

# Cultural Independence: Its Value(s) and Conditions



What autonomy and independence means to  
the members of the European network Reset!

Survey report drawn up by:

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## 1. Research questions

Reset! is a Europe-wide network of cultural and media organisations who define their activity as independent. It was launched in April 2022 by the French cultural association Arty Farty. Reset!'s application to a Creative Europe call for projects comprised an observation process. France's *Observatoire des politiques culturelles* supported this process by conducting a survey over 2022-2023 hinged around the network's members<sup>01</sup>

When it was set up, it had 34 members in 16 countries. At the time of writing, it had 85 members in 25 countries. It now (August 2024) has 110 members in 30 countries.

01

and the notion of independence they apply to their work.

In the light of the activities of the Reset! network and its members, **the survey takes a dynamic look at the construction of a category of “independent operators” in the cultural and media production industry, with a particular focus on the political-institutional and socio-professional dimensions that come into play.**

What characterises this category of so-called independent cultural operators in Europe? What representations and conceptions of the political economy of culture and the media underpin its construction within the network? How is independence put to political and institutional use by the Reset! network and its members? What are the specific needs of independent operators, as expressed in the various territorial and political contexts represented? What geographical, sectoral or other disparities or variations can be identified? How do you become (and stop being) an independent operator? What are the cultural, social, and political values promoted by network members? These are the main questions discussed within the scope of the survey.

The question of the independence of artistic activity, and of cultural and media producers, has regularly been raised in various forms and under different designations (autonomy, artistic freedom, freedom of expression, non-conformism, authenticity, emancipation, breakaway, the debate between art for art's sake and social art, underground by choice, self-production and the *Do it yourself* [DIY] ethos, etc.) when talking of the gradual empowerment of the arts and the professionalisation of culture, and of the new directions taken by the media (digital publishing and platforms, citizen journalism, etc.). However, the notion of independence can take on different meanings depending on the national, political, and historical context.

Today, given the specific history of the empowerment and structuring of artistic endeavours in different European countries, the perception and definition of independence vary—between tendencies to distance an initiative from economic processes and the quest for political and ideological autonomy. On another level, the emergence of new media has led to competition in terms of content, standards, priorities, status, scale and means of

production, and distribution in response to oligopolies, and even attempts to circumvent censorship. Over and above national historical differences, the concept of independence held by the operators is forged by social and generational factors, their previous career path, artistic currents and movements, and the editorial circles to which they belong. The vision of independence varies in line with the operators' social circles. One of the aims of this research was to identify the boundaries of political, economic, artistic, and editorial autonomy/heteronomy that are acceptable to the operators in the Reset! network, i.e. the red lines beyond which it is no longer possible to speak of independence—the aim being to come up with a definition that is not merely essentialist.

A number of questions in this survey touch on the political aspects of cultural activity that is perceived as independent. How do the tensions, divergences or, on the contrary, cooperation practices between independent operators, reinforced by the lack of resources, impact on the claim of independence in the cultural and media sector?

The survey therefore explores aspects of the activity of Reset! network members that go beyond the cultural and editorial sphere in the strict sense, and relate more broadly to social and political issues, the vision of society and its development, and public debate. What are the social and political values promoted by the members of the Reset! network? Are any of these values associated with, or even specific to, the independent cultural sector? What is the relationship between these structures and Europe?

Finally, there is also the question of the “right” public policies for independent culture. How can the independence of cultural operators be promoted in the political and administrative arena? From the point of view of the members of the Reset! network, what measures can be envisaged to mitigate the vulnerability of the independent cultural sector in the face of crises? The health crisis revealed this vulnerability, but other threats are also looming: energy, economic, financial and environmental crises, and even, in some countries, political crises in the event of a change of majority or regime. Whatever the case, this reflection must take on board the multi-level dimension of public policies, including those for culture and the media, and give due consideration to the local, regional, national, or federal and European scale.

## 2. Survey methodology

To explore these questions and come up with answers, four survey methods were adopted:

- collection and analysis of **documentation** on the subject, including material produced by the network, in particular 15 newsletters published by Reset! in 2022-2023 and the

reports drawn up in the wake of 43 workshops organised under the patronage of the network between February 2022 and August 2023;

- **participant observation**: in particular, we took part in the two Reset! forums in Brussels in 2022 and Lyon in 2023 and systematically participated in the network's videoconferences during the survey period, from autumn 2022 to the end of 2023;

- compilation and processing of an online **questionnaire** to gather information on the legal status, budget, field of activity, geographical location, size of structures and workforce, seniority and main characteristics of the members of the Reset! network. The questionnaire also touched on the definition of independence, which made it possible to map its dimensions and cross-reference the results with the characteristics of the structures. 35 network members responded to the questionnaire between December 2022 and January 2023;

- 27 **semi-structured interviews** with 30 representatives of Reset! member organisations from 18 European countries, plus 2 interviews with other resource persons (representative of the European Commission's Executive Agency for Education and Culture, director of another European cultural network).

The Reset! network offers a unique opportunity to investigate the definition of independence. It makes it possible to go beyond a case study limited to one area of activity, one country or one town. It also provides an opportunity to cross-fertilise and compare the perspectives of operators who are geographically and sectorally diverse, but who rally around a common project, challenges, and a debate that touch on the vision and experience of independence. Our thinking is based on a dynamic approach to the independence of cultural and media operators, which incorporates both its relative nature and the diversity of its conceptions in different national, political, and sectoral contexts.

### **3. The dimensions of independence: conceptual framework**

The survey was structured around four possible dimensions of independence.

- *Economic independence*

Economic independence is the key dimension in the debate on the professionalisation and empowerment of cultural production, particularly in the liberal capitalist states of the West where, given the decline of State censorship, the role of market constraints in limiting the margin of manoeuvre of artists and media professionals grew, towards

the end of the 20th century, to become the main factor limiting freedom of expression. The concentration of creation within large groups is also often held up as a factor in homogenising and controlling cultural activity. A number of alternative modes of production and distribution have been proposed and conceptualised to allow operators to distance themselves from the market model and the big groups, such as the *Do it yourself* approach in music, first developed by the punk movement.

- *Two dimensions of political independence: relations with the political-administrative world (institutional politics focus) and involvement in public debate (involvement focus)*

When it comes to culture, the quest for independence from the world of politics raises at least two dilemmas. Firstly, which political players are seen as potential sources of dependency? Are we talking about State institutions and their representatives? Or, to ensure the greatest possible degree of autonomy, is the aim to reject cooperation with any political player: parties, collective movements, human rights associations, etc.? What types of collaboration and cooperation can be considered as legitimate, and at what point does the risk of loss of autonomy become an inhibiting factor? To this must be added the role of local political players, who may even, in some cases, enter into opposition with government objectives, as was the case with Wrocław, European Capital of Culture in 2016, declaring itself to be “the city of the other Poland.”

The second dilemma concerns the relationship between independence and public debate. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine a philosophy more independent than “art for art’s sake,” which deliberately breaks away from all political considerations and debates. On the other hand, independence can be seen as a necessary condition and a basis to be given a voice in the debate on social and political issues. This is true of the tradition of non-conformist or underground art in Central and Eastern Europe, or that of intellectual activism in France, for example.

Moreover, opting for a particular mode of production and distribution in accordance with the principles of economic independence can also be linked to political choices or produce political effects (political dimensions and effects of economic independence). Contesting the rules imposed by the large groups and the approach favoured by the cultural industries, or rejecting commercialisation, the industrialisation of cultural production and the increasing scale of distribution, for example, may be considered, as in the case of radical artistic movements, as criticism of the capitalist model of society, or at any rate contrive or reinforce a semblance of an anti-establishment attitude. Similarly, the proliferation of self-managed media or platforms, which resort to participatory or other sources of funding, is helping to shape alternative models to the oligopolistic mainstream.

- *Independence of artistic expression, editorial independence (aesthetic-editorial focus)*

A fourth dimension of independence relates to a rationale that is inherent to that particular artistic or media field: the possibility of breaking away from conventions, rules, constraints, fashions, and traditions.

What are the aesthetic and editorial effects of independence, and how can they be understood? Is there an aesthetic and editorial convergence between initiatives that claim to be independent? Does independent cultural activity necessarily have to aspire to be innovative, non-conformist, alternative from an aesthetic, artistic, or editorial point of view? Is there an organic link between the model of cultural production and the scale of its distribution?

## 4. Main findings of the survey

### 4.1. Definitions of independence: local embodiments of the principle of creative autonomy

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- *Convergence of the definition around the aesthetic-editorial focus*

First of all, the survey reveals an essential convergence in the definition of independence by Reset! members. It is a pragmatic, situational, and relative definition, in which autonomy in the production of content takes precedence over the institutional form and legal status of initiatives: independence is linked, above all, to creative freedom, and the organisational structures that are designed to guarantee this freedom can be varied and take a back seat.

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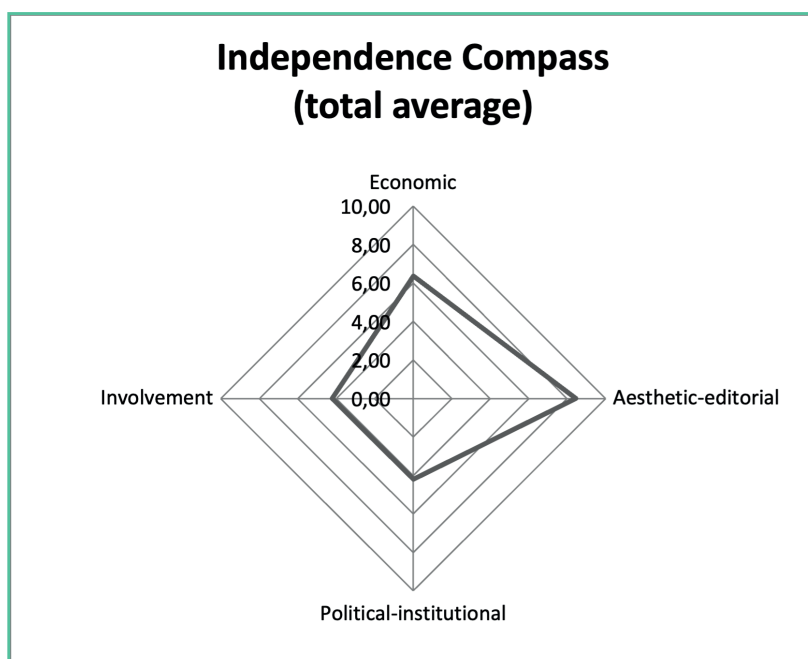
From a quantitative point of view<sup>02</sup>, the “aesthetic-editorial” focus of this definition of independence appears dominant (average score given by members in the questionnaire = 8.46/10, mean score = 9) and the most consensual (standard deviation = 1.86, i.e. the dispersion in responses is the

In the questionnaire, members were asked to express their agreement or disagreement—by giving a score on a scale of 0 to 10—with the following sentences:

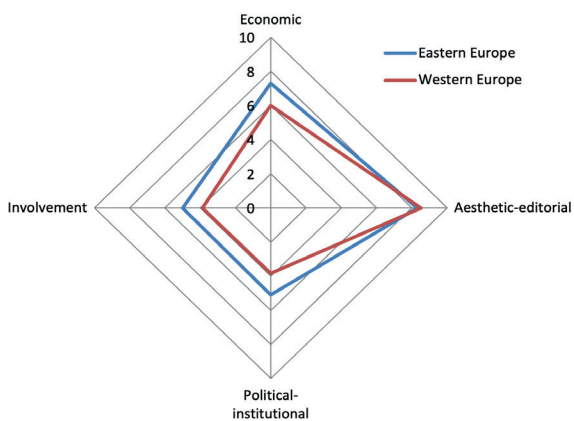
- Independent cultural and media initiatives must distance themselves from market considerations, the quest for economic profit, and large groups.
- Independent cultural and media initiatives should limit cooperation with government and State institutions, including public funding.
- Independent cultural and media initiatives must remain outside the political debate and avoid any cooperation with political parties and movements.
- Independent cultural and media initiatives must aspire to artistic or editorial originality and aesthetic non-conformity.

lowest of the four aspects, so the responses are the most homogeneous). The economic dimension comes second (mean score = 6.37), but it is also the dimension that shows up most disagreement between members (standard deviation = 3.02). On average, respondents attach less importance to the two political focuses of independence: “institutional policy” and “involvement” (mean score = 4.20), bearing in mind that the

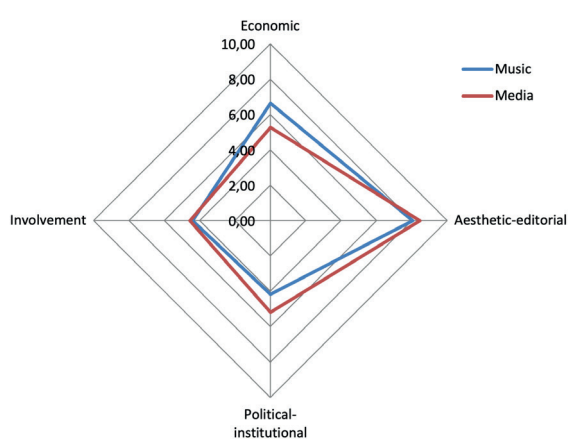
most frequent response concerning the importance of the “involvement” focus (modal value or “mode”) was zero, which testifies to the fact that a large number of participants believe that involvement in public debate on political subjects is not contradictory with the independence of cultural activity. As can be seen from the graphs, this configuration is shared by network members, almost independently of their region of origin, sector of activity, legal status, seniority, budget, etc.



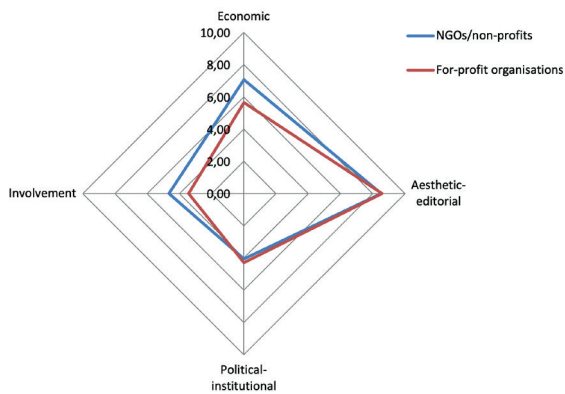
### Eastern Europe v Western Europe



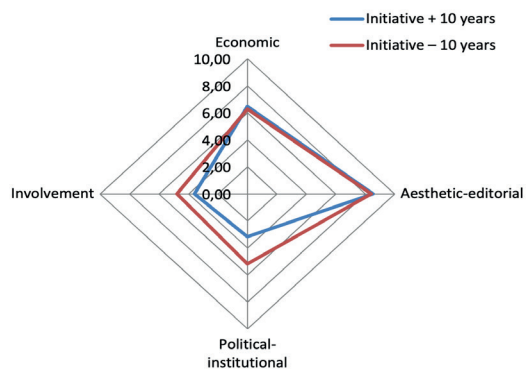
### Music v Media



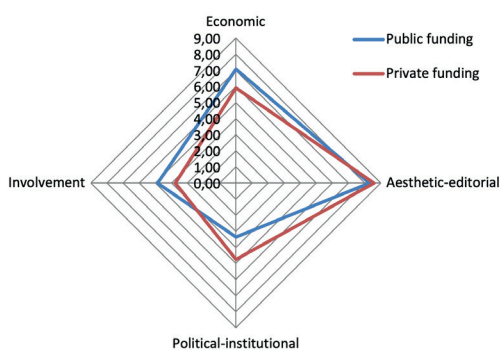
### Legal status



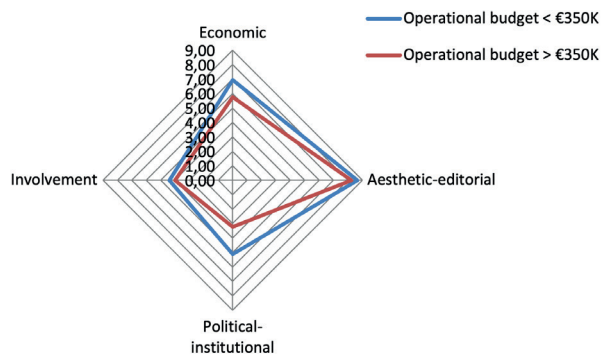
### Seniority



### Share of public/private funding



### Annual operational budget





### *- Two levels of independence: cultural independence and financial-legal independence*

However, an analysis of the interviews shows that this shared vision of independence has a dualistic quality: it implies two connected but distinct levels of definition. On the one hand, we can talk about “content independence” or “cultural independence” and, for most of the interviewees, this is an essential and primary aspect. It is necessary to separate this from “financial” or “legal” independence (the fact of not belonging to a public institution or a large group), which constitutes the second level of the definition.

This means that, at the first level, that of content, independence is seen as economic autonomy (in relation to major groups and sometimes to market expectations) and political autonomy (in relation to State authorities and institutional political players, such as political parties). This autonomy is seen as imperative for maintaining creative control, artistic and editorial innovation, and involvement in a socially useful action (promoting the values of equality, inclusiveness, tolerance, environmental protection, etc.). Independence implies that exploration, creative freedom and social usefulness are given priority over economic profit.

The second level of the definition of independence encompasses financial or administrative elements. For example, the independent cultural sector is an “ecosystem defined by a type of ownership”: the initiative (festival, media, club, label, artistic collective, etc.) belongs to the people who work there (at least for the most part); there are no external shareholders who could influence decisions; these organisations are independent of the major cultural institutions. We can identify three conditions that the interviewees attach to this legal and financial independence: self-management; profitability, sustainability and financial stability; autonomy in relation to sources of funding.

For the Reset! members interviewed, the relationship between the legal-financial level of independence and the content level is not automatic: one does not necessarily guarantee the other. For example, municipal cultural institutions (museums or concert halls) are legally dependent on local authorities, but can be quite independent in cultural terms by relying on their reputation and established position. This is a paradox where legal dependence can reinforce cultural independence. And vice versa, legally independent institutions can abandon their independence in terms of content by conforming to the expectations of funding bodies and funding criteria.

### *- Limits to independence*

Analysis of the interviews also sheds more light on the meaning that the operators assign to these aspects and on the boundaries of independence. From an aesthetic and editorial

point of view, the members insist on diversity and creative freedom without defining rigid models or formal constraints.

The perception of the limits of cooperation with private partners (including large groups) varies, but is generally quite flexible: each initiative defines the point of balance, a configuration of relations that leaves it sufficient creative margin for manoeuvre.

There is no reluctance to cooperate with public institutions, and public funding is seen as a form of protection against unfair competition from large commercial groups. That being said, the availability and accessibility of public funding varies greatly from country to country.

As a general rule, the initiatives are concerned about their image of political neutrality, and therefore adopt a cautious approach to cooperation with political parties and movements, avoiding being associated with any particular political force.

So-called “independent” initiatives are keen to become involved in public debate on political and social issues, but often tend to present themselves as non-political.

This common definition then takes on concrete forms that vary according to the national context (in particular the structure of public funding opportunities), the sector of activity, the legal status, and the profit-making or non-profit objectives of the initiative.

One possible explanation for this convergence lies in the high degree of internationalisation of the independent cultural sector. This internationalisation is visible both from an organisational point of view, since independent cultural structures often sign up to international collaborations and projects (for example, at least 15 of the 27 initiatives examined belong to international networks other than Reset!), and at an individual level.

## 4.2. Independence in daily practices and in action ---

### *- Profiles and becoming independent*

Becoming independent is often the default option, because it is the easiest way of getting involved in creative activities without making too many concessions. From this point of view, independence is seen as a driving force for creation: as this status is more accessible, it also channels projects that stand out from the mainstream and contribute to innovation.

Out of a sample of 30 people, 16 said they had a postgraduate qualification, or even a doctorate, either in cultural fields (museum conservation, media studies, art studies) or in other fields (political science, economics, IT). The others are self-taught. A very large number of the representatives of Reset! members interviewed (especially among the youngest) are true “children of Europe”—of the 30 representatives interviewed, at least 15 currently live or have lived in the past in a country other than their country of origin in order to study or work.

#### *- Independence in daily practices*

DIY and resourcefulness appear to be organic to independent cultural activity. Multiskilling and multitasking are typical of the activities, as is changing jobs within an often-horizontal hierarchy.

In terms of their organisation and day-to-day running, these cultural initiatives fall somewhere between *Do it yourself* groups—voluntary and self-organised—and the institutions of “bureaucratised” culture. They form a bridge between these two worlds.

#### *- The contradictions and tensions of independence*

The hybrid nature of the sector under study gives rise to a series of contradictions and tensions that force operators to constantly question their practices and objectives. They are resolved through a balancing act resulting in the appropriate models of action.

The first contradiction that characterises independent culture is that between the commercial nature of the activity and the ethos of selfless engagement. From this point of view, independent initiatives are situated on a scale between two ideal-typical poles: commercial enterprise and not-for-profit association. There are several ways of reconciling these two principles: by marketing initiatives in the “*artisanal*” spirit typical of independent structures and on a restricted basis; limiting the redistribution of profits; opting for a cooperative legal form for the company (social economy company); greater financial transparency; careful management and selection of funding sources and methods; separation between the initiative’s commercial activities and its altruistic projects, which are concentrated in two separate structures; diversification of activity (creation of media or labels); by setting up outside the established centres of cultural and tourist life, which limits commercialisation.

The second contradiction specific to independent cultural activity is that between professionalisation and passion, professional institutionalisation and vocation. The members of the Reset! network are generally in favour of the gradual, smooth

professionalisation of the independent sector. The solutions put forward revolve around the balanced and non-excessive use of voluntary work, the management of working time (often part-time), career management (frequent job changes) and a horizontal decision-making structure.

*- Values shared by the operators*

Freedom of expression and of the press, the inclusion of discriminated groups, the integration of art and culture as fully-fledged components of society, the need to renew social ties: such are the main demands of the independent operators. The ecological transition, short distribution channels, gender equality, and equal pay are among the objectives pursued by the members of the network, objectives that enable shared values to be defended. Transmission from one generation to the next is also a real concern for independent operators.

*- How can independence create value?*

Invisibility in the eyes of public institutions remains a major problem for many structures. Value-creation needs to come from various levels when it comes to independence: peers, public authorities, and the general public. Value-creation comes on top of all the daily tasks, so it is often carried out in an unsystematic way. Depending on the socio-political context, value-creation can be discreet or, on the contrary, offensive. Reset! members are generally keen to share best practice when it comes to the value-creation strategies that guarantee cultural independence.

*- Major challenges and good public policies for the independent sector*

Insufficient resources are the main difficulty, but not the only one. Horizontal organisation can give rise to tensions between those who are driven by their vocation and others who see their work as just another job. The uncertainty associated with job insecurity and financial insecurity also prompts some staff to leave. Volunteering is both an asset and a weakness, as it puts pressure on salaries and can be a factor in reproducing the climate of insecurity in the independent cultural sector.

Cultural policies vary greatly from one country to another, in terms of financial resources, acceptance of independence, censorship, and policies that are more or less favourable to artistic experimentation. A number of ideas have been put forward for adapting cultural policies to the specific needs of independent structures, mainly in terms of regulation, accessibility of funding, and co-construction of policies.

### *- Interdependence and transnational cooperation*

Independence is often linked to cooperation between cultural operators, who weave a web of interdependence. This means that the autonomy of the independent cultural sector does not necessarily imply that its initiatives are rolled out in isolation. There are many different ways in which independent structures work together. Cooperation is seen as essential, provided that it is balanced and takes place on a “peer-to-peer” basis, in a non-hierarchical way. In addition to their Reset! membership, many members also belong to other networks. Interdependence is self-evident for most structures and networking at all levels comes across as essential. But members outside the European Union are disappointed with the lack of flexibility of the European procedures.

## **5. Conclusion**

The concept of independence in culture has multiple meanings and its definition is constantly evolving. The meaning associated with it varies according to the period, the country, and the region. However, our study of the perception of independence by members of the Reset! network reveals a striking degree of general convergence, despite the differences arising from the political and economic contexts within which independent cultural initiatives are rolled out in Europe (these differences are shaped in particular by variations in the structure of opportunities for public funding and other forms of public support).

This convergence characterises both the vision of independence (its meaning and the weight of its different dimensions), the issues and challenges linked to the day-to-day running of the structures, and the tensions and contradictions that independent cultural activity engenders. Both a fruit and a vector of European integration in practice, the Reset! experience highlights the viability, usefulness, and prospects offered by European cooperation in the independent cultural sector.

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