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ADDENDUM

**to the ANALYTICAL BASE-LINE REPORT
ON THE CULTURE SECTOR AND CULTURAL POLICY
OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS**

**Studies and Diagnostics on Cultural Policies
of the Eastern Partnership Countries**

The document is prepared by the Regional Monitoring and Capacity Building Unit of the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme

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PREFACE

This document complements the Analytical Base-line Report on the Culture Sector and Cultural Policy of the Republic of Belarus prepared by the Regional Monitoring and Capacity Building Unit of the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme (RMCBU) in August 2012 and revised in January 2013. The report was published at the Programme's web-site (<http://www.euroeastculture.eu/en/database-of-materials/view-belarus-analytical-base-line-report-on-the-culture-sector-and-cultural-policy.html>).

The Addendum reflects the major changes that occurred in the country's cultural policy context since 2012. The content of this document is the sole responsibility of the RMCBU and reflects the opinion of contributing experts. It can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission. The document was prepared by Ms. Olga Klip, RMCBU Expert with contributions by Mr. Terry Sandell, RMCBU Expert responsible for methodological guidance for the studies, Mr. Luciano Gloor, RMCBU Team Leader and Ms. Tetiana Biletska, RMCBU Capacity Building Expert.

In 2013 the RMCBU published the Regional Research Report on Cultural Policies and Trends of the Eastern Partnership Countries and six Analytical Base-line Reports on the Culture Sector and Cultural Policy of the EaP countries. The reports were intended for a broad range of audiences that includes all culture stakeholders in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the European Union. The documents summarized results of the Studies and Diagnostics on Cultural Policies of the Eastern Partnership Countries carried out by the RMCBU from October 2011 to March 2012 in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The studies were focused on the national cultural policies of these countries and practically orientated to provide strategic guidance to the entire Eastern Partnership Culture Programme and to all activities of the RMCBU Project. A tailor-made system to analyze the current situation in the culture sector of the EaP countries was elaborated by the RMCBU. It was primarily based on conceptual comparative analysis of the countries' specific policies with applicable international standards exercised by the RMCBU in cooperation with six local experts and guided by an international expert. Preparation, publication and further promotion of the reports stimulated comments and contributions from the Programme's stakeholders and other interested parties, leading to debate on cultural policy matters for the EaP countries and beyond. No doubt, in the course of implementation of the Programme, the dialogue on cultural policy matters contributed to promoting better integration of culture into national, regional and local development policies of the Eastern Partnership countries.

Cultural activities and events in recent years

In the course of the past three years a rich programme of cultural events organised by both, the state and non-governmental sectors, could be observed. The year 2012 was marked by large-scale events in the non-governmental sector such as *'Radius Zero. The Ontology of Art-hundred's'*, an exhibition with a catalogue and critical articles, the *'World Press Photo'* exhibition at Ÿ Gallery and the *'Palace Complex Exhibition in Gomel'* which brought twenty-three artists together to interact with the historic surroundings of a famous palace. State cultural organizations took their turn in 2014 with large-scale art exhibitions at the beginning of 2014 linked to Belarus hosting the World Ice Hockey Championship. These events were however characterised by art critics as too low-quality and populist events. There is an absence of criticism of the independent sector and this is because critics from the official (i.e. state) media simply ignore that sector's activity.

One can talk of consolidation in recent years within the independent cultural sector where, for example, public lectures and discussions have become part of the everyday life of culturally active people. The sphere of culture has become understood more widely, i.e. it has become closer to everyday life. An example of this is the educational project *'Language or Coffee'* (*'Mova tsi kava'* in Belarusian) where classes of Belarusian language learning are organized with the participation of poets and musicians.

Another important feature is cultural decentralisation. The very active programme of the *'Let's Be Belarusians'* (*'Budzma Belarusami'*) movement has for years been organising literary meetings, concerts and so on throughout the country. Another example of things happening not only in Minsk is a new initiative *'European Café'* with presentations, lectures, and discussions organised in Minsk, Brest, Grodno and Vitebsk. A competition for young artists and curators called *'Towards the Development of the Contemporary Museum'* takes place in all the regions of Belarus.

In recent years several new art spaces have appeared. That said, private initiatives are very few for a country with a population of over 10 million people and information about them is hard to find. Such information that exists is disseminated only among like-minded persons and means that the circle of like-minded persons is very small.

Belarus has been engaged in the international cultural scene through two projects developed thanks to the EaP Culture Programme funding and the efforts of international teams. One project *'SAY CHEESE: Eastern Family Album. Capacity Building, Networking and Promotion of Thematic Eastern Partnership Photography'* included participants from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The second *'Sustainable Development of Local Communities through Actualisation of Cultural Heritage'* was a Belarus-Ukrainian project.

The state sector has been very active recently. Theatres, opera houses and concert halls are on a daily basis attracting their audiences and the National Art Museum has been organising large-scale exhibitions, such as *'École de Paris Artists'*, *'Marc Chagal: Love and Life'*, *'Graphics from the State Hermitage'* and so on. Some of these exhibitions were funded by banks and have attracted a wide audience as they were accompanied by strong advertising campaigns. It is interesting to see that banks fund art exhibitions as well as the advertising of them as part of their business marketing. However, because censorship continues to be very strong, the result is sometimes a 'digestible, toothless product'. The degree to which censorship goes is illustrated by the removal of the Pahonia (the coat of arms of the historical Duchy of Lithuania and the national emblem of independent Belarus in 1918 and in the early post-Soviet years) from the video of Pininghin's *'Pan Tadeush'*.

Most activities or events organised by the state sector get large media coverage and many are transformed into purely media events which influences their nature and quality, sometimes leading to low professional standards, unfair or fictitious juries (in the case of contests) and involving a high level of corruption. The latter seems to be the case with the newly established music award *'Lira'*, and also in the case of the Minsk Triennial of Contemporary Art (2012) which had no clear concept statement. These

events might be described by some people as “superfluous” in that they happen and in reality have little or no impact on cultural development in the country.

While official reports list statistics and other data, such reports usually lack a qualitative dimension. For example, we are informed that the number of objects of cultural heritage in the Mogilev region is the highest in the country (1,067) but the relevant report provides no information about the state of these objects, whether they are vulnerable to the weather, are being damaged or destroyed or have been renovated inappropriately without any respect for their original historic authenticity. To take another example, 372,990 people are reported as having visited museums in the Brest region, but there is no qualitative data on the motivation and the reasons for the visits. No information is thus available on the number of audience that attended voluntarily out of personal interest and how many belonged to visiting groups of pupils, students or soldiers that had no choice in being there.

Official reports also do not cover Belarusian culture produced by the private/independent sector. Such names as Krambambulia, the Belarusian Free Theatre and the '*Budzma Belarusami*' campaign etc. do not feature.

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned is corruption. In past years almost every single important heritage reconstruction project was accompanied by a corruption scandal with the Joint Directorate for Building Projects at the Ministry of Culture implicated in all of them¹. It is not just in the heritage field that there are problems. There was, for example, a criminal case involving the director of the Belarusian State Circus who was accused of abuse of power.

In 2012 the Belarusian independent cultural sector was totally separated and alienated from the state with the latter exercising a bureaucratic police function. In 2014 there was some thawing from the side of state towards the independent cultural sector. Culture actors associated this change with the approaching presidential election of 2015. In 2014, for example, almost all the people who had been on the notorious cultural 'Black List' of the government have been removed and can now perform or operate in Belarus. The experience shows that in Belarus a relationship between the state and the independent cultural sector is possible but only if the non-state sector satisfies the censors. The 'if' dictates the conditions under which contemporary culture in Belarus has to function and shows that there is no freedom of artistic expression in the country. For example the artist Ruslan Vashkevich has been able to present several projects in state institutions in past years, while Mikhail Gulin became a victim of the repressive state system when developing an artistic project together with the Goethe Institute and independently of the state.

Summarising it can be said that cultural creation is fundamentally affected by the political context that distorts any normal market for culture. This further deteriorates the working conditions for artists that already have to deal with a distorted art market that functions according to its own laws in which popularity is not related to talent

Cultural Policies

The Ministry of Culture insists on its openness and readiness for dialogue. At the same time there are examples of the opposite. When journalists from the independent broadcaster Belsat attempted to interview the Minister of Culture on the occasion of the premiere of the ballet '*Vitovt*' at the National Academic Bolshoi Opera and Ballet Theatre of Belarus, they were deprived of their accreditation and were asked to leave the event.

Official cultural policy is described by the President of Belarus in terms of “the strengthening of ideological bases”, “supporting the patriotic line of Belarusian culture”, and “strengthening the international prestige of the country” and so on. It is no surprise therefore that the former 'departments of culture' at local government level have been rebranded into 'departments of ideology, culture and youth'. Meanwhile fundamental questions are not being raised and discussed about the status and usage of the Belarusian language and Belarusian historic symbols, about preservation of material cultural

¹ http://www.ej.by/news/culture/2013/01/21/kto_zakapyvaet_v_belarusi_kul_turnye_den_gi_.html

heritage, about national independence vis-a-vis neighbours and the interpretation of historical events involving Belarus. It is also not yet understood by Belarusian authorities, that no country has ever strengthened its international prestige through propaganda, for which, in the contrary, the demonstration of the existence of a vibrant and alive art and culture sector that is supported by the authorities and is free in its expression is the best and proven promotional tool.

Two features characterise the domination of the Belarusian cultural space by the Ministry of Culture and other state structures. In first instance the state is overwhelmingly the main cultural producer (although not the only one as was the case in Soviet times). In second instance, the other main role of the Ministry and of state structures consists in the de facto responsibility for controlling cultural activities that are not implemented under the direct aegis of the state. In this respect the authorities acts as a 'gatekeeper' deciding who is and who is not allowed into the Belarusian cultural space. The state structures occupy and control the cultural space of Belarus to such a degree that critics argue that as a result there is no dynamic, an absence of collaborative and pluralistic agenda-setting, little new thinking and limited vision. This situation, the critics argue, results in both, limited creativity and unchallenged mediocrity. Critics may sometimes make harsh judgments under their liberal or oppositional views. But the haemorrhaging of Belarusian cultural talent out of the country - both eastwards and westwards - lends some credence to the argument that a state-controlled cultural climate produces distorted results not helpful to the flourishing of Belarusian national culture.

After the 2010 crackdown on civil society the national policies of Belarus are remaining far from democratic. Nevertheless, cooperation with the EU, specifically focused on engaging civil society, has developed in certain areas focussing on neutral sectors of mutual interest, as for instance, environment, regional development and people-to-people contacts including culture and education. Innovation and reform are taking place, even if some of the official structures remain archaic and authoritarian. The authorities of Belarus claim their experience of decentralisation of culture to be relevant for other EaP countries.

Main threads and opportunities

The following negative factors and problems are perceived as the major threats to the national culture and the cultural sector by many in the sector: lack of democratic participation, civil society involvement and of open dialogue-based principles in the public administration of the cultural sector; excessive government intervention in cultural activities inhibiting freedom of cultural expression and creativity; legislative limitations on cultural activities and administrative barriers obstructing the development of the non-governmental cultural sector and the hindering of grass-root initiatives.

The national authorities have expressed interest in specific type of technical assistance, namely for expert support to research into the role of culture in economic and social development and elaboration of relevant sub-sector strategies. That corresponds to the recent trend of the authorities of Belarus in supporting cooperation with the EU in certain sectors including people-to-people contacts. They have also been opening up space for private initiatives (including those of civil society and the commercial sector) resulting in a diversification of funding sources for culture.

It is important to mention that the Ministry of Culture has shown openness and readiness for cooperation within the EaP Culture Programme and dialogue with the RMCBU in particular, especially since the second half of 2013. Apart of several working meetings and consultations, the Ministry invited RMCBU representatives to attend the international conference '*Culture of Belarus: Current Realities*' in March 2014 in Minsk and the 10th Republican Festival of National Cultures in June 2014 in Grodno. The Ministry moved finally to a pro-active and supporting position towards the Programme's capacity building activities. Representatives of private and public cultural institutions of Belarus participated in the Cultural Policy Exchange Workshop Cycle in 2013. Two representatives of the Ministry of Culture joined other Belarusian cultural professionals in the workshop cycle 2014, while national and local authorities actively cooperated with the RMCBU during the preparation and the organisation the last workshop in Minsk in October 2014.