

CULTURAL POLICY BAROMETER

PROFILES DRAWN FROM PERCEIVED HINDRANCES

Report about the trial phase

What are the main characteristics of the cultural life in a country? Which are the strengths and the weaknesses? (Yes, and the opportunities and threats...) What kind of cultural policy model prevails?

The search for answers takes various forms. Comparing statistics is one way, probably the simplest. The Compendium programme does so in an on-going manner. Eurostat publishes aggregations of national statistics every now and then. Eurobarometer has just released its latest survey on cultural access and participation. The American Arts Index inspires the quest for similar indicators in Europe.

All these are large projects, requiring considerable resources. The relatively simple instrument that the Budapest Observatory has been testing is modelled from a similarly huge exercise, the Global Competitiveness Index of the World Economic Forum. In it, besides juggling with a myriad of statistics, a small survey with businesspeople is also included. That was the model for putting the question to “culture-people” in various countries: “What are the most problematic factors for culture in your country?”

Does a quiz like this lead to interesting, meaningful answers about the conditions of culture – about culture’s ecosystem – in various places? Our survey hopes to get the answer.

Twenty-five plagues

Graph One shows the 25 “problematic factors” in the order of frequency according to 88 subscribers to the BO newsletter.

The 25 statements were not selected by the logic of deducing from a system. They were chosen in a brainstorming fashion. Colours in the graphs nevertheless express that some of the factors can be grouped into clusters.

An important aim of this round was to test the 25 factors. Which of them help best identify the main cultural policy symptoms in a country (or group of countries)? Which should be formulated differently, or replaced by other statements?

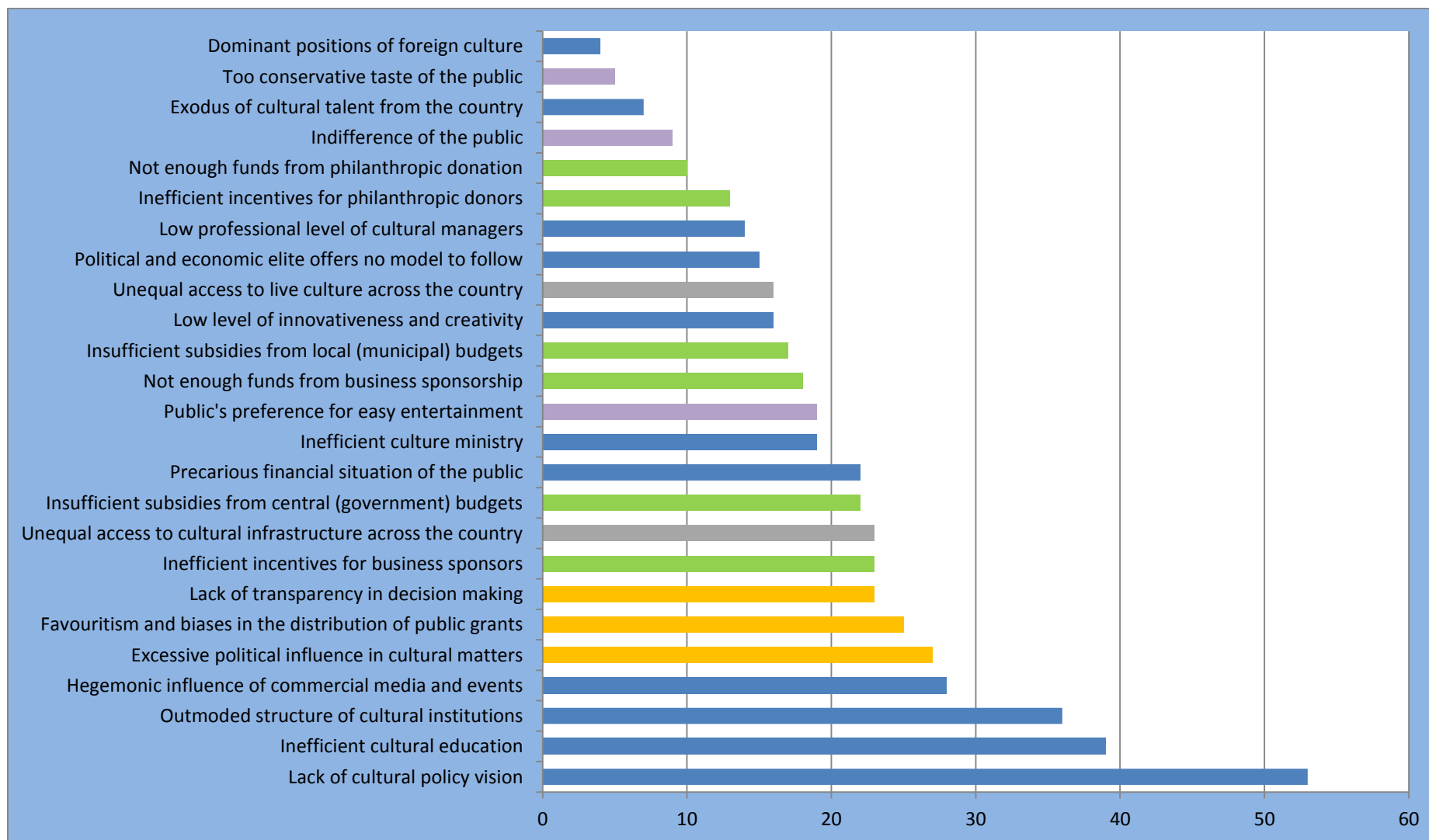
We want visions

The 88 volunteers have harvested from the problematic factors (grievances, obstacles) fairly evenly. The exception is the most favoured reference to the absence of visions. 53 responses, almost two thirds contain the plea for a vision.

What is meant by this popular desire? An abstract expression of spleen, a vague longing for a change? Waiting for clear goals? Strong guidelines? New values and authorities? Or the opposite: is this the signal of concrete determinations that the respondents hope to gain ground?

Such ambiguities would justify eliminating the item on visions. By getting rid of an obvious common place respondents’ attention would not be hijacked from harder choices. This is an open dilemma.

Graph One: The division of 25 problematic factors in the 88 responses.



Politics versus finances

Whether lack of money or lack of transparency bothers European cultural operators more? Our pilot survey has proven the second option. More numerous were the complaints about unfair political interference (in yellow on the graphs) than about the shortage of finances (in green).

Although the statements relating to politics proved to be popular, we have received suggestions that may modify them in the future. (“Excessive direct or indirect control over cultural contents and forms of expression”, and “Lack of transparent guidelines for funding opportunities”.)

With regard to the financial items, we found it strange that although public resources hugely outstrip money coming from business sponsorship across Europe, yearning for the latter pushed the relevant “factor” ahead of the complaint about culture’s weight in the central budget.

This last item was on a par with the comment on the financial situation of the public, both occurred 22 times, though rarely together, in the same response. (“Precarious” is indeed too judgemental, a more neutral adjective like unstable or difficult will be better.)

East versus west

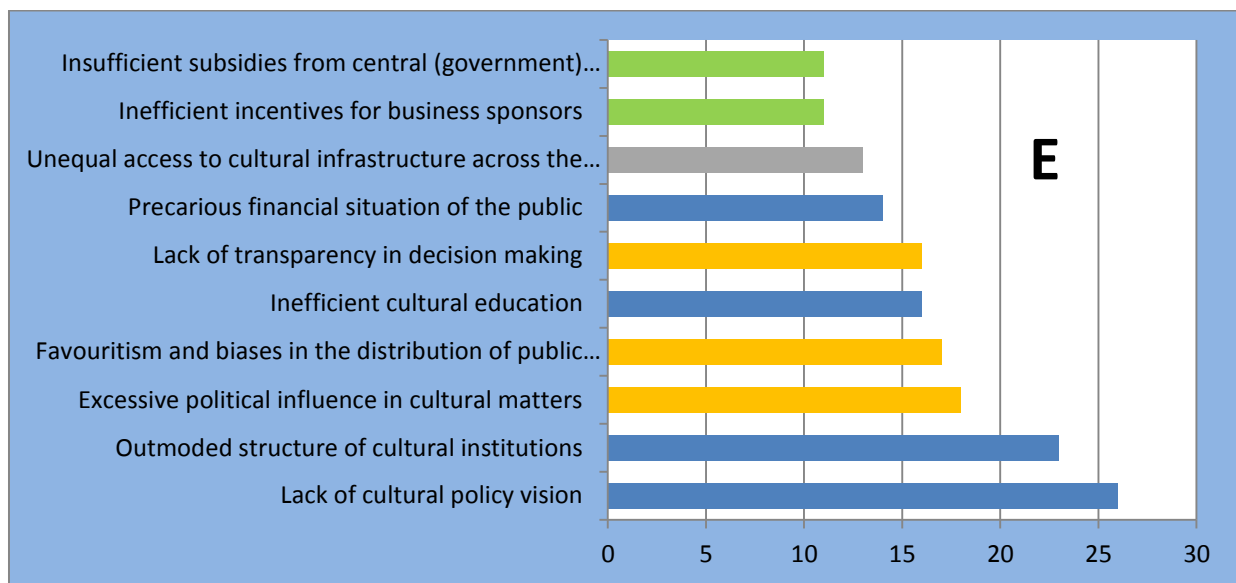
The dichotomy of politics and finances invites us to highlight the first major difference between groups of respondents, as the search for such characteristic differences is the main point anyway. Responses from “western” and “post-communist” states came in about the same number. As it was indicated in our October Memo, “eastern” colleagues (from the Black and Baltic seas to Prague) suffer from enduring political interference in cultural matters.

Political nuisances go together. There is a strong mathematical correlation between these items: if one selects a political complaint, is likely to tick one or two more of the same sort. But at the same time they clearly distinguish old and new democracies from one another. The three political factors were named on the average twice as frequently by eastern than by western respondents.

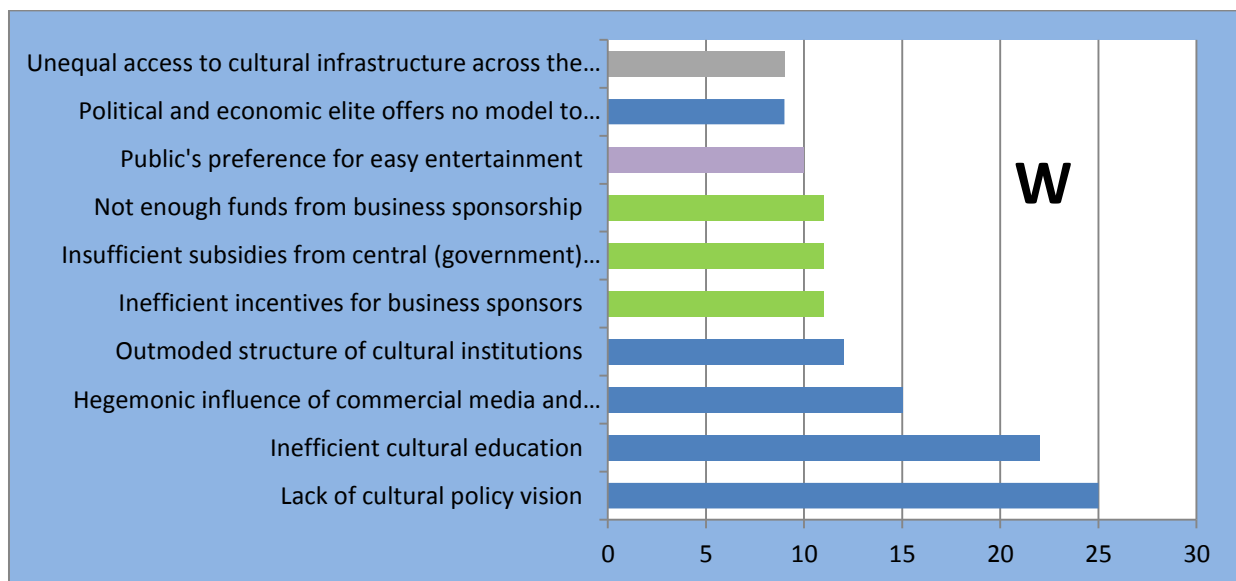
Money is the dividing issue also in the opposite sense. The two statements relating to funds from sponsorship and philanthropy were identified twice less frequently in the east than in the west. Complaints about scarcity may be loud, but there are more burning issues in our region than low level of sponsorship. Or (and), expecting help from the state has deeper roots.

There are two more items on the top list of the eastern countries that may be perceived as criticism of the cultural policies: outmoded structures and unequal access. It is the prevalence of this large cluster of political or policy related issues which conceal the fact that financial matters are of similar importance to eastern respondents as they are in the west. The absence of soring political nuisances makes financial complaints in the west appear as more disturbing than they are in the east.

Graph Two: Top ten of problematic factors in the eastern countries.



Graph Three: Top ten of problematic factors in the west.



The human condition

The place of political problems is taken by aspects of the prevailing human condition in the list of major problems in the west. The state of cultural education, the impact of commercial media and events and – in strong correlation with it – the public’s preference for easy entertainment are more direct challenges for western cultural operators than politicians’ manoeuvres.

The quality of a number of western television channels is often envied from our corners. This is why it is a surprise that the hegemonic influence of commercial media is abhorred by twice as many western respondents. If only we were not obliged to waste our votes in protest of political interference!

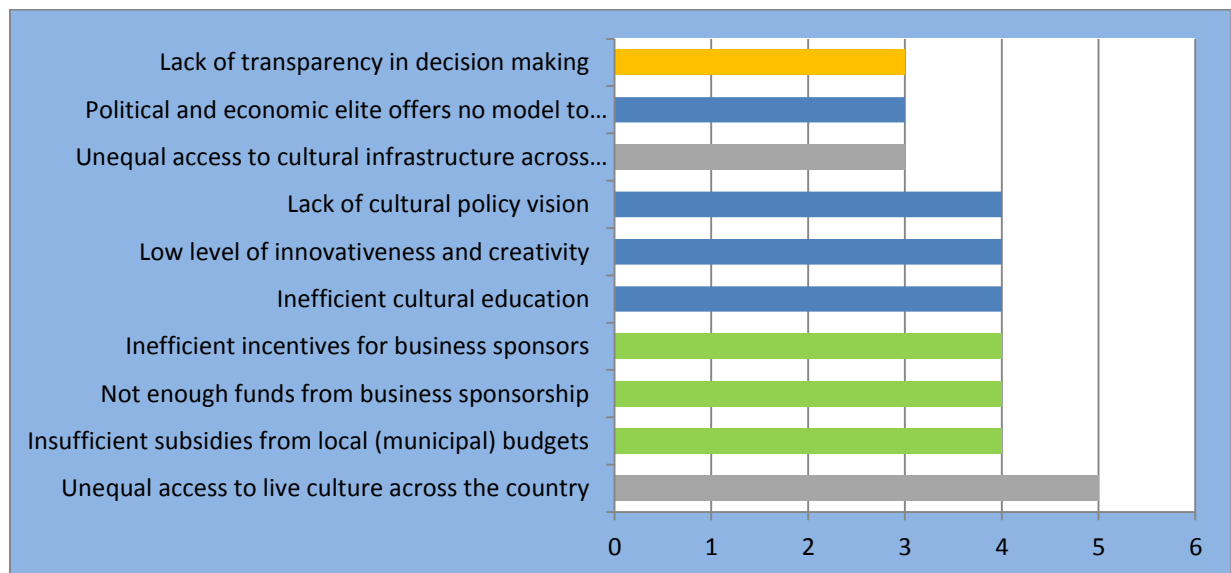
Softer kinds of statements attracted little interest. Complaints about the indifference and conservatism of the public can survive if they prove to be useful in making distinction between culture models on country level.

Northern dilemmas

There were too few responses for creating national profiles which is the real end target. Personality tests were nevertheless made about groups of countries.

The smallest group is that of the northern countries: Scandinavia and the Baltic republics. Is the profile going to be similar when more responses are gathered? Will equality (access to infrastructure and access to live productions) remain a top caveat in both formulations? Will insistence on higher level of innovativeness and creativity keep its privileged position among priorities? Some tentative answers come later in this report.

Graph Four: Top nuisances in the northern countries



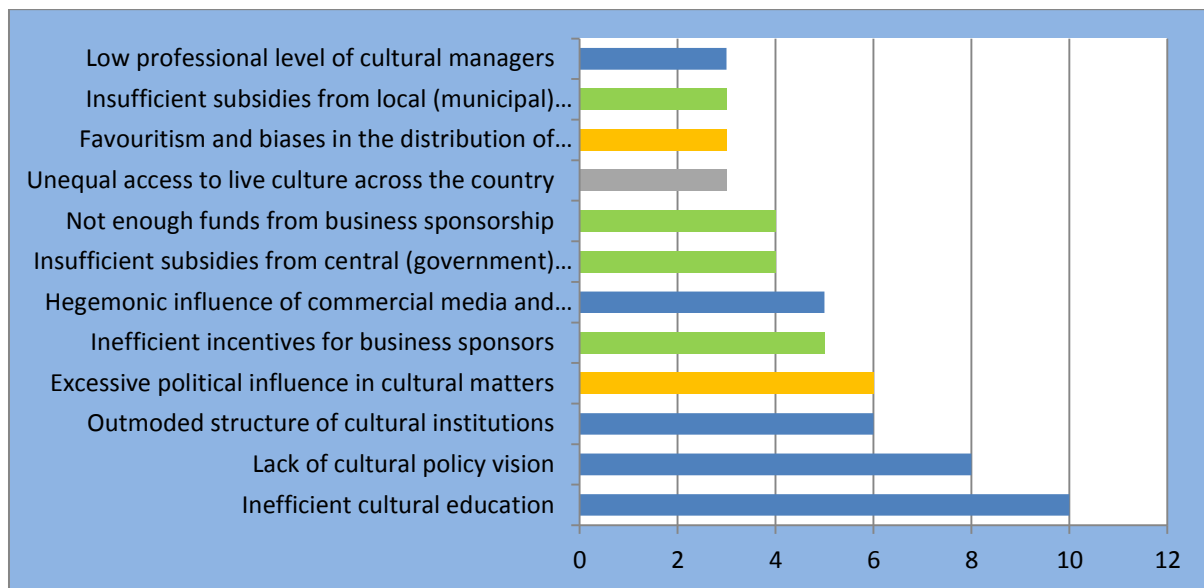
Southern priorities

Some more responses arrived from the Mediterranean region from Portugal to Turkey, Spanish and Italian in greatest numbers.

Cultural education is a priority everywhere, but not to the degree as it is emphasised in the southern group of countries.

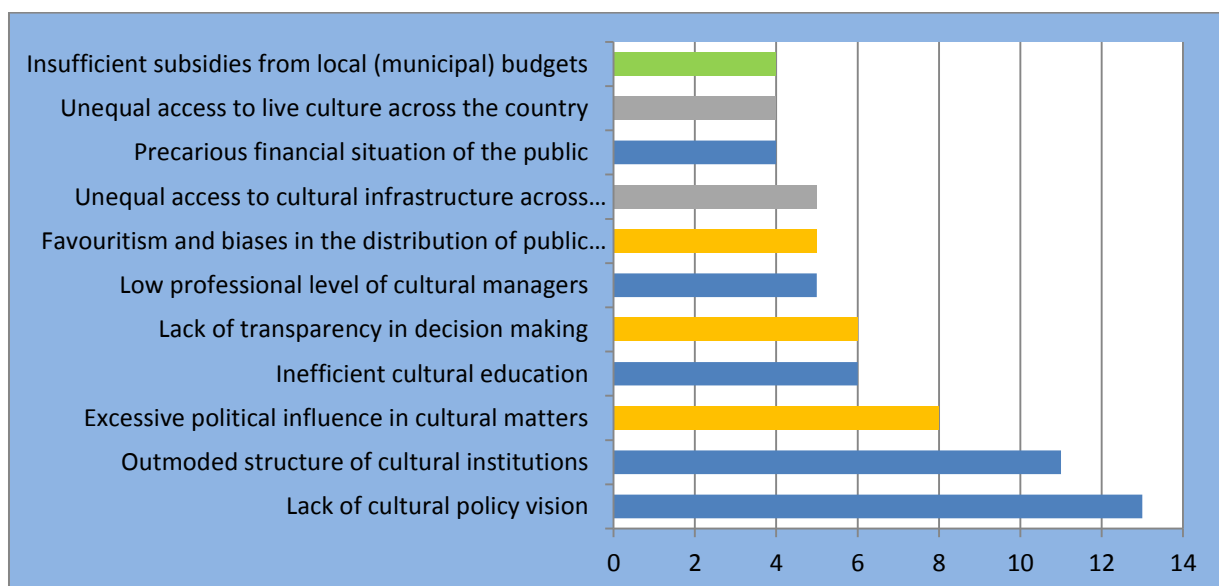
Furthermore, all four financial items appear among the top grievances, which for arithmetic reasons is a list of twelve instead of ten.

Graph Five: Priorities in the south.



Southern is the next group of countries, too. The larger number of votes arriving from the ex-Yugoslav countries and Bulgaria lend weight to the strong hope for reforms, expressed by the first two complaints about lack of vision and the outmoded system. Respect for modernisation is also signalled by putting the appeal about the professional level of cultural managers on the 6-8th position in this region. (Professional in the sense of entrepreneurial, dynamic and change oriented: interpretations specified by one correspondent.)

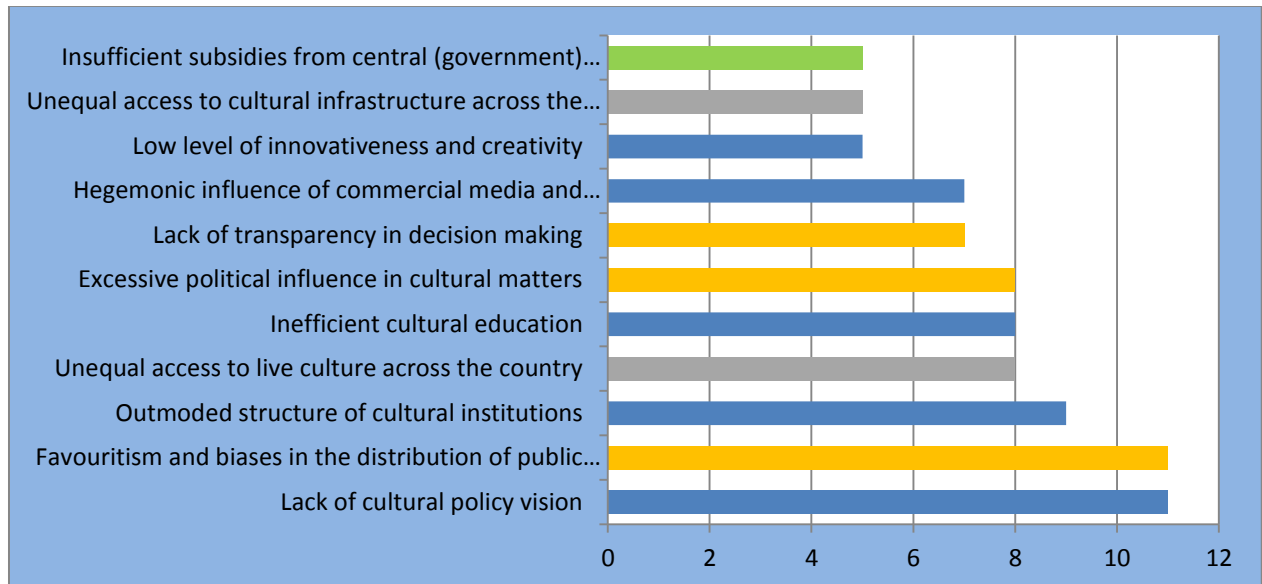
Graph Six: The profile of the Western Balkans and ex-Yugoslavia



Further to the west

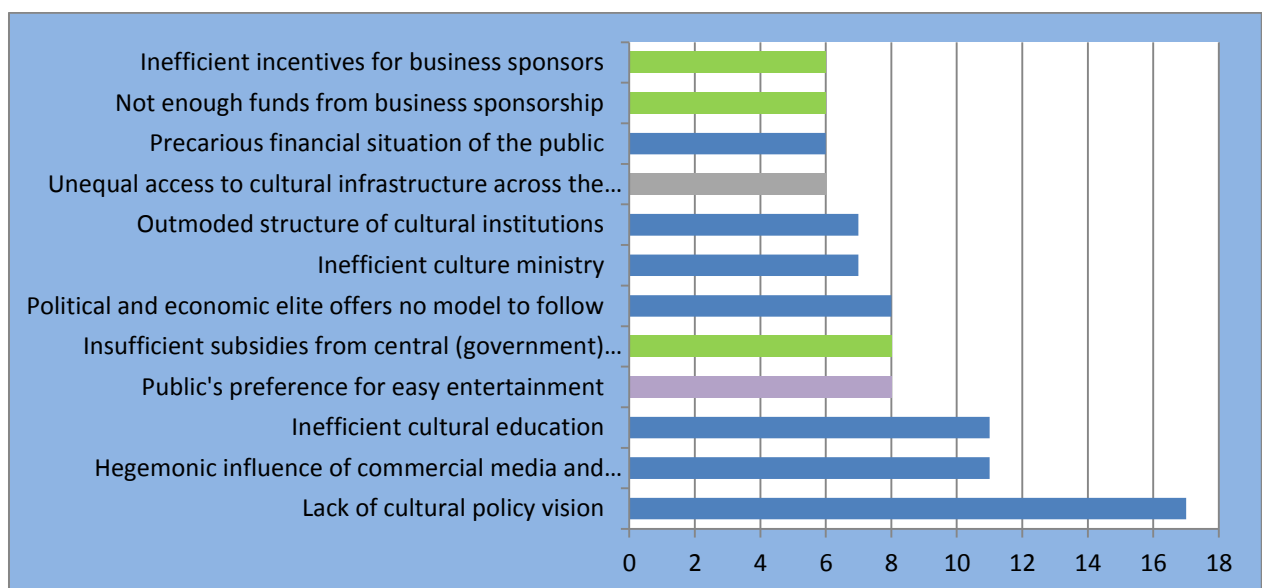
The pattern of challenges to the cultural life in the four Visegrad countries is similar to that of the Balkans. People in the sector seem to suffer more from favouritism in financing.

Graph Seven: Hierarchy of cultural policy complaints in the Visegrad Four



The next graph contains the answers that came from the north-west, Europe's centre of gravitation, including the United Kingdom, as well as the international organisations based in Brussels. There is the highest concentration of dreamers, those who are longing for new visions. They are exempt from "the insolence of office": from petty political interference, and concerned about the spiritual values conveyed by education, jeopardised by the media and light attractions, expecting the elite to offer healthy models to follow.

Graph Eight: The central pattern. Choices from the countries in the north-west of Europe.



Methods

88 answers were received from BO Memo subscribers. Only the email-addresses are known, from this we conclude that answers came from 27 countries and several international organisations. Responses came from both the European Parliament and the Commission. A smaller part of the correspondents could be identified as representing one or other branch of culture, nevertheless the majority are engaged in larger areas if not the entire cultural field.

Besides ticking from the list, quite a few comments have also arrived. Some of these were mentioned above, and many more give guidance for the improvement of the instrument later on.

This being a test round, correspondents were free to choose from the list. One colleague took the pains and ranked all 25 items by importance. The majority followed the standard procedure and ranked the five most decisive factors. This allowed for arithmetic differentiation: the first choice received a double weight, i.e. 2, the fifth kept the original 1, and 1.75, 1.5 and 1.25 went to the interim cases.

Giving weight

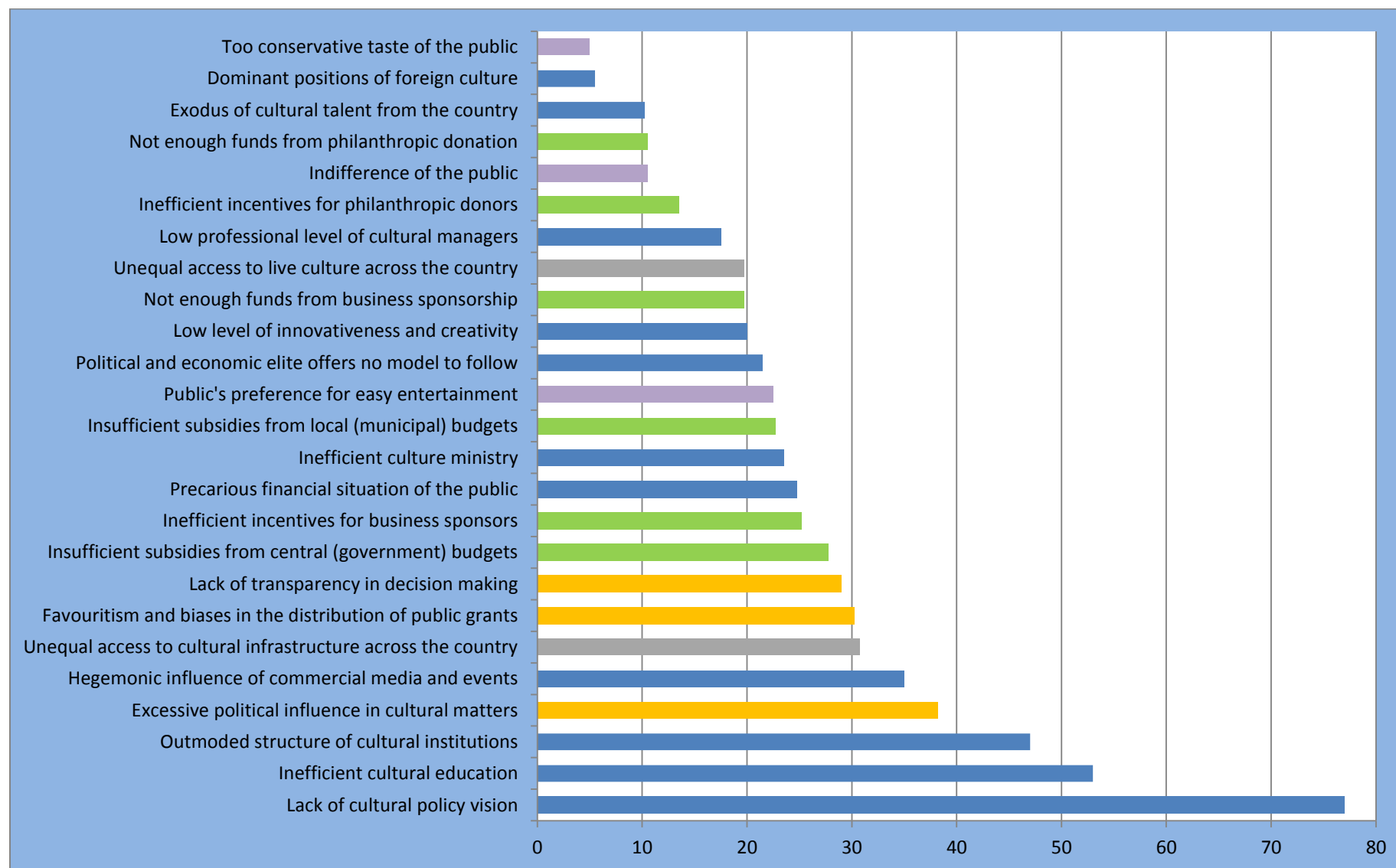
By weighting a more subtle picture is gained. There are items in the list of 25 problematic factors that were mentioned now and then but without being ranked 1st, 2nd or 3rd. Others appear to be more emphatically laden: when selected, these were put on 1st or 2nd place. The plea for cultural policy vision is one of these: by ranking its score was inflated by 50%. The other item that collected extra weight by ranking is from the end of the scale: lamenting the exodus of talent was mentioned rarely but then as one of the greatest curses to national culture.

Graph Nine presents the list as re-arranged after ranking has been considered. The leading position of the quest for vision is reconfirmed, and the increased emphasis promoted factors like the complaint about political influence and unequal access to culture ahead by one or two positions.

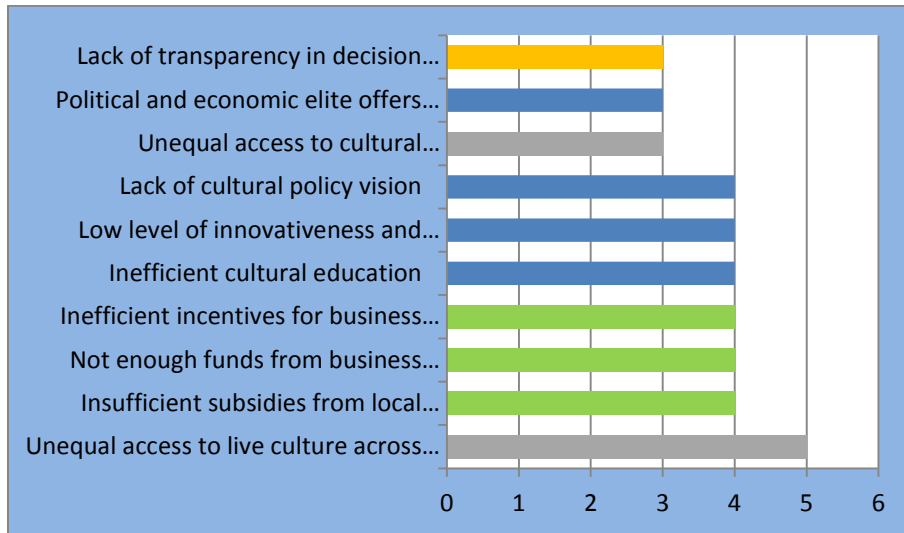
Weighting is especially helpful when there are too few answers available. As was the case with the northern countries. Graph Ten shows that concern about cultural education as well as items related to inequality of access were ranked high, thus the weighted scores offer a more nuanced cultural policy profile of the Baltic-Nordic region.

Similarly noticeable is the difference in case of the Visegrad countries. Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak colleagues gave lesser weight to the issues of equality in access than to other factors including political interference – see Graph Eleven.

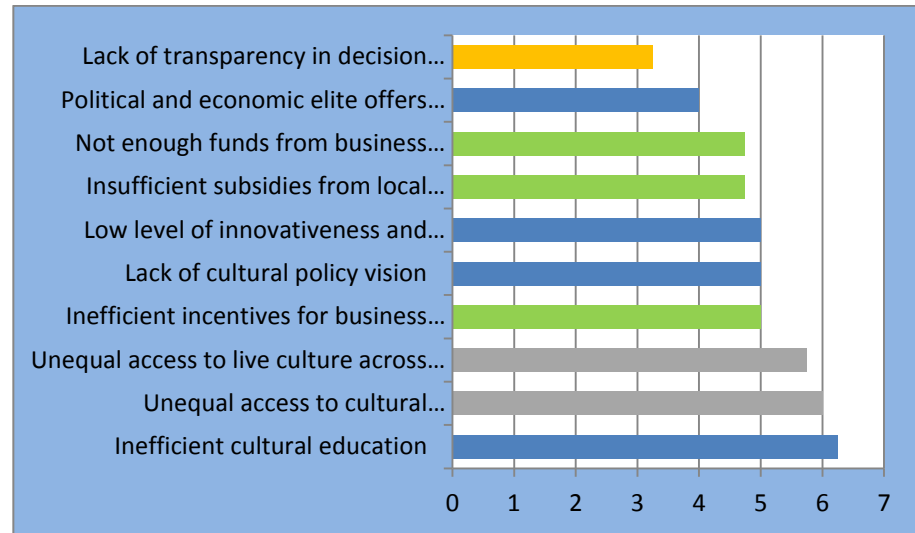
Graph Nine: The division of 25 problematic factors in the 88 responses with weights expressing ranking



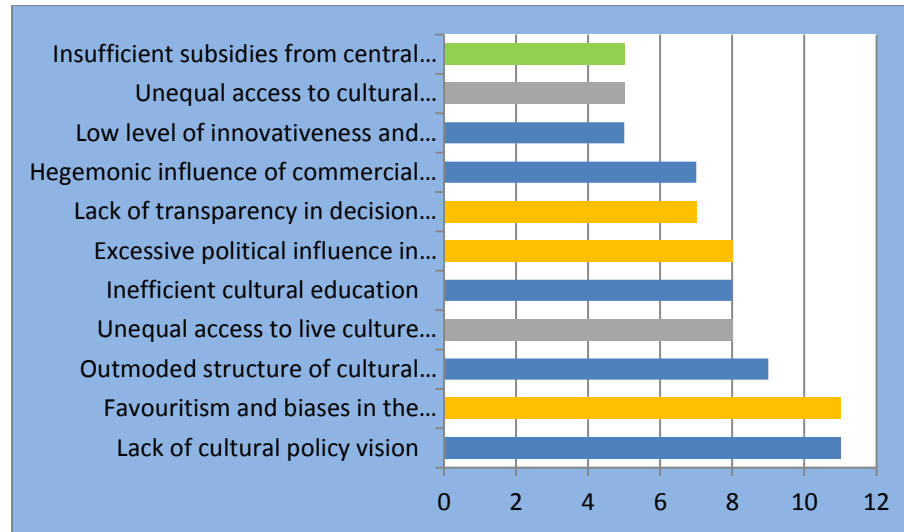
Graph Four: Top nuisances in the northern countries



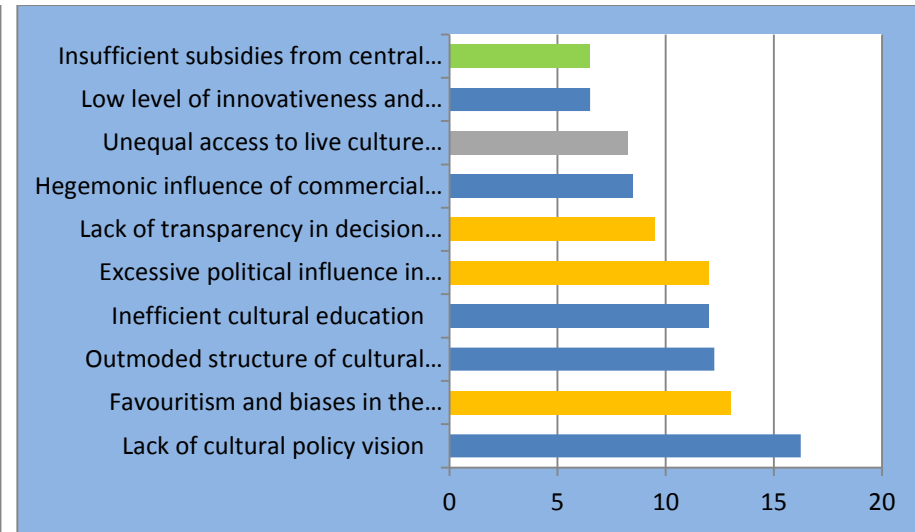
Graph Ten: Weighted scores of the northern countries



Graph Seven: Hierarchy of complaints in the Visegrad Four



Graph Eleven: Weighted scores of the Visegrad Fours



What next?

The worth of such exercise has been proven to us. If this feeling expresses a broader consensus, and if we find supporters, the survey – perfected with comments coming from our partners – can be done on a larger scale. Administering the surveying needs little investment, support is best needed to arrange for reaching greater number of respondents. For the Global Competitiveness Index dozens of businesspeople are reached in a country so that a national profile can be drawn. That will allow for identifying differences between the patterns of cultural ecosystem in Spain and France, Finland and Sweden or Serbia and Bulgaria. With careful selection cross-country profiles can also be composed from the answers of people from the same branch of culture: heritage, performing arts, cinema etc.

The Budapest Observatory is ready to go on.

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