

# ANNALES

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## CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A TOOL IN POST-CONFLICT RECONCILIATION? THE “PIKA-TOČKA-TAČKA” PROJECT (2011–2014) AND THE TENDENCIES IN REPUBLIC OF SERBIA’S POST-2000S CULTURAL EXCHANGE WITH CROATIA

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper I will focus on Serbian international cultural policy in relation to Croatia in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Aside from giving insight into general circumstances regarding the Serbian cultural sphere after October 2000, I will discuss how tense relations between Serbian and Croatian political elites during the previous decades discouraged more extensive state-supported cultural exchange, and negatively affected the results of such initiatives. Special attention will be given to the project of joint concert seasons of the most prestigious philharmonic orchestras from Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia titled “Pika-Točka-Tačka” (2011–2014) and its various cultural-diplomatic contributions.*

**Keywords:** Serbia, Croatia, cultural diplomacy, post-conflict areas, “Pika-Točka-Tačka” project

## LA DIPLOMAZIA CULTURALE COME STRUMENTO DI RICONCILIAZIONE POSTBELLICA? IL PROGETTO “PIKA-TOČKA-TAČKA” (2011-2014) E LE CARATTERISTICHE DELLO SCAMBIO CULTURALE TRA SERBIA E CROAZIA DOPO IL 2000

### SINTESI

*Questo articolo si concentra sulla politica culturale internazionale serba in relazione con la Croazia nei primi due decenni del XXI secolo. Oltre a fornire una panoramica delle circostanze generali riguardanti la sfera culturale serba dopo l'ottobre 2000, discute anche come le relazioni tese tra le élite politiche serbe e croate nei decenni precedenti abbiano scoraggiato un ampio scambio culturale sostenuto dallo Stato e abbiano influenzato negativamente i risultati di tali iniziative. L'articolo dà un particolare accenno al progetto di stagioni concertistiche congiunte delle più prestigiose orchestre filarmoniche di Serbia, Croazia e Slovenia intitolato “Pika-Točka-Tačka” (2011–2014) e ai suoi vari contributi culturali-diplomatici.*

**Parole chiave:** Serbia, Croazia, diplomazia culturale, area postbellica, progetto “Pika-Točka-Tačka”

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the fall of Slobodan Milošević on October 5, 2000, Serbian governments were facing a lot of challenges concerning revitalisation of the cultural sphere as a consequence of the country's longstanding international isolation, economic crisis, deep politicization and abandonment of emancipatory cultural policies of socialist period (cf. Đukić-Dojčinović, 2003; Pešić, 2007; Vujošević et al., 2012). The ruptures in the nexus of once prestigious and highly esteemed state-supported cultural institutions, were becoming visible day-by-day starting from their decayed infrastructure to the neglected human resources and programming (Mladenović, 2001; Premate, 2003; Ast, 2005). The similar conditions were characteristic for various cultural manifestations initiated in socialist Serbia as well as in the field of cultural amateurism, cultural education, and cultural promotion (Papan & Vukadinović, 2008; Vukanović, 2011; Toković, 2019). Aside from the collapsing structure of cultural production and distribution in early post-Milošević times, new Serbian leadership had to grapple with degraded public and private media together with their completely unregulated programming, which further eroded dominant cultural values (cf. Vesić, 2023b). Foreseeably, re-establishment and reinforcement of local, regional, and national cultural institutions, manifestations and organisations was made a complete priority while the issue of country's cultural (re)branding abroad was mostly given a marginal role. According to one of a few in-depth research works on contemporary Serbia's cultural activities in international arena (Rogač, 2011, 336–339; Rogač Mijatović, 2014, 160–172) between 2000 and 2010 there were around 2,400 programmes that were offered in 70 countries worldwide (Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America and Australia), mainly different types of exhibitions (artistic, cultural, documentary, etc.), concert and theatrical performances, and events related to film and literary production. These programmes were financially or logistically

supported by the Serbian Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs and most of them were related to the field of elite culture. The dynamic of Serbia's cultural exchange in the first decade of the new millennia showed variability as a result of internal and external political factors. However, as Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović (2014, 172) has firmly concluded, Serbian authorities were approaching the international cultural policy in an "unsystematic, particularistic and reactive manner" leaving the impression that international cultural relations were not among their first concerns. The same conclusion was reached by certain Serbian cultural actors who actively participated in the high-art music scene at the time.<sup>2</sup>

The general lack of coherent strategies and organisational framework in the process of Serbia's international cultural promotion that was characteristic of the 2000s persisted to a lesser extent in the following decade. These circumstances were made even more complex in connection with neighbouring countries. The heavy burden of unresolved post-war issues, particularly between Serbia and Croatia, has not only constantly put strain on their political relations,<sup>3</sup> but also reflected on the intensity, quality, and impact of state-supported bilateral cultural exchange. As the discussion in the following sections will show, the antagonism between Serbian and Croatian political elites diminished in a certain way the results of cultural cooperation of neighbouring states whether initiated by non-state or state actors and prevented its advancement. This can be illustrated with the example of a neatly constructed project of cultural exchange which included three most renowned ensembles of the former Yugoslavia – Belgrade, Zagreb, and Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestras and which lasted for several years (2011–2014). Although the joint concert cycle of three orchestras, titled symbolically "Pika-Točka-Tačka" [Dot-Dot-Dot], did not evolve into a long-term regional endeavour, it clearly pointed to potentials and limitations of cultural diplomacy in the post-conflict settings.<sup>4</sup> This project, in the case of Serbia, displayed various benefits of state's strategic support of cultural

1 This article is the result of research conducted within the Institute of Musicology of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovations of the Republic of Serbia (RS-200176).

2 For instance, based on her own research on Serbian high-art and culture in post-socialist times, Isaković (2012) concluded that "what is globally known as 'cultural diplomacy in the service of interests of country'" is left to chance or to sporadic initiatives, stressing that international collaboration in the field of music is mostly supported by public sector with the lack of coordination of its parts (Isaković, 2012, 126).

3 On the issue of completely incompatible interpretations of causes and outcomes of the war on the territory of the former Socialist Republic of Croatia, the lack of consensus on line of demarcation, the ongoing pressures due to filing of suit (Croatia against Serbia) and counter-filing of suits (Serbia against Croatia) in International Court of Justice (1999 and 2010) as well as the holding of opposing perspectives on crimes committed in the Independent State of Croatia during the WWII cf. Pavlaković (2009); Aleksić (2019); Popov (2016); Benčić et al. (2018); Geiger (2020).

4 Large part of the discussion on the mentioned project was dedicated to the work of the long-time director of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO), Ivan Tasovac, as I found it necessary to give an insight into the general circumstances that preceded the building of strong reputation of this orchestra in the national, regional, and international levels. The process of (re)affirmation of BPO seemed to be inextricably linked with the creation and launch of the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project and, as such, needed to be clarified.



activities with “estranged” neighbouring countries, particularly when it is accompanied by large-scale cultural cooperation carried out by individuals, NGOs, cultural institutions, and the private sector. By contrast, even a well-defined cultural-diplomatic engagement coupled with broad non-state-supported cultural exchange cannot escape the detrimental effects of antagonising practices of national political elites. The analysis of Serbia’s post-2000 cultural relations with Croatia is based on data collected from yearly reports of the Serbian Ministry of Culture and its strategic documents after year 2000, as well as abundant corpus of Serbian press coverage from the past two decades.

#### UNDER THE SHADOW OF POLITICAL DISPUTES: AN OVERVIEW OF SERBIAN CULTURAL EXCHANGE WITH CROATIA AFTER 2000

Although Serbia, as a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [FRY, renamed Serbia and Montenegro since 2003] (1992–2006) and Croatia formally established diplomatic relations in 1996, it was only after their long-standing leaders, Franjo Tuđman (1922–1999)<sup>5</sup> and Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006)<sup>6</sup> left the political scene, in 1999 and 2000 respectively, that certain steps were made in order to encourage better political, economic and cultural cooperation. One of the most important steps in the early 2000s was the mutual abolition of visa requirements for the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro and Croatia (2003), which enabled them to travel to the neighbouring country without restrictions<sup>7</sup> as well as the signing and ratification of the Agreement on Free Trade between two states (2002–2004) with several other agreements on the protection of minorities, the prosecution of suspects of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, on navigation etc. (Aleksić, 2019). Gradual “defrosting” of political and economic relations of the two neighbouring countries was received with enthusiasm particularly among actors in the cultural

sphere. Accordingly, various initiatives based on re-establishment of communication and cooperation between cultural institutions, organisations and events came into existence after October 5, 2000. Theatres from Belgrade and Zagreb were among the first who responded to the newly-created atmosphere of building bridges. Atelje 212 ensemble from Belgrade broke the ice with the performance of plays of Biljana Srbljanović and Ronald Harwood at Rijeka’s Ivan Zajc Croatian National Theater (October 18, 2000) (REKOM, 2016), and year and a half later Zvezdara Theater’s ensemble had a guest-performance of Dušan Kovačević’s drama *Lari Thompson – tragedija jedne mladosti* [Larry Thompson, or a Tragedy of a Young Man] on the stage of Zagreb Kerempuh Theater in March 2002.<sup>8</sup> Later that year, the drama ensemble of the Croatian National Theater (HNK) held a performance in FRY, although not in Serbia.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth mentioning that, from 2003 to 2007, Atelje 212 had guest tours in many towns of Croatia and Slovenia with a drama written by Croatian author Vedrana Rudan, *Uho, grlo, nož* [Ear, Throat, Knife] (REKOM, 2016). The example of theaters was followed with lot of enthusiasm by librarians from both countries. As a result, a large-scale exchange of books from Croatian and Serbian (and Montenegrin) editors, mainly literary and scientific works, was planned to be implemented through the project “Bibliodiseja” (2005) with an aim to overcome 15 years of absence of communication between libraries across the border (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2005).

The resuming of contact between Serbian and Croatian cultural institutions was accompanied by extensive collaboration and exchange in the field of popular culture and public and commercial media. A sort of revolutionary move in this respect was made by Croatian production houses, particularly AVA Television Production, whose five very popular telenovelas released between 2004 and 2008 were broadcasted on Serbian TV stations (TV Pink and Avala) (Wikipedia, 2023).<sup>10</sup> Aside from

5 Tuđman was the president of the Socialist, later Republic of Croatia from 1990 to 1999.

6 Milošević was elected the president of the Socialist Republic of Serbia in 1989 and two years later a president of the Republic of Serbia. In 1997 he became president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) (until 2000).

7 According to Milan Simurdić, the Ambassador of FRY in the Republic of Croatia between 2001 and 2005, abolition of visas “that could seem like a trivial gesture” in fact represented the “biggest breakthrough in the political relations” of two states. Simurdić also observed that “the greatest improvements regarding mutual relations were achieved when we were solving the problems of common people” (Vreme, 2006).

8 The three-day guest performance of Zvezdara Theatre in Zagreb was talked about “for months”. It was preceded by a “pragmatical agreement” between Serbian Ambassador Simurdić and Croatian Minister of Culture Antun Vujić (Stanivuković, 2002a).

9 HNK’s tour to Belgrade which was organised as a part of collaboration with Belgrade’s Yugoslav Drama Theater was officially cancelled because of the “technical deficiencies” of Belgrade’s theater stage, but the real reason was the refusing of one of the members of HNK’s drama ensemble, Krunoslav Šarović, to perform in front of Belgrade’s audience. His decision was supported by the other colleagues in the ensemble. In the end, HNK’s staging of drama “Očevi i sinovi” [Fathers and Sons] took place in Podgorica – a capital city of Montenegro (Stanivuković, 2002b).

10 Aside from telenovelas, Serbian audience had a chance to watch a Croatian sitcom (“Bitange i princeze”, 2005–2010) at the time (in 2007, 2010 and 2016) via Serbian TV stations.



gaining attention from both Croatian and Serbian audiences, the production of TV series of this kind included engaging of Serbian actors and actresses of different generations, who were thus given an opportunity to become regionally recognised and affirmed. The practice of hiring promising or renowned actors from a neighbouring country was adopted by Serbian TV producers as well, not only in telenovela formats but also in more demanding genres, for instance in the series "Senke nad Balkanom" (2017), "Besa" (2018–), "Vreme zla" (2021), etc. The various opportunities that a broader, regional market opened to producers, broadcasters and film and TV professionals from both countries in the mid-2000s via introduction of "light" television genre embedded in familiar plots and characters, and devoid of any reminiscences to the problematic political past and present (cf. Kostić, 2007; Zorić, 2012) were already recognised by the actors in music industry years before. As of 2001, Serbian and Croatian performers of the so-called *zabavna*,<sup>11</sup> rock and (*turbo*)folk music have regularly took part in concerts or concert tours across the borders, in both prestigious and "underground" places which, except in the case of (*turbo*)folk stars, was followed with substantial media coverage, especially after 2004 (according to Baker, 2006).<sup>12</sup> Certain Croatian musicians and bands (Magazin, Boris Novković and Severina) were given awards for their accomplishments by Serbian media corporation Pink in 2003 at its first and last music ceremony in Belgrade's Centre Sava (cf. Baker, 2006). The extent of "inter-musical" dialogues and transfers between Serbia and Croatia in the 2000s is hard to estimate given the predominance of pirate music material that was circulating at the time (cf. Vesić, 2023b, 153–154) and the absence of data on regional viewing figures of Pink TV satellite programme, MTV Adria (founded in 2005), and Balkanika Music TV (founded in 2005) that promoted rock, *zabavna* and (*turbo*)folk musicians and bands from the territory of former Yugoslavia (and the Balkans).

While there is no doubt that Serbian and Croatian cultural consumers were very well informed about latest commercial musical and TV products from both sides of the border after mid-2000s, which was even more facilitated after the massive spread of cable television operators, fast broadband internet as well as social networks and social media services in the early 2010s, it is unlikely that the majority of them had any knowledge on cultural-diplomatic undertakings of their own countries that were happening at the time. However, number of cultural programmes that were "exported" from Serbia to Croatia between 2000 and 2010 with support of their Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs were not insignificant on average, in comparison with other countries from the region or Europe – there were 86 of them which ranked it on 8<sup>th</sup> place out of 70 countries (Rogač, 2011, 338). Still, the connoisseurs of cultural circumstances in the region were generally not impressed by the quantity and quality of Serbo-Croatian cultural exchange initiated or supported by state officials. There was a feeling that this process was completely overtaken by non-state actors, and that the political elite has not shown much interest in its further development and elaboration (Vulićević, 2012). Despite critical notes in public, in reality there was small, but observable progress in this domain during the leadership of presidents Boris Tadić and Ivo Josipović between 2010 and 2012. The short-term period of more than just cordial relations (Paunović, 2019; Helsinški bilten, 2023, 2) not only inspired a new wave of strengthening of ties between cultural institutions from two countries, but it also gave rise to certain meticulously shaped projects of cultural exchange, such as "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project. Among other things, closer collaboration between museums from Belgrade, Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Pula, Subotica, Novi Sad, Požarevac and others was evident since 2011 and it was similar with film institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Cultural communication across the borders continued to thrive even after the change of Serbian political

11 The term *zabavna muzika* was coined in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the 1950s referring to "autochthonous" Yugoslav popular music production at the time as well as to the different popular music genres from various countries (Italy, France, US, Great Britain, etc.). The term continued to be used in the following decades and in post-socialist times mostly in association with the pop music genre (cf. Anonymous, 1972).

12 Among Croatian bands and musicians, the following were the first to perform in Serbia after 1990s: KUD Idijoti (2000), Darko Rundek (2000), Magazin (2001), Severina (2001) (Baker, 2006). When it comes to Serbian groups and singers it was Đorđe Balašević (2001), Miroslav Ilić (2002), Momčilo Bajagić Bajaga (2003), Željko Joksimović (2004), etc. (Baker, 2006).

13 Out of 78 permits issued by the Serbian Ministry of Culture between August 5, 2011, and September 6, 2013, for the use of part of collections of Serbian museums abroad, 9 permits were part of collaboration between Serbian and Croatian museums, 15 with Slovenian museums, and 4 with museums from other former Yugoslav republics (Macedonia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska/Bosnia and Herzegovina). This means that 35.89% of museum collection exchange belonged to the initiatives of regional collaboration. Between February 2011 and July 2013, Yugoslav Film Archive [Jugoslovenska kinoteka] from Belgrade took part in the 32 activities of exchange with institutions from different countries. In 2011, out of 17 such activities 5 were realised with institution from the Republic of Croatia (cf. Ministarstvo kulture i informisanja Republike Srbije, 2014, 52–68, 69–72).

leadership in July 2012,<sup>14</sup> however the hardening of rhetoric, particularly after 2015, coupled with regular escalation of political tensions (Aljazeera Balkan, 2016; Karabeg, 2018; Komarčević, 2023) slowed down this process. Even though Serbian Minister of Culture, Vladan Vukosavljević, claimed in 2017 that Serbo-Croatian cultural exchange was "at a high level" (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2017), cultural and academic protagonists from Serbia contradicted his words. As it was underlined a year later,

*Serbian public was left without explanation and arguments which could purport [Vukosavljević's] affirmative judgement given the fact that the political leadership of both countries have shown indifference towards advancement of interstate collaboration through cultural sphere and adequate cultural policies and have done a lot to minimise any attempt to solve the pressing issues in this domain. (Drašković, 2018, 104)*

That the institutionally-supported cultural cooperation of two countries has been developing since the 2000s in a very slow pace was observed by many members of the non-for-profit sector as well as artists "when they were given a chance to appear in media" (Drašković, 2018, 104). Even when positive steps were taken in this respect, such as the case of the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project or others that were inspired by it, the political factor interfered with their outcome in a negative way by diminishing their impact. This phenomenon will be discussed in detail in the following section.

#### THE "PIKA-TOČKA-TAČKA" PROJECT: THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF SERBIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN POST-CONFLICT CIRCUMSTANCES

Soon after the first signs of more substantial improvement of political relations between Serbia and Croatia became manifest in 2010, the new initiatives with focus on broader and more complex type of collaboration of cultural institutions started to take shape. As a result, after a meeting held in Zagreb on October 10, 2011, managers of three leading philharmonic orchestras from the territory of former Yugoslavia – Belgrade (BPO), Zagreb (ZPO), and Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestras (SPO) – agreed on a joint project that was to start in the season 2011/12. It was given a specific name – "Pika-Točka-Tačka"

[Dot-Dot-Dot], which could point to finally leaving the past aside and opening a completely new chapter in the process of normalization of regional cultural relations. The idea to create a firm foundation for a steady communication and interaction between prominent orchestras from Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia seemed to represent, among other things, another significant manoeuvre in a decade-long national and international rebranding of the Belgrade-based orchestra. This ensemble entered 2000s in a devastated manner, with a decaying building, lack of instruments for musicians, the non-existence of chief-conductor and a planned season (Ćirić, 2012; Varbanova, 2013, 193), but has undergone thorough transformation after 2001 and, in a way, rose from the ashes in front of the stupefied Serbian public. The fact was that only several years after Ivan Tasovac, a pianist without any previous experience in management of cultural institutions and ensembles, was appointed as its manager this orchestra became one of the most prominent cultural actors in the country winning the admiration both rising number of its concert subscribers and Serbian media.

During the first decade of Tasovac's management, the BPO was not only consolidated in terms of finances, human resources, infrastructure, and artistic results, but it also developed fruitful contacts with some of the most acclaimed conductors and soloists from the world of classical music at the time (Ćirić, 2012; Varbanova, 2013, 193). In parallel and owing to successful strategic management, BPO gained a lot of supporters outside the group of usual classical music concertgoers. As Jelena Janković Beguš, editor of the programming of the Belgrade Music Festival (BEMUS) has observed (Toković, 2019, 146), unlike some other classical music ensembles and festivals, concerts of BPO were followed by the urban elite audience "which is wealthy and wants to be entertained". According to data from a 2009 marketing survey, the orchestra's average subscriber was a highly educated individual between 45 and 50 years of age, mostly a medical doctor, top and middle manager, engineer, member of diplomatic corps, representative of international institutions, professor, and programmer. These socio-demographic characteristics are mostly in line with the research on cultural consumption and participation and the data on popularity of classical music and concerts of classical music among Serbian population, particularly part of it with higher education including experts, entrepreneurs, executives, etc. (Mrđa & Milankov, 2020, 55). What represents a departure from these results is the fact that "music

14 In the footsteps of the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project, but with much less ambition and innovative approach, Yugoslav Drama Theater [Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište] from Belgrade resumed collaboration with Croatian National Theater in Zagreb in 2016 after 30-years-long interruption (B92, 2016); the same year, folk dance ensembles "Lado" from Zagreb and "Kolo" from Belgrade renewed contact after 27 years which was supported by Serbian and Croatian Ministries of Culture (N. DŽ., 2016).

professors and teachers, composers and, generally, people with a background in music are the minority among BPO subscribers" (Varbanova, 2013, 194).

Aside from creating a high-quality ensemble and proving to the Serbian cultural policy makers, political elite and public that elite cultural institutions can gain recognition and media attention with a combination of disciplined artistic work, clever use of advertising strategies or experimenting with concert programming, it seems that the ambitions of BPO manager went further than that. While acquiring and maintaining prestigious status in the national framework was certainly one of Tasovac's main priorities in the process of transforming of BPO, as of early 2000s the interest in broadening orchestra's capacities via international cooperation and touring became openly displayed.<sup>15</sup> BPO's mini and larger concert tours in Italy, Austria, and Slovenia in 2002, then Austria, Slovenia, Sweden (2006), France, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2007), and Italy (2010) (Beogradska filharmonija, 2016), prepared the ground for novel undertakings outside Serbian borders that resonated well with plans and visions of managers of Zagreb and Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra as well as the prevailing political impulses across the region, particularly in Serbia and Croatia.<sup>16</sup> The outcome was the creation of a joint concert subscription cycle of three orchestras which included five concerts during each season – three concerts were meant to be performed by a resident orchestra, and another two by guest performances of orchestras from other countries. Apart from tours of orchestras to Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana, the idea was to present to audiences of three cities and countries the same repertoire, as well as the selection of renowned and talented soloists.

The launch of the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project took place in the season 2011/12 with the performance of SPO in Ljubljana on September 8, 2011 (Mondo, 2011).<sup>17</sup> It encompassed a tour of this orchestra to Zagreb and Belgrade in December 2011, performing of ZPO in Belgrade and Ljubljana in May 2012, and concerts of BPO in Zagreb and Ljubljana in May 2012. The unusual conception of collaboration of three orchestras in the form of a separate subscription cycle with interweaving of tours, performances of internationally renowned and promising classical

musicians<sup>18</sup> and a combined repertoire based on works of acclaimed Classical, Romantic and early modernist composers and a selection of American 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors (Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, and Paul Schönfield) represented a very innovative step compared to the standard approach to this process. Typically, cultural institutions, particularly theatres or separate ensembles were relying on the exchange of tours as the most prominent mode of cooperation. This was not only characteristic of the post-socialist period but was also consistently applied in socialist times through the programmes of the so-called interrepublican collaboration. In effect, "Pika-Točka-Tačka" was an example of "co-production" of three orchestras whose teams worked together on shaping of the repertoire, making decisions on hiring of soloists and planning of tours (cf. Šehović, 2011). The project's expected duration was five years which was emphasised in the addresses of orchestras' managers to press and media after the opening of the preliminary season (Šehović, 2011; Ćirić, 2011).

The first regional cultural *piatiletka* received an unprecedented support of the most important actors of the bureaucratic apparatus of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, including the presidents and prime ministers of the three countries, ministers of culture, and mayors of capital cities (cf. Ćirić, 2011; I. J., 2012). The significance of this project was recognised by actors in international and global politics. In fact, U.S. Department of State and U.S. Embassies in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia openly encouraged this endeavour (Varbanova, 2013, 193) and U.S. Ambassadors took an active role in explaining its value and contributions in the press conferences that preceded some of the concerts during the season 2011/12 (I. J., 2012). Although South-East Europe (SEE) was given mostly a marginal place in U.S. foreign policy at the time, Barack Obama's Administration continuously advocated for its turning into "democratic, peaceful and prosperous" region, and, aside from the integration into "Europe's political and economic institutions" it was also important to foster "transnational cooperation" and "peaceful resolution of disputes" (Gordon, 2010). From the perspective of Obama's Administration approach to SEE along with U.S. longstanding history in investing into cultural

15 As Tasovac openly underlined, his wish and the wish of the employees of the BPO was to create "the most notable cultural institution in Serbia" which he believed was mostly achieved. The next logical step was to become "the most recognizable institution from Serbia", and the "regional framework was the necessary commonsensical step not only for us but for all in the neighbourhood with the same ambitions" (Ćirić, 2012).

16 Cf. the previous footnote.

17 This was preceded by the guest performing of the BPO in Dubrovnik in August 2011 as a part of the festival "Julian Rachlin & Friends". This was the first performing of this orchestra in Dubrovnik after 1982 and ended with ten minutes-long ovations (SEECult, 2011).

18 This was characteristic for the first "Pika-Točka-Tačka" cycle owing to which the audience from Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana had an opportunity to listen to the following soloists and conductors: pianists Andrew von Oeyen, Andreas Boyde, Alexei Volodin and Andrei Gavrilov, cellist Monika Leskovic and conductors Jonathan Schiffman and Andrew Grams.



diplomacy as a potent instrument in the steering of international relations, it is possible to understand why "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project attracted attention of U.S. institutions. The strong confidence in the project's broad potential for post-conflict reconciliation and building of bridges between deeply divided peoples, cultures and states was repeatedly expressed in public appearances of orchestra managers and U.S. Ambassadors in Croatia and Serbia (James Foley and Merry Warlick).

"Pika-Točka-Tačka" was regarded as a means to demonstrate to the broad public in Serbia, Croatia and, to a certain extent in Slovenia, that it is possible and necessary to overcome the heavy legacy of war by focusing on cooperation, common interests, and universality versus particularity of human nature.<sup>19</sup> In this process, music had a central role due to the widespread assumption about its intrinsic power to cross boundaries of any kind – political, cultural, social, etc.<sup>20</sup> Given these starting points and objectives, three orchestras were meant to play the part of each country's cultural ambassador – as prestigious institutions which, owing to their artistic level and broad national and international cultural mission, had the capacity to convey the importance of regional collaboration not only as an instrument of re-establishment and strengthening of intercultural dialogue, but also of exchange of post-socialist experience in relation to functioning of high-art sphere.

What seemed important in this specific mixture of old-fashioned Cold War narratives and concepts of cultural diplomacy (cultural ambassadors, universality of music and musical language, importance of elite institutions for the national identity etc.) (Fosler-Lussier, 2015) and pragmatic interpretation of post-conflict regional cultural policy (building the bridges through direct collaboration and exchange of experiences, strategies, post-socialist

challenges, etc.) was the need to give to the artistically and organizationally neatly shaped cycle certain conceptual framing and, along with that, a set of politically important messages. The framing was the cycle's inseparable part and, as such, it served as a crucial point of reference in media coverage. This was particularly true for Serbian press and periodicals which gave a lot of space to explanations of objectives of the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project, unlike their Croatian and especially Slovenian counterparts. The daily *Politika* and weekly *Vreme* even published interviews with orchestras' managers together with detailed articles dedicated to the carrying out of the preliminary cycle.<sup>21</sup> The idea to add to project the clear-cut political messages, no matter how stereotypical some of them may seem, represented another important departure from the usual strategies of regional cultural cooperation embedded in the belief that art (or music) "speaks for itself", or that cooperation as such speaks for itself, therefore not needing any conceptual or narrative elaboration. Notwithstanding the complexity of the process of appropriation of art and music and its dependence on a number of sociohistorical, economic, cultural, and political factors, grounding cultural exchange especially in the post-conflict areas only on its auto-explanatory capacity seems very problematic. For that reason, the idea to connect the promotion of peace, stability, commonality, cooperation, progress, and development with music as a medium that, at least in theory, has a capacity to reach people regardless of their race, class, gender and cultural differences and a specific collaboration method as simple as it might appear represented a distancing from the standard approach to cultural diplomacy in post-socialist Serbia.

Moreover, the practice of framing of project of cultural exchange as was the case with "Pika-Točka-Tačka" cycle starting from its symbolic title to the

19 Damjan Damjanović, director of SPO, commenting on the preliminary cycle of "Pika-Točka-Tačka", stated that three orchestras "as the most prominent musical institutions of their own states, and, consequently, as their important ambassadors, have not just created a routine-like musical and cultural cooperation, but have overcome many barriers in peoples' heads. After all, musical language is the one that knows no boundaries" (Ćirić, 2011). His colleague from ZPO, Miljenko Puljić, stressed that owing to the joint project "we were able to spread a positive message and to show the example of a viable regional collaboration" (Ćirić, 2011). From the perspective of Ivan Tasovac, BPO's manager, this project seemed "completely logical" from the start because there is nothing "more natural than the collaboration of three leading regional orchestras which are having guest performances in three cultural capitals of the region", adding that one cannot escape "political implications of the long-term regional undertaking of such kind" especially when the main participants are three national philharmonic orchestras from the countries that "definitely don't have an idyllic past" (Ćirić, 2011). Tasovac believed that symbolism of "three dots" ("Pika-Točka-Tačka") should be open to free interpretation "in accordance with individual political, artistic or grammatical passions" (Ćirić, 2011).

20 The universal character of musical language and music itself was often underlined in the statements of orchestra managers, conductors, guest soloists and U.S. ambassadors. For instance, the Ambassador James Foley considered music as the "language of peace" emphasising the fact that Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia have "common history and common future in European Union and Europe" (I. J., 2012). The similar stance concerning the power of music was displayed by Muhai Tang, at the time resident conductor of the BPO. Tang expressed excitement for being a part of the regional exchange project and for having a chance "to lead the orchestra through a regional musical journey", noting that for him "music is the only language that connects people without any limitations, and its message can be understood by everyone" (SEECult, 2012).

21 The daily *Politika* published an interview with Damjan Damjanović, director of SPO, on December 8, 2011 (Šehović, 2011), while a lengthy article dedicated to the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project appeared in the weekly *Vreme* a month before (Ćirić, 2011).

publicly revealed objectives could be regarded as an innovative element untypical in the cultural exchange initiated by state or non-state actors, or in the regular circulation of Serbian and Croatian products of popular culture across the borders. This practice can not only facilitate the reception of particular exchange projects and the appropriation of its broader messages in the public, but it can also give to other types of cultural interaction more specific meaning and significance. Another novelty that was introduced with "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project was a long-term planning of cultural exchange. Unfortunately, instead of a five-years' framework which was shaped and announced prior to the beginning of this project, only three seasons (2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14) were completed.<sup>22</sup> The reasons for its earlier completion were not disclosed to the public, although certain issues came to the fore already during the last season. For instance, unlike seasons 2011/12 and 2012/13, the season 2013/14 attracted considerably less attention from the media, and the usual covering of statements of managers, or of conductors and orchestra musicians in Serbian press was skipped. Because of the specific model of collaboration during this season that, aside from the shortened series of tours of the whole ensembles also encompassed the exchange of selected soloists of three orchestras and their joint performing, BPO did not appear in Ljubljana in 2013/14 and the last SPO's performing in Belgrade happened in the season 2012/13 (January 2013) (cf. Beogradska filharmonija, 2016).<sup>23</sup> Concluding from the available data from the press, the appointment of Ivan Tasovac to the position of Serbian Minister of Culture in September 2013 seems not to have correlated with the circumstances surrounding the

termination of "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project. What certainly represented a curious phenomenon is the fact that endeavours of this kind and format were not encouraged during his three-year-long term. Actually, only a very remote echo of it appeared in the first months of 2016, when Serbian Yugoslav Drama Theatre and Folk Dance Ensemble "Kolo" re-established contact with their Croatian colleagues and carried out guest performances.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast with Tasovac's highly esteemed work as a manager of BPO, he did not receive a lot of praise as a Minister of Culture. On the contrary, his actions and general approach to solving a number of issues in the field of culture were often criticized and, in some circles, he was even named the worst minister of culture in Serbian recent history (Ilić, 2016).<sup>25</sup> This was also relevant to the issue of international and regional cultural relations which was, during his term, in the phase of stagnation.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although it is not clear whether political factors played a role in the termination of the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" project, they certainly had a significant impact in the period that followed. The fact that Ivan Tasovac, who became known for his fresh and innovative initiatives as a BPO manager, did not display the same qualities in the position of the Serbian Minister of Culture could have had many causes, but there is no doubt that one of the contributing factors was the limited autonomy that was granted to the ministries of culture in the process of creation of cultural policy after 2012 (Ilić, 2016; Ćuk & Malušev, 2014). Another explanation for a slowdown in the regional cultural exchange after 2015 could

22 The second season of the joint cycle brought some important novelties. Among other things, the young and talented musicians from the countries of former Yugoslavia were engaged as soloists and conductors (pianist Simon Trpčeski, cellists Maja Bogdanović, Jaka Stadler and Jasen Chelfi, baritone Ipča Ramanović, soprano Marija Kuhar Šoša, conductors Vladimir Kulenović and Simon Krečić) (Šehović, 2012), and compositions of post-WWII Serbian and Croatian authors were included in the repertoire (i.e. Dragutin Gostuški's symphonic poem *Beograd* /1951/, and Ivo Josipović's *Samba da camera* /1985/). To the list of musicians were added the talented conductor Rafael Payare, a violinist Ning Feng and others. The idea to bring together aspiring musicians and philharmonic orchestras resembled to a certain extent the initiative that appeared in the early 1960s among the officials of Musical Youth of Serbia and Yugoslavia and evolved into a regular cycle named "Mladi za mlade" [From Youth to Youth] (cf. Vesić, 2023a). The second season of the cycle "Pika-Točka-Tačka" was given a positive response from the participating musicians of philharmonic orchestras. Some of the BPO members found the exchange of professional experience with their colleagues from ZPO and SPO "precious", while others commended the encouragement of healthy competition (K. R., 2012).

23 For instance, the concert of BPO in Belgrade in April 2014, as a part of "Pika-Točka-Tačka" cycle, included the performing of quartet of soloists of BPO, SPO and ZPO (violinists Tijana Milošević, Aleksandar Milošev, flautist Renata Penezić and harpist Milana Zarić) (B92, 2014). On the novelties of 2013/14 season cf. Pofuk (2013).

24 Cf. more in the footnote number 7.

25 According to writer and editor Saša Ilić who gave a detailed critical insight into Tasovac's legacy as a Minister of Culture as well as into the "life and work" of his successor Vladan Vukosavljević, Tasovac "has gone from the talented manager of Philharmonic Orchestra to the trivial starlet of the colourful tabloid pages. During his term he has done nothing except giving support to Vučić's [Aleksandar Vučić] attack on the media and independent cultural scene. Of all his attempts to present his lack of results as a fantastic European brand, only the picture of a soaking wet and withered Minister of Culture at the Military Parade [Belgrade, October 2014] next to Serbian Prime Minister fascinated with Russian aircrafts will be remembered. Tasovac's lack of feeling for the reality came to the climax by the end of his term when he started to reappear in media with a story that he deserves another term as a Minister of Culture in order to complete everything that has not been done for the preceding thirteen years" (Ilić, 2016).

lie in the regular flaring up of disputes, public confrontations and accusations, and exchange of letter of protests between Serbian and Croatian political leadership (Komarčević, 2023). However, the disharmony in Serbo-Croatian political relations in this period appeared not to have affected the intensity of exchange in the field of popular culture which can be concluded, among other things, from the viewing figures on the digital platforms such as YouTube (Bjella, 2021). The high ratings of Serbian (*turbo*)folk and pop-folk and *zabavna* music stars on YouTube in the past years drew attention of Croatian press whose journalist observed that "Serbs are rocking the Croatian YouTube" [Srbi drmaju hrvatskim YouToubeom] (Senjak, 2019). The popularity of Serbian music in Croatia was given a new turn in the late 2023 after the incredible success of the folk singer Aleksandra Prijović, who raised a dust both in Croatian and Serbian public (Mitkovski, 2023).

Even though popular culture and various other segments (tourism) are resisting the negative influence of political disputes between Serbia and Croatia, the impression that cultural actors from Serbia have been emphasizing for years is that bilateral cultural exchange lacks clear institutional and narrative framework, and, without such framework, it cannot achieve noteworthy results. A short-term episode in the Serbo-Croatian cultural relations embodied in the "Pika-Točka-Tačka" cycle has shown that the combination of institutional support, clear messages, a well-designed program, and innovative concept can move things from a deadlock and even give meaning and "anchoring" to non-institutional and non-state-supported forms of cultural cooperation. Certainly, such undertakings can only be regarded as a small step forward, since, without systematic dealing with the problematic past on both sides, the idea of building the lasting bridges is left without firm grounding in the long run.



## KULTURNA DIPLOMACIJA KOT SREDSTVO POKONFLIKTNIH ODNOSOV: PRIMER PROJEKTA »PIKA-TOČKA-TAČKA« (2011–2014) IN KULTURNIH IZMENJAV MED SRBIJO IN HRVAŠKO PO LETU 2000

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### POVZETEK

Članek se osredotoča na srbsko mednarodno kulturno politiko do Hrvaške v prvih dveh desetletjih 21. stoletja. Poleg vpogleda v splošne okoliščine srbske kulturne sfere po padcu Slobodana Miloševića oktobra 2000 in različnih ovir, ki so se postavile na pot kulturnemu predstavništvu srbske države v tujini, članek izpostavlja, kako so napeti odnosi med srbsko in hrvaško politično elito v prejšnjih desetletjih odvrčali obe državi od obsežnejše kulturne izmenjave in kako so negativno vplivali na rezultate takih pobud. V članku je podrobno prikazan primer skupnih koncertnih sezon najprestižnejših filharmoničnih orkestrrov iz Srbije, Hrvaške in Slovenije (Beograjska filharmonija, Zagrebška filharmonija in Slovenska filharmonija) z naslovom »Pika-Točka-Tačka« (2011–2014), ki je pokazal koristi sistematičnih in vztrajnih kulturnodiplomatskih prizadevanj v procesu obnove odnosov in zbliževanja med državami v pokonfliktih razmerah. Ta projekt je opozoril tudi na nekatere omejitve kulturnih prizadevanj v takšnem procesu, ko jih nenehno spodkopavajo antagonistične prakse političnih elit. Predpostavke in zaključki, predstavljeni v tem prispevku, so rezultat temeljite raziskave bogatega korpusa srbskega tiska zadnjih dveh desetletij ter letnih poročil srbskega ministrstva za kulturo in njegovih strateških dokumentov po letu 2000.

**Ključne besede:** Srbija, Hrvaška, kulturna diplomacija, pokonfliktno območje, projekt »Pika-Točka-Tačka«

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