

# THE PATH OF TURNING AN ENEMY INTO A PARTNER

By Violeta Simjanovska, Cultural Manager,  
Skopje

The contemporary Macedonian State was established by the end of the Second World War, as one of the six constitutive states of Federative Yugoslavia. It was proclaimed the national state of the Macedonian people. Macedonia existed for 46 years in the Federal Union, under the conditions of the one-party dictatorship. Since the fall of the SFR Yugoslavia in 1991, the Republic of Macedonia has become an independent, sovereign country.

The challenges facing the new Macedonian nation are enormous. Some of the long-term priorities of the new Macedonian State in the field of education and culture include the codification of the Macedonian literary language and the creation of conditions for the development of Macedonian culture.

After the proclamation of the Republic of Macedonia as an independent and sovereign state, the new political elites accepted the democratic and civil orientation of the state, laying emphasis on the era of pluralism. Similarly accepted was the concept of civil society, as an important factor for the country's future. Following from this vision it should be stressed that, over the last few years, Macedonia has been taking part in the broader

process of adjusting relations between nations, cultures, histories and territories, (a process specific to Central and Eastern Europe) and has been following the discourse on stimulating dialogue, strengthening democratic culture and the culture of democracy on the whole, but without changing its political decision-making mechanisms. At any rate, the vision of a democratic society was and is, in some spheres, still far from being reality. Between the vision and reality there were, and still are, huge gaps - primarily between the old and the new system. Yet, the path towards adopting this new vision is the only path that Macedonia, as the other countries in the region, can take, if it wants to share in European standards and engender a positive mode of life, and not becoming an isolated island. This endeavour implies change and we have all embarked on the process of transformation or, put in modern terms - transition.

Ralf Dahrendorf once said that, at the beginning of a process of transition, political change can be achieved in six months, economic change in six years and cultural change in 60 years. After 15 years we can see that things are not so simple: change can take different directions.

Immediately after the independence, the government decided to centralise the governing system. New laws were enacted, which may have been the right ones for the initial transitional period, but which became problematic later on, because of the centralisation. In the sphere of culture a law was enacted that placed the decision-making power in the hands of one man, namely the Minister of Culture. Unfortunately, despite some adaptations in the meantime, this is still the case. When one thinks that in Macedonia ministers rotate all too often (approximately the Minister is changed every 30 months), it is not surprising that the negative consequences are enormous. Furthermore, it is not just the Minister who behaves as if he is the only person who can make decisions about “cultural policy”, but in fact almost all the directors of almost all the public institutions display behaviour similar to that of our former socialist bosses. Somehow, these people were, and some of them still are, those who were proclaimed to be the great new leaders, the experts. Their word is final. They do not leave any space for new ideas and initiatives that match the current needs of the people.

Cultural life in Macedonia was formerly determined by the programmes of the cultural institutions that stood under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and therefore a space for independent activities was almost non-existent (with some rare exceptions). These cultural

institutions have not yet been transformed, with regard to their organizational, human resource and strategic capacities. They can be characterized by poor management, an incompatibility with and an inability to communicate with the outside world, massiveness, expensive maintenance, small scale and non-innovative production. The managers of the public institutions were chosen according to their party affiliation and obedience, rather than their qualities or qualifications. All of these factors have contributed to stagnation and non-inventiveness.

On the other hand, many citizens who did not “fit” the above-mentioned conditions did start to act independently, to group themselves and to realise some common goals. This was what led in the nineties to the NEW POSSIBILITY, which became the origin of the non-governmental organizations in the field of culture. The nineties is also characterized by the claustrophobic behaviour of the government toward these independent activists, because all forms of activities that stood outside government circles were perceived as oppositional, as the enemy.

In the meantime, with great international support (and solely international support) NGOs have begun to profile themselves with educated, qualified and mobile personnel, with the ability to follow technological progress and produce high quality products and results.

Unfortunately, the most relevant cultural NGOs, instead of being backed by the Ministry of Culture, have been rather marginalized. This may be laid down to several reasons such as fear of competition, fear of losing power, personal egos, unwillingness to allow outside high quality professionals on the cultural scene, because these might one day become key players in the sector, etc.

For example, one NGO in the field of culture from Skopje, Macedonia (PAC Multimedia), was and still is one of the most serious NGOs in Macedonia covering most areas in arts and culture. This particular NGO had to deal with a situation that shocked the Macedonian public 6 years ago (in 1999). The Museum of the City of Skopje, an institution supported by the Ministry of Culture, provided, by written agreement, a venue for the NGO's offices. A change of Government brought a new director to the Museum, who was not willing to continue the collaboration and decided to expel PAC Multimedia from the venue in a very dramatic fashion: by switching off the electricity, changing the locks, and ordering the organisation's staff to leave the premises within five hours. Although the Macedonian public was shocked by the news, including the most powerful journalists from all relevant media, important artists and others who voiced their condemnation of the affair and even addressed the Minister of Culture, there came no official reaction what so

ever. The Minister was silent. And now this venue has become a new Playboy Night Bar. The particular Minister in question is no longer Minister of Culture. He became Minister of Defence of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia in 2000 and is, at present, under investigation for misuse of his position and corruption.

Such and similar circumstances have only strengthened the role of the NGO sector in Macedonia and have made NGOs a significant force for change. They are the supervisor of the democratic process, a restorer of community responsibilities, a vehicle for the expression of public opinion, and they are in charge of creating "a sense of belonging". Public awareness is increasing. In this very significant process, it is precisely artists and intellectuals, as well as representatives from the NGO sector, who were the first to start to pave the discourse of stimulating dialogue and enhancing the democratic environment.

The previous discourse of negation and the absence of communication (which was a trend in the nineties) between two significant players in society, namely the government and the non-governmental sector, have gradually been replaced by dialogue. The division into THEM and US has been replaced by unity and togetherness - WITH US. We have become aware that, on various levels, we are more or less

speaking about the same issues. Our mutual interests, our space together, our cultural life, our public funds, our living together, our future in the EU. Slowly the authorities have started to accept their primary role, which is to be a service provider for the citizens.

One of the priorities of the Macedonian government is EU integration. The notion of EU membership seems to be one of the strongest bases upon which the country's fragile democracy is leaning. EU membership is one of the main reasons for the joint efforts of all the nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia to start to accept the concept of a multiethnic society. The adjustments to the European standards have forced the authorities to open up more and more towards the outside world. This implies not only a declarative dialogue with the civil sector and with the public in general, but also a critical glance inward, detecting its own weaknesses.

A new cultural policy movement has been set in motion in order to resolve some essential problems. It is directed primarily towards achieving the following goals: democratisation of the Ministry and its institutions, decentralisation of government, decentralisation of the cultural institutions and their opening up to the public, development of the cultural and arts' market, education of professional managers in the field of culture, reconstruction of operating systems, creating a platform for collaboration with the

civil sector and the establishment of new values that will emerge from all the above tendencies.

As a positive example I would like to refer to a civil initiative focusing on cultural policy that took place in the last four years called "Determining a possible strategy for cultural development in the Republic of Macedonia".

This initiative gathered a large number of intellectuals, cultural workers and representatives from the NGO sector. After long negotiations with the Ministry of Culture, the project was realized in partnership with the Ministry. One result of the civic initiative was also the first public support line for cultural and independent NGO's, from the Ministry of Culture's budget (2004). That was a sign of true change. We managed, from a position of opponents, almost perceived as enemies, to reach the status of partner. Although this status was at first rather declarative, it is strengthening more and more.

Macedonia is not a rich country that can afford to simply build a new infrastructure to satisfy the needs of the independent creative individuals, associations of citizens, or even the public at large. What we have at our disposal at the moment, and what forms our starting point in a positive direction of development, are the capacities and facilities of the public institutions, meaning - some infrastructure, whilst the independent NGOs have developed organisational and human resource capacities,

and abound in creative and innovative ideas.

Therefore, partnership among these two sectors would imply the employment of all existing resources in the field of culture, and this would, directly or indirectly, mean the improvement of cultural and living standards. This, in its turn, would mean approximation towards European standards.

While I am writing this text in the Republic of Macedonia (9 November 2005), the news is proclaiming that the European Commission has proposed that Macedonia receives the status of candidate for membership of the European Union. This is an important signal from outside, namely a confirmation that Macedonia is moving in a positive direction.

Transforming a way of life and changing society's norms, values and spiritual patterns is a long process, but even our relatively short experience since 1991 (when Macedonia became an independent country) has proven that new values and a new regulation of cultural activities should be fought for by all of us.

Skopje, 10 November 2005