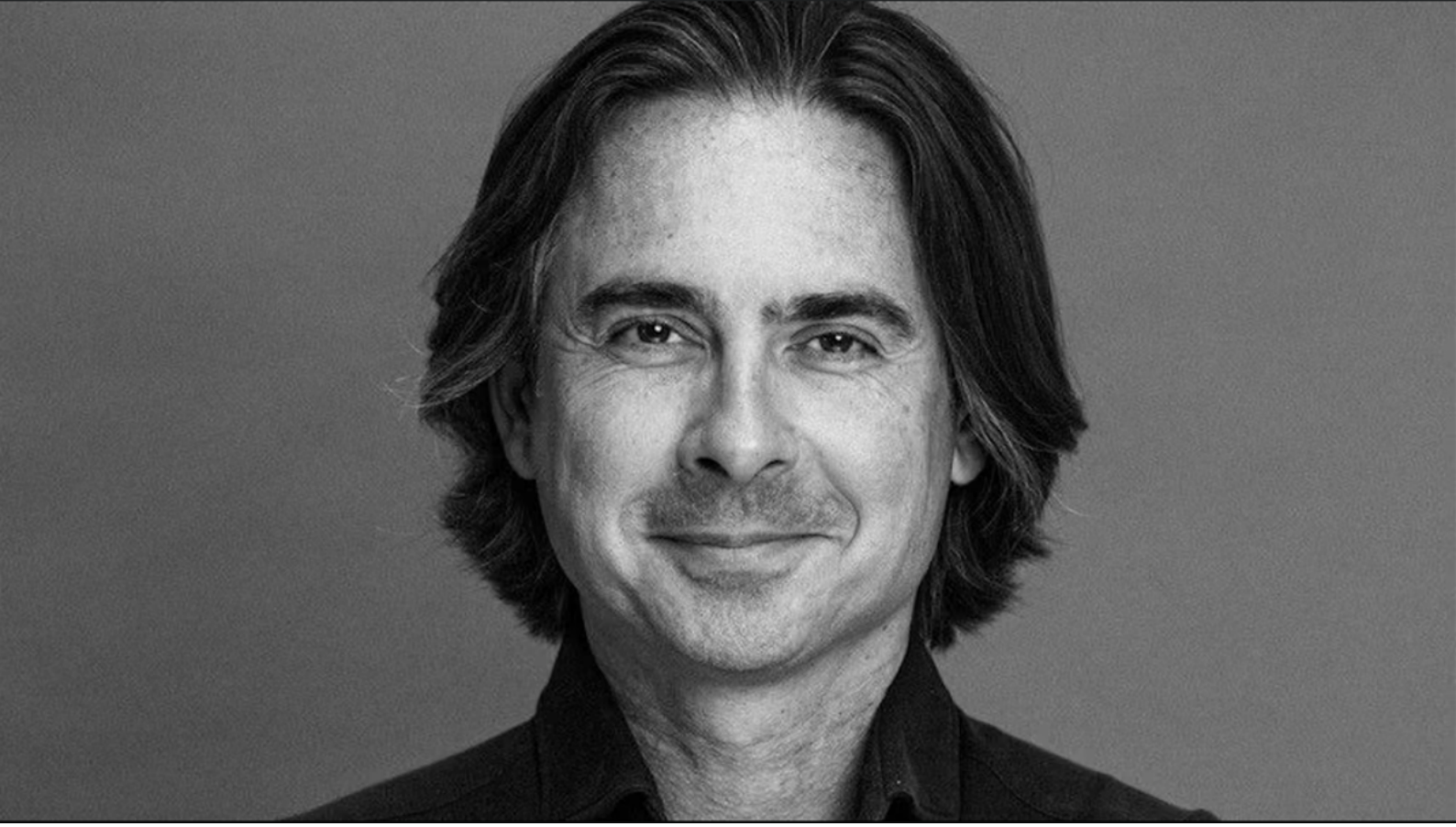


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Matej Drlička: We need a European Artistic Freedom Act

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Former Slovak National Theatre director Matej Drlička, a leading voice of artistic resistance in Slovakia, talks to CU about the need to resist systematic censorship and political interference in arts institutions through international solidarity and the landmark Bratislava Declaration.

“In my country, Slovakia, the party that claimed to represent conservative values increasingly became extreme and openly far-right after it took power,” says Matej Drlička former director of the National Theatre of Slovakia and one of the main figures of the movement for artistic freedom and freedom of expression in the country.

Following the election of Robert Fico's government in October 2023, Slovakia's cultural landscape has faced severe repression. Under Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, the government has assumed control of major cultural institutions, leading to leadership purges and substantial funding cuts. This has

created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among artists, who feel pressured to conform to the government's nationalist agenda.

In early 2025, massive protests erupted in Slovakia against Prime Minister Robert Fico's pro-Russian policies, including terminating military aid to Ukraine and suggesting withdrawal from NATO and the EU. Demonstrations drew up to 100,000 participants across Slovakia and neighbouring countries, challenging Fico's foreign policy alignment.

At the core of this was (is) the movement for artistic freedom that sparked after the purge of many cultural institution managers for disrespecting “traditional values.” Central among them was the sacking of the National Theatre director, Matej Drlička by Martina Šimkovičová, the current Minister of Culture of Slovakia.

The controversy between the Slovak Ministry of Culture and the National Theatre

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Martina Šimkovičová, a former TV presenter, was fired from Markíza TV in 2015 for posting hateful content about Syrian war refugees on her Facebook page. By contrast, these comments opened the door for her in the Slovak parliament, and as ministerial positions were allocated based on voting results, she also became the Minister of Culture, representing the Slovak Nationalist Party. Three weeks after her election, Martina Šimkovičová paid her first visit to the National Theatre. During this visit, she pronounced that Slovak culture would henceforth be exclusively Slovak.

Soon after, she gave an interview, declaring the LGBTQ+ community was a “threat to the white race.” The then National Theatre's director, Drlička, publicly responded critically, affirming the institution's commitment to inclusivity and representation of minorities, marking the beginning of an official conflict between the ministry and the National Theatre. In response, Šimkovičová stopped visiting the theatre. Drlička was portrayed in the media as undermining the theatre's “conservative values.”

With time, the Slovak government’s rhetoric toward the cultural sector became increasingly radical. The ruling party launched a billboard campaign across Slovakia, explicitly stating they would “stop financing LGBT projects”—a move many saw as a direct form of institutional censorship. The turning point came during the Crystal Wing award ceremony, a prestigious 20-year tradition honouring achievements across various sectors.

In his speech, Drlička said that "aggression was displacing tenderness and inclusivity". His critique against the systemic attacks on cultural and democratic institutions would

ultimately seal his professional fate. On August 8th, 2024, ministry representatives arrived at his doorstep at 8:30 in the morning. Finding him in his bathrobe, they attempted to hand him a dismissal envelope. Drlička refused to accept it, highlighting the deliberately disrespectful nature of the dismissal.

The day after Drlička's dismissal, Aleksandra Kusa, the director of the Slovak National Gallery, publicly supported him via a Facebook status. She was dismissed the very next day—a move that seemed to confirm the government's intolerance for dissent. In just three days, two leaders of Slovakia's most significant cultural institutions had been removed, escalating public outrage. Similar was the fate of the head of the national broadcaster, journalist Luboš Machaj, who was elected by Parliament to serve until 2027 and was replaced overnight for "political activism" and lack of objectivity.



These dismissals triggered an immediate response. Within a week, 18,000 people gathered in a massive protest in front of the Ministry of Culture. The protests were organised by two groups: the Open Culture Platform (of which Drlička is now a member), a civic cultural organisation, and subsequently by Progressive Slovakia, the country's strongest opposition party.

“The dismissals represented more than personnel changes; they were a calculated strategy to reshape cultural institutions, replacing independent leadership with politically aligned administrators,” says Matej Drlička. “Each removal was another step in reconstructing these institutions to align with the government's ideological perspective,” he adds.

Despite significant international media coverage, these protests had minimal immediate impact within Slovakia. The government's purge continued unabated, with ten more cultural directors being dismissed throughout the year in what appeared to be a systematic campaign of institutional control.

“They destroyed the Art Council, which distributes public money for culture in the regions. They claim the Council was supporting only progressive art and neglecting conservative art. But it's a lie—the numbers speak against this.”



CU: Who's driving the conservative narrative?

MD: In a press conference a few months ago, Fico praised his culture minister, saying she's the most effective in “cleaning up the progressive mess in the country.” Šimkovičová openly and publicly tells lies, and it's working. It has two effects: their voters accept it as true without questioning, while the critical part of the country gets so tired that they almost give up. This approach comes straight out of the Trump playbook—a fight between liberal democracy and what I'd call illiterate democracy.

Fico has become part of a new family of autocratic countries—like Russia, China, Belarus, and Hungary. He understands that his voters, mostly from regions with more dependence on Facebook, are in an information bubble. When he speaks, 90% of what he says is a lie, but his crucial voter base believes it, and that's enough for him.

CU: And what is the response in the field of culture? What about the National Theatre?

MD: We have five or six plays completely written for the current state of being, openly criticising the situation in Slovakia. Even though the new director tries to control the narrative, these plays are completely sold out with standing ovations after every performance.

Theatre is a very important player in continuing to tell the truth and express tough criticism.



-A scene from 'The New Century', a play challenging societal prejudices through humour. At the Slovak National Theatre now

CU: What happened when cultural representatives tried to resist?

MD: The actors from the theatre—about 80 percent of them—were saying if Šimkovičová doesn't stop, they'll leave. But nobody left. And this is exactly what they're counting on. They know that in the end, all these courageous expressions will fade. People have to pay their invoices and feed their families. So I don't think change will come from the culture sector from the bottom.

We organised the Open Culture Conference with over 23 international speakers—directors from Opera Europa, the European Theatre Convention, and Culture Action Europe. We even had Roberta Metsola, the president of the European Parliament, take patronage.

Furthermore, we signed the Bratislava Declaration—a three-page document asking the European Commission to start a legislative process similar to the European Media Freedom Act.

CU: But if all of that hasn't worked so far, what is next?

MD: We're asking for a European Artistic Freedom Act. This wasn't just an essay by artists but a well-constructed legal document. Slovakia might be burning, but colleagues from most European countries share the same concerns. After parliamentary elections, many countries might face similar challenges.

If Orbán and Fico are joined by others like Wilders, anti-democratic narratives might prevail in the European Parliament. Our only chance is if the European Commission and European Parliament do some kind of monitoring.

We showed dozens of examples of the rule of law being broken at the Ministry of Culture. It's not just ideology—laws are being systematically broken. If the Slovak minister and prime minister don't care, we want the European Commission to care. The rule of law must be attended to.



He graduated in clarinet playing from the Academy of Performing Arts. As an orchestral clarinet player, he has performed in prestigious European orchestras such as the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Geneva, the Paris Opera, the Orchestre National in Paris, the Orchestre du Capitole in Toulouse, and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo, and for seven years he was a permanent member of the Orchestre de Cannes. In 2005, due to an accident, he had to quit his career as a concert artist and started to work in music management. Since then, he has worked as a creative industry manager, dramaturg, producer, and organiser of major cultural and social events. From January 2021 to November

2022, he was the General Director of the Slovak National Theatre. He has led the largest cultural institution in Slovakia again since May 2023 until he was laid off by the current conservative government for undermining conservative values.

Header image: Protest organised by Open Culture! on 12 August 2024. Photo: Filip Pavlac

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Photo of Martina Šimkovičova by Matica slovenská, Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.