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“We must intervene with determination and help artists with their problems”

The Director General of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Cyprus talks to Creatives Unite about the bill that has been submitted to the House of Representatives for approval, which will establish the status of artist in Cyprus and aims to support self-employed artists. "This is just the government's first effort," she says.

s an opening of a door for future policies aimed at the artistic community of Cyprus, describes the bill on the artists' register and artistic grant, Emmanouela Lambrianidis, Director General of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Cyprus. In an interview with Creatives Unite, Emmanouela Lambrianidis explains the need that led the Cypriot government to proceed with the recognition of the status of artist through a multitude of formal and informal criteria and the establishment of the artists' register.

The bill, which is expected to be passed by the summer, also provides for the coverage of part of the insurance contributions of self-employed artists who meet certain criteria through the institutionalisation of artistic grant. "Supporting the most vulnerable group, namely self-employed artists, was the most immediate need," the Director General of the Ministry of Culture of Cyprus explains to Creatives Unite.

Emmanouela Lambrianidis describes it as "an achievement that the Ministry of Culture has managed to convey to the State the idea that the artistic community, as a group of workers, is a very special case", although she is not optimistic that it will be

possible in the future to establish uniform criteria at European Union level for recognising the status of artist. "I think that in a profession that is so complex, so global, that affects the culture of countries, the history of a place, it is not possible to adopt a single criterion," she says.

Born in Nicosia, Emmanouela Lambrianidis studied political science and public administration in the USA. She has served the Republic of Cyprus in various positions of responsibility since 1985. In 2023 she was appointed Director General of the Cyprus Ministry of Culture, a post she still holds.

The Cabinet of the Republic of Cyprus approved the bill on the register of artists and artistic grants at the beginning of the year. What are the next steps to make it a law and how soon can this happen?

The bill was submitted to the House of Representatives on 23 January. According to the procedure, the next steps are to be debated in the House Education Committee and then it will be put to a vote in the House of Representatives.

The length of the debate in the Parliament's Education Committee will depend on a number of factors, including the reaction of political parties and the lobbying of organised artists' groups. I hope that with the extensive consultation we have done, it will not be delayed. But it could take up to three months before it is passed. It is possible that the law will be passed before the summer.

Regarding the consultations you mentioned, how were they conducted?

There was an online consultation on the bill, but this was followed by face-to-face consultations with groups of artists, their representatives and organised groups. We have tried to incorporate many of their views into the bill. Of course, it was not possible to incorporate all of them and this will determine how the bill is received during the debate in Parliament and how quickly it moves forward. Because this is a bill that at the moment covers a part of artists, at least as far as artistic sponsorship is concerned.

What need is addressed by the creation of the Register of Artists and the recognition of the status of artist in Cyprus?

It has been a demand of the artist community for years. Several seminars and discussions have been organised on the subject. And it would come up again on various occasions, but the discussion would never lead to a result, to a proposal that could

be put forward as a bill in Parliament. The main problem was that many of the ideas ran up against existing legislation that could not be changed, such as social security legislation.

With the coronavirus crisis and the government's decision to provide benefits to various groups of professionals, the question of how to provide benefits to artists, and ultimately who and how many artists should receive benefits, arose. An ad hoc exercise was then carried out, which showed that around 2-2.5 thousand people could identify themselves as artists and receive the allowance. Since then, it has become clear that a definition and recognition of the status of this category of professionals, which is usually not so visible as a professional group, had to be found at last.

The artist's profession also has its peculiarities and uncertainties. There is often a periodicity to the work, as many artists work on a project basis or depend on grants. Does the proposed law take these specificities into account?

Of course there are these specificities in the professional status of artists. And in order to draft the law, we looked at what is in force in Europe and what other countries are doing. We also looked at our own capabilities and came to the conclusion that income support is not within our capabilities at this stage. In other words, the state cannot subsidise the job vacancies that artists have at the moment. What we could do, and what we felt was the most immediate need and the most urgent in terms of the problems that existed, was to support the most vulnerable group, the self-employed artists. The artistic grant that we are setting up will cover part of the cost of social security, so that artists can be insured and have all the benefits of the social security system.

For salaried artists, such as actors, whose contracts are based on collective agreements, we considered that there was a degree of security. In fact, we had previously made it an absolute condition in our funding programmes for theatre productions that they respect collective agreements that provide for a specific period of employment, a specific salary and the payment of the corresponding social security costs.

However, many self-employed artists are unable to pay social security contributions due to the cyclical nature of their profession and the fact that their income is not regular, and they choose not to register with the Social Security Fund. They do not exist as workers. They cannot receive unemployment benefits or pensions. They have none of the benefits that every insured person has.

For these professionals, we considered that the state could cover a percentage of the previous year's social security costs. In other words, the previous year's social security would be calculated on the basis of the individual's declared income as a self-employed artist, and the State would then reimburse them 30%.

I would also like to add that, as a result of the consultation with artists, the bill also covers self-employed artists who work part of the time as employees in other jobs. In these cases, the grant will be calculated on the basis of the artist's income from self-employment.

What are the criteria for recognition of artist status?

The whole team that we worked with decided that we wanted the bill to have an open spirit in terms of registration on the artist register.

We have listed ten criteria. A professional must meet three of them to obtain artist status, and a young artist up to the age of 30 must meet two, because it is recognised that an artist at the beginning of his or her career may not be able to meet all three criteria.

The criteria are as follows

- To have had a total of at least two public presentations of their work in the last five years.
- To be recognised by experts in the relevant field of artistic activity.
- To have received some awards, such as the Cyprus Republic Award of the Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts.
- To be a member of the Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts in the field of Letters or Arts.
- Have participated in prestigious artistic competitions, either in the Republic of Cyprus or abroad.
- To have represented the Republic of Cyprus in international and national artistic events as a member of an official state participation.
- His/her works must have been acquired by museums or other non-profit cultural institutions in the Republic of Cyprus or abroad.
- To hold a degree or diploma in any field of the arts from an institution of higher education.

- In the opinion of experts, his/her works must have a proven wide public appeal, as some artists may not have the formal qualifications but are recognised by the public.

- To be a member of an artists' association registered in the Register of Artists' Associations, the creation of which is also provided for in the same law.

Finally, there is an additional provision for older artists, i.e. artists over the age of 60 who have at least 20 years of artistic activity. In this case, the Director of the Department of Contemporary Culture of the Ministry may, by decision, allow the artist to be included in the register even if he or she does not meet three of the criteria.

As you can see, the range of criteria is wide and includes both formal and informal criteria to cover the majority of artists who wish to be included in the Register. We want as many artists as possible to have the opportunity to be included in the Register.

What procedure was used to select the specific criteria? Has there been a study of existing legislation in other EU countries and, if so, on what examples has the proposed legislation been based?

The Commissioner for Legislation has produced a study of examples of good practice from other countries, focusing on countries that support artists in terms of social security, such as Germany. We have not looked at the cases of countries that have moved to income support, which is a more drastic measure to support artists that very few countries have taken.

We may put this study on our website in the future so that the public can be informed. We have also taken into account studies by international organisations such as Unesco, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the European Parliament.

At the moment in the European Union there are a variety of criteria that determine the status of artists. Do you think it is necessary to establish uniform criteria at European level?

I think that the project would be impossible to realise, judging by the experience we had in Cyprus and the many peculiarities that each group of artists and each artist has. I think that each country should move in its own way.

There is also the question of the philosophy of a law. As I said, our approach has been to allow as many professionals with

formal or informal qualifications as possible to obtain artist status. Some countries put more emphasis on formal qualifications.

For my part, I do not believe that in a profession that is so complex, so global, that affects the culture of countries, the history of a place, that a single criterion cannot be adopted.

Is there an estimate of the number of self-employed artists who could benefit from artistic grant?

It is a rather risky estimate. Even if we assume that 50% of the 2.5 thousand artists are self-employed, not all of them would be eligible. They would also have to meet certain income criteria, which we have relaxed since the consultation.

Do you have any estimate of how much of a budget burden the implementation of the Artist Grant Scheme might entail?

For the first year we can only speculate because we don't know how many artists will eventually be on the register and how many of those eligible will apply for artistic grant. However, a budget of EUR 500 000 has been budgeted for the first year.

Some countries in the European Union, most recently Slovenia, have adopted more flexible criteria for recognising an artist's working time, including tasks such as organising a tour. Have you discussed making the criteria more flexible?

Many such issues will arise during the implementation phase and we will have to see how to deal with them. Some may require additional regulations or instructions, especially to the Social Security Agency. It will take a year or two for this law to work in the best possible way and then, of course, improvements can be made depending on experience.

How has the artistic community in Cyprus received the draft law on the Register of Artists and Artistic Grant?

In general, the reception has been positive. There are certainly differences with those who may have expected more, such as the income subsidy. Also, to take another example, paid artists may feel that they are not directly affected by the benefits of artistic support.

And the truth is that there has been an effort to support self-employed people more. But according to economic theory, supporting one group of the population strengthens the whole population. That's how we have to look at it, not competitively.

This bill is the result of a huge effort. We have been pushing for laws that are considered statutes, such as the Social Security Act. So this bill comes through all those difficulties and tries to open the door a little bit and provide two big benefits.

The first benefit is to register the artists who want it, so that at any time in the future the government's policy towards artists will be directed towards those artists who are on the register. There is a request from some artists, for example, that they should not be taxed annually but every two or three years, in proportion to the periodicity of their work. If such a policy is promoted, it will apply to those artists who are on the register and who meet any other conditions that may be imposed. This is the benefit of having an artist on the register today.

In addition, the bill comes to give a support, a helping hand, to those who are the most vulnerable in the profession, namely the self-employed.

So if you look at the bill in that way, you have to welcome it positively.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I consider it a very great achievement that the Ministry of Culture, in the two years of its existence, has succeeded in conveying to the State the idea that the artists' community, as a group of workers, is a very special case. That it should not be compared or equated with any other group of workers and that we, as a State, must recognise that artists are essentially creating the future of our culture and that we must therefore intervene with determination and help them with their problems.

This is only the Government's first effort. It is opening the door and we should treat the bill in that spirit.