

Culture, citizenship and the European unification process.

In remembrance of Günter Grass

By Steve Austen and Karolina Nowacki

Since 2004, the European Commission has launched various initiatives to promote the notion that European citizenship only can develop through means of cultural action. This idea however is not new.

In earlier years, citizenship, as a product of the implementation of human rights, came to the forefront of political cooperation between the two political blocs; the so called West and the socialist arena including the Soviet-Union. This finally resulted in the Helsinki agreements and the instalment of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This development - nowadays known as The Helsinki Process - was a caesura in post-war times. It had taken some time: the idea of a European security conference was already introduced in the 1950s by the Soviet government.

NATO agreed on further talks no earlier than the late 1960s. NATO insisted on bringing in humanitarian questions such as the free movement of people and information throughout the Eastern Bloc. By that time general human rights were not explicitly taken into account. Their role started to grow with the course of the actual process after 1973.

In the Blue Book, the final recommendation of the Helsinki consultations of June 1973, it was suggested to organise the three main subjects in the so-called Baskets for *Security*, *Economy* and *Humanitarian Questions*. The equality of the baskets of the Helsinki Final Act presented culture as an actual means to overcome political barriers. Culture was slowly allowed to descend from an ideological platform and became a more practicable notion.

The power of the symbolic to instigate reality enabled the widening civic movement to secure civil and human rights by intervening with the actual political process as well as supporting its achievements from bottom-up.

Artists and intellectuals took the initiative to take the Final Act as a guarantee of their civil, human and cultural rights and measured their current condition against the background of these agreed rights. Hence the follow-up process was dominated by efforts of securing these rights both from political as well as from civil perspective. Eventually, both efforts blended in and served the improvement of the whole situation on both levels.

Two aspects became more and more important: firstly, the need for a confident citizenship, and secondly, the importance of culture for a peaceful unification process that on the one hand tries to bind individuals, not only countries, together and in doing so achieves the most valuable results.

In 1985 the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe held a cultural forum in Budapest that was meant to guide the efforts of the third basket and find solutions to improve contacts and exchange between the European peoples. It can be seen as a turning point in regard to the significance of culture for politics.

As spokesperson of the delegation of the Federal Republic of Germany at the official forum, Günter Grass, presented his proposal to open up “the actual borders in the minds of people” by installing a pan-European cultural foundation. At the same time his fellow writers and intellectuals were discussing similar issues with invited artists and intellectuals from Hungary at an informal gathering, called the Unofficial Writers Symposium, in a local pub. Of course there was a fruitful and permanent exchange of ideas between the two gatherings.

Finally Grass had to accept that the official congress refused his proposal, thanks to the vetoes from the USA and Romania.

This situation showed clearly to all artists and politicians involved that the exchange of ideas is one thing, the implementation of practical and innovative proposals another. This notion however did not stop the involved artists continuing their endeavours, but more and more without involving the political decision-makers. The idea became common that artists, intellectuals and cultural institutions can do a lot to enhance civil society even without the consent and approval of the political class.

One of the very first attempts to prove this approach was the European Artists Forum in Amsterdam in 1987. Günter Grass accepted the invitation to discuss his Budapest proposal again, this time with artists and intellectuals from all over Europe, without politicians. With 28 artists and intellectuals from 20 European countries it could be seen as a major platform for the voice of the cultural world. This platform was called “Gulliver” and was a first attempt to develop a European, non-governmental, informal and independent working group as a platform for the exchange of ideas between individual European artists and intellectuals on essential issues for the future of European culture.

Over the years, Gulliver slowly transformed into a more advanced instrument of international co-operation, exchange and mobility by being integrated in a huge cultural network that not only links the distinct Gulliver members to each other but also to their birth place in Amsterdam as a permanent activity of The Felix Meritis Foundation (since 1988). This NGO grew with the years and outlasted the actual Gulliver body that subtly merged into this overwhelming entity formulating the foundation of a far bigger context than anyone could practically strive for: a real European civil society.

The latest attempt to foster the ideas of Helsinki is the civil initiative “A Soul for Europe” that started its activity in 2004. This time the initiative came from a politician: former president of the Federal republic of Germany: Richard von Weizsäcker. The Soul for Europe Initiators define the European process as a cultural process. The notion of citizenship must be the

leading one. Facing the dull reality that the EU so far has not been very successful in promoting citizenship and culture as the key-element in the unification process, they strive (in the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act) to link cultural bottom-up movements with policy making top-down processes.

In only a few years, intellectuals, cultural operators, scientists, artists, pupils and students, as well as politicians, local, national as well as European, have joined the Berlin process to stimulate the upcoming generation of Europeans to take our future in their hands. At the same time it promotes the idea that civil society has to be fostered to shape and influence the political decision-making process to make Europe a place which will develop from a union of member states into a union of member states and citizens. To place the ownership of Europe in the hands of the citizens themselves, cultural organisations and artists again have to take the lead.