

# **Focus on Romania: when the state gets a kick up the behind from the independent cultural sector**

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## **Introduction**

The following article is based on a series of five interviews addressing the current context for independent artistic practices in Romania, the challenges of cultural cooperation after accession to the European Union in 2007 and the question of public support in favour of the contemporary Romanian cultural scene.

Those who responded to the questions addressed by journalist Simon Chițan are:

- visual artist Ciprian Mureșan;
- curator Alina Șerban
- film producer Ada Solomon
- sociologist Radu Mălureanu
- and Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs Virgil-Ștefan Nițulescu.

## **Context**

When asked about the state of the arts in Romania, artists and policy-makers agree on one point: the independent arts and culture sector has undoubtedly flourished over the last five to seven years.

Here is a selection of comments from our interviewees:

*"I notice a very important financial commitment from the Romanian Cultural Institute since last year in supporting visual arts,"* says artist Ciprian Mureșan;

*"Current practices of public institutions encourage us to believe there is a gradual dynamics in favour of public support for the independent art sector,"* observes curator Alina Șerban.

*"No matter how creative and powerful independent artists and art institutions are, they still need the public funding support in order to develop, and this development is now happening in Romania,"* adds Ada Solomon, film producer.

Virgil-Stefan Nițulescu, Secretary General of the Romanian Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs notes: *"Increasingly we try to offer support to the independent cultural sector and, even though still in process, there has been a major evolution from this point of view. Also, we can say that, in the last few years, the differences in the quantity and quality of financial support from national authorities in favour of traditional and/or contemporary arts is much more balanced."*

This consistent development can be proven by several arguments put forward by artists, researchers and policy-makers as follows.

## **The emergence of sustainable financial support for the independent artistic sector**

Starting in 2000, the legislative and administrative tools for public financial support for the independent cultural sector have been launched and put in practice at a national level. These were the result of more enlightened, liberal and modern policies developed during the 1996-2000 period (according to Virgil-Ștefan Nițulescu and Radu Mălureanu).

Some examples of this are: the Mobility Fund and the National Cultural Fund launched by the Romanian Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs, which became effective in 2005, together with the launch of a more effective support system offered to independent arts by the network of Romanian Cultural Institutes in 2005/06 – the government agency for cultural cooperation (Ciprian Mureşan, Virgil-Ştefan Niţulescu and Radu Mălureanu).

One of the most outstanding examples of the strong acknowledgement of the independent art sector's relevance for public funding was the setting up, in 2005, of the National Centre for Dance. This was the result of the active commitment of a consortium of dancers and choreographers and independent dance organisations and projects such as Project DCM Foundation, or the former MAD Centre (according to Virgil-Ştefan Niţulescu).

However, it is true that support for different artistic fields seems to be uneven. For example, more public funding is available for theatre, music, dance and visual arts via independent organisations compared to the field of cinema where, in the absence of solid and consistent financial public support schemes (necessary for the expenses incurred by the cinema production and distribution process), the general landscape is atomised.

Hence, each young filmmaker tends to establish their own production house. The producing and distribution process for a film is still a risky and extremely difficult endeavour, even for those with a proven track record of success (e.g. Cristi Puiu and Corneliu Porumboiu – two of the leading figures of the new generation of Romanian filmmakers produced their last works entirely or almost entirely with private money. And the new Cristi Puiu production is still seeking foreign funds, in spite of the international praise gained by the director after "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu" received international awards) (Ada Solomon).

However, generally speaking we can conclude that there is growing awareness today, proven by more effective Romanian public cultural policies, of the need to support independent organisations dealing with cultural content so that these organisations can refresh and challenge the artistic practices and build a vivid context for Romanian arts.

### **What we have learned**

The sometimes patchy learning process initiated over the last decade by the whole process of institutional reshaping in Romanian culture and society has been translated into different action lines, including:

- engaging and building a relationship between the independent cultural sector and its post-communist audiences;
- creating bridges between public funding possibilities and market-oriented arts;
- inventing a dialogue between the potential and creativity of the independent cultural sector and the freshly created bureaucratic limits of new public cultural policies.

Some important concepts were at stake. First, the very notion of contemporary arts. A still precarious educational system regarding the status of modern arts, as curator Alina Şerban contends, combined with the lack of contemporary artistic practices in early post-communist Romania (as underlined by Ciprian Mureşan, Ada Solomon and Virgil-Ştefan Niţulescu), are still generating some unreceptive responses to the very notion of 'emerging arts'.

Second, the emergence of careers like art managers, exhibition curators, press agents and art producers is a recent phenomenon in Romania. These fields are still in the process of

legitimising themselves among the established Romanian cultural intelligentsia, although they are common vocabulary for any independent cultural organisation (Alina Şerban).

Third, the link between the arts and society become more and more obvious and they are mostly facilitated by cultural organisations from the independent artistic sector. This necessary connection is, for Romania, a critical factor in providing trust and building social capital, given the still fragile democratic social behaviour and the negative effects of free market dynamics on social cohesion (Ada Solomon, Alina Şerban).

Last but not least, independent artistic organisations provide many success stories in terms of collaborative projects. They build the net for the development of trans-institutional competences, which are a must in all transitional societies (according to Alina Şerban, Ciprian Mureşan and Ada Solomon).

### **What we still have to learn: some weaknesses in the 'Land of Plenty'**

All this demonstrates that a lot has been done in the cultural field in terms of recognising and promoting a different, more flexible and structurally emancipated system for independent arts.

However, there are a couple of issues that need further attention. First, the fact that young and contemporary unknown artists are validated only when they become successful outside Romania (Alina Şerban, Ciprian Mureşan, Virgil-Ştefan Niţulescu). There is still a lack of outlets for new voices in the arts, for freshly discovered talents, and for young people who are not prepared or willing to create art only for the market (Alina Şerban, Virgil-Ştefan Niţulescu).

Then, there is still very little capacity to assess the needs and the cultural practices in Romanian arts. Much quoted organisations like the Centre for Research on Culture (established under the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs), ECUMEST Association, or add. business chance on art are working on these issues, but their work cannot be comprehensive given the immensity of the task and the absence of basic data in today's Romania (Radu Mălureanu).

Last but not least, cultural practices are flourishing in capital cities, but rural and small provincial areas are completely neglected from the cultural point of view. Many small and medium-sized towns no longer have a cinema or a place for performances (Ada Solomon).

For example, the 2007 Sibiu Capital of Culture provided first and foremost the opportunity of refurbishing and rebuilding some of Sibiu's historical buildings or cultural and artistic venues, so that the local community could benefit from a sustainable artistic presence in the future. But these examples are unique and the 'islands of cultural plenty' are only found in big cities like Cluj, Timişoara, Iaşi and Braşov (according to Radu Mălureanu and Virgil-Ştefan Niţulescu).

### **Conclusion: Romania as a member of EU - what is at stake for the arts and culture?**

Even though our interviews contain much reference to the quality and importance of European and international cooperation – mainly provided through the independent artistic sector – the direct impact of EU accession is not yet clear as far as culture is concerned.

To share a few views from our interviewees:

- Alina Șerban believes EU membership will trigger better institutional frameworks and methodologies, and more rigour in assessing the cultural projects.
- Virgil-Ștefan Nițulescu believes that the arts are already so internationally oriented in Romania that EU accession brings just an added element to already existing dynamics.
- Ada Solomon and Ciprian Mureșan both admit that they are more preoccupied with the quality of artistic projects. At this early stage of EU accession, they have not yet seen a visible impact.

To conclude, artistic dynamics in Romania are flourishing, with a notable presence and participation of the independent cultural sector, in addition to more efficient and visible public financial support schemes compared to previous years. Also, we observe an increasingly liberated vision regarding the complex system of artistic practice – a vision shared by policy-makers, artists and managers alike – as well as an impressive openness to the added value of international cooperation.

If weaknesses are still to be observed, it will surely not take too long before these very weaknesses also become strengths. In other words, as film producer Ada Solomon put it when asked how she sees the recent evolution of the context of artistic practice in Romania: *“I see the evolution as both quick and positive!”*