



Reset! Reset! Reset! Reset! Reset!

A Reset! Newsletter Compilation: Threats to Cultural Independence, Artistic Freedom, and a Glimpse into Europe's Politics



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The Necessity of Archiving and Compiling

This [transparency] law [promoted by Viktor Orbán in Hungary] is all about shut up or shut down.

Gábor Kardos, 444.hu

If their goal was to make us fear, then yes it was a success. It was in our heads, and it still is! [...] The fear is here.” He argues that it was never about transparency. “I don’t have anything to hide, I can show to everyone how little (or no) money we make working in cultural media.”

Peter Bokor, [MMN Mag](#) & [Lahmacun Radio](#)

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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 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.

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.

Gentrification is not just an urban issue; it's a democratic one. It silences dissent, homogenises culture, and excludes those who cannot afford to belong.

Sofia Craveiro, Gerador

It also deepened social inequalities across the metropolitan area and the access to the centre

Jesualdo Lopes, The Blacker The Berry

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.

"Journalism and civil society are the first victims. If you silence them, you can act with impunity.

Cristina Lupu, Centre for Independent Journalism

Politicians don't understand that culture is a public service. We got here [n.r. with the rise of the far right in Romania], because we neglected artists and educators. We neglected culture as an educational act."

Mihaela Michailov, Replika

Reset! 2025 Monthly Chronology

JANUARY	FEBRUARY Kosovo's Path: Elections, Independence, and Cultural Resilience	MARCH The Independent Cultural Scene in North Macedonia: Realities, Challenges, and Regional Cooperation
JUNE Hungary's Latest Attacks on Independent Media and Cultural Scene	MAY Culture and Media amid Romania's Fight Against the Far-right	APRIL
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DECEMBER	NOVEMBER Political Paralysis, Cultural Consequences: Belgium's Cultural Scene in Peril	OCTOBER 'This Could Be the Last Time': Lithuania Defends its Artistic Freedom

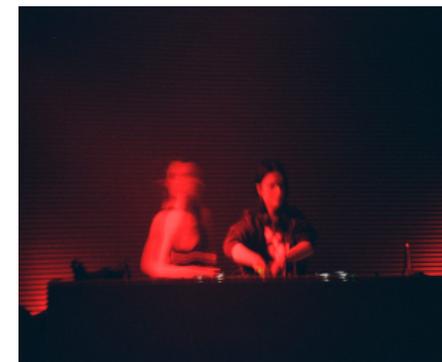
Kosovo's Path: Elections, Independence, and Cultural Resilience

In February 2025, the spotlight was put on Kosovo, with regard to its most recent elections, its 17th independence anniversary, and ongoing political and economic challenges highlighting the resistance of its independent cultural and media scene, which faces funding cuts, political interference, and external pressures while striving to foster community-driven sustainability and cross-regional collaboration. To get the pulse of the independent scene, we interviewed Besa Luci, editor-in-chief of *Kosovo 2.0*, an independent print and multimedia multilanguage magazine, as well as Sadie Suhodolli, aka Tadi, visual artist, DJ, and co-founder of the *Bijat collective*, an organisation pushing a feminist and queer perspective in the electronic music scene.

On February 17th, 2025, Kosovo celebrated the 17th anniversary of its independence. This milestone comes a week after the young country's last parliamentary elections, which took place on February 9th. The first regular elections in the country's history—meaning that the government has completed its full term—saw the incumbent candidate, Prime Minister **Albin Kurti**, and his Vetëvendosje! Party (VV) came first with more than 40% of the vote, but lost the majority they won in 2021 with more than 50% of the vote. This election and its campaign took place in an overall national and regional context of tensions and political interference that deeply affect independent Kosovan cultural and media players.



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Bijat at Karmakoma, nightclub in Belgrade – @ Nani Pavlovic

February

Kosovan Citizens Won't Be Fooled

It's important to note that the current election results are not entirely final, partly because the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) has a month to officially certify the results, and partly because the same CEC "vote counting updates were halted," says Besa Luci. Votes are hence still being counted, particularly from the diaspora, conditional ballots, and those cast by people with disabilities. However, it's unlikely that the currently announced results will change drastically.

As **Besa Luci** says, this election "indicate that citizens are increasingly holding politicians accountable, both within the ruling party and the opposition." Indeed, among the main parties, only the VV has seen its score fall. One explanation could be that the ruling VV published a very light programme and its candidate, **Albin Kurti**, refused to take part in media debates. This aloof attitude didn't

convince all 2021 voters to give their vote to VV again, which has been "criticised [for] attempt[ing] to avoid public accountability," as **Sadie Suhodolli** explains.

"Citizens cannot be taken for granted," says **Besa Luci**, and media coverage of these elections, and of politics in general, tends to be "personif[ying] politics, emphasising individual leaders rather than providing thorough, in-depth reporting, analysis, or even fact-checking"—a situation that is of course not specific to **Kosovo**. This lack of in-depth and informed political coverage doesn't represent the needs and interests of the Kosovan population, which is largely preoccupied with socio-economic well-being. Unfortunately, the latter partly depends on regional politics, especially on Kosovo-Serbia relations, in which the EU is heavily involved.

Political and Economic Interference

Relations between **Kosovo** and

Serbia are at the centre of regional politics, mainly because Serbia doesn't recognise Kosovo as an independent State. Since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, various agreements have shaped relations between the two countries in an attempt to normalise them. This process has been conducted mainly under the supervision of the EU and, to a lesser extent, the US and international institutions.

However, without going into the details of this very complex situation, not all parties are playing the game, but some are suffering the consequences more than others.

The example of the Ohrid Agreement is eloquent. This agreement, also known as the agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, fits into a broader framework of an EU-led approach to normalisation that started in 2013. The agreement was accepted by both sides in October 2023, by **Albin Kurti** for **Kosovo** and **Aleksandar Vučić** for **Serbia**, but Vučić refused to concretely sign it, claiming that more discussions were needed. For its part, the EU asserted that the verbal agreement was binding enough—a questionable stance. This was preceded and followed by various violent incidents in northern Kosovo, notably an armed attack organised by the former vice-president of Srpska Lista, a Serb minority political party in Kosovo, in which a police sergeant was killed, and violence related to the refusal of the Prime Minister Kurti to allow the establishment of the Association

of Serb Municipalities in northern Kosovo.

In this context, the EU has imposed sanctions on **Kosovo** for ‘failing to maintain peace in northern Kosovo’, but has not sanctioned Serbia for its involvement in the violence. This “double standard in the EU’s approach,” as formulated by **Besa Luci**, tends only to push the actors away from the normalisation table.

It also has a deep economic impact on **Kosovo**, as all EU funds are frozen under these sanctions. On top of this, with USAID shutting down under the new Trump administration, the US have recently cut off many flows that contribute to the development and stability of Kosovo’s economy, but also to the viability of its cultural and media scene. Indeed, **Sadie Suhodolli** shares her hope that this moment will “put Kosovo officials into trajectory of finding sustainable and independent modes of securing funds from its own budget to at least sustain main cultural life of the country.”

Independent Culture and Media Lacking Support

As in most countries, culture and media are usually the last to be considered, and even more so when it comes to independent culture and media. And in Kosovo, this situation is made even more fragile by the fact that external actors have decided to abandon the country and its scene by withdrawing their economic investments, but also because of political pressures on national funds distribution.

In 2023, the EU is said to have taken away around €500 million from **Kosovo**, while the US, mainly through USAID, distributed \$70.3 million in 2023, which will disappear in 2025. These suspensions have “forc[ed] many organisations to cut staff and halt crucial services,” explains Besa Luci. One of these victims is the **Lumbardhi Cinema** in Prizren, which had to cancel its renovation after its €1.5 million grant was frozen. And when a grant isn’t frozen, it is the EU bureaucracy which is “discourag[ing] people in applying due to gigantic application

processes, for which small scene like Kosovo don’t have manpower for,” points out **Sadie Suhodolli**.

On the other hand, **Sadie Suhodolli** explains that the national funds are in the turmoil. Despite growth in funding, there is an increased anxiety within the independent cultural scene regarding a possible “politisation of funding,” regardless of which party will come to power. Both situations weaken the infrastructures of **Kosovo’s** cultural sector by making them conditional and unreliable.

Being an independent cultural or media organisation in **Kosovo** now means being self-reliant and trying to create stronger links directly with the audience. This is what Kosovo 2.0 is trying to do with its **membership programme HIVE**: “foster[ing] both independence and a stronger connection with audiences,” as **Besa Luci** says. This is also the case with the Bijat collective, which itself exists thanks to its community of like-minded DJs and artists. The latter are even a great example of overcoming political divides between Serb and Albanian community in the region. Indeed, **Sadie Suhodolli** takes the example of the **Mirëdita, dobar dan! festival**: “it brings together artists, human rights activists, peace activists, and public figures from Kosovo and Serbia, and contributes



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to a regional perspective and fosters cooperation and peace building.” She continues by explaining that “electronic music scene from both sides has been collaborating with each other for years.”

Independence celebrations, election results, and economic instability have been the rhythm of Kosovan life in recent days, weeks, and years. Despite these challenges that push young journalists and artists to leave Kosovo, the country “still has a very vibrant independent scene with youth movements and media initiatives that are striving to contribute to a better cultural social environment,” concludes **Sadie Suhodolli**. As Europe’s newest country paves its political way, its independent cultural and media scene is indeed trying to find its place to exist without surviving, and it looks like the answer is once again collective, with the community of each project at its core.

— Manon Moulin

Resources:

[Listen to the People: Rethinking Kosovo-Serbia ‘Normalisation’](#) — *BalkanInsight*, on September 3rd, 2025

[Kosovo president sets December 28 as date for snap vote](#) — *Reuters*, on November 20th, 2025

[Political Deadlock in Kosovo: Will New Elections Break It?](#) — *The Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, in December 2025

[Kosovo’s 2025 Ends as it Began, at the Ballot Box](#) — *BalkanInsight*, in December on 16th, 2025

Following up:

→ After the February 2025 elections failed to produce a stable majority, President Vjosa Osmani dissolved the Assembly and called snap parliamentary elections for December 28th, 2025, turning the year into a prolonged campaign cycle rather than a normal term.

→ The inability of Vetëvendosje and opposition parties to agree on a governing coalition left Kosovo with a caretaker government for most of 2025, delaying key reforms, budgets, and decisions that directly affect cultural funding and socio-economic policy.

→ This extended uncertainty has reinforced the precarity of independent cultural and media organisations, who continue to face frozen or unpredictable public and international support and must rely even more on community-based and cross-regional collaborations to stay active.

The Independent Cultural Scene in North Macedonia: Realities, Challenges, and Regional Cooperation

In March 2025, the spotlight was on North Macedonia and its independent cultural scene that is caught between the pressures of institutional neglect and the enduring drive for artistic and civic expression. Despite facing financial precarity, restrictive cultural policies, and the privatisation of public spaces, independent cultural players continue to create, rebel, and collaborate. Through guerrilla art performance and regional partnerships, these artists and collectives resist the erosion of public cultural spaces while championing alternative narratives and community solidarity. However, without systemic policy reforms and sustainable funding, the future of this cultural ecosystem remains uncertain.

North Macedonia's independent cultural scene operates in a complex environment shaped by historical legacies, economic precarity, and institutional neglect. Yet, it remains an essential force for artistic expression, civic engagement, and regional cooperation. From grassroots cultural spaces to experimental art collectives, independent initiatives have carved out a space for critical dialogue and creative resistance. However, the realities we face are often marked by financial instability, restrictive cultural policies, and the broader socio-political challenges affecting the region.

Institutional Barriers, Privatisation, and Guerrilla Actions

One of the biggest challenges facing the independent scene is the lack of a coherent cultural policy that recognises the role of non-institutional actors. State funding mechanisms often prioritise large cultural institutions,

leaving independent spaces and artists to compete for a limited pool of resources. It is also often the case, such as this year, that after a change in government the expected allocation of funds from the Ministry of Culture (now renamed Ministry of Culture and Tourism) doesn't go as planned because of change in administration, leaving many defunded in a time when cultural funding is already very fragile. The situation this year left many organisations, including the biggest feminist cultural events and festivals like PRVO PA ZENSKO and Tiiiit! Inc., completely out of the list. Bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistent public funding are making it nearly impossible for small-scale initiatives to secure stable operational support.

Moreover, the privatisation of urban space has led to the displacement of cultural initiatives. The transformation of Skopje's public spaces under projects like Skopje 2014 has marginalised independent artists, replacing open cultural venues with commercialised, nationalist aesthetics. Many independent spaces in Skopje and other cities have been forced to close or relocate due to redevelopment projects that prioritise commercial interests over cultural sustainability. The once dynamic cultural landscape is increasingly dominated by spaces that cater to a narrow consumer



Everyone for MKC Protest

base rather than fostering inclusivity and creative experimentation.

As a response, cultural actors have had to resort to guerrilla artistic interventions. Pop-up performances in public squares, abandoned buildings, and other non-traditional venues, reclaiming public space as an act of defiance. The phenomenon of guerrilla performance reflects a broader struggle for cultural autonomy in North Macedonia, where artists must continuously adapt to an environment of shrinking public resources and increasing commercial pressures.

Beyond physical displacement, the erosion of public space as a site for free expression has had a chilling effect on cultural activism. The shrinking number of accessible venues forces artists to work under increasingly precarious conditions, relying on informal networks and solidarity within the artistic community.

Solidarity and the Role of Regional Cooperation

Despite these constraints, the independent cultural sector in North Macedonia has demonstrated



Stroke in Nature, Theatre Performance – © Schtrich

significant solidarity, especially in times of political and social upheaval. Cultural workers have frequently stood alongside civic activists, lending their creative practices to movements for justice, democracy, and human rights. The 2016 Colorful

Revolution saw artists, designers, and performers take to the streets, using murals, performances, and installations as a form of political resistance.

Regional cooperation has also become a key survival strategy. Cross-border collaborations with partners in **Belgrade, Prishtina, Tirana, and Sarajevo** have fostered knowledge exchange and resource-sharing, creating a cultural ecosystem that transcends national borders. Regional initiatives have facilitated joint projects that tackle shared challenges, such as censorship, the commercialisation of art, and the disappearance of public cultural spaces. Independent artists and collectives frequently engage in co-productions, skill-sharing workshops, and artist residencies that strengthen the fabric of the regional cultural scene. These acts serve not only as artistic experimentation, but also as direct critiques of the socio-political conditions shaping contemporary North Macedonia.

March

A Fragile Yet Resilient Ecosystem

The independent cultural sector in **North Macedonia** has long functioned as a counterweight to mainstream cultural production. Spaces like Social Center Dunja, Centar Jadro, and most recently Laboratorium have provided platforms for emerging voices and alternative artistic expressions. These spaces rely on ad-hoc funding, mutual aid, and sheer dedication from artists and cultural workers in order to provide the much needed creative space.

Festivals such as Sinestetika, Makedox Documentary Film Festival, and collectives like Gola Planina and Tiiiit! Inc. play a crucial role in fostering experimental and critical cultural production. Gola Planina, for instance, engages in site-specific interventions that reclaim neglected rural spaces for artistic use and were the first collective to combine young artists from different genres into an umbrella support organisation.

At the same time the independent theater scene with initiatives and collectives such as Shtrich, Atrium, Artopia, and Presvrt push the boundaries of performance art, tackling political, social, and existential themes while experimenting with form and audience engagement. They frequently use participatory theater techniques, blurring the lines between performer and spectator to foster deeper engagement with pressing societal issues. Presvrt has staged productions in non-traditional venues, emphasising adaptability and resilience in the face of limited access to established performance spaces.

Despite this resilience, the sector remains fragile. Many independent cultural actors struggle to access sustainable funding, as the majority of available resources come from short-term project grants, often tied to European Union cultural programmes or international foundations. The absence of long-term state support means that independent spaces must constantly navigate financial uncertainty, leading to burnout and



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

the precarisation of cultural labour.

Looking Ahead: The Need for Systemic Change

While independent cultural spaces continue to foster artistic innovation and critical discourse, their future depends on systemic changes at both the national and regional levels. Policy reforms that recognise the value of independent cultural production, create sustainable funding mechanisms, and protect cultural spaces from commercial displacement are crucial for the long-term survival of the sector.

Additionally, fostering stronger connections between independent culture and broader civic movements could help reinforce the sector's role as a driver of democratic engagement and social change. By advocating for more inclusive cultural policies, independent cultural actors can push for a more resilient and dynamic cultural ecosystem—one that supports artistic freedom, cross-border cooperation, and a thriving cultural scene in **North Macedonia** and the **Balkans**. As **Viktor Buckovski**, a young cultural activist and poet from Skopje notes, “culture has the power to heal and change our generations and stir forward the cultural revolution while fighting years of generational trauma and transitioning.”

— Kalina Dukovska

Following up:

→ On March 16th, 2025, a blaze at Club Pulse in Kočani killed 59 and injured over 150 during a concert; pyrotechnics sparked a fire in an overcrowded, unlicensed venue with flammable materials. Probes revealed bribery for safety waivers and municipal graft, leading to arrests of owners, inspectors, and officials; nationwide protests erupted, exposing systemic corruption in licensing that hit cultural venues hard.

The tragedy amplified scrutiny on independent spaces and festivals, prompting safety crackdowns, funding freezes amid investigations.

The scandal deepened distrust in institutions, forcing cultural players to prioritise self-reliance and policy advocacy for safer, sustainable public spaces amid ongoing precarity. As of November 2025, a major trial started against 35 individuals and 3 entities (including ex-mayors and firms), with defences claiming incomplete probes and families demand justice.

→ Amid the scandal's fallout, local elections on October 29 (with runoffs in November) saw the conservatives from VMRO-DPMNE gains in Kočani and nationwide, but fraud allegations and very low turnout characterised the political moment.

Resources:

[At Least 59 Killed At Nightclub Fire In North Macedonia – RadioFreeEurope](#), on March 16th, 2025

[Ruling party secures landslide victory in North Macedonia's local elections – EUalive](#), on October 20th, 2025

[Dozens go on trial over North Macedonia nightclub fire that killed 63 – BBC](#), on November 19th, 2025

Culture and Media amid Romania's Fight Against the Far-right

In May 2025, the spotlight was on Romania following the re-run of the presidential elections, cancelled in December 2024. The country may have narrowly avoided a nationalist turn with the election of centrist Nicușor Dan, but the battle for the country's democratic structure is far from over. The presidential race, marked by disinformation, foreign interference, and a surging far-right emboldened by social media, has revealed and left deep scars on the country's cultural and media landscape. As trust in journalism hits historic lows and independent cultural spaces face mounting political and financial pressure, Romania's artists and journalists find themselves on the frontlines—**not just of a political fight, but of a struggle to defend truth, critical thought, and public interest.**

On May 18th, Romania elected centrist Nicușor Dan as its next president, following a tense runoff against George Simion, a far-right, anti-EU candidate who has built his campaign following Trump's playbook. Consistent with his American idol, Simion has claimed victory and is now contesting the results, accusing fraud and interference from France and Republic of Moldova. In Brussels, the result was met with relief, as the country, at least for now, won't be joining the ranks of nationalist-led states like Hungary, Slovakia, and Italy.

But the damage is already done.

This election came after an unprecedented constitutional crisis in 2024, when the Constitutional Court annulled the presidential vote amid allegations of Russian interference. The surprise front-runner then was Călin Georgescu, a pro-Russian, anti-EU candidate who surged to prominence with a TikTok campaign built on disinformation,

May



Cristina Lupu holding media literacy workshops in a Romanian school – © Romanian Centre for Independent Journalism

blatant lies, and conspiracy theories. For his electorate, what mattered most was that he was seen as anti-establishment, a “man from outside the system.”

One week after Georgescu's success, Romania suffered another blow: in parliamentary elections, far-right, nationalist, and eurosceptic parties captured a third of the seats, riding the momentum of Georgescu's wave. Even if he was barred from running again, Georgescu's far-right rhetoric had already been normalised and embraced by George Simion, who campaigned as Georgescu's legitimate heir, as well as other candidates eager to appeal to the “sovereignist electorate.”

With Nicușor Dan's victory, the nationalist wave has been slowed, but the harm is clear and lasting. And independent media and cultural organisations are among the hardest-hit victims.

Trust Shattered, Truth Undermined

“People have lost all trust in everything,” says Cristina Lupu, executive director of the Romanian Centre for Independent Journalism (CJI). This sentiment is reflected in the latest Reuters Institute Digital News Report, which shows trust in Romanian news at a record low.

Lupu attributes this partly to the opaque funding of many media outlets, especially mainstream ones. Journalistic investigations have revealed that political parties funneled tens of millions of euros through intermediaries to television stations and online platforms, effectively turning them into propaganda machines.

And when parties can't buy media, they attack it. Before the second round of the presidential election, George Simion insulted reporters and independent outlets, labeling them “the press of the establishment” and dismissing critical coverage as “fake news.” Anamaria Gavrilă, leader of the far-right Youth Party (POT), threatened journalists with lawsuits, warning that “they will go extinct soon.”

“These attacks deepen public distrust in the press,” Lupu notes. She warns that when some media lie or manipulate, people begin to think all journalists are dishonest, pushing audiences toward alternative platforms like TikTok, where extremist politicians thrive.



Replika Centre for Educational Theatre – © Replika

Journalists are supposed to be gatekeepers of truth and fact-checkers of public discourse, but by eroding trust in traditional media and pushing audiences to unregulated social media, nationalists sidestep accountability. “Social media amplifies disinformation, not journalism,” Lupu says.

Journalism is expensive and depends heavily on public funding. Yet, nationalists label the media as part of a “Soros network,” discrediting independent press and putting it at risk. “If you don't pay for your information, someone else will, often with a political agenda.”

Asked about the consequences of normalised far-right rhetoric and media attacks, Lupu points to a classic authoritarian playbook. “Journalism and civil society are the first victims. If you silence them, you can act with impunity.”

Cultural Spaces Under Siege

Independent cultural organisations face threats from both the political establishment and the far right. Cultural funding has been steadily cut over the years, and now independent artists and institutions are scapegoated as representatives of “woke culture” seeking to poison traditional values.

Mihaela Michailov, co-founder of Replika Centre for Educational Theatre, an independent theatre tackling issues like labour rights and exploitation, gender roles, economic migration, LGBTQIA+ rights, and the flawed public education system, describes the mounting pressure.

The constant blaming of the so-called ‘Soros network’ and ‘woke culture’ is nothing more than a rhetorical diversion, when all this time the real danger was the far-right,” Michailov says. “I feel vulnerable because we have always had a clear leftist vision, not only when it comes to our actual plays, but we hosted debates, workshops, and school talks too.” Replika's positioning regarding these issues makes them, at least in the views of the far right, agents of influence threatening the nation's values.

The biggest worry is financial. Like most independent cultural projects and organisations in **Romania**, Replika depends on grants and national cultural funds. “No one will close us outright, but economic censorship is real. We constantly fear not being able to host plays,” explains **Michailov**.

Beyond politics, **Romania**’s deficit, the largest in the EU, means inevitable tax raises and budget cuts, with culture an easy and certain target.

“Politicians don’t understand that culture is a public service,” **Michailov** says with frustration. “We got here [n.r. with the rise of the far right], because we neglected artists and educators. We neglected culture as an educational act.” Pointing out the indifference of the people in power, Michailov recalls a discussion she had with the former Minister of Culture, regarding the cuts to the budget for independent projects. “He wasn’t understanding what we were doing. He asked me why independent artists don’t get a job at the national theatres.”

Like journalism, the independent cultural sector is under-resourced and underpaid. **Michailov** says staff often take only half their salary to keep the space afloat.

“You can’t build a sustainable cultural project like this. These spaces survive because people sacrifice their lives and resources. When they burn out, these places will close.”

Facing the Future

The road ahead for **Romania**’s independent media and cultural sectors is uncertain and precarious. “It doesn’t matter who wins the presidential elections. Things won’t get easier,” warns **Cristina Lupu**, executive director of the Centre for Independent Journalism. “Trust in journalism is dangerously low, and the risk of further radicalisation remains very real.”

For **Lupu**, rebuilding that trust starts with the public recognition that journalism is a vital service,

not a luxury. “People need to understand that journalists work in their interest. Without independent media, we would be blind to corruption, abuses, and threats to democracy.” She emphasises that support from both Romanian society and the European Union is critical—now more than ever: “Journalism cannot be sidelined when the EU discusses defense or economic priorities.”

Meanwhile, **Mihaela Michailov**, co-founder of Replika, underscores the urgency of safeguarding cultural spaces. “Politicians see culture as the least important thing, with no real stake,” she says. She stresses that without stable funding and political backing, independent cultural spaces risk disappearing.

Both **Lupu** and **Michailov** agree that independent media and culture are essential pillars of a functioning democracy. They hold the powerful accountable, challenge extremist narratives, and nurture critical thinking. The question remains whether those in power will finally recognise their importance and start acting accordingly.

— **Bianca Bălănescu & Andrei Petre**



Show at Replika’s theatre – @ Replika

Following up:

→ Sporadic demonstrations continued into late 2025 in cities like Bucharest, driven by George Simion’s fraud allegations, amplifying social media disinformation and testing Nicușor Dan’s administration.

→ The European Commission’s 2025 Rule of Law Report flagged Romania’s media transparency issues and political funding of outlets, conditioning Recovery Fund access on reforms.

→ Parliament endorsed a law against extremism in December 2025, targeting hate speech and antisemitism but raising media freedom concerns amid nationalist pushes.

Resources

[Media Freedom Mission to Romania questions fairness of electoral coverage](#) — *International Press Institute*, on June 26th, 2025

[2025 Rule of Law Report. Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Romania](#) — *European Commission*, on July 8th, 2025

[Romanian MPs endorse law against extremism returned by president for review](#) — *Romanian Insider*, on December 18th, 2025

Hungary's Latest Attacks on Independent Media and Cultural Scene

In June 2025, the spotlight was on Hungary with regard to the “transparency” draft law promoted by Viktor Orbán’s government and targeting foreign funding from NGO and media organisations.

Tuesday May 13th, an aggressive bill was submitted in the registry of the iconic Parliament of Budapest, Hungary’s capital. **Promised two months before** by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, this attempt is called the “Easter purge” against the “bugs” of Hungarian society—namely independent NGOs and media not fully aligned with and controlled by his party.

Filed by a Fidesz MP, this text **was withdrawn** due to banks or other federations opposing their roles in this bill. An updated version could be presented after this summer. But even if this proposal could be tweaked or watered down, it is worth taking a close look. This was, and could still be, the ultimate test for Hungary to remain a democracy.

Orbán’s Slow and Steady Takeover

Let’s rewind. Viktor Orbán appeared in Hungarian politics as a liberal student activist at the end of the Soviet-backed regime. Elected Prime Minister in 1998, he then lost elections 4 years later—according to him, because he was not in control of Hungary’s cultural and political narrative. Back in power in 2010 with a comfortable majority to rewrite the Constitution as he wishes, he has since meticulously reshaped all the political and civic life in Hungary.

He did it through hostile takeovers of independent media, new laws and rules for independent NGOs, interventions in the programming of state-controlled cultural institutions or the governance and teaching of universities—and the

list is non-exhaustive.

This heavy political climate, aimed to control the country’s political and cultural fabric, is also the best way for private companies or organisations to support targets of the government. In a nutshell, in Hungary, there is no level-playing field for independent actors if they are not part of the Fidesz Kraken.

Orbán’s far-right shift accelerated since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The government speeded up attacks against the free press, intervened on schools and universities curricula against gender equality, proposed new laws targeting LGBTQIA+ communities,



Protest against homophobic legislation in Budapest, Hungary on June 14th, 2021 – © Pasztilla aka Attila Terbócs

including the ban of the upcoming June 28th Budapest Pride, and delayed EU policies to support Ukraine. Last but not least, in late 2023, it created the “Sovereignty Protection Office” meant to smear independent organisations receiving non-Hungarian funding. A body seen as a breach of EU law for the European Commission which triggered legal action against Hungary in late 2024.

This is where this “Easter purge” law comes in.

The Last Hungarian Straw

Directly inspired by the “foreign agent law” in Russia or **more recently in Georgia**, the proposed

bill gave teeth to the smearing campaigns of this office. If an organisation or a person is labelled as a threat to Hungary’s sovereignty and receives foreign funds (from EU projects to any foreign transactions in their bank accounts), then it would end up on a list and would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to operate. Leaders of listed organisations could be publicly forced to disclose their personal accounts. NGOs and media could lose their tax status to receive donations, be fined up to 25 times any funding they receive from abroad or even be forced to close. No appeal was foreseen in the legislation.

This draft law “on the transparency in the public sphere” (you can read a translation **here**) is considered by **scholars** as a monumental breach of EU law. Over **320 NGOs** and **100 independent media** signed calls to withdraw this proposal, while the European commissioner for Justice and Democracy **Michael McGrath** threatened legal action to the European Court of Justice (once again).

First expected targets included **444.hu**, a media member of **Sphera Network**, a consortium of European independent media led by Médianes and a member of Reset!. “This



Hungarian Parliament building at night – © Hannes Flo

June

law is all about shut up or shut down,” **says** its CEO Gábor Kardos.

Cultural independent players were not specifically mentioned in this bill. Nevertheless, “we are worried” says **Kató Somos** from Reset! member **Art Quarter Budapest** (aqb) as “the legislation is so vague that we could become one.” She adds, “and this is what they want, for you to always be afraid.”

Peter Bokor, founder of the **music magazine MMN** and the community radio **Lahmacun**, two other Reset! members, agrees. “If their goal was to make us fear, then yes it was a success. It was in our heads, and it still is! [...] The fear is here.” He is also concerned about the potential fines, which he says “would really destroy lives” in a sector where “people sacrifice a lot” and with very little support “to be able to pay fines of this dimension.”

He argues that it was never about transparency. “I don’t have anything to hide, I can show to everyone how little (or no) money we make working in cultural media,” he snarks.

Both emphasised how difficult it already is for their organisations to survive, given that the Hungarian government provides zero funding for independent cultural actors. Their organisations stopped to even bother applying to already rare state funding for the cultural sector.

In this climate, speaking out against this bill is a potential risk. “A smaller player [like us], would not necessarily be on their radar, so they would need to do some detective work,” says **Peter Bokor**.

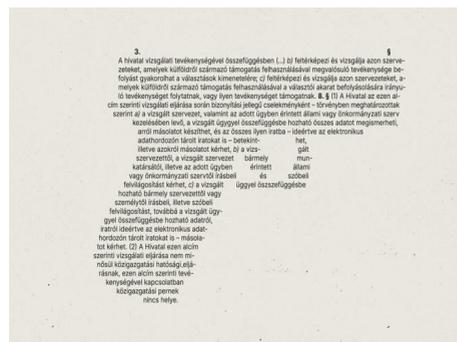
But maybe the entire point of this bill was not only to threaten independent players but to be an easy smokescreen. “I often heard that they could not apply it and it

was just for the media to be busy with this and not with healthcare, education, or the inflation,” adds **Peter Bokor**.

But maybe the entire point of this bill was not only to threaten independent players but to be an easy smokescreen. “I often heard that they could not apply it and it was just for the media to be busy with this and not with healthcare, education, or the inflation,” adds **Peter Bokor**.

Changes on the Horizon?

For the first time in more than a decade, the next spring 2026 elections could be surprising. The new centre-right party Tisza is actually **leading in the polls**. A



© Péter Somogyi (szarvas)/Telex.hu

surge mainly due to the biggest scandal of **Orbán's** tenure. Both the President, **Katalin Novák** and the Minister of Justice, **Judit Varga**, had to resign after pardoning in autumn 2023 a local Fidesz official who was convicted for his role in a sex abuse cover-up at a children's home. The pardoning happened as the politician was waiting for an appeal. A story first reported by **444.hu** last year. Ironically Tisza was founded by **Peter Magyar**, a former Fidesz member and former husband of Judit Varga.

But **Kató Somos** does not hold her hopes up for transformative change if **Orbán** is thrown out of office. Tisza “remains pretty conservative. They want to change the system but mostly on corruption issues. And of course, that would be very nice ! But besides that, I don't think too much would change.”

However, both Reset! members' representatives are adamant that

Hungary's independent cultural sector is strongly European.

Building bridges between cultural organisations is a must for aqb. “Collaborations matter a lot” as the art centre is part of Creative Europe projects. “This helps for our survival. Actually, this is our only chance of survival” says **Kató Somos**.

Even if living in a far-right country does not help. “It has happened when I'm abroad, for instance representing artists at art fairs, when some people see we are Hungarians, I can feel that they are suspicious, do not want to connect because our government is antidemocratic.”

“No matter what our government does, it doesn't mean that all Hungarians are on the same page,” she adds. In an interesting twist, the draft bill could backfire. **Orbán's** polls have not improved and Hungarians appear to oppose the bill. “We do see elevated levels of engagement in our subscription and of our voluntary donation programmes,” explains **Gábor Kardos**.

From Europe and beyond, **Peter Bokor** believes in a “practical solidarity”, with structures like Reset! to engage in advocacy campaigns, or in setting up working groups dedicated to the consequences of the democratic backsliding on the independent cultural sector.

Nevertheless, this support should go even further. **Peter Bokor** advocates for European policymakers to create pathways or proxies to guarantee that cultural organisations in illiberal countries could continue receiving European funding even if their own governments are against them.

“It is not just asking for Hungary,” he adds. “We need such tools as a blueprint so that they can be quickly adjusted and applied in countries where things shift in unfavourable ways.”

However, there might be an opening. No doubt that European institutions —which are pitching themselves as the last defenders of democracy globally—would be

under pressure to engage in such schemes if this bill becomes a law in September. **Sphera has launched its own campaign** for emergency financial and legal support if the law is implemented.

Also, as the EU will soon start drafting and discussing its upcoming financial framework for 2028-2034, such schemes offering greater protection to EU funds beneficiaries could be trialled. Watch this space.

— **Quentin Ariès**



Lahmaszter '23, BumBék in the Lahmacun Radio Studio in Budapest — © Gergő Manhertz

Resources

[A Threat to the Core – Verfassungsblog](#), on May 21st, 2025

[Hungary's ruling party delays vote on 'foreign agent' bill – Le Monde](#), on June 4th, 2025

[Magyar: The Tisza Party is going to win this election, not by a small margin, but by a huge one – telex.hu](#), on October 23th, 2025

[EU Commission slams Hungary over eroding press freedom – euractiv](#), on December 11th, 2025

[Hungary: IPI welcomes EU legal action over violations of European Media Freedom Act – International Press Institute](#), on December 12th, 2025

Following up

→ The original draft of the “transparency bill” faced opposition and was reportedly pulled back in early June 2025 due to push back from various organisations. However, the government announced a delay rather than withdrawal, citing time needed to address comments, with hints of a revised version possibly post-summer. The situation is still unclear as of December 2025.

→ The European Commission formally advanced its lawsuit against Hungary before the Court of Justice of the EU over the Sovereignty Protection Office and the “transparency bill”, citing incompatibility with EU democratic and rule-of-law standards.

→ Several independent Hungarian outlets—among them Atlatzso and Telex—reported new restrictions by commercial banks blocking or freezing certain foreign transfers under “enhanced due diligence” provisions linked to the pending transparency legislation. Press freedom NGOs described this as “pre-emptive censorship through financial pressure.”

→ By October 2025, the new opposition party Tisza maintained a double-digit lead over Fidesz in multiple national polls, the first such sustained gap in fifteen years. Analysts attribute its rise to disillusionment with corruption scandals and economic stagnation rather than ideological realignment (sources: Europe Elects, Telex, October 2025).

Georgia's Theatre on Trial

In July 2025, the spotlight was put on Georgia Serbia, to follow up on the anti-government protests that began in early winter of last year, with a special focus on Tbilisi's imperilled theatre scene has come together to defend their field. To get the pulse of the independent cultural and media sector, Reset! teamed up with Tbilisi-based OC Media, an independent platform bringing news from the North and South Caucasus, going beyond the headlines to cover in-depth analysis of the issues, movements, conflicts, and people shaping the region.

An Actor's Arrest

On December 5th, 2024, one of Georgia's most successful working actors, **Andro Chichinadze**, was arrested in his home. Along with five other individuals, he was charged with 'organising, leading, participating in, and publicly calling for violent actions.'

"The theatre scene in Georgia is very little," actor **Buka Tolordava** explains—he worked with **Chichinadze** on season 2 of the Cavea+ TV show Changing Signs. "Every theatre-working person knows each other. We are a very tight-knit community."

The night of **Chichinadze's** arrest, **Tolordava** and a crowd of fellow actors and theatre workers gathered outside his detention facility, along with Chichinadze's family and friends. "We were applauding him to let him know that we are here, we are right beside you," he says.

July



Vaso Abashidze New Theatre, Manifest performance and protest – © New Theatre archives

Like many of his colleagues, **Chichinadze** had been attending the protests outside the Georgian Parliament building on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue, following the questionable re-election of the incumbent Georgian Dream party on October 26th. The streets erupted in earnest 24 days later, when Prime Minister **Irakli Kobakhidze** announced that the government would be halting Georgia's EU accession talks until 2028.

In the weeks and months that followed, thousands of people filled Tbilisi's main thoroughfare every evening. Police in masks—offering critical anonymity in a city where everyone knows everyone—dealt brutally with the protesters, deploying tear gas, water canons, rubber bullets, intimidation, sexual harassment, and straightforward beatings. Many people were arrested.

Marches and Strikes

The theatre was at the forefront of these demonstrations from the very beginning, organising several collective marches. After a performance of Hamlet at the Karaki Theatre on November 18th, the actors urged the audience to join them. In full period costume and make-up, they descended from the stage and walked with their audience to Rustaveli to meet the tear gas and water canons.

Charges were filed against **Chichinadze** and the five others on December 6th, the day after



Andro Chichinadze – © Vaso Abashidze New Theatre archives

they were arrested. The judge ruled to remand all six to pre-trial detention until their hearing, citing 'a totality of evidence' and risks of the defendants' absconding or committing new offences.

According to Transparency International (TI) Georgia, one chapter of the international anti-corruption organisation, Georgia has a history of unlawful use of pre-trial detention. 'The court can impose pretrial detention only if the objectives of the preventive measure cannot be achieved by less restrictive means,' TI Georgia wrote in a statement on January 3rd.

'The prosecution failed [in the case of all six defendants] to present any evidence that would convince an objective observer of the reality of these risks, relying instead on general and abstract arguments.'

Chichinadze is one of a handful of working Georgian actors to have garnered international attention. Like many Georgian actors, Chichinadze has had a varied career. He has acted in TV shows, films, and on the stage, and was a member of the Vaso Abashidze New Theatre in **Marjanishvili**. After his arrest, the director of the New Theatre, **Davit Doiashvili**, announced that the troupe would begin a tour of Georgia's regions with a symbolic performance, titled Manifest, informing the public about Chichinadze's arrest and campaigning for free speech.

Like **Chichinadze**, "Georgian culture is also imprisoned," **Doiashvili** stated at the time.

The rest of Tbilisi's small theatre scene had gone on strike, hoping to inspire other fields to do the same. They demanded the release of **Chichinadze** and other prisoners detained in relation to the protests, whose number was creeping up all the time.

As they remained on strike, freelance actors and workers suffered the most due to the irregularity of their work. Many were supported financially by the actor's guild, but the money couldn't last.

"Emotionally, it was a very tough time," actor **Anuki Bubuteishvili**, who also knows **Chichinadze** personally, tells OC Media. "But at the same time I've never seen my profession and theatre workers so united."

At the beginning of March, the court again ruled to keep **Chichinadze** and the other defendants in custody. In the courtroom, Chichinadze says: "It's a very strange process... It reminded me of Jozef K., a character from Kafka, who is undergoing a trial but has no idea what is happening to him. This novel is about uncertainty [...] I always wondered how this feeling could be brought to life in practice, and somehow it happened, and it's quite strange." Around a month afterwards, on April 16th, it was announced that **Doiashvili** had been dismissed from his position as director of the New Theatre on grounds of failing to fulfil the theatre's 'founding objectives' and for theatrical inactivity, despite a flow of state funding. In reality, Doiashvili and his troupe had been busy rehearsing

two new plays. At the time, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association **states**: “the regime has normalised the purging of professionals across various fields in an attempt to suppress legitimate protest in the country, intimidate the public, and enforce submission.”

A Return to Work and Artistic Protest

Theatre Director **Gega Gagnidze** had, in December, already begun planning a new play based on **Franz Kafka’s** *The Trial*. Slowly, after three months of protest and unemployment, actors and directors began to work again.

“For these two or three months I couldn’t do anything, I was not doing my job, I couldn’t say what I wanted to say, and I was very stressed and frustrated,” **Gagnidze** tells *OC Media*.

With this new play, Joseph (after the protagonist in **Kafka’s** work) which is currently showing at the Theatre on Atonali in **Tbilisi**, **Gagnidze** feels a sense of catharsis: “I said everything I wanted to say.”

Bubuteishvili feels similarly about the termination of the strike. “Everyone slowly decided to use their art form as a form of protest,” she says. “If I deprive myself of my job, which is so influential in this sense, then the only person this does harm to is me, and what’s the point?” she questions.

She and others began to feel that by refusing to make art, they were inadvertently serving the interests of the ruling party. According to **Bubuteishvili**, many of the projects initiated since the strikes ended are satirical. “We live in very dramatic, tragic times,” she says, “the absurdity of the situation leaves no room for other genres.”

Gagnidze shares similar sentiments: “when you turn on your TV and watch people in court, when you go to Rustaveli—you can’t create anything more dramatic, and because of this you have to try a different genre.”

Chichinadze’s friends and colleagues were variably optimistic about his release, several citing the recent case of 21-year-old Mate Devidze, who was sentenced to four years in prison for waving a stick at a police officer. All felt confident, however, that a return to work and to creativity was the most effective

form of dissent available to them.

“The first role we played with the strike was the big message, and the second role we have to play is to make art [...] because now six months have passed, and people now are just scrolling past bad news [...] they are very tired, and it’s like self-defence, psychological defence,” **Gagnidze** says. “We have to create art about this situation to help people to connect with reality, to start engaging with it again.”

This fractious relationship between the Georgian government and the arts is likely to persist and perhaps worsen, but it seems to have fomented a real determination within directors and actors. As it stands, no one is willing to fill **Doiashvili’s** position at the Vaso Abashidze New Theatre—after all, it was Doiashvili’s creation, and Doiashvili who made it “the most relevant theatre in **Georgia**,” as **Bubuteishvili** puts it.

It is hoped that **Chichinadze** will finally be tried in August.

“You either know of him and respect him, or you know him and adore him,” **Bubuteishvili** says. “I guess you couldn’t pick a better person to be a symbol of this rebellion than **Andro**.”

— OC Media



Buka Tolodorava — © Beka Tsirekidze

Following up

→ Daily demonstrations against the Georgian government’s decision to halt EU accession talks in late 2024 continued throughout 2025, with crowds regularly gathering on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi and in other cities, demanding the resumption of EU negotiations and new elections.

→ Authorities have tightened public assembly laws, increased fines and detention terms for protesters, and detained hundreds of demonstrators, while police frequently used tear gas, water cannons, and other force to disperse crowds; a peer-reviewed study found many protesters reported lingering health effects—including respiratory problems, fatigue, and heart palpitations—after suspected chemical exposure during clashes.

→ The European Parliament and EU Council have condemned democratic backsliding and the stagnation of Georgia’s EU accession process, calling for new elections, release of detained civil society figures, and respect for democratic norms.

→ Human rights and civil society organisations in Georgia faced freezing of bank accounts and heightened scrutiny by authorities amid wider efforts by the government to curb independent media, NGOs, and activists involved in protests.

→ In December 2025 the Georgian Parliament passed amendments to the Election Code that ban voting abroad, requiring citizens living overseas to return home to cast ballots—a move widely criticised by opposition groups as undermining democratic participation and further eroding civil rights amid the ongoing crisis.

→ In September 2025, actor Andro Chichinadze and 18 fellow protesters were convicted after a trial widely criticised by human rights groups as unfair and politically motivated, and he was sentenced to a two-year prison term on charges of participating in “group mass disturbance,” underscoring the ongoing repression of cultural figures involved in the protests.

Resources

[Parliament deplores the democratic backsliding and repression in Georgia](#) — *European Parliament*, on July 9th, 2025

[Georgia marks a year of protests since EU talks stalled and crackdown intensified](#) — *New Press*, on November 28th, 2025

[Did Georgian police use a chemical weapon against protesters?](#) — *BBC*, on December 1st, 2025

[‘I want to know what happened’ — Georgian protesters on the lingering effects of chemical exposure](#) — *OC Media*, on December 16th, 2025

[Georgian parliament passes bill banning overseas voting](#) — *OC Media*, on December 17th, 2025

Resisting the Status Quo: Independent Culture Against Gentrification in Portugal

In September 2025, the focus was set on Portugal, which is facing a worrying gentrification crisis. This crisis is seriously affecting independent cultural organisations, which are slowly disappearing from city centres—sometimes violently. To get the pulse of the independent scene, we interviewed Jesualdo Lopes, founding curator of The Blacker the Berry, a multidisciplinary arts collective championing emerging Black LGBTQIAP+ artists of African, Caribbean, Latin, and South American descent through creative, cultural, and social interventions, as well as Sofia Craveiro, journalist at Gerador, an independent media outlet focusing on culture, citizenship, and inequalities, and Steven MacKay, co-founder and current president of Arroz Estúdios Association, a creatives and artists-run non-profit venue in Lisbon—also member of the Reset! network.

On July 25th, 2025, Planeta Manas, Lisbon's first queer safe space run by the mina and Rádio Quântica collectives held its last event. After operating mostly voluntarily for four years, the space was forced to close due to multiple police raids, mounting costs, and bureaucratic issues such as licensing problems and noise complaints. This depressing closure is not an isolated case in **Portugal** and is a

clear representation of the chaotic gentrification plaguing the country.

A State-Sponsored Gentrification

Gentrification processes are at work throughout **Europe** and the rest of the world. Most cities are being gentrified, which means that their historically working-class neighbourhoods are being priced out by richer classes and capitalist investments. This forces locals to move out of their family homes, which are then replaced by short-term, tourist-oriented apartments or new businesses. This phenomenon is accompanied by rising rents and real estate developments that aim to transform city centres, resulting in the homogenisation of European cities and the erasure of their traditional cultural and architectural characteristics.

In **Portugal**, the process of gentrification has been heavily State-sponsored over the last decade. Since the 2010s, several legal frameworks have been implemented to encourage corporate investment, both local and international, through programmes such as the Golden Visa scheme. The latter aimed to grant residency permits to foreign investors, for example those investing at least €500k in Portuguese capital funds. The Golden Visa scheme has been accompanied by tax programmes inciting real estate speculation,

September

destroying the housing balance and leading to a situation where some districts in **Lisbon** now have more than 20% of housing stock dedicated to short-term rental (e.g. **Alfama**).

This uneven distribution puts locals in a difficult position, exacerbated by soaring rents. Between 2014 and 2024, house prices in Lisbon rose by 176%.

Although **Lisbon** is marketed as a desirable place to live, it is now the least affordable city in Europe when it comes to price to income ratio, ahead of **London** and **Paris**.

This doesn't only apply to **Lisbon**. **Porto** has also undergone gentrification, with the central and local authorities favouring investors over the local communities. Even less urban areas on the **Algarve** coast and in the countryside are starting to feel the capitalist property pressure, as explained by **Sofia Craveiro**, journalist at *Gerador*.

The first victims of this neoliberal mechanism are, of course, working-class long-term residents, leaving them in an even more precarious

are primarily inhabited by African and Afrodescendant communities from the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries)," explains Jesualdo Lopes, founding curator at The Blacker the Berry (TBTB). Within the cultural sector, it is also the most vulnerable who are being pushed away or shut down: independent and grassroots initiatives.

Independent Culture at Risk, Local Communities Cornered

It has become increasingly difficult to be an independent venue and event organiser in **Portugal**. This is partly because the Portuguese State has historically overlooked culture, as **Jesualdo Lopes** explains. Figures speak for themselves: in 2020, less than 1% of the State budget was allocated to the Ministry of Culture, and in 2025 the proposal was just 0.45%. By prioritising commercial offerings and real estate developments, the Portuguese State, in **Lisbon** in particular, is actively "transforming neighbourhoods into tourism-oriented zones," says **Sofia Craveiro**. This is accelerating the commodification of housing, public space, and culture. As a result, local communities are slowly losing their spaces, either because they or the cultural spaces are being forced out



Rare Effect, Arroz Estúdios, November 8th, 2024 – © Filipa Aurélio

situation. They are also racialised people who are gradually being pushed out of city centres. In Lisbon, "greatest housing challenges were concentrated in self-built neighbourhoods on boroughs such as Amadora, Loures, Sintra, Odivelas, Almada or Setúbal, which

of their premises. This has serious social and political implications. Indeed, "erasing alternative ways of living, creating, and imagining the city affects democratic and civic participation," says Sofia Craveiro. Where will artists practise their art when there are no more spaces in the city? Where will the local community experience music and



Uncover, the festival to see beyond the image. Guimarães, March 2025 – © Mariana Silva

art when all the cultural spaces are shut down?

As the process of gentrification is the result of national (Golden Visa, tax schemes), but also of local efforts, Arrozo Estúdios, which is located in the Xabregas district of Lisbon, is a prime example of this gradual cultural loss.

Although the venue is still open, it is facing eviction and has now entered a “programming break due to economic and licensing pressure,” according to **Steven MacKay**, co-founder and current president of the venue. He highlights the challenges faced by Portuguese venues, which are subject to noise complaints from newly developed residences and restrictions on opening hours imposed by the authorities. These restrictions affect the viability of running a venue, which must consider the need to raise staff salaries—they themselves are forced to live “further and further outside the capital due to the increasing rent costs”—while maintaining affordable prices for the community.

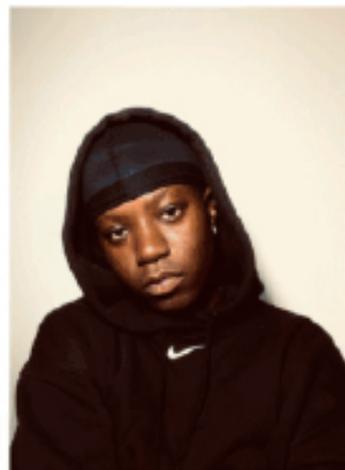
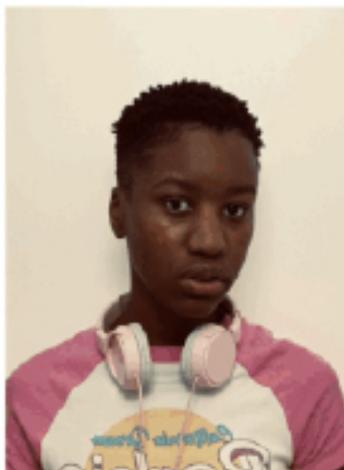
Pressure is also constantly felt by collectives such as The Blacker The Berry, which suffers from a lack of spaces in which to host events—either because venues are closing or because those that remain open have to change the way they work. This situation has forced TBTB to reduce the number of events they hold in Lisbon, as they are now facing “the introduction of rental fees, and, in some cases, the requirement of minimum financial guarantees to justify the use of the space.” Jesualdo Lopes also mentions the impact of “anonymous complaints” which put themselves and other arts collectives such as Coletivo Gira or Kizomba Na Rua, as well as their audiences in “constant fear and tension,” forcing them to cancel events and leaving people without a safe space.

“Gentrification is not just an urban issue; it’s a democratic one. It silences dissent, homogenises culture, and excludes those who cannot afford to belong,” says **Sofia Craveiro**. **Jesualdo Lopes** agrees, adding that “it also deepened social inequalities across the metropolitan area and the access to the centre.” Like many independent organisations, Planeta Manas was a significant space for queer, feminist, racialised, and marginalised communities. In less than a year, they experienced five violent police raids. On multiple occasions, the officers entered the premises without identifying themselves or presenting a

warrant. They illegally searched people and the premises, destroying equipment in the process. Despite providing all the information and documentation requested, Planeta Manas continued to be targeted by the police, who disregarded their artistic freedom. Independent and alternative initiatives like this one are usually the first to suffer repression—and indeed, other commercial venues set up around them have not been targeted by the police. “This reflects a broader issue of institutional resistance to grassroots cultural expression,” explains Sofia Craveiro.

The case of Planeta Manas is interesting, too, as they were receiving funding from official institutions such as DGArtes (Portugal’s Arts Council). This shows that no one is truly safe. “If funded projects can be targeted, imagine what could happen to small, self-sustaining, community-based collective like ours,” says Jesualdo Lopes, adding that “Planeta Manas’ closure was undoubtedly one of the saddest moments in Lisbon’s contemporary cultural scene.”

A similar situation occurred in **Porto** in 2023, when the Centro Comercial STOP!, a historical building from the 1980s housing artists’ studios and stores, was facing eviction. The artists were subjected to police raids and could only retrieve their musical instruments and artistic equipment under police escort. Meanwhile, a real estate development project was being realised on the same street... Double



The Blacker The Berry Crew

standards.

However, thanks to thorough mobilisation by the artists, they managed to regain the right to their studios and eventually resisted the gentrified, neoliberal status quo.

Alternatives Possibilities

This phenomenon has impacted many different cultural organisations, prompting the emergence of movements to raise awareness and make their voice heard. **Steven MacKay** mentions Colectividades em Luta, for example. They organise marches and carry out valuable activist work with the Lisbon municipality. Many other movements are also fighting daily against unfair tax and legal frameworks, as well as against real estate developments that destroy historic housing buildings and their local communities and culture. Movimento

Vida Justa “has played a crucial role in addressing these issues intersectionally, linking the housing crisis to police brutality and the hardships faced by racialised and migrant communities,” explains **Jesualdo Lopes**.

Through regular mobilisation, the movement succeeds in creating solidarity dynamics and a new safe space for people suffering from aggressive urban and social policies. Other examples include Casa para Viver or Movimento Referendo pela Habitação. Finding alternatives to combat gentrification involves professional solidarity. Gerador has experienced pressure from “rising rents and the scarcity of affordable workspaces.” Thanks to the Goethe-Institut Portugal, they have been provided with a workspace. Such arrangements are usually short or medium term,

which speaks volumes about the precarious situation of independent media in Portugal. Nevertheless, it is “invaluable and has allowed us to continue our work without interruption,” points out **Sofia Craveiro**.

Jesualdo, Sofia, and Steven all emphasise the urgent need for political recognition and action to control gentrification. They suggest various ideas for change, such as recognising cultural spaces as essential infrastructure for social balance, providing public-supported spaces to independent collectives, offering tax incentives to landlords who rent to artists or cultural collectives, repurposing vacant buildings for cultural use, and prioritising pre-existing venues over residential development to avoid disputes over noise complaints. Steven MacKay even highlights the need to deal with the paradox of **Lisbon’s Zone A**: the “only zone where 24-hour licences are permitted”, yet where Porto Lisboa, the main owner of most of the zone’s buildings, “has a blanket ban on dancefloors in its rental contracts,” effectively excluding

cultural venues. Independent cultural organisations face an uphill struggle in resisting the status quo defended by the authorities, who should be acting to support their territory’s cultural initiatives. “Artistic freedom depends on spatial freedom,” says Sofia Craveiro. “When spaces vanish, artists lose the physical and symbolic ground on which to create freely, and neighbourhoods lose their soul.” Municipalities have all the information; now, there is a need to open a discussion with those most affected: the local communities and the players in the independent culture and media sectors.

— Manon Moulin

Following up

→ In early October 2025 a collective of cultural organisations in Lisbon formally petitioned the city government to declare an immediate moratorium on all evictions and to allocate vacant public buildings for use by threatened cultural players, arguing that ongoing real-estate speculation and administrative pressures are destroying the city’s associative and cultural scene and calling for concrete policies to protect such spaces.

→ Independent cultural organisations have taken up the issue during events to address survival and solidarity, such as the Meet Reset! Lisbon in early November 2025 where Arroz Estúdios, Well Read, and Gerador, discussed challenges and collaborative solutions for sustaining cultural spaces under pressure from gentrification and rising costs.

Resources

[Colectividades de Lisboa pedem moratória a despejos e o uso de edifícios públicos](#) (Lisbon communities call for moratorium on evictions and use of public buildings) — *Publico*, on October 9th, 2025

[Meet Reset! Lisbon: challenges and paths for the future of cultural spaces](#) — *Gerador*, on December 7th, 2025



Arroz Estúdios — © Marina Mole

‘This Could Be the Last Time’: Lithuania Defends its Artistic Freedom

In October 2025, our attention was on Lithuania, where protests were unfolding against governmental appointments and a threatening opportunistic nationalist party Nemunas Dawn. To get a better understanding from the independent scene, we interviewed Indrė Kiršaitė, a journalist, editor, and interim director at [NARA](#), and Karolis Vyšniauskas, an author, editor, and co-founder of the podcast of Vilnius-based independent media collective [NARA](#), as well as Samantha Lippett, co-founder of the [Independent Community Radio Network \(ICRN\)](#), a non-profit organisation founded in Lithuania connecting web radios across the Baltic-Nordic region and wider Europe, and Julius Praleika, event manager at [minimal.lt](#), an independent electronic music events crew.



Protest in Vilnius, October 5th, 2025 – © Edvinas Girdvainis / NARA

October 5th, 2025. 2 pm. All over Lithuania and its diaspora. You could hear the powerful and brilliant symphonic poem *Jūra* (The Sea) by [Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis](#), one of the most influential Lithuanian artists of the 19th and 20th centuries. This common resonance is not due to the 150th anniversary of Čiurlionis’s birth, but because the Lithuanian cultural and arts community is currently raising its voice against serious political threats. Their symbols are a road sign warning of nearby piers, altered to show the word *kultūra* (culture) sinking into the water, alongside Čiurlionis’s *The Sea*. Diving into Lithuania’s strong cultural movement, we uncover a worrying political situation that deserves attention to avoid going toward Hungary’s, Georgia’s, Slovakia’s, or Italy’s direction.

A Year of Political Slippery Slope

The current situation stems from the most recent parliamentary elections, which took place in October 2024. These elections saw the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP) come out on top with just over 19% of the vote, meaning they had to form a coalition.

A new party, Nemunas Dawn (ND), also emerged, finishing third with almost 15% of the vote. Considered nationalist, pro-russian, and ‘populist’, the party is also strongly opportunistic, as explained by [Karolis Vyšniauskas](#) from [NARA](#) and [Julius Praleika](#) from [minimal.lt](#). “This party doesn’t really stand for anything,” says Karolis. It is led by [Remigijus Žemaitaitis](#), a millionaire who has made numerous antisemitic,

transphobic, and anti-Ukrainian remarks, [thereby violating his MP oath](#). These statements are particularly serious in a country that was under Soviet occupation for almost 50 years and is still threatened by russian imperialism, being surrounded by the [Kaliningrad Oblast](#) (part of russia) to the south-west and [Belarus](#) to the east. [Lithuania](#) has also been one of the main countries to welcome Ukrainian refugees and Belarusian dissidents.

With this new political player in mind, discussions to form a government were extremely sensitive and took months. The LSDP first confirmed that they would not form a coalition with Nemunas Dawn. After engaging in talks with the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS), the Union of Democrats ‘For Lithuania’ (DSVL), and the Liberal Movement (LS), they finally formed a first coalition with DSVL and Nemunas Dawn. This political reversal sparked serious discontent among Lithuanian civil society, which mobilised immediately through an open letter denouncing the potential negative impact that ND’s presence could have on Lithuanian democracy.

In July 2025, LSDP Prime Minister [Paluckas](#) resigned amid corruption allegations, further destabilising Lithuanian politics in recent years.



Protest in Vilnius, October 5th, 2025 – © Edvinas Girdvainis / NARA

As [Julius Praleika](#) presented, “This term has been very chaotic and riddled with corruption and conflicts of interest scandals, resulting in over a year without a properly established cabinet of ministers.” In September, a new prime minister took office: the Social Democrat and former trade unionist [Inga Ruginienė](#). This new government is based on a reshaped coalition made of LSDP, LVŽS, and still ND. While forming the government, tensions arose over which ministries to allocate to their coalition partner, Nemunas Dawn. Although they were supposed to receive the Agriculture and Energy portfolios, they lost the latter as the Social Democrats deemed it to be too strategically important, instead offering the Culture Ministry to Nemunas Dawn.

The party appointed businessman [Ignotas Adomavičius](#) as Culture Minister, despite him having no background or experience in the cultural field whatsoever. One week after his appointment, on October 3rd, 2025, he resigned under pressure from the October 5th strike within the cultural and media communities.

Discredited Yet Strategic Culture, Arts, and Media

This ministry swap is a sign of the lack of consideration for culture in Lithuanian politics, as in many other European countries. As [Julius](#) puts it, “the post of Minister of Culture has always been a mere bargaining chip for majority parties forming a coalition,” and [Indrė Kiršaitė](#) from [NARA](#) adds that “culture receives one of the lowest budgets of all ministries and is often considered a low priority in Lithuania.” The discredit was made clear with the appointment of [Adomavičius](#), as his glaring incompetence was evident, as [Indrė](#) explains.

October

Despite this obvious discredit, culture and the media—both under the remit of the Ministry of Culture in Lithuania—are typically exploited as strategic tools for manipulation and propaganda.

Lithuania's Soviet heritage exacerbates this issue: "They are well versed in how culture can be instrumentalised as a form of soft power and fall victim to pro-russian narratives," says **Samantha Lippett**, who has been living in Lithuania for five years. So, in this situation with Nemunas Dawn, the threat is real.

Even before receiving the Culture Ministry's portfolio, Nemunas Dawn's leader **Žemaitaitis** made incendiary comments regarding the media. As reported by **Indrė Kiršaitė** and **Samantha Lippett**, he publicly stated his intention to call for 'content audits' of the public broadcaster LRT due to its alleged bias towards certain political parties. Access to the Culture Ministry would enable ND to carry out this threat and redirect public funding along ideological lines. This process has already begun, with the LRT audit due to be completed by November 3rd, 2025. When asked whether NARA is under pressure due to this shift, **Indrė** responds that, as an independent organisation, they have diversified their income sources, making them less dependent on national funding and enabling them to avoid direct pressure. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean they are less linked to their fellow journalists from other media outlets that may be targeted, or to their cultural counterparts. "We are connected," says **Indrė Kiršaitė**.

Nemunas Dawn has a limited vision of culture. They prioritise rural and ethnoculture, and believe that national funds should first support this kind of culture, making it a State priority. This aligns with their ethnonationalist views, as **Indrė Kiršaitė** points out. They believe that culture is currently oriented solely towards the 'Vilnius elite'. By making such statements, ND is also attempting to divide the sector by setting traditional and regional culture apart from other types of culture and urban cultural players. These positions put the nightlife scene in a difficult position. "The



Minimal Mondays at their summer venue Vasaros Terasa – © Goda Dagytė

nightlife scene could suffer serious damage if the new ministry accuses us of promoting drug use because of our open-minded stance on individual rights and our active role in harm reduction," explains **Julius Praleika**, part of minimal.lt, which has been organising the Minimal Mondays event series since 2004, and Sūpynės Festival between 2006 and 2019. Their summer venue for Minimal Mondays is directly accountable to the Ministry of Culture, meaning "there is still a risk of political repression," says Julius. As always, it is the grassroots and alternative players who are first targeted within the cultural sector. However, what is happening across Lithuania right now shows the true meaning of unity and solidarity.

A United Struggle

On October 5th, thousands of these individuals took to the streets under the banner of Kultūros Asamblėja (Cultural Assembly) and the slogan 'This could be the last time,' carrying their sinking kultūra road sign placards and accompanied by the sounds of Čiurlionis's The Sea. "It was played on national radio, LRT, in the streets by a walking jazz band and by our symphony orchestra at the LVSO concert hall in Vilnius. It was also played on repeat in local bookshops," says **Samantha Lippett**. **Julius Praleika** adds that "Čiurlionis's incredible body of work across multiple fields of art is always worthy of celebration and serves as a great meeting point for artists and cultural workers from different disciplines." **Karolis** agrees: "Listening to it in full on the protest day was a truly elevating experience."

This massive and inspiring protest movement has spread throughout

the country, with protests organised in big cities and regions, and even across the world with the diaspora mobilising. **Samantha Lippett** explains, "The scale and diversity of the organisations involved has been inspiring to observe.

This has not only brought together like-minded independent organisations, but also united cultural actors from across creative fields, including opera houses, museums, bookshops, jazz bands, grassroots collectives, students and individuals, under the banner of the Kultūros Asamblėja.

This strong unity is also highlighted by **Indrė Kiršaitė**, **Karolis Vyšniauskas**, and **Julius Praleika**. Although Lithuanian cultural figures have been protesting since Soviet times, notably with the 'Rock Marches' concerts, where local bands openly stood up for independence in different cities across Lithuania, as **Karolis** evokes, this movement is unprecedented. "Artists and cultural workers who might never have met before are now marching and singing together," says Julius. This goes beyond the cultural and media sectors, too. According to a recent LRT survey, 45% of the Lithuanian population support the protests, while 23% have no opinion, and 32% oppose them.

These signs of unity and solidarity are encouraging for the future of Lithuanian culture and media. However, we must remain collectively vigilant until a new Culture Minister has been appointed. Following antisemitic remarks made by Nemunas Dawn **Žemaitaitis** against the Director General of the Lithuanian Museum of Art, who is a member of the protest movement, the President of the Republic of Lithuania **Gitanas Nausėda** said he would not be signing in a new ND minister, forcing the Social Democrats to search for a new minister by themselves. However, they have not historically been known for keeping their word or maintaining a respectable position. As Kultūros Asamblėja stated, 'This could be the last time,' but Lithuania's culture and media players are ready to counter these dynamics, and we stand in solidarity with them.

— Manon Moulin

Following up

→ After the resignation of Ignotas Adomavičius, the Culture Minister seat remained unfilled for several weeks. On November 9th, 2025, President Nausėda appointed Social Democrat Vaida Aleknavičienė as Culture Minister, excluding Nemunas Dawn from her team and pledging national cultural dialogue amid protests.

→ The October protests sparked a wave of solidarity-driven partnerships between state-backed and independent cultural organisations. New networks formed across Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda under the Kultūros Asamblėja banner, focusing on lobbying for fair cultural funding and media independence. Several municipalities expressed a will to increase cultural grants at the local level to offset national instability, without concrete action for the moment.

→ Thousands rallied outside Lithuania's parliament on December 17th, 2025, protesting fast-tracked Public Broadcasting LRT law changes that ease dismissal of the public broadcaster's director via secret ballot, amid fears of Nemunas Dawn's political interference despite an audit finding no bias.

Resources

[The government is complete again: new ministers Aleknavičienė and Kaunas have been sworn in](#) — *Lrytas*, on November 11th, 2025

[Protesters rally against proposed changes to Lithuania's public broadcaster](#) — *TVP World*, on December 17th, 2025

[Protests over media freedom in Lithuania continue – here's what you need to know](#) — *LRT*, on December 18th, 2025

Political Paralysis, Cultural Consequences: Belgium's Cultural Scene in Peril

In November 2025, we highlighted the situation of Belgium and the serious political deadlock it has been going through since June 2024. To ground our words, we interviewed two Reset! members **Sébastien Desprez**, co-founder of **Magma**, an artist management agency specialised in music, but also a record label and a collective, as well as **Nathanaël Havez**, founder of artists agency **Tempest of Noise**.

“Oof. Belgian politics. In one word, we would characterise it as a mess,” says **Nathanaël Havez**, founder of the Brussels-based Tempest of Noise artists agency, which operates throughout Belgium. Over the past decade or so, the country has gained a reputation for setting records for forming national or regional governments: 541 days in 2010-11, 652 days in 2018-20, 239 days in 2024-25, and 500+ days and counting for the Brussels regional government.

These delays stem from a highly complex political system and have serious consequences for the economic, social, and cultural organisation of Belgium.



Magma – © Melissa Fauve

Federal and Regional Systemic Crisis Since 2024

On June 9th, 2024, most EU citizens went to the polls to vote in the European Parliamentary Elections. Belgians also voted for their federal and regional representatives on the same day. Busy day.

On the one hand, the Belgian federal elections aim to elect the 150 members of the Chamber of Representatives using proportional representation. The regional elections, on the other hand, elect members of the five regional and community parliaments, e.g. the Flemish Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, the Brussels Parliament, and the Parliament of the German-speaking Community.

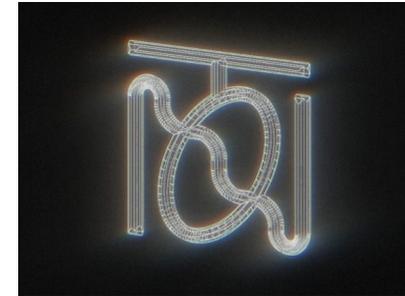
In the 2024 elections, the country generally drifted to the right, with conservative parties dominating all parliaments. This came as a significant surprise, particularly to the Walloon and Brussels regional parliaments, which have been dominated by left-wing parties for several years. This caused problems, starting with the basics of forming a government at both the federal and regional levels.

Federal government negotiations finally succeeded in February 2025 with the appointment of **Bart De Wever**, leader of the nationalist New Flemish Alliance party, which defends the transformation of **Belgium** into a confederal state (e.g. **Flanders** becoming an independent state). De Wever joined the so-called Arizona coalition alongside the liberal Walloon MR party, the Flemish socialists Vooruit, as well as the Flemish and Walloon Christian Democrats from CD&V and Les Engagés.

As has been happening in many European countries (and globally), the drift to the right has caused

November

a shift in Belgian politics, opening the door to austerity and prompting questions about the country's social welfare system. The federal government's decisions have sparked a significant social movement, with regular strikes and protests organised throughout the country—in **Flanders**, **Wallonia**, and **Brussels**—creating an unprecedented situation.



Tempest of Noise

Striking and Protesting Through Social Fatigue and Anger

Since the appointment of the new federal government in February 2025, at least 88 strike days have been held. Strikes were organised throughout the country on February 21st, March 31st, April 29th, May 22nd, June 25th, and, most recently, October 14th.

Sébastien Desprez describes this as “a routine form of resistance,” explaining that, despite their significance, strikes and protests have not prompted any change in the government's position. He refers to the “strategy of contempt” employed to wear down protesters. **Nathanaël Havez** agrees and adds that “the last couple of protests have also seen a horrible rise in police violence.” Sébastien points out that this general symbolic and physical violence stems from “their radically liberal agenda, a project that undermines solidarity, increases inequality, and pushes social polarisation even further.”

These movements have gained significant traction in the country, with unions playing a key role in bringing people together. The movements have brought together workers from air and sea transport, the hotel industry, social work, the arts, and also students. This ‘convergence of struggles’ clearly shows “the growing tension in daily life; people are angry, exhausted and afraid of what's coming next,” says **Sébastien Desprez**.

Much of this unrest has focused on the government's austerity measures, such as increasing the retirement age to 67, raising VAT, and making widespread budget cuts. The latter have spread across all sectors, including of course the cultural sector.

Targeted and Mobilised Cultural Sector

“The atmosphere has become hostile on all fronts and the cultural sector suffering both up North, down South, and in **Brussels**,” explains **Nathanaël Havez**.

The crisis of governance has hit **Brussels** especially hard. Without a sitting government, no new budget can be voted on, and subsidies for cultural projects have been left in limbo. “Many associations are going bankrupt because no new funding is being approved,” **Nathanaël** continues. “New projects aren't starting, and some existing ones aren't being renewed.”

This paralysis comes on top of major federal cuts. “There won't be any indexation for the cultural sector in 2026, which represents a loss of around four million euros,” **Nathanaël** adds. “In total, about ten million euros must be saved by 2028-2029. This will mainly impact cultural centres, museums, and libraries.” The numbers are abstract until you talk to artists, organisers, and technicians facing delayed payments, reduced programmes, and rising living costs. The



Protest in Brussels – © Sébastien Desprez



Ciao Kennedy, Magma — © Melissa Fauve

Following up

→ Brussels still remains without a regional government.

→ At the federal level, Prime Minister Bart De Wever's government is still in place but under intensifying public pressure while a conservative budget deal has been found. The administration faces growing criticism for its austerity measures, particularly on pensions, VAT increases, and public sector funding.

→ Unions announced two major national strike days for January 2026, focused on reversing social cuts and restoring cultural subsidies.

damage is both structural and emotional.

In **Flanders**, where cultural budgets traditionally fare slightly better, tension is no less palpable. "The cultural sector takes part in every strike," says **Sébastien Desprez**. "Thanks to the continuous work of our unions, we have managed to protect our artist status from the new reforms—meaning it won't be limited to two years. The cultural sector is also among the loudest voices fighting for everyone's rights. It has never been just about us. Social rights are about everyone."

Nathanaël Havez emphasises that the effects of austerity ripple through everything: "It's a domino effect: no indexation, less money for everyone, tougher choices and concessions to make. And so, less space for lesser-known cultural projects of any kind." The situation is equally worrying in the private sphere, particularly in music and the media, where concentration of funding and ownership intensifies existing inequalities. "There's a

concentration of power that leads to a concentration of money," **Sébastien Desprez** observes, echoing concerns that political rights become more fragile when culture loses its means of expression.

Still, amid frustration and fatigue, there's a sense of solidarity growing. "Everyone agrees on the need to defend culture as a public good," Sébastien Desprez concludes, "but organising collectively and maintaining long-term pressure remains a challenge." Nathanaël Havez sees a paradoxical opportunity in the crisis: "Maybe this is the moment to strengthen ties between the North and the South. Belgium's national motto is 'Unity makes strength.' We're going to have to stick together—for better or worse."

— Manon Moulin

Resources

[Belgium avoids government collapse as Bart De Wever strikes budget deal](#) — *Politico*, on November 24th, 2025

['An unprecedented void': Brussels goes record-breaking 542 days without a government](#) — *The Guardian*, on December 2nd, 2025

[Grèves en 2026: voici les prochaines dates annoncées par les syndicats, une arrive tout bientôt](#) (Strikes in 2026: here are the upcoming dates announced by the unions, with one coming up very soon) — *Moustique*, on December 10th, 2025


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Publication

January 2026

The Reset! Pages 2025 is published
by the Reset! network.

The Reset! network is coordinated by
Arty Farty.

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed
in this document do not necessarily
reflect the positions of the
European Commission.

This document was compiled and
written in early December 2025, and
does not reflect events that have
occurred since then.



Co-funded by
the European Union



