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**The Politicization  
of Arts and Culture  
in Slovakia.**



# Early Warning

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# Abbreviations

**AICA** - International Association of Art Critics

**AFI** - Artistic Freedom Initiative

**Anténa** - International Association of Art Critics Network for Independent Culture

**AVF** - Audiovisual Fund

**BAB** - Biennial of Animation Bratislava

**BIBIANA** - International House of Art for Children

**CFR** - Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

**CJEU** - Court of Justice of the European Union

**ECtHR** - European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

**ECHR** - European Court of Human Rights

**ETC** - European Theatre Convention

**EU** - European Union

**FIDESZ** - Hungarian Civic Alliance

**FPU** - Slovak Arts Council

**HLAS** - Voice - Social Democracy

**ICCPR** - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

**ICESCR** - International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

**ICOM Slovakia** - International Council of Museums Slovakia

**IKP** - Institute of Cultural Policy

**LGBTQ+** - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+

**NAKA** - National Criminal Agency

**NGO** - non-governmental organization

**OECD** - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PiS** - Law and Justice Party (Poland)

**RTVS** - Radio and Television Slovakia

**SAN** - Slovak Association of Journalists

**SKS** - Association of Self-Governing Regions

**SMER-SSD** - Direction - Slovak Social Democracy

**SND** - Slovak National Theatre

**SNG** - Slovak National Gallery

**SNM** - Slovak National Museum

**SNP** - Slovak National Uprising

**SNS** - Slovak National Party

**STV** - Slovak Television

**STVR** - Slovak Television and Radio

**UNESCO** - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**VŠMU** - Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava

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# Artistic Freedom Initiative

Led by immigration and human rights attorneys, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) facilitates pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk.

Dedicated to safeguarding the right to artistic freedom, AFI was founded on the notion that artists are uniquely situated to positively and powerfully effect change, provided their voices can be heard. As artists are increasingly censored, imprisoned, restricted from moving freely across borders, tortured, or even killed, it is more critical than ever that we safeguard the right to artistic freedom and zealously champion the courageous artists who exercise it.

To this end, AFI directly assists artists who have experienced persecution, censorship, or other restrictions on their freedom of expression and supports artists who have demonstrated a commitment to social change and fundamental human rights. We work with immigrant artists to champion art produced in exile, advance creative cultural exchange, improve conditions for artists in their home countries, and safeguard their ability to express themselves creatively through the arts.

Through our advocacy program, AFI produces thematic reports related to the protection of free artistic expression and the expansion of artists' rights around the world. Building on our research, we campaign to create new opportunities for the realization of artistic expression and to strengthen existing rights protection mechanisms related to artistic freedom.

For more information about AFI or to read our previous advocacy reports, please visit our website.

[www.artisticfreedominitiative.org](http://www.artisticfreedominitiative.org)

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# Open Culture!

Open Culture! is a non-partisan, grassroots civic initiative of the cultural community from across the Slovak Republic. It brings together representatives of institutions established by cities, municipalities, and state administration, as well as non-established organizations and independent cultural workers.

Open Culture! was formed in response to the arrogance and incompetence of the Slovak Republic's Ministry of Culture leadership, which was established after the 2023 elections.

Its long-term goal is to highlight broader issues in cultural policy and connect individuals from various cultural sectors across Slovakia. It is committed to opposing any political interference in culture that occurs without discussion with representatives of the cultural sector and professional consideration. The platform represents a network based on solidarity, mutual support, sharing information, and specific skills. The members of Open Culture! work together to create a sustainable and diverse cultural life in all regions of the Slovak Republic.

<https://platformaok.sk/>

Otvorená  
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## About the Artist

AFI is pleased to feature the work of Slovakian illustrator, graphic artist, and printmaker, Jozef Głaba, in this report, *Early Warning: The Politicization of Arts and Culture in Slovakia*. His intricate series of works highlight the divisive and destructive impact of ethno-nationalist leadership on culture and society.

Głaba is a multidisciplinary artist mainly engaging in digital illustration and free graphics, in which he frequently utilizes techniques such as screen printing, gravure printing, and linocut. Through these techniques, Głaba criticizes and reflects upon various aspects of life and society with sarcasm and irony, saturating his art with humor that he skillfully weaves into the composition of his work. Głaba studied in the Department of Printmaking and Other Media at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. He has also created illustrations for numerous children's books, editorials, and nonprofit organizations, including Amnesty International Slovakia, Mareena, and Ulita.

Głaba collaborated with AFI to create five new works featured throughout *Early Warning* that depict the destruction of artistic institutions in Slovakia, the suppression of creative expression, and the destabilization of Slovakia's cultural identity. His illustrations highlight the ongoing "brain drain" of Slovakian artists and the dismantling of artistic infrastructure in Slovakia, and expose the fragility of culture under immense political pressure, reinforcing an urgent message that without vigilance and

resistance, artistic and intellectual life in Slovakia are at risk of destruction. In order to give his illustrations a raw, punk energy that enhances the defiant tone of the report, Głaba created sketches that he translated into illustrations with linocuts. Głaba chose the technique of linocutting, which includes, cutting, carving, printing, and scanning his illustrations, to create a bold, graphic quality that captures the essence of the devastating destruction of culture in Slovakia's current government.

Additionally, Głaba selected images from a larger series he created for his March 2024 exhibition, *Ruka k ruke, tehla k tehle (Hand to Hand, Brick to Brick)*. His works explore the dual nature of brick walls as symbols of both protection and division, emphasizing their ability to create safe spaces while simultaneously isolating individuals, societies, and nations. Motivated by a fear of the cultural and societal consequences of the new government formed after the September 2023 parliamentary elections—in particular, the Ministry of Culture under Martina Šimkovičová—Głaba uses bricks metaphorically to critique the incremental construction of a hostile political environment in Slovakia. Through these walls, his works warn of the dangers of passivity in the face of governmental forces that could lead to authoritarianism, emphasizing the importance of collective action to rebuild a more unified and culturally inclusive society.

To learn more about Jozef Głaba's work, please visit his portfolio at:

<https://www.behance.net/JozefGłaba>



Jozef Głaba. Photo by: Jakub Michal Teringa

# Executive Summary



Open Culture! "OK! protest, Bratislava, August 2024. Photo by: Filip Pavlac"

*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. The recently elected coalition government is made up of three political parties: Direction – Slovak Social Democracy (SMER-SSD), Voice – Social Democracy (HLAS), and the Slovak National Party (SNS). Led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, the coalition government has moved to seize control of the state’s cultural apparatus for political ends.

The election of Robert Fico for his fourth mandate has exacerbated Slovakia’s ongoing democratic regression. His populist platforms—marked by anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) and anti-immigrant rhetoric, hostility towards critical media, and staunch Euroscepticism—places him firmly on the far right of the European Union’s political spectrum. Fico’s third term as Prime Minister culminated in his resignation following mass protests against corruption and government misconduct after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, who had been investigating corruption allegations leveled against Fico and several other politicians. Fico’s reelection in 2023, despite his controversial reputation, underscores Slovakia’s departure from democratic norms and its drift towards the illiberal tendencies observed elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe.

Since reassuming power, Fico’s administration has taken abrupt action to consolidate executive authority and weaken mechanisms for accountability that had been instrumental in investigating corruption and organized crime. The abolition of the National Criminal Agency (NAKA) and the dissolution of the special prosecutor’s office effectively removed key mechanisms for prosecuting high-level financial crimes and political corruption.<sup>1</sup> While threatening the independence of the judicial system, the Fico administration has launched an aggressive campaign against independent media, labeling journalists as “foreign agents” and undermining press freedoms.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of these illiberal measures extends beyond the judicial and media landscape, to permeate the arts and cultural sector, which is the subject of this report. Over the last eighteen months, Fico’s coalition government has rapidly sought to control artistic expression and reshape cultural institutions to align with nationalist and conservative ideologies. Slovakia’s approach under Fico mirrors the cultural governance strategies of Viktor Orbán’s Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ) and the former Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland, both of which systematically curtailed artistic freedom, subordinated cultural institutions to the state, and imposed ideological conformity on the arts. In Hungary, Orbán’s government established direct control over cultural funding, replaced independent arts administrators with political loyalists, and promoted historical revisionism in museums and theaters.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Poland’s PiS government weaponized culture as a tool of ideological warfare, purging dissident voices from national institutions and enforcing a homogenized, state-sanctioned narrative.<sup>4</sup>

The parallels with Slovakia’s current trajectory are stark. A key element of the Fico administration’s political strategy has been the allocation of power over the Ministry of Culture to the most far-right and nationalist party in governing the coalition, the SNS. Under the leadership of Martina Šimkovičová, a far-right media personality with no cultural management experience, the Ministry has shifted from being a supporter of cultural and artistic diversity to an instrument of ideological enforcement.

Under her leadership, the Ministry has centralized control over cultural funding, dismissed experienced professionals, and imposed a nationalist framework that prioritizes so-called “traditional” Slovak values while systematically excluding progressive and minority voices.

Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) and Otvorená Kultúra! (Open Culture!) released *Early Warning* to raise awareness about the risks that the Fico administration’s policies pose to artistic freedom in Slovakia, and to document the early impacts of these changes on the existing Slovakian arts community. Through policy analysis and interviews with 19 Slovak artists and cultural workers, the report exposes a series of deeply troubling developments that illustrate the systematic erosion of artistic freedom and cultural autonomy in Slovakia:

## 1. Takeover of Cultural Funding Institutions

The Ministry of Culture has taken effective control over the Audiovisual Fund (AVF) and the Slovak Arts Council (FPU). Legislative amendments have increased ministerial appointments to executive and oversight roles, enabling political influence over funding decisions. Expert-driven evaluations have been sidelined, replacing independent assessments with politically aligned appointees. This new funding structure grants the government veto power over expert committee recommendations, enabling the blocking of projects that do not align with the ruling party’s ideological stance.

## 2. Erosion of Transparency in Cultural Leadership

Governmental interference has eroded transparency and independence in cultural leadership. A legislative amendment has removed transparency measures in the selection and dismissal process of cultural institution directors. It abolished public hearings and protections against unfair dismissals for statutory officials in museums and galleries. Directors can now be dismissed without cause, increasing political control over museums and galleries.

## 3. Mass Purge of Ministry Staff

A purge of personnel has dismantled key cultural policy structures. Nearly 50 percent of the ministry’s staff have been removed in a radical purge of personnel. Key analytical and policy-driven units, such as the Institute of Cultural Policy (IKP), were dismantled, eliminating evidence-based decision-making. Employees have described a climate of fear, with dismissals often occurring abruptly and without explanation.

## 4. Politicization of Cultural Institutions

Major cultural institutions have been destabilized through politically motivated leadership changes. Seven major national cultural institutions—including the Slovak National Theatre, Slovak National Gallery, and Slovak National Museum—saw abrupt leadership changes. Many new appointees lack

experience in cultural management, with backgrounds in risk management, marketing, or television. The turnover has destabilized institutions, causing mass resignations among staff and widespread public protests.

## 5. Targeting of LGBTQ+ Initiatives

The Ministry of Culture has actively targeted LGBTQ+ initiatives, signaling an ideological crackdown on inclusivity in the arts. Minister Šimkovičová publicly declared an end to funding for LGBTQ+ non-governmental organizations and cultural projects. Among other examples, the FPU withheld funding for LGBTQ+ festivals and exhibitions, overriding expert committee recommendations. Other specific cases include the banning of a children's book on gender identity, the removal of LGBTQ+ artworks from exhibitions, and the cancellation of performances with LGBTQ+ themes.

## 6. Escalating (Self)-Censorship and Suppression

Slovak artists and cultural workers have faced an intensifying atmosphere of censorship and suppression. The cumulative effect of dismissals, funding cuts, interventions by law enforcement, and government-led smear campaigns has created an environment of intimidation, discouraging cultural expression and independent artistic production that do not align with the government's ideologies.

## 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 to participate in cultural life. AFI's analysis warns that the Ministry's efforts to consolidate control over cultural institutions by appointing loyalists to leadership positions and denying funding to dissident and/or minority artists and cultural workers—particularly those that identify as LGBTQ+—on discriminatory grounds are highly likely to result in widespread violations of these rights.

The report also includes four featured interviews with Slovakian artists and cultural workers, including Matej Drlička, the former head of the Slovak National Theatre, who discussed his struggle to protect inclusivity and cultural pluralism at the institution and the controversial termination of his contract by the Minister of Culture in 2024; Marcel Čas, the former IKP director, who recounted the events that led to his dismissal as director and the dissolution of the institute; Andrej Dúbravský, a painter and visual artist who detailed being the subject of a media frenzy led by the Minister of Culture and the mounting challenges facing LGBTQ+ artists; and the artistic duo Monika and Bohuš Kubinský, who spoke of their experience of being the subjects of a Ministry-led misinformation and smear campaign. Their testimonies offer valuable insight into how the Ministry of Culture's policies have hobbled cultural institutions and created a hostile environment for artists.

This report serves as an early warning of the dangers ahead and a call to action for those committed to defending artistic freedom and

democratic integrity in Slovakia. The title *Early Warning* underscores the rapid evolution of the situation in Slovakia, which raises urgent questions about the need for protective mechanisms to safeguard artistic freedom. The current trajectory demands immediate attention, as the pace of change suggests a pressing need for national and international intervention. While it may be too early to fully assess the effects of these changes, the immediate consequences—such as the erosion of institutional autonomy, the marginalization of diverse voices, and the destabilization of cultural governance—are troubling. The dismantling of safeguards, e.g., expert evaluations and transparent selection processes, combined with a rhetoric that excludes progressive and minority perspectives, paints a worrying picture for the direction of cultural policy in Slovakia. The long-term prospects are concerning, as these reforms risk enabling censorship, reducing innovation, and fostering an environment of ideological conformity within the arts and culture sector. Although the full impact has yet to be felt, the current trajectory suggests a potential weakening of artistic freedom and cultural diversity.

In the context of these developments, artists and civil society in Slovakia have mobilized in a timely and impressive manner, so far demonstrating remarkable collective resilience. However, sustaining this resistance comes at a steep human and economic cost, as individuals are forced to put their lives and work on hold to defend their rights. Without international support, this struggle may become unsustainable, making urgent intervention imperative.

The situation in Slovakia serves as a crucial reminder of the fragility of artistic freedom. If left unchallenged, these patterns may become entrenched, further restricting creative expression and democratic participation. Timely and decisive action is needed to protect Slovakia's cultural landscape and uphold fundamental rights. Through *Early Warning*, AFI and Open Culture! call on national and international actors, including the European Union and human rights organizations, to take immediate action. Key recommendations to stakeholders on artistic freedom—including the Slovak government, parliament, and related institutions, as well as international organizations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, and other relevant bodies—focus on restoring the independence of cultural institutions, ensuring fair and transparent funding practices, and advocating for legislative reforms that align with Slovakia's democratic commitments.

**"This report serves as an early warning of the dangers ahead and a call to action for those committed to defending artistic freedom and democratic integrity in Slovakia."**

# The Transformation of Slovakia's State Cultural Apparatus



Performative literature reading in front of the Ministry of Culture as a form of protest, Bratislava, March 2024. Photo by: Martin Toldy

# Introduction

The nation-state of Slovakia, as it exists today, was born out of the Velvet Revolution of 1989, a pivotal moment that marked the country's break from Soviet control and its aspirations toward democracy. The peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 saw Slovakia emerge as an independent state, navigating the complex transition from a centrally planned economy and authoritarian governance to a liberal democratic framework.<sup>5</sup> After joining the European Union (EU) in 2004, Slovakia integrated itself into the broader European project, embracing political pluralism, market liberalization, and institutional reforms aimed at fostering democratic resilience.<sup>6</sup>

However, Slovakia's democratic trajectory has been punctuated by episodes of backsliding. In the 1990s, the authoritarian tendencies of former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's successive governments set early precedents for executive overreach. Governance under Mečiar (1990-1, 1992-4, 1994-8) was characterized by state-controlled media, political purges, and rampant corruption.<sup>7</sup> Although later governments sought to rectify these deficiencies, the return of Robert Fico as Prime Minister in October 2023 has reignited fears of illiberal governance.<sup>8</sup>

Since its early days, Prime Minister Robert Fico's administration (October

2023–present) has aggressively restructured Slovakia's cultural sector, leveraging legislative reforms and strategic appointments to consolidate control over the country's cultural institutions. These actions signal a deliberate effort to align the country's arts and cultural governance with the ideological priorities of his political party, SMER-SSD, and its coalition partners, particularly the Slovak National Party (SNS), which is the most hardline nationalist faction within the governing coalition. Central to this transformation is the systematic dismantling of safeguards that ensured the independence and professionalism of cultural institutions. By politicizing the Ministry of Culture and installing unqualified, ideologically aligned leaders, the government has reoriented the state's cultural apparatus and laid the groundwork for it to serve as a nationalist propaganda vehicle.

Under the pretense of modernization, the incumbent administration has replaced long-standing directors, eliminated expert-led decision-making structures, and centralized authority within the Ministry. These measures have disrupted institutional stability, marginalized dissenting voices, and curtailed artistic freedom. The resulting shifts echo troubling regional trends where illiberal regimes have exploited the state's cultural apparatus to suppress pluralism and promote exclusionary agendas.

# The Politicization of the Ministry of Culture

The SNS program to assert ideological control of the arts and cultural sector began in earnest after the appointment of key party members to the leadership of Slovakia's Ministry of Culture. In October 2023, SNS parliamentary representative Martina Šimkovičová was appointed Minister of Culture, despite having no background in cultural policy or management.<sup>9</sup> Prior to her political career, Šimkovičová was a television presenter for TV Markíza, one of Slovakia's most prominent mainstream broadcasters. Known for making controversial statements, she was dismissed from that role in the summer of 2015 for remarks expressing anti-refugee and anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) sentiments. She later joined Televízia Slovan, a channel known for promoting conspiracy theories.<sup>10</sup> Šimkovičová's ministerial tenure has been marked by attacks on minority groups and confrontations with cultural institutions, signaling that her appointment will represent a significant shift away from inclusionary policies in cultural governance.

Compounding these concerns was the subsequent appointment of Lukáš

Machala as General Secretary of the Ministry of Culture's Service Office. Machala has a history of disseminating conspiracy theories, including publicly questioning whether the Earth is round and promoting chemtrail narratives, which previously led to his resignation from public office.<sup>11</sup> His leadership—characterized by the targeted dismissal of key directors of cultural institutions and ministry employees without clear justification, as detailed below—led to public protests and mobilization by cultural workers.<sup>12</sup> Reports of his authoritarian management style and aggressive centralization of power within the Ministry reflect a deeply ideological agenda, one that stifles transparency, fosters division, and intensifies fear across Slovakia's cultural sector. The cultural workers interviewed for this report uniformly stated that Machala has created a climate of fear within the Ministry, where managers and directors are in danger of being removed or replaced without notice and department funding can be cut at whim.

Together, Šimkovičová and Machala have gained and exerted disproportionate influence over Slovakia's cultural governance. As both lack appropriate qualifications and



Open Culture! protest and march from the new building of the Slovak National Theatre (Pribinova street) to Slovak National Uprising Square, Bratislava, August 2024. Photo by: Filip Pavlac

possess controversial backgrounds in right-wing politics, their appointments suggest a deliberate strategy to transform the Ministry of Culture into a vehicle for propagandist objectives. Machala himself openly declared, “*We are patriots, we want to save Slovakia from this rabid pack of progressives in some non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions, in art and in the media,*”<sup>13</sup> reflecting a clear intent to align the Ministry with the SNS’s nationalist agenda.

While the authors of this report acknowledge that governing political parties and administrations have the right to select Ministers of Culture and pursue their own cultural policies, the position of Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) is that cultural institutions should be apolitically managed and not be vessels for political propaganda.

Our organization’s deeper concern is that these changes appear to track with regional trends in cultural governance—particularly in Poland under the previous ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS), and in Hungary under the current Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ) regime—and that these early measures are ultimately aimed towards the larger political goals of (1) deplatforming artists who use their creativity to speak out against the regime, (2) transforming key arts and cultural institutions into instruments for nationalist propaganda, and (3) creating an intimidating environment for free expression in the arts and cultural sector whereby artists choose to self-censor rather than express viewpoints contrary to the government’s political platform.

# Nationalistic and conservative shift in cultural policy

The nationalist and exclusionary turn of the SNS’s cultural policies became evident early in Minister Šimkovičová’s tenure. Her manifesto-like statement during Prime Minister Fico’s visit to the Ministry of Culture on November 6, 2023, encapsulated the shift: “*The culture of the Slovak people should be Slovak. Slovak, and no other. We tolerate other national cultures, but our culture is not a mixing of other cultures.*”<sup>14</sup> This rhetoric was followed by Šimkovičová’s January 2024 public remarks, where she criticized the state of cultural affairs within the Ministry and specifically referred to a “Pandora’s box” of contracts supporting LGBTQ+ initiatives and allocating subsidies to progressive non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In response to her alleged discovery, she threatened an audit of the Ministry.

To reinforce this shift, the Minister conducted a controversial online Facebook poll on her personal account that framed cultural funding as a binary choice between preserving heritage projects or supporting

“*LGBTQ+ events where minors are to learn how to perform in a sexual show [and] rainbow parades, where half-naked people are paraded in the squares.*”<sup>15</sup> Only days later, Šimkovičová announced the termination of funding for LGBTQ+ artistic and cultural initiatives. (See report section, **Experiences of Censorship and Suppression.**)

The SNS rapidly followed these actions with a legislative push to centralize control over cultural institutions. In January 2024, the party introduced a package of laws targeting the governance of two of the main art funds—the Audiovisual Fund (AVF) and the Slovak Arts Council (FPU)—as well as the operational standards of museums and galleries.<sup>16</sup> These laws were eventually passed in the first half of 2024, and their implementation and impact are discussed in greater detail below. (See report section, **Legislative Reforms Enabling Political Control Over Cultural Institutions.**)

The legislative takeover of public cultural funding is deeply intertwined

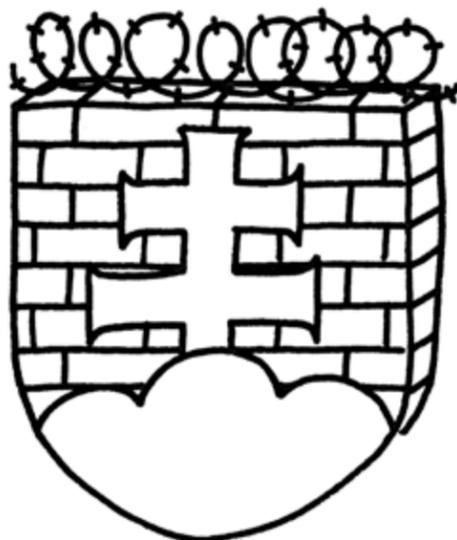


with a broader erosion of democratic freedoms, particularly the shrinking space for freedom of information and expression. In June 2024, the parliament approved a controversial law dissolving the public broadcaster, Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS), and replacing it with Slovak Television and Radio (STVR).<sup>17</sup> This move was widely criticized by international organizations such as the European Broadcasting Union, the International Press Institute, and the Council of Europe, and significantly undermined media independence.<sup>18</sup>

In parallel, symbolic policies further reinforced the nationalist agenda in Slovakia's cultural governance. The government revised the State Language Act to emphasize the primacy of Slovak in public life, a move that critics argue marginalizes minority cultures and languages.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the Ministry of Culture spearheaded a contentious project to rearrange the national anthem, incorporating traditional Slovak *fujara* tones—deep, airy melodies played on a long wooden shepherd's flute, historically associated with Slovak folk heritage—to emphasize national identity. The anthem's revision drew sharp criticism for its lack of public consultation and association with exclusionary rhetoric implying the anthem was “not meant for everyone.”<sup>20</sup>

In June 2024, further signaling the government's intent to centralize

and nationalize the cultural sector, reports emerged of a feasibility plan commissioned by the Ministry.<sup>21</sup> The plan proposed consolidating major entities, such as the Slovak National Museum (SNM) and the Slovak National Gallery (SNG), into new “Slovak national” organizations. Estimated to cost hundreds of millions of euros, this controversial project would reshape the cultural landscape, affecting thousands of employees and properties while reinforcing state control over the sector. One particularly concerning aspect is the handling of artwork, with critics alarmed by the potential misuse or misappropriation of cultural property.<sup>22</sup>



In early 2024, the Ministry also began restructuring cultural organizations. (See report section, **Purge of personnel and dismantling of institutions.**) The process started in January 2024 with the controversial announcement of the merger of Kunsthalle Bratislava with the SNG, a move widely criticized for its ideological motivation and lack of transparency. Soon after, the Ministry initiated a wave of leadership dismissals across core state institutions. On the same day in March 2024, the heads of the International House of Art for Children (BIBIANA) and the National Library were dismissed. By August, the removals had escalated, with the directors of the SNG and the Slovak National Theatre (SND) both replaced, triggering public outrage. In September, the

head of the SNM was also dismissed, further illustrating the Ministry's intent to consolidate control over Slovakia's cultural institutions.

These actions represent a deliberate strategy by the SNS-led Ministry of Culture to impose a nationalist agenda, marginalize progressive voices, and dismantle structures that previously upheld cultural diversity and autonomy. However, while driven by clear ideological goals, the government's lack of institutional expertise and inability to ensure the smooth operation of cultural institutions has led to significant disruptions. In less than a year, this combination of political restructuring and administrative inefficiency has significantly reshaped Slovakia's cultural governance, aligning it with exclusionary and ideological objectives that echo similar trends in neighboring Hungary and Poland, albeit with a more chaotic and improvised execution.

The following two sections will detail how the SNS embarked on a specific course of action enabling them to harness control of the arts and cultural sector, specifically through (1) passing legislation empowering the ruling party to control arts and cultural funding, (2) enacting laws augmenting the Ministry of Culture's regulatory control over the management of state cultural institutions, (3) large scale purging of Ministry personnel, (4) targeted dismissals of the directors of the most prominent state cultural institutions, and (5) and their replacement with politically connected directors with questionable backgrounds in cultural management.

**“The culture of the Slovak people should be Slovak. Slovak, and no other. We tolerate other national cultures, but our culture is not a mixing of other cultures.”**

**Martina Šimkovičová,  
Minister of Culture**

# Legislative Reforms Enabling Political Control Over Cultural Institutions

Since its inception, the Fico administration consolidated control over the arts and cultural sector by implementing legislative reforms that effectively dismantled mechanisms designed to ensure the political independence and transparency of Slovakia's state cultural institutions. Specifically, the SNS enacted key laws that augmented the Ministry of Culture's authority over (1) funding allocations in the cultural sector and (2) management decisions in state-led museums and galleries. Given the appointment of right-wing nationalist Minister Šimkovičová and General Secretary Machala to head the Ministry of Culture, there was initially considerable concern that the purpose of such legislation was to align the governance and programming of Slovak cultural institutions with the Fico administration's ideological agenda. This concern was in part based on Hungary's similar course of

conduct over the last decade, which entailed passing legislation and enacting reforms to consolidate the Orbán government's complete political control over cultural institutions.

Indeed, early actions taken by the Ministry pursuant to these new laws have confirmed fears that the SNS is seeking to instrumentalize the state's cultural apparatus and use it to advance a nationalist platform.

## Increased state control over funding for art and culture

In January 2024, SNS deputies introduced a package of amendments to cultural funding laws that

fundamentally altered the functioning of two key institutions in the funding scheme of arts and culture in Slovakia: the AVF and the FPU. These two institutions are at the core of the country's funding scheme for arts and culture, distributing 28 million euros in 2023 across a wide range of cultural projects and initiatives.<sup>23</sup> The amendments significantly increased the number of Ministry of Culture appointees in both executive and oversight roles within these funds, enabling the appointment of politically aligned individuals. Furthermore, the reforms eliminated professional qualifications for board members and stripped away requirements for evidence-based decision-making in funding allocations, effectively dismantling the safeguards that had ensured their institutional independence and expertise-driven management.

## Amendment to Act No. 516/2008 on the Slovak Audiovisual Fund (AVF)

Established in 2010 as an independent entity, the AVF replaced the previous ministerial fund as the primary mechanism for supporting Slovak film.<sup>24</sup> Funded through a combination of state allocations and contributions, it is dedicated to the development, production, distribution, promotion, and participation of Slovak films in international festivals.

From its inception, the AVF was designed as an expert-led structure to ensure that funding decisions were independent from political influence and based on artistic and industry merit. The Fund operates through three key bodies: the Board, the Supervisory Board, and the Director. While these bodies oversee the AVF administration and financial management, the core decision-making power regarding the allocation of grants historically rested with expert committees—composed of industry professionals with substantial experience in film production, distribution, and other audiovisual sectors.<sup>25</sup>

Effective August 1, 2024, the amendment<sup>26</sup> to Act No. 516/2008 introduced significant changes that fundamentally altered this expert-driven system, diminishing the independence of the funding process.<sup>27</sup> While the three governing bodies—the Board, the Supervisory Board, and the director—formally remain in place, the amendment has profoundly changed their functioning and the role of experts within them.

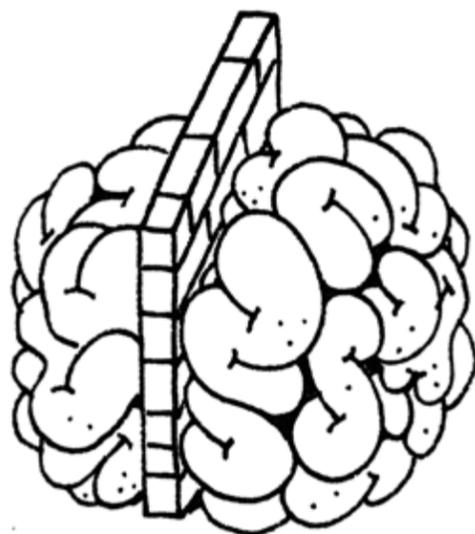
At the executive level, the new law transferred the authority to allocate grants away from the expert committees and the director, concentrating decision-making power in the hands of the Board. Under the previous system, the Board did not intervene in the allocation of individual grants but instead provided oversight and strategic direction, while expert committees made funding recommendations that were assessed by the director. The new law upends this balance by granting the Board direct authority

over funding decisions, allowing it to override expert recommendations.

The composition of the Board has also been altered to increase the influence of the Ministry of Culture. The AVF is funded by multiple bodies—including broadcasters, public service television, and distributors—necessitating their representation on the Board. While the AVF’s Board used to be composed of nine members, all appointed to six-year terms by the Ministry of Culture, the amendment increased the number of members to thirteen. Crucially, under the previous system, the Board had only one ministerial seat. The expansion to thirteen members significantly increased the Ministry’s influence, raising the number of ministerial seats from one to five.

Although the Ministry of Culture does not hold an outright majority, with five ministerial seats out of thirteen, the new system grants these ministerial nominees significant leverage. Under the new structure, at least nine out of thirteen Board members must vote to adopt an expert committee’s decision. This means that without the support of at least one ministerial nominee, funding recommendations can be blocked. This effectively provides the SNS-controlled Ministry with a powerful tool of censorship, even without a direct majority on the Board. The Supervisory Board is an oversight body responsible for monitoring the

fund’s financial management and ensuring compliance with legal and statutory obligations. The new law increases the number of Supervisory Board members from three to five. While the Board remains in charge of nominating two members of the Supervisory Board, under the new law the Ministry of Culture has been granted the authority to dismiss and replace three members. By appointing the majority of the members of the Supervisory Board, the Ministry of Culture effectively gained control of the fund’s oversight body.



While Minister Šimkovičová and General Secretary Machala framed these changes as a step towards greater transparency and fairness, Machala’s statements reveal a deeper intent to weed out progressive projects. For example, he described the reform as “an end to nepotism,

*wastefulness, and patronage in the allocation of subsidies for all kinds of projects of the liberal-progressive mafia in [the] audiovisual [sector].”*<sup>28</sup>

The film industry and the cultural community at large criticized these changes as a threat to the independence and functionality of the Slovak audiovisual industry. The implementation of the new legislation raised issues regarding Šimkovičová’s appointment of Štefan Dlugolinský as a member of the AVF Board.<sup>29</sup> On August 16, 2024, professional audiovisual organizations publicly objected to his

Board appointment, citing his lack of relevant experience in cinema and the opaque selection process.<sup>30</sup> They criticized the Ministry of Culture for disregarding their proposed candidate, Adriana Tomanová, a seasoned audiovisual production expert, without clear justification. It is important to note that Dlugolinský served as the deputy director of Slovak Television (STV) during a period marked by allegations against the administration of former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar of political misuse of the broadcaster, including violating the election law.<sup>31</sup> Further, he participated in the privatization of the joint-stock company Štúdio Koliba, which was associated with the shuttering of film production facilities in Slovakia. Perhaps most alarmingly, Dlugolinský was the former chairman of the Slovak Association of Journalists (SAN), a defunct organization whose vice-chairman was Roman Michelko—a current SNS member, parliamentarian, and co-author of this amendment to the Act on the Audiovisual Fund.<sup>32</sup>

## Amendment to Act No. 284/2014 on the Slovak Arts Council (FPU)

Established in 2015, the FPU is the primary public institution for financing and supporting art, culture, and creative industries in Slovakia.<sup>33</sup> Operating under the Ministry of

Culture, the FPU was designed to be an independent grant-awarding body to systematically support artistic and cultural projects across diverse fields, including visual arts, music, theater, literature, and cultural heritage. The FPU’s independence and integrity, much like the AVF, relied on approximately 70 expert commissions responsible for evaluating project proposals based on artistic merit and sector-specific expertise.

Overriding former President Zuzana Čaputová’s veto, the parliament approved an amendment<sup>34</sup> to Act No. 284/2014 that altered the functioning of the FPU’s three decision-making bodies: the Board, the Supervisory Board, and the director.<sup>35</sup> The new law increased the number of Board members from nine to thirteen. It granted the Minister of Culture greater control by allowing the direct appointment of eight members, instead of four. The remaining five members are still appointed based on proposals from professional associations or legally established cultural entities.

Similar to the AVF amendment, this new legislation increased the number of FPU Board members and granted the Ministry of Culture the authority to appoint the majority. The amendment removed the requirement to consult professional experts in the appointment process, thereby eliminating guarantees for qualified representation across music, theater, literature, visual arts, and intangible cultural heritage. As a result, the Ministry now controls the majority of seats on the Board, enabling appointments without consultation with experts in the cultural sector.



Participants march towards the National Council of the Slovak Republic and carry a banner reading "Kultúra má byť otvorená a žiadna iná!" ("Culture must be open and no other!"), Bratislava, May 2024. Photo by: Adam Balogh

The professionalization of the FPU is further undermined by the decision to relegate the expert commissions, which are responsible for the independent evaluation of project proposals submitted to FPU, to an advisory role. This implies that decisions over the allocation of funds are no longer required to align with the independent assessment of experts in each relevant field.

With these changes, the Ministry of Culture effectively gained significant influence over the funding of art originating from non-state entities such as freelance artists, cultural NGOs, and organizations operating outside the Ministry's direct control.

The FPU expressed serious concerns about these changes, highlighting significant operational and governance

challenges.<sup>36</sup> The newly approved legislation disproportionately concentrated decision-making authority within the thirteen-member Board, replacing the previous system of 70 expert commissions. This shift created a bottleneck in processing the approximately 5,000 annual applications for funding, leading to delays in deliberation and fund distribution. Additionally, granting the Ministry of Culture the power to nominate members to both the Board and the Supervisory Board raised concerns about conflicts of interest, further necessitating comprehensive regulatory revisions.

On August 13, 2024, Minister Šimkovičová replaced three FPU Board members with appointees widely perceived to be aligned with the Ministry due to their lack of

recognition within professional sectors and their failure to attend meetings.<sup>37</sup> The persistent absenteeism of these new appointees repeatedly prevented the Board from reaching a quorum, effectively halting 2025 funding allocations.<sup>38</sup> This paralysis fueled allegations of political interference aimed at undermining the fund's functionality. Philosopher Ján Hrkút, the only consistently active participant, revealed that he faced pressure to abstain from meetings before being dismissed and replaced.<sup>39</sup> The situation worsened in November 2024, when the failure to renew mandates for 26 expert commission members further crippled FPU operations.

On December 18, 2024, the FPU presented a new draft statute, which immediately sparked criticism due to concerns that its provisions could significantly undermine funding for cultural centers, festivals, museums, galleries, and libraries. Critics, including the Association of Self-Governing Regions (SK8), accused Šimkovičová's Ministry of Culture of systematically dismantling the support structures for culture by shifting priorities and excluding key cultural programs from funding.<sup>40</sup> SK8 called for the Ministry to halt what they described as the "destruction of cultural support programs." The draft statute is widely perceived as a politically motivated attempt to centralize control over cultural funding and remains under discussion, with a decision expected in the near future.

The changes to the FPU's governance structure and operations represent a significant shift toward centralization

and political control, fundamentally undermining its original purpose as an independent grant-awarding body. By consolidating authority within the Ministry of Culture and sidelining expert input, these changes have disrupted the FPU's ability to effectively and transparently support Slovakia's diverse cultural sector. The operational paralysis, delayed funding, and exclusion of key cultural programs highlight the adverse impacts of these reforms, fostering allegations of political interference and mismanagement. As the FPU's future remains uncertain, the ongoing debate over its draft statute underscores the urgent need for regulatory revisions to safeguard cultural independence and ensure the equitable and apolitical distribution of resources essential to Slovakia's artistic and cultural landscape.

## Expansion of regulatory authority

As part of broader efforts to consolidate control over cultural governance, the recent reforms have not only reshaped institutional oversight but also reversed progress toward transparency and modernization in the selection of statutory officials in museums and galleries. These changes have heightened concerns about the politicization of such appointments, further centralizing decision-making power within the Ministry of Culture.

One of the most significant

transparency measures in Slovakia's cultural sector was the introduction of public hearings in the selection processes for cultural institutions, a reform implemented in 2020 under former Minister Natália Milanová.<sup>41</sup> Designed to enhance transparency and fairness, these hearings allowed the public to assess candidates and their proposed management plans.<sup>42</sup> The current generation of directors represents the first cohort to be selected through these transparent processes, marking a departure from past practices of discretionary ministerial appointments.

However, this commitment to transparency was dismantled as part of the SNS legislative package aimed at streamlining cultural governance. Among the key reforms was an amendment<sup>43</sup> to **Act No. 206/2009 Coll. on Museums and Galleries** which regulates the appointment and dismissals of statutory bodies of collection-based institutions.<sup>44</sup>

While proponents framed the amendment as a managerial model intended to reduce the administrative burdens, in practice, it abolished critical safeguards designed to ensure transparent and merit-based selection procedures.<sup>45</sup> First, it eliminated public hearings and removed protection against dismissal without cause. Furthermore, it revoked the five-year term limits for directors and senior

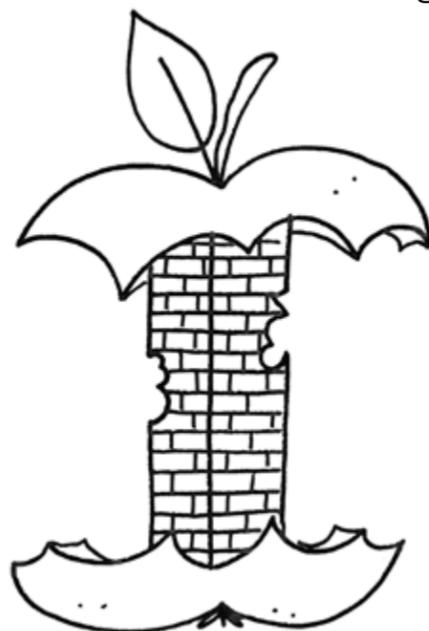
staff. Instead, the new law established that the tenure of statutory bodies and senior employees is based on the assessment of their managerial qualities and performance in their role.

The shift towards less transparent practices raised alarm about the enhanced risk of politicization faced by cultural institutions.<sup>46</sup> For example, the Slovak Museums Association denounced the new amendment as harmful to professionalism and meritocracy, as well as not conforming with standards across

European museums.<sup>47</sup> The proposal was vetoed by former President Zuzana Čaputová in May 2024. Čaputová cited concerns about transparency, fairness, and constitutionality.<sup>48</sup>

Despite her veto, the National Council of the Slovak Republic overrode the former President in June 2024, re-approving Act No. 206/2009 Coll. On Museums and Galleries.<sup>49</sup>

The Ministry of Culture rapidly enforced the Act, dismissing long-standing leadership at key institutions. In the first week of August 2024, the directors of the SND and the SNG were removed from their positions, followed by the dismissal of the SNM director on September 30, 2024. (See report section, **Targeted dismissals in cultural leadership.**)



## Key Takeaways

These reforms illustrate how the incumbent Slovak government, under Minister Šimkovičová, has laid the groundwork for non-democratic practices that threaten pluralism of expression and artistic freedom. By consolidating decision-making power over cultural financing, centralizing authority within the Ministry of Culture, and politicizing leadership appointments, the government has created conditions that raise significant concerns about the future of Slovakia's cultural landscape.

While it may be too early to fully assess the effects of these changes, the immediate consequences—such as the erosion of institutional autonomy, the marginalization of diverse voices, and the destabilization of cultural governance—are troubling. The dismantling of safeguards (e.g., expert evaluations and transparent selection processes), combined with a rhetoric that excludes progressive and minority perspectives, paints a worrying picture for the direction of cultural policy in Slovakia.

The long-term prospects are concerning, as these reforms risk enabling censorship, reducing innovation, and fostering an environment of ideological conformity within the arts and culture sector. Although the full impact has yet to unfold, the ongoing trajectory suggests a potential weakening of artistic freedom and cultural diversity.

# Mechanisms of Cultural Control

While increasing its direct control over funding, the government also secured indirect control over cultural institutions by dismissing most of the Ministry's staff and replacing the directors of prominent state cultural institutions.

## Purge of personnel and dismantling of institutions

Since her appointment, Minister Šimkovičová has initiated a significant restructuring of the Ministry of Culture, implementing a program of substantial personnel changes that affected nearly half of the ministry's 240 staff members.<sup>50</sup> The restructuring of cultural institutions began in January 2024 with events surrounding **Kunsthalle Bratislava**, a cornerstone of Slovakia's contemporary art scene. Established in 2014 and independent since 2021, the Kunsthalle provided a platform for national and international contemporary art, showcasing diverse artistic

voices, including feminist, queer, and marginalized perspectives, without maintaining a permanent collection.<sup>51</sup>

After the Ministry rescinded funding for its planned 2024 programs, Kunsthalle's director, Jen Kratochvil, resigned and the institution was merged with the SNG.<sup>52</sup> The Ministry justified this decision by asserting that Kunsthalle's programming did not align with the government's cultural priorities, particularly its emphasis on promoting traditional Slovak heritage.<sup>53</sup> The merger with the SNG was presented as a cost-saving measure and a way to streamline cultural governance. By April 1, 2024, all Kunsthalle employees were dismissed, effectively dismantling one of Slovakia's key platforms for contemporary art.<sup>54</sup>

Critics—such as the International Association of Art Critics (AICA)—condemned this decision as opaque and ideologically motivated, framing it as a deliberate effort to suppress cultural diversity and align the institution with the government's conservative agenda.<sup>55</sup> For many, the closure of Kunsthalle is not just a loss of an institution but a



A protester holds a sign criticizing the dismissals of Alexandra Kusá and Matej Drlička, Bratislava, August 2024. Photo by: Katarína Šípöcz Svobodová

significant step backward for the contemporary art scene in Slovakia. The AICA expressed deep concern over the institution's merger with the SNG, highlighting the negative impact on Kunsthalle's reputation and programming autonomy.<sup>56</sup>

By August 2024, the so-called "political purge" escalated, with the dismissal of long-standing leadership at key institutions alongside the contract termination of 30 specialists in arts and culture. Among the casualties was the **Institute of Cultural Policy (IKP)**, which was dissolved as part of the Ministry's broader restructuring plan.

Established in 2018, the IKP functioned as the Ministry of Culture's analytical center, offering evidence-based insights to support strategic decision-making.<sup>57</sup> Its creation responded to evaluations by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which had criticized the absence of data-driven policymaking in Slovakia.<sup>58</sup> During its tenure, the IKP played a pivotal role in modernizing cultural governance, advising on policies such as the transparent appointment of cultural institution directors and Slovakia's cultural contributions to EU reforms post-COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>59</sup> Alongside the dismantling of the Creativity and Education Unit, the IKP's closure on September 1, 2024 was officially



justified as financial streamlining but widely seen as ideologically driven.<sup>60</sup>

Marcel Čas, former head of the IKP, described the decision as ideologically motivated, noting, "The real reason was that [the Ministry] didn't want people who do not fit their ideological vision inside."<sup>61</sup> He recounted how General Secretary Lukáš Machala, who is viewed as the de facto leader of the Ministry, threatened him with surveillance by the Slovak Information Service due to differing political opinions.<sup>62</sup> Machala also played a

central role in the Ministry's broader cultural agenda, which critics have described as chaotic and destructive.

Trade unions and cultural workers condemned the wave of dismissals as arbitrary and accused Machala of favoritism, alleging he appointed unqualified

acquaintances to key positions.<sup>63</sup> His critics say that Machala's restructuring not only destabilized institutions but also symbolized a sharp departure from the Ministry's previous trajectory of modernization and transparency.

The dismantling of Kunsthalle and the IKP, coupled with the politicization of new appointments, has generated widespread fear over job instability and the de-legitimization of the cultural sector in Slovakia. Given the SNS's anti-progressive rhetoric, these

actions are widely perceived as a rapid centralization of cultural policy and the deliberate creation of an environment that demands compliance with nationalistic and conservative views.

## Targeted dismissals in cultural leadership

By September 2024, the wave of dismissals initiated by the Ministry of Culture extended to the leadership of seven significant national cultural institutions, undermining their stability and autonomy.<sup>64</sup> While the government oversees approximately 30 cultural institutions, these dismissals notably targeted major organizations, amplifying their impact on the cultural landscape. While leadership changes can often be expected with a new administration, the scale and nature of these actions have raised significant concerns. Based on interviews conducted by AFI and Open Culture! with dismissed directors, the abruptness, lack of formal justification, and absence of dialogue surrounding these dismissals strongly suggest political rather than professional motives, reflecting an apparent effort to centralize control and align cultural governance with the Ministry's nationalist agenda.

The first two dismissals occurred prior to the enactment of the new laws on cultural management. On March 25, 2024, the directors of the Slovak National Library and BIBIANA, **Katarína Krištofová** and **Zuzana Liptáková**, were dismissed from their

respective positions.<sup>65</sup> Both were removed on the same day and without warning during brief meetings with ministry officials. "I was invited to the ministry, and they just announced I was dismissed, with no reason," Liptáková recalled.<sup>66</sup> "By the time I walked back to BIBIANA, everyone already knew—it was prepared in advance."

In response to Liptáková's dismissal, three employees and members of the Biennial of Animation Bratislava (BAB), a flagship initiative of BIBIANA, resigned in protest.<sup>67</sup> The BIBIANA staff organized a protest outside of the institution and issued a statement defending Liptáková's suitability for the role, as she had been the first director of the institution to be elected through public selection procedure.<sup>68</sup>

The situation escalated on August 6 and 7, 2024, with the dismissal of the director of the SND, **Matej Drlička**, and the director of the SNG, **Alexandra Kusá**.<sup>69</sup> Their removal sparked significant public outcry and turmoil, with protests and widespread criticism of the Ministry's action. (See report section, **Unified Solidarity and Open Culture!**)

Kusá, who served as SNG director for over a decade and had been employed there since 2000, oversaw a transformative €75 million renovation, culminating in the reopening of the gallery in December 2022.<sup>70</sup> The largest investment in a public building in Slovakia's history, this monumental project elevated the SNG to a position of prominence within the European cultural landscape. However, Kusá faced accusations of a conflict of interest related to the reconstruction

project and was criticized for alleged “anti-Slovak activities” following a protest during Slovakia’s exhibition at the 60th Venice Biennale.<sup>71</sup> Over 360 artists and cultural workers signed an open letter denouncing her dismissal as a blow to the independence and reputation of Slovak culture.<sup>72</sup>

Appointed as director of the SND in 2021, Drlička also implemented reforms that modernized the institution and significantly improved its financial stability. His efforts to restructure the opera department boosted attendance from 50 per cent to 80 per cent; under his tenure, the SND achieved record-breaking sales of over five million euros and attracted nearly 275,000 visitors in 2023.<sup>73</sup> His dismissal occurred days after the French Minister of Culture, Rachida Dati, honored him with a prestigious award for his cultural contributions and exemplary leadership at the SND.<sup>74</sup> In a public statement about his dismissal, the Ministry cited serious misconduct and loss of trust, including failure to address issues previously raised, regulatory violations, and misuse of public funds.<sup>75</sup>

Following Drlička’s removal, the institution experienced a leadership vacuum. During this time, the Ministry of Culture assumed interim management of the theatre, a move that raised legal concerns. The Slovak organization Stop Corruption filed a formal complaint against the government’s overreach.<sup>76</sup>

In response to this incident, SND Economic Director Matej Bošňák and Opera Director Martin Leginus resigned from their positions in

protest, which exacerbated the leadership vacuum.<sup>77</sup> Cultural organizations, including Opera Europa, condemned the developments as an attack on artistic freedom and a troubling sign of political interference in Slovakia’s cultural institutions.<sup>78</sup> The European Theatre Convention (ETC) expressed deep concern over the dismissal, viewing it as part of a broader trend by far-right parties across Europe to limit freedom of expression.<sup>79</sup> They highlighted that such actions undermine the independence of democratic cultural institutions.

The wave of dismissals continued on September 30 with the removal of the head of the SNM, **Branislav Panis**.<sup>80</sup> Panis, who had overseen critical projects such as the renovation of Spiš Castle and Krásna Hôrka Castle, was removed under questionable allegations of “multiple managerial failures.” However, the Ministry did not elaborate on the specific nature of these alleged failures. Panis himself noted that the dismissal letter did not detail any reasons for his removal.<sup>81</sup> The Slovak Museum Association and the International Council of Museums Slovakia (ICOM Slovakia) condemned the lack of transparency and emphasized the destabilizing impact of abrupt leadership changes.<sup>82</sup>

On December 10, **Pavol Ižvolt** was dismissed from his position as director of the Monuments Office. He was replaced by archaeologist Mário Comisso, a decision that raised concerns among heritage professionals and cultural experts. Critics noted that Comisso had previously faced allegations that nearly resulted

in the revocation of his license to conduct archaeological research, casting doubt on the professional criteria guiding his appointment.<sup>83</sup>

This massive turnover in leadership has created an atmosphere of uncertainty within Slovakia’s cultural institutions, with many wondering who might be next. On her Telegram channel, Minister Šimkovičová hinted at potential future targets, naming Maroš Schmidt, director of the Slovak Design Centre; Pavel Sibyla, director of the Slovak Literary Centre, who was later dismissed on January 8, 2025; and Robert Jindra, chief conductor of the Slovak State Philharmonic in Košice, among others.<sup>84</sup> These individuals had publicly opposed the dismissals of Kusá and Drlička through their institutional platforms, leading the Minister to accuse them of spreading propaganda and suggesting that such political commentary could be grounds for dismissal.

## Patterns of dismissal

The aforementioned dismissals were abrupt, often communicated during meetings or through perfunctory notices. Directors and employees have described the atmosphere as one of fear and uncertainty. As BIBIANA’s former director recounted, “*The sudden announcement was not just shocking for me but left the entire team in chaos, with no time to process or plan.*”<sup>85</sup> Matej Drlička, former SND director, also described his dismissal as abrupt and inappropriate, recounting how it occurred unannounced while he

was on sick leave, with Ministry officials delivering the news at his home without prior notice or preparation for a replacement.<sup>86</sup>

In several cases, the allegations against the directors were later publicized through media and social platforms, with no opportunity for the accused to defend themselves. Directors consistently denied these allegations, describing them as baseless and a form of instrumentalization to justify their removal. Drlička, for instance, was accused of “bullying and mismanagement” yet was never summoned to discuss these claims with the ministry.<sup>87</sup> Zuzana Liptáková observed “*No dissatisfaction was communicated prior to my dismissal. It was purely political, not based on any professional grounds.*”<sup>88</sup> Katarina Krištofová, the former director of the Slovak National Library, similarly noted, “*The letter of dismissal was dated two weeks before the alleged reason—our cyberattack—even occurred.*”<sup>89</sup> Alexandra Kusá, the former SNG director, described the allegations against her as “vague and mostly fabricated”<sup>90</sup> and accused the Ministry of initiating “an era of bullying and intimidation,” characterizing their approach as “pure destruction and demonstration of power.”<sup>91</sup>

General Secretary Lukáš Machala of the Ministry of Culture was reported to have played a decisive role in the wave of dismissals, often appearing more actively involved than Minister Šimkovičová herself. His active participation was noted in meetings, direct communication of dismissals, and the orchestration of leadership changes across

institutions. “*Machala was in the room, informing me personally that I was dismissed. It was clear he was driving the agenda,*” said Krištofová of the Slovak National Library.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Drlička of the SND remarked, “*Machala fabricated reasons to justify the dismissals. He had no intention of discussing or resolving issues—his focus was solely on removal.*”<sup>93</sup>

Adding to the climate of uncertainty was the unpredictability of these decisions and the apparent lack of a clear governmental vision for cultural policy. Directors consistently reported that the government appears to lack a coherent cultural policy or long-term plan. “*They don’t know what to do; it’s just chaos,*” observed one former director.<sup>94</sup> Machala’s focus on replacing individuals rather than implementing actionable reforms has led to a standstill in many institutions. “*It seems like the goal is just to make things nonfunctional without any real plan for the future,*” said a cultural worker.<sup>95</sup>

The dismissals left a profound impact on the professional and personal lives of the directors, forcing many to navigate uncertain futures. As Liptáková noted, “*I thought the period of BIBIANA was over for me, but its consequences keep reappearing.*”<sup>96</sup> After a period of rest, she transitioned to academia, managing a student theater at the Faculty of Theater. Drlička expressed a mix of freedom and sorrow, stating, “*I feel free in a way to do what I can outside of it, but I’m very sad looking at the theater and what’s happening there because it’s miserable now.*”<sup>97</sup>

For Krištofová, who dedicated nearly two decades to the Slovak National Library, the dismissal posed significant

challenges, leaving her contemplating a move to the capital, Bratislava, or even abroad to find work. She described the difficulty of starting anew after devoting much of her career to the institution, stating, “*it’s very hard for me to find another job here because [there is only one] National Library.*”<sup>98</sup> Despite their resilience and efforts to rebuild, these directors highlight the personal toll of the dismissals, underscoring how deeply the changes in Slovakia’s cultural governance have disrupted lives and careers.

## Politicized new appointments

To replace the dismissed directors, the government predominantly nominated individuals with backgrounds in risk management, marketing, and television rather than cultural governance—many of whom have personal ties to Minister Šimkovičová or General Secretary Machala.

Petra Flach, appointed as the acting director of **BIBIANA** in March 2024, has a background primarily in economics and management.<sup>99</sup> Prior to her appointment, she worked in the economic sector, including a position at IBM.<sup>100</sup> Flach resides in Kittsee, Austria, the same town as Minister Šimkovičová, and they have been seen together at public events, suggesting a personal acquaintance. Initially appointed as temporary statutory officer, Flach was nominated in July 2024 to be director of BIBIANA in a procedure that was later criticized due

to the absence of other candidates.<sup>101</sup> The members of the scientific board of BIBIANA subsequently resigned, accusing Flach of censorship. (See report section, **Experiences of Censorship and Suppression.**)

Zuzana Ťapáková, a Slovak media executive with a background in theater studies from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava (VŠMU)—and a former colleague of Minister Šimkovičová—was appointed interim director of the **SND**.<sup>102</sup> Her tenure was marked by the controversy over the decision to cancel a performance with LGBTQ+ themes, sparking allegations of censorship and underscoring the politicized environment within the institution. (See report section, **Experiences of Censorship and Suppression.**)

The removal of Alexandra Kusá marked the start of a chaotic period for the **SNG**. Within six months, three directors—Anton Bittner, Miloš Timko, and Jaroslav Niňaj—were appointed and replaced in rapid succession, creating a leadership vacuum that disrupted the gallery’s operations.

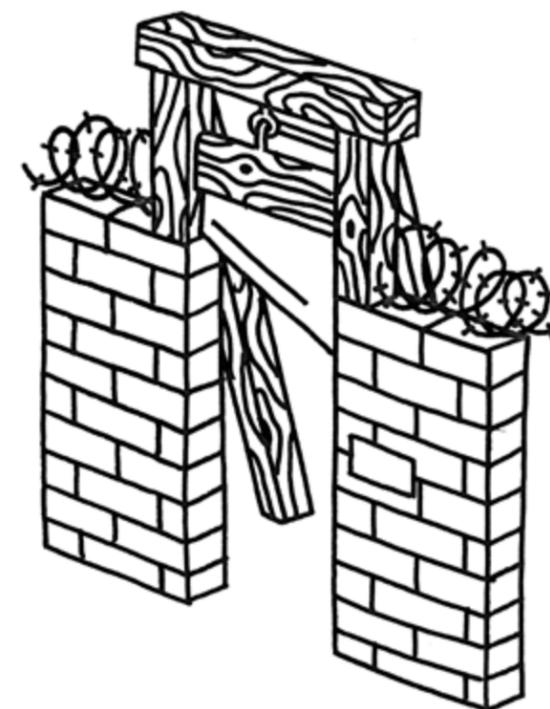
Anton Bittner, a manager with a background in international finance and corporate management, served as acting director for 54 days before being reassigned to the **SNM**.<sup>103</sup>

His successor, Miloš Timko is a Slovak consultant and auditor with experience in organizational audits and management. In September 2024, he conducted an audit at the **SNG** and was subsequently appointed as its interim director on October 1, 2024. Timko held the position for 55 days, during which he faced criticism for poor communication and non-transparent organizational changes.<sup>104</sup> In November 2024, Jaroslav Niňaj was appointed as the third acting director. His tenure began amid controversies such as

concerns about his lack of experience in visual arts.<sup>105</sup> Scrutiny of Niňaj’s leadership at the **SNG** was intensified when the Association of Independent Producers expelled a company that he co-owned, Film Worx, due to suspicions surrounding substantial grants from the **AVF**.<sup>106</sup>

These successive leadership failures

deepened the challenges facing the **SNG**, leaving it in a state of disarray and further eroding the confidence of employees and stakeholders. On November 21, 177 employees threatened mass resignations in January 2025 if their concerns—including targeted dismissals, non-transparent organizational changes, perceived incompetence, and inadequate communication—were not addressed. Days later, on November 26, the **SNG**’s department heads submitted a formal letter to Minister



Šimkovičová, announcing their intent to resign and condemning the leadership for creating an environment of intimidation and demotivation. Due to the lack of any meaningful state response, the threatened mass resignation took place in January 2025, with employees officially set to leave their positions when their contracts expire in April 2025.<sup>107</sup>

In response, Minister Šimkovičová downplayed the impact of the resignations, emphasizing the government's ability to ensure the gallery's continued operation, even in the absence of specific individuals. She stated: *"The SNG is a significant cultural institution; however, its functioning is not inextricably linked to specific individuals."*<sup>108</sup>

The changes at the **SNM** further underscored the challenges of leadership discontinuity after the dismissal of its former head, Branislav Panis, and the subsequent appointment of Anton Bittner as the temporary director of the SNM. Bittner's leadership at the SNM quickly drew criticism from staff, particularly over his controversial personnel changes at the Betliar Museum, a specialized museum under the SNM's Museum of History division. Citing internal regulations, Bittner dismissed Deputy Director Erika Šmelková and appointed journalist Andrea Predajňová in her place, overriding the recommendation of Tímea Mátéová, the Betliar Museum's director, during her maternity leave.<sup>109</sup> The Betliar Museum issued a strongly worded statement criticizing the appointment of someone they described as "unknown and professionally

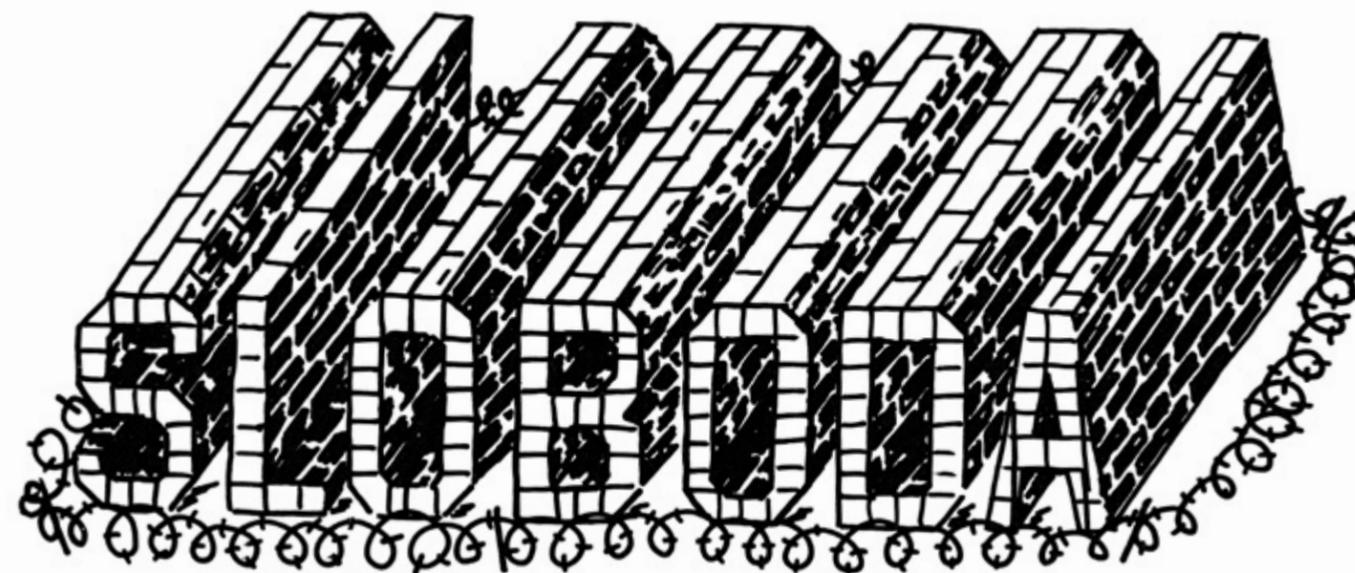
incompetent."<sup>110</sup> They also expressed concerns about the disruption to ongoing projects involving significant Slovak monuments, such as the Betliar Mansion and Krásna Hôrka Castle.

Meanwhile, the abrupt dismissal of Pavel Sibyla as director of the Slovak Literary Centre further highlights the broader pattern of disregarding professional recommendations in favor of appointing controversial and unqualified figures. Despite Sibyla having proactively arranged for his deputy, Marek Vadas, to take over during his planned parental leave in early 2025, the Ministry instead dismissed him entirely and installed Gustáv Murín.<sup>111</sup> Murín, a writer known for his ties to conspiracy platforms and with no institutional management experience, was selected over an experienced internal candidate, raising serious concerns about the government's prioritization of political loyalty over competence.<sup>112</sup>

These examples signaled a blatant disregard for institutional stability and the expertise of cultural professionals. The lack of continuity in leadership has not only destabilized these institutions but also jeopardized their ability to fulfill their cultural missions.

## Key Takeaways

Abrupt leadership changes and politically driven appointments have disrupted the operations of important institutions at the core of Slovakia's cultural and artistic production. The Fico administration's new approach to cultural governance has destabilized key institutions, undermining their autonomy and ability to fulfill their missions. These actions have caused turmoil among staff, sparked protests, and raised serious concerns in professional circles and European organizations about the erosion of artistic freedom and institutional independence. Furthermore, the prioritization of political loyalty over expertise has weakened the functionality of these institutions, jeopardizing their cultural missions and long-term stability. The broader implications of these changes extend beyond Slovakia, reflecting a troubling trend toward centralized, ideologically driven governance in cultural sectors.





Matej Drlička. Photo by: Jakub Gulyas

**Featured Interview**

# Matej Drlička, Former General Director of the Slovak National Theatre

Matej Drlička is an expert in dramaturgy, cultural event producer, founder of the classical music festival Viva Musica!, and the former director of the SND (2021-24). In his interview with AFI and Open Culture!, Drlička discussed the difficulties and roadblocks he has faced in his path to reform the theater for a modern audience, warning that the politicization of Slovak cultural institutions is stunting the growth of the country's cultural sector.

Established in 1920, the SND is the country's oldest professional theater dedicated to ballet, opera, and drama. Though the theater is a jewel of Slovakian culture, it has struggled in recent decades to stay viable as audiences around the world express less interest in classical art forms, particularly opera. Facing dwindling audience attendance as well as rising staff and production costs, the SND's finances suffered greatly, affecting the quality of its programming. Unable to overcome these challenges, several directors resigned after only a few months in the position from 2019 to 2020.

By the time that Matej Drlička was appointed director in 2020, the SND had been the subject of many news headlines and was gaining a reputation as an unmanageable institution in decline. When an open call for applications was announced, Drlička was encouraged to apply by colleagues in the field who saw his success in the management and production of cultural events (like Viva Musica!) as relevant experience that could help him address the theater's perennial failure to adopt innovative solutions.

When he assumed the role in 2021, Drlička's professed goal was to make the theater financially viable and to increase its mass appeal. In pursuit of these goals, he implemented several controversial but cost-effective measures, including reducing the number of performers on payroll. After two years the policies began to pay off; ticket sales increased and even opera attendance improved dramatically. *"The opera had been struggling for years. There was extremely low attendance*

*and the quality was questionable. [After we implemented the reforms] opera attendance jumped from 50 per cent to 80 per cent. The numbers were good, and critics were writing that the Theatre was going uphill,"* he recalled.

Despite these successes, Drlička encountered a different set of challenges after the new Prime Minister Robert Fico left the cultural sector under the purview of the SNS, appointing Martina Šimkovičová as Minister of Culture. *"We all started 'wearing black', because we knew that this would not be good [for us],"* he recalled. Weeks into her appointment, Šimkovičová made poorly received comments about the cultural sector's relationship to the LGBTQ+ community, stating her intention to end the Ministry's support for all LGBTQ+ projects. When asked about the SND's stance towards the LGBTQ+ community weeks later in a press interview, Drlička denounced Šimkovičová's comments as unacceptable and stated that the SND would remain a space of openness and inclusivity. *"People from the Ministry called me and said 'Are you crazy? [Your career] is dead now. But she should watch what she says. We are in a democratic country, she went too far.'"*

With hindsight, Drlička said that his comments against Šimkovičová marked the beginning of a battle with the Ministry of Culture that ultimately led to his dismissal in 2024. His first sign that something was awry was when Minister Šimkovičová, breaking with the long-held tradition of meeting with the directors of each national cultural institutions, refused to meet with him. *"There is an informal tradition that when a new Minister comes, they [meet with]*

*the general directors of the 30 institutions [under their purview]. Usually the SND is one of the first ones because it's the biggest institution in terms of the budget and number of employees, but [Šimkovičová] never met with me. [She refused because of] our clash over the gay community. I never had one meeting with the Minister,"* he explained.

In the months that followed, Drlička says that Šimkovičová and her General Secretary, Lukas Machala targeted the SND with constant criticism in an attempt to discredit him. It issued several hostile press releases criticizing, for example, the SND's production of a play with LGBTQ+ themes. Similar press releases were issued after Drlička's decision to hire a highly qualified stage director that also identifies as a trans woman and after an openly gay actor delivered what was interpreted as a veiled criticism of Šimkovičová in one of the SND's performances.

Drlička says that the Ministry also seized on any small issue at the theater as an opportunity to malign his management capabilities; for example, once after a set piece broke, the Ministry issued a statement saying they may have to reconsider his suitability for the position. He also mentioned that General Secretary Machala denied many of the SND's budgetary procurement requests in what he suspected was an effort to cause an incident that could give them a reason to fire him, including refusing a request to replace a broken water heater that serviced the whole theater.

The former director emphasized that Machala has played a key role

in reshaping the cultural sector. Perceived as the de facto Minister, he has required that all project decisions are cleared by him before he will release funds. Drlička said that this created a *"bottleneck situation that has led to paralysis [of the cultural sector]. It's concerning. What will the long-term effects of this paralysis be? How can artists sustain themselves [under these conditions]?"*

After months of clashes with the Ministry, Drlička was fired after Šimkovičová accused him of failing to consult her before dismissing the director of the SND's ballet troupe. The director in question had been accused of harassment and misconduct by several members of the troupe. Drlička said that after several months of attempting to resolve the issue, it became clear that the director needed to be let go for the health and safety of the performers. According to the National Theatre Law, Drlička was obligated to consult with the Minister of Culture before terminating an arts director's contract with the SND. As described above, Drlička claims that he attempted to meet with the Minister several times throughout the course of the year but was refused each time. Given his inability to meet Šimkovičová in person, he consulted his lawyer on how he could otherwise fulfill the requirement and was advised that an email to Šimkovičová would suffice. Drlička claims that he sent the email to Šimkovičová one week before firing the director, and that he received no response from the Minister's office.

Drlička was summarily fired the following week via letter. Customarily, the Minister of Culture communicates

such decisions directly, but Drlička says that Šimkovičová made no such effort. While the letter itself did not cite a reason for his termination, a statement later published on the Ministry of Culture's website said that Drlička's position had been terminated because he had brought too much "*political activism*" into the theater, though no examples of such activity were specified in the statement.

Days later, the head of the SNG, Alexandra Kusá, issued a public statement in support of Drlička and condemning the Minister's actions. Shortly thereafter, Kusá herself was fired in a similar manner for vaguely defined "*managerial failures*."<sup>13</sup> In the weeks that followed, many figures from the cultural community spoke out in support of Drlička, emphasizing that his removal was an attack on democratic values and freedom of speech.

According to Drlička, while his unceremonious removal was a deeply felt professional loss, he is more concerned that the continued politicization of the SND—and of Slovak cultural institutions more broadly—by the Ministry of Culture under the Fico administration will lead to its downfall, which would be an immense loss for Slovakia's cultural heritage. "*I'm very sad looking at the theater and what is now happening there, because it always takes much less time to destroy than it does to construct. Things are already starting to crumble. Like the ticket sales. We made such an effort to get a full house. It was three and a half years of work. Now, after only two months, tickets are not selling,*" he lamented.

Speaking about the future, Drlička believes that it will be important for Slovakian artists and cultural workers to understand and take advantage of how much power they have to resist the Ministry's efforts to stifle the cultural sector. In his closing thoughts, he encouraged them to "*start hitting from the inside. Go on strike. If you are united, it's extremely simple to win.*"

**"Start hitting from the inside. Go on strike. If you are united, it's extremely simple to win."**



Marcel Čas

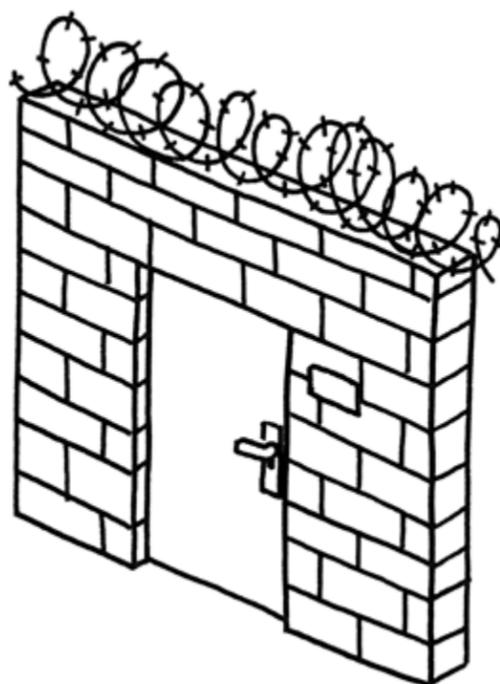
**Featured Interview**

# **Marcel Čas, Former Director of the Institute of Cultural Policy**

When Marcel Čas was dismissed from his role as the director of Slovakia's IKP, it was not merely the end of a government position. It marked the dismantling of an institution that had been central to evidence-based cultural policy in Slovakia. In his interview with AFI and Open Culture!, Čas spoke of the IKP's abrupt closure in September 2024 and the growing illiberal turn in the country's politics, one that threatens to erase decades of cultural progress.

The IKP was established as Slovakia's first analytical unit dedicated to cultural policy. The IKP was part of a network of analytical units across ministries, modeled on the internationally recognized "value for money" approach that aims to replace intuition-driven policymaking with data-driven decisions—a reform long encouraged by the EU and OECD. Its mission was clear: to provide data-driven strategies for the sustainable development of culture in Slovakia, bridging the gap between tradition and modernization. Over the years, the IKP became a vital resource for the Ministry of Culture and beyond, offering insights into cultural funding, access to the arts, and heritage preservation. For Čas and his team, the IKP was more than a policy unit—it was a platform to foster creativity and inclusivity in a country navigating its place in a rapidly changing Europe.

When asked about his sentiment upon the announcement that the Ministry of Culture would be led by an SNS-appointed Minister, Čas reflected, *"In Slovakia, it's pretty common that politicians say one thing before the election and do another after. [...] Even after the election, I didn't lose hope. I thought they'd have to remain civilized to some extent—we're part of the European Union, after all. But then, they really came with the hammer."*



As Čas anticipated, the proverbial hammer fell quickly and decisively. From the moment the new coalition government took office, the Ministry of Culture became a flashpoint for the ideological battles gripping the nation. The appointment of Minister Martina Šimkovičová sent shockwaves through the cultural sector. Known for her far-right affiliations, Šimkovičová had made a name for herself as the host of *Televízia Slovan*, a fringe YouTube channel peddling extremist rhetoric.

The channel's reach was small—hundreds, perhaps a thousand viewers—but its messages were loud. Šimkovičová's public platform railed against foreign influences, LGBTQ+ propaganda, and other perceived threats to Slovakia's traditional values.

In her first public statement as Minister of Culture, Šimkovičová

declared that Slovak culture *"must be Slovak and nothing else."* For Čas, the statement was emblematic of the reactionary vision taking hold of the ministry. *"No one even knows what that means,"* he said. *"But it was clear from the start that inclusivity and progress had no place in her agenda."*

While Šimkovičová was the face of the ministry, Čas quickly realized that the real power lay elsewhere: *"I was one of the first to know that the true Minister of Culture wasn't Šimkovičová—it was Lukáš Machala."* Machala, a senior

ministry official, wielded enormous influence over cultural policy and personnel decisions. *"He told the media outright that anyone who didn't align with his vision would be replaced. He wasn't subtle about it,"* Čas said.

According to Čas, Machala's vision went beyond mere control—it aimed to rewrite Slovakia's cultural identity. *"He once told a colleague that his goal was to erase the cultural memory of Slovakia,"* Čas recounted, *"Not what he perceives as traditional values, but the values built over the last 30 years. It's destruction for the sake of destruction."*

Čas described an atmosphere of intimidation and purges within the ministry. *"From the start, this administration came into office making threats—about dismissals, about dissolving institutions. Meetings inside the ministry turned into hate speech sessions. They even had a list of director generals they wanted to get rid of. They came to my office one day and said they were actively looking for dirt on people to justify their dismissals publicly,"* he said.

The IKP was not immune to these pressures. Čas recalled being summoned to General Secretary Machala's office, where he and his team were informed of their dismissal: *"They told me they were satisfied with our work, that we were intelligent and*

*would have no trouble finding other jobs. But they wanted to do things differently. That was the official line, at least. The real reason was that we didn't fit their ideological mold."*

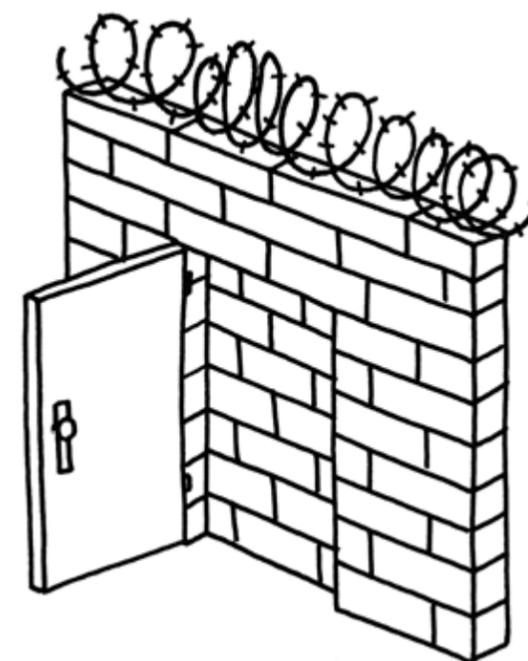
The dismantling of the IKP was not an isolated incident. Čas noted that half of the ministry's employees have already been replaced, with plans to replace even more. *"In previous administrations, maybe 10 to 20 per cent of staff would change with new*

*leadership. This administration has already replaced 50 per cent. It's unprecedented,"* he said. Čas sees these actions as part of a broader political strategy: *"Part of the government genuinely believes that Slovakia's cultural sector is being run by foreign agents pushing LGBTQ propaganda and destroying traditional values. It is a reactionary*

*group pushing against the modernization of the country."*

For Čas, resisting these changes was never just a professional obligation—it was a moral one. *"It was part of my life's work to set up an analytical unit in the Ministry of Culture; I really poured my soul into it,"* he said, *"I thought it to be my professional and civic duty to stay there and protect the institution as long as I could."*

This sense of civic duty was not his alone. Across the cultural sector,



resistance began to take root, even in the face of threats and retaliation. *“It’s being underplayed how successful the resistance has been,”* he observed. By his calculations, nearly 40 per cent of the cultural sector directly or indirectly controlled by the ministry is in a state of open strike emergency. *“That’s huge. It shows that people aren’t backing down, even if they’re afraid,”* said Čas.

The parallels to Hungary’s illiberal turn under Viktor Orbán are striking, and the term “Orbánization of Slovakia” is increasingly used to describe the country’s trajectory. Čas acknowledged the similarities but remains cautiously optimistic. He explained, *“Orbán’s success stems from a unified party with a strong electoral mandate. Here, the coalition is fragmented. They hate each other—they’re only in power to keep themselves and their friends out of jail. You need an effective public administration to run an autocratic state, and Slovakia doesn’t have that. Plus, culturally and historically, we don’t have the same unifying narrative of a huge and powerful nation as Hungary does. Slovaks aren’t wired for that imperialistic kind of thinking.”*

Despite everything, Čas believes that Slovakia’s democratic spirit will endure because *“this is not the first time we’ve faced internal challenges to our freedom in the 30 years of our independence, and it won’t be the last. But we’re resilient. I believe this phase will pass, just as others have. And when it does, we’ll rebuild.”* Signs of hope can be seen even in the most challenging moments. Public sentiment is turning, Čas noted, as evidenced by two online petitions with more than 200,000

signatures calling for Šimkovičová’s dismissal that have garnered more signatures than her entire party received in the last election.

For Čas, the fight continues even outside of government. *“I’m doing my utmost to push the government to change the administration in the Ministry of Culture,”* he said. His focus is on making both the government and the public understand that the red lines for cultural preservation have already been crossed, and that urgent action is needed.

Marcel Čas’s story is one of resilience in the face of erasure. While the forces of illiberalism threaten to dismantle Slovakia’s cultural legacy, voices like his serve as a reminder that progress, once achieved, is worth fighting for. The struggle to protect Slovakia’s cultural identity is far from over, but as Čas shows, it is a fight worth continuing.

**“This is not the first time we’ve faced internal challenges to our freedom in the 30 years of our independence, and it won’t be the last. But we’re resilient. I believe this phase will pass, just as others have. And when it does, we’ll rebuild.”**

# Impact on Artists and Cultural Workers



“Exodus” (2025), by Jozef Glaba

Interviews conducted by AFI and Open Culture! in October 2024 with 19 Slovak artists and cultural workers reveal the evolving dynamics of artistic freedom, censorship, and resistance in Slovakia. These firsthand accounts go beyond documenting past challenges to provide a vivid snapshot of the rapid decline in artistic freedoms. These testimonies highlight both the obstacles faced and the resilience and collective efforts of those committed to safeguarding the vital role of arts and culture.

# The Ministry of Culture Under the SNS: Suspicion and Distrust

For many of the artists and cultural workers interviewed, today's pressures feel like a return to practices reminiscent of Slovakia's history. The government-led targeting of artists is not without precedent in the country's past. During the "normalization era" (1969–89), a period of political repression following the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, cultural production in the former Czechoslovakia was tightly controlled. This era was characterized by the systematic dismantling of the liberal reforms of the Prague Spring and the imposition of strict state control over public life, including arts and culture.<sup>114</sup> Artists and intellectuals who diverged from the regime's ideological framework faced censorship, forcing many artists to withdraw from public life or to work clandestinely, creating and sharing art in private settings.<sup>115</sup> While the fall of communism in 1989, known as the Velvet Revolution, brought

some democratic reforms and greater freedoms, including in cultural institutions, it was followed by the rollback of several rights and freedoms under the leadership of former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s.<sup>116</sup> The resurgence of the political will towards illiberalism under the current Fico administration reflects a longer history of Slovakia's struggle to establish firm democratic institutions.

From the outset of Martina Šimkovičová's appointment as Slovakia's Minister of Culture, artists and cultural workers expressed deep concern over her controversial background, her lack of expertise in the cultural sector, and the unprecedented control of the Ministry by the far-right SNS. For artists and cultural workers who experienced normalization firsthand in the 1980s, Šimkovičová's appointment sparked fears that historical practices of cultural

repression and misuse of state power would repeat themselves. Katarína Mišíková, film scholar and associate professor at the Film and Television Faculty at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, remarked, "We grew up with the idea of what it means to not take [freedom] for granted. So I think that's why we are so 'hysterical.'" <sup>117</sup>

## A Contrast to Previous Administrations

Ironically, the current period of instability in cultural governance comes after examples of effective leadership under previous administrations, including those of Prime Minister Robert Fico in his previous term in office from 2012 to 2016. Although Fico's first tenure was marked by controversy, artists and cultural workers acknowledge that under his government, there were instances of constructive cultural policy. For example, Marek Maďarič, who served as Minister of Culture during Fico's second and third Cabinets (2012–16, 2016–18), is widely regarded as having made significant contributions to Slovak culture. As Ilona Németh pointed out, "the best thing ever done for Slovak culture was when Marek Maďarič founded the [FPU]." <sup>118</sup>

The establishment of the FPU introduced a system where funding decisions were made by experts from various artistic fields, based on the

quality of projects rather than political agendas. This structure allowed for a degree of independence from state interference, fostering a freer and more dynamic cultural environment. "It was very important," Németh emphasized, "because after [19]89, art became much more free, and this structure supported that independence." <sup>119</sup>

This period stands in stark contrast to the present, where artists and cultural workers feel the Ministry lacks competence, eroding the previous flourishing of the cultural sector.

A key reason for this dramatic shift lies in the parliamentary coalition dynamics. Indeed, to secure the SNS as a governing partner and tip the balance of power, Fico integrated the far-right party into his government. In doing so, he allocated to the SNS ministries considered less influential, namely Culture, Environment, and a new Ministry of Sport and Tourism.<sup>120</sup> These pragmatic compromises were made to sustain political control but have significantly affected the quality and direction of cultural governance.<sup>121</sup> Many in the cultural sector interpret the SNS's handling of the Ministry of Culture as a distraction from the government's broader political agenda, both to undermine democratic institutions and to roll back the anti-corruption policies pursued by the previous administrations of Matovič and Heger. Németh explained, "we don't see the exact goal of our cultural politics. It's about money, destruction of the structures, and providing smoke to cover the government's other priorities—like dismantling the justice system or getting corrupt politicians out of detention on remand."<sup>122</sup> Indeed, under Matovič and Heger, large-scale



Protesters hold signs reading 'Ministry of Culture of Slovak Republic does not represent us' at the Venice Biennale, Italy, April 2024. Photo by: Monika Kováčová

corruption investigations resulted in the detention of several politicians, lawyers, and high-ranking police officers. Since returning to power, the Fico government has released several of these individuals from investigative custody, and some have since taken up positions as members of parliament within the current administration.<sup>123</sup> This perception of cultural policy as a tool for diversion rather than a genuine attempt to shape cultural identity contrasts with the more ideologically driven approaches recorded by AFI in its reporting on Hungary and Poland.

Another notable recent initiative from the previous administration was the Strategy of Culture and Creative Industries of the Slovak Republic 2030,<sup>124</sup> a comprehensive framework aimed at fostering sustainable cultural development.<sup>125</sup> Approved in June 2023, this strategy remains officially valid but has been disregarded by the current Ministry of Culture, which refuses to implement it. The strategy was designed to promote participation and openness in cultural policy, yet its abandonment further signals the Ministry's unwillingness to engage with expert-driven policymaking. Cultural commentators and industry professionals have expressed concern over this neglect, viewing it as part of a broader pattern of undermining long-term cultural planning.<sup>126</sup>

## Key Takeaways

The Ministry of Culture's current trajectory under the SNS has set off alarm bells across Slovakia's artistic community. The absence of clear policy goals and the Ministry's apparent prioritization of personal and political gains over cultural development have left artists and cultural workers disillusioned. For many, the Ministry's actions represent not only a failure to support the arts but also a dangerous distraction from the government's broader efforts to consolidate power. This shift reflects both the unique challenges of Slovakia's current political landscape and a broader global trend of politicizing culture to obscure or advance contentious agendas.

## "Slovak, and no other": Artists and Cultural Workers Respond to an Exclusionary Vision

From the moment she was appointed to lead the Ministry of Culture, Martina Šimkovičová's stated policy aims and nationalist rhetoric alarmed the Slovak cultural community. Artists and cultural workers widely criticized Šimkovičová's infamous statement made at the inaugural press conference in November 2023 about Slovak culture being "Slovak, and no other."<sup>127</sup> Ilona Németh highlighted how nationalism has always been a recurring theme in Slovak cultural policy, though its prominence has varied over time.<sup>128</sup> Today, however, nationalism has become a dominant ideology, echoing the oppressive tactics employed under communist normalization and the authoritarianism of the Mečiar era. For artists and cultural workers, this statement was not only shocking but also fundamentally at odds with their understanding of culture. It immediately set the tone for what many believed would be a deeply exclusionary and divisive approach to cultural policy.

This exclusionary vision, which frames cultural and artistic expression through a nationalistic lens, was further reiterated by SNS President Andrej Danko in June 2024. While

unveiling the party's stance, Danko opposed government support for LGBTQ+ or "politically motivated" cultural projects that deviate from traditional Slovak values.<sup>129</sup> He also articulated a preference for Slovak artists in national institutions, stating, "I don't think we should have a ballet dancer from Korea or foreign conductors when we have artists in Slovakia."<sup>130</sup>

Artists and cultural workers across Slovakia criticized the idea as reductive and disconnected from the country's cultural reality. "To [say] that art should be Slovak and nothing else means they don't understand the basic foundation of culture," said Németh, adding, "Culture is always interconnected. It's a mixture of influences—of different nations, races, histories. To claim otherwise is a fascist concept."<sup>131</sup> Many artists and cultural workers highlighted Slovakia's deeply multicultural history, pointing to Bratislava as an example of a city shaped by German, Hungarian, Jewish, and Czech influences. "Nothing like pure national cultures exists," remarked Katarína Mišíková, "not nowadays, and not even in the past."<sup>132</sup>

Artists and cultural workers also denounced the government's narrow focus on tradition as a way to suppress contemporary and progressive culture. "What they're promoting isn't really about supporting Slovak culture; it's about forbidding other kinds of culture," explained Jana Keeble, vice-rector for international relations and project activities at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava's Film and Television Faculty.<sup>133</sup> The insistence on a "Slovak, and nothing else" culture represents a misunderstanding of what culture

truly is. Keeble criticized the government's fixation on traditional art forms: *"Traditional art is beautiful, but it's fixed—it doesn't develop anymore because we don't live like that anymore. They are stuck 100 years ago, ignoring the development of new art forms. Why? Because they can't control them."*<sup>134</sup> Contemporary art, with its unpredictable nature and direct engagement with audiences, is seen as a threat precisely because it challenges traditional power structures and cannot be easily managed.

Even voices in traditional arts, the very group Šimkovičová's rhetoric claims to champion, reject her legitimacy. Folk dancers and musicians expressed discomfort with the Ministry's agenda, which they felt instrumentalized their work. *"We're hearing voices from folk dancers and music companies who say, 'No, this is not what we mean,'"* observed Veronika Kolejáčková, writer, dramaturge, and Gestalt therapist.<sup>135</sup> The backlash from folklore artists became public during a major summer festival, where Šimkovičová was booed during her speech and criticized for wearing a traditional Slovak costume without respecting the codes of the tradition.<sup>136</sup> Anna Ďurišiková, a performance artist, reflected on this moment, saying, *"Based on their public demonstrations of protest, we can see that people working in folk art don't support her. They don't agree with her personality or her moves."*<sup>137</sup>

## Key Takeaways

For Slovakia's artists and cultural workers, the rhetoric of *"Slovak, and nothing else"* culture feels like a direct attack on the essence of their work and values. Both traditional and contemporary artists and cultural workers reject the government's exclusionary vision, seeing it as a distortion of the true richness and diversity of Slovak culture. Whether through the alienation of progressive creators or the instrumentalization of folklore, Šimkovičová's agenda has left artists and cultural workers united in their opposition.



Performers in traditional Slovak dress raise their tied hands in a symbolic gesture against censorship and political control during a cultural protest in front of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, May 2024. Photo by: Katarina Psenak



“Disclosed Love” (2020–2023), by Dorota Holubová

# Experiences of Censorship and Suppression: The Immediate Impact on Artists and Cultural Workers

Since the change of administration, Slovak artists and cultural workers have faced an escalating atmosphere of censorship and suppression. While overt bans are rare so far, the current government’s actions and policies have created a climate where artistic freedom is increasingly constrained. Artists and cultural workers describe a variety of tactics, from funding cuts to the cancellation of shows, which collectively signal a disturbing trend toward silencing dissenting or nonconforming voices.

# Censorship

Early signs of censorship have become particularly evident in theater and visual arts, where interventions and targeted actions are increasingly restricting creative expression. Artists and cultural workers describe direct and abrupt interventions in theater productions, a historically significant and politically vibrant art form in Slovakia.

In November 2023, Slovak photographer **Dorota Holubová** faced the cancellation of an SNM exhibition featuring her *Disclosed Love* series, dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community. Her photographs were to be part of a group exhibition focused on queer art, with plans for some pieces to be acquired for the SNM's collection on inclusion, which highlights LGBTQ+ themes. Holubová was on the verge of signing a contract—her photographs were already at the museum and, in their final meeting, curators had presented the contract to her. However, according to Holubová, during a separate meeting between museum management and Minister Šimkovičová, the latter verbally imposed a “thick red line for LGBTI propaganda,” leading to the cancellation of all planned exhibitions with LGBTQ+ themes, including the acquisition of Holubová's work. The photographer was reportedly told that while the museum could not purchase her photos, she could donate them and perhaps in four years—under a different government—they might be displayed.<sup>138</sup> The SNM denied receiving any formal directive from

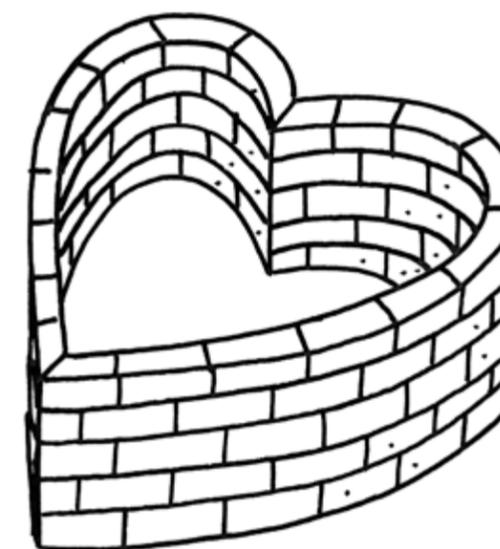
the Ministry of Culture on this matter, stating that her work had not been included in the official exhibition plan for the year, and no contract had been signed.<sup>139</sup> In response, Holubová published a selection of 27 emails documenting her communication with the museum and sent them to Slovak newspapers. She was subsequently banned from the Ministry of Culture's social media pages, despite never having engaged with them directly.<sup>140</sup> While the full circumstances remain unclear, the case highlights the uncertainty and pressures surrounding LGBTQ+ themes in public cultural institutions, already at the outset of the change in government.

This climate of hostility has been paired with overt actions, as seen in Minister Šimkovičová's announcement that the Ministry of Culture would no longer provide funding to LGBTQ+ NGOs. She justified this move by rejecting what she called “progressive normalization.”<sup>141</sup> In a statement sent to the media on January 12, 2024, she criticized the **Saplinq Association**, pointing specifically to their involvement in organizing a drag workshop in Košice.<sup>142</sup> The event, supported by the EU and Slovak state funds, aimed to promote art and education. Šimkovičová condemned the event, describing drag performances as “sexualized shows” and expressing disapproval of young people being exposed to such activities.<sup>143</sup> She further questioned the financial support Saplinq had received and conducted a controversial online poll that framed cultural funding as a choice between preserving heritage projects or supporting “LGBTQ+ events where minors are to learn how to perform in a sexual show [and] rainbow

parades, where half-naked people are paraded in the squares.”<sup>144</sup> The Minister instrumentalized the Saplinq Association event to frame her decision as part of broader budgetary cuts, citing the financial difficulties faced by local governments and the need to consolidate public finances: “*public finances are in collapse... and that is why I want to announce upfront to the public that the Ministry of Culture will no longer be spending taxpayers' money on this kind of training of youth for a sexualized LGBTQ+ show organized by a non-governmental organization,*” Šimkovičová stated.<sup>145</sup>

In June 2024, Petra Flach, the newly appointed director of **BIBIANA**, faced accusations of censorship over her decision to ban the publication of a book review in BIBIANA's quarterly magazine. Written by Milena Šubrťová's, it reviewed a book by Czech author Marto Kelbl, *Ani holka, ani kluk (Neither a Girl nor a Boy, translated into Slovak as Stáva sa Elu)*, and was originally intended to appear in the first issue of the magazine's 2024 edition.<sup>146</sup> Nominated for the “Most Beautiful Books of Slovakia” competition in 2023, the book addresses themes of gender identity, aiming to educate young readers about the experiences of individuals who do not identify strictly as male or female.<sup>147</sup> Flach's decision was supported by Minister Šimkovičová, who expressed concerns about introducing topics related to gender

and LGBTQ+ issues into children's literature.<sup>148</sup> Šimkovičová stated that BIBIANA's primary mission is to focus on children and art, suggesting that discussions on sexuality and related ideologies do not belong in children's literature or within the scope of BIBIANA's work. The scientific board of the magazine denounced this decision as an act of censorship and resigned in June 2024 to protest against the political and ideological influence in the institution.<sup>149</sup>



Just two months later, Štefan Kuffa's public disruption of a theater performance in a village of eastern Slovakia further illustrated the SNS's growing influence over creative freedom. Kuffa, who is a State Secretary from the SNS-led Ministry of Environment, personally halted

this theater performance.<sup>150</sup> The production portrayed themes of life, love, and intimacy but Kuffa deemed the play immoral and unsuitable for young audiences.<sup>151</sup> He stood up in the middle of the performance and loudly objected to the content of a monologue delivered by actress **Ľuba Blaškovičová**.<sup>152</sup> Following the incident, the theater acknowledged that the play was better suited for an 18+ audience but emphasized that the age recommendation was clearly indicated and that the responsibility for deciding attendance ultimately rests with the parents. The actress involved described the event as deeply shocking, saying, “*nothing more insane*



“Disclosed Love” (2020–2023), by Dorota Holubová

*has ever happened to me.”*<sup>153</sup> Such acts not only disrupt artistic expression but also serve as ominous warnings to other cultural practitioners, who view every new intervention as a signal of the government’s tightening grip on creative expression.

Another notable incident is the abrupt cancellation of a Czech theater company’s participation in the **Drama Queer Festival** on the SND stage in September 2024.<sup>154</sup> Historically, the SND has served as one of the festival’s main stages, even under prior administrations. However, the new director of the SND, Zuzana Ľapáková, who was appointed by the Minister of Culture after the dismissal of former director Matej Drlička, blocked the guest performance titled *Moonstone*, citing insufficient preparation time and administrative constraints as the official reasons.<sup>155</sup> This explanation has been widely criticized, as the festival’s program had been announced well in advance. Many saw this decision as a politically motivated act, given the festival’s focus on LGBTQ+ themes and its association with progressive cultural values.<sup>156</sup> Veronika Kolečáková described the incident as a blatant act of suppression, *“it’s a clear case of suppression and banning. [...] This is how we all feel now—that [censorship] is not hidden anymore.”*<sup>157</sup> The Drama Queer Festival, which features performances across multiple venues, continued as planned at locations outside the Ministry of Culture’s direct control. The suppression continued into 2025 when the newly reconfigured FPU refused to approve any funding for the festival, overriding an expert committee’s recommendation.<sup>158</sup>

Beyond these overt incidents, subtle forms of censorship are also taking hold. Kolečáková shared concerns about a recent theater adaptation of a political World War II novel, which had already been approved by the SND’s dramaturgy team. *“I’m just waiting for the response,”*<sup>159</sup> she said, reflecting the uncertainty artists and cultural workers feel about whether politically sensitive works will move forward. The anticipation of potential backlash or last-minute cancellations weighs heavily on creative decisions, fostering an environment of preemptive self-censorship.

## Suppression

### Discrimination: Targeting of LGBTQ+ Artists and Themes

The LGBTQ+ community has become a particularly frequent target of institutional discrimination and public hostility in Slovakia, exacerbated by the current administration’s rhetoric and actions. This comes against the backdrop of the tragic 2022 murder of two young queer individuals outside the Tepláreň bar in Bratislava, a crime that moved the nation and underscored the dangers faced by this community.<sup>160</sup> While the government initially condemned the attack, the current administration’s policies and statements suggest a retreat from inclusive policies and a shift toward marginalizing LGBTQ+ voices.

The marginalization of LGBTQ+ voices has extended beyond the funding decisions and censorship examples presented in the previous section to include explicit targeting of individual artists. In November 2023, Minister Šimkovičová publicly condemned a painting by renowned Slovak contemporary painter **Andrej Dúbravský**, displayed as part of a gallery exhibition inside the Slovak Radio building.<sup>161</sup> The artwork entitled *Kissing*, which depicts two men kissing, was described by the Minister as “disturbing.” She later called for legislative changes that would prevent works with LGBTQ+ themes from being displayed in public institutions, citing Dúbravský’s work as an example of a work that she deemed unacceptable.<sup>162</sup> In the aftermath of her remarks, Dúbravský found himself at the center of a media frenzy, receiving constant requests for interviews, television appearances, and podcast invitations that persisted for over a year. While he acknowledged that this exposure unexpectedly broadened his audience, he also noted that the intense scrutiny made it difficult to focus on his artistic practice.<sup>163</sup>

In her public role, Minister Šimkovičová has made several inflammatory statements targeting LGBTQ+ and socially-engaged art and questioning their cultural value. In January 2024, in an interview with *Pravda*, Šimkovičová characterized the state of cultural affairs as “Pandora’s boxes” filled with contracts supporting the LGBTQ+ agenda, subsidies allocated to progressive NGOs, and practices she claimed to be questionable.<sup>164</sup> Minister Šimkovičová has also made inflammatory statements linking

LGBTQ+ rights to overarching societal issues, claiming in a July 2024 interview that “*Europe is dying out, children are not being born because there is an LGBTQ+ overpressure.*”<sup>165</sup> Such remarks illustrate a deliberate strategy to frame LGBTQ+ individuals as an existential threat to the future of the Slovak nation.

## Stigmatization and Discreditation – General Rejection of “out of the norm”

The rhetoric of the SNS and the Ministry of Culture consistently equates traditional, nationalistic, and conservative values with the concept of “normality,” shaping a cultural policy that excludes diversity and modernization. Lukáš Machala, General Secretary of the Ministry, reflected this stance by stating, “*We will protect our traditional values and return to normality. We won’t support anything that deviates from the norm.*”<sup>166</sup> This narrative promotes an exclusionary and divisive agenda, categorizing society into “normal” and “abnormal” groups, and further undermines inclusivity in Slovakia’s cultural landscape. While some of these challenges predate the current administration, they have intensified significantly under the present government.

The artists and cultural workers interviewed by AFI and Open Culture! reported that any deviation from

traditional or nationalist norms is met with rejection and hostility, both within public discourse and institutional practices. “[*Any*] difference in your appearance, in what you think—[*anything*] out of the norm will not be accepted,” explained Soňa Ferienčíková, dancer, performer, choreographer, pedagogue, and founder of the civic association BOD.Y.<sup>167</sup> Their experience aligns with statements made by Minister Šimkovičová and the General Secretary Machala, who have repeatedly emphasized a vision of culture exclusively rooted in traditional Slovak identity. Artists and cultural workers find their work dismissed or stigmatized for not conforming to these narrow definitions of cultural acceptability.

The Ministry of Culture has selectively targeted specific artists and projects, often related to contemporary art and queer themes, portraying them in public discourse as corrupt, worthless, or unworthy of support because they supposedly lack value within traditional or nationalist frameworks and are perceived as inherently threatening to the ethnocentrist, Christian, and conservative norms and identities promoted by the SNS.

The current administration’s communication with the cultural sector is heavily influenced by the personal and professional backgrounds of Minister Šimkovičová and General

Secretary Machala, both of whom have ties to disinformation networks and frequently use their personal media channels to amplify divisive rhetoric and fan the flames of online hate. Their actions have contributed to an environment where specific artists, projects, and institutions are publicly discredited, often under the guise of questioning the use of state funding. These tactics not only undermine the credibility of artists and cultural

workers but also serve to rally public outrage. As Veronika Kolečáková explained, “*This government actively encourages hate. They need a name, an institution—something very specific to target. Once the content is published, even if it only inherently includes triggers for hate speech, the public response begins, and it spirals from there.*”<sup>168</sup>



Both strategies of stigmatizing artists and cultural workers and making disparaging claims about cultural projects receiving public funds are evident in **several recent incidents:**

In February 2024, State Secretary of the Minister of Culture Tibor Bernaták publicly accused the **producers of MIKI**, a film about the origins of organized crime in Slovakia during the 1990s, of submitting false documents to the AVF.<sup>169</sup> This announcement came before the producers had been formally notified of any concerns and before the results of a requested AVF audit were made available. The supervisory

commission of the AVF had conducted an audit of the project following a request from the AVF director to ensure compliance with state aid rules. While the audit ultimately found no violations of laws or internal regulations, it noted suspicions regarding the authenticity of certain documents, recommending that the matter be referred to law enforcement for further investigation, despite the absence of clear evidence.<sup>170</sup> **Zuzana Mistríková**, the film's producer, criticized the handling of the case, noting that she was unaware of any specific issues until the State Secretary publicly announced the allegations, stating: *"I was surprised. I have worked as a producer with the fund for 15 years. There has never been any doubt about our work, either from the fund, RTVS, or international partners."*<sup>171</sup> Mistríková warned that these actions could be politically motivated, designed to undermine public trust in cultural institutions and stigmatize creative projects. *"I do not want this case to become a justification for asserting that the fund is corrupt or a reason to control it politically,"* she added.<sup>172</sup>

The SNS's hostility toward the film can be understood within its broader ideological framework, which emphasizes Slovak nationalism and glorification of traditional heroes. Indeed, the controversy surrounding MIKI has been exacerbated by comparisons drawn by SNS officials between the public funding for this film, centered on the infamous mafia boss Mikuláš Černák, and the minimal funding allocated to a project about General Ján Golian, a Slovak national hero from the anti-fascist Slovak National Uprising (SNP).<sup>173</sup>

In her interview, performance artist **Anna Ďurišiková** recounted a March 2024 incident where a choreographed performance designed to be repeated in unison by the crowd at a protest event was filmed by a collaborator of the Minister of Culture, who described it as a "satanic ritual" online, sparking widespread hate speech against the performers.<sup>174</sup>

In April 2024, SNS Member of Parliament Roman Michelko criticized excerpts from author **Dalimír Stano's** work *Blaho*, a book supported by FPU, describing its use of vulgar language as an example of "low art" unworthy of public funding.<sup>175</sup> Ironically, the book was published by the Slovak Writers' Association's publishing house, where Michelko served as a statutory representative, indicating his prior awareness of the publication and its source of funding.

In May 2024, SNS Member of Parliament Roman Michelko falsely accused contemporary artists **Monika and Bohuš Kubinský** of using bodily excretions in their artwork *Meadow*, which he described as "dirty sheets with feces on them."<sup>176</sup> Michelko's claims, shared in a social media video, were factually incorrect, as clarified by the artists themselves. The materials used in *Meadow* consisted of recycled, clean sheets imprinted with natural pigments such as hibiscus, saffron, and beetroot, emphasizing ecological principles. Michelko's misrepresentation came on the day Parliament was voting on the Amendment to Act No. 284/2014 on the Slovak Arts Council.<sup>177</sup> The incident illustrates how misinformation has been weaponized to delegitimize artists.



"Kissing" by Andrej Dúbravský



Demonstrators cover their mouths in a silent gesture against censorship and threats to artistic freedom, Bratislava, August 2024. Photo by: Katarína Šipőcz Svobodová

In August 2024, the Minister of Culture publicly criticized a grant awarded to the **Milan Šimečka Foundation** for the Fjúžn festival, a multi-genre and multicultural event focusing on migration. The Minister accused the Foundation of securing multi-year funding in a “non-standard” manner.<sup>178</sup> The Foundation refuted these claims, explaining that multi-year grants are a common practice for long-term cultural projects.<sup>179</sup>

Another example of such attacks is the targeting of the internationally recognized dancer and choreographer, **Soňa Ferienčíková**, who is also the partner of opposition politician Michal Šimečka. In September 2024, Prime Minister Fico disparaged Ferienčíková’s work during a public discussion, describing her performance as “shaking in a trance.”<sup>180</sup> Narratives focusing on women’s bodies often serve to devalue their work, framing them as inappropriate or provocative. As Ferienčíková noted, “If you’re a female and a dancer, you’re seen as an [easy] woman or a whore.”<sup>181</sup> Such attacks reflect a broader fear of bodies and bodily expression, creating what Ferienčíková described as a “witch-hunting atmosphere.”<sup>182</sup> SNS leader Andrej Danko referred to Ferienčíková as a “pole dancer,” while Minister Šimkovičová questioned on her Facebook profile whether such performances should receive state support.<sup>183</sup>

## Intimidation: A Climate of Fear and Repression (Police Raids, Questioning, and Legal Action)

Under the current administration, intimidation has become a pervasive tool used to suppress artistic expression and discourage dissent. Artists and cultural workers describe a climate of fear exemplified by statements from ministry officials like General Secretary Machala, who declared in August 2024 that “everyone will pay for their insolence.”<sup>184</sup> This hostile environment is heightened by police interventions, questioning, and other legal actions.

One of the most alarming developments has been the use of police raids to intimidate artists and cultural spaces. In the summer of 2024, two raids were conducted on music clubs, including a high-profile incident at the **WAX club** in September.<sup>185</sup> These clubs, known for being alternative and inclusive spaces frequented by members of the cultural community, aim to foster environments of safety and diversity in the nightlife culture. The event at WAX was organized to bring people together through music and to celebrate community and inclusiveness.<sup>186</sup> During the raid, visitors described being searched, verbally abused, and subjected to invasive treatment.<sup>187</sup> The operation

led to the event being canceled without reimbursement for the organizers.<sup>188</sup>

The police stated that the operation was initiated to investigate alleged violations related to receipts and e-cash registers, as well as to uncover drug-related activities.<sup>189</sup> Police reports claimed that small bags of a white crystalline substance were discovered in various parts of the venue.<sup>190</sup> Many attendees and cultural workers viewed this explanation as insufficient to justify the scale and aggression of the raid, which they felt was a clear demonstration of state power aimed at intimidating the cultural community and was reminiscent of authoritarian tactics from the Mečiar era.<sup>191</sup> Public statements from the Minister of Internal Affairs, describing the raids as effective tools for maintaining order and suggesting that such operations would continue, further amplified concerns.<sup>192</sup> Although no additional raids have been reported since September 2024, the cultural community remains wary, fearing these actions could resume at any time.

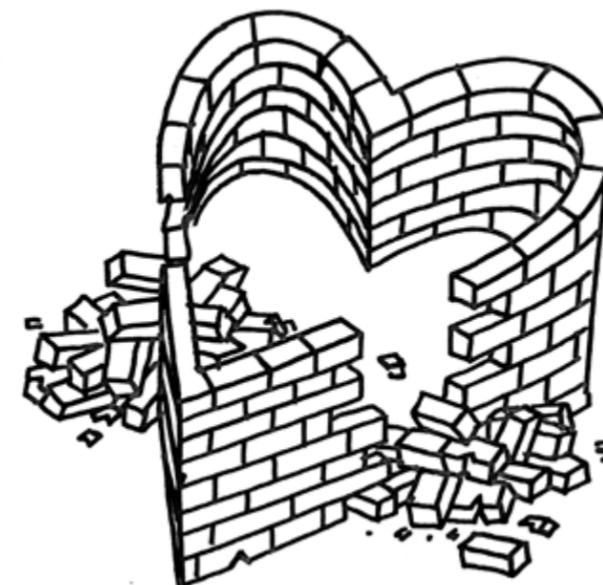
This intimidation extended to individual artists and organizers through the use of police questioning. In March 2024, a student who co-organized a symbolic protest, “**Burying Kunsthalle**,” was summoned to the police station, where they were asked whether the protest was intended as a death threat

against Minister Šimkovičová.<sup>193</sup> The protest involved a cardboard coffin symbolizing the closure of Bratislava’s Kunsthalle, which the police alleged had been perceived as an allusion to harm against the Minister.

In a similar case, **Ilona Németh** was summoned for police questioning in August 2024 after initiating a public call for Šimkovičová’s resignation.<sup>194</sup> Signed by 188,000 people, the petition criticized the Minister’s actions and

policies. Németh, a prominent figure in Slovakia’s cultural scene and an active participant in the Velvet Revolution, expressed dismay at being targeted for her artistic and civic activism, drawing parallels to the state control experienced during socialism. “I thought that similar practices ended with the Velvet Revolution,” she stated after the hearing.<sup>195</sup>

The use of legal systems to suppress dissent adds another layer of intimidation. In September 2024, writer, translator, and Head of Department of Culture for Bratislava Old Town, **Michal Hvorecký**, became the target of a criminal complaint filed by Minister Šimkovičová for alleged defamation.<sup>196</sup> The complaint followed an opinion piece in which Hvorecký criticized the government, referring to Šimkovičová and the Minister of Environment as neo-fascists.<sup>197</sup> While Hvorecký is a prominent and





Open Culture! performative protest "Mourning for Kunsthalle" following the closure of Kunsthalle, Bratislava, March 2024. Photo by: Adam Balogh

well-established figure who continues to speak out, interviews conducted for this report reveal that others view his experience as a cautionary tale. Even when these trials do not result in convictions, they impose significant psychological and financial burdens on the individuals involved, eventually discouraging others from engaging in critical or provocative work.

## Key Takeaways

While such interventions by law enforcement remain limited and are not yet widespread, Slovakia appears to be in the early phases of a shift toward increased censorship and repression. If these measures are left unchecked, they could escalate and mirror the more entrenched censorship seen in neighboring Hungary. The combined effect of suppression tactics, police interventions, and legal threats has been instrumentalized to create a culture of silence within Slovakia's artistic community. This chilling effect not only limits the scope of artistic expression but also undermines the cultural sector's ability to serve as a space for critical dialogue and social reflection.



Open Culture! performative protest "Mourning for Kunsthalle" following the closure of Kunsthalle, Bratislava, March 2024. Photo by: Adam Balogh



Andrej Dúbravský. Photo by: Branislav Šimončík

**Featured Interview**

# Andrej Dúbravský, Visual Artist

Andrej Dúbravský is a Slovak painter based in Bratislava who has made significant contributions to the contemporary art scene both in his home country and abroad. In conversation with Dúbravský, the artist recounted his experience at the center of a media frenzy against LGBTQ+ art and artists led by Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, and denounced her efforts to prevent minority and opposition artists and cultural workers from participating in the arts and cultural sector.

Dúbravský has worked as a contemporary artist in Slovakia for more than 15 years. Speaking to his unique style and artistic sensibilities, he says that the common threads running through his body of work are themes of identity, environmentalism, and the relationship between the two. Many of his pieces feature motifs of bees, caterpillars, roosters, and nude figures, which he uses to allude to the shared vulnerabilities of humanity and the rest of the natural world.

Reflecting on the challenges he has encountered throughout his career in Slovakia, Dúbravský—who is also a gay man—says that being essentialized by critics as a “*queer artist*” has been one of the hardest professional hurdles to overcome. Early in his career, the artist found that critics and audiences were attributing LGBTQ+ themes to his work where none were necessarily intended, and were missing or ignoring other valid interpretations that were more aligned with his own critical approach to the pieces. Far from harmless misinterpretations, Dúbravský said that these projections onto his work stunted his professional growth by pigeonholing him into a certain genre and limiting the critical reception of his work; “*When I was younger it was a serious issue for me, I tried very hard to show people that I am not ‘just a gay painter.’ [...] Every artist is a complex person, but we as humans tend to reduce and label artists. [...] But labels can be dangerous.*” Undeterred by these limiting interpretations, Dúbravský continues to create bold works that defy genres and challenge viewers to push past conventional interpretations.

In 2022, Dúbravský developed a new series of works that used the male nude as a vehicle to explore broader themes of intimacy and vulnerability. The series featured a diversity of subjects, including a group of young men swimming in a river, a young man scrolling on his phone, and a man holding a cat, among many others. One of the images in the series, *Kissing*, depicts a large figured man and a thin man kissing and locked in an embrace. *Kissing* and several of the other paintings from this series were later displayed at a gallery inside the Slovak Radio building as part of an exhibition.

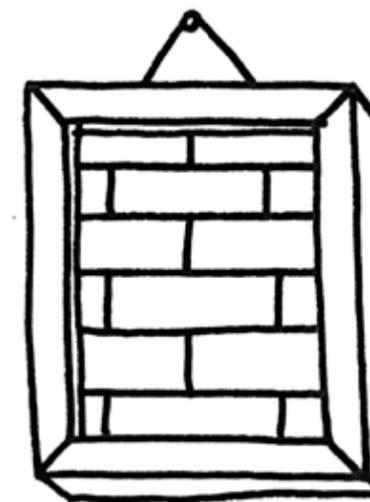
In December 2023, Dúbravský was surprised to learn that the Minister of Culture mentioned *Kissing* in a broadcast on the TV Slovan network, in which she criticized the painting as obscene, and said that it “*disturbs a lot of people and it disturbs me too.*”<sup>198</sup> Minister Šimkovičová went on to say that such a work was inappropriate for the venue during the Christmas season. Dúbravský’s initial reaction to the comments was indignation, as the Minister’s comments were not only offensive but also indicative of a clear lack of understanding and appreciation for contemporary art. Looking back on the experience, he now feels that it was inevitable that such a lack of expertise at the top level of the Ministry of Culture would result in poor decisions that could do real damage to Slovakia’s arts community.

In the months that followed, Šimkovičová began to use Dúbravský’s work to lobby for restrictions on LGBTQ+ art. She referred to *Kissing* several times when calling for changes to the FPU, a key source of national

funding for the arts, arguing that national funds should not be used to commission LGBTQ+ artworks. In 2024, her efforts led to the passing of new legislation enabling the Minister to appoint seven out of thirteen members to the FPU Board, which is responsible for selecting and awarding grantees. Through the new legislation, Šimkovičová is able to stack the Board with members that support her party’s ideological stance and control key grants. With a board composition heavily influenced by Šimkovičová, LGBTQ+ artists will likely be excluded from fair consideration for national funding opportunities.

Throughout the Minister’s campaign against LGBTQ+ artists and her repeated comments about his works, Dúbravský says that he was subjected to a frenzy of media attention: “*Every three days someone was calling me asking me questions, wanting to shoot videos and inviting me to TV and podcasts. It literally didn’t stop for more than a year.*” Several of the online comments that he received were hateful messages, evidencing how the Minister’s remarks may have stoked hostility and emboldened some users to disparage and attack the LGBTQ+ community. Though disappointed by these negative comments, the painter said that not all of the media attention was bad; he was pleasantly surprised

to receive hundreds of messages of support over the course of the year and see his audience and fan-base grow significantly. “*Many people [discovered] me and messaged me to say how much they like my work and that they were happy they discovered it through Šimkovičová. I just opened an exhibition in Bratislava in October 2024 and the gallery was so packed. People were standing in line for 40 minutes to get in. So things turned out pretty well for me,*” he said.



Beyond the media frenzy, Dúbravský said that Minister Šimkovičová’s attacks on his works also created several professional challenges for him. For example, his works were scheduled to be acquired by the Jozef Kollár Museum in 2024,

but the acquisition was cancelled following Šimkovičová’s comments and her appointment of new museum leadership. Prior to the failure of the acquisition, the painter had agreed on a symbolic price for the works, as he hoped to have them displayed at a national institution where they would be more accessible to the public. Despite this professional loss, Dúbravský said that he is fortunate to be connected to private galleries and collectors through which he can sustain his career, a privilege that he worries is not available to many other LGBTQ+ and other minority artists

and cultural workers being forced out of public institutions by Šimkovičová and her appointees. *“[Luckily] I have the support of private collectors and private galleries in Slovakia and abroad, but there are true victims of this government—curators working in the institutions for years who are kicked out for no reasons, the actual museums and [cultural institutions that have been undermined], and, of course, the audience and the visitors of those institutions. What kind of exhibitions and culture will they receive now?”* he wondered.

Speaking to the broader impacts of the new leadership at the Ministry of Culture, Dúbravský said that he has been deeply disturbed to see Slovakia’s cherished cultural institutions gutted and the arts and cultural ecosystem destabilized as a result of the Minister’s interventions: *“Šimkovičová ruined the National Gallery [by] kicking out the director and many professionals. [The government] ruined the State Art Foundation which used to fund many, many projects, theaters, galleries, art, and culture centers etc. They also kicked out the director of the National Theater, and they stopped funding other museums [...] These people are not professionals. They have no plan—they just keep destroying.”* He impresses upon the international community the severity of the Ministry of Culture’s campaign to dismantle Slovak arts and culture, and hopes that they will support the efforts of Slovakia’s arts community to resist them.

Despite the difficulties he has encountered in the past year, Dúbravský continues to develop new works and is intent on preserving the integrity of his creative voice.

He said, *“I am staying here, attending the protests. I will stay visible and authentic. That’s all I can do.”* He also feels thankful for his audience and the artistic community that rallied around him during the controversy—their gestures are a means of defending the rights of all artists to participate in Slovakia’s cultural life.

**“I am staying here, attending the protests. I will stay visible and authentic. That’s all I can do.”**



Demonstrators hold a handmade sign reading "You cut, we bleed. No more cuts to culture!" during a protest against budget reductions in the cultural sector organized by the Cultural Strike with Open Culture! collaboration, Bratislava, September 2024. Photo by: Andrea Kalinova

# Outlook on the Future for Artists and Cultural Workers

The future of the Slovak cultural scene under the current administration presents a complex mix of expectations and fears. Many artists and cultural workers voice deep concerns about the decline of diversity, creative freedom, and institutional independence. The policies and actions of the Fico government have created an atmosphere of uncertainty, raising fears of censorship, suppression, and the erosion of Slovakia's burgeoning artistic momentum. Yet, amidst these challenges, there remains a resilient thread of optimism and determination.

Ferienčíková noted, *"There is a big risk of the artistic scene dying [...] we are coming back to zero."*<sup>199</sup> This fear stems from the government's arbitrary interventions in funding, programming, and institutional leadership, which threaten to narrow the diversity of artistic expression and reduce the overall quality of cultural output. The absence of funding for certain themes—such as LGBTQ+, feminist, or minority-related work—combined with self-censorship pressures, risks stifling creativity and fostering a monocultural artistic environment.

## A Shrinking and Isolated Cultural Landscape

A recurring fear among interviewees is the "death of the cultural scene," a stark term used by Soňa Ferienčíková to describe the potential point of no return if current trends persist.

Institutions across the arts are particularly vulnerable. One interviewee highlighted the threat of increased state control through mergers or dissolutions of cultural institutions like the Theatre Institute<sup>200</sup> or the Slovak Film Institute.<sup>201</sup> Similarly, Ilona Németh observed that artists and cultural workers who fall afoul of the administration's ideology may find themselves blacklisted and unable to exhibit their work, leading to a culture of exclusion.<sup>202</sup>

These policies not only affect contemporary artists and cultural workers in the capital but also hinder regional cultural centers, which serve as vital hubs for smaller communities. *“These centers are islands of freedom [...] if they lose their freedom, I don’t know what these people in the regions will do,”* explained Tomáš Straka, spoken word poet and general manager of Oz Slam Poetry SK.<sup>203</sup>

Furthermore, many interviewees fear that the lack of opportunity and financial support due to changes in the FPU’s decision-making structure and the fertile ground for self-censorship, detailed in the following section, will drive brain drain among artists and cultural workers, particularly younger and emerging ones. Soňa Ferienčíková reflected, *“If I want to continue my artistic work, I would just have to find support outside of Slovakia. I don’t like this [...] I have to choose: either I do something else and stay here, or I do my artistic work.”*<sup>204</sup> This migration not only risks depleting Slovakia’s creative talent pool but also disrupts the cultural ecosystem, which has been steadily evolving in recent years. The momentum built through earlier initiatives is now at risk of being undone, with the quality of art potentially declining under politically motivated interventions. Veronika Kolejáková lamented, *“Every year it was getting better [...] but now it seems like it might be a huge downgrade.”*<sup>205</sup>

## State Control of the Funding Sources: Slovak Arts Council and Audiovisual Fund

Slovak artists and cultural workers are facing unprecedented challenges in securing funding for their work as the current administration reshapes the cultural funding system. The politicization of public funds, the appointment of incompetent decision-makers, and deliberate delays in the allocation process have created an atmosphere of uncertainty that is paralyzing the cultural sector. This shift is affecting not only critical and progressive artists and cultural workers but also traditional cultural forms and grassroots initiatives, leaving the entire art and culture ecosystem of Slovakia at risk. Many artists and cultural workers believe that the funding crisis is not merely a result of incompetence but a deliberate strategy to weaken the cultural sector. Jana Keeble summarized this sentiment, *“They are cutting funds to weaken us and make us tired. It’s about control through exhaustion.”*<sup>206</sup>

## Uncertainty and the Challenges of Planning

This erosion of expertise has led to a breakdown in the functioning of the FPU. Board meetings for funding decisions are delayed because political appointees fail to attend, further stalling the approval of grants. (See report section Amendment to Act No. 284/2014 on the Slovak Arts Council (FPU))<sup>207</sup> This chaos has paralyzed the system, leaving artists and cultural workers unable to plan their projects or secure resources.

Artists and cultural workers face an acute sense of uncertainty due to delays and changes in the funding process. Tomáš Straka described the impossibility of planning under the current system: *“You write an application in October and wait until February. I can’t plan. I can’t make a vision. I can’t make anything until two months into the next year.”*<sup>208</sup> This lack of predictability is forcing many artists and cultural workers to consider seeking funding abroad, despite the challenges of navigating international applications. Soňa Ferienčíková reflected on the difficulty of this shift, particularly for those who lack the language skills to compete for European grants: *“What about the people who basically don’t speak English? Because you need to speak English if you want to get sources from abroad.”*<sup>209</sup>

## Compounded Challenges of Marginalized Voices

The government’s funding policies are raising significant concerns among artists and cultural workers working on LGBTQ+ themes, feminism, body politics, and minority issues. Though the exclusion of marginalized voices has not yet become systematic, the current trajectory and rhetoric from the government are prompting artists and cultural workers to prepare for the worst. This anticipation is already shaping decisions, with many exploring alternative funding sources or scaling back projects to mitigate potential risks. While the effects are not yet fully realized—as funding for 2024 projects were already secured before the new administration came into power—the artists and cultural workers interviewed for this report have voiced concerns about the current administration’s open stance on shifting financial support to traditional and conservative art. Many artists and cultural workers anticipate that their current projects will struggle to receive support under the Fico administration. Veronika Kolejáková highlighted these fears, explaining, *“friends running LGBTQ+ magazines are already preparing themselves for not being published.”*<sup>210</sup> This preemptive anxiety reflects a growing belief that the government’s cultural policies will prioritize conservative, nationalist values over inclusive and progressive initiatives.



"The New Cultural Policy (FPU)" (2025), by Jozef Glaba

Artists and cultural workers working on politically sensitive themes also face uncertainty about their projects' futures. For example, Kolejáčová described doubts about whether a project focusing on women in revolutions and active citizenship would be approved: *“Those topics now are completely the kind of topics that are suppressed, possibly and very actively.”*<sup>211</sup> While some creators are determined to proceed despite the risks, the lack of clarity around funding decisions has led to hesitation.

Additionally, artists and cultural workers worry that personal reputations are becoming a factor in funding decisions. As Soňa Ferienčíková shared, *“I think my name [is] forbidden. [I’m a] persona non grata.”*<sup>212</sup> While such fears remain hypothetical for now, they reflect a broader concern that personal or ideological biases may increasingly influence funding outcomes.

## Impact on Grassroots Culture

The funding crisis is not limited to progressive or critical artists and cultural workers; it is also affecting grassroots initiatives. Veronika Kolečáková highlighted how public libraries and small community projects are now struggling to secure resources. *“A lot of projects will fall victim to this confusing system,”*<sup>213</sup> she said, adding that even conservative communities that rely on small grants will feel the impact. Jozef Kovalčík, a former FPU director, lamented that his vision for

the FPU was exactly to mitigate the challenges faced by the hundreds of self-organized cultural groups in Slovakia with regards to funding: *“My vision was, from very beginning to establish really democratic institution, which would be [...] open for everybody, [...] not just Bratislava, but also other regions, not to be [...] an elitist institution [...] and to be really transparent in the processes.”*<sup>214</sup>

Unfortunately, Kovalčík's efforts are reversed with the new administration, and cultural centers outside Bratislava are now at risk. Tomáš Straka explained, *“if the Slovak Art Council falls, most people who will suffer from it are not artists in the capital [...] Smaller cultural centers, which really depend on the Art Council, will be impacted. So no theater, no literature.”*<sup>215</sup> These smaller institutions often lack the alternative revenue streams available to larger organizations, making them especially vulnerable to funding cuts.

## Key Takeaways

The paralysis of art funding in Slovakia is creating a crisis that extends beyond individual artists to the entire artistic and cultural ecosystem. Political appointments, systemic bias, and bureaucratic chaos are undermining the ability of artists, cultural workers, and institutions to function. For many, the pervasive uncertainty is forcing difficult decisions about their futures, with some seeking opportunities abroad while others brace for further challenges at home. This deliberate erosion of support for culture threatens to silence diverse voices and stifle creativity.



Protesters gather outside the Slovak National Council, holding a sign with the acronym 'FPU,' referring to the Slovak Arts Council, Bratislava, May 2024. Photo by Katarina Psenak

## Self-Censorship

Under the current administration, a pervasive atmosphere of suppression has led many artists and cultural workers to grapple with the pressures of self-censorship. While outright prohibitions and direct censorship are more visible, self-censorship operates subtly but insidiously, shaping creative choices and silencing dissent before it even emerges. This atmosphere affects in particular those who depend on state funding or institutional support for their work, as well as those in vulnerable positions within cultural institutions.

## Navigating Suppression Through Silence

Many artists and cultural workers described an atmosphere of palpable pressure to stay silent, either to protect themselves or to avoid jeopardizing their projects. Veronika Kolejáková observed, *“what’s worrying me is that some people don’t say anything. They avoid [speaking out...] they are just waiting.”*<sup>216</sup> This tendency to stay quiet, even among previously vocal individuals, reflects an instinct for self-preservation in the face of potential backlash.

This silence can be especially pronounced in institutional settings, where individuals feel they have

little room to take risks. As Katarína Mišíková noted, *“I’ve spoken to so many people from institutions [...] who say, ‘Yeah, I 100 per cent agree, but I don’t want to speak up openly because I would be sacked.’”*<sup>217</sup> Such fears highlight how self-censorship often emerges as a response to an environment of uncertainty and repression.

## Altering Work to Avoid Controversy – The Financial Stakes of Free Expression

For those who rely on public funding or institutional support, the stakes are particularly high. Michal Hvorecký, described how schools and libraries are withdrawing from collaborations on sensitive issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights, out of fear of government repercussions. In one case, a school refused to host an exhibition about the queer bar shooting in Bratislava that happened in 2022 which resulted in two deaths, citing fears of reprisal as they report to the Ministry of Culture.<sup>218</sup> (See report section, **Discrimination: Targeting of LGBTQ+ Artists and Themes.**) Similarly, a project on disinformation and fake news was canceled because libraries were unwilling to take the perceived risk. *“Even schools are stopping cooperation,”* Hvorecký lamented, underscoring how fear trickles down to everyday decision-making in cultural institutions.<sup>219</sup>

These examples illustrate how financial dependency can drive individuals and organizations to self-censor, prioritizing survival over creative freedom. As Ilona Németh pointed out, *“the pressure is so intense [...] it means you will not tell what you think.”*<sup>220</sup> For artists and cultural workers who lack alternative sources of income, this pressure is compounded by the practical realities of sustaining their careers. Soňa Ferienčíková reflected, *“I thought my friends, my colleagues, won’t do that [...] but it’s a valid choice if you need to take care of your family and you need to bend your work or change your work.”*<sup>221</sup> This acknowledgment highlights the complex moral and personal decisions artists and cultural workers face in an environment where speaking out can jeopardize not only their careers but also their livelihoods.

Despite these pressures, pockets of resistance remain. Artists and cultural workers who are less financially dependent on their work or have alternative career paths express a stronger willingness to take risks. Veronika Kolejáková noted, *“I’m not completely dependent on my artistic work in terms of existential support [...] but why should it be like that? That we actually lose what we have?”*<sup>222</sup> This sentiment captures the frustration and defiance felt by many who refuse to compromise their values, even as they recognize the challenges faced by others.

## Key Takeaways

For many Slovak artists and cultural workers, the pressure might shape not only what they say but also what they choose not to create. While some resist these constraints, others might feel compelled to adjust their work or remain silent, particularly those dependent on public funding or embedded within institutions. This chilling effect threatens to erode the diversity and vibrancy of Slovakia’s cultural landscape, leaving only those voices that conform to the government’s narrow vision of acceptable art.



A child paints on a collaborative protest banner reading 'Kultúrny štrajk' ('Cultural strike'), Banská Bystrica, September 2024. Photo by: Martin Dubovský

## Optimism Amid Adversity

While the challenges facing the Slovak cultural sector are significant, there is a pervasive sense of hope among artists and cultural workers that this period of suppression could ultimately catalyze positive change. Many view the current crisis as a phase rather than a permanent decline. Veronika Kolejáková observed that while global factors like war and economic instability present broader concerns, the adaptability and creativity of Slovak artists and cultural workers remain a wellspring of resilience: *"I always believe that this flexibility and creativity will be useful,"* she said, underscoring the inherent resourcefulness of the cultural community.<sup>223</sup>

Some interviewees also suggested that the structural issues in Slovak culture were long overdue for reform. As Michal Hvorecký pointed out, the current turmoil might pave the way for a more sustainable and independent cultural infrastructure.<sup>224</sup> The possibility of restructuring cultural governance and fostering greater autonomy in funding could provide the sector with a much-needed foundation for growth and stability. This sentiment was echoed in discussions about alternative, independently funded arts spaces, which are increasingly seen as refuges for creativity amidst rising censorship. Such spaces offer not only physical venues but also symbolic arenas for artists

and cultural workers to continue their work without compromise.

Artists and cultural workers agree that creating independent platforms will be critical for sustaining creativity in Slovakia. These efforts can counteract the isolation and suppression fostered by current government policies. Additionally, international collaboration and external funding offer potential lifelines, though these options are limited for those without linguistic or logistical capabilities. Ilona Németh observed, *"now we have this international contact. Not just you are here to ask what is the situation here, but also this international interest is present, and this is very important."*<sup>225</sup> This transnational interconnectedness provides Slovak artists and cultural workers today with tools and platforms that their predecessors lacked during previous historical periods of artistic and cultural hardships, offering hope that collective resistance can again prevail.

Ultimately, the outlook for Slovakia's cultural sector is defined by both fragility and resilience. The fear of losing a vibrant, diverse artistic landscape is real, yet the determination to adapt, resist, and find creative solutions underscores the resilience of Slovakia's cultural community. Whether through grassroots activism, international support, or sheer creative tenacity, artists and cultural workers have been and remain committed to preserving their craft and its role in society, even in the face of mounting challenges.

# Artists and Cultural Workers Protest Against Change

Slovakia's cultural community has responded to the escalating repression with remarkable collective action, forming networks of solidarity, organizing protests, and stepping into roles as activists. While these efforts showcase resilience and commitment, they also highlight the strain of sustained resistance, as artists and cultural workers struggle to balance activism with their creative practices. The movement reflects both the urgency of defending cultural freedoms and the challenges of engaging the broader public in this fight.



“Cultural Ecosystem” (2025), by Jozef Glaba

# Unified Solidarity and Open Culture!

One of the most significant achievements of the cultural resistance has been the formation in February 2024 of Open Culture! (Otvorená Kultúra!), a platform that unites artists, academics, and cultural workers from across Slovakia. Open Culture! has emerged as a non-partisan and non-hierarchical civic initiative representing 340 organizations and 1,900 individuals from Slovakia's creative sector.<sup>226</sup> Open Culture! was born in January 2024 as a result of the first petition asking for the Minister's resignation, which had already garnered 180,000 signatures—indicating that Šimkovičová was not welcome from the very beginning and that the cultural sector took immediate action.<sup>227</sup>

Since its inception, Open Culture! has played a pivotal role in organizing resistance efforts, providing support to cultural workers, and amplifying the collective voice of Slovakia's cultural sector. Slovak artists and cultural workers draw strength from historical precedents. Many recall the effectiveness of civil society in countering authoritarian policies in the 1990s. Veronika Kolečáková noted, “back then, attempts to rule over

*culture like this ended quickly because civil society defended effectively.”*<sup>228</sup> Others, like Jana Keeble, pointed out that decades of suppression have equipped Slovak artists with a “well-trained” instinct for resistance.<sup>229</sup>

This initiative has fostered a rare sense of solidarity across disciplines and institutions, creating a unified front against government suppression. As Anna Ďurišiková mentioned, “there is strong solidarity [...] if [the government] picks an individual and attacks them, the whole cultural scene starts to support that person.” Another interviewee explained that “there was never such a big unity in a way across fields.”<sup>230</sup> This unity has been particularly crucial as the cultural community navigates an environment of uncertainty and repression.

Solidarity has extended beyond Bratislava to smaller towns and regional institutions, amplifying the movement's reach. A key driver of this expansion has been the Network for Independent Culture (Anténa), an established network of cultural centers across Slovakia. As a strong partner of Open Culture!, Anténa has played a crucial role in disseminating

activities beyond the capital, turning independent cultural centers into hubs of local protests. Kolečáková observed, “all towns of Slovakia have joined in this. It's not just here in Bratislava, and it's really good.”<sup>231</sup> Such widespread participation underscores the deep connections and shared values within Slovakia's cultural sphere, even as the movement struggles to engage the broader public.

All of Open Culture's work is carried out on a voluntary basis, reflecting the dedication and passion of those involved. Despite the emotional and physical toll of sustained activism, the initiative continues to play a crucial role in coordinating resistance and maintaining morale.

## Coordinating Protests and Petitions

Open Culture! has been at the forefront of organizing protests against the government's policies, particularly the dismissal of key cultural figures and the ideological restructuring of institutions. One of its most notable actions was in August 2024, with the second petition demanding the dismissal of Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová. This petition garnered an astonishing 188,000 signatures within just 48 hours, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the government's cultural policies.<sup>232</sup> These petitions represent a significant mobilization of

public opinion, with the number of signatories far exceeding the number of votes Šimkovičová received in the September 2023 parliamentary elections (27,615 preferential votes).<sup>233</sup> The group's ability to mobilize such rapid and large-scale support underscores its importance as a unifying force within the cultural sector.

Maintaining this momentum has been difficult. Many artists note a disconnect between the cultural sector and the general public, with culture often perceived as a niche concern rather than a vital societal pillar. Katarína Mišíková described this struggle, “we have to find ways to persuade people that culture is part of their lives [...] otherwise their lives will decline.”<sup>234</sup> Kolečáková observed that, unlike the 1990s when public support for cultural protests was more robust, today's demonstrations often draw primarily from within the cultural community itself: “In the 1990s, when actors and artists went to protest, the whole public, or that part of the public who wanted change, supported them. But now, it's just us.” She added, “when we have this demonstration, maybe 4,000 people will come [...] and it's just the artistic community. Where are the other people?”<sup>235</sup> This difficulty is compounded by the complexity of a modern era, which is marked by social media and mass disinformation, further isolating the sector. Yet, there is hope that broader societal frustrations with government policies may eventually align with the goals of cultural resistance, creating an opportunity for stronger public engagement.

Despite these challenges, protests remain a critical tool for raising awareness and applying pressure on decision-makers.

## Cultural Strikes: Symbolic Action and Practical Challenges

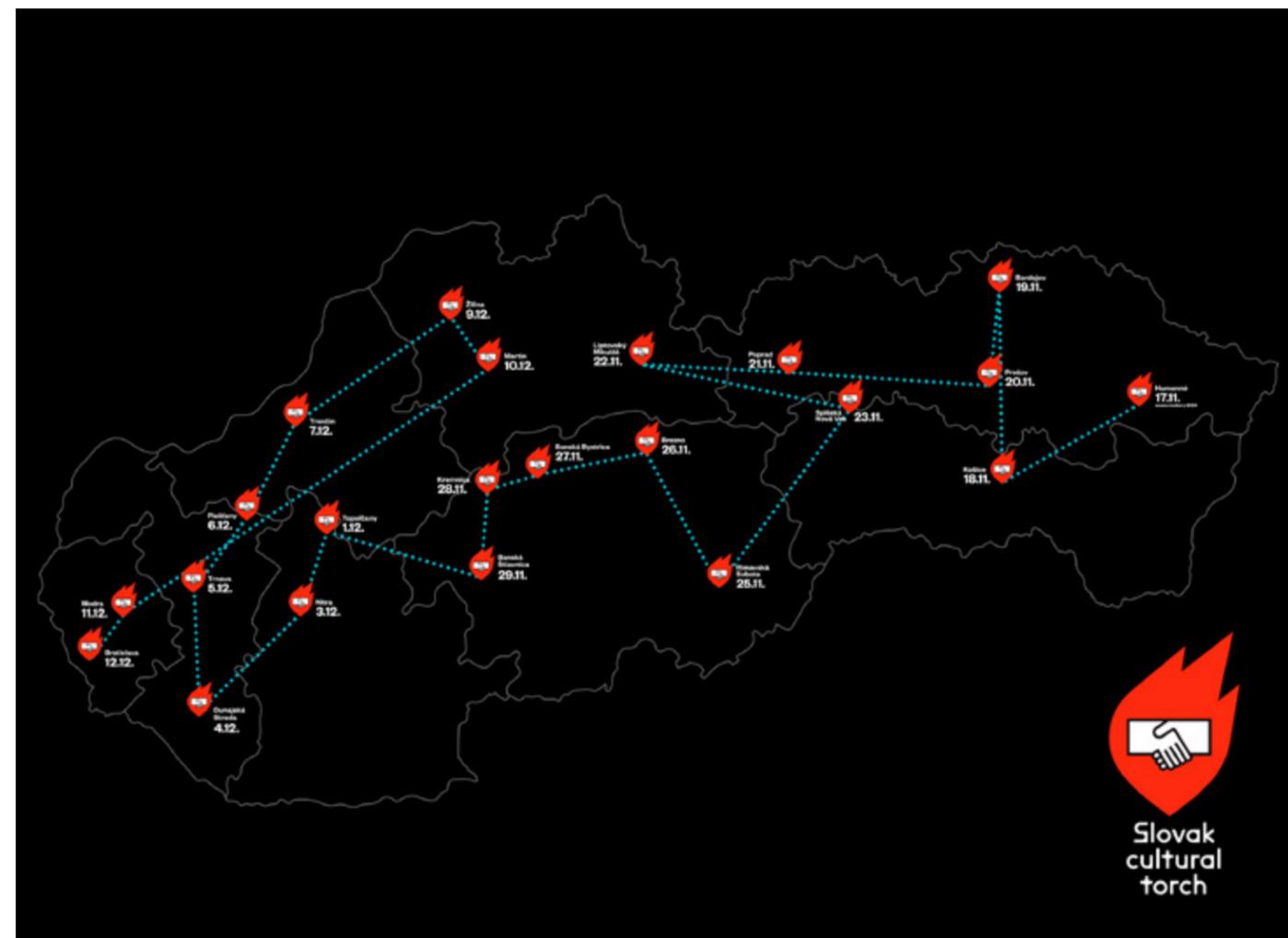
The cultural strike, a key component of the resistance movement, has been a symbolic gesture to demonstrate the collective frustration and determination of Slovakia's cultural sector. Currently in an "alert" phase, the strike serves as a warning to the government: without meaningful change, the cultural community is prepared to take more drastic action.<sup>236</sup> Symbolic gestures of this alert phase include demonstrating support by wearing the cultural strike's logo and slogan, as well as displaying messages of solidarity in participant's workplaces, on social media, and online platforms.<sup>237</sup> Thousands of individuals and institutions have signed up for the strike alert.<sup>238</sup>

However, organizing a full-scale strike has proven difficult. As Katarína Mišíková explained, "*The legal and practical aspects are hindering us from being more aggressive or rigorous in our demands.*"<sup>239</sup> Indeed, the right to strike is protected under international, regional, and national instruments, yet its practical implementation in Slovakia's cultural sector reveals significant challenges.

Unlike traditional labor disputes that target the employer, the demands of the cultural strike are primarily directed at the government and the Ministry of Culture. Key demands include the cessation of ideologically motivated censorship, financial stabilization of the sector, and professional management of cultural institutions.<sup>240</sup> Since these objectives reflect broader political and systemic challenges rather than workplace-specific grievances, the cultural strike is located outside the typical framework of Slovakia's labor laws, posing a significant obstacle to its implementation and effectiveness.<sup>241</sup> Indeed, Slovakia's legal framework governing strikes is closely tied to collective bargaining and employer-employee relationships.<sup>242</sup> Artists and cultural workers, many of whom are freelancers or project-based, often lack traditional union representation and the financial stability to endure work interruptions. Additionally, constitutional provisions for striking remain ambiguous, with limited precedents to guide action. This lack of clarity deters artists and cultural workers from fully engaging in strike activities, despite the urgency of their demands.

The cultural sector's reliance on precarious employment models further compounds the difficulty of organizing a strike. Freelancers and project-based workers face substantial financial risks when participating, as their contracts often provide no safety net during prolonged work stoppages.

These barriers underscore the urgent need for systemic reform, not only to address the sector's immediate



Itinerary of the Culture Torch. Illustration by: Andrej Gregorčok

challenges but also to create a legal framework that supports collective action within the context of Slovakia's cultural landscape.

Despite these limitations, the cultural strike has had a significant impact in terms of visibility and morale. It sends a clear message to both the government and the public. As Mišíková put it, "*We are here, don't be afraid. Step up. You are not alone.*"<sup>243</sup>

This reassurance is particularly important for individuals in smaller towns, who may feel isolated in their opposition to government policies.

## Symbolic Gestures: The Culture Torch

In addition to its protests, petitions, and strikes, Open Culture! has used symbolic gestures to unite the cultural sector and raise awareness. Between November and December 2024 and in cooperation with Anténa, Open Culture! organized a "culture torch" that traveled across the country, stopping in 22 cities.<sup>244</sup> This symbolic act demonstrated the breadth of support for the resistance movement and emphasized the importance of culture in connecting communities.

# Artists and Cultural Workers as Activists: The Personal Cost of Resistance

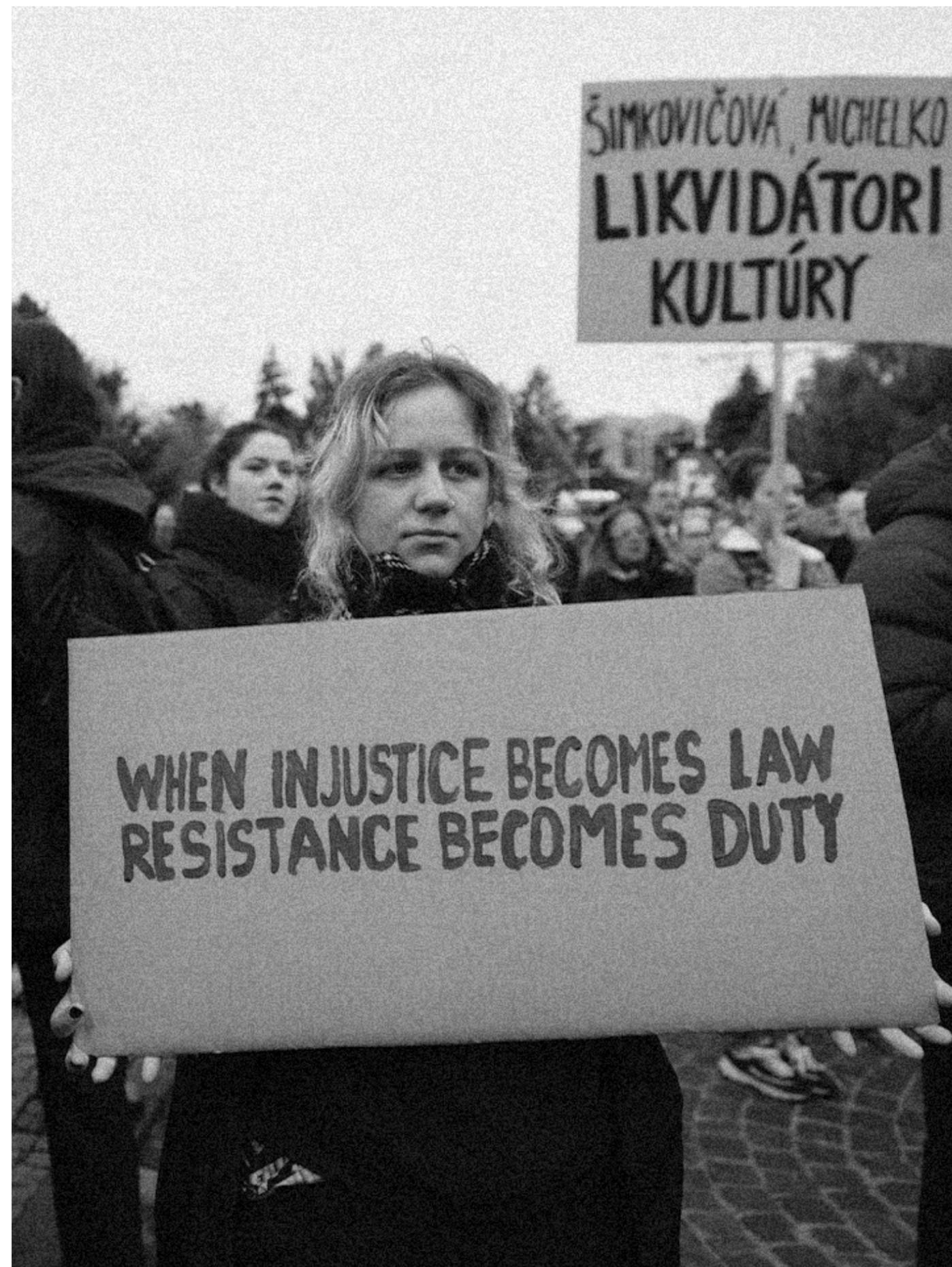
For many artists, the urgency of the current crisis has necessitated a shift from creative practice to activism. This transition has been both empowering and exhausting. Ilona Németh described the difficulty of balancing artistic work with activism: *“Our minds are completely colonized by politics... It’s very hard to concentrate on artwork if every day you are faced with new barriers and decisions from the government.”*<sup>245</sup> Similarly, Mišíková admitted, *“I’m sort of an activist against my will. It just feels like something that has to be done.”*<sup>246</sup>

The toll of sustained activism is significant, with many artists experiencing burnout. Veronika Kolečáková, who works with cultural activists as part of her psychological practice, noted, *“the energy is low. It’s physically quite tough for them [...] sometimes it’s just anger, or they feel the need to retreat and not do anything.”*<sup>247</sup> This collective exhaustion highlights the emotional strain of resistance and

the challenge of sustaining momentum in the face of ongoing repression.

## Key Takeaways

The collective action of Slovakia’s cultural community reflects both the resilience of its artists and the immense challenges they face. From the creation of Open Culture! to the organization of protests and strikes, the movement has demonstrated a deep commitment to defending artistic freedom and human rights. However, sustaining this resistance will require addressing the emotional and practical toll on those involved, while finding new ways to engage the broader public. As one interviewee put it, *“we can’t stop fighting. If we do, they win.”* This determination underscores the enduring belief in the power of art and culture to shape a better future, even in the most difficult times.



Protesters hold signs reading 'When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty', 'SMER [ujeme vzad]' ['SMER - going backwards'], and 'Šimkovičová, Michelko - likvidátori kultúry' ['Šimkovičová, Michelko - liquidators of culture', Bratislava, April 2024. Photo by: Boris Nemeth



Monika and Bohuš Kubinský. Photo by: Juraj Hantabal

**Featured Interview**

# Monika and Bohuš Kubinský, the Contemporary Artist Duo

AFI and Open Culture! had the pleasure of interviewing Monika and Bohuš Kubinský,<sup>248</sup> a contemporary artist duo specializing in site-specific installations and multimedia art, including paintings and sculptures. Their studio is located in a small settlement close to Bratislava and their motto, *“Let art not to be a waste of time,”* reflects their belief in art’s transformative power to provoke thoughts and inspire change. Their work explores themes of personal and historical memory; through creativity, they always have something to say about the happenings in their surroundings. They exhibit only when they feel they have something meaningful to contribute to public discourse. In conversation with the artists, they recounted their experience at the center of an SNS-led misinformation campaign against progressive art, and voiced their concerns about the current government’s use of such tactics to limit free artistic expression.

The Kubinskýs recounted their decades-long journey as socially engaged artists in Slovakia, which was sometimes fraught with harassment and abuse from authorities and the public. Their politically vibrant art took root in the 1990s during Slovakia's turbulent post-communist era, when they collaborated with a Franciscan priest (Ján Krstiteľ Baláž) who had been ostracized for criticizing the political establishment. As a supportive intellectual act of solidarity, in 2000, they hosted an exhibition of his poetry alongside their own artworks, known as the *Touches* project. The exhibition earned significant public attention but also attracted criticism from Slovakia's Catholic community, which was targeted toward the priest (Baláž) in particular. A suspicious theft of artworks from their studio was followed by police interrogations and tax audits. Former President of Slovakia, Michal Kováč, personally warned the couple and the priest to be careful in their daily lives to avoid being physically harmed. During a period of respite after these disturbing incidents, Monika focused on family through her art while Bohuš pursued teaching at the Faculty of Architecture in Bratislava. They made a powerful return in 2014 with their *Frontline* exhibition for the DOX gallery in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. The *Frontline* project addressed the centennial anniversary of the start of World War I with the motto, "*Flames of wars never stopped burning.*" Their exhibition also addressed the 2014 occupation of Crimea and the rise of extremism in Slovakia. Through their projects, the Kubinskýs reaffirm their commitment to tackling societal

issues through art under the current Fico administration, the Kubinskýs see mounting barriers for progressive artists, particularly through policies restricting funding and visibility for nontraditional art forms. These themes were central to their 2016 multimedia installation, *Exklusiv*, which critiqued nationalist narratives. By embossing wafers with folkloric motifs juxtaposed against symbols of fascism and xenophobia, they highlighted the dissonance between Slovakia's celebrated hospitality and its darker societal currents. The Kubinskýs noted that this previous work feels increasingly relevant as cultural policies today suppress diverse artistic expression. Reflecting on changes observed under Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, the Kubinskýs highlighted the actual intent behind sudden amendments made to cultural funding institutions such as the FPU and the AVF. "*It's not just about funding—it's about visibility,*" Monika emphasized, "*Alternative culture is being pushed out of public spaces and into obscurity.*"

The Kubinskýs expressed concern over the stigmatization of progressive voices and the spread of disinformation under the far-right Ministry of Culture. They shared their experience of a misinformation campaign initiated in May 2024 by SNS Member of Parliament Roman Michelko, which targeted their environmentally conscious project, *Meadow*. The parliamentarian's allegations falsely claimed their work involved "*dirty sheets with feces,*" a misrepresentation that the artists later debunked, explaining that the project utilized clean, recycled sheets



"Meadow" (2024), by Monika Kubinský



"Meadow" (2024), by Monika Kubinský

imprinted with natural pigments like hibiscus, saffron, and beetroot. Despite their efforts to correct the parliamentarian's comments, the misinformation campaign against Meadow quickly escalated. Monika and Bohuš first learned about the accusations through an influx of calls and messages. *"At first, it felt surreal,"* Monika recounted. *"We couldn't believe someone would twist our work this way. Our aim was to highlight sustainability and environmental consciousness, and suddenly it was being framed as something obscene."* Bohuš added, *"The hardest part was the threats—not just against us, but against our family. It showed how easily misinformation can spiral into something dangerous."* The Kubinskýs attributed part of the misunderstanding to the legacy of communism, which restricted cultural access for the older generation.

Rather than focusing on fighting with authorities, the Kubinskýs turned adversity into an educational opportunity. They organized 49 guided tours of their exhibition, fostering dialogue to counter misinformation by fostering transparency. *"We decided to use this attack to educate,"* Monika explained, further noting that *"Art has the power to open minds, even in the face of hostility."*

The public response to their guided tours and exhibitions was overwhelmingly positive. Visitors from across Slovakia attended, many driven by curiosity sparked by the scandal. *"People came with questions, sometimes skepticism, but left with understanding and appreciation,"* Monika noted. The exhibitions created a space for open dialogue,

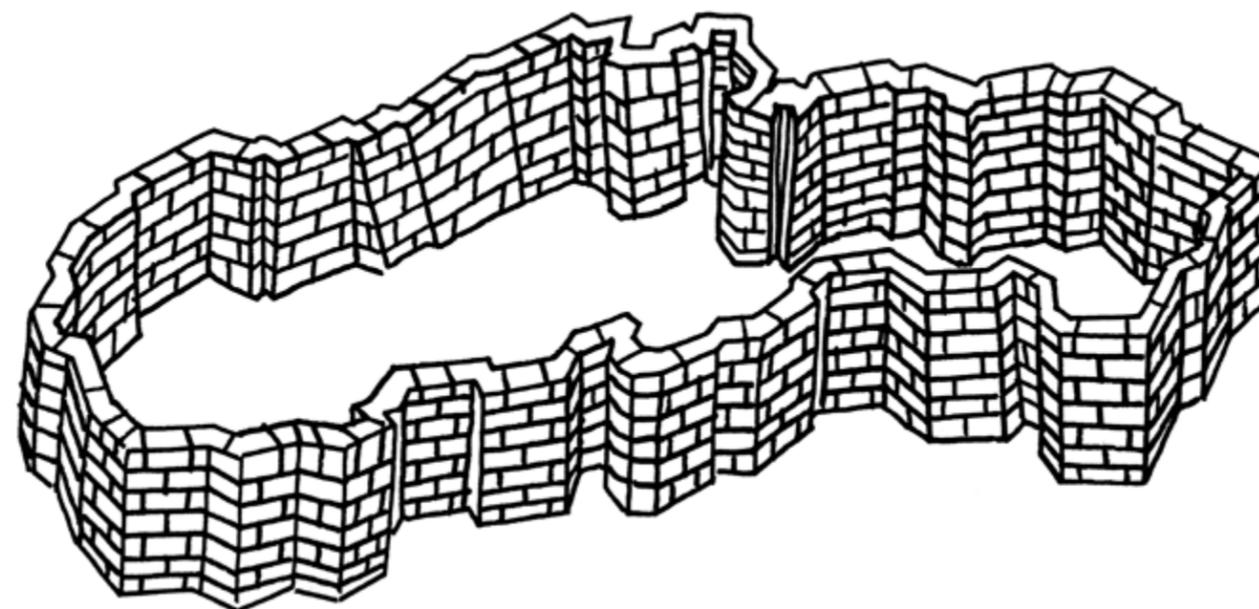
where attendees could interact directly with the couple. *"By the end of the tours, many visitors—especially women—were moved to tears,"* Bohuš shared. *"They would hug us, apologize for believing the misinformation, and express gratitude for the experience."* This profound emotional connection reinforced the Kubinskýs belief in the transformative power of art to bridge divides and foster empathy.

Reflecting on the broader implications of this incident, Bohuš highlighted the dangers of Slovakia's disinformation landscape: *"We were shocked by its power and reach, especially as mainstream media retreats and social media becomes a primary source of information for politicians and citizens alike."* The campaign coincided with a parliamentary vote on amending Act No. 284/2014 on the Slovak Arts Council, underscoring how disinformation can be weaponized to delegitimize artists and justify censorship.

The smear campaign not only had an impact on public discourse and policies—it also had tangible consequences for the Kubinskýs, negatively affecting their professional reputation and financial stability. Bohuš revealed that some collaborators withdrew from projects, citing concerns about their "tainted" reputation. Monika noted that their work is largely confined to their studio, for now, while they seek collaboration with independent spaces and institutions willing to host them despite the controversy. They also have been encouraged by several offers to exhibit their work outside of Slovakia.

Despite the numerous challenges they have faced and continue to face in their career, the Kubinskýs remain resolute in their mission to create art that provokes thought and fosters empathy. They draw strength from the solidarity of their artistic community, especially through initiatives like the Open Culture! platform. *"Art knows no borders,"* Bohuš affirmed, underscoring their determination to continue creating without succumbing to censorship or fear.

**"Art knows no borders"**



# Early Signs of the Slovak Government's Violations of the Right to Artistic Expression

It is AFI's position that the Fico government is engaged in a course of conduct intended to marginalize minorities and dissenting voices in the arts and cultural sector—particularly those that do not correspond to the government-promoted identities and art forms—while amplifying creative expression aligned with the coalition government



"Ripped From the Roots" (2025). by Jozef Glaba

This effort is evident on multiple fronts. First, public statements by SNS politicians have explicitly signaled their intent to suppress artistic expression that does not align with the government's vision. Second, legislative reforms pushed by the SNS have significantly expanded the Ministry of Culture's authority over the management, funding, and oversight of cultural institutions, tightening governmental control over cultural production. Third, the dismissal of independent directors from key cultural institutions reflects a broader strategy to replace critical or autonomous leadership with figures more aligned with the ruling coalition's agenda. Finally, targeted actions against LGBTQ+ programming in Slovakia's cultural institutions demonstrate a commitment to an exclusionary cultural policy that privileges certain identities and artistic expressions while systematically marginalizing others. These developments, taken together, illustrate a coordinated strategy to reshape the cultural landscape in line with the government's ideological imperatives. Each of these trends is explored in detail below.

While recent developments in Slovakia's cultural sector raise serious concerns that the far-right ruling party is attempting to suppress creative expression, it is important to recognize that—at the time of writing this report—the Fico administration has been in power for only 18 months, so the full extent of its impact on artistic freedom may not yet be realized. AFI fears that the most significant damage is yet to come, as the groundwork for

increased government interference in artistic and cultural expression has already been laid. It is critical to note that international legal protections of freedom of expression not only extend to affirmative actions by the government to directly censor artists; they also require states to enable pluralistic expression and prohibit using the administrative apparatus of the state to favor one viewpoint over another.

# Treaties, Conventions, and Laws Governing Artistic Expression and Cultural Rights

Slovakia's recent hard turn towards illiberalism presents a grave threat to the country's long-standing commitments to fundamental human rights. While Slovakia is a party to key international, regional, and national treaties and conventions that ensure the government's obligation to respect the freedom of expression of artists and the public's right to participate in artistic and cultural life, recent legislative and political measures signal a troubling shift that could undermine these commitments. Prime Minister Fico's early actions restricting press freedom and threatening civil society organizations have raised legitimate concerns regarding the ruling coalition's commitment to upholding fundamental human rights. The Fico administration's efforts to control the cultural sector conflict with Slovakia's international legal commitments to protect artistic expression.

Further, the administration's early interferences in the sector have set up the preconditions for future violations of the right to artistic expression.

## International Treaties and Conventions

### International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Having achieved independence and sovereignty at the end of the Cold War, Slovakia ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1993.<sup>249</sup> The ICCPR



Protesters hold up illustrated signs, including one reading 'Pani smrť kultúry' ['Mrs. Death of Culture'], Bratislava, April 2024. Photo by: Andrea Kalinova

obligates countries that have ratified the treaty to protect civil and political rights, notably, the right to freedom of expression, the prohibition against discrimination, and the right for minorities to enjoy the right to cultural life. Article 19 of the ICCPR upholds the right to freedom of expression and opinion without interference and cites permissible limitations to this right:<sup>250</sup>

*1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.*

*2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.*

*3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:*

*A. For respect of the rights or reputations of others;*

*B. For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.*

According to the United Nations Committee on Civil and Political Rights, paragraph 2 of Article 19 includes the right to cultural and artistic expression as guaranteed under the right to freedom of expression.<sup>251</sup>

## International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), all individuals are guaranteed the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights. After gaining independence from the former Czechoslovakia in 1993, Slovakia ratified the ICESCR, complementing the protections already affirmed under the ICCPR.<sup>252</sup> In particular, Article 15 of the ICESCR protects the rights to freedom of artistic expression and creativity:<sup>253</sup>

*1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone:*

*A. To take part in cultural life;*

*B. To enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications;*

*C. To benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.*

## Regional Treaties, Conventions, and Mechanisms of Enforcement

### European Convention on Human Rights

As a stipulation of their membership to the Council of Europe, all forty-seven European states have ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which protects the civil and political rights of all countries belonging to the Council. After previously belonging to the Council as a part of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia rejoined in 1993 and ratified the ECHR.<sup>254</sup> Slovakia is now subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which enforces Article 10 of the ECHR, a crucial mechanism for the freedom of artistic expression:<sup>255</sup>

*1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.*

*2. The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such*

*formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.*

In *Müller and Others v. Switzerland*, the ECtHR held that freedom of artistic expression is protected under Article 10 of the ECHR.<sup>256</sup>

Further, in domains where the state exercises administrative or regulatory authority over matters of free expression, established jurisprudence from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) affirms that the state bears a fundamental obligation to uphold public institutions as arenas for open and diverse discourse, rather than co-opting them as instruments of state-imposed ideology. In *Centro Europa 7 S.r.l. and Di Stefano v. Italy*,<sup>257</sup> the ECtHR found that in “sensitive sectors” such as “as the audio-visual media... the State has a positive obligation to put in place an appropriate legislative and administrative framework to guarantee effective pluralism.”<sup>258</sup> It is AFI’s position that this principle applies equally to state cultural institutions, which must remain open to pluralistic expression, free from political interference, and safeguarded against ideological control.

# Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

As a member of the EU, Slovakia is legally bound to the Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) and must protect the fundamental human rights enjoyed by EU citizens and residents. The EU ratified the CFR in 2000 and the charter became legally binding through the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. The CFR is interpreted by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), providing an overarching framework for enforcement of the obligations enshrined in the charter.<sup>259</sup> Article 11 of the CFR respects the right to freedom of expression and information:<sup>260</sup>

*1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.*

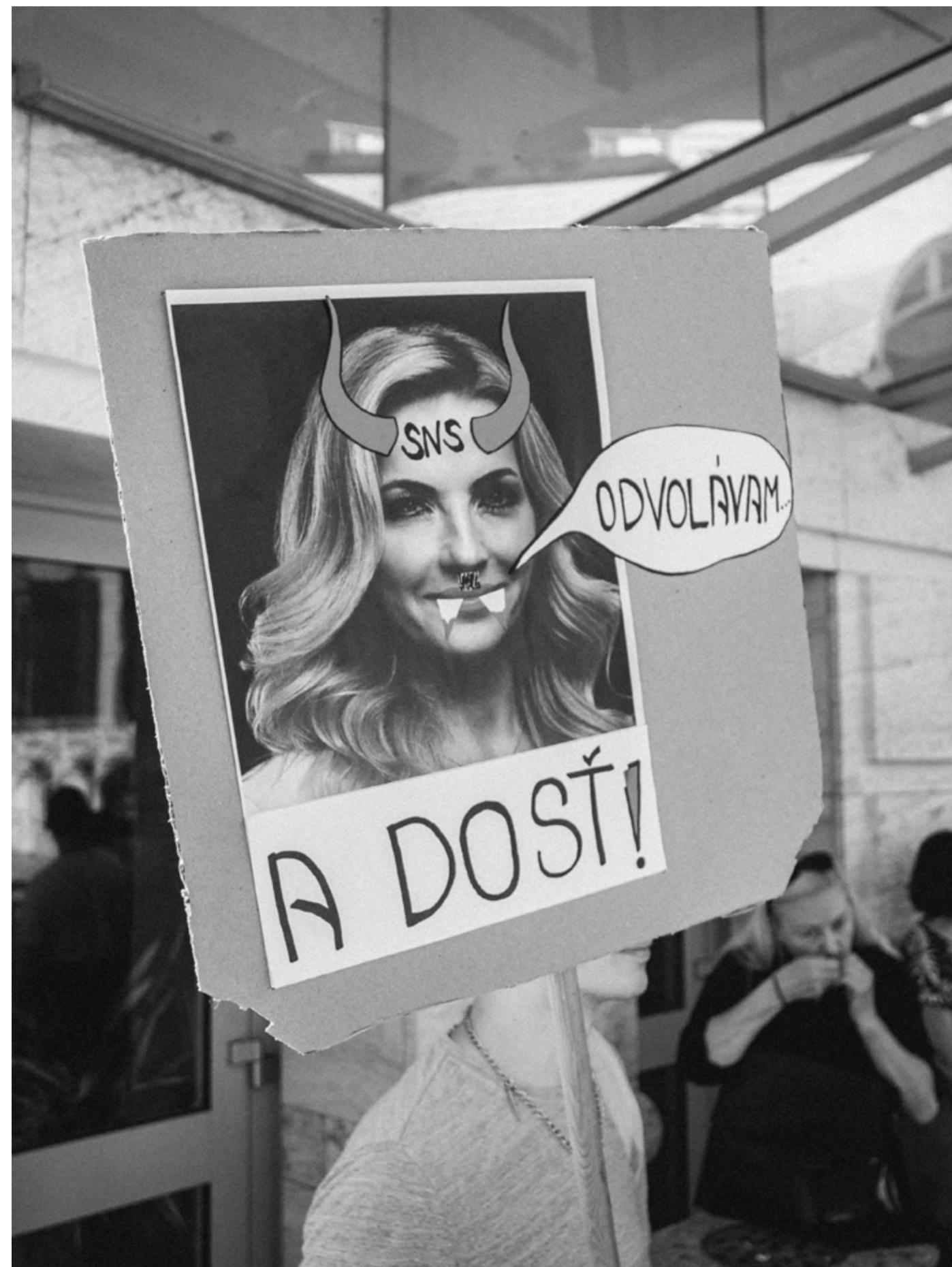
*2. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.*

Article 13, “Freedom of the Arts and Sciences,” of the CFR also makes a specific reference to freedom of artistic expression. Under Article 13, the “the arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint” and “academic freedom shall be respected.”<sup>261</sup>

# National Instruments

## Constitution of Slovakia

In 1992, the Slovak National Council passed the Constitution of Slovakia, which was most recently revised in 2017. Generally, the constitution reflects the state’s commitment to the international human rights frameworks listed throughout this section, emphasizing their responsibility to uphold the fundamental rights of all individuals. Specifically, Slovakia’s constitution distinctly details the right to freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of scientific research and art, and cultural life.<sup>262</sup> In Slovakia’s constitution, Article 24 guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religious creed, and faith as well as the right for all individuals to publicly express their thoughts, while the fourth paragraph of the article stipulates that these rights may be limited “to protect public order, health, morals, or the rights and freedoms of others.” Article 26 safeguards the right to freedom of speech and the right to information, explicitly stating that “censorship is banned.” Similarly to Article 24, Article 26 also puts forth that these rights may be restricted by law “to protect the rights and freedoms of others, state security, public order, or public health and morals.” Finally, Article 43 protects the rights to the results of creative intellectual activity and clearly denotes “freedom of scientific research and in art” as guaranteed under the law.



A protest sign caricatures Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová with devil horns and the phrase 'A dosť!' ['Enough!'] and 'Odvolávam' ['I dismiss'], Bratislava, August 2024. Photo by: Filip Pavlac

# Laying the Groundwork for Cultural Repression

AFI asserts that the Fico administration is engaged in a broad strategy to restructure Slovakia's cultural landscape in a manner that undermines pluralism, silences critical voices, and subordinates artistic expression to the political imperatives of the SNS. There are four developments that substantiate SNS's repressive cultural policies: (1) explicit public statements by SNS politicians and officials in the Ministry of Culture signaling their intent to suppress artistic expression that does not conform to the ruling coalition's ideological platform; (2) the passage of SNS-drafted legislation that significantly expands the Ministry of Culture's authority over the governance, funding, and oversight of cultural institutions; (3) the targeted removal of independent directors of cultural institutions; and (4) a concerted, early effort to suppress LGBTQ+ programming within Slovak cultural institutions, reflecting an exclusionary cultural agenda.

First, official and non-official statements issued by Ministry of

Culture officials demonstrate an explicit intent to reshape Slovakia's cultural landscape to align with the coalition's nationalist ideology, dismissing artistic works that do not conform to their vision. On her Telegram channel, Minister of Culture Šimkovičová stated the following in January 2024:

*LGBTI+ NGOS WILL NOT RECEIVE A SINGLE CENT MORE FROM THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE The NGO Sapling and similar organizations will no longer leech off funds from the Ministry of Culture. Under my leadership, I certainly won't allow it.*<sup>263</sup>

This statement articulates a clear policy to defund and disqualify artists who identify as LGBTQ+ from consideration for public grants, demonstrating an intent to discriminate based on sexual orientation. On the same day, General Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Lukáš Machala, expressed his assent with Šimkovičová and went further in expressing an intent to silence art aligned with the political left:

*Their golden era is coming to an end with the arrival of the SNS in the Ministry of Culture. In my opinion, culture is not represented by the Bratislava café loafers. Slovak culture is also made in the regions, and that is where our government will direct more support. Sunshines - it is over. Not a cent more for your pseudo-projects. And we are starting an uncompromising CHECK of your subsidies.*<sup>264</sup>

These exclusionary statements from top Ministry of Culture officials are part of a broader government effort to redefine cultural norms in Slovakia along nationalist lines. This agenda is not limited to funding decisions but extends to a more fundamental attempt to dictate what constitutes acceptable Slovak culture. The official stance of the government is further reinforced by statements published on the Ministry of Culture's official page, signaling an institutional commitment to this ideological shift. Prime Minister Robert Fico echoed this position in April 2024, making it clear that the government's cultural vision rejects what it deems as morally or ideologically inappropriate:

*Not a culture of transsexuals, or people who don't know what they want, not a culture of perversion and vulgarity, which is sadly entering our cultural scene, [...] You will have my full support if you continue to create Slovak culture that is good, honest, decent, and not depraved and vulgar.*<sup>265</sup>

The statements by the Prime Minister and Ministry of Culture officials show an intent to marginalize progressive voices in Slovakia's cultural institutions, thereby

discriminating against artists and cultural organizations based on their political views and eliminating pluralism in the cultural sector. This intent is corroborated by statements from SNS leaders, cited above, conveying that only art rooted in traditional Slovak identity will be supported. Such declarations suggest an attempt to impose a nationalist cultural orthodoxy, reducing the space for artistic diversity and effectively marginalizing voices that do not conform to the party's vision of Slovak identity. This cultural re-engineering not only violates the rights of free expression and non-discrimination, but also echoes historical patterns in which authoritarian regimes have sought to control national identity by dictating cultural production.

Second, subsequent legislative changes have given the Ministry of Culture broad authority over cultural management, funding, and transparency, allowing the government to exert ideological control over artistic production through financial and administrative means. As detailed above, Slovakia's National Council passed three laws, handing the Ministry of Culture plenary authority to control the appointments and removals of directors of cultural institutions and funding sources in the cultural sector, while reducing transparency in how management and funding decisions are made: the Amendment to Act No. 516/2008 on the Audiovisual Fund; the Amendment to Act No. 284/2014 on the Slovak Arts Council; and the Amendment to Act No. 206/2009. It is important to note that these bills were effectively only passed with support from the right-wing



Children and adults create a collective artwork on a large protest banner featuring messages like 'Kultúra bez cenzúry' ['Culture without censorship'], Banská Bystrica, September 2024. Photo by: Robert Ragan

parties; there was considerable opposition, voicing concern that these laws would lead to the politicization of state cultural institutions and funding.

Third, the early actions taken under this new legal framework—including the pretextual dismissals of cultural institution leaders and the selective distribution of funding—demonstrate that these legislative changes are already being used to undermine artistic autonomy. To date, the Ministry of Culture dismissed the following heads of cultural institutions:

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**Zuzana Liptáková**  
**25. 03. 2024**

#### **Slovak National Library**

**Katarína Krištofová**  
**25. 03. 2024**

#### **Slovak National Theatre**

**Matej Drlička**  
**06. 08. 2024**

#### **Slovak National Gallery**

**Alexandra Kusá**  
**07. 08. 2024**

#### **Slovak National Museum**

**Branislav Panis**  
**30. 09. 2024**

#### **Monuments Office**

**Pavol Ižvolt**  
**10. 12. 2024**

#### **Slovak Literary Centre**

**Pavel Sibyla**  
**08. 01. 2025**

These removals, often justified by vague accusations of mismanagement or administrative inefficiencies, serve as a warning to others in the sector that deviation from the ruling party's cultural vision may result in professional consequences. (See report section, **Targeted dismissals in cultural leadership.**)

It is further notable that Marcel Čas was let go as the director of the Institute of Cultural Policy after the institution was dissolved, and that Jen Kratochvíl resigned in protest as the director of the Kunsthalle Bratislava after a reduction in key funding. The replacements for the above directors were generally unknown in the field of arts and culture and their appointments were mostly met with protest from the staff of their respective cultural institutions. (See report section, **Purge of personnel and dismantling of institutions.**)

The appointment of unknowns to lead the ministry signals an effort to consolidate ideological control over cultural institutions, subordinating artistic and intellectual production to the ruling party's nationalist agenda. A significant incident highlighting the impact of managerial changes was the sudden cancellation of a Czech theater company's participation in the Drama Queer Festival on the SND stage in September 2024. The SND had historically been one of the festival's primary venues, even under previous administrations. However, after the appointment of Zuzana Ťapáková as the new director—following the dismissal of former director Matej Drlička by Minister of Culture Šimkovičová—the guest performance



A protester holds a sign reading 'Pozor! Padá kultúra' ['Warning! Culture is falling'] in Open Culture! protest, Bratislava, August 2024. Photo by: Filip Pavlac

of *Moonstone* was cancelled. The official justification from Ťapáková cited insufficient preparation time and administrative constraints, yet this reasoning has been widely criticized given that the festival's program had been announced several months in advance. Many viewed the decision as politically motivated, particularly in light of the festival's focus on LGBTQ+ themes and progressive cultural values. (See report section, **Experiences of Censorship and Suppression: The Immediate Impact on Artists and Cultural Workers.**)

Managerial changes such the one that took place at the SND not only undermine institutional autonomy but

also create a chilling effect on artists and cultural workers, who may fear political reprisals for producing or creating work that does not align with government ideology. By replacing independent professionals, the ruling SNS party is effectively turning state-funded cultural institutions into extensions of its political project, rather than preserving them as spaces for open artistic discourse.

The ability of the Ministry of Culture to selectively direct funding further exacerbates these concerns, as it allows the government to reward ideologically compliant cultural production while financially starving institutions and artists that engage in

critical or diverse forms of expression. This financial leverage, coupled with reduced transparency measures, creates an opaque system in which artistic funding decisions are driven by political loyalty rather than artistic merit or cultural significance. Such a system enables the government to exert indirect censorship—rather than banning dissent outright, it can instead make critical artistic work financially unsustainable.

Fourth, the government of Slovakia has already taken early steps to restrict funding to dissident and minority artists. In January 2024, the Ministry of Culture announced that it would no longer allocate public funds to LGBTQ+ organizations, framing the decision as a pushback against “progressive normalization.” This financial exclusion was reinforced through the restructuring of the FPU, allowing political appointees to override expert recommendations. The concrete implication of such a move was seen recently in February 2025, when the FPU—whose Board is now controlled by the Ministry—denied funding for the Drama Queer Festival despite its prior approval. (See report section, **Experiences of Censorship and Suppression: The Immediate Impact on Artists and Cultural Workers.**) It is AFI’s firm position that this denial was a violation of the rights to freedom of expression and non-discrimination, and an indication of how the Ministry intends to wield its newly consolidated power in the near future.

Taken together, these developments represent a concerted effort to bring Slovakia’s cultural sector under direct political control, fundamentally

threatening artistic freedom and pluralism. In two prior reports, AFI detailed precisely the same phenomenon in Hungary under FIDESZ regime and Poland under the former PiS government.<sup>3,4</sup>

The artists we interviewed for the report have explicitly expressed fears that Slovakia is taking the same path as Hungary, and that arts grants will be politicized to such a degree that any artist or arts organization not aligned with the regime will lose funding. AFI shares these concerns.

The erosion of independent decision-making, the financial weaponization of cultural policy, and the ideological purging of institutions all indicate an attempt to suppress critical voices and enforce a monolithic cultural narrative. In doing so, the ruling party is not only violating fundamental human rights protections on free expression but also undermining the rich cultural dynamism that is essential to a democratic society. The international community, as well as domestic civil society actors, must remain vigilant in calling out these encroachments and advocating for the protection of artistic and intellectual freedom in Slovakia.



Cultural Strike protest (with Open Culture! collaboration), Nitra, September 2024, Photo by: Peter Bednár

# Recommendations



Both AFI and Open Culture! are deeply concerned that recent developments in Slovakia's cultural governance too closely align with troubling regional patterns favoring illiberalism over democratic governance, notably those observed under Hungary's FIDESZ regime and, to a lesser extent, under Poland's former PiS government. These early policy measures suggest a broader political objective: deplatforming artists and cultural workers who use their work to critique the government, transforming cultural institutions into vehicles for nationalist propaganda, and creating a climate hostile to pluralistic artistic expression.

Recognizing the urgency of this situation, AFI and Open Culture! have compiled a series of actionable recommendations designed to guide the Slovak government toward solutions grounded in democratic values and the protection of cultural rights. We emphasize that swift and decisive action is imperative to prevent further regression, and to foster a future where art and culture flourish as essential pillars of a healthy democracy.

# Recommendations to the Slovak Government, Parliament, and Related Institutions:

## Protect Artists, Cultural Workers, and the Right to Artistic Freedom

Guarantee artists are free from intimidation and threats. Any violations must be investigated by an impartial body.

Ensure that Slovakia's legal framework and policy on arts and cultural management aligns with international and regional obligations on freedom of expression, particularly Article 11 of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

## Restore Independence from Political Influence in State-Led Museums, Galleries and Theatres

Reverse recent legislative and policy changes to guarantee independent management of national and regional arts and cultural institutions, including but not limited to repealing Act No. 168/2024 on Museums and Galleries that currently allow political interference in the appointment and dismissal of statutory bodies.

Reinstate open competition and merit-based hiring for directorships and managerial roles in cultural institutions, ensuring transparency, non-discrimination, and fairness.

Ensure that programming within state-led museums and galleries upholds the principles of artistic freedom, fostering diversity of artistic expression and ensuring that no discrimination is exercised in the selection, curation, or presentation of works.

## Ensure Fair and Transparent Funding for Arts and Culture

Restore an independent, transparent, timely, and merit-based grant process for arts funding, informed by experts in the field, by amending the recent changes to Act No. 516/2008 (Audiovisual Fund) and Act No. 284/2014 (Fund for Slovak Arts Council).

Guarantee equitable access to funding for underrepresented and minority communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities.

Protect socially engaged art from marginalization, including artistic expressions of political dissent or governmental criticism.

## Safeguard Media Plurality

Amend the “Act on Public Media” to reinstate the independent public broadcaster, Radio and Television Slovakia, replacing the newly established state-run entity.

Ensure pluralism and safeguard freedom of artistic expression in public broadcasting by preventing political control over cultural and artistic voices.

Promote and protect independent media to ensure diverse perspectives are available to the public, preventing the silencing of artistic and critical voices that do not align with the political apparatus.



# Recommendations to International and Regional Multilateral Bodies

## Advocate for Legislative Changes

Urge the Slovak government to repeal or revise laws that restrict artistic freedom, including:

Act No. 207/2024 Coll., amending Act No. 516/2008 Coll. on the Audiovisual Fund.

Act No. 169/2024 Coll., amending Act No. 284/2014 Coll. on the Slovak Art Council.

Act No. 168/2024 Coll., amending Act No. 206/2009 Coll. on Museums and Galleries.

Act No. 157/2024 Coll. on Radio and Television of Slovakia.

→

## Ensure Compliance with International and Regional Standards

Maintain pressure on Slovakia and utilize existing monitoring mechanisms to ensure alignment of its policies with international and regional obligations, particularly regarding freedom of expression and cultural rights.

Advocate for the cessation of ideologically motivated censorship and destructive changes in the cultural sector.

## Support Artists and Cultural Organizations

Allocate funding for independent arts organizations, prioritizing those working with underrepresented and marginalized communities.

Publicly condemn the politicization of Slovakia's arts and cultural sector and express solidarity with Slovak artists, cultural institutions, and arts organizations affected by the recent changes in cultural policy.

# Recommendations to UNESCO

## Enhance Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Strengthen the reporting and evaluation frameworks of the UNESCO to systematically track threats to artistic freedom, political interference in cultural institutions, and restrictions on cultural expression. Establish regular assessments that highlight violations and provide evidence-based recommendations to Member States and international bodies.

## Integrate Artistic Freedom into Global Cultural Governance

Reinforce the role of artistic freedom within UNESCO's existing frameworks, such as the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, by introducing clearer policy guidelines and commitments for Member States to uphold pluralistic cultural policies and independent artistic production.

## Promote Cultural Diversity as a Cornerstone of Sustainable Development

Ensure that UNESCO's cultural policies explicitly prioritize artistic freedom and cultural plurality as key drivers of sustainable development, advocating for funding mechanisms that safeguard independent artistic production from political instrumentalization.

# Recommendations to the European Institutions and Organizations

## Establishing Legal Safeguards for the Freedom and Autonomy of Culture

Establish a dedicated legal framework to protect the right to artistic freedom across Member States, ensuring culture remains autonomous from political interference, censorship, and restrictive funding mechanisms.

Extend the legal protections for media pluralism to the cultural sector, ensuring that artistic expression benefits from the same level of safeguards against state control, ideological restrictions, and the suppression of diverse cultural narratives.

## Monitoring and Enforcing Mechanisms to Detect and Address Threats to Artistic Freedom

Stand up for an independent and diverse cultural sector in Slovakia, and report on democratic backsliding, including through the annual Rule of Law report and other instruments;

Investigate whether institutional restrictions within the cultural sector constitute a violation of EU law and of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and consider launching infringement proceedings;

Ensure that EU funds are not used to reinforce violations of artistic freedom and a further breakdown of the rule of law. Leverage conditionality tools under the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation and or Slovakia's Recovery and Resilience Plan.

# Recommendations to States and Other Stakeholders Dedicated to Cultural Programming

## Facilitate International Cultural Exchange and Collaboration

Support exchange programs and collaboration between Slovak cultural institutions and international peers, promoting cross-sectoral partnerships with journalists, NGOs, and legal experts.





# Conclusion

This report has explored the systematic erosion of artistic freedom in Slovakia under Prime Minister Robert Fico's administration. We have detailed the deliberate centralization of cultural governance, the politicization of institutions, and the use of legislative, financial, and ideological mechanisms to suppress dissenting voices. Through testimonies from artists and cultural workers, coupled with an analysis of policy changes, we have captured the immediate and long-term implications of these actions on Slovakia's cultural landscape, its democratic integrity, and the broader human rights framework to which it is bound.

The suppression of artistic expression in Slovakia marks a critical inflection point in the country's democratic trajectory. The actions of Minister Martina Šimkovičová—including the dismissal of cultural leaders, censorship, and promotion of nationalist narratives—underscore the fragility of cultural rights under the current administration. AFI and Open Culture! unequivocally support the artists and resistance movements that continue to advocate for pluralism and artistic freedom despite significant personal and professional risks. Their resilience reflects a commitment to cultural expression as a cornerstone of a free and democratic society.

We urge the Slovak government to immediately halt policies and practices

that undermine artistic freedom and to restore transparency, independence, and inclusive and participatory approaches in cultural governance. The EU must also act decisively to ensure Slovakia upholds its commitments to European and international human rights instruments. This includes implementing mechanisms to safeguard cultural diversity and prevent the misuse of state power to suppress dissenting voices. Timely intervention is essential to preserve Slovakia's democratic and cultural fabric.

As this report reveals, Slovakia is in violation of its commitments under international and EU human rights frameworks. Recognizing the urgency of this evolving situation, AFI and Open Culture! have published a list of actionable recommendations to guide the Slovak government toward remedies that align with democratic principles and cultural rights. AFI and Open Culture! remain steadfast in its dedication to human rights, artistic freedom, and the empowerment of cultural actors as agents of social change. We stress that immediate action is not only necessary but imperative to halt further deterioration, and to ensure a future where art and culture thrive as pillars of democracy.

# Note of thanks

AFI extends its sincere gratitude to all those who supported the development of this report. We are especially indebted to the artists and cultural workers who shared their experiences with us throughout our research—their insights were invaluable in shedding light on both the tangible and intangible effects of artistic repression on the Slovak cultural landscape. In particular, we thank Matej Drlička, Marcel Čas, Andrej Dúbravský, and Monika and Bohuš Kubinský, whose featured interviews helped bring these issues to life with clarity and conviction.

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