




Weekly Briefing

Slovenia social briefing:
Minister of Culture in conflict with the critical cultural workers
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Minister of Culture in conflict with the critical cultural workers

Summary

After only half year in his function as Minister of Culture, Vasko Simoniti is already in serious conflict with cultural workers from a number of organisations and institutions, as well as with a number of internationally esteemed Slovenian artists and art groups. The conflict escalated in spring during the first wave of the COvid-19 epidemic and reached an unprecedented seriousness in October over the Ministry's one-sided decision to evict a number of art, cultural and research institutions from a building owned by the Ministry. During the time when great numbers of cultural institutions and artists, especially in performing arts, are suffering effects of the lockdown measures due to the second wave of the epidemic, the prolongation of this conflict may endanger the functioning and existence of many important elements of the Slovenian cultural scene.

First half year of the new Ministry of Culture and the Covid-19 crisis

In March 2013, when the government was sworn in, the position of the Minister of Culture was given to Vasko Simoniti, already a minister during Prime Minister Janša's first government term, between 2004 and 2008. A historian and university professor by profession, Simoniti is an active member of Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party and a close associate of Janša. He entered politics in 2000 and organized a campaign right-wing candidate in Presidential Elections of 2002, Barbara Brezigar. He was among the founding members of the right-wing Rally for the Republic, which mostly consists of high-level members of Slovenian Democrats. The selection of Simoniti to again serve as the Minister of Culture in March 2013 was not a surprise. The ministry he took over was already struggling to resolve several issues, especially originating from the Ministry's one-sided interventions in the selection of heads of cultural institutions. With the arrival of Simoniti, however, the situation even worsened, and several rapid changes followed. Following the replacement at important positions at the ministry, one of the first radical changes was the replacement of the board of Prešeren prize – most prestigious national award for achievements in arts and culture, where most of the new board members are open sympathisers of Janša's Slovenian Democrats.

The conflict between the cultural workers and the new Minister first showed when according to the former, the problems of cultural workers during the epidemic were largely overlooked in the first two “corona-packages”, the measures to alleviate the negative effects of the COvid-19 epidemic on the Slovenian economy and society. In late May, representatives of self-employed cultural workers addressed this issue with an open letter to Minister of Culture, stressing the difficult position of this segment of cultural workers and proposing new measures (e. g. the establishment of an emergency fund, compensation stimulations for organising events after the end of the pandemic, vouchers for culture, microcredit system etc.). What the group mostly criticized was the passiveness of the Minister in the negotiations for alleviation measures and the failure of the Ministry to shape an adequate response to the crisis and to properly communicate it to the shareholders in the field of culture. The help that was received by the most fragile part of cultural sphere, was according to the critical voices, only enough for the short-term prevention of worst social crisis, while not at all preventing the live culture segment from collapsing entirely in the long term when the epidemic progresses. The response of the Ministry was that Slovenia gave its citizens as well as the cultural sphere comparatively more help in the Covid-19 crisis and that the first two corona-packages provided the self-employed cultural workers with all the required aid.

While most of the media attention was given to the Covid-19 crisis, the Ministry continued to intervene with the changes in leadership structures of public cultural institutions. Already controversial procedure of selecting a new director of the Modern Art Gallery was stopped and the call was repeated due to the alleged “contamination of the selection procedure”. Ministry directly or indirectly intervened in the selection processes in the Museum of Architecture and Design and the National Book Agency. Several other institutions, where the mandate changes are due in these months, express their worries about the potential interventions of the Ministry and their consequences.

At the end of September, a list of more than 30 main associations of cultural workers addressed an open letter to the Minister of Culture Vasko Simoniti, with an appeal to start solving the pressing issues in culture or resign from his position. The signed associations demanded seven key points of the Minister: (1) to make sure the procedures (contracts, calls etc.) are ran according to the schedule, (2) to actively work with the Public Health Institute in the preparation of Covid-19 measures and requirements for cultural events and institutions, (3) to withdraw the currently proposed budget plan for culture and keep the pre-elections' promises of a budget raise of at least 20 million euros; to provide an Covid-19 emergency fund for culture;

and to ensure transparent budget distribution (4) to provide a solution for the worst affected sectors and to stop blocking the procedures in National Book Agency and Slovenian Film Center, (5) to withdraw the proposal of the new media legislation and protect the public interest by limiting the possibility of political interventions in national media, (6) to establish a regular and two-sided communication with the share-holders in cultural sphere, being responsive to the responses from the side of cultural workers, (7) to sanction the functionaries and officials at the Ministry who fail to respect legal and ethical norms, and to sanction the catastrophically led procedures at the Ministry.

The Seven-Points Appeal received an answer by the Ministry, rejecting the accusations and claiming that the Ministry is already solving the listed issues, while the Minister's work is done in a serious and responsible way. Some additional comments were given which had a more stern tone, e. g. in the domain of high quality cultural workers the Minister announced a thorough revision to see if all recipients of this status are really eligible for it, in order to potentially reduce the number of cultural workers receiving state aid.

Eviction of Metelkova 6 building

Before independence, the area near the current Ministry of Culture in Ljubljana was occupied by a large complex of military barracks of the Yugoslav National Army. In 1993 the complex was occupied by a group of cultural associations and NGOs which slowly transformed part of this area into an autonomous cultural zone Metelkova Mesto, today one of the most important centres of alternative culture in Slovenia. Another part of the complex was rebuilt and renovated to host a number of national cultural institutions, The Slovenian Ethnographic Museum, National Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art +MSUM. One of the buildings in between the two parts of the complex, at Metelkova street no. 6, now in the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, continues to host a large number of NGOs, cultural and research institutions: e.g. the Association of Slovene Film Producers, Centre for Slovenian Literature, CITY OF WOMEN - Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture, Contemporary Dance Association Slovenia, Dance Theatre Ljubljana, Institute for Sustainable Development, Legal-Informational Centre for NGOs, Peace Institute, Otok Institute / Isola Cinema festival, Centre for Contemporary Arts SCCA-Ljubljana, Škuc Association, Slovenian Global Action – platform of non-governmental organizations etc. Several internationally renowned art groups and collectives also had their offices there, e.g. NSK, Laibach, En Knap etc. In Mid-October, following the increasing conflicts between the cultural workers and the

Ministry, the list of institutions and artists were informed of the Ministry's one-sided decision that they need to leave the premises by January 2021 or else they will be evicted from there by the court intervention. The reason given for the decision was the alleged unsafety of the unrenovated house and the Ministry's decision to use the building for its own purposes, while no replacement location has been offered. The current residents opposed the forced eviction and stressed that such a sudden eviction can only be understood as a direct attempt of the government to suppress the critical NGO voices and alternative culture as such. They called attention to the fact that the eviction was by no means urgent, since the budget resources for the renovation of the building are only scheduled for 2023. They also reminded that the current position of many of the artists and groups in this building is already seriously financially affected by the current Covid-19 crisis and the limitations for the performing arts, therefore finding office space at high commercial rates is impossible for them. An online petition was opened against the eviction, which currently already collected more than 7000 signatures.

Conclusions

The lockdown measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic weakened the already financially unstable sphere of Slovenian culture, especially in the segment of small institutions and self-employed cultural workers. The situation is being made worse by an escalating conflict between the Minister of Culture, Vasko Simoniti and the cultural workers. The recent decision to evict a number of cultural and research institutions and artists from the Ministry-owned building in Metelkova complex in Ljubljana will doubtlessly aggravate the already difficult communication between the two sides and seriously endanger the survival of a large segment of Slovenian cultural production.