

Culture

Bringing Polish culture to the world

Minister of Culture and National Heritage Bogdan Zdrojewski sits down with WBJ to talk about his ministry's priorities, defending culture from politics, the position of Polish culture at home and abroad, and how it is financed

Ewa Boniecka: Political tensions have begun to enter the domain of culture, and the country's budget is tighter than when you first took office. How are these factors affecting your ministry's work?

Bogdan Zdrojewski: My job is to defend culture from politics, and nothing has changed on this front. I also try to maintain the priorities that I consider most important for preserving and promoting culture in the longer-term perspective. Among these, the first priority is investment in cultural infrastructure and overcoming years of enormous neglect. The second priority is cultural and artistic education, which means upgrading audiences' understanding and artists' conditions, especially during study. The third priority is the protection of national heritage, particular-

ly those things which are most important for Poland's national identity and history.

How do Poland's expenditures on culture look? Some complain that there is too little money spent on it.

Expenditures on culture have increased over the last five years from around zł.9.5 billion to zł.12.7 billion – that includes all financial expenditures: those coming from the Ministry of Culture, local governments, public institutions and private sources. The funds coming from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage have increased from around zł.2.3 billion to over zł.3 billion, the biggest increase in recent years. Now spending on culture is 0.80 percent of budgeted expenditures, while five years ago it was 0.57 percent.

You have made a concerted effort to develop private sponsorship of culture in Poland. What results have you achieved?

Everything here begins and ends with building mutual trust. The public administration, including the Ministry of Culture, has to respect the prerogatives and also the needs of private businesses. At the same time, it is important that private business learns to look at culture as something worth investing in. So my first step was to begin building mutual trust and arguing that relations between business and culture will bring mutual benefits.

This is especially important because from the fiscal point of view there is little incentive for the state to invest in culture. Taxpayers have the option of donating 1 percent of their income tax payments to a particular cultural institution. In the past people very rarely took advantage of this option, but now there is a positive trend.

In my view it is crucial to pay attention to businesses' specific interests when it



COURTESY OF DANUTA MATYLOCH

Bogdan Zdrojewski, Poland's Minister of Culture

comes to sponsoring culture. These interests include strengthening a given business' brand and increasing its public standing. Potential cultural partners need their donations to be acknowledged.

It seems to me that I have been successful in creating an environment that is favorable for encouraging companies to invest in and sponsor cultural institutions and events. Among the larger sponsors are such firms as Orange, PZU, Wielkopolski Bank Kredytowy, the private holding represented by [business mogul] Jan Kulczyk.

Are foreign firms that operate in Poland interested in investing in Polish culture?

One steady foreign investor is [Bank Citi Handlowy's] Kronenberg Foundation, which has been sponsoring Polish culture for many years. We also have support from some foundations and private sponsors to help in caring for historic Polish cemeteries, famous historical institutions – such as the Polish Library in Paris and the Museum and Polish Library in Rapperswil, Switzerland – which are important for our culture and heritage and are also significant in terms of European history. But we are still way behind in attracting international sponsorship for historical monuments.

What is Poland doing to promote its culture abroad?

In promoting Polish culture abroad we have reached a real breakthrough. The Adam Mickiewicz Institute, which is the main institution responsible for promoting our culture abroad, has changed enormously. When we compare what was done to promote Polish culture abroad five years ago and how the situation looks now, I would say we went through revolutionary changes.

The Adam Mickiewicz Institute applied the strategy of concentrating on specific goals and achieving them at the highest professional level, instead of conducting limited activity in many fields.

The new strategy has resulted in such successes as the Year of Polish Culture in Israel in 2008, the Year of Polish Culture on the British Isles, and the Year of Chopin, which was regarded throughout the world as the one of the best cultural promotions. It successfully promoted our art, music and theater during Poland's presidency of the EU.

The Year of Czeslaw Milosz, our great contemporary poet, has just ended and we managed to encourage

and partly finance translations of his poetry into languages such as Chinese and Arabic, in which Mr Milosz's verse had previously been unavailable.

All those undertakings are bringing lasting effects and Polish culture is highly regarded and acclaimed around the world. Now we are celebrating the Year of [composer] Witold Lutoslawski. Our artists perform in the most prestigious venues in the world, the best concert halls, the best galleries and museums.

Polish culture is being seen and heard in places it never has been before. For the first time in 70 years we had exhibitions – three of them – in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. Currently, we are conducting talks concerning bringing a large exhibition of Polish classical painters to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, as well as an exhibition of Polish art at the National Museum of China in Beijing. In 2012, the MOMA in New York had a large exhibition of sculptures by Alina Szapocznikow.

Would you say that promoting cultural exchange with countries that we have sometimes had difficult relations with can be a vehicle for reducing political tensions?

In promoting our culture abroad, we have to be strictly professional in dealing with foreign institutions and artists. Culture can always be a leader in improving relations, both political and economic.

You say that you defend culture been from politics. But there have been political attacks on the film "Poklosie," which some have called anti-Polish, and some protest the Polish Film Institute's co-financing of a movie about the 2010 Smolensk catastrophe. How do you see the situation?

I have said that I defend culture from politics, but that does not mean that politicians do not attempt to use culture for political gain.

The directors of these films have the right to realize their artistic visions. When their films' screenplays are accepted, they can ask for public funds to produce them. Those decisions are made by a group of independent reviewers at the Polish Film Institute, and it is the minister of culture's job to protect those independent decisions. The minister has nothing to do with the final decision about whether a film is granted public funding.

The Museum of the History

of Polish Jews in Warsaw is now in its final stage of construction. When is it expected to open?

I am convinced that the museum should open only once every detail has been completed. That's why I never announced a specific date for its opening. I would say that there is a good chance it will open between 12 and 18 months from now.

This particular museum is a very complex project. In my view it could be very difficult to hold the opening by the end of 2013, so sometime in 2014 is more likely.

How would you evaluate your ministry's cooperation with local governments in caring for and developing culture?

Some 68 percent of expenditures on culture come directly from local governments. I can say that my cooperation with local governments is good, or even very good. Recently, we accomplished the enormous task of providing access to broadband internet in all of Poland's libraries in towns with less than 15,000 inhabitants. We were able to achieve this goal in cooperation with Orange, and the access will be free for five years.

Due to cooperation with some foreign entities, among them the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we were able to provide all those libraries with computers. This is evidence of our very good cooperation with the lowest levels of local government.

Yet public television and radio, which are sometimes the only sources of information and culture for some people in poor regions of the country, are now near collapse. You have promised to help them financially, but that won't solve all their problems, especially since most people don't pay the obligatory subscription fees for public media. Is there a solution?

First, I want to stress that Polskie Radio [Polish public radio] is doing quite well. It looks like 2012 will be the first year in recent history that Polskie Radio will have a positive balance.

We are trying, in accordance with the current possibilities of the state budget, to guarantee modest financial help for public television, so it can carry out its mission.

We are also working to change the present system for paying fees and to introduce a simpler, more modern and cheaper subscription fee.

I also want to add that in 2012, the ministry financed many cultural programs. ●