

Development of Lithuanian Regional Culture

A Positive Experience

Eglė BERTAŠIENĖ

Vilnius Academy of Visual Arts

I would like to present to you the main features of Lithuanian cultural policy and its implementation into one of the most important in Lithuania – the Regional Culture Program.

The Ministry of Culture is the governmental body of the Republic of Lithuania in charge of formulating and implementing state cultural policy in the fields of professional and amateur art, theater, music, fine arts, cinema, museums, libraries, and publications, as well as in the area aimed at the safeguard of copyright and neighboring rights and the protection of cultural values. The main objectives for the cultural policy of the Republic of Lithuania are:

- to preserve and cultivate the national cultural identity;*
- to encourage creative activity and artistic diversity;*
- to develop the information society;*
- to encourage the openness of national culture;*
- to create the conditions for society to participate in and consume culture.*

One particular focus of the Regional Culture Program is to increase cultural services, to pay due attention to traditions and ethnic culture, and to bring about the de-centralization and de-concentration of culture management by organizing special projects. An example of such a project is the national program-competition under the name "Lithuanian Capital of Culture" that was launched in 2008 and to my knowledge has no parallel elsewhere in Europe. The roots of this program can be traced back to 2009 when Vilnius was awarded the status of "European Capital of Culture". Funds allocated for the implementation of the program for the period 2008-2009 amounted to approx. 54 million euros. These funds were awarded by the Ministry of Culture, the Municipality of Vilnius, and the European Commission.

It was the public institution established for the occasion "Public Enterprise Vilnius – European Capital of Culture 2009" that announced submission for an on-going national competition, "Lithuanian Capital of Culture", in 2008. The goals set for the contest were the cultural development of the regions and active participation by the residents.

To these ends, every year artists and cultural institutions in the medium-sized cities (there are 60 municipalities in the Republic of Lithuania) draft their own cultural projects for the competition. All submissions are evaluated by a jury of independent experts.

In 2008 the status of Lithuanian Capital of Culture was given to Zarasai, a town with a population of around 8,000 residents. All events in Zarasai were concentrated around the project "Culture as Fresh Water", which was granted approx. 29,000 euros for its implementation by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania. The island located in the lake within the town was transformed into a space for a festival of Lithuanian culture, and stages were erected for musical events and cinema screenings. In the surrounding waters, a flotilla of 100 boats appeared, and theatrical fashion shows and contemporary art installations were staged. Local artists presented their works on the banks and in urban spaces, and international musical festivals, book fairs, classical music concerts, and street performances were held in the area.

In 2009 the title was given to the town Plungė with a population around of 23,000. The cost of the Capital of Culture project in Plungė totalled approx. 116,000 euros. The organizers of the events introduced three tourism routes comprising the musical route, the religious route and the cultural route visiting industrial objects that were orientated towards both the local community and the expanse of national culture. Attractive events were designed to highlight not only the cultural heritage of Plungė, such as the European park and the magnificent palace – our Lithuanian Versailles – situated in the midst of the park, but also other targets. The musical route was inaugurated by the 11th International Brass Band Festival, a presentation of a joint project of famous musicians and young, local and international performers. The religious route included the visual art workshops in the famous religion sites of this region. Local wooden churches also became venues for concerts of sacral music and poetry readings. The project also marked the year of the 600th anniversary of the christening of the Samogitia region. The cultural route invited visitors to view modern art, light and music installations on the premises of industrial enterprises in Plungė, in bus stations, railway stations, and urban bus stops; moreover, open-air exhibitions were held in unconventional places, such as the grounds of Soviet-era plants.

The impact attributed to the project was that the number of tourists in the region almost doubled that summer and in 2013 the town was named the 20th most attractive site for tourism in Lithuania.

In 2010 the small town of Ramygala with a population around of 1,700 was awarded the status of Lithuanian Capital of Culture. The project, budgeted at approx. 58,000 euros, gave priority to events with sustainable value, such as the outdoor sculpture festival. A traditional goat parade was held as the main attraction, and Ramygala had never seen so many visitors as it did during the event. Buildings in the town were decorated with plaques representing its history, a memorial stone was set to commemorate famous people of the region, and a national festival of students' songs was held.

The following year the committee selected the project titled "Memories of Lithuania Minor", which was proposed to take place in the town of Šilutė with a population around of 18,000 that was celebrating its 500th anniversary. The project was granted approx. 29,000 euros and aimed at reminding Lithuania that in addition to the four ethnic regions that the country is traditionally divided into, there is a fifth one: Lithuania Minor – the historical, Lithuanian-speaking region in East Prussia. Visitors were invited on tours to flooded villages to remind everyone that it was a land of water and that the life of local people had for centuries been attuned to the tides. Other activities were, for example, concerts in the town's Lutheran church, an international art symposium on enamel, a night-in-the-museums event called "Jazz, architecture and light", a dandelion wine festival, and a regatta of sailboats.

In 2012 a town called Anykščiai with a population of around of 11,000 was granted the hosting role of Lithuanian Capital of Culture. Local government was granted approx. 29,000 euros and the remaining costs were covered by private investors and resident businessmen. The winning project was called "My cultural diary", the centerpiece of which was a jazz opera, based on a story by an author from Anykščiai. The unifying theme of the program was focused upon youth, combining the town's cultural traditions and rich historical and natural heritage with traditional and alternative means of expression, and formal and informal communication in both virtual and real spaces. Some of the events taking place were classical music performances, a parkours course, the "Devil's stone" rock music festival, the "Purple evening" national bards' festival, and a youth audio-visual performance: "Cinema in movement". Local government used the means to erect a viewing point

in the tower of the church, to renovate the river bank within the city and complete a 4km biking route along it, and to purchase and print books for the local library. All in all, the town gathered a lot of attention from the national press and attracted more tourists, which allowed Anykščiai to reach the top 5 most attractive sites for tourism in Lithuania.

In 2013 a seaside resort called Palanga with a population around of 18,000 was awarded the status of Lithuanian Capital of Culture. The Ministry of Culture covered only one third of the project's budget, leaving a remaining project budget of approx. 29,000 euros. The ambition of town's residents was to attract more tourists from abroad. Besides the traditional festivals such as Palanga Smelt, the Resort, Palanga Table, Birute Botanical Park, Classics' Voices, Ave Maria, and Night Serenades, there were novelty events to be held, such as the Culture Night, during which the two-act national opera-melodrama Birute was performed, a textile installation in the Love Alley, an exhibition of experimental photography and video-art, and the mobile project Art Express.

This year (2014) the fifth largest city in central Lithuania, Panevėžys with a population of around 114,000, was selected as the host. The Ministry of Culture has allotted some 60,000 euros and the Panevėžys municipality has given approx. 200 000 euros for the purpose. The program "Panevezys is a crossroad of culture" was oriented to the cultural process itself, something that the city has been known for, rather than hosting some new big events. The motto "Lordly, Solidly, Royally" was proclaimed, which also covered an active process of learning, and shows that Panevėžys is a creative, friendly, tolerant and European city. The main motto of this year's project is "Culture is more than Art. It is a part of our Daily Life", that declared the fight against a façade culture, insincerity, and superficiality. Among the 12 largest events hosted that year was the city's birthday celebrations, an international festival of literature, the Light and Fire Festival, the "Fairytale of H.K. Andersen" international puppet theater festival, an international film festival, the Festival of Chamber Performances, an international folk dance festival, and international ceramics, paintings and art glass symposiums. Since the cultural program was extended for the period of 11 months, encompassing over 230 various events and supplemented with private initiatives, a variety of events was devoted to traditional and contemporary arts, such as literature, art, photography, theater, cinema, music, folk art, and national cuisine, with one or several neighboring countries to be presented every month by way of exhibitions, education, social campaigns, performances, films, concerts, meetings with writers and travelers.

For 2015, it has been announced that the host of the program shall be the city of Žagarė in the north of Lithuania with a population of around 2000. The project is aimed at presenting this historical, ethnic area and one of the oldest towns in Lithuania to a broader European audience. Along with a variety of events, the program will culminate in the famous annual "Festival of Cherries", during which Žagarė will host the meeting of 27 small European town charters.

In conclusion we may say that even though the Ministry of Culture usually covers only one third of the project's budget, the national "Lithuanian Capital of Culture" program has a long-term input into the cultural life of the towns, bringing positive changes to whole regions. The active participation of towns and townships of Lithuania in the competition has demonstrated that the idea of the Lithuanian Capital of Culture has served its purpose: the creation of a platform for further cultural development, the cherishing of identity, and the cultural self-expression of all the regions of the country.

With a view to achieving a consistent cultural policy and taking into consideration that the situation of culture in Lithuania demands a critical approach, attention and positive changes, as well as the necessity to preserve society's cultural identity and to grant to culture the status of a state-supported priority area, on June 30, 2010, the parliament of the Republic of Lithuania approved the Guidelines for Alternation of the Lithuanian Cultural Policy. In implementing this document, the government of the Republic of Lithuania approved the Inter-Institutional Action Plan for 2012-2014, implementing the Guidelines for Alternation of the Lithuanian Cultural Policy.

These documents and successful regional cultural development strategies encourage further positive development of Lithuanian regional cultural strategy, and ensure the continuity, development and promotion of national culture, society's expression and involvement in the cultural activities, as well as the protection of cultural values. It shows that culture could be one of the main elements to minimize the gap between the city and the countryside in Lithuania. It also raises the importance of the cultural workers' role in the regions, and reinforces the links between professional and local art. Even if we have no cultural and statistic research concerning distinguishing aspects of the Regional Culture Program in development, the regular national "Lithuanian Capital of Culture" program may be qualified as the most important achievement ensuring the continuity, development and promotion of national culture and cultural expression.