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Early warning: The cultural sector in Slovakia is under siege

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A new report reveals how Slovakia's government is rapidly reshaping the country's cultural landscape.

Slovakia's government is rapidly reshaping the country's cultural landscape reveals a new report. By taking over independent funding bodies, dismissing critical voices, targeting LGBTQ+ initiatives and installing political loyalists in leadership positions at key institutions such as the Slovak National Theatre and the Slovak National Gallery, the Ministry of Culture is, according to advocacy groups, carrying out an aggressive campaign of politicisation. These actions have sparked protests, mass resignations and an atmosphere of intimidation and self-censorship among artists.

The report, based on interviews with 19 Slovak cultural workers presents a portrait of a cultural sector under siege following the 2023 parliamentary elections. Under the title Early Warning: The Politicization of Slovak Arts and Culture, the report was jointly published by the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) and the Slovak grassroots coalition Open Culture.

According to the report, the Slovak government, led by Prime Minister Robert Fico's coalition comprising SMER-SSD, HLAS and the far-right SNS, has moved swiftly to dismantle the institutional independence of the arts. Martina Šimkovičová, the SNS-appointed Minister of Culture and a former far-right media figure, seems to be at the centre of the transformation. Critics argue that her leadership has created a climate of censorship, suppression and ideological conformity.

The report documents the rapid erosion of artistic freedom brought about by legislative and administrative reforms. Key cultural funding bodies, such as the Audiovisual Fund (AVF) and the Slovak Arts Council (FPU), have had their independence compromised. New legislation has granted the Ministry expanded powers to appoint board members, overrule expert evaluations and veto funding decisions. Both institutions, which distributed €28 million in 2023, are now effectively under political control.

Meanwhile, amendments to Act No. 206/2009 Coll. have stripped museums and galleries of protections against

unjustified leadership dismissals, enabling direct ministerial intervention without cause. Critics say that these changes dismantle transparency and professional standards in cultural governance.

Since taking office, Šimkovičová has overseen the dismissal of almost half of the Ministry's staff and the dissolution of the Institute of Cultural Policy (IKP), which was previously a centre for data-driven cultural strategy. Seven major national institutions, including the Slovak National Theatre (SND), the Slovak National Gallery (SNG) and the Slovak National Museum (SNM), have experienced abrupt leadership changes.

Among those affected are Matej Drlička, the SND's general director who was recognised for his financial reforms, and Alexandra Kusá, who led a €75 million renovation project at the SNG. Both were dismissed without formal justification, prompting mass resignations, public protests and condemnation from European cultural bodies.

LGBTQ+ crackdown

The Ministry's cultural policy has embraced an exclusionary narrative. Šimkovičová's statements, including declarations that "Slovak culture should be Slovak. Slovak, and no other," underscore the ideological direction. The Ministry has cut funding for LGBTQ+ organizations, banned a children's book on gender identity, and cancelled inclusive exhibitions and performances.

A controversial social media poll by the Minister framed public funding as a choice between "heritage" and "LGBTQ+ sexual shows," igniting widespread criticism. These actions signal a broader campaign to sideline minority voices and promote a singular, traditionalist vision of Slovak identity.

The report highlights a growing atmosphere of fear among artists and cultural workers. Reports of law enforcement interventions, government smear campaigns, and widespread self-censorship paint a chilling picture. Artists who speak out—such as visual artist Andrej Dúbravský and the artist duo Monika and Bohuš Kubinský—have faced media vilification and professional repercussions.
This environment, the report warns, is not just stifling dissent but dismantling the infrastructure of Slovak artistic life.

The report issues a clear appeal to the European Union,

UNESCO, and human rights organizations to intervene before the damage becomes irreversible. Recommendations include restoring expert-led cultural governance, ensuring transparent funding, and safeguarding Slovakia's obligations under international law to protect freedom of expression and cultural participation.

"This is an early warning," the authors write. "The fragility of artistic freedom in Slovakia demands immediate and decisive action."

You can read the report here.

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Credits: AFI is pleased to feature the work of Slovakian illustrator, graphic artist, and printmaker, Jozef Gľaba, in the report: Early Warning: The Politicization of Arts and Culture in Slovakia. The central photo of the article is an illustration by Jozef Gľaba under the title, "Ministry of Culture" (2025).