditional Bulgarian crafts has been preserved even today. The architectural ethnographic complex “Etara” is a genuine reservation of old Bulgarian crafts, where experienced master craftsmen create art and try to pass it on to the younger generations. An attractive

place near Gabrovo is the village of Bozhentsi – recognised as an architectural and historical reservation. It has preserved the authentic atmosphere of the 18th and 19th century, the village is a natural scene for various cultural events related to Bulgarian folklore.

In the beginning of the 20th century Gabrovo was referred to as the Bulgarian Manchester due to its apogee as an industrial centre, and today this is a part of history that the people of Gabrovo are proud of, as they accept culture as a contemporary form of industry. At some point in history the town was dubbed the “Capital of humour and satire,” due to another cultural fact – the unique Gabrovo humour: a trademark of outlook, which blends self-irony, inventiveness, a particular approach to survival and

attitude towards other people. The frugality of the people of Gabrovo has been immortalised in the numerous Gabrovo anecdotes that the citizens of Gabrovo are famous for throughout Bulgaria. Every year, in the month of May, the town is host to the traditional Carnival of humour and satire, preceded by the Festival of satire. Today, the traditions of Gabrovo humour are interwoven with new, innovative forms of satirical art: festivals, performances, etc.

THE TOWN IS OPEN TO THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD CULTURE TO THOSE DIMENSIONS, WHERE THE FREEDOM TO EXPRESS ONESELF AND CHOOSE THE WAY TO DO IT ON YOUR OWN IS UNCONDITIONAL, TOWARDS OPPORTUNITIES, IN WHICH SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES ARE INTERTWINED INTO A SOLID NETWORK THAT GIVES PEOPLE TRULY VALUABLE PRODUCTS.

3. Basic principles

The conducting of cultural policy in the Municipality of Gabrovo is based on several key principles that the local authorities are focused on defending in the different programmes and projects they implement:

- Equal access to culture
- Cultural variety
- Using public spaces as cultural spaces
- Transparency of information and public participation in the formation of cultural policy
- Preservation of tangible and intangible cultural legacy
- Stimulation of civil and private initiatives aimed at variety and quality of cultural projects

The vision of the Gabrovo municipality with regard to culture for the next 10 years has been reflected in a Strategy for the Development of Culture in the Municipality of Gabrovo (2014 – 2024) that was passed by the Municipal Council of the town of Gabrovo in 2014. While preparing the strategy, a number of meetings were held with various representatives of cultural life in Gabrovo, representatives of local governance, municipal structures, NGO's, artists, citizens... The principle of public participation has been fully kept in the formation of cultural policy. The drawing up of the Strategy expresses Gabrovo Municipality's aspiration towards sustainability and recognising culture and cultural industries, cultural tourism, education and science as an important factor for the development of Gabrovo and the region throughout the next ten years.

The leading goal of the strategy is the long-term development of Gabrovo as an influential national and international platform for contemporary arts. The goals set by the Strategy before the town caused major disputes among the cultural community – some considered it to be way too ambitious, while others supported its high goals and expectations. The mere fact that there was a debate and various reactions



was an indication that culture is a factor in Gabrovo, with the expectation that culture will be at the heart of the town's development.

Main highlights

Within the period from 2014 to 2024, the cultural sector within the Municipality of Gabrovo will be developed as a hospitable environment for education, experimentation, and innovation in the field of art and culture, with an emphasis on education, active exchange of experience, information and good practices at a local, national and international.

- The vision for long-term development of Gabrovo Municipality includes cultural initiatives with international content, participation, dimension, value and audiences, which:
 - would support the town's cultural and economic development;
 - would propose a sustainable mechanism for the stimulation of youth employment; to stimulate the development of cultural tourism as well as the cultural and creative industries in the region.
- Gabrovo is to develop as a national centre for education, exchange and innovations in the field of contemporary art and cultural management, and also as an international centre for performing on the independent stage. Some of the primary strategic objectives:
 - Upgrading and developing Gabrovo's image as the Capital of humour and satire, updating and filling the town's trademark with contemporary and high-quality content;
 - Gabrovo is to become the largest national centre for young artists from the whole world;
 - The town may develop as a preferred place for the audiences of contemporary arts in the Balkan region and a major cultural centre on a European scale.

WE BELIEVE THAT CULTURE COULD BE AN ACCELERATOR FOR THE TRANSFORMING PROCESSES IN A CITY, AND THE RESULTS CAN BE MEASURABLE WITH HIGH DEGREES, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE INDEX OF HAPPINESS.

4. Agenda 21 for culture and pilot city

Including Gabrovo as a Pilot city of culture in the programme oriented towards the new Agenda 21 carries a definitive message – the town is open to the challenges of contemporary world culture to those dimensions, where the freedom to express oneself and choose the way to do it on your own is unconditional, towards opportunities, in which social, economic, ecological and cultural practices are intertwined into a solid network that gives people truly valuable products. There is also an exhibited readiness to overcome the remnants of an encapsulated system of templates, which is what culture was during the communist era, in order to create a well-functioning ecosystem of principles and methods, in which the password for success would be the unification of people, ideas and opportunities in a contact network of mutual relationships.

Culture in the context of some local specific issues

In the whole world, culture is viewed in the context of global changes, various crises (economic, demographic, political), which pose important questions before society. It is different and specific in the

various points of the world. This is why the principles of Agenda 21 have different interpretations and are encountered along with a number of local problems in the various countries and cities. Some specific problems that culture in Gabrovo has yet to address:

- **Demographic decline**

The negative population growth and the leaving of people between 18 and 40 years of age is the primary problem of Municipality Gabrovo. Apart from the necessity for visible changes in the economic sector and the creation of good opportunities for young people, it is important for the cultural sector to realise its role as an instrument for solving the town's economic and demographic problems. The strategy for developing culture within the Gabrovo municipality (2014 – 2024) reviews this relationship as a strong, from which the vision for the development of the culture in the town of Gabrovo throughout the next ten years is drawn.

- **Urban spaces and buildings**

The pre-fabricated concrete neighbourhoods and buildings, built during the communist era, determine the town's appearance to a great extent as a problem, which is to be remedied with an adequate solution. Any such resolution would cost resources – time and money, yet this is where a culture space can form: artistic concepts for buildings, façades, streets, neighbourhoods could turn this problem into a platform for modern art, and in certain projects the citizens themselves could participate in the transformation of these spaces. Actually, the issue of the poor architectural heritage exists in many cities and countries, and it should be reviewed at a higher level as a serious reason for applying models, good practices and sustainable solutions.



- **Transition between contrast cultures**

Similarly to the unsightly grey façades, there are also façades of human thought and attitude towards culture. Template models of aesthetics and cultural values in art are unacceptable. Perhaps the most important change, which is happening to an extent yet still has much work to be done, is related to the people. Cultural experts, managers of cultural institutes, cultural agents should be broad-minded persons, open to the contemporary forms of culture and understanding the messages that they bear. This is related to the need for conceptual changes, of entirely new visions for existing cultural products.

- **The sad streets...**

They are colourful and noisy in May. This is the time of the festival of humour and satire, which concludes with a carnival. People come from near and from far, the hotels and establishments are filled, the neighbourhoods come to life. And then they leave. Long ago, someone decided to dub Gabrovo “the capital of humour and satire.” And it still is nowadays. The truth, however, is that humour and the good mood are missing in daily life, in the small things. We realise that this symbol of Gabrovo should be visible, the art of satire is to be displayed in a tangible form within external and internal spaces, on the

level of valuable cultural products. In order to accomplish this goal, we could undoubtedly rely on international cultural cooperation, our cooperation as a Pilot city – Culture 21, and the active work of the local authorities, NGO's, cultural agents, artists and citizens towards affirming the principles of Agenda 21 would surely help make this happen.

- **Lack of good communication**

There is no common language and methodology for communication between the participants in cultural life and the local authorities, as well as among themselves. This necessitates coming up with an efficient system for communication, to unify the good potential of people, ideas and opportunities. The need for achieving such synergy determines the emphases, which should be leading in cultural practices and policies throughout the next few years.

THE VISION FOR LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT OF GABROVO MUNICIPALITY INCLUDES CULTURAL INITIATIVES WITH INTERNATIONAL CONTENT, PARTICIPATION, DIMENSION, VALUE AND AUDIENCES, WHICH WOULD SUPPORT THE TOWN'S CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PROPOSE A SUSTAINABLE MECHANISM FOR THE STIMULATION OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT.

Pilot city

As a Pilot city, which embraces the principles of Agenda 21, we set a priority goal consisting of the following primary tasks:

- Place culture in the centre – as a major factor for the town's sustainable development
- Provide as many people as possible with access to culture
- Work purposefully for the improvement of the relations between the Municipality and all participants in cultural life. This relationship could be highlighted as the primary factor for the occurrence of quality changes. Creation of a methodology for communication between local authorities and the participants in cultural life.
- Work in the neighbourhoods: support for quality cultural projects aimed at the neighbourhoods of Gabrovo, as well as the areas surrounding the town
- Constructive dialogue with local artists:
- Working as a network: creating different focus dynamic networks of artists, cultural routes, products, relations between neighbourhoods, villages.
- Stimulation of international relations and programmes in the field of culture, including attraction of external artists who would dedicate themselves to the town and help deal with the various challenges that it faces.
- Focusing on the relationship between culture and urban planning. Imposing culture as an important factor in the transformation of the common space.
- Achieving a balance in cultural policy between public and private participation.
- Stimulation of the creation and proliferation of cultural goods and services. Affirming culture as an important factor for the town's economic development.
- Viewing villages as a cultural factor, including them in the planning and conducting of cultural policy
- Fostering innovation and affirming Gabrovo as one of the Intelligent Cities
- Stimulation of programmes and practices for the fostering of reading and distribution of books
- Effective measures for the improvement of urban cohabitation
- Direct connection between natural wonders and culture. The mountain and the river – an important marker in the town's life and culture.

5. Good practices

„Welcome to the village“

Short description: Youths (ages 15 to 29) from Gabrovo, who are not familiar with rural life, would go and live for a week at the houses of elderly men and women “for rent” in a Gabrovo village. Symbolically, the



youths are grandchildren “for hire,” while the hosts are grandparents for rent. Within a week they share their lives, the youths live at these homes and learn much about life in the village and about their roots. They take part in the work in the field, preparation of food at home, house chores, listening to songs and tales from the local folklore, and most importantly – being close to one's grandma and grandpa for rent and living like a real family, in which everyone is engaged with the joys and plights of the others. Goals:

- Real connection and exchange of experience between the generations.
- Stimulating tolerance, understanding and interaction between them.
- Promoting Bulgarian traditions and customs among the young
- Social integration
- Enhancing the circulation of exchange between the town and the village. Creating a space for cooperation between the town and the village.
- Using the village as cultural space
- Forming a space for debate, which unifies public and private participants in the cultural sector
- Provoking young people's interest towards life at the village. The programme is becoming more popular and greater numbers of youths have expressed a wish to participate and apply for it.
- Cultural variety in the activities: the participants cook, sing, work, work, dance, learn specific crafts...
- Teaching young people a healthy way of life: cooking with local healthy products, protecting the environment...

The Bread house

The first Bread House was created in Gabrovo in 2009 by a woman of Gabrovo lineage. The house was the heritage of her grandmother and she decided to turn it into a cultural centre, which would unite people. Looking for a unifying symbol, she reached the insight that bread unifies people all over the world, it expresses the culture and beliefs of the various peoples. Thus was born the idea of the bread house, in which the mainly used method is the collective kneading of bread, accompanied by various forms of art and sustainable ecological education. The idea touched the hearts of many people and soon the Bread House spread throughout the whole world – a network of bread houses was created in more than 15 countries on the five continents. They are managed by trained volunteers. The bread house functions as a social enterprises – bakeries, which train and hire disadvantaged people, also serving as social-cultural centres. Goals:

- To inspire people and communities throughout the world to discover and develop their creative potential
- Foster cooperation among the participant of all ages, vocations, sexes, special needs and ethnic background.
- Bread kneading therapy
- Creating communities: local and international
- Education in universal values
- Attracting of disadvantaged people as participants in cultural life.
- Creating new cultural routes – e.g. the Road of bread
- Creation of specific cultural products: e.g. - breadcrumb theatre, drawing in flour, etc.
- Stimulation and promotion of volunteering

6. Conclusion

The accomplishment of the cultural transformation in Gabrovo would be symbolic for the system of cities, which have similar characteristics and problems. The good solutions discovered here could have their beneficial branches and help many other cities and people – in Bulgaria and outside the country. A city's transformation passes through the four dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, environmental and cultural. We face the challenge of finding the exact position of the cultural factor in Gabrovo, so that this point would balance and unite all resources from the different dimensions. We believe that culture could be an accelerator for the transforming processes in a city, and the results can be measurable with high degrees, taking into account the index of happiness. Our participation as a *Pilot city of culture* and the passing of the new Agenda 21 is an important step in precisely this direction: working as a network, we will have the opportunity to re-draw the geographic map of contemporary culture, and along with it – of happiness.

7. Other information

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Social network: Website: <http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org/>

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4c0sTBfMiA>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4kOIGcfd9M#t=132>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Priemimenaselo?fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/BreadHousesNetwork?fref=ts>