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2024

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Into
Europe's
Threats to
Cultural
Independence
and Artistic
Freedom



Co-funded by
the European Union

The Necessity of Archiving and Compiling

Half of the year has passed, and out of twenty competitions in various fields, the Ministry has announced the results of only three. This has directly impacted the cultural sector, particularly independent culture, hindering numerous associations, festivals, initiatives, and projects vital to Serbian culture. It has worsened already poor working conditions and deprived citizens, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, of quality cultural programmes.

Marijana Cvetković,
founder of [Stanica](#)



By bringing together independent cultural and media organisations across Europe—from Portugal to Georgia, from Norway to Greece—the Reset! network has at its core the responsibility to document the situation of its members and peers. **Given the multiple threats facing independent players, such as an ever-growing far right, budget cuts for culture, a propagandisation of culture and media supported by corporate economic aggressiveness through takeovers, and a significant concentration of ownership, it seems more than necessary to analyse the political realities of each European country in order to monitor changes and evolving challenges.**

Each month, Reset! therefore devotes its newsletter to a specific country going through a particular political situation, be it elections, budget cuts, an abuse of power, or any other news that makes the headlines. The twist, when compared to the regular media coverage of this

Keeping Track

Archiving and compiling the network's documentation efforts has several aims: to inform, to raise awareness, and to keep track. Indeed, remembering the changes that have taken place over the past year, with the distance that time gives, allows us to refresh our critical vision of political events. This document is then a way of going through the Reset! newsletters as an effort of remembrance—a European information walk through time, month by month. From February to November, Reset! takes the reader back to what has happened and updates its focuses.

In times of hyper-connectivity and constant information flow, it can be easy to forget that a news story ever happened. This compilation is then a way to keep remembering events, to keep remembering the evolution of the European political situation, to keep remembering how artistic freedoms and cultural independence are under perpetual threat.

news, is that Reset! tries to analyse it through the following lens: how does this political situation affect the autonomy of all cultural organisations, especially independent cultural and media structures?

In this way, **the Reset! newsletter makes it possible to put independent players, who are often forgotten or overlooked, at the centre of the analysis.** Thus, this monthly work has become one of the network's advocacy tools, with more than two years of documentation on the attacks on artistic and informational freedom and cultural independence. It is now important to think about how to make this content live better over time, and one answer is to be found in archiving and compiling.

If there isn't a political shift to the left, it's quite possible that we may face closure as a self-managed centre. However, I want to emphasise that while we must recognise the severity of the situation, there are always new ways to continue projects. We've built a network that can endure beyond our current physical location.

**Frederik Marroquín,
co-founder of
Semmelweislinik**

Learning a Lesson?

The archiving of editorials and the compilation of this material also offers the opportunity, through access to information in a single document, **to realise the scale of the problems and to learn a lesson—especially for policy makers who may be tempted to believe in isolated situations rather than systemic threats to independent culture and media.**

Lessons from the past tend to be overlooked and buried, creating repetitive destructive situations. The initiation of this compiled archive is a way for Reset! to build

a comprehensive analysis of the European political state and the independent scene's response to it—the first step towards a necessary observatory of all these grounded threats. By reading about a situation in Georgia or France, independent counterparts from North Macedonia or the UK could see a solution to their own situation. **This compilation will then serve as a tool for collective information and solidarity for Reset! members and like-minded independents, and as an advocacy tool towards allies and policy makers.**

Archiving and Compiling to Advocate

This compilation of articles from the Reset! newsletters opens the new year 2025 with the will to continue to look at the integrity of Europe; to continue to support independent cultural and media players fighting against electoral fraud in Georgia, to support independent Austrian actors resisting a new far-right power, to continue to support Ukrainians in their struggle against Russian imperialism, to highlight the struggle of Hungarians facing an autocratic regime, or to shed light on the massive budget cuts imposed on the German cultural sector or the violent repression of organisations supporting Palestine.

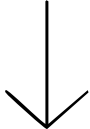
Defending artistic freedom and cultural independence doesn't just mean taking a stand, it also means supporting that stand, and this Reset! compilation is an attempt to do just that. What this compilation will be used for—advocating for independent cultural and media organisations at the European level, but also raising awareness on the threats faced by all cultural players in their artistic autonomy—is another attempt. **Trying to influence and change the EU policy framework so that it is more in line with the challenges of the independent scene is one of Reset!'s missions, and this compilation will help in doing so by grounding the network's advocacy efforts in the concrete situations described and analysed here.**

This document is also proof that one of Reset!'s policy proposals, formulated in its Atlas of Independent Culture and Media, entitled "[Observatory on Threats to Independence: Safeguarding Independence in the European Cultural and Media Sectors](#)", is more than necessary. Having a structure capable of monitoring the evolution of European political situations that threaten cultural independence and artistic freedoms would enable better understanding, support, and solidarity movements to flourish.

Unfortunately, Georgia cannot be considered as a role model for anything anymore. Now we are synonymous with human rights violations, autocratic laws, falsified elections, and oligarchy

**Irakli Kupradze,
General Secretary of the opposition coalition Strong Georgia**

Reset! 2024 Monthly Chronology



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and Media:
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MARCH

Ukraine:
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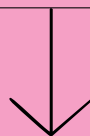
DECEMBER

NOVEMBER

Georgia and
Moldova Facing
Elections: Cultu-
ral Resistance or
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OCTOBER

Austria at the
Crossroads: Far-
Right Comeback
and the Fight to
Protect Cultural
Diversity



Crisis in Culture and Media: France's Struggle for Independence

In February 2024, the spotlight was put on France, with regard to the latest appointment in the government, and the general deterioration of the French cultural and media sectors. We interviewed **Théo Majcher**, actor, co-founder, and artistic director of the European theatre company **Alter Ego (X)**, as well as journalist and co-founder of the independent ecology media **Engrainage** **Clément Lopez**.

In January 2024, the French government has changed again. And again, a new Minister of Culture has been appointed—**Rachida Dati**, former Minister of Justice under the very conservative President **Nicolas Sarkozy** (2007-2012). In the almost 7 years of Emmanuel Macron's presidency, France has had 5 different Ministers of Culture with very different political positions, an enormous instability for any continuation in terms of cultural policy. "At ministerial level, this succession of appointments shows that culture is far from being one of the executive's priorities," explains **Théo Majcher**.

Added to this instability and the general feeling of abandonment in the cultural sector itself, this new appointment is a worrying sign for French cultural organisations, especially independent ones. The new minister, who has no connection with culture and is currently accused of corruption, declared in her first speech that she wanted to focus her mandate on the MJC's (the Maisons de la Jeunesse et de la Culture are publicly funded associative structures created after WWII), adopting a conservative dialectic that departs from the



↑ Symbolic action led by Alternatiba to challenge the "climate sabotage" of Emmanuel Macron and his government. His portraits were removed from several town halls across France a few months before this action – © Clément Lopez, *Engrainage média*

Febru

legacy of **André Malraux** (Minister of Culture in the 1950s-1960s). Even if today the work of the MJC's is very positive and useful in terms of popular education, "*the MJC's have not been the centre of artistic creation for over 30 years,*" **Théo Majcher** points out, and continues, "*we're taking a very traditional approach to culture, leaving little room for the realities on the ground.*"

This situation forces French independent cultural organisations to constantly adapt. The general decrease in public funding for independent culture is another argument contributing to this necessary adaptation. The French region AURA is a striking example of this decline. In two years, 4 million euros have been cut from more than 140 cultural organisations, a

decision taken by the president of the regional council, the very conservative **Laurent Wauquiez**. Where is this 4 million now? Well, only 1 million has actually been redistributed to rural cultural initiatives, the 3 other million are nowhere to be found. Of the 140 cultural organisations that have been affected by these cuts, many are independent and have found themselves in a very difficult situation, often having to cut their programmes and suspend activities, influencing independent cultural actors' mental health greatly, as exposed by **Théo Majcher**. From government to regions, France has witnessed a general shift to the right, which has increased the threats and the need to defend the value and work of independents.

These threats are not only a burden for cultural organisations, the French independent media sector is equally targeted and struggling. Of course, funding has been a concrete issue in the country for some time, with independent media relying mainly on community-based funding, with audiences contributing to the survival of independent media, as presented by **Clément Lopez**.

These funding problems have led to the erosion of independence in the sector, creating an unprecedented concentration of ownership—9 billionaires own 90% of France's major media. *"The direct consequence of the concentration of the French media is that information serves the status quo,"* **Clément Lopez** explains. Indeed, this concentration raises important issues such as ideological dependence, homogenisation of information, lack of pluralism, threats to freedom of expression and information.

This chaotic situation for the media is aggravated by the fact that, under **Macron's** presidency, the government is increasingly cracking down on independents, as it has done in the cultural sector. The arrest of investigative journalist **Ariane Lavrilleux** of the independent media *Disclose* in September 2023, after she reported on leaked documents alleging that French intelligence services were used to target civilians in **Egypt**, was a major demonstration of the lack of respect for freedom of information by the French authorities. The police have searched her home and computer, jeopardising the protection of confidentiality of sources, a law that is the basis of free and public-interest journalism. **Clément Lopez** corroborates: *"Legal abuses are on the increase, making journalism an increasingly complicated profession. Whether we like it or not, this also influences our editorial choices, and forces us to choose our subjects according to the risks involved."*

uary



Following up

These attempts against the freedom of information have been ongoing since 2017, with their latest incarnation in France's position on the European Media Freedom Act. During the debate on this European regulation, which is supposed to guarantee the independence, freedom, and pluralism of the media, France stumbled over its Article 4 on the protection of sources. In fact, France disagreed with the original text and wanted to authorise the use of spyware against journalists and the media in the context of 'national security offences'—in other words, to allow the surveillance of journalists on the basis of an ill-defined 'national security offence'. The latter was eventually dropped, but that doesn't take away from the French government's freedom-destroying intentions towards its media sector as well as "*an indicator that the government wants to protect itself*," **Clément Lopez** points out.

France is slowly but steadily moving towards an increasingly worrying situation, both for the cultural and media sectors—and on a wider social scale—with a political power that has little respect for independence, freedom to create and inform, and for refugees, whose rights have recently been curtailed by a reactionary, nationalist immigration law that does not envy the ideas of the far right. On the horizon, therefore, there is a need for a dynamic of solidarity between cultural and media players, who are certainly already united in their independence, through unions like Syndeac as underlined by **Théo Majcher**, networks, or organisations like Fonds pour une presse libre created by Mediapart as highlighted by **Clément Lopez**.

— Manon Moulin

→ After the European elections on June 9th 2024, President Emmanuel Macron dissolved the French parliament and called snap elections for June 30th and July 7th, 2024.

Despite a brief campaign in which an extremely vocal far right claimed it would win its place to form a government, it is the coalition of the left that won the most seats on the evening of July 7th, without a majority.

→ Although the first bloc in this snap election was indeed the left, Macron refused to appoint a Prime minister from their bloc, choosing Michel Barnier of the conservative Les Républicains party—despite the party only winning 5.41% of the vote in the election.

→ Since Michel Barnier's appointment as Prime minister, his policies have been rather flat. His government is a mix of very conservative figures from the right wing of the Republican party and others from Macron's Renaissance party. In any case, this government hides the fact that Macron is now dependent on the far right, as it is thanks to Marine Le Pen's party that this new government passed the vote of confidence in parliament.

→ In the last few months of 2024, the government was struggling more than ever and has been toppled on December 4th, 2024. The President Macron now has to name a new PM.

→ In all this general political chaos, culture is the main issue missing from the debate. The government is clearly not making it a priority, and meanwhile independent cultural and media players are in a tense situation. Many regional authorities are continuing with budget cuts, such as in the Pays-de-la-Loire, where there is talk of a drastic cut of up to 73% in the operating budget for culture, i.e. for festivals, theatres, art centres, etc.



↑ Demonstration at the Place de la République in Paris on June 10th, 2024 – © Aurèle Castellane (@broth_earth), *Engrainage média*

Resources

France at the Crossroads: Far-Right Surge, Political Crisis, and Threats to Independent Culture and Media – *Reset! network*, on June 25th, 2024

French culture sector expresses relief after parliamentary elections—but what's next? – *The Art Newspaper*, on July 9th, 2024

French government caught up by social unrest – *Le Monde*, on November 14th, 2024

Pays-de-la-Loire : plus de 500 artistes et professionnels de la culture se mobilisent contre les sévères coupes budgétaires (Pays-de-la-Loire: over 500 artists and cultural professionals mobilise against severe budget cuts) – *Libération*, on November 24th, 2024

Budget 2025 : le ministère de la Culture brutalement amputé de plus de 100 millions d'euros (Budget 2025: the Ministry of Culture slashed by more than 100 million euros) – *Télérama*, on January 17th, 2025

Ukraine: Cultural Paradoxes of War

In March 2024, the spotlight was on Ukraine after the sad two-year anniversary of the start of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine. Tetiana Pushnova, Ukrainian arts and culture editor at *Ukrainska Pravda*, writes more about the situation for Reset!.

3,750 kilometres. This is how much the front line of the Russian war in Ukraine has been for more than 2 years. There are Ukrainian writers, artists, musicians, actors, directors, art researchers, art managers, journalists in almost every trench along this front line. And some of them die almost every day.

Analysing the current independent Ukrainian culture, it is impossible to turn away from this context. War caused the incredible crisis that the creative industries of Ukraine are currently experiencing—the dispersion of professionals, the psychological and economic exhaustion of the war, crisis of State art support, the destruction of 1,946 objects of cultural infrastructure, robbery of museums, cultural colonisation of the occupied territories.

At the same time, this context caused the incredible rise of Ukrainian culture—this is probably the most amazing paradox of the war. Poetry readings, performances, exhibitions, and concerts take place in shelters right next to the front line. This is recorded, for example, by writers participating in Ukrainian PEN trips to the front-line territories.

Kharkiv is the closest city to the Russian border and under everyday rocket attacks from there. But artistic life is bubbling here. It has several epicenters, one of which is the independent Nafta Theater. It practices a non-violent approach, documentary theater, works with modern drama and topics of war, LGBTQI+, victimisation. The Nafta



↑ Democracy and control, 2023 – © Alevtina Kakhidze

had played illegally when the city council prohibited showings in State theaters because of security reasons. Now it has sold-out of all performances.

YermilovCenter is another important institution for **Kharkiv** cultural landscape. Located in the basement, the Art Center became a refuge for local artists and students who remained in Kharkiv during the siege of the city at the beginning of the Russian invasion. After the de-occupation of the region, the YermilovCenter resumed its main activity—the representation of contemporary art and rethinking of the Ukrainian art avant-garde heritage.

Recently, there was a big exhibition of street artist **Hamlet Zinkivskiy**, who did not leave the city even in the most difficult times. Now YermilovCenter is preparing a project by **Pavlo Makov**—a Ukrainian new wave artist who returned to **Kharkiv** from **Italy**. This is how Pavlo explained the reasons for his return: “I started to lose my meaning in Italy. Understood, if Ukraine goes away, what the hell is all this to me? When I returned, it became much easier and more interesting for me to work.”

The literary life of the city revolves around the Kharkiv Literary Museum, the Oleksandr Savchuk Publishing House, and the writer and poet **Serhiy Zhadan**.

In the spring of 2023, the Museum returned from evacuation and all these three **Kharkiv** phenomenons hosted the Fifth Kharkiv Festival, dedicated to the Ukrainian linguist **Yury Shevelyov**.

KharkivMusicFest is also worth mentioning—an international festival of classical music that took place under siege in the spring of 2022 in the **Kharkiv** metro. Last year, he regained his international status. This year it is scheduled for April 13th.

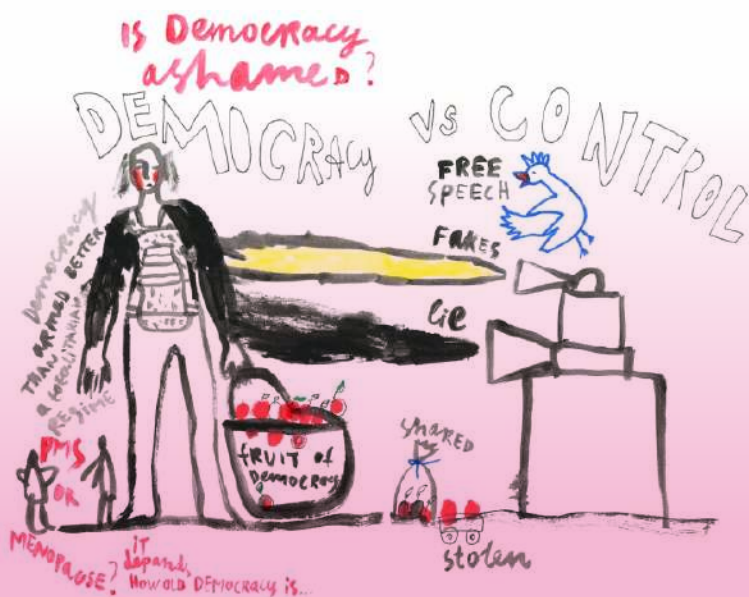
And the further from the front line, the more active the cultural life is. New independent theaters, bookstores, concert halls, and art institutions are opening in Ukraine, such as the revitalised **Jam Factory Art Center** in **Lviv**. There are important and extremely painful questions discussed by artists.

Understanding war and life at the moment of danger, rethinking collective action and solidarity, politics of memory, decolonisation, reaccepting of expropriated and discriminated artists—these are the main topics with which independent Ukrainian cultural organisations work today.

With the beginning of Russia's occupation of **Crimea** in 2014, the most visible activity there is the one of the independent cinema

sector. Thus, the progress of Ukrainian documentary cinema was recognised this year with the highest awards—the Ukrainian director **Mstyslav Chernov** received awards from the American and British film academies for the film about the beginning of the Russian occupation 20 days in Mariupol. Many original artists have worked in this field: **Iryna Tsilyk** (*The Earth is Blue, Like an Orange*), **Roman Liubyi** (*Iron Butterflies*), **Oksana Karpovych** (*Peaceful People*) and many others. The documentary environment is actively developed by the **DocuDays** international documentary film festival.

All this is happening in extremely unfavourable circumstances, connected not only with the war, but also with the collapse of the Ukrainian State Film Agency—an institution that is designed to develop an independent cinema. Instead, it maintains incompetent management, invests public financing non-transparently and defends the interests of large private media companies. Distrust of this institution reached such a level that Ukrainian filmmakers appealed to the government and the president with the demand to redirect State funding from



March

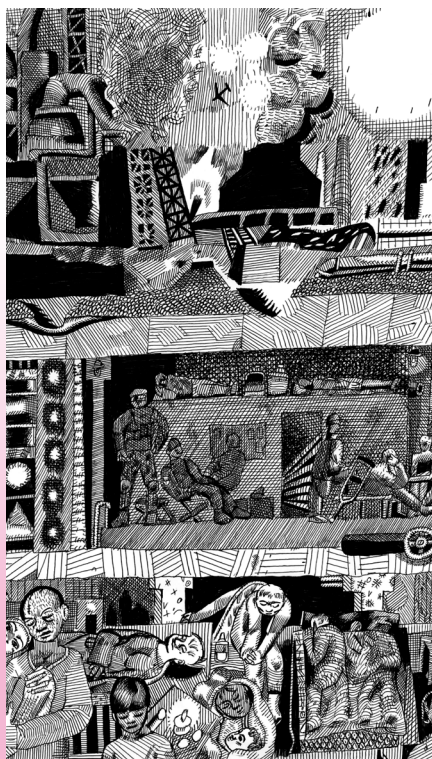


the production of films to the needs of the Ukrainian army. This is approximately 10 million euros for 2024.

By and large, the entire post-Soviet culture policies and public management showed its inability to support the development of culture as well as protect cultural heritage and independent cultural organisations. Despite 32 years of independence, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, as well as the legislation of **Ukraine**, continues to instrumentalise culture, understanding it as a service function of ideological needs.

And despite this, it is a great wonder to observe how Ukrainian art actively emancipates itself in times of the greatest existential threat. It emerges from the shadow of the former metropolis—Moscow—, frees itself from paternalism, decentralises itself, and declares itself far beyond Ukrainian borders.

— Tetiana Pushnova



↑ Azovstal, Mariupol – © Danylo Nemyrovsky

Following up

→ The independent cultural and artistic scene in Ukraine continues to develop, even in challenging times. New independent bookshops are springing up in Kyiv, and, as noted by the electronic music label Standard Deviation in the description of their latest release, *Succession*, “*new talents have emerged on Ukrainian dancefloors.*” This last Standard Deviation release illustrates the trend, showcasing 10 emerging Ukrainian musicians.

→ Despite the ongoing war, clubs in Ukraine remain active. “*Do you guys still have parties in Ukraine?*” Yes, we absolutely do,” the aforementioned label states. In Kyiv, renowned institutions such as *3* (also known as K41), *Bruxxt*, and *Closer* continue to operate. *Reset!* member *20ft Radio* continues to stream and propose audio programmes to its community. Near the frontline, independent cultural hubs like *Some People* in Kharkiv—a city bombed almost daily—persist in organising events, providing essential meeting spaces for their communities.

→ As the war intensifies—with North Korea sending troops to support Russia and increased Russian bombardments over Ukraine—Ukrainian cultural projects continue to raise funds for soldiers on the frontline. *3* (also known as K41), an independent cultural space and club in Kyiv, underscores this commitment: “*Supporting our army and community has always been, and remains, one of our core principles.*” The club has recently noted a significant decrease in the average donation amount, which has impacted its ability to provide necessary support to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In response, they have introduced a donation-based entry fee of UAH 300, ensuring that 100% of donations collected at the entrance go directly to supporting the army.

→ Independent cultural actors and artists are also reflecting on the future of their country, addressing topics like ecocide and ecological crises. One such example is *Echoes of the Earth*, a project launched by *3* (also known as K41). It examines the destruction of nature caused by war and explores personal responsibility for preserving water, soil, air, and wildlife with which we coexist. This illustrates the Ukrainian artistic scene’s willingness to think about their country’s future.

Resources

[UNITED24 Media](#)

[The Kyiv Independent](#)

[‘Like reading under the covers’: books flourish in blackout-hit Ukraine](#) – *The Guardian*, on April 29th, 2023

[Succession](#) – *Standard Deviation* on November 15th, 2024

Election Fever: Bulgaria's Cultural Landscape Amidst Political Upheaval

April

In April 2024, the spotlight was on Bulgaria with regard to the political crisis following the unsuccessful negotiations between Mariya Gabriel (GERB party) and Nikolai Denkov (We Continue the Change party) and the failure of the planned government rotation. We interviewed Victor Yankov, political scientist, deputy director of the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation, and ex-director of NIGHT / Plovdiv festival, as well as Alexander Vladimirov, founder and editor-in-chief of electronic music and club culture media Fonoteka Eletrika, and Desislava Pancheva, founder of the independent publishing platform Hip Hip Library, and head of the Bulgarian Creative Europe Culture Desk.

On June 9th, 2024, **Bulgaria** will not only hold European parliamentary elections, but also snap elections for members of the National Assembly. This will be the country's sixth election in just three years. In fact, since 2021, Bulgaria has been in a state of instability, characterised by an inability to form coalitions in parliament and thus to form a lasting government. *"If we see it in the European context, it's not something new. Belgium, the Netherlands, and many other countries, they were quite unstable in the last ten years, in matter of central governments,"* Victor Yankov points out. Desislava Pancheva confirms *"The recent withdrawal and instability? They're signs of deeper problems, like people not being happy with how things are run, economic gaps, or social tensions. And let's not forget, Bulgaria's not living in its own bubble. What's happening here reflects global trends."*

By June 2023, however, Bulgaria had entered a period of hope. Indeed, after the April 2023 parliamentary elections, a solid coalition had emerged between the GERB party and the We Continue the Change party. Both agreed to a rotating government, with **Nikolai Denkov** of We Continue the Change becoming Prime Minister, and **Mariya Gabriel** of GERB becoming Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister for the first nine months, after which they would switch positions. The government functioned without major hurdles for the first nine months, giving Bulgarians a sense of stability and continuity. But in March 2024, after **Denkov's** resignation as planned in the rotation agreement, the two parties in the coalition couldn't find common ground for the next round of rotation, leading to the collapse of the coalition. *"It created a feeling of disappointment and a loss of trust in the movement that was working, or at least seemed to be, for the rule of law, democratic change, and progress. And that describes only the part of the society that in general is still fighting for change. Because large parts of it are simply living in apathy,"* explains Alexander Vladimirov.

As for the independent cultural and media sector, it isn't characterised by this apathy, but its actors are rather *"accustomed to living in uncertainty,"* Alexander points out. Indeed, this instability is a habit for independent actors, who suffer from the lack of

a strategy from the central government and its Ministry of Culture. In addition, *“the frequent changes in leadership have been detrimental to the long-term sustainability of the cultural and creative sectors. To give you an idea, since I began my work at the Creative Europe Desk in Bulgaria (in 2017), we’ve seen approximately 10 changes in ministers and directors of major State cultural and film funds,”* **Desislava Pancheva** explains. The Ministry of Culture tends to focus on public institutions such as operas, theatres, or galleries—a legacy of the socialist propaganda machine, as **Victor Yankov** explains—leaving independent organisations in a constant ‘adaptation mode.’ This situation has been exacerbated by the suspension of the National Fund for Culture, the body that finances a large number of cultural projects in Bulgaria. *“Unfortunately, even if there is no political crisis, the Ministry of Culture is never a brave body, brave moves have always come from the cultural scene itself and from the cities,”* Victor explains.

“upscaling” of Bulgarian independent culture, i.e. exporting it to the rest of Europe, and importing European culture into Bulgaria, as well as *“censorship and limited freedom of expression,”* says **Desislava Pancheva**, *“in politically unstable environments, there’s often a risk of increased government control or censorship over media and cultural content,”* she continues.

Whether the snap elections in June will help the cultural scene to get a Ministry of Culture with a proper strategy is anyone’s guess, as is the general shift to the right of the political spectrum—both Alexander and Victor believe that the growing far-right parties *“have reached their maximum level of support,”* around 10 to 15%. What is certain in Bulgaria today is that, in Alexander’s words, *“many organisations are doing great work despite all the problems, so kudos to them all,”* and **Desislava Pancheva** to conclude *“challenges like these often bring people together. We might find new ways to collaborate, innovate, and advocate for our values and missions, finding strength in unity and resilience. We’re not easily defeated!”*

— Manon Moulin

After the pandemic, it was a working group made up of cultural workers themselves that designed the administrative framework for supporting culture, in a bottom-up dynamic. On the other hand, the City of **Plovdiv**, for example, maintains good relations with the scene and tries to distribute EU funds to the cultural scene, especially in 2019 and beyond, when Plovdiv was the European Capital of Culture.



This lack of support, strategy, and funding from the central government isn’t the only challenge facing Bulgaria’s independent players.

Alexander Vladimirov also succinctly lists: *“lack of interest by the general public, and lack of understanding in the broader society about the meaning and importance of independent culture.”* The general lack of interest affects what **Victor Yankov** calls the

Following up

→ **Bulgaria's** parliamentary elections on June 9th, 2024 were indeed marked by general apathy and a record low turnout of 34%. No party won an outright majority, perpetuating a fragmented parliament.

→ With no coalition formed after June, President **Rumen Radev** appointed a series of caretaker governments to manage governance. These caretaker administrations faced internal disputes, forcing another early election

→ This election, the seventh since 2021, saw a slight increase in turnout to 38.9%. Despite hopes for stability, the results were inconclusive, with the main parties unable to bridge their differences. The political crisis appears to have fuelled frustration with ineffective governance and concerns about Bulgaria's economic challenges.

→ In the midst of political turmoil, Bulgaria's cultural sector continues to struggle with precarious cultural funding, always exacerbated by political instability. While John Malkovich's play of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and The Man*, sparked nationalist protests in Sofia before its premiere at the capital's National Theatre for its alleged misrepresentation of the Bulgarian people, the independent cultural sector remains dynamic, with magazines such as *B B B !* and its great publications—it has also joined *Reset!* in September 2024—, and acclaimed authors like Georgi Gospodinov (*Time Shelter*) and Ivan Krastev (*After Europe*), who were included in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung's* list of the 100 best books of the 21st century.



↑ The Arch of Freedom, Bulgaria, one of the locations for Altitude Attitude project by Fonoteka ElektriKa – © Velislav Baldev, Lyon
Visuals for Fonoteka ElektriKa

Resources

[Bulgarian national election produces an \(un\)expected outcome](#) – *The Loop*, on June 26th, 2024

[Bulgarian parliamentary elections: take 7](#) – *euro/topics*, on October 17th, 2024

[John Malkovich premiere sparks protests in Bulgaria](#) – *Reuters*, on November 7th, 2024

[Melting democracy: the October 2024 national elections in Bulgaria](#) – *The Loop*, on November 20th, 2024

Georgia at the Crossroads: Defying the 'Russian Law' and the Battle for Democracy

In May 2024, the spotlight was put on Georgia following the re-instatement of the Foreign Agent Bill in April—the same bill that sourced massive protests in Tbilisi during spring 2023, forcing the parliament to back up and vote down the legislation. One year later, Tbilisi's streets were crowded again. Georgian journalist and documentary filmmaker Maradia Tsaava writes more about the situation for Reset!.

May

What Is the Problem?

Tbilisi, the city with vast experience in rallies, witnessed an unprecedentedly huge demonstration on April 28th, with tens of thousands of people marching on Rustaveli Avenue chanting “Yes, to Europe! No, to Russia!”

The march on the warm Sunday evening of April 28th, was only one out of huge permanent protests going on for more than one month in **Tbilisi**.

It was on April 3rd when the ruling **Georgian Dream** party re-initiated Foreign Agent bill—the one that sourced massive protests in **Tbilisi** last spring, forcing the parliament to back up and vote down the legislation.

Even though the Georgian Dream made a strong assurance they would not reconsider the bill, one year after, and just 6 months before the parliamentary elections, Rustaveli Avenue in **Tbilisi** is again flooded with people protesting what they already rejected last year—the ‘Russian Law’.

This year's Transparency of Foreign Influence bill is no different from the Agents of Foreign Influence bill of the last year. Except for the wording, nothing has changed—neither the essence of it, nor the critical reaction.

The word Foreign Agent in the bill is transformed into Foreign Influence this year, requiring all media and non-profit organisations to register as “pursuing interests of a foreign power” in case they receive more than 20% of their income from abroad—just like the legislation of Russia's Foreign Agent Law, which crushed the civil society and independent media in the country since its introduction in 2012.

Georgia is facing the threat to fall under the same trap and end up in this dead-end, which has no way back to democracy, and freedom of speech and expression. Whereas, the country has never been this close to the European Union: after forcing the government to withdraw the legislation, **Georgia** was granted the European Union candidate status in December 2023.

A few months later, the country has to fight for its European track again with non-stop rallies around the parliament, while inside the parliament the adoption procedures are pulled out as much as possible.

The European parliament and US senators fully support the position of Georgian people, calling the government to

withdraw the legislation, as it is undermining **Georgia's** European future and its relations with the U.S. In response, the Georgian Dream is not only rejecting the criticism, but calls for governmental rally supporting the bill in front of the parliament and addresses to violence.

What Will Be Affected?

Alongside the rallies, more than 100 non-governmental and media organisations suspend cooperation with the government until the bill is dropped, claiming they will never register under the label of “pursuing interests of a foreign power.”

*“First of all, this label is problematic, disrespectful, and harming. Organisations serving the society and doing public good that the government has to be doing, will be labelled as pursuing someone else’s interest, instead of serving the interest of **Georgia**,”* says Giga Bekauri, the head of Guild-independent professional union for culture.

“Secondly, this label is problematic in legal terms. Identities under this label might get limitations in functioning. This can cause mistrust and confrontation in the society and might end with the organisations shutting down.”

Overall, there are more than 10.000 non-governmental organisations registered in Georgia, functioning

under international funding and actively participating in economic development, agriculture, minority rights, healthcare, cultural and historical heritage, education, environment, media, etc. To pass the ‘Russian Bill’ is to put all the public good **Georgia** has been gaining since its independence under question.

Independent Media Shut Down

In a super polarised media environment, mostly owned and run by political interest, internationally-funded online media is the only stream of objective and transparent journalism, where voice of people can be heard.

“We are serving the interest of Georgian people, nobody else,” says **Zura Vardiashvili**, co-founder of online media Publika founded in 2019, covering general news.

“First of all, we will not register under this offensive label and secondly, we will not be able to function. Like in Russia, this law will bring more limitations, giving the government access to our confidential information. We can be declared as foreign agents operating against the national interest any time they desire.”

One of the important parts of the dubbed Russian legislation is the obligation to fill out a declaration annually. This, as Georgian Dream claims, will bring transparency to the



international money spent in **Georgia**. However, organisations have a very clear argument opposing in this regard.

“90% of media managers’ work is filling out the declarations annually, monthly, and even weekly, reporting where and how the money was spent,” says **Lika Antadze**, executive director of Chai Khana media.

“Government has full access to financial data and is able to make a full investigation any time. Therefore, it’s clear that transparency is not the goal of Georgian Dream.”

Chai Khana media, operating in south Caucasus for 10 years already, is a platform encouraging local journalists, documentary filmmakers, and photographers to seek and collect unique stories that are left behind in the news.

Chai Khana has also become one of the first distribution platforms for documentary films by launching Kinedok, as part of an international network. Operating in **Georgia** for 2 years only, Kinedok has already arranged more than 100 alternative screenings with more than 2000 attendees, starting from the locations high up in the Georgian mountains, ending with the big cities.

“Under this bill, authors from south Caucasus will lose Chai Khana as a platform for experiment and a source of additional income. And the audience will lose Kinedok as a source of information to watch documentaries for free. All other countries of Kinedok’s network will go on screening films in different alternative places, while Georgian audience will be left aside,” **Antadze** says.

Cinema Under Threat

Georgian cinema has been facing difficulties even before the “*Russian Law*.” The one and only financial source for Georgian filmmakers, the Georgian National film Centre has been taken over by the government last year, giving out the signs of censorship. This led more than 450 film professionals to boycott the film centre¹.

Salomé Jashi, Georgian documentary filmmaker, who’s legendary Taming the Garden was the main target of censorship and was banned from the cinema, co-founded DOCA (Documentary Association of **Georgia**) to resist the oppression in documentary cinema and find ways for future development. Now, DOCA is also under threat.



↑ Doca event – © Giorgi Kolbaia



↑ Kinedok screening – © Lasha Phalavandishvili



↑ Kinedok screening – © Kinedok Archive

“We are also funded by several international organisations like everybody else, because Georgia has very limited financial resources. Only with the help of international donors are we able to support Georgian authors, who’s artistic ideas will now be considered as the voice of a financier.”

“Under this law, developing Georgian documentary filmmaking will be considered as developing an interest of some foreign power. This puts us under the risk to lose our donors and shut down,” **Salomé** says.

Although it has only been operating for a year and a half, DOCA has already managed to provide financial support to filmmakers, organise industry discussions, set up a regular film club at

¹ This boycott, as well as the whole Georgian Cinema Is Under Threat movement, has been documented in the Reset! Atlas of Independent Culture and Media, in its first volume Expressions of Resistance: Navigating Independent Culture Through Adversity, in an article entitled “Georgian Cinema Is Under Threat–Independent Cultural Movements in Resistance” by Tiko Nadirashvili.

the movie theatre with growing audience, begin conducting research works, etc.

“We started from zero and we are growing day by day. Now we are under the risk to lose everything we gained. But cinema is only a part of the risk we are under. The whole country is under threat.”

Theatre Rebel

Theatre this year has been the pedestal of the protest against the “Russian Law.” Starting from the Vaso Abashidze New Theatre, stage after stage actors and directors have been declaiming ‘No to Russian Law’ directly to the audience.

Theatre in Georgia is mostly State-funded and has often been accused of taking the government’s side in crucial moments. But this year, theatre has played one of the biggest roles in denying the dubbed Russian bill and calling for protest, even the State-owned ones. But some independent theatres have already faced difficulties. **Ioseb Bakuradze**, the founder of the Movement Theatre, already got a denial from a German partner for future collaboration.

*“I already staged one performance in Gallus Theatre in **Frankfurt**. I was going to stage one more performance in **Koln**, but the German side is already concerned, refusing any future collaboration in case the ‘Russian Law’ is adopted.*

Following up

→ After the law on foreign agents was passed on May 14th, 2024, President **Salome Zourabichvili** vetoed it. Two weeks later, a parliamentary majority overrode the President’s veto and the law was indeed reintroduced, putting at risk many Georgian NGOs, including independent cultural and media organisations that receive foreign funding.

→ Since then, the situation in the country has worsened, especially after the parliamentary elections on October 26th, 2024. Read more about this in the November 2024 Reset! newsletter, on page 42.



Georgia’s Future

Along with media and culture, this law is going to affect all different social groups, except big business.

“A few big non-governmental organisations have definitely deserved criticism, but fighting against them will affect the whole sector: eliminating the chances to defend labour rights, preserve cultural heritage, protect national resources, and proceed with crucial healthcare programmes saving thousands of peoples’ lives,” says **Giga Bekauri**, the head of the independent professional union.

“Sexual minorities, people with disabilities, children, and women undergoing domestic violence, farmers, people living along the occupation line—everybody will be affected,” explains **Ana Shalikiani**, school teacher and co-founder of Laboratory of Georgia, supporting young and female entrepreneurs in **Kutaisi**, western Georgia. “This law will muzzle and chain us more and more.”

The parliament adopted the bill on May 14th with 84 votes, but President Salome Zourabichvili still has time to veto the law. The procedures of final adoption will last up to two weeks and then, **Georgia** will have its final verdict—in which direction the country is heading toward—to the West or to the North.

— **Maradia Tsaava**

Resources

Georgian Constitutional Court declines to suspend foreign agent law – OC Media, on October 10th, 2024

#Georgia thread – OC Media

Spotlight on Europe: Independent Culture and Media Amidst 2024 Elections

In June 2024, the spotlight was on Europe as a whole, following the European parliamentary elections of June 6th-9th, 2024. To get the pulse of the independent cultural and media sector, we interviewed Laura Naum and Petrică Mogoș, co-founders of Bucharest-based printed magazine [KAJET Journal](#), as well as Dylan Ahern, artistic director of Amsterdam-based cultural event organiser [DE/MO](#) and co-founder of democracy promoter [De Kiesmannen](#), Mika Hallbäck Vuorenpiää, member of the team of Malmö-based music festival [Intonal](#) and multi-arts venue [Inkonst](#), Tiago Sigorelho, president and editorial director of Lisbon-based platform for journalism, culture, and education [Gerador](#), and finally Kalina Dukovska from Skopje-based cultural centre [Laboratorium](#).

2024 is a special year in modern global history: over 40% of the world's population will elect new parliaments and leaders, reshaping geopolitical landscapes. One of these elections is the world's only and largest supranational election by direct universal suffrage: the European parliamentary elections, held between June 6th and 9th, 2024, in the 27 European member States of the European Union.

This election, like the previous nine European elections (since 1979), is a victim of abstentionism, with around one in two voters not casting a ballot. This trend reflects a general disinterest in European elections across the continent, with poorly attended campaigns. This was exacerbated by the fact that national elections were held at the same time. Indeed, in several

European countries, such as **Hungary** and **Romania**, local elections were organised on the same day, overshadowing the European elections and their stakes. "EU elections are still 'second-order elections'," as **Dylan Ahern** puts it, explaining that in the **Netherlands**, people kept their attention on national issues, such as the government negotiations for coalition with far-right PVV in the centre of it. This could explain the 65% abstention rate among the Portuguese, who were mainly focused on their national parliamentary elections three months ago. From abstention to parallel and preceding national elections, these European elections were also quickly replaced by snap elections organised at national level, such as in **France**, where President **Emmanuel Macron** decided to dissolve the parliament after the European results, triggering a major crisis in the country and opening a window for a possible far-right government.

Because that is the main takeaway from these 2024 European elections; the big winners are both the conservative and the far-right groups. In fact, this new European Parliament will be dominated by the conservatives of the European People's Party (EPP) with 188 seats (up from 174 in 2019), followed by the far right with 185 seats, even if it is spread over several groups (European Conservatives and Reformists; Identity and Democracy; Various Far Right), and in third place the social democrats of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats with 137 seats. The Ecologists and the Left are both far behind. Conservative and far-right parties came first or second in many European countries, including **France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Belgium, Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Latvia, Slovenia, and others**. How can we explain the rise of the far right across the continent and the dominance of right-wing parties? The answers are certainly varied and complex, as **Laura Naum** and **Petrică Mogoș** explain: *"Another plausible interpretation may be that we are witnessing a hyper-normalisation of aberrant politics: with the surge of far-right discourses, we are collectively coming to terms with our new*

June



↑ Gola Planina performing at the FIJUK EXPO event at Laboratorium, Skopje, on January 4th, 2024 – @ Laboratorium

reality.”

What is this new reality? What could these results mean for independent cultural and media players? Well, a conservative and far-right domination means no good for culture, which is often less considered and neglected by the former, and dangerously exploited by the latter. Indeed, “as always, the conservatives want to quiet the free spirits of culture, as a way of controlling the opposition and nipping the buds of free thought. The EU election cements this further, on a larger scale,” explains **Mika Hallbäck Vuorenpää**, drawing on the Swedish experience after the 2022 national elections. **Dylan Ahern** underlines the racist roots of the far right’s position on culture; “the far right predominantly sees culture (‘our way of life’) as a mean to exclude others (Europeans of colour and non-EU citizens in general) and promote an

ethnic cultural identity of Europe.”

This danger would be exacerbated by the decline in funding for culture, “which today is facilitated through multiple support programmes,” as **Tiago Sigorelho** points out, and voted on in six-year cycles, the next of which is due in 2027 but is being discussed this autumn. The far-right also praise closed-borders. **Laura Naum** and **Petrică Mogoș** elaborate on this: “With the rise of ‘closed borders’ politics, cross-cultural collaborations may suffer. And what else might closed borders bring if not closed cultures?” This inward-looking strategy of the far right also raises concerns for EU candidate countries and their cultural organisations. “Usually a more conservative or right wing elective means less support for further EU enlargement and tightening on mobility control for non-EU citizens,” explains **Kalina Dukovska** from **North Macedonia** (candidate since 2005) and continues: “considering the fact that culture is often very fragile and at times abused on a national level, I think having an overarching budget and working groups dedicated to supporting independent art, giving opportunities for artist residencies and creating various artistic mobilities



↑ De Kiesmannen's De Grote Europashow in Utrecht – © Maïke Schwarz

is the focal point of EU's cultural support”—and should remain so. This set of threats posed by the composition of the European Parliament are compounding the challenges already faced by independent cultural and media organisations across the continent and beyond, which all our interviewees agree on, and which they have to deal with on a daily basis: a general lack of funding for the independent scenes, a lack of spaces for independent practices, the weight of bureaucracy and complex application processes (both at national and EU level), but also increasingly strict legislations on cultural events.

Despite these perils, independent cultural and media players often “demonstrate elasticity, [and are known] to ‘resist’, ‘be resilient’, and ‘adaptable’”, even if this “flexibility is both a blessing and a curse,” as **Laura Naum** and **Petrică Mogoș** brought up. **Dylan Ahern** confirms that “the cultural and creative sectors always hit first, and are also always the first to hit back,” while **Tiago Sigorelho** affirms our common “role in anticipating trends and finding ways to correct deficiencies.” They all stressed the importance of solidarity and collective action, supported by networks that bring together different communities of independent players to “challenge the status-quo, to question its illusions, and finally seek to imagine viable alternatives.” On a combative and hopeful note, as **Kalina Dukovska** put it: “Giving up cannot be an option!”



in Stadsschouwburg

Following up

→ After the EU elections on June 6-9th, 2024 and the formation of a new European Parliament, the new MEPs had to approve the new European Commission. **Ursula von der Leyen** was reappointed as President of the European Commission despite fragmented support. Negotiations between Member States and the European Parliament also led to the nomination and approval of new Commissioners for the 2024-2029 term.

→ **Glenn Micallef** of **Malta** was appointed as Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Culture, Youth, and Sport. During his confirmation hearing on November 4th, 2024, he emphasised fostering connections with other Commission priorities, including advancing diversity, fair remuneration for creators, and embracing digital transformation in cultural sectors.

Resources

What happens after the European elections? – European Parliament, on July 3rd, 2024

Culture after the EU elections: what to expect? – UnpackCulture, on October 1st, 2024

Cultural compass, team Europe, and 'strategic' funding: 9 takeaways from Glenn Micallef's hearing – Culture Action Europe, on November 5th, 2024



↑ FIJUK EXP0 event at Laboratorium, Skopje, on January 4th, 2024 – © Laboratorium

Ongoing Repression of the Independent Serbian Cultural Scene: Funding and Competitions in the Turmoil

In July 2024, the spotlight was on Serbia, in a one-year follow-up after Reset!'s June 2023 newsletter. Since then, the situation had worsened and Serbian journalist Vesna Milosavljević analysed the situation for Reset!.

For years, Serbia's independent cultural scene has struggled with insufficient, delayed, and non-transparent allocation of financial support for programmes and projects, distributed through annual competitions by the Ministry of Culture and city authorities—these annual competitions are divided in two main categories: contemporary culture and heritage, the former being divided in sectors such as visual arts, publishing, performing arts, music, etc. This year, the situation has reached unprecedented levels. As of mid-July, the Ministry of Culture has yet to announce the results of its 2024 contemporary creativity competition. Moreover, the City of Belgrade, home to the largest number of cultural civil society organisations (CSOs), has not even published its competition for this year. The only other time this lack of city support occurred was in 2020, when funding for cultural projects

was redirected to so-called priority areas due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Unprecedented Delays

In 2023, the Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia (ICSS), the Association of Fine Artists of Serbia, "Stanica" - Service for Contemporary Dance, and other organisations and individuals protested against the Ministry of Culture's delay in announcing the competition, which according to the law should be done within two months of the adoption of the State budget. This year, the situation is even more serious, as the Ministry of Culture has violated the Law on Culture by failing to announce the results of the competitions within 60 days of deadline for submitting projects. The visual arts competition, one of the first to be announced for 2024 following protests by many visual artists, had a submission deadline of December 26th, 2023, making the results almost five months overdue.

"Half of the year has passed, and out of twenty competitions in various fields, the Ministry has announced the results of only three. This has directly impacted the cultural sector, particularly independent culture, hindering numerous associations, festivals, initiatives, and projects vital to Serbian culture. It has worsened already poor working conditions and deprived citizens, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, of quality cultural programmes," says **Marijana Cvetković** from "Stanica" - Service for Contemporary Dance, which has three projects supported by Creative Europe, but now lacks domestic support.

July

Biased Selections

Marijana Cvetković notes that since President **Aleksandar Vučić**'s party came to power twelve years ago, the Ministry of Culture's competitions have consistently diverted support for cultural development, especially in artistic production, towards party-affiliated associations and conservative, nationalist cultural practices. This has contributed to a retrograde and conflict-oriented cultural landscape.

"The evaluation process, the composition of the commissions (which evaluate project proposals), and the justifications for supported and unsupported projects reveal a deliberately designed system to eliminate all critically-minded artistic and cultural projects. Artists and cultural workers, particularly from the independent sector, have been pointing out this 'pre-elimination' system for years, often involving the same commission members who lack relevant knowledge, insight, and basic information about trends in the fields they are supposed to be evaluating. This has proven to be a successful strategy of devaluation and anti-intellectual counter-evolution, which constitutes the official cultural policy of Serbia. The consequences include the emigration of artists and intellectuals, the undermining of public cultural institutions, the dominance of nationalist narratives in the public sphere, anti-intellectualism, and the degradation of the role of culture as an educational platform for the wider population," **Marijana Cvetković** explains.

She adds that the Ministry of Culture only occasionally responds to pressure from part of the cultural scene, often non-institutional. For example, on the eve of the last protest action of the ICSS on June 26th, 2024, the Ministry announced false news about the results of three competitions for 2024. In doing so, it *"further humiliated the reputation of that institution and the State of Serbia as a whole"*, stated **Marijana Cvetković**. The effective results of the competition in question were announced three days later.



↑ Protest in front of the Ministry of Culture in Belgrade on June 26th, 2024 – © Luka Knezevic Strika

Lack of Financial Opportunities and Co-financing Issues

The delay in publishing the results of competitions creates further issues for projects funded by several foreign sources available to the cultural scene, including the Creative Europe programmes. Unlike their European partners, and even some in former Yugoslav countries, which receive operational funds and multi-year project support from various government levels, Serbian CSOs in culture can only apply for specific programmes, maintaining their capacity primarily through hard work, enthusiasm, and personal financial investments, often juggling multiple jobs. Consequently, only few CSOs can lead European projects, and even those acting as partners are now withdrawing from collaborative projects due to the inability to secure necessary matching funds.

The new Minister of Culture **Nikola Selaković**, appointed after the snap parliamentary elections last December, previously headed the Department of Labour and Social Policy. So far, he has not made contact with critics of cultural policy from the independent scene, who have been calling for years for an increase in the budget for co-financing cultural production, especially the inadequate support for non-institutional actors. They have also raised the issue of non-competitive allocation of funds on the basis of the Minister of Culture’s discretionary power.

According to ICSS data, in 2022, more than half of the money (2.5 million euros) allocated to competitions (3.9 million euros in total for the all support for contemporary culture) was distributed through the discretionary decisions of the then minister, with more than one million dinars per project (approximately 8,500 euros). This far exceeds the amounts awarded through regular annual calls for proposals, which often amount to only €2,000 to 3,000.

Despite protests and public appeals by cultural workers and artists to the Ministry of Culture to publish the results of open calls in the field of contemporary culture, there has been no response. Unfortunately, the issue of the alarming state of culture was not even mentioned by the opposition parties during the campaign for the early parliamentary elections in December and the recent local elections in June. This leaves the independent cultural scene at the mercy of the government, which has been marginalising it for years and trying to stifle it by refusing to support it, even though it is the most important and internationally recognised part of the overall cultural and artistic production in **Serbia**.

— Vesna Milosavljević



↑ Protest in front of the Ministry of Culture, June 26th, 2024 – © Luka Knezevic



↑ Protest in front of the Ministry of Culture, June 26th, 2024 – © Luka Knezevic

Following up



Protest in front of the Ministry of Culture in Belgrade on October 16th, 2024



Protest in front of the Ministry of Culture in Belgrade on October 16th, 2024 – © Luka Knezevic Strika

→ Since July 2024, political instability and public discontent in **Serbia** have grown, with social and cultural protests highlighting unresolved issues. The Ministry of Culture was criticised for delays in funding and competition results, disrupting cultural programmes and international collaborations. Initiatives such as 'For Dignified Cultural Employment' increased calls for systemic reforms, highlighting the precarious situation of independent organisations and the continued neglect of cultural policy. The situation remains unresolved, fuelling wider discontent.

→ After 25 years of significant work in **Serbia's** independent art scene, the Remont Gallery announced its closure on October 1st, 2024. Citing financial difficulties, insufficient institutional support, and a deteriorating cultural environment, the gallery team decided to withdraw. This closure is an accurate representation of the challenges facing independent art spaces in the country.

Resources

Announcement – Remont, on October 1st, 2024

Cvetičanin: (Ne)razumevanje stanja kulture u Srbiji danas (Cveticanin: (Mis) understanding of the state of culture in Serbia today) – SEEcult, on October 21st, 2024

Poboljšati status slobodnih umetnika (Improve the status of independent artists) – SEEcult, on November 16th, 2024

“Serbia, stop” protest action held across the country, incidents in front of Radio Television of Serbia and Faculty of Dramatic Arts – Mašina, on November 22nd, 2024

Germany at the Crossroads: Budget Cuts in Culture, Independent Cultural Sector as Target

In September 2024, the spotlight was on Germany, as the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media announced major cuts in the budget of the six funds for culture. We interviewed Laurens von Oswald and Harry Glass, co-founders and artistic directors of the [Berlin Atonal festival](#), as well as Jonas Petry and Amelie Neumann, co-artistic directors of Leipzig-based festival and Reset! member [Seanaps](#), Cymin Samawatie, musician, pianist, singer, conductor, composer, and co-founder of [Trickster Orchestra](#), [Heinrich Horwitz](#), freelance choreographer, actor, and performer, and finally Gregor Hotz, managing director of [Musikfonds](#).

On July 16th, 2024, the German cultural sector has received a shocking and sudden notification. **Claudia Roth**, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media—the equivalent of a Minister of Culture, although there is no such thing in Germany—presented a draft bill for the overall budget of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM) for the year 2025, in which the funding

of the six funding foundations was drastically cut. The six federal funds—the Literature Fund, the Translators’ Fund, the Performing Arts Fund, the Sociocultural Fund, the Music Fund and the Art Fund Foundation—are the institutions that primarily fund independent culture and recognise the importance of experimental and innovative practices. These cuts pose a significant threat to independent cultural actors in **Germany**, but they also appear to be targeted at them, as the general budget of the BKM has not changed, giving priority to other kinds of cultural practices.

The Surprise Factor

“It was pretty surprising; they didn’t tell us in advance that the cuts will be so substantial, and we just got an email, very brutal,” explains Gregor Hotz, managing director of one of the six funds affected by these cuts, the Musikfonds. If the directors of the funds hadn’t been consulted before the announcement, revealing a serious miscommunication within the administration, the surprise was also total for the cultural actors themselves. Indeed, both the announcement and its timing came as a surprise, as most people were on holiday at the time. “People freaked out and were so helpless, especially because it was during the summer break, which is also pretty mean from politicians to do this at this time of year,” points out Heinrich Horwitz, choreographer, actor, performer, and ActOut activist. In response to this astonishment, Heinrich Horwitz, together with other cultural workers, decided to launch a petition to raise awareness of the damage these cuts would cause and to unite the independent sector.



↑ FLIPPER. Performance at Ballhaus Ost Berlin, funded by Fonds Darstellende Künste – © Maria Boltz



September

Independent Cultural Sector for a United Response

On July 31st, **Heinrich Horwitz** submitted the petition on their behalf, as their activist experience is notable and recognised in the German scene. The petition, entitled “Saving up on independent art costs too much!”, quickly gained thousands of signatures, and was massively shared on social medias–“it got viral,” says Heinrich Horwitz.

“The advocacy and political work being done by members of the independent scene itself is truly amazing, not least because independent artists and musicians are not paid for this kind of work, and some individuals are really putting in a lot of effort that will benefit the whole scene. We wondered how to connect the multiple scenes and their respective interests and found that a petition that calls out the dramatic precariousness created by the government’s plans was the right way to go forward,” says **Cymin Samawatie**, musician, singer, conductor, and composer, as well as co-founder of Trickster Orchestra, an ensemble bringing together artists from various backgrounds, genre, and musical traditions, breaking down the rigidity of music towards a trans-traditional music born of radical diversity and musical multiperspectivity.

6 weeks after it was launched, the petition had 36,607 signatures. This is a significant number, especially for the independent scene. “The independent scene is quite well connected and united, and this brings the independents from theatre, dance and music closer together,” explains **Heinrich Horwitz**. Independent artists have also received support from the funding institutions, in particular from **Holger Bergmann**, director of the Fonds Darstellende Künste, and **Gregor Hotz**. This success is also proof of the scene’s ability to unite its audience. By bringing together cultural practitioners and audiences, this petition has helped the independent cultural scene to communicate at eye level with the federal administration. In fact, the growing interest in the announcement of the cuts pushed the BKM to invite **Heinrich Horwitz** and other artists to defend the petition: *“The fact that we were invited by the ministry also shows that the pressure is now very high.”*

And it went even higher with the press conference organised by the same cultural workers behind the petition, including **Heinrich Horwitz** and **Cymin Samawatie**, on September 2nd at the independent theatre HAU (Hebbel am Ufer), in Berlin. The press conference was attended by 25 journalists, which both Heinrich and Cymin point out is a lot for the independent scene. This event has led to many interview requests and better press coverage in Germany–unfortunately not enough outside of **Germany**. The main takeaway from this press conference is that the independent scene is the one working and showing variety, diversity, and multiplicity of cultural perspectives, and it needs support. As Cymin Samawatie points out *“the independent cultural scene in Germany is defined by its extremely unique talents, its ability to take risks, and its ideas, but what most defines it is its vast diversity, not only of artistic forms but of people–it is one of the most ethnically, socially, and culturally diverse spheres of our society and a hub for international perspectives,”* and goes on to explain that this reality is not reflected in the administration, *“because the closer you enter into the spheres of politics and power, the less diversity you’ll find.”* This fight for a better representation in the sector could be one of the casualties of these budget cuts, as with less money to distribute, fewer projects will be funded, threatening already marginalised communities, be they BIPOC, queer, or disabled.

Threats and Instability for Independent Cultural Sector

The German independent cultural sector, like many of its European counterparts, is facing numerous challenges, with funding clearly at the top of the list. *“Funding is indispensable because the type of work, the way of working that we fund and try to support, is music that cannot survive commercially, on the capitalist music market,”* explains **Gregor Hotz**, using the example of the independent music scene. The federal money distributed by the six funds is in fact the key to the experimentation that is at the heart of the independent scene, as well as to the preservation of its creativity and freedom of expression. **“The cuts are very significant and a bad omen, as the federal funding bodies for the independent arts scene play a crucial role in ensuring that non-commercial but important projects for cultural diversity in Germany have some sort of minimum financial security,”** explains **Jonas Petry** from the Seanaps festival in Leipzig. The announced cuts only exacerbate a situation that is common to all independent cultural organisations: project-based funding. As **Gregor Hotz** points out, *“Most artists and organisations are handing in one application after the other and they don’t know if it’s going to work or not.”* This uncertainty will only be deepened by these cuts, as the Musikfonds’ budget would drop from 5,25 million in 2024 to 2,9 million in 2025, a reduction of almost 50%. *“It’s going to have a big impact on the funding rate. At the moment, we reach something like 15% of applications funded, and with the cuts it will surely drop. At a certain point you start to ask yourself if you still want to spend time on an application if the chance of being funded is less than 10%?”* wonders **Gregor Hotz**. This reduction will affect the sector *“which will be less diverse, it will also be harder for new projects to emerge, and hard for somewhat established projects to sustain their work. Without this kind of funding, there would be no Seanaps festival with this outreach and network,”* point out **Jonas Petry** and **Amelie Neumann**. **Heinrich Horwitz** confirms and adds *“Our situation is already precarious. We are living from hand to mouth, from project to project. Nothing pays us regularly. And now cutting the money in an inflation time, which impacts our lives but also the price of production for performances, means that people won’t be able to continue doing their job. And we already saw that after covid, a lot of people quitted arts and culture. It will make the scene less flourishing and diverse.”*

There is also the issue of recognition when presenting and defending one’s cultural project or applying for funding. **Cymin Samawatie** highlights that in the 2010s it was difficult to get funding for an ensemble based on presenting music and social diversity—the Trickster Orchestra was finally re-funded in 2018, when Germany started to *“talk about diversity.”* When working with local scenes or experimental cultural practices, establishing a relationship with the administration can be a real challenge. **Harry Glass** and **Laurens Von Oswald** from Berlin Atonal explain; *“We just want to convince decision makers that we are worthy of being taken seriously. It’s harder than ever to get government*



↑ Multi-instrumental



list Damsel Elysium at Seanaps 2023 – © Ines Könitz & Corinna Mehl

agencies in Germany to recognise that what you're doing is important and deserves a sustainable, forward-looking approach to economic self-sufficiency" and add *"what we want is to engage meaningfully and transparently with the State to achieve a healthier cultural scene."* This confirms the general lack of determination on the part of the BKM administration, which, with this announcement, has decided not to give priority to independent art and culture. This atmosphere is worsened by the rise of the extreme right in **Germany**, which won regional elections in two of the former GDR regions in early September. Regional and local funding for independent cultural players may be called into question in this context. Plus, with a general election due next year, one wonders whether the federal funds will continue to exist and support independent culture in a far-right government scenario.

From the budget to project-based funding, from inflation to heavy bureaucracy to the threat of the far right, the German independent sector is

looking to the near future with a bitter and anxious feeling. After completing the petition and handing it over to Claudia Roth on September 11th, 2024, **Heinrich Horwitz, Cymin Samawatie, Gregor Hotz, Jonas Petry, Amelie Neumann, Harry Glass, Laurens Von Oswald**, and all cultural workers from or supporting the independent scene are waiting to see what the government's response will be. Will it stick to its positions and defend a terrible budget for 2025 in parliament? Will it backtrack and revise these cuts? Will Parliament vote for the cuts or will it amend the budget? Many questions remain unanswered at the moment, but Reset! will do its best to document and update, while sending its support to the German independent cultural scene in these unstable times. Nevertheless, Reset! member representing Seanaps, Jonas Petry gives an important reminder that *"this independent cultural landscape has such a vibrant potential to give space to subversive, reflective, sensitive and utopian approaches. It's up to democracy to realise the real value of this treasure."*

— Manon Moulin

Following up

→ The coalition government collapsed in early November 2024, plunging **Germany** into political instability. Elections are scheduled for February 2025, delaying all major decisions, including the 2025 national budget.

→ From January 2025, public institutions and cultural bodies will operate under the last approved financial plan. However, there is a lack of clarity as to whether this will be the original €5.25 billion budget or the reduced €2.9 billion budget adopted after the 45% cuts in summer 2024, as the lack of communication from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM) adds to the confusion.

→ In addition to this national situation, cuts are also being announced at local level, notably in Berlin, where the conservative CDU-led Senate is preparing austerity measures. With an annual city budget of around 40 billion euros, it is now looking to 'save' at least 3 billion by 2025 alone.

→ The independent cultural sector is severely affected, with reduced resources to sustain activities. This prolonged instability risks deepening the crisis in **Germany's** cultural scene.

Without a clear budget by mid-2025, the sector faces further cuts, layoffs, and closure.

→ Along with this worrying budget situation, Germany has been repressing Palestinian culture and solidarity with unprecedented violence. The Bundestag passed a highly controversial resolution that deepens this repression by muzzling any cultural organisation that supports **Palestine**, limiting freedom of expression.



↑ Trickster Orchestra – © Susanne Diesner

Resources

[German government's 2025 cultural budget: An attack on the freedom of art – WSWS](#), on October 4th, 2024

[German Repression of Palestinian Culture and Solidarity: Independence as Resistance – Reset! network](#), on October 8th, 2024

[Germany engulfed by political crisis as Scholz coalition falls apart – BBC](#), on November 7th, 2024

[Plan to cut Berlin arts budget will 'destroy' city's culture, directors warn – The Guardian](#), on November 27th, 2024

Austria at the Crossroads: Far-Right Comeback and the Fight to Protect Cultural Diversity

In October 2024, our attention was on Austria, where the far right came first in the recent general election, with its highest score since 1945. We interviewed Frederik Marroquin, from the independent centre for arts and culture Semmelweisklinik, and Smaranda Krings from QMA, an organisation working for giving a free access to all to the Vienna art scene, as well as setting a proactive networking between newcomers and established members of Vienna's art and culture scene.

The far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has made a comeback in the latest parliamentary elections in Austria, which took place on September 29th, 2024. This victory comes after the FPÖ's already chaotic political experience in the 2017-2019 coalition government between the right-wing conservatives of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the FPÖ, which ended with the resignation of its leader and vice chancellor, **Heinz-Christian Strache**, after a scandal involving him in corrupt practices with Russian oligarchs for positive news coverage in return for government contracts. The FPÖ's position is now extremely threatening to Austria's independent cultural sector, as it has been—and still is—in **Italy, Sweden, Hungary or Slovakia.**

Unprecedented Yet Progressive Victory

The fear that has been building up in the minds of many European

voters over the past few years has also materialised in **Austria**, with a far-right party coming first in the country's parliamentary elections. In fact, the FPÖ won 29.2% of the vote, while the conservative ÖVP came in second with 26.48%, and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) came in third with 21.05%. These results are unprecedented. Since 1945, the extreme right in Austria has never achieved such high results. "Until the last moment of course we hoped this wouldn't happen, but it almost seemed inevitable," says **Smaranda Krings** from art initiative Question Me and Answer.

Indeed, this unprecedented situation didn't just happen. The FPÖ has built a strategy to conquer power that has been laid out for years, from political presence to media occupation to narrative dominance. "*These elections are the visible results of a long-standing, deep-rooted problem in Austria. They reflect a lack of coming to terms with the historical crimes of National Socialism and the normalisation of far-right ideology, marked by the shifting positions of other parties in favour of the FPÖ,*" adds **Frederik Marroquin**, visual artist and choreographer, and co-founder of the self-organised art space Semmelweisklinik.

In fact, the country's media structure has helped the FPÖ and its far-right narrative spread enormously over the years. **Austria** has a high concentration of ownership and a general media offering that is not diverse at all. The country counts only 12 daily newspapers, mostly owned by wealthy families and the Catholic Church. Even on a regional level the offer doesn't follow, with some regions counting only one periodical. This situation is the perfect ground to lock people into a unique, closed narrative that the European far right knows so well.

Both this historical and political setting helps to understand the particular context of the Austrian far right, now led by **Herbert Kickl**, an extremist who wants to get into the chancellery and then be called '**Volkskanzler**' (like Hitler at the time).

A Threatening Ideology for Independent Culture

As the FPÖ is a party founded by ex-Nazis, nothing encouraging was to be expected, but their programme, attitude and general presentation is still extremely worrying. They have built the entire campaign around migration issues, and the other parties have bent over and adapted to the far-right's themes. Herbert Kickl and the FPÖ want to introduce a 'remigration' plan in **Austria** to deport what they consider to be 'illegitimate' migrants, and they denounce a 'forced multiculturalism.' They reiterate the need to focus on 'groups of people who are native to Austria,' in a general programme titled 'Austria first' that considers making the country a 'fortress.'

This policy plan is nothing but racist and reactionary. As always, the first targets of such ideas will be already marginalised communities, be they BIPOC, queer, migrant, or poor people. Any person or group that deviates from their extremist norm will be an outcast. And this is a direct threat to all independent cultural organisations, especially those that focus on marginalised communities, but also on the rights of migrants and exiles. *"We see is that it created fear in our communities of migrant artists living in Vienna. People have built a life and a career here and are of course afraid,"* points out **Smaranda Krings**. The FPÖ is also a pro-Russian party that wants to stop supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russia's full-scale invasion. The support of Ukrainian artists in exile could then also be threatened by this political moment.

"It's very straightforward: the FPÖ does not support free art or culture," says **Frederik Marroquin**. At risk of losing funding, access to spaces or even legal and social recognition, independent cultural organisations could suffer greatly if the far right makes it to the chancellery.

However, this possibility of seeing **Herbert Kickl** as the next chancellor of **Austria** isn't as certain as it might seem.

In fact, the FPÖ needs a coalition to get to Ballhausplatz 2 (the official residence of the chancellor), and all parties have so far rejected the possibility of an alliance with them, especially because the figure of **Herbert Kickl** is too extremist. But who knows what might happen on the right wing of the political spectrum? The conservative ÖVP has already formed an alliance with the FPÖ in the past, and precedents in Europe prove that alliances with the far right do exist—like in **Sweden**. This negotiation period puts independent cultural players in an uncertain situation, especially because of the Austrian funding agenda: *"All annual applications for funding from the Ministry of Culture are due at the end of September and are discussed from October to December, so ideally organisations find out in December whether they will continue to receive funding for their work in the new year. In theory, there is a transitional budget, so there shouldn't be any cuts. However, if the government is formed very quickly, changes could be made to the available budget,"* explains **Smaranda Krings**. While some media suggest that the country could be without a government until the winter break, the horizon isn't quite clear. Either way, the Austrian independent scene is determined to resist and form alliances in order to survive no matter what.



↑ The old washing kitchen in Semmelweislinik – © Johanna Lea Lassnig

October

Independence Fights Back

In the face of this existential threat and, as **Smaranda Krings** puts it, “a big part of the population feeling empowered after such elections to voice their racist sentiments much louder than before”, independent cultural players immediately mobilised to express their concerns and values, in particular through a collective petition entitled “Not with the FPÖ! Cultural Diversity Is Not Negotiable.” In this document, cultural workers unite to denounce the threat that the FPÖ poses to Austrian culture and its diversity, and they reaffirm their commitment to a democratic culture in **Austria**.

This solidarity movement is necessary to maintain the cultural sector and its activities in such a political situation. The independent scene is very often the most proactive actor in this matter, and even in the face of difficulties it finds a solution to continue resisting and existing. **Frederik Marroquín** confirms and explains: “*If there isn’t a political shift to the left, it’s quite possible that we may face closure as a self-managed centre. However, I want to emphasise that while we must recognise the severity of the situation, there are always new ways to continue projects. We’ve built a network that can endure beyond our current physical location.*” Question Me and Answer also hopes that people will mobilise to support migrant organisations by “*getting involved and donating to our causes,*” and **Smaranda Krings** continues, “*we need to continue holding spaces, creating opportunities, and supporting each other.*”

These actions are inspiring to keep hope alive in times of adversity, and many organisations have committed to long-term action by bringing their communities together to strengthen bonds, with community events or advocacy efforts by organisations such as Black Voices, Maiz, D-Arts, Kültür Gemma, or Question Me and Answer. As **Frederik Marroquín** beautifully puts it, “*We need to move beyond a cycle of outrage and apathy toward a positive shared vision for the future. It may seem absurd on days when the*

violence—whether directly experienced or through media—is unbearable. It may seem absurd during times of war and climate crisis, where political discourse consistently sidesteps these issues in favor of inhumane positions. However, it is essential to cultivate hope and extend our vision beyond our own lives and the next art project. We must translate this hope into concrete actions, remembering that alongside immediate aid and protests, there is a need for slow, detailed work to transform our society sustainably. We don’t all have to take on the same roles; what matters is that we all contribute and see ourselves as actors capable of making a difference.”

— Manon Moulin

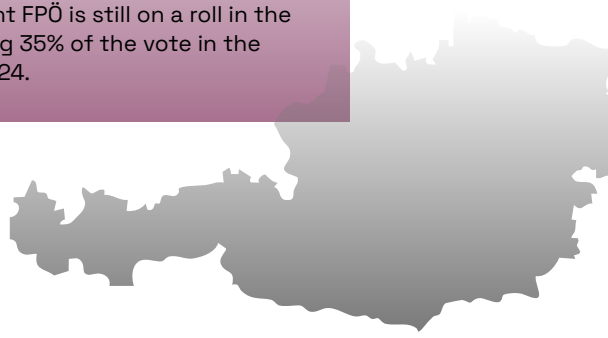


↑ Semmelweislinik's annual summer festival -

Following up

→ Since the elections, **Austria** has formed a three-party coalition, excluding the far-right FPÖ. The coalition consists of the ÖVP (conservatives), SPÖ (social democrats) and NEOS (liberals), following the FPÖ's historic victory but lack of support from other major parties, particularly around its leader **Herbert Kickl**.

→ Despite this coalition, the far-right FPÖ is still on a roll in the country's regional elections, winning 35% of the vote in the Styria region on November 24th, 2024.



© Elisabeth Blum

Resources

[Austria's three-party coalition begins to take shape without the far-right – Euronews, on November 18th, 2024](#)

[Large victoire de l'extrême droite dans un scrutin régional en Autriche \(Large victory for the far right in a regional election in Austria\) – La Libre, on November 24th, 2024](#)



↑ QMA Stage 2023 – © Maria Belova

Georgia and Moldova Facing Elections: Cultural Resistance or Nothing

In November 2024, the spotlight was put on two countries that went through tensed elections processes, Georgia and Moldova. Georgian journalist and documentary filmmaker Maradia Tsaava as well as independent journalist Vitalie Sprinceana write more about both situations for Reset!.

In the wake of contentious elections in Georgia and Moldova, two stories of political and cultural resistance emerge, highlighting the fragility of democratic processes in the face of rooted power dynamics. Maradia Tsaava's account of Georgia's parliamentary elections reveals a landscape marred by allegations of electoral fraud and authoritarian consolidation, as citizens grapple with disillusionment and systemic

oppression. Meanwhile, Vitalie Sprinceana examines Moldova's presidential election and referendum, illustrating how political interests and cultural divides undermine clear information and marginalise independent voices. Together, these narratives offer a reflection on the challenges of fostering democracy and cultural independence in transitional periods, which these elections represent.

Election Fraud in Georgia: Impotence of Change, Force of Cultural Resistance

On November 16th, as the Election Administration announced the final results of Georgia's parliamentary elections, Giorgi Kalandarishvili, the head of the administration, was splashed with black paint directly in his face.

The act, carried out by Davit Kirtadze, a member of the opposition UNM party, was in reference to the election held on October 26th, which gave victory to the ruling Georgian Dream party with 53.9% of the vote. A result that the opposition and non-governmental organisations say was brutally rigged.

In addition to serious violations observed at polling stations, such as voter control, bribery, and voting with someone else's ID, the Georgian Young Voters Association reported that one of the fundamental principles of the right to vote was violated on October 26th: voting was not secret.

"Voter secrecy is a fundamental aspect of the constitutional right to vote, and when this principle is violated, the protection of that right becomes illusory," GYLA reported and requested annulment of the results from all polling stations.

The Georgian court dismissed the claim, even though the test at one of the court stations revealed that the voter's mark was visible on the other side of the ballot paper, because the ink has seeped through the paper.

The act of pouring black paint over

November

Kalandarishvili's face came to symbolise the leaking ink of the parliamentary elections, which NGOs, opposition parties, and thousands of civilians say are not legitimate.

"Our biggest mistake is that we were not expecting this scale of falsification" says **Irakli Kupradze**, General Secretary of the opposition coalition Strong Georgia. *"We considered the new electronic voting system reliable, and we were not ready for absolutely new ways of total falsification. Knowing the limitless immorality of the ruling Georgian Dream party very well, we should have anticipated this."*

The opposition did not plan to enter the parliament and remained outside along with the demonstrators, while on November 25th Georgian Dream held the first assembly to form the parliament, which thousands of people protested against and which President Zourabichvili declared illegitimate. Although the EU has recognised the fraud and some of its representatives have joined the demonstrators in Tbilisi, there has been no official announcement that it will not recognise the legitimacy of the elections, which are seen as a crucial turning point towards either democracy or autocracy.



↑ Protest in Tbilisi – © Nik Voigt

What Happened?

At 06:15 in the morning, **Eka Tsotsoria** was already at the polling station, ready to observe the process. A filmmaker by profession, she registered as an observer for the first time in her life.

“Since this election was pivotal for Georgia, I wanted to be part of the process, to have my own observation of it,” Tsotsoria says.

Eka underwent two days of training held by the Georgian Young Voters Association to prepare. This, after a long journey of resistance: boycotting the Georgian National Film Centre in 2023 along with other 450 filmmakers—launching the Georgian Cinema is Under Threat protest movement –, fighting against the privatisation of the Balda Canyon in western Georgia and protesting against recent laws on the streets of **Tbilisi**. So, becoming an election observer was another step **Eka** was ready to take.

And she was not an exception: hundreds of civilians from different backgrounds joined the My Vote coalition to observe the elections. On the election day, the situation seemed rather calm, but the feeling of doubt never left **Eka**.

“I was observing the process which was calm on the surface, but something else was going on beyond. I was capturing people’s faces for the second, or the third time at the polling station, but the verification machine was validating their identity cards. How could I go against the machine?”

By noon, **Eka** knew she was observing a process that she couldn’t really change. She remembers a tall, big man at the entrance who never left the place; some people moving around with lists in their hands; a camera recording in the middle of the polling station; the ink leaking on the other side of the ballot paper and was not completely covered by the envelope; observers with some unknown, newly created NGO names on their badges; and finally, the

verification machine, which shattered all her confidence and left her with doubts.

“I felt like reality was slipping through my fingers. I was observing a falsification with my own eyes, but I didn’t have actual proof to change anything.”

Although the opposition won her polling station with 58% of the vote, **Eka** went home defeated and devastated. *“I knew we were against the system which was impossible to defeat. Dreaming about fair elections was over.”* And the results confirmed her fears. While Edison Research’s exit polls gave Georgian Dream around 42%, the official result was 54%. Since 2012, the difference between Edison Research’s exit polls and the official results has never been more than 2%.

The results outside **Georgia** were also drastically different. Georgian Dream lost the majority of all polling stations abroad. *“The results from outside Georgia are those without propaganda, bribery, and criminal schemes of falsification,”* says Kupradze of the Strong Georgia coalition. *“After the elections, we found more than 3,000 secret offices mobilising more than 10,000 people involved in the falsification scheme in Georgia. The ID numbers of immigrants who didn’t register for the elections abroad were used here by Georgian Dream.”*



↑ Protest in Tbilisi – © Maradia Tsaava

What's the Future?

Georgia, once seen as the leading country in the region on the road to democracy, now faces long-term isolation in autocracy.

A series of Russian-style laws against international organisations and LGBTQ rights have already caused suspicion in the West and has put Georgia's EU accession on hold.

Under these circumstances, the parliamentary election of October 26th was seen as crucial for Georgia—either get back on the European track with a multi-party coalition government, or remain under the rule of Georgian Dream for a 4th term and isolate itself from the Western world.

*“Unfortunately, **Georgia** cannot be considered as a role model for anything anymore,” Kupradze says. “Now we are synonymous with human rights violations, autocratic laws, falsified elections, and oligarchy.”*

34 years-old writer **Iva Pezuashvili** is still ready to fight. Boycotting the Writers' House, which was taken over by the government in 2023, Pezuashvili has been one of the leading members of resistance movements in the cultural sphere. *“It's a super comfortable position to admit defeat to the Russian empire and give up. On October 26th, the Georgian people lost to Russian special forces and this battle was uneven. Autocratic regimes come with elections, but never go with elections.”* Pezuashvili is hoping for resistance in the form of street protests and massive boycotts. *“After Stalin's regime, no other power has ever harmed Georgian culture like Georgian Dream did, but still, the phase we are in is a very short period of time in history. And it's a period when it becomes clear: are we the people who give up when the battle is uneven, or are we the ones who fight for independence to the very end?”*



↑ Mutant Festival back in September 2024 in Tbilisi –
© Laurent Bigarella

Moldova's Elections That Surprised and Saddened... Everyone. A Story in Two Episodes

Episode 1: Politics of Interests

Moldova held two rounds of presidential elections (on October 20th and November 3rd) and a referendum (on October 20th) on European Union integration.

While the elections were to some extent routine—the mandate of President **Maia Sandu** was due to expire in December this year—the referendum was a completely new experience.

Technically, the referendum was announced on the same day as **Maia Sandu's** intention to run for a second term. *"I think it is necessary to say clearly which road we—the whole country—choose for Moldova",* said **Maia Sandu**, immediately asking the people of **Moldova** to support her presidential bid.

This peculiar timing gave the impression that the whole referendum process was less about the EU integration and more about **Maia Sandu's** bid for re-election. This suspicion was confirmed when it was announced that the referendum would be held on the same day as the presidential elections, on October 20th, 2024.

It can be argued that the referendum was confusing, unnecessary, and completely tied to the political interests of one party and her presidential candidate. First of all, the referendum was not, at least formally, about the EU integration per se, but about a constitutional amendment, which in itself has no impact on the process of European integration and on the technicalities of the EU negotiations (the exact question for the referendum was: *"Do you support the amendment of the Constitution with a view to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union?"*).

Second, the referendum was also unnecessary because the process of European integration is already enshrined in Moldovan law (through the Declaration regarding the European Integration of Moldova adopted by the majority of MPs in 2005 and a decision of the Constitutional Court in 2014).

Thirdly, the referendum was also connected to the political agenda of **Maia Sandu's** Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), and its intention to associate **Maia Sandu's** image with the process of EU integration. In the end, the referendum passed with a very tiny majority of 50.35%. But these results in no way reflect the preferences of Moldovans towards the EU. Rather, they reflect the Moldovan electorate's attitude towards **Maia Sandu** and the PAS, which has governed the country for almost 4 years and has failed to deliver on its promises.

Maia Sandu was also elected after a very nervous second round, but overall there is little reason to celebrate. The main reason is that instead of somehow uniting the country, the referendum has exacerbated some existing divisions and has created some new ones.



↑ Performance entitled "Stadionul este Republican" against the selling of the former Republican Stadium in Chișinău – © Vitalie Sprinceana

Episode 2: Culture of Divides

The cultural sector in **Moldova** has also been divided by this referendum and the presidential elections—along both existing and new lines, with little hope of re-establishing ties or healing wounds. Let's start with the conventional division into three spheres: *the public cultural sector* (State institutions at central and local level), *the creative industries* (commercially oriented cultural entities), and *the small but vocal independent cultural sector* (comprising activists, NGOs, individual artists and groups).

Traditionally, the State has been responsible for the first, enthusiastically supportive of the second, and completely ignored the third.

A series of neoliberal reforms aimed at restructuring the State, combined with a gradual withdrawal of the State from the cultural sector, meant that the State would try to keep the traditional cultural institutions going, while encouraging new cultural initiatives and groups to look elsewhere for funding and support. The idea that cultural institutions could survive—and possibly thrive—on their own created a fertile ground for the perspective that culture in general should look for ways to be profitable, i.e. to take care of itself. This line of thinking, popular in the Moldovan Ministry of Culture at least since 2009–2010, motivated successive governments to pay excessive attention to the *creative industries*, which were seen as a model for the development of both the State cultural sector—which was forced to become more profitable—and the independent cultural sector—whose non-profit orientation was seen as an unjustified whim.

The independent cultural sector, whose practices emphasise accessibility, respect for the environment, social responsibility and the involvement of the artists, opposed this logic of the commodification of culture—but with little success. In 2020–2021, when PAS and **Maia Sandu** came to power, many people

in the independent cultural sector believed that things would change. After all, many people in the sector had been active in causes and struggles that shared many of the same lines as PAS.

Some even saw the new government as a natural ally. The first actions of the new government were reassuring: the approval of the Istanbul Convention (against violence against women and domestic violence, or the reform of the mechanism of State support for NGOs).

At the same time, there were worrying signs: The excessive attention paid by the Ministry of Culture was paying to tourism (to the point that the Minister of Culture inaugurated conferences on medical tourism), the renewed rhetoric about the importance of the creative industries model (which, as it turned out, are not so profitable or sustainable in themselves, judging by the enthusiasm with which organisations in this sector applied for State funding), which suggested that in the area of cultural policy, the current government was continuing the policies of the past rather than breaking with them.

But there was more to come. From 2023, the Ministry of Culture began to behave as a mere appendage of the Presidency and its agenda, becoming the main organiser of cultural events around Maia Sandu's political agenda. In May 2023, for example, the meeting in support of European integration was organised by the Ministry, which paid more money (4.6 million Moldovan leu) for a glamorous concert than it gave to the entire independent sector in that year (3 million Moldovan leu).

A final blow to hopes of change came this summer, when the independent cultural sector signalled that the space for debate in **Moldova** was shrinking and censorship was being re-introduced. The case that sparked the debate was the decision by a State theater to cancel a performance that was mildly critical of the President, after receiving a call from the President's office. When asked to investigate the case, the Minister of Culture preferred to brand the people and organisations raising the issue as "anti-European".

The three-body part of the **cultural**

sector thus approached the elections and the referendum on two separate tracks. The public cultural sector and the creative industries actively participated in the campaign. In the last days of the campaign, most of the public cultural institutions—may they be orchestras or theaters—and most of the organisations of the creative industries sector expressed their support for **Maia Sandu**. The independent cultural sector, on the other hand, has been silent and mostly absent from the campaign.

Most of the people in the sector felt uncomfortable with a situation where they had to choose between two equally bad politicians for the sector. Neither **Maia Sandu** nor her counterpart, **Alexandr Stoianoglo**, could be considered friends of the independent cultural sector, regardless of their motivations.

The situation has not changed in the weeks since **Maia Sandu**'s re-election and is unlikely to change in the immediate future. On the one hand, there will be parliamentary elections in Moldova sometime next year, which will occupy the entire government agenda, leaving little room for culture. On the other hand, with no changes in the Ministry, there is little hope that things will change in a significant way: For instance, that the government will stop favouring only the creative industries and start working on the things that are important for the sector—the retribution of cultural workers, the law on the status of artists, the unionisation of the sector, and so on. It appears that, for the time being, the independent cultural sector in Moldova, a small but vocal community, will have to continue the struggle with little or no understanding from the current government.

The elections in **Georgia** and **Moldova** expose deep-seated challenges to democracy and cultural autonomy. In both cases, political manipulation and systemic marginalisation have fuelled public discontent, leaving citizens and independent cultural players facing uncertain futures. These struggles underline the urgent need for resistance to safeguard democratic values and cultural diversity in the region.

— Maradia Tsaava & Vitalie Sprinceana



↑ Installation by Lilia Nenescu, seeds from the territory of the former Republican Stadium, from the exhibition Chișinău at the Red Line, November 2024 – © Lucian Spătaru

Following up

→ Prime Minister **Irakli Kobakhidze** announced the suspension of EU negotiations, breaking a prior pledge to secure membership by the decade's end. This decision marks a contentious shift as EU integration has strong public support and is enshrined in Georgia's constitution

→ Tens of thousands have taken to the streets in Georgia, following the government's decision to suspend EU accession talks. Demonstrations have spread outside the capital Tbilisi, with protesters demanding new elections and the reversal of Russian-style policies. The protests have seen violent clashes with police using water cannons and tear gas to disperse crowds.

→ Many independent cultural organisations, such as Reset! member **Mutant Radio**, have decided to suspend their activities and events in order to focus fully on the protests against the election results and the decision to suspend EU negotiations.

→ Moldova is now facing an unprecedented energy crisis due to its precarious situation and past heavy dependence on Russian-produced energy (gas and electricity). As the country tries to diversify its energy model, Moldovans are struggling to pay for energy expenses and to heat their homes. This crisis will, of course, have an impact on independent cultural venues, as their finances may suffer from these rising costs.

Resources

[#Georgia thread](#) – *OC Media*

[Protests in Georgia, explained](#)
– *The Kyiv Independent*

[48 detained in crackdown on pro-EU protests in Georgia](#)
– *Politico* on December 7th, 2024

[Mutant Radio's post](#)

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