Democratizing Public Cultural Institutions in Times of Uncertainty: Evidence from Polish Institutional Theatres

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Abstract: Local public cultural institutions—particularly repertory theatres—constitute an essential but understudied segment of local governance in Central and Eastern Europe. Formally situated at the intersection of public administration, cultural policy, and democratic accountability, they offer a unique lens into the tensions that arise between elected representatives and professional managers. These tensions have intensified in Poland over the past decade, driven by political polarisation, declining trust, and growing uncertainty surrounding the governance of public institutions. As a result, theatres have become visible arenas in which broader democratic dilemmas—concerning autonomy, accountability, expertise, and political influence—are played out with exceptional clarity.

This paper draws on an ongoing nationwide mixed-method study (in-depth interviews, Q-methodology, document analysis) examining processes of organisational democratization within Polish institutional theatres. Based on almost 100 interviews with directors, artistic and technical staff, trade unions, and representatives of local governments, the findings show that theatres are frequently exposed to conflict-prone interactions between political oversight and professional autonomy. Leadership selection, strategic planning, and programmatic decisions often become contested spaces where elected officials prioritise political responsiveness, while many theatre managers emphasise expertise, continuity, and public value.

The study identifies three major patterns. First, the growing mistrust between local authorities and theatre professionals weakens institutional stability and undermines democratic accountability mechanisms. Second, internal democratization—through participatory practices, shared decision-making, and enhanced employee agency—emerges as both a response to uncertainty and a tool for strengthening institutional resilience. Third, hybrid governance arrangements develop, blending hierarchical political control with the expectations of professional independence and organisational learning.

By treating theatres as micro-laboratories of local democratic governance, the paper demonstrates how public cultural institutions reveal deeper structural tensions embedded in local administration. Understanding these dynamics offers valuable insights into designing governance models that balance political legitimacy with professional expertise, contributing to stronger and more resilient local democracy under conditions of uncertainty.