



Weekly Briefing

**Slovenia Social briefing:
Recent developments in Society
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February 8th is Slovenian national holiday, the so-called “Day of Culture”. Culture, understood in the narrow sense of term, mostly as art and language, is generally seen to have played a very important role in the nation building process. The national Day of Culture and the weeks before and after February 8 is always a time of debate and polemics about the role of culture in Slovenian society. This year the debate was additionally aggravated by the criticisms of the new decision on long-term financial support.

Background – the ministry of culture in the last government term

In the coalition negotiations between the parliamentary political parties after the 2014 elections, the Ministry of Culture was given to the political party DeSUS, the Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia. The first minister of culture in Cerar government was seen by media and the cultural sphere as a very problematic choice. Julijana Bizjak Mlakar had no background in this field and she started appointing a series of people without references in the field to the key ministry positions. Her most known intervention was the regulation on the quotas for Slovenian music in media. The badly prepared regulation caused a lot of confusion and still presents a problem today. During her mandate different artists and representatives of cultural organizations organized strikes and protest, even a hunger strike in autumn 2015. Eventually in April 2016 she was forced to resign due to another issue, related to the heritage and organizational status of the old mercury mine in Idrija.

The biggest scandal in the Bizjak Mlakar mandate, however, was related to the National Day of Culture in February 2016. On the evening before the Day of Culture, artists are awarded with the national culture awards, Prešeren awards. France Prešeren was an early 19th century Slovenian poet, who for his quality and great patriotism is considered to be the “national poet”. The Day of Culture, February 8, was chosen, because that was the day of his passing away in 1849. The award was established in 1947, and although the scope and number of

awards changed, it kept the status of the highest and most prestigious award an artist of any specialization can get. Since 1991 the committee selects two awardees for the lifetime work award and up to six artists are awarded with the “Prešeren fund” award for individual projects. In February 2016 the theatre director who was selected for the official ceremony, wanted to use Prešeren’s most famous poem “The toast”, also the national anthem, to emphasize the cosmopolitan qualities of his poetry. Because of the allusions to the refugee crisis, part of his idea was censored by the Prešeren awards committee and the Ministry of culture. That was seen in media as a case of political pressure on the sphere of culture, unprecedented in Slovenian history after independence. The public scandal about the censorship affair calmed down when the committee of Prešeren awards was replaced later that year and they elected a new president, the writer Vinko Möderndorfer.

National Programme for Culture (2018–2025)

After the replacement of the Minister of Culture, Bizjak Mlakar with another DeSUS minister, former secretary of the same ministry, Tone Peršak. One of his goals from the beginning was the reform of the national cultural strategy, a document that was due in 2018, because the previous such document was the National Programme for Culture 2014 – 2017. Draft programme was presented in late August 2017. The four key challenges that ministry identified, were (1) the understanding of culture as part of the national essence, (2) digital transformation, (3) globalization and commodification of art and culture, and (4) lack of funding in the national budget for the growing extent of the cultural production. The strategic goals that were presented in programme draft were as follows:

- establish a new status of culture beyond the nation-building framework, but based in public interest and development potential of the sector of culture
- renovation of the culture financing system

- encouraging other (non-budget) resources for the financing of culture
- decentralization of the financing and gradual elimination of imbalances

between sectors

- systematic promotion of Slovenian cultural production abroad

The draft was placed in public debate until end of September and a series of criticisms followed. Five representative associations from the field of culture made a joint statement at the end of this debate, claiming that the draft was inconsistent and had a lot of structural issues. They also objected the fact that by a new regulation, the representative organizations had no say in the preparation of such a document. What was seen as especially problematic, were the changes in financing, which lower the so-called “programme funding”, the segment of the public financing which guarantees a longer term financial stability.

Results of the Call for Programme Funding

“Programme” funding compared to “project” funding is awarded for strategies, which are wider in scope (not for limited projects) and guarantees more financial stability for of the institutions of cultural production and the cultural workers themselves. Precarious, unstable forms of work have been identified as one of the most pressing problems in the cultural sector in the past decade.

The results of the last call for the 2018–2021 period of programme funding came out in January, and immediately they caused a big upheaval among the cultural institutions. 82 proposals for public cultural programmes came in, while the call was for the funding of 32. The yearly sum of funding for the call was 2.681.300€. The biggest surprise for the applicant was the result – because the Ministry had the strategy of funding a smaller number of programmes with a comparatively larger support, a lot of applicants that had public cultural programmes before for a longer period, were now suddenly left without any stable funding. Some of the rejected proposals were seen in public and media as a shocking decision, for example two Slovenian best and world renowned

singing choirs APZ Tone Tomšič and Carmina Slovenia, academic folklore group AFS France Marolt, one of the main music education institutions Glasbena Matica, several important international festivals of classical and modern music, the main dictionary project, University radio station etc.

The choice was seen as an arbitrary and extremely harmful decision, since many of the institutions that were left out despite their continuously excellent achievements, might not be able to continue production through the next three year period. It might be especially harmful for the most precarious segment of the cultural workers, the independent producers, who have the least stability in their funding even without this cut. A lot of criticism was also directed towards the lack of evident strategy for the selection, not following any clear criteria or development vision for Slovenian cultural sector. What was seen as especially problematic, was the discrepancy between the growing overall budget of the Ministry of Culture and the lowered total funding for independent production, which according to the critics, shows the direction towards monopolizing of the big public cultural institutions, and on the other hand, commercializing of culture in the private sector, not leaving any space for small independent production.

Prešeren awards 2018

The public debate went on in the two weeks before the awarding ceremony of Prešeren awards 2018. The main speech at the ceremony is always held by the president of the committee of Prešeren awards, and Vinko Möderndorfer, president of the committee since 2016, was known to be very critical towards the policies of the Ministry of Culture. His 2017 ceremony speech was already very harsh, but after the debate about the programme funding, general public expected a very critical address. And that was the case, he used the parable from a famous socially critical comedy by famous Slovenian early century writer, Ivan Cankar, *Scandal in St. Florian Valley*, to elaborate on the fallacies of the current attitude that the Slovenian political leadership has towards cultural sector.

The support for his position in media, on social media and in the general public was large, and in the past week, serious appeals emerged for the Minister of Culture to resign. Not surprisingly, the repeated failure of DeSUS political party to choose a good candidate for the position is also being used already in the pre-election campaign by other political parties, most notably the leading Modern Centre Party, who promised to their potential voters, in case they get an opportunity to assemble the government again, to not give this ministry up to any other coalition partner. Within the cultural sphere it is expected that the debate will reemerge at the latest when the results of the call for project funding (call was published on February 16) will come out.