

ACTIVISM AS A LEADERSHIP STYLE: AN INDEPENDENT CULTURAL ORGANIZATION IN A TROUBLED CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Research focuses on the value of activism as regards an independent cultural organization in Serbia, which demanded specific leadership capacities and skills during the turbulent historical period, marked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. We have selected the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD stands for Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju, and this abbreviation is commonly used when writing about the Centre) and its leader Borka Pavicevic, a paradigmatic figure and symbol of dissidence and activist movements of those period, for a case study. The main approach would relate to the organizational development studies and leadership theories trying to explore mutual interdependence, located in the context of cultural transition and social movements that presented key agents of change in post-communist time. A method would include an adaptable quality management approach (Dragicevic Sestic, Dragojevic 2005) and an Adizes leadership theory, while empirical part would be based on an interview with Borka Pavicevic and an analysis of the CZKD strategic plan.

KEY WORDS

leadership, activism, independent cultural organizations.

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Introduction

This study explores the leadership style of Borka Pavićević, a dramaturg, producer, manager, and a theatre director. Her personal story reflects well the transformation of Serbian and Yugoslav cultural and political space in the second part of the twentieth century until today. Educated as a dramaturg, she developed her work in the Atelje 212 city theatre and within the scope of the international cutting edge theatre festival called BITEF (1967). Using first op-

portunities that state offered to artists and cultural operators, Borka Pavicevic created one of the first independent cultural organizations, Nova Osecajnost (New Sensitivity 1981), which acted more as a cultural centre rather than just a theatre (It was the first time that a brewery as postindustrial architecture in the center of Belgrade was used for cultural purposes). However, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the rise of nationalism turned her career more towards

political engagement and political activism, participating in the creation of numerous movements and organizations such as “UJDI” (1988)¹, “The other Serbia” (1992)², “Belgrade circle” (1992)³, where numerous artists and intellectuals had gathered. A reason for the creation of the organizations was to unite citizens that do not agree with nationalist crime, and Borka Pavicevic explains: “Nationalism in this environment quickly became populism. Inside the Belgrade circle, we started discussing that we must include artists, architects, film directors in order to create one centre that would lead the resistance against nationalism in an emotional, catharsis way... The centre should act as a tool for creating catharsis against crime, against war.” From that perspective, in 1995, the Centre for Cultural Decontamination was created, as one of the first organizations that acted as a platform for assembling artists, intellectuals and cultural activists⁴.

Taking the Centre as a case study, research focuses on the relation between an activist type of organization that organizes a dissident movement in the cultural field and a leadership style of Borka Pavicevic. The hypothesis is that the specific leadership capacities and skills were necessary during these turbulent times, while the mission and activities of the organization conform to the leadership style. We started with the thesis that such organizations

were the key agents of cultural change in the post-communist time.

The methodology is based on a multi-perspective approach. Theoretical research involved theories on strategic management, an adaptable quality management approach (Dragičević Šešić, Dragojević 2005), cultural leadership theories (Adizes 2004), and the concepts of cultural policy, offering research questions for empirical research. Empirical part of the research is based on interviews with Borka Pavicevic, conducted on different occasions (last two on March 28, April 17) and an analysis of the CZKD strategic plan (2011, 2016). The main approach would relate to the both organizational development and a leadership model, trying to explore their mutual interdependence, located in the context of cultural transition and social movements. Additional concern of this study is to explore how the story about the CZKD inspired other players in the field to be brave and active in creating new organizational forms in the independent stage in Serbia.

1. The context and the birth of the CZKD

The 1990s were the years of the deepest crises in Serbia's recent history, marked with the civil war, ethnic conflicts, hyperinflation and political and economic sanctions. The growth of the culture of nationalism (Dragičević Šešić 2013: 158) during those years, the abolishment of self-governance, centralization, and the heavy state-control of cultural institutions were the direct consequence of the Slobodan Milosevic's regime. In such political environment, in 1994, the Center for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD) was founded and opened its doors at the “Veljković” Pavilion on January 1st, 1995 as an independent cultural institution. The “Veljković” Pavilion was the

1 Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Association_for_Yugoslav_Democratic_Initiative, (accessed 2 June 2017); “), “Belgrade circle” (1992) (<http://pescanik.net/filozofija-srbije/>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

2 Available at: https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr/%D0%94%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B3%D0%B0_%D0%A1%D1%80_%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%98_%D0%B0, (accessed 2 June 2017).

3 Available at: <http://pescanik.net/filozofija-srbije/>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

4 See more at: <http://www.vreme.co.rs/cms/view.php?id=1159816&print=yes>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

first private museum of the European art in the Balkans, built before the World War II. After the War, the property was “nationalized” and communist politicians like Mosa Pijade had their atelier for a certain period here⁵. Over the years, the pavilion and the house were ruined. In 1995, the CZKD began rebuilding the space into a “sanctuary for civil society and a symbol of cultural liberation”⁶.

The idea for the establishment of the Centre had developed since the summer of 1993 and in the autumn of 1993/1994, specific programs and activities had been implemented as part of a special project of the Belgrade Circle (The Belgrade Circle was a non-governmental organization, established in Belgrade in 1992. Initially, the organization hosted lectures and debates with Serbian intellectuals that opposed the nationalist policies of Slobodan Milosevic) that supported the establishment of the CZKD. The idea for the foundation of the CZKD was initiated by a group of individual artists, cultural workers and social and political activists such as Borka Pavičević, Ana Miljanić, Mirjana Miočinović, Stojan Cerović, Dubravka Knežević, Violeta Čurčić (on behalf of The Belgrade Circle), Sonja Biserko (President of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia), Nikola Džafo and Dragoslav Krnajski (“Led Art” Group) and Suzana Jovanović (organizer). At the moment of creation, the goal of the CZKD was “to transform a social atmosphere that was contaminated by orchestrated nationalism, hatred and destruction”, while “opposing nationalism, xenophobia, intolerance, hatred and fear, and to be the place where people come to feel free.” It was one of the ten centers that were cre-

ated in Serbia after 1995 as parallel, independent “public” spaces (Dragičević Šešić 2013: 160).

Over the course of twenty-two years, the Center implemented over 3000 programs, like theater performances, exhibitions, artistic projects, open discussions, lectures, protests, conferences and campaigns. The CZKD has also been a host venue for the collaborative ventures of artists and activists, public and private sectors, government and non-governmental organizations, and international and domestic initiatives.

2. Organizational capacities and values

Due to the international funding of the CZKD activities, the organization had to develop and establish the practice of strategic planning. Contrary to other smaller independent cultural organizations in Serbia, the CZKD raised organizational capabilities and advanced its planning instruments (i.e. a strategic plan), as an essential mechanism of adaptable quality management. At the same time, they focused on content, art production and knowledge creation, developing their programming excellence, based on activist values, like the battle for human rights, race equality (numerous programs with Roma population)⁷, gender equality (collaboration with

5 Available at: <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/233289/Paviljon-VeljkoVIC-ostace-centar-za-kulturu>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

6 Details are available at: <http://www.czkd.org>, (accessed 2 June 2017).

7 Among them was a *Medea-Hamlet* project, where both professional artists from Burhan Roma Professional Theater (originally from Skopje, but since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, located in Mulheim, Germany), and Roma amateurs from Belgrade suburbs, played together an emotional contemporary “coreodrama” about life of Roma population or numerous film screenings and debates like the one around the *Paradise hotel*, a utopian urbanistic experiment for Bulgarian Roma (2010), long-term *New Politics of Solidarity* projects that had shown to what extent the stigmatization and discrimination of Roma during the Roma decade became more visible.

feminist movements)⁸, regional truth and reconciliation programs (since the first “Tuzla in Belgrade” exhibition in 1996)⁹, social equality and transitional justice (collaboration with the “Ignorant master” NGO. This program relates mostly to the deconstruction of capitalist neoliberal pressure and its impact on transitional Serbian society).

Thus, the story of the CZKD and Borka Pavićević is a story of an activist organization defined as a meeting ground of ideas (Dragičević Šešić, Dragojević 2005: 149). The philosophy of such an organization is the philosophy of artistic activism and social responsibility. Even the premises of the CZKD (hidden courtyard in the city centre), proves the nature of the organization commitment and to its larger cultural activist profile. According to the literature (Dragičević Šešić, Dragojević 2005: 149), most of independent cultural organizations use strategies of linkage (networking, partnership, decentralisation, and inter-sectoral linkage) and strategy of public action (public commitment, changing public space, lobbying, and advocacy). Research showed that all of these are used extensively by the CZKD, not only locally but also internationally, as the CZKD and its leader Borka Pavicevic succeeded in creating strong international lobby for their support.

On the other hand, it could be said that the CZKD was created as a result of networking among different agents such as

socio-political movements, cultural movements, artist collectives, independent intellectuals, artists and cultural operators. Different forms of partnership were created with independent media, such as Radio B92, Nasa Borba, Vreme and Danas. Still today, Borka Pavicevic writes a weekly column in Danas, and this newspaper publishes information about the CZKD activities. Over time, partnerships with numerous other social movements and artist collectives have developed. These partnerships crossed borders of Serbia by focusing on regional organizations that shared the same values, such as “Multimedia Pristina”, “City form” Tuzla, and “Shadow casters” from Zagreb, etc. Thus, through the *New politics of solidarity in culture and knowledge production* project (2011/2012), partnering organizations conceptualised the new space of freedom in the cities debating and questioning future of solidarity and commonalities in the Balkan region (That kind of project is financially supported by foreign donors, such as a Swiss cultural program, European cultural foundation, and EU funds).

Besides partnering with independent media and regional organization, the Centre developed programs and projects with artists’ collectives as well. Nikola Dzafo and “LED art group” marked the first years of the CZKD, followed by projects with “SKART” and “Metaklinika”.

Specifically, important strategy that the CZKD has used since the beginning as part of the social responsibility program is the strategy of decentralization. Thus, the *Communication* project (youth photo workshops) was implemented in multi-ethnic cities of Subotica, Novi Pazar, Bujanovac and Pristina (2007). On each conference or workshop in Belgrade, activists from provinces are invited as partners (“Women in action” from Velika Plana, “Urban – IN”

8 Network for East West women, Woman in Black, Centre for Gender studies, Labris, Woman in Action

9 Programs such as: Pertej, an exhibition of Kosovo Albanian artists (1997), Women activists for peace are crossing borders (2002), The Bridge Pristina – Belgrade (2008), Panel debates with Igman initiative (2005), Who is to you Reihl-Kir (2010). Since 2010, this regional collaboration has mostly developed through art and knowledge production such as projects with Shadow casters from Zagreb, related to the traumatic cultural relations between Serbia and Croatia.

from Novi Pazar, "Citizens action for human rights", from Pancevo). Further, one of the latest programs named *Studies of the Context* has been implemented in Subotica, Novi Pazar and Nis, where local partners were identified and empowered.

The strategy of public commitment is pursued through all programs and their social relevance. There is no single action, concert or exhibition that does not have social, in addition to artistic, value. It is most visible in the complex programs that combine art productions with panel debates. The public action called *Listen little man* is taken as a complex week program including films, exhibitions, "fashion shows", publications and panel debates. The most important part of this action was a series of site specific performances in front of incidental audiences throughout Belgrade (Dragičević Šešić 1998).

A specific dimension of the CZKD programs relates to cultural policy debates, defining this approach as a bottom up cultural policy (Visnic, Dragojević 2008). Important performative projects of theatre artists Ana Miljanic and Sonja Vukicevic were always politically relevant. The first one that happened in 1995 was the dramatization of "Zli dusi" (Dostojevski) which reflected the atmosphere and feelings of Belgrade society in that complex socio-political setting ("*We have chosen this text to start our activity because it states that terror starts not because terrorists and autocrats are strong but because liberals are weak and because Verhovensky claims we are going to destroy everything. This text is the most appropriate to the space of the Pavillion. Cleaning the Pavilion, we found the whole history of the Veljkovic family, and we immediately made the first exhibition out of the rejected material. It included the books of Madam Stall, the first human rights declaration, blue prints about industry develop-*

ment, books with state FNRJ stamp as this was in one moment Mosa Pijade Atelier, personal family letters etc ", Borka Pavicevic). The next performance, "Macbeth", went to the streets of Belgrade and was performed in front of police cordons during students protest in January 1997, showing the support for the citizens' protest movements (Dragičević Šešić 2001).

It is evident that selected strategies reflect important values underlying the CZKD, such as social justice, regional reconciliation, solidarity, empathy, pacifism, gender equality, inter cultural dialogue, and the culture of memory. Every program and project, whether related to art or knowledge production, made public effort to make changes in Serbian society necessary for democratization. Thus research proved that Centre belongs to the activist type of cultural organizations with appropriate strategies and modalities of operations.

3. Leadership

On the independent cultural scene in Serbia, most of the organizations were created by strong personalities, already recognized leaders on the public cultural and political scenes (For example, Ljubisa Ristic created KPGT after he received numerous prizes for its mis-en-scenes, Darka Radosavljevic created Remont after leaving B 92 cultural program and REX cultural center, Zoran Pantelic created Kuda.org, etc.). Taking Adizes leadership theory into the account (2004), two out of four managerial capabilities or roles are necessary to be a leader. As regards Borka Pavicevic, it is entrepreneurship (E) and integration (I). According to Adizes theory, entrepreneurship means having ideas and capacities to design and to execute a project. Integration (I) relates to the capacity to create and sustain teams for a long period of time.

Borka Pavicevic, due to her big I, always gathered a number of partners (organizations and individuals) around herself, as well as followers ready also to administer (A) and to produce (P) – to execute the idea that was created and accepted through collaborative and participative processes. At the same time, she would join, as an individual and as the organization, different movements and networks, using them but also contributing to their development. All the networks and social movements that were linked to the CZKD were attracted by her personal charisma and professional credibility.

According to Adizes theory, in order to function and grow, the team must have all four capacities in place. As regards Borka Pavicevic as a leader, research identified two characteristics (E and I) as most prominent and dominant. Her participation in the creation of numerous movements and organizations proves her capability to create not only one but several teams in order to implement her numerous diversified ideas, from politics and social debates to artistic projects. As a theatre person, Borka Pavicevic is well aware about the importance of production in order to create credibility and respect of a cultural institution. At the same time, she understands the importance of institutional memory for the sustainability of the organization. In one of the interviews, she pointed out that it was her personal initiative to create documentation and archive for every organization or project she participated in, as well as to create memory events, anniversaries, homage and commemorations for lost comrades.

That proves an Adizes theory that a good leader, besides characteristic in capital letters, should have other characteristics at least in certain amount (small letters), in order to be able to delegate to collaborators and to appreciate their contribution in these domains.

On the other hand, our previous research (Dragičević Šešić, Stefanovic 2017) found that Borka Pavićević represents the example of the transformational leader emerging in the period when platforms for activism and art production were in need for stronger support and patronage. Thus, by creating the CZKD, she acted as a visionary and heroic leader, who strengthened community spirit and united the voices of dissent, always showing respect to other cultural personalities with leadership capacities – “bringing” them close to the Center. The first exhibition devoted to Mira Trailovic, a theater director and founder of the Atelje 212 and BITEF festival, to a certain extent proves that she was for Borka Pavicevic a “role-model”, mentor, woman that had strength and courage to be entrepreneurial, innovative and even subversive, in the time of the bureaucratic socialism (Dragičević Šešić 2012). As Sheryl Sandberg (2013) states, it is extremely important for a woman-leader to take responsibility for other women, as “women are better off than ever. We stand on the shoulders of the women who came before us, women who had to fight for the rights that we now take for granted.” That is the reason why Borka Pavicevic also takes responsibility to keep memories of those brave personalities: from all those that created Serbian “moderna” (men and women), to Mira Trailovic, Mirjana Miocinovic theater scholar that left university due to its “neutrality” during war times, and Latinka Perovic, contested politician-dissident in 1970` and controversial historian today, fighting to reveal and confront negative past.

Conclusions

An independent stage in Serbia had evolved in last 25 years, building leadership and organisational competencies, widening a scope of activities and adapting them

to the local context (Cvetičanin 2011). However, some researchers identified the lack of organizational structure that will ensure the survival of eventual leadership loss as a main weakness of the CZKD (Skoko 2011: 15). The structure of the organization relies too much on present personnel, their skills and strong points, which risks destabilization every time when there is a change in human resource. Further, a particularly devastating scenario that could be imagined if the director (Borka Pavicevic) left the organization is the conclusion of the analysis mentioned. Our analysis today, based on the assumption that NGOs are mostly project-based organization and that their flexible organizational structure is better suited for the turbulent circumstances in which they operate in the Balkans, does not see that as an ultimate threat. The team, art collectives and social movements that gravitate around the CZKD today, are well integrated within the strategic vision and values of the organization, but at the same time, they have a lot of autonomy in creating and developing projects that they are personally interested in. That makes them loyal participants and partners in the development of the CZKD and real stakeholders that in future might guarantee the continuation of the Centre work.

The story of the CZKD and success of its leader Borka Pavicevic, which was proved by numerous international awards, was inspirational for many cultural activists and artists that created their own organizations with or without her help. She has shown that it is possible to sustain for a long time not only an organization but an institution with its space, and to keep its autonomy till today¹⁰.

¹⁰ Throughout Eastern Europe many organizations that were created by the help of Soros foundation in the 1990s, are closed now or have lost their autonomy (i.e. the Soros Centre for contemporary arts or Open clubs in Serbia).

NGO leadership imposes the need for both individual attributes and contextual relevance (Hailey, James 2004: 343). As we could investigate, an effective and resilient leader such as Borka, balances numerous pressures from different sides, but always keeps her individual identity and values. Using an adaptable quality management approach in understanding organizational culture, philosophy and its strategies, as well as an Adizes theory on leadership, we have concluded that Borka Pavicevic as a leader – founder of the CZKD is a rare example of transformational leader of an activist cultural organization, who goes beyond her personal interests in linking movements, art collectives, media in creating a multileveled network of individuals and organizations around similar values and aspirations.

Using once more the words of Hailey and James, “unless systems and processes to support this work are put in place, the apocryphal warning “trees die from the top” will have more than a grain of truth in it.” Independent organisations and their leaders in the troubled world of populist cultural policies of today, do brave and important work and they deserve support, especially if persisting in civil society unfriendly context, from Serbia to Russia, from Turkey to Trump US, already threatening the cultural scene of dissent.

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