

Politicians' Attitude to Widening Cultural Participation

This is the edited version of the written and oral contribution of Péter Inkei at the Warsaw Forum, held on 4-6 September, 2018. The organisers expected a ten-minute response to the question: What is the role of cultural policymakers in widening participation and promoting cultural democracy?

The attitudes are defined by the context: time and place, as well as the policymakers' overarching agenda. This latter – basic values and priorities – can fundamentally define the role and weight of culture: think of enlightened liberal policymakers and their zealously nationalist counterparts, to name just two extremes.

With regard to time, it is not without lessons if one recalls the heyday of widening participation: the cultural revolution in the early Stalinist era in east Europe.

As to place: the share of people who claimed at Special Eurobarometer 399 not to have done any culture in the previous year ranged from 23% in Denmark to 84% in Bulgaria. Widening participation means something quite different in places with a large urbanised established middle class than in rural depression areas.

As to the motivation: why would politicians decide on supporting the widening of cultural participation? I do not mean those – culture ministers, vice-mayors in charge of culture etc. – whose job description contains the issue but the ulterior decision makers: prime ministers, mayors, MPs etc. Politicians, for whom every decision must fit into broader agendas, including – if not above all – the decision's effect on chances at the following election.

- a) In our pragmatic age the widening of cultural participation is associated with the quality of the population, above all as contributor to growth and competitiveness. Indeed, attendance usually correlates with the GDP. Culture is a vehicle of modernisation.
- b) Culture enhances the feeling of commonality. Shared emotional experiences strengthen cohesion in the society.
- c) Furthermore, policymakers are encouraged by the actors in the sector, driven by idealism and existential interest. The existing institutions and infrastructure also call for fuller use.
- d) Beyond these utilitarian goals, the policymakers are driven by the wish to extend the gratification by culture to those who are partly or fully uninitiated. In other words, they want to shape them as much as possible in their own image. Altruism and/or narcissism of those inside towards the excluded.

My experience and conviction is that indeed this fourth motive guides policy makers best in their decisions. The proofs and arguments about culture's economic and social impact may influence their choice but rather as factors that justify and legitimise decisions. Next to (or instead of) rational assessment of the instrumental value of broadening participation in culture, politicians' instinctive and emotional attitude – somewhat ironically – favours the position of intrinsic culture.

Coming down to those inside: cultural decision makers and operators overwhelmingly share this last dimension of motivation. They deeply believe in the benefits that culture offers to every individual; that culture – among others – conveys self-confidence, comfort and ultimately security to everyone. And here is the crux of widening cultural participation. With the wrong content or approach, discomfort and alienation can come about. This might produce backlash – as is part of the explanation of the advances of populism in our days. The recognition of this risk has led to applying the tools of cultural democracy, with increased empathy and tolerance, complementing the conventional strategies of the democratisation of culture.