

FROM THE PUBLISHER

# POLISH CULTURE THRIVING

While it would be an exaggeration to say that money makes the world of culture go round, public funds create special opportunities for individuals and social groups to express themselves. Of course, culture would also exist without government support, but certain things would simply be impossible.

Ministries receive funds from the government and use them to support various projects on the basis of specific criteria. The distribution of this money is without a doubt a political decision because choosing goals and assigning public funds for them is the very quintessence of politics.

In a special interview in this section of the Voice, Bogdan Zdrojewski, the culture and national heritage minister, outlines and justifies the cultural

policy of the Polish government. He also discusses the results of this policy, those already attained and those expected to materialize in the future.

One of the examples of the government's policy on culture is the annual Culture Minister's Award, which is given out to artists and leading figures in the cultural life of the nation in recognition of their lifetime achievements or outstanding achievement in a specific year. Briefly put, the award aims to single out and honor those who drive Polish culture forward.

This year the minister has handed out 11 awards. We portray all the award winners in a special hall-of-fame section to give readers a chance to find out more about those who make Polish culture thrive.

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SPECIAL GUEST

# NURTURING CULTURE

**Bogdan Zdrojewski,  
the minister of culture  
and national heritage,  
talks to Andrzej Jonas  
and Witold Żygulski.**



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### **W**hat is the role of the government in shaping culture?

In totalitarian systems, culture is designed to serve those in power; its role is to sanction and strengthen the authorities. Therefore, culture is treated as a means to an end. Even when a semblance of freedom is created, it must serve those in power. In a democracy, those in power, if they are wise, take advantage of culture and its resources, including historical resources, and of the talents of artists. In this way, culture can strengthen the state and the citizens. Polish history shows just how important culture was for regaining statehood, which we lost several times. Culture was of great importance to the strength of the state.

In Poland we have an economic policy, a fiscal policy, a history policy... the list goes on. However, the word "policy" is not really well suited to culture. Pursuing a policy conjures up the idea of imposing your own values on others, while we, politicians, use the values inherent in culture. We do not build culture by means of policy.

After the fall of communism in Poland and after the country regained full sovereignty in 1989, Polish culture collided with the culture of the Western world. To be able to compete effectively with the West, whose culture had been largely shaped under free-market conditions, other qualities had to be looked for. As Polish playwright Janusz Głowacki once said, "We've gained freedom, but we've lost our appeal." A large number of people involved in culture and

the arts thought at the time that it would be enough to abolish censorship and political control to immediately create a cultural golden era here. They thought that Polish culture in all its manifestations would fare well under free market conditions. But they overlooked one very important thing—that the power of culture depends not only on the talent of artists, but also on the education of the public. The greatest losses we suffered in culture in the first two decades of freedom resulted from ignoring the need for constant and all-round cultural education.

### **So what are the most important tasks of the state when it comes to culture?**

It needs to be strongly emphasized that, in Poland, no one can replace the government in protecting national heritage. Essentially all the national heritage is in state hands. Public institutions—including those run by the central government, local government or the church—are the owners. This makes us different from many Western countries, where castles or palaces are often owned by private people or foundations. In our history, during wars, partitions [when Poland was under foreign control] and [Nazi] occupation [during World War II], we suffered tremendous losses in the field of culture and national heritage, so its careful protection is especially important today.

Another very important task—one that has been the most neglected in recent decades—is the effort to educate the public regarding culture. More than 90

percent of elementary schools are in state hands, so the government can and should ensure a good, well-prepared and well-educated audience for what culture has to offer.

A third factor is attention to how the artistic community is educated. In Poland, the government is responsible for virtually 100 percent of such education at all levels, from first- and second-level music schools to secondary schools for



visual arts to fine arts academies. It is important to teach children and young people to not only play an instrument, but also be part of teams or groups, which means teaching them teamwork. For the last two years we have been gradually introducing a system that requires music school students to play with other students in various micro-bands for a few hours a week. After three years, the system is designed to cover all music schools nationwide.

The last major responsibility of the government in the field of cul-

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ture is taking care of cultural facilities. After 1945, practically no new facilities—theater buildings, opera houses, concert halls and so on—were built in Poland. We merely adapted existing buildings, which were in various conditions, for this purpose; we rebuilt some of them from ruin. So we had an enormous amount of work to do after 1989.

### **What is the state of Poland's cultural facilities today?**

It's fair to say that no other European country has made such a big leap in terms of cultural facilities in the last 30-40 years.

Next year, I will be able to say that Poland has joined the top five European countries in the field of cultural facilities. Poland will join the elite, especially in terms of music and museum facilities. Theater facilities have also improved. The only area in which we are still behind other countries is visual arts. It's fair to say that no other European country has made such a big leap in cultural facilities in the last 30-40 years.

### **All this takes money. How much does the government spend on culture?**

Over my five years as minister I have been able to double the expenditure on culture in Poland. Today I have a budget of around zł3.5 billion plus zł1.2 billion for specific projects.

Of course, the most important thing is working with local authorities, who spend considerable amounts of money on projects in the culture sector in their regions. In this team-up I carefully calculate the money involved—in the case

of each construction project the point is to have a clear picture of how much the facility will cost to operate once it is built. The rule is that a local government needs to provide a detailed cost estimate in order to get the go-ahead for a specific project. I want to avoid a situation in which financing allocated for projects will not enable the facility to operate in the long term, for example, guaranteeing enough money to pay musicians—the thing is to not only provide a venue for them to perform, but also pay them for their work.

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When I took over as culture minister in 2008, I had to give up several large projects in the culture sector because they did not have the proper economic justification. Over the last several years, we have built the Podlasie Opera in [the eastern city of] Białystok, for example, but this is where we must draw a line—I cannot consent to two more operas. One academy of performing and fine arts in [the northwestern city of] Szczecin is enough; there is no money for more, because universities cannot be any poorer. Nor am I allowing new college-level music schools to be established, because we have a very well-balanced situation today in terms of the job market for graduates of such universities. Instead, despite the demographic low, I have consented to the establishment of 40 new first-level music schools. Many parents are interested in providing an education for their children in this area, which is rare in Europe. This, however, can be explained by looking at the results of surveys conducted among Polish teachers; they show that those who work in arts and music schools tend to more strongly believe in their students and their talent, and have a much better opinion of their students.

Financing culture also means enlisting private donors, especially for projects such as exhibitions, concerts and films. Private investors are also very helpful in recovering artwork abroad, for example by buying works of art at auctions across Europe. For example, a collection related to Frederic Chopin has returned to Poland in this way.

### **Do you have any preferences in your cultural policy, areas about whose development you are particularly concerned?**

I am fully aware that if I wanted to go down in history and be remembered as a minister, a focus on a specific area would help me with this. People would then say years later “oh that’s the one who helped writers” or “the one who supported visual arts.” However, my intuition and my belief is that I am not allowed to make any such choices, or show any such preferences in my work. I’m supposed to ensure fairness, which, of course, in the realm of art is doubly difficult. I’m concerned about making sure that the right conditions are in place for talent to blossom in all areas of culture in Poland. The situation in the visual arts is unsatisfactory, which is why one of my priorities is to create a Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw as soon as possible. I think this is the most important cultural project in the country today.

### **We’ve talked about money, projects, facilities... what other means of stimulating culture does your ministry have at its disposal?**

The range is very wide. First, there are various kinds of scholarship programs for artists. As part of such scholarships, we can support the work of a young writer or poet who is writing at home. We can, for example, buy a bow for Agata Szymczewska [a 28-year-old violinist who won the top prize of the Wieniawski competition in 2006], so that she can make better use of her Stradivarius.

We also have the Culture Promotion Fund, whose functioning has undergone deep strategic changes in recent years. For years, the main audience for Polish culture internationally were Poles living abroad, and the most important “export product” of Polish culture were folk [song and dance] ensembles. Today we are promoting culture according to new, modern standards. The first event



where this new strategy was used was the Year of Polish Culture in Israel. We sent some very young people there with a contemporary repertoire. Even the classic opera *Madame Butterfly*, directed by Mariusz Treliński, was staged in a completely new, non-traditional way. The audience appreciated that.

Another such event showcased in Europe was the Year of Chopin, designed along completely different lines than before.

### **Effective promotion of Polish culture helps the country and**

### **its artists as well as all of society, giving it a cause of pride and satisfaction...**

Of course, we can be proud of Polish artists. Sometimes I joke that composers and conductors such as Krzysztof Penderecki, Antoni Wit, Wojciech Kilar or the late Henryk Mikołaj Górecki and Witold Lutosławski will never play as badly as the Polish national

Sometimes I joke that composers and conductors such as Krzysztof Penderecki, Antoni Wit, Wojciech Kilar or the late Henryk Mikołaj Górecki and Witold Lutosławski will never play as badly as the Polish national soccer team.

soccer team. If we ask people in Poland if they are proud of their artists, they will certainly say yes. But when we ask a young Pole today of whom he is the most proud, he will much sooner name Robert Lewandowski [the Polish soccer player who plays for Germany’s Borussia Dortmund club] than Frederic Chopin. In my opinion, this is, first, the result of a flawed education system, and second—of poor promotion of the greatest artists, especially in the public media, even though this should be their duty and part of their mission statement.

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### **You also have special Culture Minister’s Programs. What are these for?**

The Minister’s Programs are a way of dividing money from the Promotion Fund, around zł.300 million a year, according to certain priorities. All subsidies are awarded on the basis of competitions announced by the ministry.

One-third of this amount is for historical monuments: of which half is for religious monuments, places of worship of all religions, and the other half for the remaining sites—castles, palaces etc. The money goes mainly for roofs, with foundations as the number two priority. Above all we must save facilities threatened by destruction. In recent years, we have reconstructed more than 600 historic roofs for this money.

The next one-third of the total pool, or about zł.100 million, goes for cultural and artistic education in the broad sense—facilities,

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supporting children's creativity, purchase of instruments, theaters for children, etc. The remaining funds are distributed to help smaller programs such as Polish heritage abroad or to support reading—of magazines, books and translations from Polish into foreign languages. We also finance an unprecedented program which is being developed at the moment, thanks to which children under 16 years of age will be able to enter most museums across Poland for a token one zloty. Studies show that if parents wanted to show their children all the most important museums for their education—such as [Cracow's] Wawel [Castle], the Wieliczka [Salt Mine], [the castle of the Teutonic Knights] in Malbork, Auschwitz-Birkenau [the former Nazi death camp] and the *Panorama Racławicka* [painting by Jan Matejko depicting the Battle of Racławice fought during a Polish uprising against Russia in 1794]—they would have to spend amounts posing a major burden on their household budgets, especially for large families.

**Your annual Culture Minister's Awards for artists and those shaping Polish culture aim to recognize outstanding achievement. What exactly are your criteria for giving out these awards and what results have they produced?**

Originally, the awards were divided into categories. But obviously there are years when three phenomenal films are produced and not a single prominent theater production, or vice versa. So

when I took over [as culture minister] I decided to do away with this strict division into categories. At the moment, the awards jury proposes two to three names for each category. Then we sit down at the table at the ministry with other reviewers and choose from among the candidates the top personalities behind the success of Polish culture the year before.



The nominees are not disclosed to the public; we only disclose the names of the winners. Each receives a statuette and z1.40,000 in prize money.

I try to make sure that all fields of culture and art without exception are represented. It has happened, for example, that the award was given to an architect, Stefan Kuryłowicz [killed in an air crash in June 2011], whose projects literally dominated the year. This year, one of the awards went to Anna Bedyńska, the first photographer to win.

Choosing the winners is not an easy process. However, these

choices are important indicators of what is happening in the realm of culture, what trends are particularly valuable.

**So in what state is the world of Polish arts and culture today?**

Being the culture minister in Poland today is an honor. As for



the external, international response, this is particularly positive in relation to the world of music, especially classical music. We have philharmonic orchestras of European stature today, of which we can be proud. We have world-renowned opera soloists such as Aleksandra Kurzak, Ewa Podleś and Mariusz Kwiecień as well as Piotr Beczała, one of the award winners this year. Once we could only dream of seeing so many Poles performing at the world's top venues such as Milan's La Scala or the Metropolitan Opera. Now it's all come true—Polish soloists are employed

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there on a regular basis and are very highly rated there. And an increasing number of world-class musicians, both soloists and ensembles, are coming to Poland.

When we look at Polish theater, it's enough to take a glance at the most important European festivals such as those in Avignon and Edinburgh to see that

Jarzyna and Krzysztof Warlikowski, who are in their fifties; as well as young, beginning artists. In music, we have Krzysztof Penderecki, but we also have Paweł Mykietyń, who is in his forties. In film, we have Andrzej Wajda as well as Wojciech Smarzowski, who is in his 50s, and Jan Komasa, in his 30s. Ten years ago we made a dozen or so films a



Polish productions are the most important and most highly rated there year after year.

Polish film, after some lean years, has emerged from a crisis. We may not yet have an Oscar, the most important film award in the world, but we have already had some nominations. It's very important that we have people from all generations in all areas of culture today. In theater, we keep recalling the work of Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski, neither of whom is with us anymore. We also have a generation in their seventies—Krystian Lupa and Maciej Englert; Grzegorz

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year; now more than 60 are produced. When it comes to productions of our own, we are now number four or five in Europe. In fact, Poland has become the only European country where locally produced films attract more viewers than American movies. Polish film festivals are also very highly rated.

Polish artists such as sculptor and performance artist Mirosław Bałka exhibit their work in the world's largest galleries such as the Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.