Local Culture in the Global Context: Can cultural events help local development? Evidence from Bulgaria

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1. Introduction

Nowadays culture is everywhere. Culture is a full-fledged economic sector that – as any other – generates impacts on the urban environment, ranging from direct and indirect expenditure to employment generation. Culture can influence local development in many ways. It may contribute to a more balanced and sustainable urban development. Culture is part of urban revitalisation projects in degraded urban areas throughout the developed world. It provides a formidable opportunity for personal development and social interaction among weaker groups, and gives to “excluded” individuals a chance to their own start businesses or to catch up socially. It can be found in technology hubs, in media clusters nourishing innovation, on city walls in the form of graffiti, or at local community centres and street festivals which trigger social interactions.

Indeed, properly planned festivals have the ability to attract a variety of consumers to an area and in turn increase the economic impact on the community. Festivals are capable of displaying and honouring cultural traditions, as well as boosting the local economy. This is because funds generated by festivals help sustain the jobs of vendors, provide local tourism related businesses with a spike in revenue, benefit other businesses through indirect and induced spending, and increase taxable revenue for local governments.

In order to sustain or increase the economic benefit to the local community, it is essential to understand the attributes of festivals that are most important to consumers. By understanding the needs of the people visiting the festival, researchers can recognize the reasons participants are coming to the event and what they value enough to spend their money on. Depending on how far a participant has to travel to attend an event, restaurants, hotels, and other local businesses not directly involved in the festival can greatly benefit from the swell of visitors. This injection of funds into the community can have a dramatic effect on the benefits received by the locals. Taxed income can help improve community resources, while the growth in personal income can spur increased spending and economic growth.
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In Bulgaria, there are a tremendous number of cultural events that are being held and, their number is growing every year. A recent survey has proven that the festivals in Bulgaria are highly dependent on municipalities. However, there is no accurate data on the share of festival project funding, and the volume and forms of support for cultural events. Evidence shows that municipal funds are spent on creative projects in the larger Bulgarian cities: Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Ruse, Shumen and others.

Festivals in Bulgaria have a long-standing tradition. For the first time a festival was organised in 1926 in the city of Varna. Their existence over the years is supported by a relatively wide network of cultural institutes, organisations, and educational institutes for training in various artistic and cultural-creative activities. There is a sustainable practice of decentralisation in regards to organisation of festivals, including places that are not characterised by active artistic and cultural-creative activities. In the second half of the 20th century a number of forums in performing arts (music, theatre and dance) developed and gained prestige. The last two decades are characterised by the rapid development of pop culture and amateur festivals. In the last ten years, local events related to the local lifestyle have increased enormously. Unfortunately, the good practices of promoting festivals are rare.

Contemporary culture also finds its place in various Bulgarian festivals of arts, dance, music, films, photography etc. Annual events are not confined within the frame of Bulgarian culture, though. The events also draw visitors, performers and artists from different parts of the world thus turning the country into a great venue for many international talents.

Every year numerous Bulgarian festivals attract visitors from all over the world in the country. Considering the rich cultural, ethnographic and historical heritage of Bulgaria, there are hundreds of rites, rituals and celebrations across the country that are all worth experiencing.
2. Grouping Traditional Festivals in Bulgaria

Bulgarian festivals are cases of event tourism. They give you the chance to easily interweave culture, history and entertainment in only one vacation and be part of any festival Bulgaria has to offer. Some of the most enchanting Bulgarian folklore festivals are usually connected with specific holidays or held together with music folklore contests. Most often they are also dedicated to particular traditions and crafts.

Rose Picking Rituals/Rose Festivals

Rose Festival is one of the most remarkable events in Bulgaria. It is dedicated to the beauty of the famous Bulgarian roses. Bulgaria has a long history of harvesting roses and the annual Rose Festival is a colourful, fragrant celebration of this age-old tradition. Rose harvesting is carried out from mid-May and lasts for about three weeks. This is a traditional women’s task, as it needs tender care and nimble fingers. Women go out very early, starting work at 4 a.m. when the scent of the Bulgarian roses is at its highest, and pick blossoms and lays them in baskets until 10 a.m. It is important to pick the Bulgarian roses early, as when they are picked in the afternoon, they lose about half of their rose oil content.

When the period for picking roses in Bulgaria comes, the Rose Valley welcomes a festive event inaugurating it, the Bulgarian Rose Festival. This traditional event is held in the town of Kazanlak, and also in Karlovo, another town in the area.

Kukeri Festivals

Kukeri is a word thought to be derived from Latin, from the word for “hood”. In Bulgaria it is used about men who perform rituals during kukeri festivals in Bulgaria to chase evil spirits, and their attire is especially picturesque. They wear animal masks, made of wood, with horns; some of the masks are even double faced, to symbolise good and evil. They are mostly masks of rams, goats, bulls, and can be adorned with colourful pieces of cloth, mirror pieces, etc. The colours in kukeri’s masks are carefully chosen: red prevails, to remind of the revival in nature, the sun and nature’s fertility, black is added to symbolise earth, and white stands for light and water.
Hanging on kukeri’s waists are large bells, made from copper or brass, which sound as the performers of the ritual do their dancing. Chasing evil spirits by kukeri can be witnessed both in the period around New Year’s Day and prior to Lent. The ritual is well-known all over Bulgaria. In almost every village and city it is performed. The most famous festival is Surva that is held in January in the city of Pernik.

*Nestinari Dances/ Fire-Walking*

Nestinarstvo is a traditional Bulgarian ritual. It involves barefoot dances on smouldering embers performed by nestinari. This ritual is a unique mixture of Eastern Orthodox beliefs and older pagan traditions from Strandzha Mountain. During the dancing they carry an icon of the Saints Constantine and Elena.

Before the dancing, at morning time, a procession led by the nestinari goes to the nearby sacred spring. All villagers attend the procession. At the spring, the icons are consecrated and a round dance is formed. Then the procession tours the village and reaches a chapel where the nestinari stay until nightfall, listening to drums to get into trance. A fire is lighted which goes on until the evening. At night, the nestinari start dancing on the live coals. Nestinari dances are also performed in other places in the country, as part of tourist attractions.

The ritual is performed in several Bulgarian villages in the Strandzha Mountain. Consequently, many localities in the region organise cultural events dedicated to the ritual.

Folklore Festivals

So far, folklore festivals are the most common cultural event held in Bulgaria. Hundreds of traditional folk festivals are held every year all around Bulgaria. Usually, local governments or even small villages organize such events. Indeed, on the territory of Bulgaria are spread seven different folklore areas that have their characteristics. In each
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folklore area there are different folklore costumes, customs, food and various dances and songs.

Among the most famous Bulgarian cultural events is the **International Bagpipe Contest** in the village of Gela (the Municipality of Smolyan). The festival aims to promote the authentic Rhodopes folklore. A prerequisite for Bulgarian participants is performances are a hornpipe. The interest in the festival increases, visitors range from 8 000 to 13 000 per year.

Another famous cultural event is the **Festival of Chiprovtsi Carpets**. The hand-woven, colourful carpets of Chiprovtsi have become not only a symbol of the city but of whole Bulgaria. They are part of UNESCO’s intangible world heritage because of their deftly woven geometric figures of humans, animals and birds in red, black, yellow, blue, brown and green. On this festival, you can find exhibition of the best traditional carpets from Chiprovtsi and many activities to help you get to know more about this custom.

Every year, Gabrovo – the capital of laughter and humour in Bulgaria, organizes the funniest event in the country – **Gabrovo Humour Carnival**. Famous for their smart jokes and puns, locals dress up in colourful costumes and march the city.

**Fruit and Food Festivals**

Agriculture is a traditional means of living. Indeed, the fertile land allows in the different regions of Bulgaria to grow a various fruits and vegetables, depending on the altitude and climate. Based on the agricultural tradition there are a number of events organised in the different parts of the country. Such examples are the Cherry Holiday in Kyustendil, the Plum Festival in Troyan, the Pumpkin Holiday in Sevlievo, the Potato Fest in Chepelare and the Bean Fest in the village of Smilyan (the municipality of Smolyan). Those events are well-known across the country and collect hundreds in those localities.

Over the years new initiatives have emerged. Such example is the Fest of cabbage in the village of Peturch (the municipality of Kostinbrod) that is held on the last weekend in
October. Traditionally, it includes a contest for the largest cabbage, culinary exhibition and many other competitions. Another one is the festival of peppers and tomatoes that is held in the village of Kurtovo Konare (the municipality of Stamboliyski). Residents and guests at Kurtovo Konare can enjoy a variety of traditional food and art items from the region, as well as understand how lyutenitsa is made and how tomato soup is prepared.

In addition, there are a number of festivals dedicated to food. Such events are the Fest of lard and grated brandy in Apriltsi, the Festival of egg in Pavlikeni and the Fest of fish sprat held in the town of Kranevo (municipality of Balchik).

On the territory of many Bulgarian municipality are organised such traditional cultural events. As a rule those are one or several days in which the local people dance and sing, cook food, prepare aromatic drinks and express their gratitude to the Mother Nature asking her to be merciful to their crops in the future. However, there is no systematic approach in performing and financing such events. In different locality organisation is different – in some the money comes from the municipal budget in some comes from local sponsors; in many places main organiser in the local government, in some are NGOs or local voluntary groups.

4. Institutional Framework

The Protection of Culture and Development Act in Bulgaria allows for the existence of the festivals in several forms. They are as follows:

- State, regional or municipal cultural institute - created by an act of state or local government. There is currently no data on a festival that exists under this form;

- A mixed cultural organisation - according to the provisions of a statute or a constitutive act. There are currently no such festivals;

- A private cultural organisation – in case it is entered in the special Register of the Ministry of Culture. However, the Registry does not provide information on the subject of activity of the organisations that are registered;
The festivals can also be organized as an additional activity of an already established cultural institute or community centre (chitalishte). The State Cultural Institutes are described in the directorates, but there is no other information besides the names, addresses and names of the managing directors. Chitalishte has a separate Registry. There are also no data on the activities of chitalishte, including the organisation of festivals.

Festivals are also organized by non-profit legal entities. Those can be (i) foundation - based on a donation act of one or more founders; and (ii) association - on the basis of a statute by virtue of which a certain number of persons are associated. The distinct difference between the two forms is the way the resources are spent: the first one is to be in private interest - to provide money on their members or on a set of persons defined in their statutes; the second one is to be in the public interest - the development of meaningful social relations of common interest.

A festival may exist as a company registered operating in accordance with the commercial legislation. In such case there is no obligation to register in the Register of the Ministry of Culture.

Also organizing a festival is possible and simply as an informal initiative of one or a group of citizens.

Actually, the list provided reflects the unsustainable forms through which festival events are organised. As of present, the legal form of festival organisation is overlooked. Typically, behind such facts lies the specific work on a particular project, the existence of the initiative as an informal community or unsettled forms of partnership. This result, in itself, shows that the festivals in Bulgaria are too dependent on the temporary coincidence of the circumstances.

The Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act grants the right to municipalities to provide cultural services. So far, this is the most common form of organisation of traditional and well-established festival events taking place in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, it is a common practice for local-level festivals to exist without specially
agreed and approved regulations for their activities, as well as a distribution of rights and responsibilities. Most of the major festival events are funded under the so-called “other cultural activities” paragraph of the municipal budgets. This helps to sustain cultural events but burdens them with a number of co-ordinating procedures in municipal administration. Municipalities, with very few exceptions, do not publish the approved budgets for festivals and cultural events. In fact, there are no public reports on the funds spent. Thus, the amount of municipal funds spent on festivals remains unknown.

For the festivals in Bulgaria the municipalities are of paramount importance. Research shows that still too few of them are funded on a project basis. There is no accurate and summary information on the share of project funding in municipalities, the volume and forms of support for cultural events and, in particular, festivals. From sporadic observations it can be concluded that funds for financing creative projects are mostly in the larger cities: Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Ruse, Shumen and others. Not always the practice of project financing is accompanied by fairly published information on funded projects, selection criteria, assessments, reports and analyses for long-term benefits. Gathering accurate information on funding for festivals is now facing the greatest difficulties. The reasons are complex: the absence of standards and rules in the public administration for the publication of statements of funds spent, the institutional immaturity of cultural operators and the absence of statistical standards are the systematization of this type of information.

Indeed, each edition of the festival has a different look, status and structure, as well as is gathers different amount of money. The 100% volunteer nature is directly related to its flexible administrative form. Depending on the money and the needs of the respective participants, teams are also formed differently - each edition of each festival has a different composition.
5. The Case of the Municipality of Silistra

Located on the bank of the Danube River, bordering Romania to the North, the municipality of Silistra stretches on a territory of 516 sq. km. It is comprised of the city of Silistra and 18 villages. The city is determined as medium-sized for Bulgaria and is a major city of a district. According to the latest census in 2011 its population counts 51’386 inhabitants.

The municipality has a yearly cultural calendar that is published but it is a subject to change upon request. It is possible certain cultural events to be additionally added. Also, in order to perform cultural activities included in the calendar an amount of municipal funds is allotted to that purpose. This amount is an integral part of the municipal budget and is approved with a special decision of the Municipal Council of Silistra.

The municipal cultural calendar foresees a number of events every month. Those events have different level – municipal, supra-local, national and international. The municipality organizes one international event annually – the folklore festival Tomorrow’s Peace Starts with Today’s Friendship. This event is considered “traditional” and it has been organized for 25 years. Over the years the festival has brought participants from more than 30 countries. However, the municipality has never estimated the impact of the event on local development. Every year the local government allots certain amount of municipal money on that event. Last edition of the festival cost roughly 10’000.00 Euro.

Apart from the municipality, each locality has its own event that is funded by local people. Some events like the Festival of Watermelon Treacle in the village of Smilets on a project basis. The above-mentioned event has its own success and gathers attention to the locality. So far, data on the number of participants is not measured.
6. Policy Recommendations

One of the major weaknesses in local culture management is the lack of co-ordination in the organisation of festivals and well-structured municipal cultural calendars. Local administrations still perceive the programming of cultural and artistic activities during the year as a list of events and not as an effective tool for the realization of cultural policies.

The new local cultural policies should be aimed at augmenting or leading local development, and focusing on:

- Developing long term cultural visions and programming at local level;
- Making use of cultural traditions that are difficult and costly to maintain;
- Generating fun and entertainment (wellbeing and social cohesion) through festivals and cultural events;
- Attracting tourism or international investors (cultural events and an attractive suite of cultural infrastructure and reputation as a destination city/region);
- Helping the city to internationalise.

7. Conclusions

There is no sustainable system to observe and evaluate festivals in Bulgaria as a result of the lack of long-term strategy. At present, the Ministry of Culture has not developed adequate policies for cultural festivals. The process of organisation and performance of festivals is completely decentralised. Yet, standards that measure the creation, consumption and trends in culture and arts are obsolete and do not reflect the modern dynamics of socio-economic development. Thus, the information related to the content of the festivals in Bulgaria remains unaffected by the responsible politicians, experts and managers. Normally, decisions to support a festival event from a public institution, a donor organisation or a corporation are often based on occasional circumstances. There is no necessary legal and regulatory environment to ensure transparency in the actions of responsible institutions. This, in turn, makes long-term planning impossible as a condition for development and new productive perspectives in the organisation of festivals.
The state and local governments do not take advantage of the enormous opportunities that the good festivals provide to promote national and local cultural identity. The Bulgarian festivals are still cut off by the movement of current artistic styles and strands, as well as by the possibility of performing equal exchanges with leading artists from different arts. There is insufficient capacity for cultural operators to manage cultural events. The established arts forums in Bulgaria are still showing little initiative in adapting to modern marketing approaches to popularise their activities. There is no effective and sustainable partnership with the tourism industry. The possibilities of specialised criticism and debates of the artistic processes in Bulgaria are increasingly limited. Thus, initiatives to organise different festivals are often accompanied by fatal compromises in quality. The lack of adequate public policy, accompanied by absence and mechanisms of internal self-regulation in the sector, deprives Bulgarian culture of the existence of large and prestigious festival forums commensurate with the world standards. The absence of interpenetration between seasonal artistic and creative productions deprives the festivals of opportunities for their involvement in more lasting tendencies of cultural life and does not generate a sustainable effect.

8. Sources


Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act, promulgated in the State Gazette No.77/17.09.1991 year, last amendment in the State Gazette No.47/05.06.2018 year

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