

## Study visit to Kraków 21/22 September 2023

report by *Karolina Golimowska*

The study trip of the members of the European Alliance of the Academies to Cracow begins on 21 September 2023, just over two weeks after “Green Border” directed by **Agnieszka Holland** premiered in Venice and a few days after the Polish Minister of Justice compared Holland’s work to Goebels’ propaganda. It is also the day on which the Polish Minister of Internal Affairs announced that every screening of the film in Poland has to be preceded by a short explanatory footage prepared by the Ministry for the sake of “the public good”. At the same time, politicians issuing hostile statements that humiliate the director admit in public that they have not yet seen the film.

We arrive in Poland in the midst of the election campaign – the parliamentary elections are scheduled for 15 October.

The European Alliance of Academies issues a statement of solidarity with the director in her right of artistic freedom the very same day after all participants of the study trip agree on the wording.

**Dominika Kasprowicz**, the director of Willa Decjusza (Villa Decius, a foundation that has been run by an NGO for the last 27 years, but the property belongs to the city) provides an overview on the current situation of culture and culture policies in Poland and explains the different competencies and the structure of financing. Some cultural institutions are financed by cities, other by regions (voivodeships) or centrally by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. It therefore makes a difference if we look at culture from national or from a local perspective, says Kasprowicz.

Jacek Majchrowski, Cracow’s Mayor since 2002 (which makes him the longest ruling mayor of the city ever) is a non-partisan and in opposition to the national government. The voivodeship acts in line to the Ministry of Culture though and hence follows the policies introduced by the government in Warsaw. Dominika Kasprowicz underlines the fact that the right wing conservatism that Kraków is often associated with is not being reflected in its cultural policies.

It was in early 2000 when for the first time the ruling party PiS started using culture in the ideological battlefield. It uses a rhetoric of resentment, sets the focus on the Polish nation and its martyrdom. Kasprowicz identifies three trends in the current cultural policy in Poland:

- A trend to go back to mythology: referring to the golden age, promoting the myth of the *Polonia Restituta* (including anti-German and anti-communist sentiments)
- The sphere of culture becomes very much in line with other political activities, so the scope of artistic freedom etc. becomes narrower.
- The return of central planning – more and more cultural policies are adopted centrally which weakens regions and cities in this regard.

Piotr Gliński, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, a sociologist by training, has identified the biggest achievements of his government in the field of culture as doubling the spending on the protection of national heritage, doubling the number of museums under auspices of the Ministry as well as doubling the number of other cultural institutions controlled directly by the Ministry. This clearly shows the priorities of the government, says Kasprowicz.

She mentions examples of the consequences of these trends: MALTA – a street theatre festival did not receive public money this year, instead a yacht that was financed by the Ministry of Culture and other dubious investments followed. Additionally, as Maria Anna Potocka, the director of MOCAM museum mentions later, the Ministry has cut the formerly available 600.000 EUR per year for contemporary art museums. 0,4 % of Poland’s total state budget is spent on culture.

After Olga Tokarczuk received a Nobel prize for literature, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage made clear that her work is not considered as something to be proud of.

However, the topic of culture policies up to the recent developments around “Green Border” has been avoided in the public debate in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Artists and managers of culture remain free in terms of their artistic expression and choices and as long as these choices are in line with the governmental policies, they can count on public funding. Or, as **Witold Bereś**, author and filmmaker puts it in one of the panel discussions the next day “You’re free to write anything you want but it becomes more and more difficult to get it published as publishers don’t want to risk their own existence”.

“A lot still depends on the director of a cultural institution”, says **Maria Anna Potocka**, later on that day. This is why the government started to exchange directors of these institutions so that they can have direct influence on the contents.

Meetings and conversations with directors of four cultural institutions that follow are all centered around the everyday dilemma they face. On the one hand they try to maintain their leadership and protect their institutions and teams/ensembles they feel responsible for. This might require them to self-censor. On the other hand they want to keep identifying with the contents they present or not present to the public and feel a moral obligation to remain true to themselves.

These four institutions are: **Cricoteca, MOCAK Art Gallery, National Theatre Słowacki and Utopia Home – International Empathy Centre**. All of them currently face financial challenges due to the changing model of cultural policy in Poland (growing centralization in terms of the distribution of funds). All of the directors of these institutions played a part in establishing them. They talk with the members of the European Alliance of Academies very openly about the problems and repercussions they face.

**Cricoteca** is a museum and cultural center devoted to the theater director Tadeusz Kantor. It is a municipal institution, supported to some extent also by the national public money. Its director **Natalia Zarzecka** talks to us about collaborations with other cultural projects during the pandemic, among others offering their spaces to the local Festival of Photography in March 2021. Only a few days before the planned opening of an exhibition which was a part of the festival, Zarzecka discovered that one of the art pieces presented a collage of banners collected during massive protests against tightening up of the abortion law that took place all over the country in October 2020, despite lockdowns. These banners carried vulgar slogans addressed directly at the ruling party. Zarzecka decided to remove that piece from the exhibition. The Festival then cancelled the opening and the entire exhibition. She says it was her responsibility as the director of a public institution that made her censor the exhibit even though she supported the protests.

On the day of the planned opening, demonstrations for the freedom of art took place in front of the building of Cricoteca. Zarzecka says, this chain of events has traumatized her.

**Alexandra Xanthaki**, a UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights who also takes part in the study trip comments on self-censorship during the key note she delivers the next day. Self-censorship restricts the flow of ideas and art. A cultural manager put in a position in which they have to self-censor in order to maintain their position can either act heroically and fight for their contents or they will feel that they let others down. “Very few of us are going to be heroes in such a situation”, says Xanthaki. This has nothing to do with these individuals though, it has something to do with the state. Through such measures cultural agents are made responsible for mistakes of the state.

**MOCAK** – Museum of Contemporary Art is a municipal institution run by Maria Anna Potocka, one of the first private collectors of art in Poland after 1989. She is known for being critical towards the current government and for publishing articles and essays in which she openly expresses her opinions. Recently she wrote two essays after the publication of which she was told that she might not receive any more money to run her institution. The first one was an essay against the ruling party's interpretation of the plane catastrophe in Smolensk in 2010 and the other about the efficiency of right wing manipulation.

The museum opened in 2011. It is located in the old Schindler's factory. It shows international and Polish contemporary art and runs its own publishing house. Conceptual art lies at the heart of the museum. Its collection was started by Maria Anna Potocka herself who donated her private collection to the museum. It runs collaborations with museums in Rome and Vilnius and with the Center for Persecuted Arts in the Solingen Art Museum.

The museum has been organizing a series of exhibitions centered around various areas of private and public life in connection with art, e.g. "Sports in Art", "Food in Art", etc. "«Religion in Art» will probably be my last exhibition here. I love scandals", says Potocka with a bitter smile on her face.

As a municipal museum, MOCAK is subordinate to the Mayor of Kraków who is its main sponsor. It can also count on money from private sponsors who still manage to be independent from politics, as Potocka stresses.

Each director is independent in their choices as long as they are in accordance with the law, she says. She makes it clear she will not agree on any compromises and will keep doing her work for as long as it is going to be possible.

"If you want to become less conservative, visit a museum. If you want to be conservative as a stone, stay at home", says Potocka.

"You are a sister", says Jeaninne Meerapfel to Maria Anna Potocka while leaving.

**The Juliusz Słowacki Theater in Kraków** has been operating continuously since 1893. Its facade is decorated with an inscription 'Krakow for the National Arts'. It takes pride in the heritage of Stanisław Wyspiański who also staged there at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The theater currently employs 200 people: 40 actors, administration workers and technicians. As a national theater it depends directly on the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Its director since 2017, Krzysztof Głuchowski, has been suspended in his duties after he had refused to take the play "Dziady" by Adam Mickiewicz off the schedule. In it, the main male character was played by a woman and the play was adapted to comment on the current affairs in Poland including the situation of women in the country and its solidarity with Ukraine. The authorities including the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage took it as a personal offence. It was considered anti-Polish and iconoclastic. Teachers were banned from taking their students to the play ("Dziady" is a part of the curriculum at public schools). The procedure to fire the director was started and so far has lasted for more than 400 days. The procedure is not being given up and so the vacuum remains reality, says Edyta Sotowska-Śmielek, the deputy director of the theater. Głuchowski not only refused to take this one play off the schedule, but together with his ensemble has been producing other plays – most of them adapted classics. Edyta Sotowska-Śmielek says that Głuchowski counts to the top 3 personae non gratae in Poland right now. **Since the scandal, public funds for the theater were cut drastically. "It is not enough to pay salaries", says Sotowska-Śmielek.** Currently it finances its activities with the money from sold tickets and donations from private supporters. The theater also rents some of its premises for external events and conferences and for commercial shooting.

Sotowska-Śmiłek mentions great support of independent media and private businesses, similarly to Maria Anna Potocka of the MOCAR Museum. The theater can also count on the support of international media (mostly German and Swiss). It runs a cooperation with the Wisława Szymborska Foundation and with the National Theater in Mannheim. The first premiere of a jointly staged play will take place in Poland in December 2023, the Mannheim premiere is scheduled for February 2024. “Sometimes it’s easier to find money abroad”, concludes Sotowska-Śmiłek.

The following week a next premiere is approaching, straight before the elections. “It will be political”, says Sotowska-Śmiłek.

### **Utopia Home / Łąźnia Nowa Theater in Nowa Huta, Kraków**

**Bartosz Szydłowski** and **Małgorzata Szydłowska**, directors of the institution who started it as an independent student initiative in the 1990s talk about its beginnings and its development from an NGO to a big institution.

Utopia Home is located in a former electrical school building that used to be abandoned for 4 years. It carries out participatory creative projects and workshops involving local community of Nowa Huta – one of the largest planned socialist realist settlements ever built, originally for workers of Vladimir Lenin Steelworks and their families. After the transformation of 1989 the district became run down, Bartosz Szydłowski says that as a young boy he often felt ashamed when admitting that this is the place he comes from.

The main aim is to empower citizens from local community. Empathy as an attitude linked with people in a given space. Inside there is also a gym, artists are invite for residencies.

Utopia Home is also a theater – called Łąźnia Nowa. Bartosz Szydłowski and Małgorzata Szydłowska initiated the international Devine Comedy Festival as a new way of promoting the city.

Bartosz Szydłowski has to leave straight after the conversation as he is meant to have an important phone call with the Mayor. 2017 he was accused by the PiS government of financial fraud and removed from the position of a general manager of his theater, acting from then on as its creative director. After four years of trials, the court declared him innocent stating that the measures undertaken were a form of political oppression. Now there is a chance he can return to his previous position as a general manager – that is what the conversation with the mayor is meant to be about.

### **Villa Decius, Debate *Rights and Freedom of Culture in Times of Political Change* #1**

Dominika Kasproicz opens the event and welcomes all the guests. Marion Döring hosts the panel.

**Jeanine Meerapfel** talks about the European Alliance of the Academies, its founding, meeting of members and study trips since 2020. Its founding manifesto states that “art and culture are essential to democracy and social cohesion.” Art and culture cannot be understood only nationally. Their freedom mustn’t be jeopardized.

The European Alliance of Academies is concerned about the freedom of artistic expression in Poland. It has previously expressed its support with the historians Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski who were persecuted in Poland for their publications and research on the Holocaust. The Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) is a member of the European Alliance of Academies.

The question remains: What can we do against nationalistic and populist voices?

**Robert Piaskowski, Deputy Mayor for culture in Kraków delivers a statement about the city and its cultural policies.** Kraków is a strong, open city whose program of integration and inclusion is called “Open Kraków”. 160 nationalities contribute to the city life, many of them are students and tourists. Kraków is also home to many refugees, mostly from Ukraine and Belarus.

Kraków is the Polish capital of culture, the birth place of Polish avant garde, Witkacy, Wyspianski and Kantor, Penderecki – all the rebellious artists lived and worked here. Piaskowski underlines the importance and power of cities and their mayors. He mentions Salman Rushdie in this context: when the UK could not grant him asylum, the city of London did. Mayors should network and act together in order to overcome hurdles. Despite difficulties cities become more and more important as islands that serve as hubs for creativity. Piaskowski says that in the last 20 years the Mayor of Culture in his city has not censored anything. He condemns abusing culture for political reasons and talks about cultural war taking place in Poland. He mentions protests that took place the previous day in front of the cinema “Pod Baranami” against Agnieszka Holland’s “Green Border”. The film has become a convenient tool in the election campaign, he adds.

Piaskowski mentions the December 2020 report on breaches of artistic freedom of LGBTQ+ people that includes cases from Poland. He brings the example of the Black Madonna placed on a rainbow background: the artist Podlesna was accused of harming religious feelings of others. The court declared that homophobia, intolerance and exclusion are **not** religious sentiments.

Cracow has provided safe heaven for artists struggling elsewhere, says Piaskowski. He mentions the scandal around “Dziady” in Słowacki Theater (the performance alluded to *Strajk Kobiet* – Women on Strike), and assures support of minorities, and for subversive repertoire. The city promotes a systematic equality approach, it defends LGBTQ+ groups in the public discourse and runs a policy of openness.

The city of Kraków supports the Barakah Theater that stages plays on gay rights and sexual transitions. It also co-finances the Joseph Conrad festival with its major topic migration.

A medal for civic culture is being awarded every year by the city to courageous people of culture. Award for cultural education is also a part of the city’s way to make its inhabitants resilient in ambiguous and unsure times, says the Deputy Mayor. 400 NGOs, 80 festivals and 500 cultural institutions are being supported by the city.

**The key note by Alexandra Xanthaki** starts with the description of the role of special rapporteurs at the United Nations. There are 55 independent special rapporteurs, 15 of which focus on specific states, e.g. Russia, Somalia, Afghanistan etc. The other rapporteurs focus on disciplines; they’re independent experts appointed for 3+3 years, they do not represent their countries.

**Xanthaki’s** mandate is to monitor the situation of culture rights around the world. She does so conducting official visits to different countries, writing reports that are then presented to the UN General Assembly and accepting communications – mostly emails from individuals and institutions about violations related to cultural rights. These signals give her the possibility to act. States have international obligations that they signed and ratified; respecting cultural obligations is not debatable. The state has to take steps to protect freedom of speech and cultural rights, freedom of expression and contribution. This includes the right to express ones opinion through art, the freedom to join or leave a given cultural group, the right to reject a given religion or opinion and the right of artists to use religious, political and cultural symbols as a counter discourse to dominating powers. **To push people to reflect upon the actions undertaken by their governments is an act of patriotism.** An active citizen is a patriotic citizen! Art is not as luxury but a greenhouse for new ideas and vision.

Cultural rights are crucial for mutual understanding and tolerance.

Xanthaki provides legal framework to protection of cultural rights. She stresses that it has its limitations. Participating in public debates is protected by international laws.

Measures used by a state to limit the freedom of cultural expression and to disempower artistic collectivities that are not in line with the policies of the ruling authorities include using health and safety regulations as excuses, providing religious reasons, restricting access to funding, promoting hate speech and undermining products of cultural communities questioning its merits even though abroad these representations are cherished. Also polarization is used, i.e. labelling a given piece of art as anti-Greek, anti-Polish etc., and making it more and more unclear as of what can and cannot be said. Lines and boundaries remain unclear.

These restrictions lead to a lack of empathy. This also affects the youth and its interaction with culture.

Ideas for solving the mentioned issues: to insist on legal obligations, reminding the states about them. Multilateralism is very important.

Xanthaki encourages everyone to refer to international law. The emphasis must be on the state and not on individuals.

It is also important to recognize all forms of power: abusive power does not come only from one source. E.g., a theatre director can also abuse his power towards his ensemble: therefore it is important to recognize the hierarchies of power everywhere.

The European Alliance of Academies is a rare and very helpful initiative, as very often artists work alone and lack a community that would represent their interests. Civil society can be strengthened through initiatives like this one.

Xanthaki's key note ends with a statement of solidarity: "I'm here to listen and to learn. I stand together with all of you!"

**Marion Döring** talks about the growing populism as a danger to the freedom of artistic expression. The European Alliance of Academies is alerted. She refers to figures published by ARD Panorama Magazine according to which in 13 out of 27 EU member states right wing parties are on the rise. Among them are Hungary and Poland but also Spain and other countries. The following statements present the situation in various European countries.

**Valerio Rocco Lozano** presents instances of violations of cultural rights and the freedom of artistic expression in Spain.

In August 2012 a Catalan rapper **Valtònyc** whose lyrics are based on an anti-capitalist, republican and anti-fascist ideology was arrested at the age of 18. In February 2018, the Supreme Court of Spain sentenced him to 3,5 years in prison after he was convicted of slander, Lèse-majesté, and glorifying terrorism in his lyrics. **Valtònyc** escaped to Brussels to avoid imprisonment.

In October 2021, the Belgian constitutional court ruled that the offence of lèse majesté, which had been on the statute book since 1847, was unconstitutional as it infringed the right of freedom of speech. This decision means in effect that Valtònyc cannot be extradited to Spain for this particular offence.

**Pablo Hasél**, also a rapper was imprisoned in February 2021 on a nine-month sentence for recidivism in insulting the Spanish monarchy, insulting the Spanish army and police forces, and supposedly praising terrorism in his lyrics.

In the field of visual arts: **Santiago Sierra's** work was censored during Arco Madrid Art Fair in 2018. His series of 24 pieces called "Political prisoners in contemporary Spain" was withdrawn from the fair by his own gallery which is a clear example of self-censorship, stresses **Valerio Rocco Lozano**. The exhibition organizer IFEMA said that they wanted to prevent a "polemic" that would have damaged the entire exhibition.

**Santiago Sierra** and **Eugenio Merino** faced legal persecutions after bringing a 14-foot statue of King Felipe VI, the reigning monarch to ARCO in 2019. The buyer of the statue was contractually obliged to burn it within a year of purchasing.

**In the field of literature:** The distribution of the book ***Fariña. History and indiscretions of drug trafficking in Galicia*** by the Spanish journalist **Nacho Carretero** was suspended as a result of a court order in March 2018. The reason: alleged violation of the right to honor of one of the persons mentioned in the text. The mentioned cases of censorship earned the mentioned art pieces popularity.

A play based on **Virginia Woolf's "Orlando"** was taken off the schedule in Valdemorillo, a small town near Madrid, as the mayor of the city considered it improper to stage a story in which the main character changes its gender.

However, according to **Valerio Rocco Lozano**, the situation generally improves as politicians seem to have understood that it is a very sensitive matter.

**Jeanine Meerapfel** presents an overview of the situation in Germany

She talks about the rise of the far right wing AfD, founded in 2013 and now present in local parliaments in Germany, since 2017 also in the Bundestag. The AfD is also represented at the EU parliament despite its Euroscepticism. The number of Germans supporting extreme right wing positions has more than tripled in the last four years according to a study published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. What is the position of artists and academies?

"We talk, discuss, try to make clear what it means to suppress the freedom of speech. Please look at us! Also we are in danger," says Meerapfel. "Still as intellectuals and artists we have not found a way to fight against right wing powers. We have to have a look at our strategies and please, friends, help us!" We have to come up with means to oppose the strong populist rhetoric of othering, of a blurry undefined plural "we"/"us"/"ours". A national culture does not exist. We as European Alliance of Academies do not exclude but include. But how to successfully distinguish the "we's"?

**Cécile Wajsbrot describes the current situation in France**

She talks about the 5 syllables that build the name Vincent Bolloré, a conservative billionaire from Bretagne who keeps extending his medial imperium and openly supports Éric Zemmour. He controls *Canal+* that has been emptied from all substance but still invests in cinema productions and C8 with its populist talk shows. Also the radio station *Europe 1* belongs now to Bolloré's media group. Almost all of the station journalists went on strike and almost 80% of them left. But Bolloré quickly set up a new team.

In the realm of the press *Paris Match* and *Le Journal de Dimanche* were taken over by Bolloré which resulted in a 6 weeks strike of the journalists and in stopping the publication. Afterwards almost everyone quit.

The publishing house *Hachette Group* is now also a part of the imperium.

Cécile Wajsbrot also mentions the bookshop *L'écume des pages* in Saint-Germain in Paris that was recently bought by Bolloré and the social upheavals it caused.

She talks about these right wing voices becoming louder and clearer in France until “one morning you wake up and listen to the radio and then you know it happened.” This discourse has taken over.

There are now two currents in France’s far right politics: there is Marine Le Pen with her populist approach that is appealing to people outside of big cities. And then there is Éric Zemmour who together with Marion Maréchal, Marine Le Pen’s niece tries to rewrite the history of the country etc. “We are in luck that until now they haven’t been cooperating as they see each other as political enemies”, concludes Wajsbrot.

### **Ferenc Czinki talks about the situation in Hungary.**

“I now mostly write petitions and declarations instead of other literary pieces as I believe that the freedom of art and speech should never be questioned”, says Czinki.

He then talks about the relation of culture and business in Hungary.

“Everything is labelled as democratic, legal and capitalistic. Every time the word dictatorship is being mentioned, politicians are offended. Public money and the actions undertaken by the so called “governmental businessmen” intertwines with private priorities. The Hungarian president has the ambition to rule for many more years.”

Marion Döring says that when the European Alliance of Academies visited Budapest, she had the impression that people there were tired, depressed, that there was no more energy. She asks Ferenc Czinki if he feels another spirit in Poland.

“Poland has always been a few steps behind us in terms of how bad the situation is”, says Czinki.

He concludes with the stereotype of the liberal oppositional intellectual who goes abroad to complain whom he can identify with.

**Jan Tomasz Adamus** – conductor and general and artistic director of the Kraków early music orchestra and mixed symphonic choir Capella Cracoviensis talks about the situation of his institution in Kraków.

Poland is facing many problems but its situation cannot be compared to the one in authoritarian countries.

General Managers of state philharmonics and operas are not interested in anything ambitious on stage! That is the biggest problem, this internal censorship. “If I didn’t fight for my repertoire, I would have to play Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* only”, says Jan Tomasz Adamus.

We should be smart and strong. We should talk to people, to politicians face to face, also in private, without audiences. “‘State’ as such is a myth. Behind it are people and **we need practical solutions to survive**. We have no right to destroy everything, we should act in a smart thought trough way.”

“The quality of democracy can be improved only through education. It doesn’t matter who is the mayor of this or other city. People are generally not educated enough” adds Jan Tomasz Adamus.

**Wolfgang Kaleck** a lawyer and founder of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights takes the floor and talks about cooperates with the Akademie der Künste and the European Alliance of academies since 2021.

He says he has some reservation when talking about European values as it reminds him of bigotry; prefers to talk about legal obligations instead.



The larger context here are growing authoritarian tendencies all around the world, not only in Europe. The debate on the freedom of art should be led in the context of shrinking spaces.

How to organize resistance against a variety of tools of oppressions? You have to react in a connected, multilevel way. It is an individual as well as collective task to help build resilience. International mechanisms and a smart use of legal tools can help here.

Wolfgang Kaleck than talks about utopian visions of justice. It is a long process to develop visions of what justice can be. "Combating right wing rhetoric requires a more complex political vision that goes beyond self-defense".

Then **Aleš Šteger** takes the floor.

There is more than one Europe, he says.

There is the Europe of diplomatic smiles, solidarity pacts, central bank, the European Court for Human Rights, bail outs and group photos of representatives of all member states. Its mouth is full of freedom and art and its anonymity is embedded in bureaucratic procedures. This Europe is a dull and unconvincing repetition of itself.

And then there is Europe behind the screen of the first Europe; a place to which we always return in conflicts and struggle. Its face is disfigured by its own past and present. It is cynicall, it mocks a fault sense of community, manipulates emotions; one gets shivers when seeing this Europe's face.

Šteger diagnoses chronic diseases of Europe. He quotes Czesław Miłosz's 1946 poem „Child of Europe”

1

*We, whose lungs fill with the sweetness of day.  
Who in May admire trees flowering  
Are better than those who perished.*

(...)

*As befits human beings, we explored good and evil.  
Our malignant wisdom has no like on this planet.*

**Paternalism** – a new word for the neo-colonial behavior in Europe in the last 20+ years. Colonialism within the EU is a continuation of years long processes. Besser-wisser, always in the domain of the stronger

**Cynicism:** any accident that may happen will actually happen, the EU is a master of petty calculating,

**Let others decide for us** (used to be Belgrade, today it is Brussels), blaming others of internal problems.

**Chronic pro-nationalism:** we operate cross border but when we are confronted with the unknown fear becomes the driving force, fear of failing and non-acceptance

## **Villa Decius, Debate *Rights and Freedom of Culture in Times of Political Change #2 – The situation in Poland***

Dominika Kasprowicz opens the debate mentioning its focus: the rights of culture and the development of people of culture. Right to what you do and what you do not do in the wake of a political change.

The field of culture as the primary field of political struggle has been eliminated from election programs. Lacking ideas on how to change Poland's cultural policy, there is no well-thought-out structural plan for cultural policy in the broadest sense, this applies also to oppositional programs.

Kasprowicz talks about a project conducted jointly with the university which analyzes election programs in regard to questions of the freedom of artistic expression, the state control and independence of cultural intuitions in terms of their content-related choices.

An intense discussions of the panelists follows. Here are the most important points each of them raised in this dialogue:

**Wtold Bereś**, journalist at a magazine *Kraków i Świat* (Kraków and the World), filmmaker and producer starts with saying that he's been in love with culture for 40 years. There is no culture without freedom.

He mentions an essay by Isaiah Berlin on the different stages of freedom (1958). Berlin initially defined negative liberty as "freedom from", that is, the absence of constraints on the agent imposed by other people. He defined positive liberty both as "freedom to", that is, the ability (not just the opportunity) to pursue and achieve willed goals; and also as autonomy or self-rule, as opposed to dependence on others.

"In our **hybrid democracy**, we do not have a "freedom to", we have a freedom "from", like in all Western countries. You can write anything, but to whom? There is no official censorship, but if the Polish state unleashes a huge aggression, what's in it for you."

He just finished writing a political thriller written under the supervision of lawyers about what's happening in Europe and how it will end (badly). The publisher didn't accept it because he's afraid of lawsuits.

"Dark times are coming, the situation in Kraków will change, no one is talking about it because we are afraid to say it", concludes Bereś.

We have the ability to respond to evil with intellect. The result should be an idea that allows us to act.

Bereś also mentions a TV production he withdrew from after the National Polish Television TVP suggested he should have a vodka with its director Jacek Kurski and discuss all the discrepancies between the opposing visions for this production in order to secure money for its realization.

He managed to make the film without TVP money but it took two years longer.

"Politicians won't help us. We must act horizontally, outside of politics, this is our only chance."

He is concerned about the election results but he sees the political tendencies as a global trend.

**"You can sell yourself, get some money maybe but nothing will come out of it, nothing will be left behind. Let's keep doing our thing!"**

**Michał Anna Nowicki**, director of the BARAKAH Theater in Kraków

BARAKAH is a non-institutional theater and has been operating for 19 years. Nowicki is currently undergoing a transition as a 50-year-old person. As a girl, he got accepted at a theater school and he indicates that this experience was not an easy one.

“There are no structures in Poland that allow trans people as full-fledged citizens and creators of culture to participate in the creation of art”, says Nowicki.

It is important for people like me to not be isolated.

For the past two years, the Barakah theater has not received any state subsidy because it initiated a nationwide project called “Attention: LGBT Zone”. A dialogue with authorities is entirely missing. Culture remains undefined.

Nowicki sees the upcoming elections as a huge hope. If we don’t participate in them, we will lose that hope.

He always chooses his repertoire with precision. Barakah stages plays about euthanasia, the Holocaust, war, transition, mobbing, and hunger for touch. “We can’t afford plays that will immediately end up in the trash.”

Nowicki stresses that the local government supports his theater but that all ways of communication with the Ministry have been blocked for him.

He mentions a Drag Queen Show that the BARAKAH theater prepared for the city wide Long Night of Theaters. “We were ordered to change the repertoire. When asked why drag artists were being discriminated against, an inspection by a committee was announced, which judged that it was not obscene and so the show was shown after all!”

Nowicki mentions that the BARAKAH Theater was attacked by anonymous perpetrators already three times in its new premises. The door to the theater was smashed, showcases with posters were destroyed. The entire country reacted – Nowicki was very moved by this solidarity. The theater management decided to publish a CCTV camera photo of the perpetrator and help the police. Tens of thousands of shares followed. “We found the man ourselves. It was a salesman in the store next door who didn’t even recognize me”, concludes Nowicki. Still, the case was dismissed by the police because the perpetrator was not found.

Another time one of the actors was beaten up in the foyer. “The worst thing is precisely that in Poland there is still a social permission for such things. We cannot count on the authorities defending an institution like ours.”

**“We represent an area of public activity, not our private affairs”**, stresses Nowicki.

**Bartosz Szydłowski** – director and founder of the Theater Łażnia Nowa in Nowa Huta

The right to culture – currently in Poland the fundamental fabric of creation is threatened.

There are people who, having been in the system for years, have been selected and are protected because their activities are considered socially relevant.

“Our representatives in parliaments treated culture as something optional after 1989 – the result is a great indifference to culture among the public. The ruling party demagogically exploits this now, devaluing culture. We have low-quality cultural products, and worthwhile projects are being eliminated. The Ministry gives more money to institutions that implement the state’s vision, to museums that show no exhibitions.”

“Theater is the most disadvantaged area of culture, in film the situation is a little better. I would like a state that will like crazy people. The entire political class has let go of the field of culture completely. Theater has always been disliked by politics”, says Szydłowski.

The cultural space is indestructible.

The authorities are putting a mirror in front of our society: more and more people will have a problem with personal freedom, they will become more conformist as they might not be able to stand it under such stress another if PiS is going to rule for the next 4 years. I have the impression that we have regressed, there is a growing attitude of entitlement, little sense of agency, an acceptance that someone else will fix something on us. These are the effects of the increasing tightening of the muzzle.

“It needs to be made clear to Western Europe why certain topics are relevant in Poland and Polish theater can explain it very well.”

**Natalia Zarzecka**, director of Cricoteka and art curator starts her statement with a quote from Tadeusz Kantor on how he understands freedom (from an essay published in 1989):

Freedom exists within us, we must fight with ourselves for it. Politics harms art. Concepts of political freedom and absolute freedom (André Breton).

It is unclear what is worse: political terror or the terror of the market?

Loyalty to Kantor is fundamental, says Zarzecka, “but it does not close us off to other subjects, we try to stimulate new audiences. Kantor the world, played in Polish, and became one of the most important directors of the 20th century.”

Zarzecka mentions the question of accessibility of Cricoteka for people with disabilities.

“Every day grassroots work will save us”, she concludes.

**Nele Hertling** mentions the arrogance of the Western theater makers toward Eastern European productions that dominated the discourse for many years.

**Dominika Kasprowicz** closes the debate with stressing the importance of Villa Decius that as an institution has been co-shaped by all its international visitors throughout the years.

It is important to revive the mutual curiosity around the world. Poland does not seem to be as curious as it declared to be in the 1990s. Contact to institutions in other countries is necessary for an energy to act.