

Lithuanian Institute for Social Research. A study of the cultural situation in the regions. Report of a sociological study. Vilnius, 2009.

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Culture can be understood as a totality of particular values, beliefs, traditions and customs. Culture has an influence on the thinking and actions of individuals and social groups, as well as determines their lifestyle. The Lithuanian society of today is characterized by rapid political, economic and social change – our life and values become transformed. Yet the need for culture, the ability to be proud and appreciative of the latter is the precondition for the vitality of any society.

As Lithuania has joined the European Union and experiences the increasing pressure of globalisation, the chief objective of Lithuania's culture policy – to preserve the identity and diversity of the national culture – becomes particularly relevant. Of special importance is the regional culture, which, being a constituent element of national culture, is being shaped and developed in various regions of Lithuania and reflects their distinct ethnic, linguistic, historical and cultural identity.

The development of regional culture encompasses the objectives to promote sustainable and targeted development of culture in the regions, to ensure the dissemination of cultural services and make them accessible to all of the country's residents by creating favourable conditions for the residents of the regions to satisfy their cultural needs and foster the regional traditions.

To determine the state of culture in Lithuania's regions, we examined the cultural situation at the level of municipalities in this study. This approach was motivated by the fact that the concept of regional culture in Lithuania is a fairly misleading one, as based on the formal administrative division of Lithuania a *region* should correspond to the county level, yet in the public space the state of culture in the counties is rarely addressed, because *regional culture* is defined by contrasting it with the capital city of Vilnius or by distinguishing the rural areas. The still-ongoing process of development and improvement of Lithuania's administrative system further complicates the situation – the final model of county reform has not been produced yet.

Another highlight of the study is the fact that the state of culture in the regions is assessed on the basis of a survey of the municipal culture centres' employees, who assume the role of experts in evaluating the cultural situation in the regions. This choice was not accidental, because the development of Lithuanian regional culture is very closely tied to the activity of the culture centres. It can be asserted that culture centres are the only cultural institutions that are capable of meeting the universal cultural needs of the people.

The object of the study: employees of the culture centres (CC) and municipal culture administrators. The directors, managers and art experts of the culture centres were surveyed as CC employees. The employees or experts of the municipalities' culture departments or other departments related to culture were surveyed as municipal culture administrators.

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The materials of focus group discussions and the summary of problems

The notion of the region and the assessment of regional culture policy

The participants of many focus group discussions addressed the vagueness of the concept of the region and acknowledged the lack of a shared understanding of the latter. According to the directors

of the culture centres, regions should be distinguished on the historical and ethnographic basis, because it is precisely the cultural traditions that form a region. Yet in the view of the heads of culture departments / culture experts of the municipalities, regions should be distinguished by assessing the economic integrity of a territory, and not just on the cultural ethnographic basis.

When discussing the state of regional culture, the CC directors proposed to follow the scheme of distinguishing between the Centre (the capital) and other Lithuanian regions corresponding to the level of municipality. The heads of culture departments / culture experts of the municipalities and mayors opposed this approach, emphasising that a single municipality is incapable of generating and sustaining cultural phenomena of broader significance. Therefore, the practice of distinguishing a larger subject of regional culture policy (e. g. a county) was viewed positively: *“In our county we have agreed upon supporting cultural phenomena rather than random small-scale events. The Philharmonic Society began organizing big events. Who must support these phenomena when the county is being abolished? Who can ensure continuity? Vilnius-based orchestras can come and give a concert, but who will sustain the milieu?”*; *“The problem of the regions’ cultural needs is a common one. There must be a point of support, a strong regional centre that would collect its own funds to finance its priority directions.”* It was stated that the municipalities’ culture policy could not be viewed as synonymous with regional culture. Substantiating the claim that both regional culture policy decisions and their implementation are not within the competence of the municipalities, the respondents stressed that the documents regulating regional culture policy, drawn up by the Ministry of Culture, are not obligatory for the municipalities.

It was stressed during the discussions that the Lithuanian law on local self-government specified that culture was an autonomous municipal function. However, it was also noted that there was a lack of autonomy at the level of elderships: *“It is good that the municipalities are autonomous; it would be good if the elderships were autonomous as well”*; *“culture could be administrated at the eldership level (the Ministry of Culture could support this)”*. Nevertheless, there was some controversy in the evaluation of local autonomy, and it was suggested that the autonomy of the municipalities should not deny the importance of the role of the Ministry of Culture: *“it is not good that the Ministry of Culture does not exert influence at the local level. For instance, there is a district-wide competition, and the jury includes a zootechnician or a lawyer. The Ministry should not leave the matters of culture solely to the municipalities...”*. It was also noted that the cultural situation and the understanding of the importance of culture in municipalities often depends on political or personal preferences: *“the situation depends on the mayor and the administrative director and their approach to culture. If there is no determination to preserve the tradition, and the focus is on the commercial aspect alone, the cultural situation is difficult”*; *“the cultural situation in a particular area depends on political and personal issues, although it is supposed to be culture policy, not politics in culture”*. The representatives of the communities also actively discussed the lack of awareness of the importance of culture at the level of local authorities: *“in general, culture is in the third place according to importance – the people’s need to eat is taken care of in the first place. The Council members believe that fun goes after that”*; *“the problems originate at the top – the municipality’s culture administration expert does not have much authority”*. Speaking of the role of the employees / specialists of the municipalities’ culture departments, it was acknowledged that they did not always do their job properly, and cultural workers lacked their support: *“the municipality has the Department of Education, Sports and Culture, 5 experts are working there, but it is unclear what they are actually doing – they provide cultural workers with neither methodological support nor mere assistance, only giving directions: these must do this and those must do that. They keep saying that they are unable to help because they don’t have funds. Everything remains limited to fruitless interaction several times a year”*.

When assessing the state of culture in the regions, the directors of the culture centres stated that even though the diversity of culture services in the regions did not match that of the big cities or the capital, the quality of culture services kept up with or even surpassed that of the latter. *“The quality*

of culture services in the regions exceeds that of the big cities and the capital, but the diversity is smaller, although maybe there is no need for greater diversity at all". "The regions surpass the capital both in the quality of culture services and in expertise". "If one was to take the republican and national institutions away from Vilnius, then the cultural situation in many regions would prove to be much better".

The advantage of the cultural situation in the regions was associated primarily with the fact that the provision of cultural services is directly related to the building and mobilization of the local community, which is difficult to attain in Vilnius. *"There is more consumerism in the centre. The municipality of Vilnius is lost, helpless, hasn't built a community and relies on shared national resources".*

It was suggested that the only culture centre in Vilnius was the Vilnius Teachers' House, but its situation cannot be compared with that of the regional culture centres. Two aspects were distinguished when summing up the existing cultural situation in the centre and in the regions:

- The activity of the culture centres (in this regard, Vilnius is weak, and the situation in the regions is often better).
- The activity of the national cultural institutions (the Philharmonic Society, state theatres and other institutions are mostly concentrated in Vilnius and their activity is *"unacceptably disproportionately focused on Vilnius"*).

The mayors of the municipalities also claimed that the popular belief which holds that nothing is happening in the regions is caused by the shortage of information about the regions' cultural life. The heads of culture departments / culture experts of the municipalities confirmed that preconceived attitudes towards culture in the regions do indeed exist: *"There is a bad trend. It is said that the regions only have the ethnic culture, there can be no other cultural phenomena there. Even the state officials publicly proclaim: "There are no cultural phenomena in the regions, there is no professional art there". This is not true, they are there".*

The insufficient focus on the importance of regional culture in the general context of the state culture policy was determined by analysing the allocation of funds as one of the instruments for the implementation of culture policy: *"If we compare all the recipients according to the amount of funds received, it is professional art that gets the most and is the manifest priority of the state culture policy. Regional culture is not the priority today. Yet it is precisely the tradition of the regions that makes Lithuania distinctive in comparison with other countries, it is what makes us interesting. Lithuanian professional art is of a very high quality, and today we are more concerned with this non-exclusive, albeit very high-quality, culture, even though it is the regions that shape Lithuania's image and make it special".*

Describing the cultural life of the rural areas, the representatives of community organisations reported a lower availability of culture services: *"The possibilities of cultural education of children in the countryside are poorer. It takes a 30 km ride: parents form groups of 4-5 people and drive their children to the music school. In addition, children who live in remote areas are taken home after classes and cannot participate in the activities of the culture centre".* There were claims that the cultural needs and the level of cultural activity of the local residents in the rural areas were quite limited as well: *"For instance, there are festivals organized in Zapyškis, but it is mostly residents of Kaunas who come, the locals do not participate – there is a need to educate them".* Still, it was also noted that the cultural situation in the regions varied and one should not focus only on the negative aspects, as there are also some very good things: *"it is precisely the regions and the countryside that preserve the language, customs and traditions. Sometimes the cultural situation in the regions is better than in the centre. Today there are enough culture services to meet the existing needs.";* *"festivities and other events take place in smaller towns and villages. These events are vibrant and warm, many people come to the countryside from the city to take part in them"; "people from the*

small town go to theatres in Kaunas or Klaipėda. People pay to go there 4-6 times a year. Do the residents of big cities go to theatre more often?”.

Evaluating the culture centres' contribution to the development of regional culture, the municipalities' mayors emphasised their educational activity: *“Culture centres are not merely organisers of leisure and entertainment. Of course they do also organise these types of activity, yet educational activity must be the priority in stimulating and supporting the culture of the regions. The focus on development of cultural needs must also be reflected in the regulation of the culture centres' activity. Classifying them as providers of education services will make it possible to finance the educational activities from the state funds dedicated to informal education using the study basket system”.*

The directors of the culture centres claimed that the biggest difference between the regions and the big cities was the fact that in the regions the culture centre was the primary culture dissemination institution, providing the services of dissemination of professional art, cultivation of amateur art and organisation of entertainment events alike. *“The culture centre carries out all of its statutory functions and even more; it is distinguished precisely by its multifunctional nature”.* Still, it is the development of amateur art that is perceived as the most important sphere of the culture centres' contribution to the regions' culture: *“Amateur art is a treasure”.* The directors of the culture centres suggested that the primary objective of the culture centres' activity was to find effective ways of involving people in the process of self-expression.

The lack of awareness of the importance of culture was identified as a major drawback, because it gave rise to other problems. *“People must realize the significance of cultural workers, because their activity is directly related to general education; culture is a huge sphere of education which requires a high level of professionalism”.*

Summing up the thoughts shared during the focus group discussions, the following main problem spheres were identified:

- People's cultural passivity;
- Uncertain nature of the model of optimisation of the culture centres' network;
- Lack of cooperation between different institutions;
- Low wages of the cultural workers;
- Shortage of culture experts.

People's cultural passivity

Discussing the possibilities of satisfying the cultural needs of the residents of the regions, some of the elders emphasised the passivity and the limited nature of cultural needs of the local people themselves: *“People are grumpy, cheerless, even in active communities less people show up, and there's nothing one can do about it”;* *“The need for culture in the countryside is decreasing – less people come. Even in the places where the material base of the culture centre is excellent and the buildings are in good condition, there is no end user – schools are being shut down, there are no children. There are about 20-30 active people in the village, others are insular and indifferent”.*

Other participants of the discussions opposed the expressed pessimistic view, arguing that, on the contrary, *“people's need for culture and interaction has increased”.* A lot was said about the need for increased application of new methods of culture dissemination that would be more attractive to the local residents: *“The events must suit the local people's needs, then they will come”;* *“it is important to find and implement new forms of activity. This is where our culture institutions and their employees can learn from the experience of other countries: for instance, the museums' activity – in Lithuania the museum is usually of interest only to experts. Museums offer educational activities, but the visitors cannot touch anything in the museum. Meanwhile, in Scotland, for*

instance, there are games for children put near a painting by Dali; in this way, they see the painting as well while playing. In addition, one can walk around the museum with a cup of coffee. Our children, on the other hand, are not really willing to go to the museum, so the teachers take them to the shopping mall”.

Optimisation of the culture centres’ network, cooperation between institutions

Various possible models of optimisation of the culture centres’ network were discussed. Considering the optimal configuration of such a network, the directors of the culture centres proposed several options:

- First option: each municipality should have one central culture centre (located in the district’s administrative centre) and several peripheral ones serving a certain territory with the radius of approximately 20 km, as well as smaller branches or additional specialists according to the need.
- Second option: the culture centre should be very close to the people. It is not necessary to have specialised halls in every locality, but it is not a good situation when one must travel 20 km to get to the culture centre. *“The mobilisation of people is one of the key functions of the culture centre, thus it is important for it to be within close reach”.*

The heads and the experts of the municipalities’ culture departments associated the problem of optimisation of the CC network with the choice of the model of a network of institutions, based on the culture policy provisions: *“There is no certainty at this point of purification. We are trying to purify the Soviet network, yet we haven’t chosen the model yet; it can be the Scandinavian model or the new Portuguese one. There is no wide supply of models. The optimisation of the library network entails centralisation, while the model of the culture centre network is not purified”.* The crystallisation of the culture centres’ objectives and tasks is equally important for the network’s optimisation: *“We are speaking about culture centres, thinking about amateur creative activity”.*

The law on culture centres regulates their activity, yet the expectations for them are ambivalent. Analysis of the implementation of regional culture policy reveals that culture centres are primarily expected to provide cultural and artistic education, yet even the culture experts themselves more often refer to them as a platform for amateur artistic activity. According to the heads and the experts of the municipalities’ culture departments, optimisation of the culture centre network requires a clearer regulative position of the Ministry of Culture: *“There is no model whatsoever, even though there are examples both in the social and the education sectors”;* *“The municipalities are inventing the bicycle, each on its own. It must be said clearly that a territory of such and such size, with a particular remoteness and reach factors must have a particular number of branches”.*

The culture experts of the municipalities compare their sphere with that of education, and see significant differences in the implementation of policy in these spheres: *“The sphere of education is obligatory and extremely important, while the sphere of culture is optional and completely unimportant. Strategic documents cannot be autonomous, they must be integrated. Yet the regions’ culture policy, administrative model, financing model and network model are all autonomous. We are sometimes asked how we are doing, but there are no guidance documents”;* *“Schools receive guidelines – a classroom must have this, this and this in order to be classified as a classroom”.* Similar regulations in the sphere of culture are lacking.

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The heads and the experts of the municipalities’ culture departments are sceptical about the newly emerging ideas that communities themselves can take care of culture: *“The community cannot replace the culture centre; it can only complement its activity with simpler things, but cannot shape serious cultural processes. The community chooses what is popular. Can we entrust the community*

with solving social and educational issues? Then why do we think that we can delegate cultural matters to it? It may be the medium, but not the developer”.

The directors of the culture centres attached particular importance to the mutual relationship of the culture centre and the increasingly active local community organisations. The position of the CC directors regarding the community organisations is ambivalent. On the one hand, the spontaneous reaction was: *“We will have another competitor”*; on the other, it was acknowledged that local communities could also be partners rather than competitors: *“Culture centres also organize mutual projects with community organisations. Often it is the employees of the culture centres who are the founders and activists of the community organisations”*; *“Perhaps we should indeed be more open”*.

Considering the potential subjects of cultural work, the mayors of the municipalities did not tend to single out any of them: *“It is culture itself that is important; whether it will be organised at the culture centre, community centre, or parish house is not essential”*. The attitude of the elders is similar: *“culture centres that lack activity and are understaffed could be given over to the community organisations”*.

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The elders also admitted that community organisations, culture centres and elders often compete: *“sometimes there is competition among community organisations, culture centres and elders while organising events. There are power struggles. It is crucially important that there is more coordination and cooperation, but this cannot be regulated by any legal acts”*. It was specified that the municipality and its Council played a prominent role in balancing and accommodating the interests of all parties: *“sometimes the distribution of funds among the communities, culture centres and elders provokes mutual hostility and conflict”*. The elders believe that it would be most appropriate to allocate the funds according to the following scheme: the financing of traditional national events should be distributed to the elderships in accordance with the number of residents, while community and culture centres should receive the funds in accordance with their competencies, organised events and their long-term value, and the ability to attract the people.

The representatives of community organisations discussed the situation which led to the emergence of local community organisations: *“in smaller and more remote localities in particular, almost nothing was happening, people were left to their own devices; the school, culture, the library were all distant from the people. Communities emerged precisely because people felt the lack of activity, there was a gap. Communities were founded with the purpose of uniting and mobilising the local residents and solving the sociocultural issues of the locality”*. It was noted that, compared to the employees of the culture centre, the activists of the community organisations keep in touch with a wider circle of local residents and solve a wider variety of problems: *“the cultural worker deals with 10 amateurs, while other do not know him”*; *“the communities engage in a wide range of activities: laying out the deceased, visiting the ill, contracting the reciters and funeral chanters, organising trips to theatres or abroad, etc.”*.

Speaking about the mutual relationship between the community centres and the culture centres, the representatives of the communities emphasised that collaboration between these institutions was vitally important, and that they ought to pursue a shared goal – to serve the people: *“the activity of the cultural workers is important for the activity of the communities, and sometimes vice versa – an active community organisation member animates the cultural life of the whole community”*. It was stated that there had been some conflicts earlier, but recently there were increasingly many examples of close collaboration between community organisations and culture centres: *“many of the community centre leaders are cultural workers (they must work jointly)”*; *“some time earlier, 3-5 years ago, there was more noticeable confrontation between the culture centre and the*

communities". Nevertheless, it was also noted that it was not always possible to avoid conflict and discontent: "sometimes the community organises the events instead of the cultural worker, although this mostly happens when the cultural worker does not live in that locality"; "naturally, the community is disgruntled when the cultural worker includes a community event in his work report, even though he does not show up and participate in it himself".

Representatives of the community organisations also drew attention to another aspect of the problem – the lack of collaboration between the cultural workers themselves: "there is no collaboration between the cultural workers themselves: the central library is a separate republic, and I don't know anything about the museums all the more. Libraries, museums and culture centres have little contact". A lot was said about the school's role in the local life; it was noted that the school often distances itself from the culture centre and the local community organisation. The heads and the culture experts of the municipal culture departments emphasised the tensions between the cultural and the educational institutions in carrying out the informal education functions, stressing their subordination to different ministries and the fund allocation principles.

In the view of the municipalities' mayors, "culture is inseparable from communication", and officialdom triggers mutual hostility between not only institutions, but also communities. Such polarisation involves confrontation between informal art education schools and culture centres, schools and libraries, etc. This confrontation leads to duplication of activity.

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The feasibility of establishing multifunctional culture centres was discussed. The directors of the culture centres claimed that in some smaller localities everything was already combined under one roof. There were also some doubts regarding the rationality of establishing multi-functional culture centres "now, when there are four axes: the school, the museum, the library, the culture centre; this is better than combining everything". It was also suggested that "culture centres are multifunctional institutions as they are; their activities are varied and of a broad scope, there is no need to squeeze everything into one shell". It was stressed that the most important thing was for multifunctional culture centres to emerge from an actual inner need and not just for the sake of conducting a "new experiment".

Culture centre employees

Speaking about the state of culture in the regions, the directors of the culture centres particularly noted the problem of the lack of culture experts: "the specialists are mostly concentrated in the big cities; the situation is perhaps somewhat better in the region of Žemaitija, where culture specialists are trained, but they do not go to the region of Dzūkija"; "If we are to measure the concentration of culture specialists using the measure of "specialist/m²", in the regions, where the situation is much worse, we can sometimes speak only about the measure "specialist/km²". The elders echoed their opinions: "many culture specialists are of retirement age, young ones do not come".

The issue of culture specialists' pay was stressed as being relevant as well – the wages are low: "specialists don't come to the regions for a wage of 800 Litass"; "Training a culture specialist costs a lot. It is a great asset. But low wages force people to quit and go to, for instance, art schools". The mayors also acknowledged that the problems of regional culture are associated, among other things, with the low level of pay, which is significantly lower than that of education workers, although it is not less important.

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Discussing the general cultural situation in the region and its recent developments, the directors of the culture centres admitted that the condition of culture is improving. The following indicators of improvement were identified:

- growing wages;
- ongoing renovation;
- implemented support programs (with one half financed by the ministry and the other half by the municipality).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- The ambiguous nature of the notion of the region and the absence of a generally accepted notion lead to the multiplicity of meanings of the notion of regional culture and a variety of interpretations: at times the region is associated with the level of the municipality and at times with that of the county. This highlights the need for greater clarity of the Lithuanian administrative reform.
- Culture's status of an autonomous municipal function leads to a situation where the documents that regulate regional culture are not obligatory for the municipalities and are not always implemented, or the local authorities do not recognize the importance of culture. On the other hand, the importance of state regulation of culture and financial support is emphasised. Therefore, appropriate modifications of the law on local self-government should be considered.
- When assessing the formation of state-level regional culture policy, doubts were voiced regarding the appropriateness of the administrative structure of the Ministry of Culture of Lithuania – there is a need for a uniform strategic structural unit to coordinate and analyse the development of regional culture. It is thought that the jurisdiction of such a strategic department for regional culture should encompass the branches of not only the culture centres, but also other cultural subjects (libraries, museums, etc.).
- When assessing the state of culture in the region, it was stated that the diversity of culture services in the region is lower than in the big cities or in the capital. Yet the quality of culture services is not lower and even surpasses that of the big cities. The belief that nothing is happening in the regions is a result of insufficient information about the regions' cultural life.
- Development of cultural needs was identified as one of the major objectives of the regional culture centres' activity. The educational function of the culture centres is emphasised in assessing their contribution to the development of regional culture.
- Discussing the programs important to the development of regional culture, the participants of the discussions distinguished between culture policy strategies, programs, and their implementation. The representatives of almost all groups positively evaluated their relevance and importance, yet also noted the occasional problems with their implementation.
- The following main problem spheres were identified: people's cultural passivity, uncertain nature of the model of optimisation of the culture centres' network, lack of cooperation between different institutions, low wages of the cultural workers, and shortage of culture experts.
- Discussing the general cultural situation in the region and its recent developments, it was admitted that the condition of culture was improving. The following indicators of improvement were identified: growing wages, ongoing renovation, and implemented support programs.