

The Anson Report ®

The Political Calculus of Culture

The role of culture in lessening long-held animosities in international relations was considerably heightened by the recent appearance of the New York Philharmonic in North Korea. The orchestra's visit may also foster a further review of the EU's year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 whose primary assumption rests on the fact that artistic creations constitute "goods" of the type that contribute to the cohesion of an internal economic market and provide a platform on which a common European value system and identity will eventually emerge. In light of this perspective, at least Euro 2.4 million has been allocated to a series of pivotal projects devoted to the cross-border visibility of art, museum artifacts, music, folklore, films, and the literary exhibition of the immigrant, ethnic experience.

Though the potential contributions of cultural exchange programs is widely welcome, an ongoing critique of a theoretical nature questions whether a focus on the sharing of traditional cultural items may ironically heighten cultural diversity and therefore act to undermine attempts at utilizing associated projects to dampen patterns of ethnic or social exclusion.* At the multi-national level, Kosovo's declaration of independence is taking place against a backdrop of dwindling inter-ethnic cultural mechanisms, which are embedded in a divisive political and regional context that has understandably overwhelmed popular attention to projects that are designed to occur on, and over, an essentially local European landscape.

Any observer cannot help but conclude that a major problem of cross-border cultural dialogue itself rests on the local diversity of European situations in which the fabric of inter-ethnic relationships is already expressed. Ancient cultures, such as the Basque, continue to hold themselves distant from the mainstream despite nationally centralized linguistic and cultural institutions. Integration of outlying populations, in particular, into the EU has stemmed largely from economic reforms that have modernized and expanded the functioning of traditional craft industries present among extended family holdings in customary mountainous areas of residence. In Europe's urban areas the lengthy cultural distinctiveness of immigrant populations is linked more to economic dependence than to cultural differences that are often widely appreciated elsewhere in member states and throughout the EU organization.

As the EU organization expands, so does its enlarging Neighborhood Policy, and with that, an incidence of contact with the ways in which politics has been activated among ethnic micro-communities to craft a distinguished place within their own nations. Norway's ancient Sami people were at first subject to a variety of acculturative imperatives stemming from the broader society but ultimately developed elected representation that continues to exist alongside of more traditional informal councils headed by group leaders experienced in local economic lifeways. In the process, a recognition of artistic creation appears to have followed the definition of a newly found political identity and is being used to constantly revitalize it within a broader national scheme.

In contrast, Ukraine, a neighbor with a potential EU accession trajectory, may present the organization's Intercultural Dialogue projects with a history of activating history classes and pop music events to purposefully expose micro-communities to unifying national themes in the midst of the uncertainties of the economic and social fragmentation that accompanied the onset of the post-Soviet era. Ukraine has also witnessed the expansion of a different but unifying cultural trend. The expansion of evangelism to formerly isolated localities, including those with an increasing number of immigrants, has reinforced both a national identity and links to international organizations as well.**

As the Intercultural Dialogue progresses, it seems clear that projects will be confronted with a series of challenges that may not vary seamlessly, but rather according to local the interplay between culture, politics, and economics. Given the program's desire to use cultural exchanges as means of EU integration, an additional irony may lie ahead. Surveys of micro-communities within the EU and among its neighboring states suggest that many of the very ethnic communities from which cultural items are meant to be

extracted and shared in a cross-border fashion retain a necessary continuity when the politics of nationhood are at their least secure, and thus at their least inclusive phase.

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EUobserver,4.12.2007.

** Wanner, Catherine. Communities of the Converted. Ithaca and London.

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