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"Slovakia's Cultural Democratic Uprising Against Authoritarianism"

"Large protests continue across Slovakia, with tens of thousands calling for Prime Minister Robert Fico's resignation over his pro-Russia stance. A movement of Artists and Cultural professionals is at the heart of the events"

Tens of thousands of Slovaks protested in over 50 cities across Slovakia and internationally (e.g., Prague, London, Paris) on Feb 7-8 under the slogan "Slovakia is Europe." The largest gathering took place in Bratislava's Freedom Square, drawing 42,000–45,000 people. Demonstrators demanded Fico's resignation, chanting "Resign!" and "Russian agent!" These protests marked the second major wave in two weeks, reflecting sustained public opposition to Fico's alignment with Russia and attacks on democratic institutions and freedom of expression. The scale of dissent mirrors the 2018 protests after journalist Ján Kuciak's murder, which forced Fico's prior resignation.

Artist Rudolf Sikora urged opposition unity at a January protest, stating, "Fico, go to Moscow"

The rallies are following January's, massive anti-government protests which swept Slovakia, with approximately 60,000 people gathering in Bratislava and 100,000 nationwide. Protests in

Slovakia started in September 2024, when Culture Minister Martina Simkovičová dismissed managers of public cultural organisations and replaced them with loyalists. Thousands protested Simkovicova's policies in December 2024, accusing her of aligning with authoritarian regimes like Hungary and Russia.

The directors of the Slovak National Theatre and Slovak National Gallery were abruptly fired in August 2024 for alleged "progressive-liberal political activism" and failing to align with the government's "traditional values." The Slovak Arts Council, a key financial supporter of independent culture, has faced mass layoffs and appointments of politically aligned officials lacking cultural expertise. Additionally, the replacement of public broadcaster RTVS with a state-controlled entity (STVR) raised concerns about media manipulation, further alienating the cultural sector. Artists see these moves as part of a pattern to consolidate power and silence dissent.

High-profile resignations (e.g., national gallery staff) and international solidarity campaigns (e.g., European Alliance of Academies) amplified the pressure on the government. Visual artist Svetlana Fialova condemned the government's "destruction of culture" as part of a broader anti-democratic trend.

Bypassing censorship

In response, cultural workers initiated the Slovak Culture Strike on 5 September 2024, adopting unconventional protest methods. Performers turned their backs on government officials during speeches, while galleries displayed blank frames labeled "Censored by the State." Artists, students, and academics continue to lead the protests. Over 1,000 psychologists and psychiatrists signed an open letter condemning Fico's authoritarian rhetoric, while cultural figures like journalist Boris Kršák (fired from the state-controlled broadcaster STVR) denounced government censorship.

The Open Culture! Platform and newly formed Cultural Trade Unions are now coordinating demands for professional ministry management and improved labour conditions. Meanwhile, Slovak artists are increasingly seeking international residencies (e.g., Germany and Hungary's 2025 programs), fostering cross-border collaboration. Platforms like the Bratislava in Movement Festival are strengthening European partnerships to bypass domestic censorship.

The government has framed its cultural policies as defending "Slovak heritage" against so-called "LGBT ideology" and "Western progressivism." Simkovičová has accused progressive artists of contributing to the "extinction of the white race," reflecting a nationalist agenda that conflates artistic dissent with ideological threats. Fico's administration has proposed constitutional amendments to limit LGBTQ+ rights, part of a broader strategy to appeal to socially conservative voters. Artists and cultural workers have been vocal opponents of these policies, which they view as discriminatory and regressive. The government's attacks on LGBTQ+ communities have galvanized protests that merge cultural and human rights advocacy.

Rights groups highlight a "chilling effect" on free expression. "Art is the soul of democracy," said Jana Kollárová, a striking theatre director. "If they kill it here, where does it end?"

The opposition plans another no-confidence vote in parliament, while protesters vow to continue rallies until Fico resigns. The next major protest is scheduled for February 14, 2025, with organizers aiming to sustain momentum.

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