

Early Warning: The Politicization of Slovak Arts and Culture

Early Warning: The Politicization of Slovak Arts and Culture provides a detailed account of the alarming transformation of the cultural sector in Slovakia since parliamentary elections were last held in October 2023. Led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, the coalition government has moved to seize control of the state's cultural apparatus for political ends. This effort has been driven by the Ministry of Culture, which is under the leadership of the Slovak National Party (SNS).

Through policy analysis and interviews with 19 Slovak artists and cultural workers, *Early Warning* exposes a series of deeply troubling developments that illustrate the systematic dismantling of protections for artistic freedom and cultural autonomy in Slovakia:

1. Takeover of Cultural Funding Institutions

The Ministry of Culture has asserted control over the Audiovisual Fund (AVF) and the Slovak Arts Council (FPU) through legislative changes that increased ministerial appointments to executive and oversight roles, enabling political influence over funding decisions. Independent assessments have been replaced with politically aligned appointees, allowing the government to veto funding decisions that do not align with the ruling party's ideological stance.

2. Reduction of Transparency in Cultural Leadership

Governmental interference has reduced transparency and independence in cultural leadership. The amendment to Act No. 206/2009 Coll. on Museums and Galleries removed public hearings and protections against unfair dismissals, allowing the government to dismiss directors at will, increasing political control over museums and galleries.

3. Mass Purge of Ministry Staff

A radical purge has destabilized key cultural policy institutions. Nearly 50 per cent of the ministry's own staff has been removed; the dissolution of the Institute of Cultural Policy (IKP) has eliminated evidence-based decision-making; and: abrupt and unexplained dismissals of leadership and staff at cultural institutions have fostered a climate of fear.

4. Politicization of Cultural Institutions

Politically motivated leadership changes have destabilized major national cultural institutions—including the Slovak National Theatre, Slovak National Gallery, and Slovak National Museum. Many new appointees, lacking cultural management experience have triggered mass resignations among staff and widespread public protests.

5. Targeting of LGBTQ+ Initiatives

The Ministry of Culture has launched a campaign to censor LGBTQ+ representation in the arts. It has cut funding for gender inclusive NGOs and cultural projects, and has withheld funding from LGBTQ+ festivals and exhibitions, overriding the recommendations of expert committees. It also banned a children's book on gender identity, ordered the removal of LGBTQ+ artworks, and canceled related performances.

6. Escalating (Self)-Censorship and Suppression

Slovak artists and cultural workers report an intensifying atmosphere of censorship and suppression. Dismissals, funding cuts, law enforcement interventions, and government-led smear campaigns against artists have created a climate of intimidation, discouraging cultural and artistic expression that does not align with the government's ideology.

7. Violations of International Law

The Ministry's cultural agenda and policies conflict with Slovakia's legal obligations to protect the rights to freedom of expression and cultural participation. AFI warns that appointing loyalists to leadership positions and denying funding to dissident and/or minority artists and cultural workers—particularly LGBTQ+ individuals—risks widespread rights violations.

Lived Experiences

The report features firsthand accounts from Slovak artists and cultural workers, illustrating the devastating impact of recent policy changes on the cultural sector. Matej Drlička, former director of the Slovak National Theatre, recounts his abrupt dismissal after defending inclusivity and cultural pluralism. Marcel Čas, ex-director of the dissolved Institute of Cultural Policy, describes the Ministry's dismantling of evidence-based policymaking. Monika and Bohuš Kubinský, an artistic duo, share their experience of being targeted by a Ministry-led smear campaign. Together, these testimonies offer a stark portrait of a cultural landscape under siege, where political interference and ideological control threaten artistic freedom and institutional integrity.

Call to Action

Artistic freedom in Slovakia is in a critical state, as government interventions have removed key protections. Without intervention, the arts and cultural sector will sustain lasting damage.

The international community must act urgently to counter these developments. *Early Warning* calls on European institutions, human rights organizations, and other stakeholders to:

- Advocate for the restoration of independent, expert-led cultural governance in institutions.
- Pressure Slovak authorities to implement fair and transparent funding mechanisms.
- Press Slovakia to recognize its obligation to respect and protect artistic freedom.
- Support Slovak artists and cultural organizations

About AFI

Led by immigration and human rights attorneys, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) facilitates pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk. Its reports are evidence-based tools to advocate for the protection of free artistic expression and the expansion of artists' rights around the world.

For more information, please contact AFI's Senior Researcher and Policy Analyst, Irene Pavesi, at irene@artisticfreedominitiative.org or visit AFI's webpage www.artisticfreedominitiative.org

About Open Culture!

Open Culture! is a non-partisan, grassroots civic initiative of the cultural community from across the Slovak Republic. Open Culture! was born in January 2024 as a response to Minister Šimkovičová's appointment and is since then committed to opposing any political interference in culture that occurs without discussion with representatives of the cultural sector and professional consideration.

For more information, please contact otvorenakultura@platformaok.sk or visit Open Culture!'s webpage.

