

Autonomy and Accountability: Towards a New Policy of State Museums

Abstract

This paper particularly deals with one of the detected problems in a discussion on new museum policy between autonomous museums and the administration representing the “owner” of museum collections (i.e. the ministries of culture and the government), which is a lack of adequate discourse as a means of coordinated activity to develop common decision-making and to reach a more significant social aim of state museums. My reflection is based on my experience as a director (since 2001) of one of the leading cultural institutions in the instable political and economic context of post-Milosevic Serbia. This experience is informed by many attempts to formulate a more cohesive museum policy in Serbia, as well as a dialogue between stakeholders (primarily representatives of the Ministry of Culture and state museums) in spite of a serious financial difficulties the cultural institutions are facing.

After a disastrous period of the 1990s in Serbia, state museums were in a position to formulate a “back-up” policy as a short-term goal in order to make institutions operational in relation to the public and accountable in relation to the state as the owner of collections. In this process there have been two operational legacies to dwell upon, both denigrated in the previous decade. One is the policy of “self-management” as a legacy of Yugoslav socialism which guaranteed a relative autonomy of cultural institutions and provided an administrative and organizational framework for their sustainability. The other one is the activity of the civil sector which, under Milosevic’s repression, was only one to provide capacity-building for institutional reforms. In terms of the relationship between the Government and the museums, the former legacy allowed for a formulation of the “State Coordination body” for all

state museums with representatives of the ministry and up to three representatives of museums taking care of the legal, financial and program sectors. However, due to very different interests of museums (irreconcilable difference in their profile, program, location, size, etc.), this idea practically failed and was abandoned. On the other hand, following conclusions of a conference on “Cultural policy and cultural production” in 2000) and based on the cross-sectoral analysis, an Agency was formed by the Ministry of Culture which was to take care of investments in culture and additional financing of cultural institutions. This initiative also failed because of very different needs and interests.

Currently, the Ministry of Culture in Serbia has been formulating different “working groups”, consisted of experts in cultural practice and cultural policy, with the mandate to influence decision-making in the Ministry and to discuss and amend new legal framework in the field of culture which so far resulted in the new draft of the overall “Law on Culture” which makes grounds for specific laws regulating cinematography, museums, and other fields. The working group on Museum policy (mostly consisted of museum directors and experts in cultural policy) has been forming its conclusions upon several documents required from the museums which include: the directors’ auto-evaluations, institutional evaluation including the SWAT analysis and the short-term and long-term strategies.

The short-term result of this process will be a signing of three-year contracts between the Government and the museums, in which a transparent relationship will be forged and financing secured. (With this a new model of museum policy may be inaugurated, similar, yet more restricted, to the Dutch model of short-term contracts with cultural institutions based on an open call, whereas in our case the position of the state institution is secured yet in long-term may be lost). Therefore, the long-term result of this process may be a new museum policy based on the practical experience and the dialogue, analysing deficiencies and locating competencies. This process should guarantee the autonomy of museum yet should prompt greater accountability in relation to the state and the public financing.

Museums should be self-controlled yet not self-referential organizational units and regardless of differences in profiles should apply some fundamental holistic policy and regulations administered and monitored by the Ministry. However, the overall supervision of its property should be regulated by the state through a centralized institution dealing with conservation and restoration of cultural heritage (the initiative to found a Central Institute for Conservation in 2008). By this, museums are fully autonomous in their “identity” yet supervised and better co-ordinated among themselves in the field of protection, security, storage, loans, auditing, legal matters, etc. This framework-policy may allow for a development of *content* which have to be embedded in a new museum policy.

There are many challenges in the analysis of this content. One of the crucial ones to be discussed is the utilization of the “heritage” as given and inherited and not as produced continually. Therefore the new museum policy should make solid ground for a reconsideration of museums not only as, on the one side, instruments of protection and presentation of heritage, and on the other as catalysts of entertainment and tourism. In a new museum policy a museum should be recognized as a site of production and reflection, a place where heritage is re-invented in order to approach challenges of globalization and new demographic processes. The social role of the museum may be fostered upon new forms of dialogue in which all sides in this dialogue will understand the need to develop new options for ensuring participation and utilization of what museums have to offer.

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