

The Influence of Cultural Policies from Romania on the Independent Cultural Sector

Viorel COJANU

*Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative din București
Bulevardul Expoziției 30A, 012244 București, România*

viorel.cojanu.24@drd.snsa.ro

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Abstract

Starting from a case study about an independent/private cultural entity - the Replika Educational Theater Center -, which has stood out in the national cultural landscape and whose importance has been recognized through various awards, this paper tries to highlight the role and importance of a national cultural policy, correlated with the current needs and necessities in the cultural field, which gives a clear direction to all the "actors" in the field - authorities, cultural workers, public or private/independent institutions, educational institutions - and which can prevent possible slippages of any kind: political, financial, administrative, etc. For contextualization, the main national public policy initiatives, the programs and initiatives of various public institutions that have among their objectives the generation of directions and strategies of national policies, statistical data on national and European cultural consumption, as well as the public debates of those directly involved and targeted were analyzed. At the same time, in Romania, where, in 34 years, the Ministry of Culture had 32 ministers, no Sectoral Strategy in the field was approved, and cultural consumption is below the European average, we can conclude that there are many systemic problems, which require real debates to remedy. However, in this dysfunctional ecosystem, independent cultural entities have managed to resist and create different cultural projects and cultural education programs but need predictability and continuity to continue providing quality cultural services anchored in the realities of the communities they represent and to develop institutionally. Thus, a public policy strategy in the field of culture must stimulate/protect the organizations/collectives that have proven to be a constant and recognized activity and support the creation of new organizations/collectives that respond to the new challenges that society "offers."

Keywords

Artist; Community Art; Cultural Consumption; Cultural Infrastructure; Cultural Policies; Educational Theatre.

Introduction

Twenty years after graduating from the National University of Theater and Cinematography „I.L. Caragiale,” Bucharest (UNATC) - Faculty of Theatre, Bachelor's and Master's, Performing Arts, I realize that I have become „a complete actor/artist”. No, it's not an immodest statement, nor one that denotes narcissism. During the student period, „a complete actor” meant the ability to acquire the most varied means of expression: singing, movement/dance, learning a musical instrument, some circus exercises (juggling), stage fights, and so on. In the last 10-15 years, this phrase has acquired a different meaning with the increased consolidation of the independent sector: „a complete actor/artist” is the one who knows how to write projects, makes accounts, produces performances, and manages and/or is managed, within various cultural projects.

In 2024, a young actor/artist, immediately after leaving the academic environment and entering the labor market, is forced not only to perfect or diversify his means of expression - to participate in a series of workshops with various professional artists, learn to play an instrument, learn the basics of different dance styles, etc. - but to fill a series of gaps that the labor market in the cultural area has: producer, cultural manager, stage technician (sound, lights, video, etc.), PR and communication, and many others.

According to the „Report on the state of higher education in Romania," published in December 2023 by the Ministry of Education, in the period 2014-2023, approximately 300,000 students were enrolled in university undergraduate studies in the fundamental field of studies *Arts and Humanities* (Ministry of Education, 2023). What is their future in the “labor market”? In most cases, employment in a public cultural institution for young artists is impossible. There are counties in Romania that do not have a theater (Bistrita Năsăud, Sălaj, Mehedinți, Ialomița, Teleorman - where Alexandria is a city that has been holding an important theater festival, *Ideo Ideis*, for over 15 years, without having a theater). Some cities with over 50,000 inhabitants do not have a theater: Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Bistrița, Alba Iulia, Slatina, Zalău, Hunedoara, etc.

In addition to the lack of cultural infrastructure, another cause is the rigidity with which the Authorising Officer approaches the organizational chart of a cultural institution, which must be a living entity in continuous contact with its audiences, as well as the multiple suspensions/freezes of employment at State institutions through various Emergency Ordinances - austerity measures - or the various merger and/or reorganization processes, which “cancel the professional status of cultural employees and mutilate the specific organizational structure" (Ministry of Culture, 2023).

„If we take a closer look at who we are working with and for, we find ourselves with a similar revelation: many of the artists around have a job, a survival source, or even primarily spend their time being managers (or different types of workers) in the arts. Actors who manage projects, dramaturgs who do PR, and art graduates who work in cultural policies... make up a big part of the cultural management field in Romania. Many navigate between their identities as creators and organizers and for some this constant negotiation between working to survive and working to create ends up with the manager taking over the artist" (Bucea, 2017).

Thus, this paradigm shift of the „complete actor/artist" becomes the prerogative of both the very rapid transformations in the cultural market, to which top universities and public performing arts institutions adapt very hard and arduously, as well as the indifference and inactivity of the decision-making factors in the elaboration of public cultural policies, from the last over 30 years. Unfortunately, „no executive, regardless of his declared ideological composition, was tender with the sensitive area of living culture (not to mention the perfectly irresponsible tolerance towards the destruction of inherited heritage)" (Baconschi, 2019).

Public policies are a series of actions carried out by the authorities (central or local) in response to the problems that come from society and represent „a network of decisions related to each other regarding the choice of objectives, means, and resources allocated to achieve them in specific situations " (Miroiu, 2001).

Even if, lately, much research has been undertaken on the role and importance of a cultural policy due to its contribution to general well-being, many are still opposed to the „peculiar oscillation in the status attributed to cultural policy as a sector of public policy action. It can figure successively as a peripheral and as a central component of governmental strategy, as superficial and as fundamental, as decorative or as substantial” (Ahearne, 2009).

The research objective of this paper is to highlight how a national cultural policy strategy, or rather lack thereof - as is the case in Romania - can influence the activity of an independent cultural organization. The independent cultural sector represents that segment of the cultural area, associated especially with NGOs and artists not affiliated with public structures (Zbranca, 2020), but which hides a vast diversity of types of organizations and types of objectives (Iacob, 2021), and any cultural policy strategy must not be thought of only from the perspective of public institutions but must provide a regulated framework for sustainable development for this “diversity” as well.

The case study carried out at the Replika Educational Theater Center serves as a model to understand this interdependent relationship between public policies and labor market actors in the independent cultural area. To contextualize the case study, the main national public policy initiatives, the programs, and initiatives of various public institutions that have among their objectives the generation of national policy directions and strategies, statistical data on national and European cultural consumption, as well as the public debates of the „actors” directly involved and targeted, regarding the systemic dysfunctions in the cultural area, were analyzed.

In structuring the material, the starting point was to review the cultural public policies in Romania, correlated with the importance of culture and participation in cultural activities in the sustainable development of society, also referring to the national and European realities of current cultural consumption, continuing with a case study, which reflects the impact that a socio-political context has on the independent cultural sector.

The evolution of public policies in the cultural area in Romania

In the last two decades, more and more research has highlighted the importance of culture and participation in cultural activities in the „sustainable” development of both the population and society. Culture (the creative sector) has permanent funding in Europe and developed countries in general. It is among the main engines of development and economic growth, being considered, along with education and health services, a public service of national importance (Croitoru, 2017), and the World Health Organization summarized in a report, global evidence on the role of art in improving health and well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

At the national level, references to the importance of culture can be found in various specific development strategies, starting from the encouragement of creativity during early education – provided for in the document “Educated Romania,” continuing with the reforms in the cultural field existing in Component 11 of the National Recovery and

Resilience Plan (PNRR) – whose implementation falls under the responsibility of four ministries (the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration) – and also passing through cultural diplomacy – seen as a tool for increasing Romania's relevance internationally (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, 2024). However, as noted in the analysis carried out for the Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2023-2030, the existence of dysfunctions in inter-ministerial collaboration, as well as reduced coordination between the central public authority and local public authorities (Unitatea de Management a Proiectului - UMP, 2023), lead to the lack of programmatic documents and public policies specific to the field of culture, in accordance with the European strategic framework.

Unfortunately, in the last 34 years, in Romania, there has been no continuity regarding the development and implementation of public policies in the cultural field. There is no systemic vision that is based on real consultations with all the players/beneficiaries of these policies and political non-assumption of the various national strategies elaborated over time (e.g., *the Sectoral Strategy in the field of Culture and National Heritage 2014-2020*; *the Sectoral Strategy for Culture and National Heritage 2016-2022*, and recently *the Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2024 - 2030* - the updated version) made it impossible to carry out a fundamental reform of the cultural sector. For a clearer understanding of this phenomenon, it should be mentioned that *the Sectoral Strategy in the field of Culture and National Heritage 2014-2020* was not proposed for official adoption, and *the Sectoral Strategy for Culture and National Heritage 2016-2022* was in public debate, but it has not been finalized nor has it passed the consultation stage.

In 2020, Lucian Romaşcanu (from the PSD party) and Vlad Alexandrescu (from the USR party) - both former Ministers of Culture - drafted a bill to amend Government Emergency Ordinance no. 189, which establishes the legal framework for the appointment of directors of cultural institutions, but was approved negatively by the Ministry of Culture, led at that time by Bogdan Gheorghiu (from the PNL party). This situation brought back into question the need for reform in the cultural sector, „OUG 189 kept changing (about five times), but the changes were related to the wishes of the political decision-makers and less to the real needs of the sector” (Cucuteanu, 2020).

„No government approves the cultural strategy, already drafted in 2013 and completed in 2016. Why? Because a cultural strategy approved by a government does not facilitate the disorderly support of some events with electoral or populist purposes, because an assumed cultural strategy risks filling the gaps of information and critical thinking, risks collaborating with the environment and education to constitute a critical mass of more well-read citizens, more permeable to new things, more open to constructive dialogue, in a word: more demanding, among other things” (Şuteu, 2019).

As for funding, according to an analysis carried out for the period 2000 – 2018 by the National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (INCFRC), there is a tendency to increase the national average of the percentage of expenditures made by local public authorities, with values ranging from 3.3% – the minimum in 2001 – to 10% – the maximum value reached in 2018. It should be noted that these expenses are made in the entire chapter 67, Culture, recreation and religion. The law used mainly by local public authorities for the financing of cultural projects from non-reimbursable public

funds is Law 350/2005 – which generically refers to any non-profit project of interest to the community -to the detriment of OG 51/1998, which is a legislative act dedicated to the financing of cultural projects (Savu & Pălici, 2020). At the same time, there is a decrease from 0.41% (in 2017) to 0.18% (in 2020) of the expenses from the State Budget allocated to the Ministry of Culture, even if, in absolute values, there was an increase of over 100 million lei, from 630 million lei (in 2017) to 774 million lei (in 2020) (Unitatea de Management a Proiectului-UMP, 2022).

Even if cultural policy is a small domain of public policy that attracts relatively little attention from voters and the media (Henningsen, 2023), responsible government officials must obtain support from actors in the sector to succeed in formulating public policies consistent with the reality on the ground, because, in a democratic policy, a public strategy must be accepted as legitimate (Muers, 2018).

„Promoting an inclusive vision in relation to the idea of public culture, taking into account the participation of NGOs as an integral part, would contribute significantly to enhancing the field's capacity to educate and emancipate audiences. From a very pragmatic perspective, what makes even more urgent the need to address this imbalance is a very high market pressure on the reform and implicitly on the adaptation of the system to the reality on the ground, resulting from the appearance of an ever-increasing number of graduates of profile faculties on the labor market" (Drăgănescu & Drăghici, 2021).

In 34 years, the Ministry of Culture had 32 ministers. Only three had a mandate of approximately 4 years (between 40 and 48 months): Răzvan Theodorescu, Ion Caramitru, and Adrian Iorgulescu. After a brief analysis, it appears that 29 ministers "rotated" in the seat of the Ministry of Culture, in approximately 21 years, as follows: 4 ministers stayed for more than 20 months (Hunor Kelemen, Bogdan Gheorghiu, Andrei Pleșu, Lucian Romașcanu); 9 ministers stayed over 10 months (Marin Sorescu, Viorel Mărginean, Ludovic Spiess, Valer-Daniel Breaz, Theodor Paleologu, Daniel Constantin Barbu, Ionuț Vulpescu, Mihail Golu, George Ivașcu); 7 ministers stayed over 5 months (Mona Muscă, Corina Șuteu, Lucian Romașcanu, Hunor Kelemen, Vlad Alexandrescu, Puiu Hașotti, Ionuț Vulpescu); 2 ministers stayed between 3 and 4 months (Grigore Zanc, Petre Sălcudeanu); 3 ministers stayed for about 2 months (Victor Ponta, Mircea Diaconu, Gigel Știrbu); 3 ministers stayed for a month each (Mihnea Costoiu, Liviu Maior, Csilla Hegedüs).

„I thank the minister for making an act of normality here. We also had the first official meeting at the time when there were hearings in the Parliament. In parentheses, (...) we only came the former and the present (Minister of Culture - n.a.), we could, if we thought a little, come with the future as well (Minister of Culture - n.a.). I was the 31st and the 27th, and the minister is the 32nd, so we rotate harder like the coaches from Steaua. The idea is that, if we cannot have continuity through people in positions, that is how Romanian politics is, at least let us have continuity in projects and what we set out to do (...)” (Matei, 2023) (Lucian Romașcanu, Minister of Culture, at the press conference at FITS 30 - Sibiu International Theater Festival, 2023).

The lack of coherent cultural policies and strategies was felt most acutely during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when public authorities were unable to intervene in support of the cultural sector, proving that at the legal level, it was extremely difficult for cultural

workers in Romania to demonstrate their employment status and prove their eligibility to benefit from the state aid allowance. The Ministry of Culture had only a few disparate general situations collected only from the level of subordinate institutions (Croitoru, 2021).

The National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (INCFC) only started in January 2021, after an attempt not completed in 2020 - due to the inconsistent correlation with the state aid scheme regarding the support of the cultural sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic - to draw up a Register of the Cultural Sector, to map individuals, non-governmental organizations and companies active in the field of culture, on a self-registration basis.

All this inactivity at the level of the decision-making factors is also observed by the delay in the adoption of the de minimis aid scheme for the independent cultural sector, approved by Order no. 3453 on November 4, 2022, and published in the Official Gazette, Part I, no. 1090 on November 11, 2022. The scheme's objective is "to support beneficiaries whose activity was negatively affected by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus or whose activity was prohibited by military orders during the state of emergency or restricted during the state of emergency alert" (Monitorul Oficial, 2022).

Cultural consumption in Romania

The current context in which we debate and act on the importance and necessity of a national cultural policy and strategy is given by both the latest Cultural Consumption Barometers and the latest data provided by Eurostat on cultural consumption in the EU.

„Cultural Consumption Barometer 2022. Cultural participation and democratic perspectives", the study by the National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (INCFC), indicates, among other things, a decrease in participation in theater performances and watching films at the cinema compared to 2019 (a prepandemic year). Thus, according to the barometer, at the level of cultural consumption in the public space, the effects of the pandemic are being felt considerably, with the only increase recorded being 14 percentage points for visiting historical monuments or archaeological sites, at least once a year (59% of respondents in 2022, compared to 45% in 2019). This increase is also explained in light of the longer maintenance of the ban on activities in closed public spaces during the pandemic.

Table 1. Dynamics of cultural consumption in Romania between 2019 and 2022 (Source: Croitoru, Becuț Marinescu, Ceobanu, Hampu & Matei, 2023)

ACTIVITY	2019	2022	EVOLUTION
Visiting a historical monument or an archaeological site at least once a year	45%	59%	+ 14%
Participation in theatre performances at least once a year	29%	20%	- 9%
Watching movies at the cinema at least once a year	35%	26%	- 9%
Going to the library to read / borrow books at least once a year	28%	17%	- 11%
Visiting a museum, exhibition, or gallery of art, at least once a year	38%	30%	- 8%

The explanation for the decreases in cultural consumption highlighted in the comparative analysis is not only in terms of the prohibition of activities in closed public spaces - during the pandemic -, but also as a result of the decrease in the purchasing power of the population and the barriers to reception of a cultural product. These barriers to the positive response to a cultural product, accentuated in recent years, require a series of measures to increase interest in culture and the understanding of cultural products and artistic creations through cultural education projects addressed to both children and young people, as well as adults (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2023).

This low cultural consumption in Romania is also highlighted in European statistics. In 2015, around 62.6% of the EU adult population (aged 16 and over) said they had gone to the cinema, attended a live performance (Theater, concert, outdoor cultural event, etc.), or visited a cultural site (museum, historical monument, art gallery or archaeological site) in the last 12 months. Within this statistic, Romania has a percentage of 27.4% (Eurostat, 2020). According to the same Eurostat, in the EU, the participation rate in cultural activities was higher among groups with an above-average income than among those with low incomes. In 2022, in Romania, less than half of people with high incomes participated in cultural activities, and the rate of cultural participation among people with low incomes was below 20% (Eurostat, 2024). The same data show us that there are significant gaps between different social and demographic categories and that there is a tendency for lower participation of women, older adults, people from rural areas, and those with a low level of education and income (below the national average) to cultural activities.

These realities are also supported by the inability of the political sector to understand both the cultural sector and the management of a performance institution.

„What does the local authority want from the theater in the town? What does it want for the local community? I have read a little about it. Maybe also because the local authority, those in charge of Culture either have no idea what the management of a performance institution means, which they often align with the management of an enterprise, or they are only interested in the imposition of a particular candidate(s). It is almost impossible to talk about a vision related to the development of the city, of the area from the perspective of a complex theatrical activity. Instead, a strange fact, 7 Romanian municipalities have signed up or want to sign up in the pre-selection race (in December) for the designation of European Capital of Culture 2021. The absurdity, in fact, is not that they signed up, but that some do not have a modern, multidisciplinary cultural infrastructure, consolidated relations with their own community” (Popescu, 2015).

Bureaucracy, dependence on the political factor and inclusion in the general framework of a public administration, without taking into account the specific needs of the cultural area (frequency of mobility in artistic work; atypical forms of contracting artists - through temporary, part-time contracts - on projects; the continuous need for professional training; the support of contemporary cultural forms, etc.), make many public institutions unable to adapt to the demands of the labor market.

Nevertheless, over the past 30 years, a very active segment of independent organizations, private companies, and freelancers has developed to meet many of

these labor market needs. However, the instability of the funds and the preponderance of „project-based“ financing, the non-adaptation of the legislative framework and eligible expenditure categories, the rigidity in the area of public cultural institutions, the majority of cultural operators in the independent area cannot design a stable human resources plan, preferring to work with collaborators (artists, technicians, administrative staff). This project-based art, which involves a finite time frame and limited resources and uses theories and management tools as in the business environment, does not allow for a long-term vision and planning (Zbranca, 2020).

Within this cultural ecosystem, a significant number of cultural workers became self-taught and learned, through practice, what it means and how to approach other jobs in the cultural sector, some still unregulated.

Methodology

For this analysis, the case study was chosen as a research tool because it is a qualitative research method that aims to present and provide an in-depth understanding of a complex reality and “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individuals life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood changes, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (Yin, 2009). „Case study research typically focuses on an individual representative of a group, an organization or organizations, or a phenomenon. The phenomenon being researched is studied in its natural context, bounded by space and time. Case study research is richly descriptive because it is grounded in deep and varied sources of information. It employs quotes from key participants, anecdotes, narratives composed from original interviews, and other literary techniques to create mental images that bring to life the complexity of the many variables inherent in the phenomenon being studied” (Hancock, Algozzine & Lim, 2021).

For this case study, the Replika Educational Theater Center was selected, a Bucharest cultural space with a clear and well-defined direction in its approximately 10 years of activity, which can say that it represented the "pioneer" in educational theater in Romania because "The Replika Cultural Association did shows for teenagers at a time when they were not yet "fashionable," before the establishment of the Center" (Stoica, 2019).

„Unlike the eternal stories about good and evil presented in children's theaters, these shows addressed concrete, specific, and immediate problems that they faced: *Memories from the school era* (about the destruction of the imagination at school), *The Offline Family* and *The Children's Rights Theater* (participatory theater where children of different ages play alongside the actors). Performances, workshops, and debates have been presented in the *Educational Theater Platform*, a festival from 2014 that will turn, after the opening of the Center, into a season of events for young audiences, the *Educational Art Platform*, with two sessions, spring, and autumn” (Stoica, 2019).

The research objective is to highlight how a national cultural policy strategy or, rather, the lack of it - as in the case of Romania - can influence the activity of an independent cultural organization. Considering that a public policy in the field of culture involves

governmental strategies and activities that promote "the production, dissemination, marketing, and consumption of the arts" (Rentschler, 2002), through the realization of the case study, we can understand this inter-dependent relationship between public policies and labor market actors in the independent cultural area and beyond.

The case study started with analyzing the internal documents of the Replika Cultural Association. This entity manages the Replika Educational Theater Center (Statute, Activity Reports, Reports of the various projects implemented with national and European non-reimbursable funds, etc.) and continued with a series of in-depth interviews among the founding members by using open questions and at the same time focused on the mission and vision of the Replika Educational Theater Center, in relation to the actions of the regulatory authorities in the field.

The qualitative research took into account the in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interdependence between a national cultural strategy and an independent cultural space, focused on actions of education through culture, artistic research of community issues, and addressing themes, most of the time taboo. Seven interviews were conducted, and the interviewees were both founding members – with over 15 years of experience in the independent theater sector – but also young associate artists who began to develop educational theater projects, mentored by the artists of the Replika Center.

Table 2. Replika interviewed staff and the diversity of "jobs"

Name	Position in Replika	Years of experience in Replika	Other "Jobs" in the cultural field
Radu APOSTOL	Artistic director / theater director	13	Sound technician, lighting technician, playwright, project manager, PR and communication, responsible for receiving the audience, writing projects, responsible for maintaining cleanliness
Mihaela MICHAILOV	Artistic director / playwright	13	Project manager, PR and communication, responsible for receiving the audience, writing projects, responsible for maintaining cleanliness
Gabi ALBU	Scenographer	13	Sound technician, lighting technician, responsible for maintaining cleanliness, Theater set handler, props, costume designer and cabin crew
Elena GĂGEANU	Video artist	9	Sound technician, lighting technician, PR and communication, responsible for maintaining cleanliness, Theater set handler, props
Anna AROȘ	Responsible for PR and Communication	7	Sound technician, lighting technician, PR and communication, responsible for maintaining cleanliness, Theater set handler, props
Tania DRĂGHICI	Theater director	1	Sound technician, lighting technician, project manager, PR and communication, writing projects, responsible for maintaining cleanliness, Theater set handler, props
Larisa POPA	Theater director	1	Sound technician, lighting technician, project manager, PR and communication, writing projects, responsible for maintaining cleanliness, Theater set handler, props

The evolution of a thriving cultural organization. The impact of public policies on the independent theatrical sector

In November 2011, the Replika Cultural Association was established with the following objectives, according to the Statute: the promotion of Romanian culture by organizing theater performances, fine art exhibitions, scenography, costumes and other forms and creations in the cultural field; promoting contemporary art by performing contemporary dramaturgy shows, editing, publishing and distributing specialized magazines, books, dramaturgy, adaptations, scenarios, etc.; carrying out cultural and educational programs and projects (Replika, 2011).

At the time of its establishment, these objectives had a general character - we must take into account that the founding members are artists who, as I mentioned at the beginning of the work, belong to the category of those who tried to acquire/improve specific knowledge without resorting to the help of a formal institution - autodidacticism -, to meet particular needs in the cultural area. With the passage of time and the accumulation of practical knowledge through direct contact with the communities in which they implemented different education projects through culture, these objectives became more specific and consistent with the realities in and for which their creations were designed, summarized in what is called Educational Theater.

Educational Theater involves artistic research and work in and with different communities, and most artistic/theatrical solutions are given by those you co-create with, "who are not only performers of roles fixed by the artists, but become, themselves, creators and authors involved in the development of the show" (Apostol, 2018). The community is motivated to participate in co-creating a cultural endeavor "because their proposals give them security on stage and make them feel represented by what they play" (Apostol, 2018).

„I strongly believe in the artist inspired and nourished by the society in which he lives, the artist who builds creative communities, who leaves the numbed and canonized theater behind to enter the "living life" in his proximity... Working with professionals and non-professionals, projects inspired and developed due to collaboration between different communities are, for me, the main source of theatrical creativity" (Apostol, 2018).

After a series of cultural, educational, and intervention projects implemented in partnership with various local and national cultural institutions (National Dance Center, Bucharest; Little Theater, Bucharest; Comedy Theater, Bucharest; "Mihai Eminescu" Theater, Botoșani; "Bacovia" Municipal Theater, Bacău, etc.), the Replika Cultural Association established, in 2015, the Replika Educational Theater Center, an independent, interdisciplinary space, intended for collaboration between professional artists and underrepresented communities or groups.

„The Replika Center aims to develop and promote artistic research programs and creations focused on acute themes and topics in contemporary society, valuing an art in solidarity with the world in which we live. The Replika Center aims to become a platform for pedagogical creation and participatory art through which marginalized audiences can represent themselves and create art that defines their needs and

expectations. We believe that community art can ennoble society, every man is born an artist, every man is a pedagogue in continuous formation. We believe that access to any cultural event must be *free*, supported by the entire community. We support the right to representation of marginalized categories that face ignored or insufficiently explored issues" (Replika, 2015).

Since its establishment, the Replika Educational Theater Center - a theater studio room with a capacity of 64 seats -, located in Tineretului District, on 93-95 Lănăriei Street, behind the Gheorghe Șincai National College, has proposed the creation of a context of exploration and consolidation of a work methodology specific to educational theater - a direction of research and artistic practice through which vulnerable groups are directly involved in the realization of projects, thus emphasizing the need for their representation.

Anchored in the Romanian reality - which, through the statistical data also presented in this work, highlights the fact that in 2023, the highest share of people facing severe material and social deprivation was recorded (19.8%) (Eurostat, 2024) - The Replika Center aimed, from the very beginning, to become an accessible and inclusive space, through the *free access* of the public to all public events and creative workshops organized by it.

In 2015 and 2016, the show produced by the Replika Association - „*Familia Offline*” - was played at the Replika Center, in which the Center's team (playwright Mihaela Michailov, director Radu Apostol, actress Mihaela Rădescu and actor Viorel Cojanu) worked with 10 children from the neighborhood Republica (Bucharest), for a year, in workshops on children who stay alone at home and whose parents are away working abroad. The show produced as a result of these workshops, in which the two professional actors and the 10 children performed together, was performed in more than 15 cities in the country. The work experience and the educational theater methodology used were also concretized in two books - „*Familia Offline*” and „*Educational Theatre. Games and Exercises*”, books that are in the curriculum of the Master's Degree in Theater Pedagogy from the National University of Theater and Cinematography „I.L. Caragiale”, Bucharest.

By working on this show and its subsequent performances, both in Bucharest and in the country - tours were made in more than 15 cities in Romania -the educational theater methodology began to take shape and become the main approach in all subsequent endeavors of to the team of initiator artists of the Replika Center.

„For me, Theater has always been a community art that bears the imprint of the society in which creators appear and are formed, but I also believe that Theater represents a method of educating and training people in society. Like Hamlet, the theater artist should devise "spectacular traps" to enlighten his peers" (Apostol, 2018).

The shows produced or realized in partnership with the Replika Center were performed in schools and high schools in Bucharest and the country. The priority for the Center's artists is to disseminate cultural projects in as diverse educational environments as possible - education through culture.

„From the very beginning, we wanted the phrase "educational theater" to be included in the name we will take, because it seemed to us that it best defines the direction we are concerned with. Namely a theater where we develop performances and different types of theatrical formats centered on educational themes and topics. A theater where we debate with our audiences the problems we tackle, trying to find solutions together, educating each other. We firmly believe that Theater is the most empathetic form of collective education and social criticism of major dysfunctions and inequities. We strongly believe that Theater is a popular pedagogy that should bring communities together, not reiterate inequalities. That is why one of our core values has been free access to cultural performances and activities” (Michailov & Apostol, 2021).

In the first 5 years, the Replika Educational Theater Center organized five editions of the Educational Art Platform, an event focused on performances of shows with an educational dimension, book presentations, and film screenings. The concept of the Educational Art Platform is centered on the presentation of cultural creations different in terms of aesthetic language and stylistic content but related from the point of view of the theme addressed in such a way that various categories of the public have the opportunity to reflect from multiple perspectives on some related issues between them. Within each micro-season, performances were presented that explore themes and subjects extracted from everyday reality, themes that expose young people, but not only, to confrontations with the world they live in: the history of the family in Romania, the rights of the child, criticism of the system of education, how pornography affects the education of teenagers, the role of social networks in the daily life of young people, gender identity, children's relationship to truth and lies, discrimination and how stereotypes and clichés shape our thinking, etc. The books and films chosen had similar themes to those of the shows, thus developing an appetite for theatre, literature and cinematography, received as a unit.

Another project successfully carried out for 3 years, in 3 secondary schools in Bucharest, was *Play what you see! Cultural intervention in school*, which offered, through games and theatrical exercises, a type of education based on immediate experience and direct knowledge, students being challenged to imagine concrete situations of action and to learn by intervening in the immediate reality. The project was one of creative education and social awareness, which aimed at a performative approach to posters pasted in a school, transformed into artistic creation material.

„Posters represent a textual and visual medium with which students come into daily contact, belonging to the space – the school – in which they spend a good part of their time and having – in most cases – a social relevance (combating violence in school, combating domestic violence, combating human trafficking, supporting responsible consumption). The project explores performatively – through theater, video art, installation – the way in which students understand, become aware, dramatize and artistically expose the content of these posters, the way in which the message can have a direct impact on them. The posters represent messages that generate civic action, through which the school is transformed into a space for social intervention” (Replika, 2018).

The Replika Center is an independent cultural space that does not benefit from direct support from local or national authorities; all the programs, projects, and activities it

carries out are within the projects with non-reimbursable funding (local, national, or European), which the artists involved write, implement and report.

Considering the structure of funding in the cultural area, which is primarily based on an annual budget, and the eligible indirect expenses (rent, utilities, communications, etc.) cannot exceed between 5% and 10%, it is very difficult for an independent cultural entity, which also manages a performance hall, to have security and continuity in the projects and programs it runs. At the same time, to be able to cover as much of these expenses as possible with the performance halls, many of the independent cultural spaces are forced to carry out as many projects as possible, which, over time, becomes an additional burden for the artists who manage these spaces. Also, because of this uncertainty and lack of continuity of funds, very few independent entities can afford to hire administrative, technical, and artistic staff with a work card, the contracting being on a project or cultural program, with a limited duration of time.

Starting from the analysis of the projects and programs of education through culture that the members of the Replika Center have implemented and from the realities faced by an independent cultural space, the research continued with a series of interviews with both the founding members and artists from the young generation, who joined this artistic approach. The questions were outlined around the relationship between the state – the artist – the independent cultural sector.

Analyzing the answers, we can see a common need that a cultural strategy should have among its objectives „the support through multiannual funding (minimum 3 years, maximum 5 years) of cultural programs that have asserted themselves in the last 10-15 years, in cultural spaces established from private/independent initiatives and which have an educational, formative mission" (Radu Apostol, Founding member and Artistic Director of the Replika Center), as well as supporting your generation of artists by „creating frameworks that programmatically support artists at the beginning of their journey, through grants dedicated to them" (Mihaela Michailov, Founding member and Artistic Director of the Replika Center).

„From my experience so far, I don't think that the Romanian state sufficiently supports artistic endeavors, especially of young artists (independent, by the way). I think it would be important to have more funding to which you can apply, at different times of the year. Although we have the AFCN (Administration of the National Cultural Fund, n.a.), it offers only two funding periods, which is little, considering that during your studies, no one teaches you to write a cultural project, so you can very easily lose funding, not knowing how and what a cultural project means" (Tania Drăghici, young Associate artist of the Replika Center).

„Cultural education should become a national priority and provide a framework for collaboration for the two ministries concerned. First of all, the independent sector is the one that, in recent years, has proposed the most relevant cultural education projects with national coverage. The strategy should take into account and expand on models of good practice offered by the independent sector, giving more cultural actors the opportunity to participate in them. In this way, both national and local funding could be created for projects that have this strategy at their core" (Mihaela Michailov, Founding member and Artistic Director of the Replika Center).

„Our elected representatives, both in Parliament and at the level of the local administration, understand by "culture" only the "circus" offered from time to time, seasoned with the "bread" specific to a time of the year (either meatballs and beer, or cabbage rolls and alcohol, or bean food) or worse imagine bombastic themes, with a nationalist and patriotic flavor (see the National Culture Day, see year X, Romanians everywhere, etc.) Or even worse, the most serious: they have a corporate vision of the cultural field, "how much money do I put in and how much money do I get?" (Radu Apostol, Founding member and Artistic Director of the Replika Center).

Conclusions

Access to culture is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Romanian Constitution, which, through Article 33, regulates access to culture as guaranteed, the freedom of the person to develop his spirituality and to access the values of national and universal culture cannot be restricted. Access to cultural practice and experience attributes to each individual the feeling of belonging to a group, to a community, contributing to personal development. Thus, "the development of personal, social, creative and intercultural skills, and thus the very integration into society, become impossible to achieve without access to culture, which deprives the individual of essential qualities for adaptation in a community" (Matefi & Cupu, 2021).

However, as we could also see from the contextualization of this case study, Romania has not adopted a cultural strategy in the last 30 years that would provide a clear framework and vision for the sustainable development of the public and independent/private cultural environment. Each time, we lean towards culture only when an artist or an artistic collective receives international recognition, in electoral campaigns – when "bread and circuses" are offered – or when force majeure events occur.

The multiple and diverse forms of organization of both the entities that operate in the cultural area, as well as the objectives they have, make it necessary to consult very thoroughly with each "actor" to be able to develop a cultural strategy that is as coherent as possible with what a "living culture" means, today. This consultation can become the first step towards a normal public-private partnership relationship in the cultural area to solve systemic deficiencies, of which each one is aware but does not have the necessary resources or cannot or does not want to find the most viable solutions.

In the Romanian context, any independent cultural space needs predictability and continuity to contribute to increasing the population's participation in cultural activities – a fundamental human right – to offer quality cultural services anchored in the realities of the communities it represents and to succeed in institutional development. Thus, a public policy strategy in the field of culture must stimulate/protect organizations/collectives that have proven a constant and recognized activity and support the creation of new organizations/collectives which respond to the new challenges that society „offers.” Encouraging the development of local and regional cultural infrastructure, creating a favorable framework for institutional grants for a more extended time (between three and five years), supporting young artists, and integrating cultural education as a main priority could

represent some directions that a public policy strategy, anchored in reality, should contain.

„Culture, through the knowledge and interpretations it contains, through the opening of horizons and through the motivations it creates, affects beliefs, sets in motion behaviors, induces actions" (Marga, 2012).

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