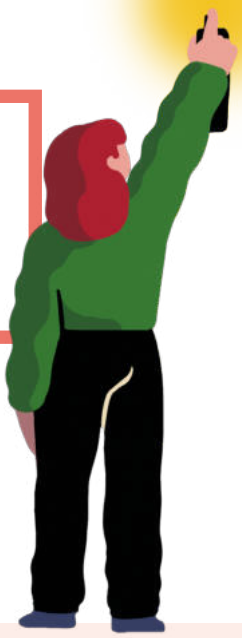
GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

VOLUME 30
WINTER 2025

ACTING OUT

ARTS & CULTURE UNDER PRESSURE



TWISTING THE PLOT

ALESSIO GIUSSANI

This year, the 50th anniversary of the death of dictator Francisco Franco, Spain's progressive government launched its Cultural Rights Plan. This 200-page document aims to transform Spanish cultural policy by redefining it through a human rights perspective. It states that "the future is a cultural construct: it is not something that is waiting for us, but something that is shaped from the present, by the way we inhabit the world, build relationships and share meanings."

Today, the ability of arts and culture to foster a sense of community and help us understand the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future is often celebrated. But Spain's approach to cultural rights represents an exception rather than the rule in European cultural policy. Artists and cultural workers across the continent are facing job precarity, marginalisation in policymaking, defunding, and instrumentalisation.

The Covid-19 pandemic didn't so much create as expose widespread economic vulnerability within culture and the arts, with artists and cultural workers from across the EU demanding recognition and protection. But not much has changed since. Today, government expenditure on culture in OECD countries remains below pre-2008 levels.

Part of the problem lies with economic orthodoxy. The conviction that the "cultural and creative industries" could support a new wave of economic growth and stimulate consumption at a time of deindustrialisation was never going to be sustainable. Neoliberal laissez-faire did the rest, leading to financial insecurity and precarisation. The ongoing shift in European priorities towards economic competitiveness is reinforcing the neoliberal mindset that values human activities only to the extent that they contribute to GDP growth. Culture's more indirect contributions to the economy and social cohesion are challenging to prove, especially at a time of political fragmentation and polarisation.

The rise of the far right is also to blame for the erosion of free, democratic culture. Far-right forces have demonstrated a fundamentally ambiguous attitude towards culture. They have clearly understood its capacity to shape hearts and minds and have invested significant resources in building cultural power to normalise their discourse. At the same time, they see free culture as a threat to their existence and resort to censorship and defunding to silence critical voices.

This mix of strategies is visible across Europe. Italy's far-right government has monopolised public media and cultural institutions in the name of restoring pluralism. Viktor Orbán has gone to great lengths to weaponise cultural heritage and push the government's narrative, including by flooding Hungarian town and village squares with monuments of dubious artistic quality. The Sweden Democrats have used music to convey a narrow understanding of Swedish culture and identity. And in Spain, Vox has adopted a negative approach to cultural policy, seeking to control regional cultural portfolios only to censor progressive voices.

Technological developments – treated as a natural phenomenon, incompatible with democratic steering and oversight – are adding another set of pressures on artists and cultural workers. The world's largest corporations dominate the production and distribution of culture. Artificial intelligence (AI) promises expanded creativity, yet it relies on familiar forms of extraction and dispossession. Its advance also raises existential questions around the future of human creativity, authorship, and imagination. Meanwhile, non-transparent algorithms reinforce the individualisation of cultural consumption and feed cultural and ideological bubbles. For Europe, these challenges are made all the more serious by the fact that it does not own or control the rapidly evolving technologies it timidly tries to regulate.

In a tense geopolitical landscape, the control of digital platforms is part of a broader competition for hegemony conducted via both soft and hard power tools. Under Trump 2.0, the US has subordinated cultural influence to economic and military coercion but is still waging culture wars in order to undermine pluralism and fuel the far right in Europe. Putin's Russia, in its full-scale war against Ukraine, has combined propaganda with attempts at cultural erasure by military means.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping's China is profiting from the US withdrawal to position itself as a global supporter of multilateralism, severing culture from its connection to human rights and open societies. Erdoğan's Turkey is also utilising cultural products such as TV series to defy Western narratives and has achieved notable success, particularly in the Balkans.

Responding to these complex challenges is not easy. But there are new ideas and sparks of cultural resistance to build on and draw inspiration from.

Leading economists are disputing the notion that culture should serve as a tool for GDP growth or other numerical metrics. For example, in this edition, Mariana Mazzucato emphasises the capacity of arts and culture to reshape and redirect the economy towards public value and sustainability. Meanwhile, cultural economist Justin O'Connor proposes viewing culture as foundational for democracy, alongside education and healthcare. This requires stronger public funding and support, as well as cultivating the commons – "third spaces" that exist outside both state control and market logics. Fostering participation while addressing socioeconomic inequalities and urban-rural divides is also at the core of Spain's Cultural Rights Plan.

Under the right circumstances, technology can make a positive contribution to this mission. For example, as cultural geographer Rowan Jaines demonstrates in this edition, progress in the field of satellite imagery has empowered architects to reimagine the future of rural landscapes beyond extraction and dispossession, thereby questioning the notion that the urban is the primary space of democratic and cultural life. More generally, artists and cultural practitioners are not passive receivers of new technologies but engage with them critically to reflect on issues of ownership, enclosure, and control in the age of automation. In her article, Seden Anlar foregrounds the efforts of researchers and activists to preserve the community value of culture and critique colonial logics in cultural production and consumption.

The EU can be an ally in this struggle, as long as it doesn't reinstrumentalise culture as a soft power tool or a "democratic shield" against hybrid warfare

and other security threats. Instead, it should value artistic freedom within its borders and strengthen its role as a global enabler, building on existing cooperation in the field of international cultural relations. As Mafalda Dâmaso stresses in her essay, this could help the EU find its place in the multipolar world order without renouncing its values.

Moreover, culture and the arts can serve as a vehicle for ecological transformation, remedying the failure of institutional politics to act on the climate crisis at the scale and pace required. This mission isn't simply fulfilled by adding greening requirements to cultural funding (which can result in greenwashing or higher burdens for a sector already gasping for air). Instead, in the words of Lucile Schmid in her conversation with Ladislav Miko and Edouard Gaudot, it is about giving space and voice – with no strings attached – to "the complexity, tensions, and contradictions that are intrinsic to any agenda of change".

Through their participation in coalition governments, Greens have forged and refined their approach to cultural policymaking, promoting their core values of inclusion, accessibility, and sustainability. Yet a distinct and coherent green vision for culture remains elusive. Sam Murray recommends prioritising the localisation of cultural funding and access to culture in rural communities. Attaching cultural provisions to green industrial and energy projects is also essential in fighting the far right, which seeks to blame the loss of collective identity in local communities on immigration and the green transition.

This edition aims to open a space for what both the green movement and the cultural and creative sectors identify as the prerequisite and essence of healthy democracies – dialogue, imagination, pluralism, and mutual understanding – without erasing disagreement and productive conflict.

ACCESSIBLE, DIVERSE, AND SUSTAINABLE

A GREEN APPROACH TO CULTURE

ARTICLE BY
SAM MURRAY

Green parties in Europe have considerable experience in using culture to promote their values and combat far-right narratives, yet a global vision for green cultural policy remains elusive. A look at initiatives introduced by Greens in government in Ireland, Luxembourg, and Latvia could help fill that gap and design the possible contours of a future green vision for culture.

The strategic value of cultural policy in today's political climate is clear. As part of efforts to stoke anti-migrant sentiments, far-right parties in Europe claim that national and local cultures are under threat from "replacement" and are monopolising cultural institutions when in government.[1] Yet this instrumentalisation of culture has failed to translate into increased investment in the cultural sector or better protection for creative workers. On the contrary, the promotion of white, Christian, and nationalist values through culture often results in the defunding of cultural programmes, which often question dominant narratives, as a means of restricting criticism.

In the Netherlands, for example, Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) have threatened to end "nonsensical subsidies" for arts and culture, claiming that "native" Dutch people are discriminated against in these fields.[2] As Latvian Minister for Culture Agnese

1 For instance, in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán's oligarch supporters have bought out major media companies. See Justin Spike (2024). "How Hungary's Orbán uses control of the media to escape scrutiny and keep the public in the dark". *The Associated Press*. 31 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2024/how-hungarys-orban-uses-control-of-the-media-to-escape-scrutiny-and-keep-the-public-in-the-dark/>.

2 Senay Boztas (2024). "'Culture is fragile': Dutch art world figures express concerns for future under potential coalition government". *The Art Newspaper*. 19 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/01/19/culture-is-fragile-dutch-art-world-figures-express-concerns-for-future-under-potential-coalition-government>.

AN OVERALL VISION FOR GREEN CULTURAL POLICY IS STILL LACKING

Lāce states, "Those who don't want open societies target culture first."[3] This dynamic has been compounded by multiple crises – the Covid-19 pandemic, the rising cost of living, and security threats – which have squeezed budgets and redirected spending towards other priorities.

This deprioritisation of culture is clearly reflected in the allocation of ministerial portfolios within governing coalitions. As culture is not considered as prestigious as finance, home affairs, or foreign affairs, for example, the portfolio is ordinarily given to a junior coalition partner. In many cases, it is held by Greens.[4]

As a result, Green parties have gathered significant experience in fighting the far right through culture and using it to promote their core values of sustainability, inclusion, and accessibility. They are deeply aware that culture can draw to the very heart of society, setting values for public life, facilitating mass expressions of identity, and bringing significant social and economic benefits. Green culture ministers have begun making the argument for wider cultural investment and have sought to ensure that creative workers, at the heart of culture, receive increased protection. Nevertheless, an overall vision for green cultural policy is still lacking. Taking stock of the successes and challenges faced by Greens in government can help fill that gap and sketch out what a genuinely green vision for culture may look like in the years to come.

ADDRESSING PRECARITY IN IRELAND

A key priority for Green cultural ministers has been to address the precarity of cultural work as well as the unregulated nature of freelance creative work. In Ireland, Green then-culture minister Catherine Martin oversaw the launch of the pilot Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) scheme in 2022, which provided 2000 participant

3 Interviewed for the purpose of this article.
4 Recent examples include Sweden (2014-2021), Ireland (2020-2025), Germany (2021-2025), Austria (2020-2025), and Luxembourg (2018-2023). In both Spain and Latvia, Green parties have held the culture ministry since 2023.

artists with a basic income payment of 325 euros a week to support their creative practice. By "support[ing] participants to develop their practice by providing income during periods when practice and portfolio are being developed", the pilot aimed to "give recognition to the value of the arts and the role of creative practice in Irish society" and "minimise the loss of skill and experience from the arts sector".[5]

In their recent article evaluating the BIA, cultural policy scholars Satu Teppo and Paraic Mc Quaid examine the political climate that enabled the introduction of the scheme and explore its reception. They emphasise the importance of Martin's background within the arts; she is "a classically trained singer and performer, and [was] a music teacher for several years before entering politics".[6] This experience, they argue, made her well placed to advocate for BIA. Not only was she able to connect with creatives (her main stakeholders), she could also make a convincing case for a greater recognition of the often unpaid time devoted by creative workers to their practice.

The BIA pilot is still ongoing and has recently been put on a permanent footing in the budget.[7] While we cannot yet know the full extent of its impacts, Teppo and McQuaid state that it "clearly asserts the significance of the contribution artists already make to society through their art" by freeing up artists' time for the generation of creative output. Many artists, of all mediums, are obliged to take a traditional job with reliable regular pay to supplement their income during periods of creation. By "provid[ing] significant support to a demographically broad range of artist and arts workers", the scheme has allowed artists to focus solely on their creative work, ensuring that ideas are given the right environment in which to flourish. This leads to innovations within the creative industries that could be beneficial both to the wider economy through their consumption and to society by creating approaches to art that more people can access. Preliminary research also demonstrates generally positive impacts on the creative workers involved. Participants in the scheme reported greater peace of mind and an increased sense of professionalism and also believed that the quality of their creative output had improved.[8]

5 Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (2022). "Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) pilot scheme: First payments issued". 28 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-culture-communications-and-sport/press-releases/basic-income-for-the-arts-bia-pilot-scheme-first-payments-issue/>.

6 Satu Teppo & Paraic Mc Quaid (2025). "Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme – an Irish case study". *Cultural Trends*, pp. 1–15. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09548963.2025.2525211#abstract>.

7 Jack Horgan-Jones (2025). "Basic income support scheme for artists to be made permanent and opened to new entrants in budget". *The Irish Times*. 6 October 2025. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2025/10/06/budget-2026-states-basic-income-scheme-for-artists-made-permanent/>.

8 Satu Teppo & Paraic Mc Quaid (2025). "Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme – an Irish case study". *Cultural Trends*.

Furthermore, Teppo and Mc Quaid suggest that the BIA pilot, as well as representing a positive shift in the public discourse regarding the arts, has also had an impact on this narrative. In their conclusion, they state that BIA "presents a globally unique example of how a national cultural policy instrument can contribute to that evolving narrative".

While acknowledging the generally positive impacts of the BIA scheme, Teppo and Mc Quaid also emphasise the broader challenges creative workers experience, which fall outside of its remit. These include income-related issues with access to housing, education, healthcare, and childcare that are not addressed by the financial support offered by BIA. It is important that the scheme is not regarded as a silver bullet for general income equality. Instead, it should work alongside a broader package of policy reforms aimed at tackling income inequality across the areas its critics highlight.

PROTECTING THE STATUS OF ARTISTS IN LUXEMBOURG

In 1980, UNESCO outlined a major new approach to cultural policy in its Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist.[9] The Recommendation calls for improvements to be made to artists' "professional, social and economic status", including by ensuring equitable access to state support and social security. Since this landmark policy agenda was announced, there has been rather slow progress on formalising such rights, with the EU yet to adopt a clear directive on the issue, but Greens in EU member states are working to advance the cause.

In Luxembourg, Sam Tanson, who occupied the post of culture minister from 2018 to 2023, sought to strengthen the status of artists by making creative work more accessible and viable for those from a variety of backgrounds and exploring the journey an artist takes from education to production. In 2018, she published the *Kulturentwécklungsplang* (KEP), a central workplan for the cultural sector that identifies culture as a human right in line with Article 27 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The KEP introduced measures such as lowering VAT for creatives to 3 per cent, reducing (and in some cases, abolishing) conservatoire admission fees, and changing the conditions attached to "intermittent artist" status[10] by widening its scope, allowing more artists to obtain it, and reducing the minimum qualifying period for the reception of financial assistance. These combined measures have afforded artists stronger protections.

9 UNESCO. *1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist*. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/1980-recommendation-concerning-status-artist>.

10 Similar to BIA, the "intermittent artist" [*intermittent du spectacle*] scheme provides financial support during periods where work is not immediately available. The scheme serves to indicate the precarity of creative work but also validates the contributions of culture to society, with state investment demonstrating the value of the work of artists in Luxembourg.

Interviewed for this article, Tanson expressed pride at "having put the *statut de l'artiste* [the status of the artist] on a firmer footing, ensuring better social security and fairer recognition of cultural work". She noted that this reform was "long awaited, and gives artists greater stability, which is essential for creativity to flourish". The rollout of the plan was complicated by the pandemic, which Tanson remembers as the greatest challenge she faced in the role: "The cultural sector was hit hard, and we had to respond quickly with emergency support, while also thinking about long-term resilience." The pandemic shifted elements of the KEP to ensure a more flexible package of supportive funding and created a need to push for greater contingency planning and a focus on resilience.

The KEP is still a work in progress, with statistics related to the measures Tanson introduced still to be generated and clear outcomes identified. A comprehensive evaluation of the programme will be crucial to ascertain whether similar reforms could be adopted in other parts of Europe.

CULTURE FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN LATVIA

To make the case for supporting artists amid cash-strapped national budgets and shifting priorities, Green ministers have framed culture as a way to bring communities together, forge connections, and find common ground. The role of culture in creating cohesion in communities is also recognised as a core theme by the European Commission, which states: "Culture is essential for avoiding conflicts and for conflict resolution. It is an ideal means of communicating across language barriers, empowering people, and facilitating social cohesion, including among refugees, migrants and host populations."[11]

In line with this thinking, in Latvia, Green culture minister Agnese Lāce and her predecessor Agnese Logina have crafted a policy that calls upon culture to act as "social glue". Lāce's current priorities clearly reflect this focus: "Efforts continue in the area of social cohesion, where we are actively working on strengthening the Latvian language, creating support mechanisms for non-governmental organisations, and engaging all communities to enhance societal resilience," she explains. "We emphasise the role of cultural institutions in promoting resilience and an inclusive society."

Latvia, like Lithuania and Estonia, is facing complex challenges. In this Baltic nation – a young democracy, where the Russian minority makes up 25 per cent of the population – the threat of Russian aggression and hybrid warfare is keenly felt. This is reflected in

11 European Commission (2023). "Cohesion and well-being".
Available at: <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/selected-themes/cohesion-and-well-being>.

government spending priorities. "It is no secret that this is already the second budget in which security has been set as a priority in Latvia. Consequently, in the cultural sector, there is a clear need to reallocate funds and attract additional financing," Lāce explains. This commitment to security poses an immense challenge to the cultural sector to articulate its purpose and value in the current context. Lāce stands firm in her belief that culture has an important role to play in Latvia's resistance to security threats. "I strive to explain to my partners in the government why culture remains important even under, and even more so under, security-focused conditions. Freedom of expression and a resilient society are key determinants for security in any democracy."

Lāce is relatively new to her role, having only been in post since June 2024, but has already sought to get policy moving. Her ministry has developed a plan for the protection of cultural heritage in crisis situations and established a supporting foundation for the Latvian Museum of Contemporary Art. This focus on heritage helps to provide the bedrock of social cohesion, enabling Latvians to proudly and strongly engage with and celebrate their national identity, history, and values. Social cohesion can be also be fostered through an openness to the participation of new contributors and ideas within a national culture. In line with this principle, Lāce has facilitated cultural exchange by welcoming foreign artists and introducing a state guarantee system that provides essential support to national museums in organising exhibitions of their work.

A GREEN VISION FOR CULTURE

Regardless of whether they actively seek culture portfolios in government, Greens have gained experience there that has allowed them to forge and refine their approach to cultural policy. But what is the relationship between culture and political ecology? And are there areas in which a green approach to cultural policy is still to be fully developed?

In Agnese Lāce's opinion, "Green, progressive parties clearly demonstrate that culture is the basis for sustainable development on this planet." This echoes the language of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which place culture at the heart of sustainable development. For Jyoti Hosagrahar, then-director of the UNESCO Division for Creativity, "Culture […] contributes directly to many of the SDGs – safe and sustainable cities, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, the environment, promoting gender equality and peaceful and inclusive societies."[12]

12 Jyoti Hosagrahar (2017). "Culture: at the heart of Sustainable Development Goals". *UNESCO Courier*. 11 April 2017. Available at: <https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/culture-heart-sustainable-development-goals>.

GREEN PARTIES SHOULD EXPLORE POLICIES TO LOCALISE CULTURAL FUNDING AND ENSURE ACCESS TO CULTURE WITHIN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Luxembourg's Sam Tanson, too, stresses the connection between culture and ecology: "Both deal with how we live together and imagine the future. A green perspective brings sensitivity to sustainability, diversity, and social justice – all of which are deeply connected to cultural life. For me, there was no contradiction but rather a strong complementarity."

A further key element of the Green political ethos is its emphasis on giving local communities more of a say in decision-making that affects their lives. For example, green energy policy across Europe promotes citizen ownership of energy infrastructure, green transport policy has called for better integrated and connected transport systems, and the movement has promoted community health initiatives.

Culture is another space in which localisation could reap great benefits. Green parties should explore policies to localise cultural funding and ensure access to culture within rural communities. It is also important to protect and sustain traditional rural cultural heritage, including festivals, food and drink, music, fine art, and textiles. To help refine such an approach, there is need to reengage with Elinor Ostrom's principles on governing the commons to ensure shared ownership and access to cultural practices and locally produced cultural goods. Greens should also review and improve the systems of protection offered to cultural heritage across Europe to ensure access for and engagement by future generations.

Another priority linked to localised cultural policy is the replacement of fossil fuel culture. Industrial decline across Europe has often left communities facing a loss of cultural identity. In Europe's fossil hey-day, large industrial employers would often provide leisure facilities for workers. Cultural activities would inhabit these spaces, including choirs, bands, amateur theatre groups, and art classes, bringing the community together. As coal mines, industrial works, and factories closed, communities were fractured. The far right is starting to be more successful in framing this cultural loss as the responsibility of the green transition and immigration. Progressives have so far failed to

AS MAINSTREAM POLITICAL PRIORITIES SHIFT AWAY FROM CULTURE, GREENS SHOULD DOUBLE DOWN ON THEIR EMPHASIS ON THE CREATIVE SECTORS

develop a vision for how the culture and community that industry once engendered could be revived.

Green cultural policy therefore needs to examine the place of culture in post-industrial towns and cities and seek to revive and protect the social cultures that once thrived. Renewable infrastructure and green industry must be successfully connected with culture, thereby quenching the flames of the far right's culture wars. Options include attaching cultural provisions to the building of wind or solar farms (including cultural spaces in the design of renewable projects) and reinvesting the profits generated by renewables in the cultural lives of communities that house infrastructure. A starting point could be bringing together Green policymakers, creatives, and community leaders to find solutions on how culture can be integrated into plans for a just transition.

A forward-looking green cultural policy should also aim to address one of the greatest areas of tension between the cultural sector and Green parties: copyright. It is clear from the work of Sam Tanson in Luxembourg and Catherine Martin in Ireland that creator protections are a core aspect of the green vision for culture. However, during the discussions surrounding the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, which came into force in 2019, the European Green Party mainly spoke against the directive. The Green position was nuanced: while it was critical of the use of upload filters to automatically determine whether content met copyright law and of a so-called "link tax", which requires extracts of news articles to be licensed by aggregators such as search engines, it did advocate for the fair remuneration for creators. But these messages became difficult to balance. As a result, the Greens failed to give the creative industries a clear idea of how they intended to support the protection and fair expansion of creator income.

The growth of artificial intelligence has also presented further impetus for Green parties to take a strong stance on copyright. AI companies are training their software on creators' work without licenses or providing remuneration, effectively stealing to generate outputs originating from others' creative works. In some extreme cases, AI-generated music and videos are created by scraping data from recordings and manipulating the voices and images of creators without consent. The development of a clear Green position on creative autonomy in the age of AI is therefore essential.

As mainstream political priorities shift away from culture, Greens should double down on their emphasis on the creative sectors. This means seeking the culture portfolio whenever they are in power (including at the local level), designing a clear plan for local-level

cultural engagement and the role of culture in a just transition, building on the work of past culture ministers to advance the status of artists and strengthen the protection and support afforded to them, and refining their approach to intellectual property and copyright.

Only this way can a compelling vision for culture be built, ensuring, in the words of Agnese Lāce, that "culture is accessible, cultural workers are protected, civil society is engaged, and freedom of speech and of expression are celebrated." This answer does not just describe ongoing cultural priorities in Latvia; it also helps to sketch out a clear direction for green cultural policymaking.

SAM MURRAY
is a lecturer in music management at the University of Leeds, specialising in music cities and cultural policy. He is also a touring and performing musician with the group Me and My Friends. Sam sits on the Musicians' Union Live and Education committees and worked in policy for the music industry at UK Music and the Council of Music Makers.

CLIMATE ACTIVISM IN MUSEUMS: VANDALISM OR LEGITIMATE PROTEST?

On 14 October 2022, visitors to the National Gallery in London were stunned as two Just Stop Oil activists splashed tomato soup over Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. "What is worth more, art or life?" asked one of them as she glued her hand to the wall. "Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people?"

Nine days later, two activists from Last Generation repeated the gesture, this time throwing mashed potatoes at Claude Monet's *Les Meules* ("Haystacks") in the Museum Barberini in Potsdam. Both artworks were undamaged as they were covered by protective glass.

Since 2022, climate groups and activists have carried out dozens of non-violent but disruptive actions in museums in Europe, North America, and Australia to bring attention to the ecological crisis and to demand social and environmental justice. And even though these actions have managed to capture global headlines, reactions have been overwhelmingly negative, and authorities have come down hard.

WIDESPREAD BACKLASH

Reading the comments on videos showing these disruptive actions, public reception appears to be generally negative. This is also evident in surveys. For instance, an Odoxa survey conducted in June 2023 found that almost 90 per cent of French people were against environmentalists "vandalising" art.[1] At the same time, media coverage of the incidents, particularly in mainstream outlets, has been overwhelmingly condemnatory, with reports often focusing on criticising the activists' tactics (sometimes stating that such actions are counterproductive) rather than concentrating on the urgency of the environmental crisis itself.

But the political crackdown has been even harsher, with authorities showing little tolerance for disruptive climate protests, whether in museums, at airports, outside mines, or even on the streets. From the UK, France, and Germany to the Netherlands, Sweden, and Italy, countries have enacted new anti-protest legislation or expanded existing laws to criminalise climate activism. Italian and German authorities have invoked anti-organised crime or anti-mafia legislation to curb protests and investigate groups like Last Generation, while the French government even attempted to dissolve Les Soulèvements de la Terre (The Earth Uprisings Collective) using laws drafted to tackle extremist groups, denouncing them as "ecoterrorists". Moreover, courts have enforced increasingly severe penalties, including both jail terms and fines. Detentions have soared as a result.

Museums themselves have been critical of the disruptive protests, too. In a joint statement following a spate of disruptive incidents in 2022, 92 museum directors from major institutions around the world expressed shock, saying activists "severely underestimate the fragility" of artworks. This backlash has had a heavy toll on both climate activists and groups. Fines and costly legal proceedings have led to financial hardship for some activists. At the same time, strict bail conditions have meant that protesters often face curfews, electronic tagging, and prohibitions on demonstrating while awaiting their trials.

SNAPSHOT

1 Odoxa (2023). *Baromètre sécurité des Français – Les Français et l'activisme écologique*. 17 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.odoxa.fr/sondage/les-francais-sopposent-aux-methodes-daction-des-activistes-ecologistes>.

The mental impact has also been severe, with some activists experiencing constant anxiety and psychological exhaustion. In March 2025, Just Stop Oil said it would cease high-visibility protests after its members were handed down a series of prison sentences (although the group itself stated it was disbanding as its demand that the UK approve no new fossil fuel projects had been met). In France, Riposte Alimentaire ("Food Response") made a similar announcement in October 2024. Why, then, did these individuals and groups go through so much trouble?

A primary goal behind acts of civil disobedience in museums is to generate widespread international media coverage and public awareness of the ecological collapse in an "overcrowded attention economy"[2] that ignores more subtle protests. The choice of artworks and protest methods is also intended to hold symbolic value: canned soup and mashed potatoes highlighted increasing food insecurity, while Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* was targeted to bring attention to crop failure. Moreover, museums were specifically targeted due to their role and mission in public education, which the activists believed they were failing to fulfil in relation to the climate crisis.

IS COLLABORATION POSSIBLE?

That said, climate groups have almost exclusively targeted works guarded by protective material, or their surroundings, such as transparent barriers, pedestals, frames, etc. Moreover, activists have expressed an interest in collaborating with museums and joining forces in a shared commitment to ecological sustainability.[3]

Initiatives aimed at opening spaces for dialogue between museums and eco-activist collectives are isolated, but they exist. One notable example is the Baltimore Museum of Art's efforts to establish a sustainability programme, informed by an advisory committee composed of artists, activists, and city officials. Tim Martin, an artist and activist who took part in the action targeting the display case protecting Edgar Degas's *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was invited to join the committee.

As the International Council of Museums has stated, art institutions can play a key role in initiating and supporting climate action. Working actively with both climate groups and individuals will undoubtedly help make that vision more feasible. ■

2 Alice Madeleine Hilder Jarvis (2025). "No Art on a Dead Planet: Political Iconoclasm as Climate Activism". *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 29 October 2025. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.70055>.

3 Anne Bessette (2025). *On Art 'Vandalism' and Civil Resistance in Museums: Destruction, Degradation, Artistic and Political Interventions since 1970*. London: Routledge.

ANNE BESSETTE
holds a PhD in sociology and is an associate researcher at CERLIS and PALOC (Paris, France). Her current research focuses on the issues raised by ecological activist interventions in museums.

AMIR HASHEMI
is editorial assistant at the *Green European Journal*. Previously, he was language editor at *The European Correspondent* and copywriter at Geeks.ltd. He has a master's degree in Communication Studies from the VUB.

Soft Power, Hard Control: Culture in Communist China

ARTICLE BY
LAURENCE VANDEWALLE

Since the mid-20th century, the arts and culture scene in China has gone from strict Communist Party control to relative freedom and back to heavy restrictions. More recently, the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has increasingly used culture as a tool for projecting soft power abroad and portraying China as a legitimate civilisational alternative to liberal democracy. How should Europe respond to this in its cultural cooperation with China?

When Wang Xiao[1] was a child during the Cultural Revolution, her father buried his leather shadow puppets in the garden to save them from the Red Guards, who were destroying anything associated with traditional art and the "old culture". In secret, he taught his children to bring them to life so that the ancient art would not die.

Decades later, in Xi Jinping's China, Wang Xiao is an established puppeteer: she holds shows in Beijing and runs a puppetry school. Choosing her words carefully, she shares: "It's a terrible thing to say, but as artistic freedom shrinks, my work prospers. Children are told they must know their culture and have cultural confidence. That means more classes, more students."

Under Xi Jinping, China aims to become the world's leading nation in every field, including arts and culture. The country projects its cultural power abroad as it does domestically: through tight political control. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) oversees the Ministry of Culture, cultural industries, and artists, ensuring they "serve the people" (read: the Party). A Leninist organisation, the CCP promotes a positive image of the country it rules, portraying China as a credible international actor and an alternative model to liberal democracy.

MAO'S CULTURAL DOCTRINE

The CCP was founded in 1921 under the guidance of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The Communist International (Comintern), an organisation founded by Vladimir Lenin dedicated to advancing world communism, played a decisive role in shaping the new organisation, influencing its political strategies and providing cadre training. From the outset, the CCP, like the CPSU, placed

1 The name has been changed.

UNDER XI JINPING, CHINA AIMS TO BECOME THE WORLD'S LEADING NATION IN EVERY FIELD, INCLUDING ARTS AND CULTURE

great emphasis on propaganda, including in the fields of art and culture.

After the Long March (a defining 1930s military retreat during the Chinese Civil War that elevated Mao Zedong's power), Mao refined his ideas on the relationship between art and politics. His 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" articulated his vision clearly. Mao declared that "literature and art are part of the whole revolutionary cause" and must "serve the workers, peasants and soldiers" by advancing the political objectives of the revolution.

Once in power, the Party quickly asserted control over artists, creating numerous state-sponsored associations including the China Writers' Association, the China Dancers' Association, and others. In 1949, the famous novelist Shen Yanbing, also known under his pen name Mao Dun, became China's first culture minister. He oversaw the alignment of literature and art with the ideology of the Communist Party, promoting the view that culture should serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. During this period, many cultural institutions were under the ministry's direct oversight.

Mao Dun was forced to resign in 1965, as the Cultural Revolution began. Mao Zedong told the Red Guards to eradicate the "Four Olds" – old customs, culture, habits, and ideas – and "purify" society. Soon, the Ministry of Culture was paralysed and its cadres purged. In its place, a revolutionary committee dominated by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, took over. Artists were labelled class enemies, tortured, bullied, and forced to undergo "re-education" through labour, and many died. Creative production nearly ceased, even at the level of folk art.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution following Mao's death in 1976, cultural activity slowly revived, though China remained poor and isolated. With Deng Xiaoping's accession to power and the start of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1979, things improved. Cartoons from the Shanghai Animation Film Studio offer a beautiful example of post-Cultural Revolution artistic production.

The 1974 discovery of the tomb of Qin Shi Huang Di greatly helped China's cultural revival. Once the Cultural Revolution had passed, the Terracotta Warriors were massively advertised abroad. The statues became a new tool of Chinese soft power. They projected the image of an ancient civilisation linked seamlessly to the modern Party-state – a stark reversal from the destruction of culture under Mao Zedong.

XI JINPING'S NOT-SO-NEW ERA

From the late 1970s through Hu Jintao's presidency from 2003 to 2013, China's cultural sphere flourished with relative openness, gaining global recognition, especially in contemporary arts. In twenty years, Chinese painters rose from near invisibility to international fame. They became major players in the lucrative global market for contemporary art, and their works are collected by both Chinese and Western billionaires. Ai Weiwei is probably the best known among them in the West, but the works of other artists such as Wang Guangyi – often called the "Chinese Andy Warhol" – are also highly sought after.

This trend reversed under Xi Jinping, who rose to power in 2012 and rapidly infused a Mao-flavoured nationalism into Party politics. His 2013 visit to Qufu, Confucius's birthplace, served as a political rehabilitation of Confucianism – now tweaked as a precursor to socialism. In 2017, Xi declared a "New Era", re-centring the Communist Party in Chinese society and once again tightening its grip on cultural productions. He also underscored the need to "tell the China story" well, a process in which artists play a central role.

The New Era marked the end of relative artistic freedom. For instance, Gao Zhen – one of the Gao Brothers, known for provocative works mocking Mao's personality cult and reinterpreting the Cultural Revolution – has been imprisoned since 2024 under a law against "defaming the reputation of heroes and martyrs".

The Confucius Institutes are another instrument the Communist Party has routinely used to project soft power. Launched in 2004 under the Ministry of Education, these institutes supposedly intended to promote Chinese language and culture abroad, with teaching materials and staff vetted by the CCP. As Xi Jinping's nationalist ideology grew stronger, they became tools of influence and political control. In the face of international criticism, many Confucius Institutes have been rebranded or closed, particularly in the US and the EU. The Covid-19 pandemic dealt a major blow to China's cultural outreach, with foreign students departing and academic exchanges being paused. The CCP's ideological campaigns intensified. Propaganda ballets were staged at the China National Opera, which had once hosted famous foreign artists.

When Covid-related restrictions finally eased in December 2022, cultural exchanges slowly restarted. In 2023, Xi Jinping launched the Global Civilisation Initiative, which is the cultural diplomacy arm of the Party's Community of Shared Future for Mankind. As the Trump administration weakens US soft power, China is reasserting cultural "openness". But CCP ideology and censorship are never far away.

THE 1974 DISCOVERY OF THE TOMB OF QIN SHI HUANG DI GREATLY HELPED CHINA'S CULTURAL REVIVAL

A LONG MARCH, ABROAD

Many embassies around the world count a cultural advisor among their diplomats. This is particularly true of China, whose embassies play a central role in managing cultural diplomacy. For a time, Beijing's diplomatic missions seemed mainly involved with teaching Chinese to students. However, with Xi Jinping in power, they turned into tools for monitoring how the "China story" is told abroad and

for intervening when narratives diverge from official CCP lines.

In 2020, Nantes History Museum in western France cancelled an exhibition on Genghis Khan after Beijing demanded the removal of terms including "Genghis Khan", "empire", and "Mongol". The controversy was a sign of the Party-state's growing sensitivity around identity issues, including in Inner Mongolia, where China had just enforced a ban on teaching classes in Mongolian. The exhibition finally opened in October 2023, with loans from Mongolia and Taiwan, rather than China.

There have been other, similar incidents. The recent renovation of Paris's Guimet Museum sparked debate when researchers alleged that references to "Tibet" had been removed under Chinese pressure – a move some consider as complicity in cultural genocide.

Yet despite its efforts, China has not always managed to control the narrative. Major but alternative Chinese voices such as Ai Weiwei, contemporary film director Chloé Zhao, and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature Gao Xingjian, have found an audience in the West. Ironically, these artists might not be very famous in their own country, but they form a diaspora cultural resistance. Their success shows that cultural soft power cannot be completely centralised.

CONSCIOUS OF THE POWER OF CULTURE, THE CCP ALLOWS LITTLE SPACE FOR FOREIGN INFLUENCE

NO FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN MY BACKYARD

Conscious of the power of culture, the CCP allows little space for foreign influence. During the 1990s, American cultural icons such as Mickey Mouse, Madonna, and Sylvester Stallone were visible across China, but that did not last long. The China Film Administration, under the Party's Propaganda Department, strictly limits the number of foreign films allowed on the Chinese market and also censors the content. This has helped the Communist Party preserve ideological control and nurture the domestic movie industry.

Disney's experience with the challenging dynamics of the Chinese market illustrates the success of Beijing's control. In 1998, the US-produced cartoon *Mulan,* based on the Chinese legend of heroine Hua Mulan, failed to captivate Chinese audiences. The animation's 2020 live-action remake – partly filmed in Xinjiang, home to the Uyghur minority persecuted by the CCP – faced backlash in the West for ignoring human rights concerns. The comments of leading actress Liu Yifei, who supported the police during the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, also sparked international controversy. Despite complying with the CCP's sensitivities, Disney gained little access to the Chinese market. The movie received a score of 4.7/10 on the Chinese rating platform Douban. Meanwhile, domestic animated movies have flourished, with *Ne Zha 2* (2025), a box-office sensation in China, becoming the first Chinese cartoon to achieve significant global success. This has only increased the CCP's confidence, in a kind of soft power reversal.

What is more, China has already established itself in digital industries, and particularly the gaming industry. Games like *Genshin Impact* (2020), played by hundreds of millions globally, subtly project an image of China as technologically creative and culturally sophisticated.

In recent years, China's soft power has shifted from traditional institutions such as Confucius Institutes to digital ecosystems. Through global social media platforms and cultural exports like gaming and cinema, the CCP is building a pervasive narrative infrastructure. This digital Silk Road of culture allows the Party to reach global audiences directly – aestheticising Chinese ideology normalising control.

LAURENCE VANDEWALLE
studied sinology and international relations at KU Leuven. A fluent Mandarin speaker, she has studied, lived, and travelled extensively in China since 1990. She worked for 19 years in the European Parliament, where she served as advisor to the chair of the Delegation for Relations with China and as coordinator of the EU-China political parties' forum. In parallel, she is an active cultural practitioner, running a puppet theatre in Liège, Belgium.

HOW SHOULD EUROPE REACT?

Responding to the CCP's cultural assertiveness is complex. For years, Europeans assumed that China's economic liberalisation would naturally lead to political liberalisation. This didn't take into account the CCP's determination to remain in power.

The EU's 2019 communication *EU-China – A strategic outlook* marked a turning point, recognising China simultaneously as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. Since then, Europe has begun scrutinising Chinese propaganda efforts – ranging from disinformation to covert cultural influence – more closely, as can be seen from investigations into Confucius Institutes in several EU member states.

European cultural actors must better understand the political aims embedded in Chinese cultural outreach; ignorance risks complicity. For instance, at the 2025 Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in France, few noticed the problematic nature of an exhibition entitled *Strangers*, curated in China and depicting Tibetans from a Han Chinese perspective. The exhibition illustrates the risk of uncritical collaboration and the reproduction of state narratives.

Since 1979, the CCP has gradually reinforced its discourse around "Chinese civilisation", using culture as both shield and sword. Under Xi Jinping, the Party has reframed its cultural soft power into a civilisational power, granting legitimacy to China's quest for global leadership and normalising its model as a legitimate civilisational alternative.

In its cultural cooperation with China, Europe must acknowledge this political dimension, engaging openly but without naïveté. Rather than merely reacting to China's narrative, Europe should project its own story – one grounded in openness, pluralism and individual freedom. Dialogue should continue but not at the expense of Europe's narrative sovereignty, artistic freedom, or democratic values. ■

SUCCEEDING WHERE POLITICS FAILS

CULTURAL FESTIVALS AND THE GREEN TRANSFORMATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH
LUCILE SCHMID &
LADISLAV MIKO
BY **EDOUARD GAUDOT**

With their overly simple language and polarising messaging, politicians often fail to capture the contradictory realities of life, especially in times of crisis and transformation. Can arts and culture fill the gap that politics leaves and connect people to complex ideas, foster dialogue, and inspire action? An interview with Lucile Schmid, founder of France's Prix du Roman d'Écologie, and Ladislav Miko, president of Czechia's EKOFILM festival.

EDOUARD GAUDOT: A former minister of the environment in the Czech Republic, a former elected member of the regional parliament for the Paris region – you both have political backgrounds. What prompted you to foray into the world of culture?

LUCILE SCHMID: Culture and literature are my original areas of interest. When I entered politics, I was struck by how time consuming it was, making it absolutely impossible to read a book, go to the movies, see a play, or enjoy culture in general. It seems that being in power and doing the task of representing people eventually disconnects you from culture and creativity – and that the culture of power somehow pulls you away from cultural issues. I find this deplorable. Representing society and offering a vision for the future in these difficult times demands a stronger connection to culture and its complexity.

I believe that being connected to culture is the only way to understand the dynamics of transformation and ongoing social crises, because culture is about learning a new vocabulary and coming up with novel ways to express the world. I felt that I could contribute more to this

endeavour if I left Paris, party politics, and the usual political circus and engaged more in creating cultural projects. This is why I established the Prix du Roman d'Écologie.

LADISLAV MIKO: My path was quite different. When I was young, I lived in communist Czechoslovakia. There, being involved in politics basically meant collaborating with a totalitarian regime. My engagement with culture began when I was a student of science. During this period, I staged plays as part of a student group. This was our way to express our messages to society and the community and to circumvent the communist grip on daily life. It was the first time that I felt the power of art in bringing people together and carrying political messages – even in a highly complex environment.

It was the Velvet Revolution – and later, the separation of Czechia from Slovakia – that finally brought me from the field of science into politics. I remained a scientist, but when I started to work in politics, I remembered the importance of communicating through culture, which allows you to directly connect with people and bring them together. For example, while serving in the European Commission as Director for Nature in Brussels, I launched a "Czech Fun Club" with my wife to bring together compatriots from the European institutions, along with artists and public figures, to spend time together and exchange ideas. When I left politics, I was offered to take over the direction of EKOFILM, Europe's oldest international environmental film festival, created by the Czech Ministry for the Environment 51 years ago. It is an institutional tool that can be used to create cultural connections, and I have been involved with it for more than a decade.

LUCILE SCHMID: For me, it was also very striking to see that mainstream political agendas rarely put the ecological transformation at their centre. Usually, these issues don't enter political debates unless there is a crisis or popular mobilisation. You can see this in France today, where green issues have completely disappeared from the political agenda. But with cultural events like ours – film festivals or prizes on green literature – we have a way to intervene in political discussions and make these topics more prominent.

When we created the Prix du Roman d'Écologie [a literary prize that aims to nurture green themes in French literature] with writers and leading green figures, we had two objectives in mind: first, giving visibility to issues that were absent not just from politics but also from mainstream literature. Initially, people were sceptical. They believed that nature and landscape writing were something for English-language literature and American culture. But we wanted to show the relevance of transformation and green values. Our second goal was to highlight the complexity, tensions, and

POLITICS IS ABOUT CONFLICTS, BUT TOO OFTEN, POLITICAL AGENDAS TEND TO OVERLOOK COMPLEXITY AND DISMISS CONTRADICTIONS

contradictions that are intrinsic to any agenda of change. Politics is about conflicts, but too often, political agendas tend to overlook that complexity and dismiss internal contradictions. Movies, books, and other artworks don't shun these aspects, so we wanted to showcase them and give them some kind of political meaning.

In France, literature is very much seen as something purely aesthetic. A true artist should not be engaged, and a good writer is not supposed to convey political preferences or meaning. But we have helped new writers emerge, and people now recognise that young and up-and-coming authors have a different outlook because of the times we live in. And they can be very good writers. This is not limited to new writers; established novelists increasingly include references to environmental issues and their impact on our lives.

Another goal of the Prix du Roman d'Écologie is revisiting history and imagining how it could have been different. This is something that, for example, Sibylle Grimbert achieves with her *Le dernier des siens* ("The Last of Its Kind"), which tells of the friendship between a naturalist and a great auk in 1840. In the novel, the bird happens to be the last of its species. But its friend, the naturalist, does not know this.

It was one of our aims to show people that culture can be a political commitment. Quite different from you, Ladislav, since you used to live in a country where the lack of democracy made art into a subtle form of political engagement that people recognised.

You both touched on the relationship between the arts and political institutions. Would you see a danger in the institutionalisation of art and culture?

LADISLAV MIKO: The simple answer would be, yes, it can be potentially dangerous. But it's also circumstantial. As far as I'm concerned, with EKOFILM we have complete freedom, and this is enabled by institutional support. The certainty and stability of the funding are liberating. In fact, one specific condition for the festival is that there cannot be any politicisation, and when ministers and politicians are invited, it's only as part of the discussion in the spirit of a pluralist community. In the 2024 edition, one of the most successful conversations featured the last eight Czech environment ministers in a roundtable discussion on environmental issues from different points of view. Such a programme would be impossible in a partisan environment.

The content of EKOFILM is determined by the festival itself, not by the institutions. People come because of its substance and pluralistic approach. This is, in my view, very political – but in the right way.

LUCILE SCHMID: I remember a debate in France between a government official and a group of scriptwriters, where the artists confessed their uneasiness at being solicited by the government. This underscores both the necessity and difficulty of bridging the two worlds. Another telling example is the way France's current culture minister treats and addresses artists. She accuses them of being disconnected from society and urges them to leave Paris and go to the countryside and other parts of France. She speaks of artists in an antagonistic and populist manner, as if she were leading some kind of culture war.

Indeed, culture has now become a real battlefield. Certain elected officials, including regional council presidents, are slashing budgets and trying to discredit, silence, or even destroy the bits of culture they disagree with. They claim to be doing this in the name of sound public finances and European standards of a balanced budget, but that's a pretext. It is, of course, hard to generalise since policies change depending on who is in charge, but it seems that many public institutions believe culture must serve their political purpose or renounce its public funding. This is a problem because culture can only be a tool for positive transformation if it is free and without strings attached.

LADISLAV MIKO: The trends Lucile describes are also visible in my country, and we have populist parties attacking culture and trying to defund artists. However, I still haven't seen a Czech minister of culture who would act the way you mentioned. Our historical legacy reminds people what culture meant to them in totalitarian times. I hope it will remain so.

Books are solitary, intimate experiences, whereas movies are more collective. Can the tension between collective and individual practice be resolved in festivals and public events?

LADISLAV MIKO: For me, the fact that people are coming to see movies about the environment is only a starting point. What truly matters is the creation of a lasting community of people who come together every year to each festival. The festival is about much more than two hours of watching a movie and then two hours of discussing it. We also have many "post-festival activities", with events in various towns, schools, and universities, where locals gather to see a film. The movie itself is just the start of the story. The most important part is the social and cultural connection it provides.

I find it much easier to achieve this with movies than with books. In my view, literature might be less conducive to forming a community and connecting people.

LUCILE SCHMID: You're right. With books, it's certainly more difficult, but they can still contribute greatly to creating collective culture.

WE SHOULD MAKE ARTS INTERACT, REFRAIN FROM DECREEING WHAT IS POPULAR AND WHAT IS ELITIST, AND AIM TO MAKE COMPLEXITY A PART OF POLITICS

When we decided to establish the prize, we selected a large jury of 20-25 people. Half of them were students and younger people from various schools who were working on the issues related to our work. Now, eight years later, there is a real community of people dedicated to the initiative and committed to enlarging its outreach. We have created what we could call a deliberative mini-public. In a sense, it's a democratic exercise.

Another point worth mentioning is that we have managed to establish our reputation strongly enough for novelists and scriptwriters to seek our advice on their own practices. For instance, I've been contacted by an association of screenwriters to help them identify biases about green topics in their work on mainstream series. What I know for certain is that our prize provides a great opportunity to explore the tensions between generations, social issues, and green topics.

Cinema, movies, literature, or theatre – I think we should make arts interact, refrain from decreeing what is popular and what is elitist, and aim to make complexity a part of politics. Today, there are many festivals that focus on green issues or transformation, and mainstream events increasingly provide opportunities for such interactions between politics and the arts.

We can say that the opposite is also true: political events are increasingly taking on the form of festivals. A striking example is France's Fête de l'Humanité – historically connected to the Communist Party – but also many green-minded festivals focused on degrowth or alternative futures. Political events use culture to attract participants who don't necessarily share their cause. Does this imply that people are more willing to engage with culture than politics?

LADISLAV MIKO: There is a very important point here, which is again related to the experience of living in a former totalitarian world. Literature and books were the best way to sneak culture into a closed country. If you had a book, you could read it, translate it, distribute it,

THE MOMENT YOU PUSH FOR A SPECIFIC SOLUTION OR PICK A POLITICAL SIDE, YOU RISK CREATING POLARISATION

and disseminate its contents. This is how we learned about different realities beyond the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, movies, albums, bands, theatre pieces, and other cultural objects were only allowed when selected by the regime. Books helped create a democratic feeling. They contributed to bringing people together and helped make a demos, a society, emerge. They can play a real, subversive role.

Today, the challenge is much more difficult: books have to compete with a variety of other offers such as social media, the Internet, TV, etc. I think festivals and their crowds are responding to this situation.

Today, societies are increasingly aware of the urgent challenges they face, yet this awareness is not always reflected in the choice of political leaders. Why is this sense of urgency, which is so visible in your festivals, lacking from voting behaviour as well as political agendas?

LADISLAV MIKO: Our aim is not to influence how people vote. We are primarily providing them with facts and information about the urgency and scale of the problems we are facing and also about the many potential ways of addressing them. You can encourage movements, action, and the desire to act, but the moment you push for a specific solution or pick a political side, you risk creating polarisation, and you narrow your audience to those people who are sympathetic to your perspective. I still believe the priority should be to speak to the broadest possible segment of society.

LUCILE SCHMID: The idea cannot be to advocate for one political party. Yet if the public does not see meaningful action despite its growing awareness, it may get frustrated. That said, this awareness hasn't so far fully translated into voting behaviour, and this is mainly due to the democratic crisis and the perception that politicians lack the power they claim to have. So we should start questioning political systems rather than culture and the outreach of festivals.

What's certain is that culture lives within language and words, and if politicians had the ability to capture the complex and contradictory conditions we are facing and stopped oversimplifying, they would have more credibility – and thus more power. Unlike political storytelling, culture – including books, movies, and series – has the ability to tell intimate, contradictory stories that people see and live every day.

Currently, a lot of popular and influential green figures are receiving millions of views from young people on YouTube and other social media, but they leave them with a sense of despair and the conclusion that there is no solution, exit, or possibility to change anything.

I'm not arguing that these scientists, artists, or writers should promote one party or another, but it's also important to show people that there are solutions and that they are not doomed.

Words matter, and so does culture. We should use our cultural influence to show that there is a way. To recall that democracy is ours. So I believe people who have the ability to influence public opinion have the responsibility to take and defend a future-oriented perspective.

LADISLAV MIKO: I agree. And I believe that neither culture nor science are bound to remain outside of politics, commenting and providing ideas and data. They must also be a source and an inspiration for politics and politicians. They can provide a link and a sense of community. We need more scientists and artists to take on their political responsibility and go into the arena to fight for their ideas.

LUCILE SCHMID
is president of La Fabrique écologique, a think tank specialising in green issues. In 2017, she co-founded the Prix du Roman d'Écologie (PRE), a literary prize that aims to foster green inspiration in French literature.

LADISLAV MIKO
is a Czech soil biologist, ecologist, and environmentalist. He teaches ecology, environmental sciences and restoration ecology at Charles University in Prague. In 1989, he participated in the Velvet Revolution and later entered politics, serving as Czechia's environment minister in 2009. He worked for the European Commission between 2005 and 2021. Ladislav is the president of EKOFILM, Europe's oldest environmental film festival.

EDOUARD GAUDOT
is a historian and political scientist. He has worked at the College of Europe in Warsaw and in the European Parliament. He is a teacher, consultant, and writer. His latest book is *Les 7 Piliers de la Cité* (Plon, 2022).

RURAL ARCHITECTURE
THE FUTURE'S LABORATORY

ARTICLE BY
ROWAN JAINES

The tendency to equate the "rural" with nature rubs up against the fact that non-urban areas have long been laboratories for the testing of destructive agricultural practices and other capitalist endeavours. Architects are now leading the charge in imagining new ways of creating sustainable rural life worlds.

California's Central Valley is haunted by a long history of landscape transformation. In 2023, 130 years after Tulare Lake – or Pa'ashi, as it is known to the Tachi Yokut Tribe who once lived there – was drained for agricultural purposes, it came back to life. Tulare Lake was once the US's largest freshwater body west of the Mississippi. After California's integration into the United States in 1850, the US government, along with settlers, used drainage techniques developed from European colonisers and enhanced by the steam power of the Industrial Revolution. The exposed land was then placed in private hands.

But in early 2023, California experienced heavy winter storms followed by large-scale snow melt from the Sierra Nevada mountain range north of the Central Valley – both products of climate change-related phenomena. Water began flowing back into the Tulare Lake basin at a rate that the parched soils could not absorb and the drainage systems could not manage. Within weeks, arable fields of pistachio, cotton, and tomato were submerged. The historic lake was making a comeback.

By the end of June 2023, Tulare Lake receded into history again, for now. A combination of state agencies implemented measures, including diversion and pumping, to move the water away from arable fields.

The area of the Tulare Lake, drained for agricultural purposes. California, United States (circa 1940). ©WaterArchives.org, via Flickr

The flooding, however, prompted conversations about ecological and social justice in the region. There are calls from tribal and community leaders to turn parts of the lake into wetlands, with the aim of easing flood dangers, providing habitat for wildlife, and restoring the ancestral waters of the Tachi Yokuts.

Tulare Lake is just one example of a rural landscape that was transformed by the displacement of native people and the technologies of the (long) Industrial Revolution for the purposes of agriculture. Today, many of these landscapes – particularly those that utilised drainage – are reaching the end of their design life and in doing so are disrupting established perceptions of ruralities.

CORRECTING THE RURAL RECORD

There has been a tendency to falsely conflate rural landscapes with nature, in opposition to the urban as the site of culture and technology. This perspective ultimately deprives ruralities of agency and imagination, depoliticising their past and future, and perpetuating their status as peripheries and sites of extraction for the urban "centres".

THERE HAS BEEN A TENDENCY TO FALSELY CONFLATE RURAL LANDSCAPES WITH NATURE, IN OPPOSITION TO THE URBAN AS THE SITE OF CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Architects and researchers are now challenging this narrow understanding of rural areas and urban-rural relationships, aiming to change the way we imagine non-urban futures. Their efforts are enabled by rapid advances in the accuracy and accessibility of open satellite imagery sources. The development and rollout of super-resolution models that use machine learning technologies to generate increasingly high-quality images from satellite data is making it possible to analyse rural landscapes in new ways. This information has been utilised across a multitude of sectors, from navigation to urban planning, as well as journalism and scholarly analysis.

Satellite imagery also enables greater visibility of remote areas and large privately owned land, both of which have been somewhat off-limits to analysts of the countryside and agricultural areas for decades. As Nathalie Pettorelli, a senior fellow at the Zoological Society of London, puts it, satellites "provide you with the opportunity to monitor the Earth globally and monitor aspects of biodiversity that were very much neglected before."[1]

LAND GRABBING THEN AND NOW

Some of the most forward-looking work using satellite imagery is coming from the field of architecture. The modelling skills that architects are trained in have harnessed the power of the "open source revolution" to develop new forms of analysis that hold truth to power. The Forensic Architecture project, based at Goldsmiths, University of London, is a key example of this developing praxis. This team of researchers investigates states and corporate entities using a practice that centres around the geolocation of data and the building of navigable 3D digital models and interactive maps.

1 Augusta Dwyer (2021). "A boom in satellite technology is revolutionizing the way we see the Earth: And the data is opening new doors for landscape management and restoration". *ThinkLandscape / Global Landscapes Forum*. 19 April 2021. Available at: <https://thinklandscape.globallandscapesforum.org/51523/a-boom-in-satellite-technology-is-changing-the-way-we-see-the-earth/>.

Since its establishment in 2010, Forensic Architecture has investigated cases of state violence and violations of human rights around the world. This includes the policies of European, national, and international authorities in relation to migration across the Mediterranean and the conduct of Israeli Defense Forces soldiers during Israel's war in Gaza.

One of its ongoing investigations focuses on the ecological destruction of Namibia's grasslands from a human rights perspective. The researchers used a combination of historical photographs and oral histories to create 3D vegetation maps of the landscape in an area called Hatsamas, 60 kilometres east of the capital Windhoek, prior to the German colonisation that took place in the late 19th and early 20th century.[2]

The researchers then used the same process to generate vegetation maps for the earliest available aerial images from 1972 and up-to-date satellite imagery from 2023. They used these maps to create an interpolated map series in which each frame represented a year. With a video game modelling tool called Unreal Engine, they then created a navigable 3D model for each frame, which allows for an immersive and visual representation of the combined environmental and social repercussions of colonial policies, land use practices, and suppression of Indigenous lifeways.

This research project from Forensic Architecture shows how novel modelling and visualisation techniques can make the relationships between environmental degradation and human rights violations much clearer than previously possible. In the Namibia context, the 3D models the researchers produced show that the genocide that began with German colonisation in South West Africa was not a single event but an unfolding process that evolved in a wider global political context, from imperial land grabbing through military campaigns to more insidious forms of dispossession and landscape degradation.

The research also reveals the continuity between colonial and genocidal practices and the ongoing environmental and ecological destruction in non-urban areas. Landscape transformations that began with land grabbing, often at the hands of imperial forces, can be seen through these new methods as processes that escalate and evolve, first through military campaigns and later through the development of global trade and commerce systems. These systems perpetuate both the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the idea of non-urban landscape as a site of extraction.

2 Forensic Architecture / Forensis (2025). "The Environmental Continuum of Genocide in Namibia". *Forensic Architecture Investigation*. 15 August 2025. Available at: <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-environmental-continuum-of-genocide-in-namibia>.

A visual from Forensic Architecture's investigation "The Environmental Continuum of Genocide in Namibia". Perspective view with the 2023 species map applied in a 3D environment in Unreal Engine. ©Forensic Architecture/ Forensis, 2025

THE MILITARY-AGRICULTURAL COMPLEX

The research that organisations like Forensic Architecture are carrying out reflects a growing interest in rural areas, one that is shared by landscape and building architects, as well as planners. The 2019 exhibition *Taking the Country's Side*, commissioned by the Lisbon Architecture Triennale and curated by French philosopher and architectural historian Sébastien Marot, confronted the constructed division between the country and the city through an exploration of the formal links between architecture and agriculture.

Formed of 42 panels, a large chronological frieze, a compass of scenarios, and a collection of short films, the exhibition emerges from Marot's teaching on environmental history. Marot makes the case that agriculture and architecture both emerged from a move towards the domestication of plants and animals, and humans, during the Neolithic Revolution (10,000 to 12,000 years ago). This, as American political scientist James C. Scott highlighted in *Against the Grain* (2017), is the critical period during which humans became increasingly sedentary and, as a result, began to build and design landscapes and dwellings in a more permanent way.

Both Scott and Marot document how agriculture, the planning of non-urban environments, and the design of social systems are intrinsically linked in pre-history and continue to shape our understandings and uses of non-urban landscapes to this day.

Marot's exhibition further elucidated the links between the military industrial complex and non-urban landscape design, highlighted by Forensic Architecture's research in Namibia, through the integration of French agricultural engineer and critic Mattieu Calame's research into nitrogen.[3]

Calame's work highlights the significance of biochemical research in the 19th century that discovered the importance of nitrogen in plant growth. Bones are a key source of nitrogen, and this discovery led to gruesome campaigns from industrialised nations, in particular England, to pillage nitrogen reserves from catacombs and battlefields around the world to replenish the soil they had impoverished through monocultural farming practices.

The efficacy of nitrogen in improving soil quality for industrialised farming led to a race by chemists to identify methods of converting atmospheric nitrogen. This was finally achieved in the early 20th century with the Haber-Bosch process of ammonia synthesis, which made possible the production of ammonia-based artificial fertilisers. The technique was, however, very energy intensive and was first used on an industrial scale during World War I for the production of munitions. This military-industrial process was then refined and redeployed for agricultural purposes in the second half of the 20th century.

The new techniques in visualising and modelling non-urban landscapes make clear the links between military processes and agricultural

3 Sébastien Marot & Matthieu Calame (2020). "Inaugural lecture of the exhibition 'Agriculture & Architecture: Taking the Country's Side'". *EPFL / Archizoom*. 26 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.epfl.ch/campus/art-culture/museum-exhibitions/archizoom/inaugural-lecture-sebastien-marot-matthieu-calame/>.

industrialisation in the 20th century. In the period after World War II, tanks were repurposed as tractors, munitions production sites were transformed into a new pesticide and fertiliser industry, airfields and bunkers were converted into farms and farm buildings.

FOCUS ON THE COUNTRYSIDE

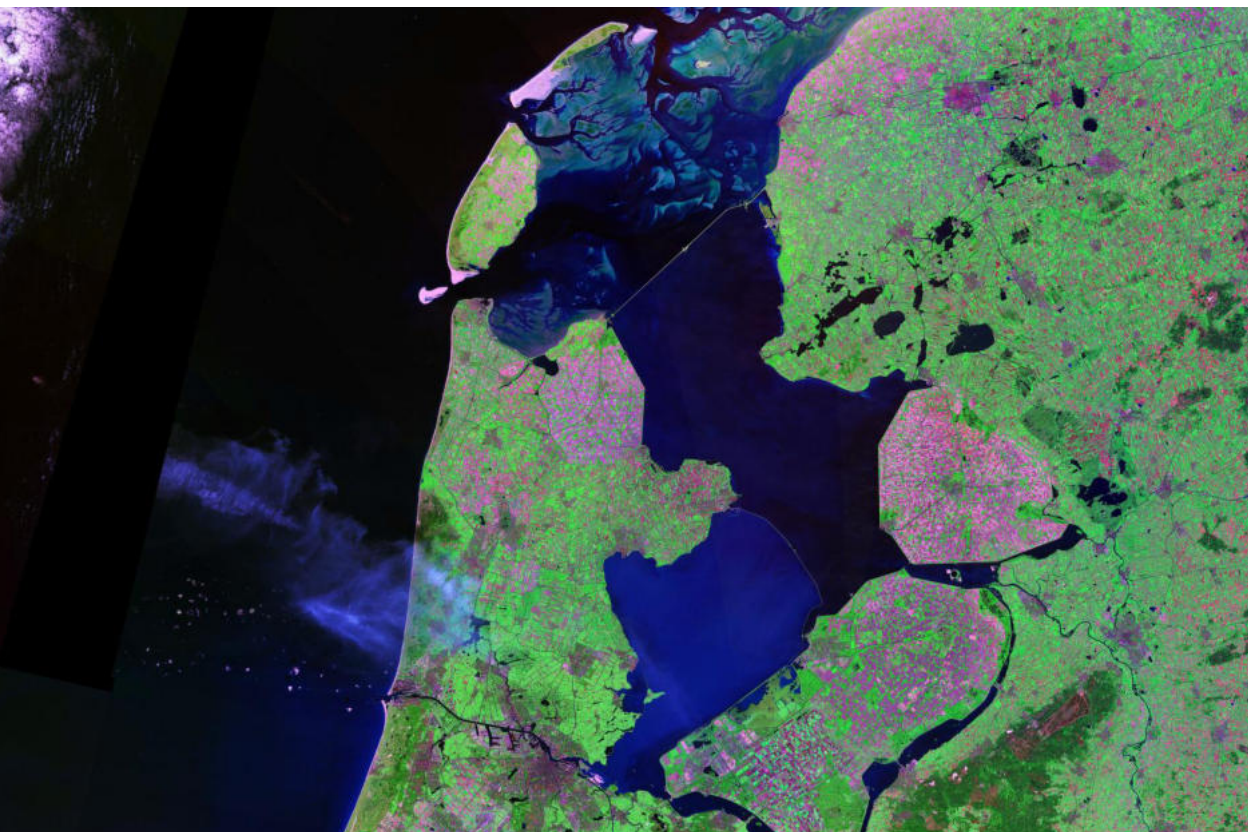
Taking the Country's Side didn't just focus on the past. Much like Forensic Architecture's research, it aimed to use its historical criticism to present new ways of imagining the future of rural landscapes. In particular, it presented a future scenario in which new rural commons disrupt the idea of the city as the primary site of democracy and civil life. Marot argues that this commonplace idea of the urban as the home of participative politics obscures a complex system of older rural practices, including issues around the management of common land.

Marot drew on ideas from permaculture and agroecology to critique the metropolitan zeitgeist in which cities imagine themselves as the height of culture without understanding their interrelationships with the territories and life worlds that they depend on for resources. The idea of the future of the countryside, as a producer of both cultural and political material and resources, is also central to the Dutch radical architect Rem Koolhaas's work on rural futures.

In his 2020 Guggenheim exhibition *Countryside, The Future* and the accompanying book *Countryside, A Report*, Koolhaas explores the importance of ongoing social, cultural, and aesthetic transformations across the non-urban surface of the globe from an architectural perspective. As a key player in debates around the mass movement to urban areas in the 1970s and 1980s, Koolhaas is uniquely positioned to critique the underexploration of the rural. His work since 2020 asks important questions about what happened to the places that those who moved to the city left behind.

From the mid-20th century, the world's population has been rapidly urbanising. In 1960, more than 60 per cent of the global population lived in rural areas; by 2007, the distribution of rural and urban residents had equalised, and since then the share of people residing in urban areas has surpassed 50 per cent of the total population. Despite this, the non-urban presently accounts for 97 per cent of the world's surface and is home to just under 50 per cent of the human population.

Our focus on cities is likened by Koolhaas to the model of the relative sensitivity of the human body, where some areas – like the lips and eyes – are engorged and overrepresented and others – such as the hips and shoulders – are shrunken and under perceived. The revolution in satellite imagery and methodological advances in modelling are opening



NASA satellite photo of the Zuiderzee, Netherlands. Source: Stahlkocher, via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain

Farmers picking cauliflower in Fenland, Cambridgeshire, England (2018). ©Rowan Jaines

new opportunities to even this field by making visible and explorable vast areas of terra incognita that, since the 16th century, have been cut off from public access, use, and imagination by colonial projects both internal and external. From Namibia to the Scottish Highlands, these new methods and technologies are opening the countryside to the imagination in ways that have never before been possible.

INTERMEDIATE PLACES

Koolhaas alerts us to the rapid transformations that are now occurring in the countryside. Far from the pastoral idyll, today's countryside is the laboratory of the future, characterised by new patterns of ownership and seasonal migration, new vernacular architectures of data centres, wind and solar infrastructure, and smart farms, and new populist and right-wing ideologies. The city seems static in comparison.

Like Forensic Architecture's research, Koolhaas's team utilised a mixed-methods approach, using open-source satellite data to investigate the non-agricultural rural. They chose an area of rural Holland, north of Amsterdam – arguably the image par excellence of a post-Enlightenment agricultural landscape – and created a detailed inventory of a 12-by-3-kilometre strip comprising several villages and the areas between them.

FAR FROM THE PASTORAL IDYLL, TODAY'S COUNTRYSIDE IS THE LABORATORY OF THE FUTURE. THE CITY SEEMS STATIC IN COMPARISON

They discovered a new kind of rural landscape, characterised not by agriculture but by its "intermediate" status. By combining satellite imagery with other open-access data concerning business and economic activity as well as traditional ethnographic techniques, the researchers found an important gap between the appearance of, and everyday life within, non-urban areas. This is a place where the surface appearance of the place has no relation to what is happening at ground level, where former farm buildings are transformed into yoga studios and art museums, and workers' cottages house white-collar commuters.

Koolhaas and his team uncovered two interlinked transformations occurring simultaneously in this site. The area is increasingly appealing to young urban people attracted by a narrative of authenticity and nature; at the same time, farmers are diversifying their enterprises by relying more heavily on technological automation and reducing the labour time they dedicate to farming. This research highlights the intermediate nature of the countryside in our contemporary moment, where new forms of production and extraction are being laid on top of older geographies of power.

Newly in possession of the rich visual data afforded by satellite imagery and the software advances of the open-source revolution, architects are uniquely positioned to help us understand what is occurring and what is at stake in the rural transformations that are underway. Their training in the philosophy and history of design of place allows them to identify where old patterns are being reproduced and to visualise these in accessible ways.

The increasing geometric perfection of farming is one such form, highlighted by Koolhaas, that is of particular importance for debates around sustainable futures. With increased automation, we see higher standardisation of farming equipment and practices across the globe. There is also an ongoing entrenchment of the dynamics outlined in Forensic Architecture's study of the Namibian context. Colonial

THE WORK OF ARCHITECTS IS IMPERATIVE TO IMAGINING NEW WAYS OF CREATING SUSTAINABLE LIFE WORLDS

processes of land grabbing and the development of extractive industries, from farming to mining for the military-industrial complex, are giving way to capitalist projects that use the same language of form. This is a utilitarian pattern visible across non-urban landscapes the world over, from missile sites to data centres, wind farms, and industrial agricultural areas. It is an architectural vernacular of rigour and functionality that hints at a wider totalitarian logic.

DESIGNING FUTURES

In my own research into present-day agricultural regions built on former wetlands, I have found the same grid-like system of monocultural fields sprawled across low-lying flatlands from East Anglia to California's Central Valley.[4] There are clear links between this form and the factory. In his writings on the shifts associated with the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution, Marx identified steam power as a key driver of capitalist labour organisation. Steam power, however, was not only used to mould society on the factory floor of urban areas; it was also a productive force that facilitated the draining of wetlands (deemed "waste" areas in Western European thought) through pumping machinery and allowed for an acceleration in the wide-scale transformation of these landscapes into industrial agricultural regions.

These drained areas often act as key sites for food production and, as such, occupy simultaneously central and peripheral space in the national imagination. They are given nicknames such as "the breadbasket of Britain" in the case

4 Rowan Jaines (2022). "The Social Life of Agriculture: History Passes into Setting". *Discover Society: New Series 2*. Available at: <https://discoversociety.org/2022/03/09/the-social-life-of-agriculture-history-passes-into-setting/>.

of the Fens in eastern England, or "America's Salad Bowl" in California's Salinas Valley. These sites are home to some of the most productive and high-value land in the world, yet the people who inhabit them experience economic, social, and environmental health issues that are intimately entangled with the landscape transformations that redesigned wetlands as agricultural powerhouses in the image of the factory.

The work of Koolhaas, Marot, and Forensic Architecture highlights this form as a hyper-Cartesian order imposed on the countryside from the 16th century, when the sensuous was divided from the intellectual by Enlightenment philosophy. This has resulted in a formal landscape architecture characterised by the geometric lines of the military-industrial complex.

The drained wetlands of my research are all reaching the end of their design life: the soil is degraded through ever-intensifying production, and the low-lying land is subject to flooding as a result of rising sea levels and increased snowmelt. The work of architects is imperative to imagining new ways of creating sustainable life worlds in these regions.

This work is particularly important when we consider the design of sustainable futures. If our wind and solar farms continue this landscape vernacular of grid-like geometric forms, then we risk repeating previous extractive colonial processes. Perhaps the most valuable contribution that architecture can make is the synthesis of the large scale into questions about liveability, not only for human life but also for the ecosystems in which we exist. ■

ROWAN JAINES
is a Lecturer in Human Environmental Geography at the University of Sheffield. Their research and teaching focuses on the designed elements of agricultural sites, in particular drained wetlands, and the connections between overlooked species, populations, and places and their politics, potentials and perils. They are a co-author of *Nature's Calendar: The British Year in 72 Seasons* (Granta, 2023).

GRIEVING MODERNITY WITH TURKISH TV

"I'm afraid of losing you," said Kerim, holding Fatmagül in a gentle embrace. "You don't need to be afraid," Fatmagül answers, doe-eyed, before they lose themselves in a passionate kiss.

Scenes like this one from *What is Fatmagül's Fault?* characterise Turkish TV dramas (also known as *dizis*), which have taken the world by storm in the last two decades. Lovers who defy their families' wishes, forbidden affairs, meddling parents, and historical retellings – these storylines have avid watchers from the Balkan and Gulf countries all the way to China. In South America, parents have even started naming their babies after their favourite *dizi* characters.

In recent decades, drama series have introduced millions of people to Turkey, but they are only one of the tools the country has used to reshape its global perception. Under the ruling AKP, Turkey has increasingly asserted itself on the international stage – capturing TV screens, building mosques, language schools, and cultural centres abroad, and hosting international sports competitions. Turkish authorities have also expanded the flagship Istanbul airport and backed the majority state-owned Turkish Airlines to include more destinations than most other European competitors.

Dizis come in a wide variety of genres. Historical dramas put a charismatic spin on Ottoman sultans fighting off foreign invaders (in storylines that often mirror Turkey's contemporary military campaigns), while action-packed *dizis* running on faux-Ottoman nostalgia show brave officers outsmarting and defying the threats of Western imperialism. And then there are the Anatolian-style romance soap operas that feature themes relevant to more intimate, domestic settings: the clash between conservative and "modern" values, the rich and the poor, and dramatic storylines of honour and sacrifice.

As a soft power tool, *dizis* have been very effective. If you turn on a TV in the Balkans, you're never more than a few channel flips away from a Turkish soap opera. They are so popular, in fact, that North Macedonia nearly passed a bill to prevent the "Turkification" of society. "Dizi tourism" is soaring, and only British and American shows have more global viewership than Turkish series. And wherever Turkish TV celebrities go, they are met by screaming crowds.

TURKEY'S DIZZYING RISE

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu strived to build a "new Ottoman geopolitical space" in their foreign policy, reshaping Turkey as the "central country" in the region. This vision also aims to bring about new economic, cultural, and political relationships with former Ottoman territories. And the AKP has been successful in its goal. Through repeated military incursions, creating a buffer zone, and now active involvement in state-building in Syria, as well as extensive operations in the Black Sea, Turkey has solidified its geopolitical relevance. Moreover, the country has become a defence partner to the European Union and has played a key role in the bloc's externalisation of migration. Still, TV series are by far Turkey's most successful cultural export.

While *dizis* have served to present a favourable impression of Islam and Turkish culture in countries that Turkey does not often interact with, the shows have had a much more controversial task in regions with a shared Ottoman past: to shift and overpower negative historical narratives. In parts of the Balkans where

mentioning Ottoman rule often elicits curses and acrimony, Christian Orthodox audiences overwhelmingly join their Muslim neighbours in bingeing propaganda-laden storylines about the very empire their history teaches them to resent. How did this happen?

SOFTENING MODERNITY

The answer lies in discourse. When these shows cross borders, they do not dominate or conflict with other cultures as much as converse with them. Turkish dramas are often met by audiences willing to – sometimes heavily – negotiate and compromise on their views.

And this exchange is bilateral. Much like the *dizi* – which Professor Arzu Öztürkmen of Boğaziçi University calls a "genre in progress" – the idea of *Turkey* itself, as a bridge between East and West, is continuously (re)negotiated. More than a century after the Ottoman Empire's fall, Turkishness remains contested. Secular or Sunni, educated and urban or agrarian and rural, faux-Ottoman nostalgia or a path towards continued Westernisation – such debates play out as much on a political as they do on a cultural level.

Dizis bring these conflicts to the forefront. A modern Turkish setting disrupted by a traditional love affair, or a biased and glorified perception of an Ottoman past long gone – few *dizis* simply portray modernity as a stable state of affairs. The characteristic (over)dramatisation of *dizis* – which lends them the typical soap opera comparison – not only constitutes a renegotiation of Turkishness, but also grapples with modernity itself.

In most non-Western parts of the world, modernity is often shaped hegemonically by the West, leaving non-Western countries in need of spaces to bargain with, process, and integrate its disorienting aspects. Turkish shows offer spaces to vent frustrations about changing values, vanishing certainties, and what feels like the intrusion of a foreign moral order. They stage conflict to explore where an "old" concept (honour, family, sacrifice) might still be able to stave off change, or at least soften its edges.

Dizis allow communities that aren't built on Western individualism to witness transformation in ways that feel more natural to their own moral fabric – to grieve modernity, while also embracing it. ■

HAZAR DENIZ EKER
is a freelance journalist. Besides investigative and personal projects, he is the editor for the Democracy and Human Rights Desk at *the European Correspondent*. He got his start in writing through sharing accounts of Turkish immigrant experiences in Germany. Staying on the topic, he built an academic background in EU-Turkey relations as a researcher.

NEVENA VRAČAR
is a Belgrade-born writer and journalist based in the Netherlands. With a background in social science and ethnography, she covers Western Balkan politics, society, and culture for European audiences, with a broader focus on migration, democracy, and identity, challenging familiar narratives and fostering fresh dialogue.

AFTER GROWTH

CULTURE AS FOUNDATIONAL FOR DEMOCRACY

ARTICLE BY
JUSTIN O'CONNOR

Hyped as a driver of economic growth, culture has been systematically devalued and marginalised in public policy over the past few decades. This has led to increased precarity now compounded by predatory AI systems. If GDP is not a good metric to measure the value of arts and culture, how should we rethink their role in our societies?

For the last 35 years, arts and culture, in the form of the "creative industries", have been primarily valued as a driver of economic growth. This connection was more than a marriage of convenience, whereby the sector simply used metrics of gross value added (GVA), employment, or innovation spillovers as advocacy tools for government funding. Rather, it was a powerful economic imaginary.

The idea of cultural industries emerged in the 1980s. This was a time of deindustrialisation, when many old industrial cities believed that lost jobs could be replaced by the kinds of cultural activities quite literally occupying the newly vacant factories and warehouses. The cultural industries were viewed as part of a new post-Fordist economy, in which standardised goods gave way to niche customisation, an expanded service sector, and the growing importance of knowledge "intangibles" in production.

Goods with a high "aesthetic" content and services that provided "experiences" proliferated, driven by individualised lifestyles. Production of high-touch, customised goods and services required the embodied aesthetic know-how and "out of the box" innovation traditionally

associated with artists. Cultural industries thus went from being a pre-industrial artisanal hangover to post-Fordist bleeding edge almost overnight. This was the flip side to the belief that the new consumption economy, uncoupled from utilitarian need and driven by infinite – because insatiable – desire, would generate new demand for high-profit consumer goods, stimulate investment, and counter the signs of economic slowdown that had been around since the mid-1970s.

It was this structural connection to post-Fordist growth, rather than clever advocacy metrics, which gave the creative industries a forward-oriented, even utopian, aspect in the later 1990s. They were closely linked to the new agglomeration economies of cities, now released from their nation-state containers to swim in global flows – an urban "renaissance" generating a sense of metropolitan autonomy coupled to the progressive politics of an educated, professional class.

But before the turn of the millennium, the links to European-style social market economies had given way to the creative entrepreneurialism of Silicon Valley. This shift was exemplified by the profoundly a-social market definition of creative industries given by the UK government in 1998, as "those activities that originate from individual creativity, skill, and talent, with the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property".[1] This seemed to hand the keys of the future over to the "creative class". For, as Richard Florida suggested, "if workers control the means of production today that is because it is inside their heads; they *are* the means of production."[2]

A FAILED VISION

As it turned out, "creatives" remained factors in a production process controlled by those who owned the IP for the hardware and software systems within which cultural production was rapidly subsumed and the hedge fund capital that financed them – a tendency only accelerated by predatory AI systems. If the 1990s promised flat hierarchies, networked production, and grassroots innovation, by 2025 six out of the 10 largest corporations on the planet were involved in the production and/or distribution of culture – the ecosystems of which they increasingly dominate.

The upshot of this creative utopian vision was the marginalisation of culture in public policy. Government expenditure on culture in OECD countries sits at pre-2008 levels, despite

1 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2001). "Secretary of State's Foreword". Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b11d440f0b66eab99ec2a/2001part1-foreword2001.pdf>.
2 Richard Florida (2012). *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited*. New York: Basic Books, p. 25.

THE FAUSTIAN BARGAIN BETWEEN CULTURE AND ECONOMIC GROWTH HAS NOW BEEN SPRUNG

growth in total government spending. Indeed, though culture was now an industry, the strategic levers applied to it were pure innovation neoliberalism – promotion of entrepreneurship, skills, and networking, public sector outsourcing, management by economic performance metrics – rather than the kind of state-led industrial strategies seen in China and South Korea.

Whether culture should be an industry or not, the capacity of neoliberal states to actually engage in industrial development was extremely limited. As the platforms and monopolies suck the life out of the cultural ecosystem, the sector has suffered a serious erosion of conditions. Cultural workers were never full professionals – their career paths were not clear, their associations (if there were any) rarely controlled entry and work conditions. But if the professional class is in decline more generally, then the creatives are in freefall. Employment in the creative industries is concentrated in metropolitan cities, and in particular parts of those cities.

The social context in which 1980s cultural industries emerged – cheap rent and public housing, free education, welfare payments, a social infrastructure of civic institutions and associations – has also disappeared. As the economic argument for culture stumbled and sources of income dried up, the advocacy game moved on to proving economic worth via social impact – health and wellbeing, social cohesion, tourism, and other "spillovers" – expressed as complex fractions of GDP using convoluted metrical calculations worthy of a 16th-century astrologer. More recently, culture is to be seen as the soft power complement to Europe's rearmament drive. And so on.

In any event, the Faustian bargain between culture and economic growth has now been sprung. If the cultural sector agreed to self-identify as "industry" as a condition of state funding, it is now being asked by the UK government to give up its collective IP to the AI tech bros in order to boost productivity – for the greater national good. In the face of this, the cultural sector stands mute, as years of industrial and

impact metrics have hollowed out its sense of value. But what exactly is the role of arts and culture in the modern polity?

CULTURE AS FOUNDATIONAL

In my book *Culture Is Not an Industry*, I try to argue that art and culture should be seen as part of the social foundations, alongside health, education, social services, and basic infrastructure. I used Nancy Fraser's notion of "Cannibal Capitalism", wherein capitalism relies on "non-economic" systems of regulation, political legitimacy, ecological sustainability, and social reproduction (child-raising, education, nurture, etc.) – systems that, nonetheless, it systemically undermines in its search for ever-expanded profits. Like the *ouroboros*, it eats its own tail. I argue that culture is also part of social reproduction (and is similarly being devoured), in which case, to place culture under industry and economic development is a fundamental category mistake. It should stand with the other social foundations and not be forced to serve economic development.

But this immediately hits a problem. Many who would broadly agree with this emphasis on the social foundations would struggle to include culture within it. If foundational liveability is a matter of ensuring the supply of universal basic services for most citizens, most of the time, how does culture fit in? Isn't the proliferation of fabricated cultural desires and their ancillaries in fashion, travel, Instagram and TikTok, online shopping – the whole lifestyle-entertainment complex – deeply implicated in the sorts of useless, wasteful consumption that has brought us to the current systemic crisis? More generously, is not art and culture a matter of discretionary spending rather than need, something pleasurable that comes after, once the basics have been met? After all, art is not food, water, or housing.

Certainly, it is easy to dismiss popular culture as hedonistic and destructive, though there is often a scent of an older, patronising view of "mass culture" here that we should be wary of. Perhaps it is more useful to view culture as a capability rather than a need (or a luxury). Amartya Sen emphasises the capabilities that allow citizens to live "the lives they have reason to value".[3] This certainly does require material resources – as Hegel said, "secure at first food and clothing, and the kingdom of God will come to you of itself." But foundational cultural provision, like education, with which it is closely aligned, equips citizens with the ability to fully engage in culture, to participate in the shared "rules of the game", in which our active individual *parole* works in relation to a common *langue*. It involves a capacity to evaluate and judge

3 Amartya Sen (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

PERHAPS IT IS MORE USEFUL TO VIEW CULTURE AS A CAPABILITY RATHER THAN A NEED (OR A LUXURY)

our shared values and traditions, as articulated through art and culture, which is crucial to democratic life. Citizenship is then less a right or status than an activity of decision and choice where we are defined as much by shared meanings as shared needs.

INFRASTRUCTURE, ECOSYSTEM, CIVIL SOCIETY

The cultural foundations can be seen as an infrastructure, a material apparatus or assemblage of cultural and educational institutions, spaces of preservation, learning, production and consumption, and the provision of cultural funding and support that allow individuals to acquire the capability to "fully participate in the cultural life of the community", as the UN Declaration of Human Rights has it. This requires public funding and local democratic participation. This is not about funding "market failure" – funding things that, unfortunately, cannot be made to pay on the market. Rather it is about an explicit public, democratic commitment to providing the foundations by which everyone can participate in culture as far as they want to.

But a lot of cultural activity takes place outside or on the periphery of direct state funding, in the realm of civil society. These are ecosystems of small-scale businesses and embedded markets, community economies and non-commodity exchanges of the commons, art and cultural fields that are located on the edges of the fully transactional commercial sectors. These local cultural ecosystems make our towns and cities worth living in. Though not directly publicly funded, they produce public goods that we all share and enjoy: the book and record stores, the small performing venues, the side-alley galleries and pop-up cinemas, vibrant cafes and bars, local craft and fashion spaces, festivals and street markets. These ecosystems are facing a crisis, their public goods rapidly being privatised as the air is sucked out of the system by predatory platforms, big finance, hospitality chains, and real estate.

The question, then, is not just about levels of state funding for cultural infrastructure but how national and local governments can find new ways of protecting the ecosystem of local embedded markets and variegated spaces of the commons. How to produce public goods that help sustain this non-state sector, to support local ecosystems that are disappearing into the maw of the capitalist *ouroboros*.

This is not just a local problem, however, for the predatory algorithms of platforms reach deep into the eyes and ears, into the excitable frontal lobe receptors, of everyone's lived experience. The AI juggernaut, driven fast and furious over the political, legal, and digital sovereignty of so many nation states – and towns and cities – is currently set to fundamentally restructure our cultural and communications system with

next to no democratic debate. A Gutenbergian revolution driven by a bunch of alt-right sociopaths in Northern California.

This will require strong, concerted pushback at many different scales. It will be a tough battle, but it cannot be fought without a strong sense of the social and political purpose served by arts and culture. Ultimately, it is a foundation of free citizenship, of individual and collective development in common, one based on an affective, aesthetic (related to the senses), imaginative, and embodied symbolic space of collective communication and meaning making. Images and sounds, movements and rhythms, and forms of poetic language speak to us about our place in the world. They allow a form of collective meaning-making, a distinct mode of symbolic knowledge not available to abstract-rational discourse, providing an indispensable, if sometimes opaque, contribution to our shared social life. The transformative ideals we place on culture relate to the creative freedom we experience through the capacity to enjoy, engage, participate, make, experience, critique, and celebrate art and culture.

As Dylan Riley recently wrote, civil society is not some singular agent but a site of Gramscian struggle for hegemony. It is a struggle that the broad left-of-centre, and even the small "c" conservative right, are currently losing.[4] As Kaiser Y. Kuo wrote, "We're left here in America, and perhaps in the West more broadly, with free speech devoid of shared meaning, innovation without a shared purpose, and pluralism without a civic scaffold sturdy enough to hold it."[5] The fight for a cultural infrastructure is not just about finance but about politics, about confronting "the systematic destruction of the cognitive and social infrastructure that makes cooperation possible in the first place".[6]

GROWTH?

Is there then no relationship between culture and the growth agenda? In direct terms, it's pretty minimal; the economic "footprint" of the cultural sector is dwarfed by that of social services, health and education, housing, and infrastructure. In some cases, restricting the role of AI in culture and social media might actually reduce GDP (along with the emissions from data centres).

Indeed, for many, culture's primary relation should be to sustainability, even degrowth. This ranges from measures to reduce the carbon footprint of the production-consumption cycle of art and culture to using them to inculcate

4 Dylan Riley (2025). "Contra Arendt". *New Left Review Sidecar.* 3 October 2025. Available at: <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/contra-arendt>.
5 Kaiser Kuo (2025). "The World Has Changed". *Sinica Podcast.* 6 October 2025. Available at: <https://www.sinicapodcast.com/p/the-world-has-changed>.
6 The Structural Lens (2025). "The Dissolution of Civic Infrastructure." *Harmonious Discourse.* 5 October 2025. Available at: <https://harmoniousdiscourse.substack.com/p/the-dissolution-of-civic-infrastructure>.

ideas of climate emergency and sustainable living. But, apart from AI, culture's carbon footprint is not that large compared to, say, construction or transport, and it is hard to see how initiatives in this area can compete with the mass production of renewables or replacing cement, all of which require massive state direction. So too, the cultural sector's ability to change minds is of different order to that required to build the political coalition for a serious green transition. Which, of course, is not to say these sustainability goals should not be undertaken by the cultural sector.

Jason Hickel, a well-known proselytist for degrowth, writes that "those who sought to pave the way for capitalism in the 16th century had to destroy other, more holistic ways of seeing the world." This made people adopt a dualist philosophy "leveraged to cheapen life for the sake of growth; and it is responsible at a deep level for our ecological crisis".[7] On the one hand, this looks to an epochal, if not civilisational, cultural change that goes beyond anything cultural policy could handle. On the other, it reduces modernity to a particular worldview, ignoring powerful counter-currents in European thought that have long challenged this dualist, extractivist and growth-oriented worldview.

From our perspective here, culture's long opposition to "economy" (however hypocritical and self-serving this has often been) and its articulation of very different ways of seeing the world represent a crucial resource in any project of fundamental social transformation. Indeed, we might say that rather than being a means of climate-sustainable awareness-raising, the very act of investing in cultural infrastructures and ecosystems as foundational to sustainable liveability would itself be a sign that we were overcoming the dualist-capitalist worldview.

More recently, there's been a new "left productivism", a call for a new industrial growth strategy in which the modernist promise of abundance can be fulfilled. Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's bestseller *Abundance* is centrist "new deal" but barely "green".[8] But Matt Huber,[9] Keir Milburn[10] and others present a heroic growth agenda embedded within socialist and ecological ideals.

Few involved in this new growth agenda mention culture, a strong exception being Mariana Mazzucato. Already in her account of the "mission economy", the heroic purpose of transformation is to be equally shared by the guy sweeping the floor at NASA all the way up to the scientists and astronauts at the pointy

7 Jason Hickel (2020). *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*. London: William Heinemann.
8 Ezra Klein & Derek Thompson (2025). *Abundance*. New York: Avid Reader Press.
9 Matt Huber, Leigh Phillips & Fred Stafford (2025). "Abundance for the 99 Percent". *Jacobin*. 2 August 2025. Available at: <https://jacobin.com/2025/08/klein-thompson-abundance-liberalism-socialism>.
10 Kai Heron, Keir Milburn & Bertie Russell (2025). *Radical Abundance: How to Win a Green Democratic Future*. London: Pluto Press.

ART AS FREEDOM IS ALSO SOMETIMES CRITIQUE AND REFUSAL

end of the moonshot. In her latest pamphlet, on the public value of arts and culture, she has an epigraph from Saint-Exupéry: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood... Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."[11] The forms of "arts and culture" in play here are very wide, ranging from the shared culture of communities, to cultural festivals such as Notting Hill Carnival, and to the *BBC* with its economic and technological spillovers. This "culture" is to be used, somehow, to shape people around an ambitious economic mission, though it is not really clear what this mission is, other than a green and just transition. Signing up culture for such an open, unspecified mission is not necessarily something that will generate buy-in. But in any case, with such a big and amorphous lever as "culture", it is unlikely to be very effective, even if it does give some colour and glamour.

CONSERVATION AND EMANCIPATION

Benign as this mission might be, using culture as an ideological-emotional tool to shape a new economy is also to re-instrumentalise it. Of course, moments of momentous renewal and transformation can call into being the great designers, architects, sculptors, and artists associated with other such moments – the Bauhaus and New Deal that Mazzucato evokes (and we might add Haussmann's Paris, early 1920s St Petersburg, the Festival of Britain, or, to be honest, the early days of Italian fascism).

But rather than viewing culture as a means to shape an economic mission, these are surely signs that the vision has already gone beyond economics, to value acts of creation and imagination as an essential element of the mission's end goal. Faced with these heroic calls, evoking Raymond Massey in *The Shape of Things to Come*, or even Gary Cooper in *The Fountainhead*, I am always tempted to remember Baudelaire's *spleen*, or Dostoevsky's underground man, or the darker moments of Joy Division. Art as freedom is also sometimes critique and refusal. Negative dialectics.

In all this, we should not forget those other traditions that were also wary of untrammelled growth and unexamined progress: the small "c" conservatism of writers such as Edmund Burke or T.S. Eliot, those who look to tradition, sanctioned hierarchies, long-standing institutions and rituals of religion, civic life, and family. Burke's idea of society as a "contract… not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born", was aimed

11 Mariana Mazzucato (2025). *The Public Value of Arts and Culture: Investing in Arts and Culture to Reimagine Economic Growth in the 21st Century*. London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose.
Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/publications/2025/sep/public-value-arts-and-culture>.

at the French Revolution, but it can also apply to contemporary notions of culture as well as "sustainable development". This conservatism has been a victim of accelerated capitalist growth, of the neoliberal *ouroboros*. It faces the profound uprooting of traditions, the shattering of the established foundations of family and community life, and waves of ontological insecurity that have unmoored us from any shared vectors of meaning, fragmented by a hyper-individualistic media sphere.

We on the Left might bring a tradition of cultural critique and artistic autonomy, a questioning of authority and holding it to account, a confidence in our ability to rule ourselves, individually and collectively, thus leaving behind our "self-incurred tutelage", as Kant had it. This is the radical enlightenment bargain that our tradition of art and culture forms a part of. This may now rightly be subject to post-colonial reckonings – and those of women, ethnic minorities, queer people – and all those who fell afoul of that conflicted endeavour for enlightenment.

But we are faced with a radical onslaught from the tech bros and their alt-right allies, in which every aspect of human experience is lined up for control and commodification, just as any sense of justice is to be swept away as irrelevant to techno-progress. Then some form of radical enlightenment, one that knows also how to conserve and sustain – culturally, not just environmentally – might be the order of the day. We are only just waking up to the fact that art and culture are not luxuries but rather were neoliberalism's first privatisation, the reduction of a fundamental realm of human experience to that of a rational-individual consumption economy. Perhaps culture could help show the way out?

JUSTIN O'CONNOR
is Professor of Cultural Economy at Adelaide University, Visiting Professor at the School of Cultural Management, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and Hallsworth Visiting Professor at the University of Manchester. Justin recently published *Red Creative: Culture and Modernity in China* (Intellect, 2020) and *Culture is Not an Industry* (Manchester University Press, 2024).

POLITICISING POP
THE FAR RIGHT AND MUSIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH
EMÍLIA BARNA &
MELANIE SCHILLER
BY **KONRAD BLEYER-SIMON**

Authoritarian political forces often use popular music to legitimise their power, embedding nationalism and reactionary ideologies into culture. At the same time, many musicians work under precarious conditions and rely on selective state funding or sponsors, which makes political statements risky. But can music also amplify progressive ideas? An interview with music scholar Emília Barna and professor of media cultures Melanie Schiller.

KONRAD BLEYER-SIMON: Emília, in your book, *Working in Music on the Semiperiphery*, you look at how authoritarian governments have used popular music as a means of control. Can you explain how that works?

EMÍLIA BARNA: I would make a distinction between the control of the music industry and the use of music as a form of political control, though of course the two are interrelated. First, there are forms of incorporation that aim to take control in a material sense – through occupying gatekeeping positions, as well as allocating money and managing resources. An example of this sort of control is establishing institutions to fund popular music. At the same time, ideological control can be seen as a more direct move towards an expectation of representing nationalism in an ethnicised sense. This could entail conservative ideas around heteronormative families and gender roles.

Between 2010 and 2022, when I did my research in Hungary, I witnessed a gradual increase in ideological control – especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic downturn, as well as the energy crisis and the extremely high level of inflation. This polycrisis put musicians

THE COVID-19 POLYCRISIS PUT MUSICIANS INTO MATERIALLY PRECARIOUS AND VULNERABLE POSITIONS AND INCREASED THEIR DEPENDENCE ON POLITICAL OR STATE ACTORS

and other music industry workers into materially precarious and vulnerable positions and increased their dependence on political or state actors. In Hungary, this meant support was mostly provided to artists who were close to the government and often aligned with Fidesz's ideology or discourse in their statements, appearances, and lyrics. At the same time, control of infrastructure, whether in festivals or venues, also increased. Finally, in 2014, Hungary also introduced a programme for funding popular music, which is significantly larger than any other similar schemes in the country. The programme marked a move towards professionalising, formalising, and legitimising the industry, including through education initiatives and music export.

The first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic were among the most difficult periods for musicians and music industry workers, as the sector received virtually no support during the lockdown. In late 2020, support schemes were introduced, but funds were allocated selectively. In many cases, the government used music funding programmes as a means for active political campaigning. This was especially true for the 2021 autumn series of government-funded concerts, which basically provided opportunities for local Fidesz mayors and other politicians to take photographs on stage with musicians. This became part of the ruling party's campaigning strategy in the lead-up to the 2022 elections.

These examples show how music and the funding of artists were tied to political propaganda at a time when musicians and the workers catering to them behind the scenes were at their most vulnerable materially.

How exactly does the use of music as a tool for political control manifest?

EMÍLIA BARNA: This is a topic that we researched together with Melanie Schiller and others. We saw that themes like nationalism, references to the homeland, the so-called traditional gender roles, a logic of crisis, and an "us versus them" narrative – which we associate with populism – are increasingly appearing as themes. These motifs make their way into lyrics along with nationalistic elements such as folk references. For instance, Hungary's Fidesz government actively utilises artists and music during national holidays, commemorations, symbolic events, football matches, and school events and ceremonies.

MELANIE SCHILLER: The situation in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany – the countries where I conducted my research – differs from the Hungarian case. I would not call it control per se, but there are certain influences

over musicians' opportunities. A good example is the protests around Palestine and their implications for freedom of speech. A number of questions arise: Who is allowed to perform? What are artists allowed to say on stage? What are audiences allowed to bring into the concert venue?

There is a significant difference between artistic and ordinary speech, and different legal frameworks exist for an artist voicing their criticism in a song or on stage as part of a performance. It is harder to regulate music and art than to set boundaries for general expressions of opinion. At the same time, there are more grey areas – especially regarding the limits of artistic speech and the authority to decide what can or cannot be said in art. For example, it is generally not up to the government or political actors to determine whether political expressions are allowed at a festival or whether national flags can be brought or displayed – it is up to the venue to decide that. In this context, it is also important to look at whether events are subsidised by the state or commercially driven.

People tend to think of popular music as a market-supported product, while you are talking about subsidies as a source of vulnerability. What exactly is the role of subsidies in music production?

MELANIE SCHILLER: A student of mine, Sjoerd Baas, conducted research on the funding system for festivals in the Netherlands. He found that, like almost everywhere else, the country's music industry has gone through a long period of neoliberalisation: there was less state funding available, and commercially driven festivals became more dominant over the years. He wanted to see whether there was a connection between the kind of funding provided and the kinds of political expressions welcome at these festivals. He found that state-funded festivals allowed much more freedom of political expression than the commercially driven ones. The reason is that commercially oriented festivals like to define themselves as a politics-free space, a place to have fun. At the same time, those that are partly subsidised through government funding see themselves more as a space of political negotiation and debate. I think that sounds very different from the Hungarian context. State funding in our case means more freedom of political critique and opposition, while Emília was talking about the opposite.

EMÍLIA BARNA: Not exactly the opposite, in the sense that the main commercial players or gatekeepers in live music are strongly politically connected, creating a link between the two spheres, at least in live music. After the Covid-19 pandemic, however, many concert organisers disappeared from the market, and now the majority of live performances and festivals are organised by local governments and don't charge entry fees. These include town or village days,

wine festivals, and gastronomic-themed events. In our research project on the mainstreaming of populism and right-wing ideology through popular music, we found that these events were a very important space for spreading pro-government messages, because people who would normally not attend paid gigs would only have access to events of this kind.

However, recorded music is entirely different due to the role of global platforms. Some of the young artists who are the most openly political – such as rapper Krúbi, who has actively criticised or even mocked the Hungarian government for close to a decade now, as well as a number of other artists who have recently emerged – make very efficient use of social media and music platforms. These musicians have a local industry network and a group of supporters that is partly independent from the major gatekeepers, such as large concert promoters.

In Hungary, there has been a lot of talk about the politicisation of popular music, especially over the last summer, when fans chanted anti-government slogans and musicians made critical statements. What happened there?

EMÍLIA BARNA: I did not research this phenomenon, but it is possible that the media hype was somewhat exaggerated. There has definitely been an increase in the number of musicians articulating anti-government positions, but over the summer, the more radical political expressions tended to come from the audience rather than the musicians themselves. Some bands – or their management – weren't comfortable with this. Whether and in what ways there has been a relevant shift in the political positioning of musicians in Hungary still needs to be researched.

Far-right influence in popular music appears to be government imposed in the context that Emília describes. What does it look like in Western Europe?

MELANIE SCHILLER: I did most of the research on this topic in Sweden. Here, populist music content comes out of right-wing cultures. For instance, the populist radical right party, the Sweden Democrats, is very musical; many of its members are musicians who regularly perform right-wing political songs. The most prominent among them is the party leader Jimmie Åkesson. His band, Bedårande Barn ("Adorable Children"), is a wannabe hard rock/pop group with punk influences. Their lyrics are full of underdog narratives, nationalism, melancholia, nostalgia for a better past, and so on. In their case, we see literal performances of party politics through a musical medium. We also see that the party is using music or appropriating popular songs that are not per se political, giving them a new meaning through cover versions. Even though the lyrics are not changed and the music might sound the same, the meaning changes drastically if you move the song from,

LIVE MUSIC IS ONE OF THE WAYS IN WHICH THE RADICAL RIGHT PRESENTS ITSELF AS AN ORDINARY AND HARMLESS GROUPING THAT REPRESENTS "NORMAL" SWEDISH CULTURE

for instance, a left-wing, queer, and feminist emancipatory context into a right-wing populist setting. That is a really powerful way in which right-wing populists are using music in Sweden.

In the lead-up to the last national elections, members of the Sweden Democrats travelled around the country accompanied by musical performances. These political events, organised as a form of celebration, are one of the ways in which the radical right presents itself as an ordinary, fun, accessible, and harmless grouping that represents "normal" Swedish culture. In addition, the Sweden Democrats also attempt to influence music policy measures and funding schemes, with party members pointing out that elite culture – like opera – is heavily subsidised and is subject to lower taxes than the kind of popular music performed for "the people".

Is the music that the Sweden Democrats perform considered mainstream, or is it something on the fringes?

MELANIE SCHILLER: The music that they themselves produce is niche. It may appear on the iTunes charts for a day or two, but it is not on the national charts and is not widely known in society. At the same time, they cover mainstream songs in their concerts that everyone can sing along to and recognise. So they routinely politicise music. Finally, there is also a new genre called Epa dunk [associated with modified tractors and young people who drive them] that is mainstream but not explicitly aligned with radical right-wing populism – although it has many similar themes, like celebrating the countryside and a "normal" lifestyle.

How is the far right's use of music different in the Hungarian case?

EMÍLIA BARNA: In the 2000s, we saw the organic emergence and organisation of an extreme-right subculture with its own institutions, festivals, radio stations, and so on. This radical-right scene played a significant role in the emergence of the Jobbik party and later politically and culturally inspired Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party. Over time, many of these acts moved from the fringes to the mainstream. The best example is the band Ismerős Arcok ("Familiar Faces") and its song Nélküled ("Without You"), written in 2007, when the band was still part of an extreme right-wing subculture network. From a song initially known only in the national rock scene, it became a football anthem in the mid-2010s and is now considered as the quasi-second national anthem. It is sung by children at

school ceremonies and played at weddings and is openly endorsed by the government.

What do we know about the impact of popular music on voter behaviour?

MELANIE SCHILLER: There are only speculations on this topic, as the influences are very hard to isolate. Music is part of lifestyle, culture, and many other things. We cannot investigate whether listening to a particular song will change one's party preferences. That is not how culture works. But when we consider music to be part of a larger cultural network – including the funding mechanisms and the policies that govern them – we can indeed say that music offers different ways of thinking about the world and allows listeners to connect with a variety of people, build other communities, and change discourses. It impacts what you can or cannot say, what is accepted, and what is normal.

EMÍLIA BARNA: I agree that it is a very complex set of relations. One thing that we can definitely observe – and there is existing research on this – is that popular music helped organise the far-right subculture.

Active participation in mainstream and underground music scenes and self-organisation (including establishing venues, small record labels, or niche radio stations) may also be considered a form of political education. This is especially true if we understand "political" more broadly: not just in terms of party politics but also as learning to take action, form or organise collective decisions, and implement decision-making processes. This is something that certainly existed in Hungary in the 2000s.

It is very difficult to predict the influence of musicians expressing political opinions on party politics. Do these opinions just articulate a class position or a generational position? Or can they affect the audience's preferences? All this is dependent on the coming together of various forces – a conjuncture, in Antonio Gramsci's terms. In subculture research, for example, we are looking at the economic context, material reality, and the experience of political, state, and market control, and how these factors could radicalise certain groups of people.

MELANIE SCHILLER: In our research with Emília, we also observed that musicians or artists definitely have the power to set an agenda and move public media discourse in a certain direction. Again, this is something we have seen in the Netherlands recently, where musicians often make pro-Palestine statements on stage. The media also reports on these events, moving the discussion in a certain direction. It is impossible to measure whether this impacts voter behaviour. Still, when it comes to affecting the media discourse, I think musicians have a direct impact.

MUSICIANS OR ARTISTS HAVE THE POWER TO SET AN AGENDA AND MOVE PUBLIC MEDIA DISCOURSE IN A CERTAIN DIRECTION

What should progressive movements or parties do if they want to support critical and progressive-minded music?

MELANIE SCHILLER: Funding and support, as well as creating or saving spaces where subcultures can meet, mingle, and develop ideas – I think those would be the most important ones for me.

EMÍLIA BARNA: I would go back to the issue of musicians' vulnerability and resilience. The material and working conditions of musicians – at least in Hungary, though I think this applies to most countries – are often precarious. There is significant inequality among musicians: a very small elite captures most of the revenue, while a struggling majority works for little or no pay.

There is also a global competition that is amplified by digital platforms. In Hungary, this competition coincides with a rapid decline of local infrastructure, especially outside of Budapest. Hungarian musicians have to contend with a lack of alternative venues where they can play, as well as a web of informal dependencies – including on managers, promoters, venues, festivals, and so on. For this reason, political connections are also important for musicians to secure their livelihoods. Given these dependencies, I think creating spaces and providing infrastructure for relatively autonomous cultural expression and participation are crucial to supporting progressive-minded music.

MELANIE SCHILLER: I would also emphasise the importance of music education. Learning to play an instrument early on can have great value for a young person. It is paramount that music education is not something that only rich families can afford.

In addition, I would call for the regulation of funding for music in the digital space, so that musicians can make a living from streaming, which has become one of the primary ways of consuming music.

Despite its popularity, streaming generates minimal revenues for artists. It is, therefore, crucial to distribute streaming royalties more equally rather than allowing the majority of profits to end up in the pockets of major superstars like Taylor Swift. Today's imbalanced constellation is not sustainable if we want to ensure a vibrant music culture.

Do you think it is acceptable for a progressive party to involve musicians in the work of the party, invite bands to their political events, or have the leader of the political party take the stage and sing together with them?

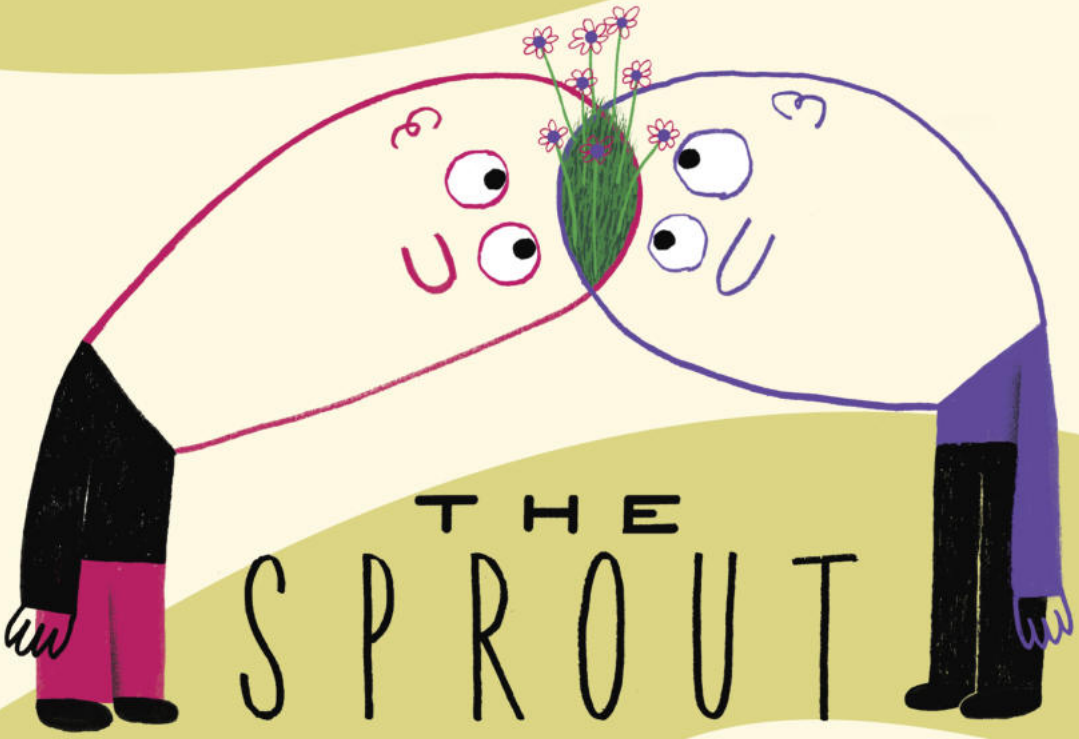
EMÍLIA BARNA: I wouldn't say this is desirable, and I don't think it is the best path towards creating space for relatively autonomous cultural production.

MELANIE SCHILLER: I agree. The broader understanding of politics that Emília mentioned is much more important. What we ultimately need is openness and respect for each other, which can be conveyed through popular music. Inviting a band to perform at a party event would use music only as a functional soundtrack; it would not catalyse political change at the grassroots level.

EMÍLIA BARNA
is a sociologist and popular music scholar and Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Communication, Budapest University of Technology and Economics. She is the author of the monograph *Working in Music on the Semiperiphery: Local Cultural Production and Global Capitalism* (CEU Press, 2025).

MELANIE SCHILLER
is a professor of contemporary media cultures at Radboud University in the Netherlands. She is the co-editor of *Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe* (Routledge, 2024) and author of *Soundtracking Germany: Popular Music and National Identity* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018 and 2020). Schiller is also the chair of the Benelux branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM).

KONRAD BLEYER-SIMON
is a research associate at the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom. He pursued doctoral studies at the Human Rights Under Pressure joint programme of the Freie Universität Berlin and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



THE SPROUT

At the *Green European Journal*, we believe that critical thinking and imagination are the seeds of a better future.

In these times of social and ecological crises,
The Sprout — our new ideas newsletter — explores reads that cultivate change.

If you're looking for ideas for thriving societies within planetary boundaries, sign up today. Each month, we delve into debates that inspire progress towards a more equitable, environmentally conscious, and socially just world.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/newsletters

SCAN TO SIGN UP

OWNING THE PAST
ORBÁN'S STATUE CRAZE

ARTICLE BY
KATA BENEDEK

Hungary is covered with monuments built with the support of the Fidesz government, all part of its effort to control the country's past and secure the party's future. But the opposition has built them too, although with fewer resources and a smaller geographic reach. No political side has sought an inclusive national consensus and, as a result, the national image is fragmenting.

The past decade has witnessed the demolition and defacement of historical monuments in various contexts across the globe, reflecting shifting national struggles over memory and identity. In contrast, Hungary under Viktor Orbán has, since 2014, embarked on a mass monument-building campaign. In the past 10 years, more than 2000 memorials and statues have been erected or renovated across the country's 3000 settlements in the framework of a semi-disguised political campaign funded by public money.

Fidesz has integrated the trite Party slogan from *1984* "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" into its strategy for achieving its ultimate goal of retaining political power. During its 15-year rule, the right-wing populist party has utilised public memory to construct a new, politically motivated historical canon to underpin its party identity.

THE GOVERNMENT AND PRIME MINISTER ORBÁN HIMSELF PROFESS TO BE HEIRS TO THE NATIONAL HEROES WHO DEFIED OPPRESSION

This does not apply exclusively to monuments and statues. Fidesz has been systematically rewriting national history by focusing on one simplistic narrative: traumas occur when the nation loses its sovereignty to foreign oppressors. This transhistorical mantra serves to support and legitimise the government's political stance both at home and internationally. The government and Prime Minister Orbán himself profess to be heirs to the national heroes who defied oppression to regain national freedom. He then extends this historical self-identification to the members of his voter base, which creates the centre of gravity of the Fidesz universe: the nation.

The nation is the core that repels foreign interference, military occupation, and the imposition of international treaties. Today's occupiers, according to this narrative, are, among others, the EU, asylum seekers, the independent press, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, young people attending festivals, NGOs, Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, and LGBTQIA+ people – as well as, more generally, opposition parties and their voters.

This framing aims to construct a bipolar political environment. It is based on an exclusionary national(ist) identity, resulting in a permanent culture war waged by the "nation" – a supposedly peaceful and unified majority – against those whom the government identifies as an aggressive minority. This political goal does not require complex historical narratives to be publicly debated, challenged, and criticised; it only needs "experts" and the media to deliver the message of an integrative concept of national identity.

MEMORIAL YEARS

To support its narrative, Fidesz started by establishing a large-scale, pseudo-professional scholarly network. The government terminated respected state-funded research institutions and replaced them with newly founded organisations or those that had previously been

marginalised professionally. Notable examples are the XX Century Institute and the XXI Century Institute, both led by Orbán's former advisor and current Fidesz ideologist Mária Schmidt. She is also the director of the House of Terror Museum in Budapest – an institution widely criticised for its portrayal of Hungary as merely a victim of 20th-century totalitarian systems. Schmidt has led all three institutions for over 25 years, since their establishment during the first Fidesz government (1998-2002). On paper, these institutions conduct independent research and/or educational activities, but in practice, they act as historical propaganda factories for the government.

Once this network of mouthpieces was in place, Fidesz began to disseminate its simplified historical narrative through various platforms. The most spectacular examples of these efforts were the centrally organised, generously funded national memorial years marking the anniversaries of key historical events: the Holocaust (marked in 2014 at a cost of about 5 million euros), the First World War (2014–2019, at 7 million euros), the Gulag (2015, no data on the budget), the 1956 Revolution (2016, at a cost of 42 million euros), the 1989 transition to democracy (2019, 33.5 million euros), the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which led to Hungary losing two-thirds of its territory (2020, 28.9 million euros), and the bicentenary of the birth of poet Sándor Petőfi (2022-23, 25.2 million euros). In parallel, several locally organised memorial years were carried out by Fidesz-funded institutions, most often commemorating influential historical figures in Hungary, particularly military and religious leaders.

The combined cost of all the memorials held over the past decade has surpassed 150 million euros. This amount was disbursed under the supervision of Fidesz-appointed committees. Their members, such as Mária Schmidt, were selected from Fidesz-related institutions and politicians. They distributed these public funds among their research networks, exhibitions, publications, conferences, general communication, and to erect or renovate public memorials following a central government programme. In practice, this money actively supported Fidesz's campaigning without being part of its budget (until 2025, Hungary had legal campaign spending limits of approximately 3 million euros per party per election).

MONUMENT MANIA

The monument mania has its precedent in the first Fidesz government. In 2000, the government put forward a programme to celebrate the turn of the millennium: dozens of statues, murals, and plaques of founding father Saint Stephen, the "Holy Crown" worn by Hungarian kings, and other related monuments appeared throughout the country. The government created a demand and opportunity that did not exist in the first

place and then quickly satisfied it from the centre of power.

These public objects remained forever linked to those who commissioned them: local mayors and Viktor Orbán. Fidesz undertook this project without establishing expert committees or open spaces for civil, professional, and artistic deliberation, inaugurating a tactic of non-consultation that later became the norm during the memorial years.

In 2012, Fidesz put an end to the autonomy of the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts, which had been licensing and financing new public art-works and monuments to ensure a certain level of quality by professional measures. Experts in the field warned about the risks of both ideological influence and a decline in quality. Years later, these fears have proven to be justified.

Fidesz tried to establish central memorial sites in Budapest; however, in the rather liberal capital, many of these efforts resulted in public outrage and ridicule of the government. The most outstanding scandal followed the erection of the Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation (at a cost of 416,000 euros) during the 2014 Holocaust memorial year. The monument was widely criticised for its low artistic quality and its message, which absolves Hungary of its collaboration with the Nazi regime and equates Hungarians with the victims of the Holocaust. Owing to fierce opposition from civil groups and Jewish organisations, the monument has never been officially inaugurated.

Another example is the Totem sculpture (which cost 615,000 euros) and the Golden Stag statue (513,000 euros), both erected in 2022 to commemorate the mythical origins of the Hungarian nation. They were met with near-unanimous public outrage for the enormous public spending and the wacky aesthetic. The works also damaged the reputation of their creator, party-favoured sculptor Gábor Miklós Szőke, whose studio was stuffed with state commissions worth millions of euros.

Outside of Budapest, Fidesz has exploited municipal or state monopolies over public spaces to advance its monument craze. For most memorial years, it opened tenders for local communities to erect or renovate monuments. The scale of this initiative is striking: the Holocaust memorial year resulted in more than 45 new monuments; the World War I commemorations led to 828 being produced or renovated; the Gulag memorial year added 269; and the 60th annniversary of the 1956 Revolution another 473. In total, around 1615 new monuments were erected or renovated through the nationwide programmes, with approximately 470 more linked to smaller, locally organised memorial years – adding up to over 2000 in less than a decade.

THE UNIFYING ELEMENTS OF THE ERECTED MONUMENTS ARE AMATEURISM AND LACK OF AESTHETIC, ARTISTIC, AND CONCEPTUAL QUALITY

The nature of the tenders determined the quality of the results. The extremely short deadlines for the applications did not give enough time for conceptualisation or discursive deliberation. The budget for monuments outside of the capital would not have been sufficient to cover such expenses anyway: local governments could have applied for between 1200 and 12,000 euros per project in total – a meagre sum compared to the hundreds of thousands of euros granted for central sites. Not surprisingly, most of the memorials are relatively small and lacking in any artistic value. Most of them are schematic material variations of already established relevant national symbols, simplistic figurative kitsch, and characterless portraiture.

The unifying elements of the erected monuments are amateurism and lack of aesthetic, artistic, and conceptual quality. The government values the existence of the memorials over their form, as they gain their meaning not from their concept or symbolism, but from their position in the symbolic political field.

The open calls contained no guidelines on the construction of the monuments but clearly demanded that Fidesz be credited for financing them. This shows that the monuments channel the government's populist cultural propaganda not through symbolic signifiers but by their mere existence. In this sense, there is no difference between the new monuments and the appropriation of existing monuments by financing their renovation and integrating them into the same narrative context.

ALONG WITH MEDIA COVERAGE, INAUGURATION CEREMONIES HOLD GREAT IMPORTANCE IN THE POLITICAL EXPLOITATION OF THE MEMORIALS

REPRESENTATION AND DEMOCRATISATION

Along with media coverage, inauguration ceremonies hold great importance in the political exploitation of the memorials. Party members, including regional representatives of Fidesz, MPs, and even ministers, frequently attended and spoke at these events. Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó, for example, inaugurated a 1956 memorial in Mindszentkálla, a village of 229 inhabitants. In another case, a Fidesz MP participated in five inauguration ceremonies in one day. The lack of opposition politicians is not surprising, considering the dominance across the country of mayors who are either Fidesz candidates or independents who collaborated with the ruling party to "beautify" their municipalities' public spaces.

The events served as performative acts to strengthen the public perception of Fidesz's connection to the newly shaped collective memory and national/cultural identity. Considering that Hungary has approximately 3000 municipalities, the ceremonies provided a significant opportunity for the government to strengthen its presence throughout the country on a scale that no other party could. Organised around new, symbolic objects of inclusion, these events served to reward and further boost party loyalty in off-campaign periods.

The question of their quality, and lack thereof, is also key. Besides controlling memory, constructing a shared identity, and strengthening the local presence of the party, public monuments also reflect the taste of society. The formalistic schematism is not merely a side effect of the rapid occupation of public spaces but a conscious choice by Fidesz. The reliance on the taste and rushed decision-making of non-expert individuals and committees provided a sense of democratisation of the public space. The government trusted local communities and their representatives to commission and erect memorials that corresponded to their taste. Avoiding more innovative artistic concepts, such as abstract aesthetics that many people find harder to relate to, also aligns well with the anti-intellectual front of the Fidesz-led culture war.

BY THE BEGINNING OF THE 2020s, FIDESZ BEGAN TO ENCOUNTER SMALL-SCALE LOCAL COMPETITION IN MONUMENT CONSTRUCTION

Indeed, these monuments can positively contribute to the democratisation of memory. Memorials dedicated to nationally significant, primarily Budapest-related turning-point events in Hungarian history can play an important role in shaping a shared national identity across the country. However, in the current political context, these are not signifiers of national consensus but instead reinforce the narrow identification of the "nation" with the governing party's voters.

A STATUE RACE

By the beginning of the 2020s, Fidesz began to encounter small-scale local competition in the arena of monument construction. Frustrated by their inability to influence the large, central historical narratives reinforced through the media and the education system, local mayors of the anti-Orbán opposition adopted Fidesz's tactic. They began erecting their own counter-memorials in public spaces.

At the right-wing populist end, parties even further to the right than Fidesz – such as Jobbik or Mi Hazánk – erected statues glorifying, for example, the anti-communist White Terror of the 1920s or celebrating Miklós Horthy, the interwar governor responsible for anti-Jewish laws and the beginning of deportations.

In contrast, the left-wing and liberal opposition, invoking feminist slogans, started erecting modest statues of historical female figures or attempting to reclaim national historical events that Fidesz has appropriated, with generally limited success.

While the historical narrative differs, the ethics and quality of the opposition's monuments are comparable to those erected by the government. No political side sought to build an inclusive national consensus; instead, they presented topics that reflected the vision of their own voter base. In the same district of Budapest, you can find a Holocaust memorial that absolves the perpetrators located just

a few meters from a statue of fascist regent Horthy. Meanwhile, opposition-led districts erect monuments for other figures, such as martyrs of the fascist regime. In each case, it does not matter what the statue depicts or how it looks – the only determining factor is what voters think about the relationship between the statue and the politician who commissioned it.

Rather than offering a cohesive narrative, such memorials demonstrate the fragmentation of the national image and stand as an enduring testament to shameless political opportunism.

KATA BENEDEK
is a Hungarian art historian with a PhD from Berlin's Freie Universität. Her research explores the geopolitical temporalities and modalities of socialist and post-socialist East-Central European queer cultural history, particularly within the discursive biases of the East-West epistemic binary.

IRAN'S QUIET, LOUD ART

It deceives you, this red hue imprinted on the sky is no crimson dawn,
O Friend! It is a frost-numbed ear, the mark of winter's icy slap.
And the cramped heavens' frozen light, dead or alive,
Lies hidden in the nine-layered, death-laden casket of darkness.

Mehdi Akhavan Sales, *Winter* (1956)

Mehdi Akhavan Sales wrote these lines in the oppressive years following the 1953 coup that ended a brief era of free expression in Iran under Mohammad Mosaddegh's premiership. With Mohammad Reza Pahlavi once again wielding almost unchecked power as Shah, the government soon began a wave of arrests, banned opposition parties, and exerted tighter censorship over the media and the arts. Some of Iran's most prominent writers, including Akhavan Sales himself, were imprisoned for their critical work.

And yet, the poet and his contemporaries fought on. The 1960s and 1970s saw a wealth of politically charged writing from the likes of Nima Youshij (the father of free verse poetry in Iran), Ahmad Shamlou, Simin Behbahani, and Forough Farrokhzad (widely regarded as Iran's greatest female poet).

This movement extended far beyond poetry. In painting, sculpture, cinema, theatre, and music, political expression became an inseparable part of art. Iranian artists of this period used covert language to circumvent censorship as they challenged repression. But there was also more direct and defiant criticism, visible in the works of figures such as writer and folklorist Samad Behrangi, journalist and poet Khosro Golsorkhi, and cartoonist Ardeshir Mohasses.

However, the 1979 revolution, the culmination of decades of struggle and protest, ultimately brought about further repression and censorship.

ART UNDER THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Just a year after the Pahlavi dynasty collapsed, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, which led to a bloody eight-year war. Although the conflict posed a significant threat to the newly minted Islamic Republic, it also allowed the regime to consolidate ideological control. Streets across the country were adorned with murals, posters, and billboards featuring fallen fighters, as well as religious figures and Iranian political officials. Moreover, radio and television produced a slew of programmes with themes of mourning, as the government attempted to instill a Shiite "culture of bereavement" while systematically marginalising deeply cherished, non-Islamic festivals.

It was also during the war with Iraq that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) was established, creating a comprehensive censorship regime. This body oversees all arts and cultural institutions in the country, and its approval is needed for all artistic works meant for public consumption. It also has complete control over public funding for artistic production and uses grants, work bans, and other tactics to force artists into submission. Works that do not comply with the MCIG's notoriously opaque "Islamic principles" are either censored or banned. Persecution and imprisonment are rampant, too.

Violence against artists reached a peak during the 1988-1998 "Chain Murders", when more than 80 activists, artists, and thinkers were killed or

disappeared. The government at first denied involvement but then blamed the murders on "rogue elements". No transparent trial was ever held to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Yet Iranian artists never stopped producing political works. Instead, they developed tactics to evade the state's censorship apparatus.

Across different fields, Iranian artists have used symbolism and figurative language to convey social and political critique. As a result, metaphors, allegories, and fables are prevalent in artworks, while genres like surrealism and absurdism have become widely popular. At the same time, an underground scene has emerged where artists work away from public scrutiny and without obtaining formal permission from the MCIG. Moreover, works by anonymous artists appear on walls and online, openly challenging the government's censorship and spatial dominance. But the event that led to the most remarkable outburst of artistic freedom and political expression in the Islamic Republic's history was the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini in 2022.

WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM

When news broke out that Mahsa Amini had died after allegedly being beaten by morality police officers for not wearing her hijab "properly", Iranians from all over the country rose in defiance. At her funeral, women collectively removed their headscarves as crowds chanted "woman, life, freedom!", which quickly became the slogan of the "Mahsa Revolution". Soon, images and artworks showing her on life support took the internet by storm.

From the outset, art and artists were integral to the struggle. Singers and rappers like Mehdi Yarrahi, Toomaj Salehi, and Saman Yasin produced songs criticising the government's corruption and calling on citizens to revolt. Two weeks into the protests, Shervin Hajipour released *Baraye* ("because of" or "for the sake of"), a song whose lyrics drew on a wave of tweets by Iranians mentioning their reasons for bringing about a revolution. *Baraye* was taken down days later under government pressure, but not before amassing tens of millions of views and becoming "the anthem of the revolution". Some of the most famous names in Iranian cinema also supported the movement, including a number of female actors who denounced mandatory hijab.

The artworks of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement engaged in conversation with both Iranian and foreign cultural outputs. A Persian rendition of *Bella Ciao;* a poster juxtaposing Tehran's famous Azadi ("Freedom") Tower with Henri Matisse's *Dance;* graphic designs featuring poems from the cherished 11th-century epic *Book of Kings;* and revolutionary songs inspired by Chilean protest anthems – they all tell the story of a movement that is every bit as artistic as it is political. ■

AZADEH RAVAGHI
(pen name) is an Iranian journalist.

CULTURAL RIGHTS
THE ELIXIR OF SOCIAL COHESION?

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ERNEST URTASUN

Spain is home to one of Europe's last standing progressive governments, but its society is not immune to deep ideological divisions amplified by inequalities and exploited by the far right. In this context, culture is a contested political terrain, riven by battles over memory and identity as well as attempts at silencing critical voices. Can the promotion of cultural rights contribute to mending social divisions while advancing a green agenda? An interview with Culture Minister Ernest Urtasun.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: Your flagship initiative as Spain's minister of culture has been the Cultural Rights Plan. What's the vision behind it? And what exactly are cultural rights?

ERNEST URTASUN: With this plan, we are trying to change the approach to public policies on culture. For many years, cultural policies have been interpreted as merely a means to support cultural consumption, such as by making culture more affordable. This is a bit strange, considering that the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights already recognised culture as a fundamental right in 1945. But member states never fully aligned their cultural policies with international law. Now we want to do precisely that: consider culture a fundamental right.

This means that culture needs to be accessible and affordable, but it is not limited to that. It also means that as a citizen, you have a right to participate in the cultural life of your community and to have the means for artistic creation. To achieve these general goals, the plan envisions hundreds of concrete actions, including removing barriers to cultural participation, promoting cultural education, ensuring gender equality,

BY MAKING CULTURE A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT AND ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE, WE ALSO FIGHT INEQUALITIES IN GENERAL

protecting multilingualism, and advancing digital governance.

Spain is one of the first countries in Europe to take such actions, but not in the world. Brazil, for instance, has been working with a cultural rights perspective for many years.

Many of the issues the plan aims to address – economic precarity, discrimination, unequal access – reflect broader inequalities and divisions within society. Is culture the right tool to mend these divisions?

Absolutely. For citizens to be able to enjoy their cultural rights, we need to address the socio-economic inequalities that prevent them from participating in cultural life. There are several barriers that need to be removed. For example, Spain, like other European countries, has introduced a 400-euro grant for young people to spend on cultural products and activities such as books or theatre tickets. However, only 70 per cent of 18-year-olds make use of it, while the remaining 30 per cent don't – either because they don't know about it, or because they don't have the opportunities to use it. This is a form of social discrimination. With the Cultural Rights Plan, we are working with what we call third-sector associations to reach these people and make them aware of the options they have.

Geography adds another level of discrimination. If you live far away from the big Spanish cities, you don't always have access to cultural services such as public libraries, museums, or theatres. This prevents you from enjoying your cultural rights.

There's also a huge gender gap in culture, which reflects the reality of Spanish society. Women in Spain have more difficulties in fully enjoying their cultural rights than men. For instance, if you are a female actor, there are very high chances that you have been sexually harassed.

All these inequalities – social, territorial, gender, and more – create unequal access to culture, which in turn reinforces disparities. By making culture a fundamental right and accessible to everyone, we also fight inequalities in general.

Some of the inequities you mentioned have contributed to fuelling the extreme right in Spain. How has the rise of the far-right party Vox, particularly at the regional level, affected culture?

The far right in Spain considers culture a threat. When they participated in regional governments in recent years, they often negotiated with the conservatives to get the cultural portfolio for themselves. Once they had control over cultural policies, they went on to massively cut subsidies for progressive cultural initiatives – promoting censorship by cancelling festivals,

THE RIGHT AND THE FAR RIGHT STILL DEFEND BULLFIGHTING AS A CULTURE WAR AGAINST THE LEFT

plays, performances, and other cultural events. This shows that the far right sees very clearly that culture is a powerful tool for critical thinking and therefore needs to be weakened or cancelled. As soon as we arrived at the ministry, we addressed this by creating a special unit to fight censorship in the regions.

Isn't there more than just censorship in the far right's vision of culture? In other European countries, they have put forward their own model, not defunding but monopolising cultural institutions and public media.

I don't think that has been the case in Spain so far. Vox hasn't taken advantage of the regional cultural portfolios to create anything particularly beneficial to their ideology. The only exception might be their massive support for cultural activities associated with Spanish nationalism, such as bullfighting.

Bullfighting isn't just a far-right obsession, however. In October, the Spanish parliament repealed a popular legislative initiative that proposed eliminating the legal protection currently enjoyed by bullfighting due to its status as cultural heritage.

Bullfighting has a very strong tradition within Spanish society; it is deeply enshrined in our identity. But can bullfighting be considered a form of culture? The answer is yes, it undeniably belongs to Spanish culture. But it is a type of culture that we do not want to see any longer, because it entails animal torture. And luckily, if you look at surveys, it is an increasingly minoritarian cultural activity, and its support in society is declining. People are becoming more aware of the fact that torture is no longer acceptable in our societies.

But the Right and the far right still defend bullfighting as a culture war against the Left. They say that it is at the core of Spanish national identity, and the Left is attacking it. Now, the problem is that the Socialists are deeply divided on the matter because in some regions they have strong connections to fighting traditions. The reason why the popular legislative initiative was rejected in parliament – despite collecting more than 700,000 signatures – is that the Socialists abstained.

But to be honest, I think it is just a matter of time, because young people in particular are turning more and more against animal torture. Bullfighting will be banned in Spain, sooner or later.

CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE SHIFTS NEEDED IN SOCIETY TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE AND ADAPT TO ITS EFFECTS

Memory politics is another deep cultural divide in Spanish society. The year 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the death of dictator Francisco Franco, and the legacy of the dictatorship remains quite contested. How are you navigating these issues?

For many years, we have argued that the far right was not as strong in Spain as in other European countries because our dictatorial past was still too close and its memory too vivid. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. Particularly among young generations, there's very little knowledge about what the dictatorship was, and normalising the far right is increasingly common among young people. What we are trying to do in government, and particularly this year with the anniversary, is to try and explain what Spain was like under the Franco regime.

When it comes to culture specifically, we are trying to complete the democratic transition that was left unfinished. For example, we have taken the initiative to return thousands of art pieces that were seized by the Francoist regime and never given back to their legitimate owners. We are also trying to close down the Franco National Foundation, which essentially promotes Francoist ideas and the legacy of the dictatorship. But in my view, addressing the fading of memory among the Spanish youth is the biggest challenge we face as a society.

The dictatorship isn't the only contested chapter of collective memory. As a culture minister, you've spoken out about the need for a reckoning with Spain's colonial past, including in state museums. Where does the country stand on that front?

Spain has not debated the need to critically address the colonial past in our museums in the way that other countries have done. One of the cases we have studied most closely is the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, where a comprehensive process has been put in place to incorporate decolonial views into the museum. I brought up the issue in Spain because the Museo de América and the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Madrid, among others, have not yet had this type of conversation on decolonialism.

When I became minister, one of the things I did was to remove banners in the Museo de América that were openly racist towards Indigenous populations. This was a controversial move because the Right argued that I was meddling with fundamental issues of Spanish history. But we did it anyway, because we thought it was important. And I think more and more people now understand that our museums need to be respectful and grant a voice to those communities that have always been silenced.

I only regret that Spain is a bit late compared to other European countries, but we are catching up now, and this is very positive.

One of your other initiatives as a minister of culture has been the Libro Verde – the Green Paper on the Sustainable Management of Cultural Heritage. How do traditional green priorities like ecology, sustainability, and climate action intersect with the field of culture?

First, cultural activities can and should contribute to the energy transition. The Libro Verde aims to establish policies for our heritage sites and cultural venues to adopt renewable energies and become more energy efficient. For example, the Teatro Real, Madrid's opera house, now has a roof fully equipped with solar panels, and it is entirely reliant on renewable energy.

But even more important than that, cultural and artistic activities can contribute to the shifts needed in society to fight climate change and adapt to its effects. We know that we need to change the way we live and think, as well as how we organise ourselves as European societies. Culture is an indispensable component of that transformation. This is why we have created the Climate Biennial, a meeting place that will use culture and art to encourage debate and action for a just climate transition.

Climate change is the most critical challenge for Spain, a country with a vast coastline that is struggling with desertification and drought and has already been hit hard by climate-induced disasters such as floods and devastating wildfires. Therefore, it is no surprise that the climate is increasingly present in our movies, literature, and other forms of artistic production. The arts are crucial to help us imagine and bring about a better future.

Another shift that is likely to change the way our societies are organised is the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence. Is the cultural sector ready to deal with this transformation?

This is a huge debate in Spain. Artists and creators are very worried about the emergence of AI. One of the things they rightly ask is that we take steps to protect human creation. I think that AI can be a powerful tool for creators, but there always needs to be a human behind it in order for the result to be considered a cultural outcome.

Another concern for creators is that large language models are trained with artistic work subject to copyright. Yet AI companies are not paying authors and creators for using their work. This is a critical problem that EU regulation of AI has not solved, and we need to address it urgently. This year, Barcelona hosted MONDIACULT, a major UNESCO conference on cultural policies, bringing together more than 100 culture ministers from all over the world. Fair remuneration

for authors in the age of artificial intelligence was one of the measures we called for, and everyone recognises it as a key issue.

Of course, the fact that Europe doesn't control many of these technologies adds another layer to the challenge. We need Europe to be present in the field of AI. Spain has created a public, open-source AI foundational model called ALIA. Other countries are taking similar actions, but we are lagging behind on the global stage in the race for AI technologies.

Aside from pursuing technological sovereignty, what can the EU do to reinforce a shared sense of European belonging at a time of resurgent nationalism?

Culture was essential in the second part of the 20th century to create a shared sense of European citizenship. We all have favourite musicians, writers, and filmmakers who come from European countries other than our own. The EU's "cultural exception" protects cultural goods and services from free trade rules because it understands culture as a public good.

We cannot expect European integration to continue progressing in the coming years without a strong cultural component. But we need more effort in that direction. The new Multiannual Financial Framework [MFF, the EU budget for the years 2028-2034] should strengthen our common cultural tools. We hope that the Culture Compass, an initiative the European Commission is developing, can play a role in that.

The issue with culture is that it constantly needs to remind politicians of its value in order to be supported and recognised. I worry that with new priorities like defence and competitiveness, Europe will make the mistake of cutting cultural spending. I can say that this won't be the case in Spain, and what we know so far about the next MFF suggests that the culture budget will increase at the European level too. But some member states are taking a different course, and that would be a huge mistake. In a tense geopolitical landscape, a strong European cultural sector is more – not less – necessary.

ERNEST URTASUN
is a Spanish Green politician and economist, serving as Minister of Culture of Spain since 2023. He was a Member of the European Parliament between 2014 and 2023.

SCRAPING THE SACRED

BIG TECH'S NEW CULTURAL COLONIALISM

ARTICLE BY
SEDEN ANLAR

The corporations driving the charge in AI development present their products as tools that allow endless creativity. Yet behind that rhetoric lies an exploitative system built on the uncredited labour of artists whose works are scraped without their permission. Still, even as artificial intelligence repeats the colonial pattern of extraction, enclosure, and commodification, artists and communities are pushing back, reclaiming authorship and demanding accountability.

At London's National Gallery X, visitors linger before striking portraits and glowing landscapes. Figures gaze out with uncanny confidence, framed by vibrant colours and luminous textures. Each piece feels polished and looks as though it belongs in a centuries-old tradition of portraiture, yet infused with something undeniably contemporary.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, the Museum für Kommunikation's *New Realities* invites audiences into reimagined realities. Everyday objects – a desk lamp, a rubber plant, a vintage phone – are arranged in unfamiliar constellations, their sharpness almost unsettling. The show gestures to "digital workplaces".

The two exhibitions have something in common: the pieces displayed weren't made with brushes or charcoal. Instead, they are the result of interactions between human artists and machines – not imitations, but experiments. Each work probes what authorship and creativity mean when algorithms become part of the artistic process, as artists use AI to question precisely the systems of automation and authorship that now define cultural production.

Outside the gallery, however, the same tools move from experiment to industry. What serves as a medium of exploration for some becomes, in other contexts, a mechanism of mass production, trained on vast archives of human creativity. Type in "portrait in the style of Van Gogh" or "Afrofuturist astronaut" and within seconds, an image appears. It might seem like an instantaneous or easy process, but behind the screen are sprawling datasets – such as LAION-5B – containing billions of images scraped from across the open web. These archives – the backbone of products like Stable Diffusion and DALL-E – remix countless examples to conjure something new.

To the casual visitor or user, this might feel like magic; creativity without limits. But scroll through online artists' forums, and the mood is far from celebratory.

A THEFT ALLEGED

Andrew Menjivar, a senior concept artist at American video game developer Blizzard Entertainment, puts it bluntly: "The technology works on theft, plain and simple. Artists do not need to compete with automated slop built off the backs of their hard work." His words capture a growing anger that spilled onto ArtStation in 2022, when thousands of artists staged a mass digital protest, flooding the platform for artists and designers with banners reading "NO TO AI GENERATED IMAGES."

That sense of dispossession runs deep. In the United States and beyond, artists have raised alarms about AI systems that can replicate their signature styles – reproducing visual motifs, lines, or character designs without permission. Some works, such as *Zarya of the Dawn* (a comic entirely illustrated using image generator Midjourney), have triggered legal and copyright scrutiny over whether AI-made art should be protected. In Japan, manga creators have already seen their drawings scraped, altered, and reposted through AI tools – stripped of their original meaning. In Europe, photographers were unsettled to find AI-generated images bearing faint traces of the Getty watermark – the basis for Getty Images' lawsuit against Stability AI, which it accuses of stealing millions of photos to train its deep learning model Stable Diffusion.

Musicians face a similar erosion of authorship. In 2023, an AI-generated track imitating Drake and The Weeknd went viral on TikTok before being pulled down at the request of Universal Music. Since then, automation has gone further: in mid-2025, an entirely AI-generated "band" drew more than a million Spotify streams, raising fresh concern that machine-made music could further squeeze the livelihoods of independent artists, already struggling under streaming platform economics. With the line between experiment and exploitation blurred, what sounded like a novelty to listeners felt, to working artists, like an existential threat.

GENERATIVE AI IS SOLD AS A REVOLUTION, A TOOL THAT PROMISES LIMITLESS CREATIVITY. BUT FOR MANY, IT FEELS RUTHLESSLY EXTRACTIVE

Whether in comics, photography, or music, the story is the same. Generative AI is sold as a revolution, a tool that promises limitless creativity. But for many, it feels ruthlessly extractive: a machine that mines culture and centuries of artistic labour, processes them into patterns, and resells the result as novelty.

While art has always evolved through new tools, what is new here is the speed, opacity, and concentration of control through which creativity becomes data and who gets to own and govern it. So a question hangs in the gallery air: if art can be scraped, stripped, and remixed by machines, what remains of authorship itself?

DIGITAL EMPIRES, FAMILIAR HABITS

For critics and artists alike, the answer feels uncomfortably familiar. What artists describe as theft is, at a deeper level, part of a wider pattern – a replay of older histories of power, where culture is treated as a resource to be harvested. What might appear as a narrow dispute over copyright instead points to something larger: the continuation of extractive logics that echo colonial dynamics.[1]

Ethiopian scholar Abeba Birhane has argued that AI systems reproduce the hierarchies of empire, treating people and cultures as raw material. In *Race After Technology*, Princeton University sociologist Ruha Benjamin shows how supposedly new tools often extend old patterns of racial and cultural domination. And communications scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias describe this as "data colonialism": the capture of human life and creativity for corporate profit.[2]

1 Abeba Birhane (2020). "Algorithmic Colonization of Africa". *SCRIPTed*, 17(2), pp. 389–409. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2966/scrip.170220.389>.
2 Ulises A. Mejias & Nick Couldry (2024). "*Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back*". Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Seen through this lens, generative AI is a tool for dispossession[3] – taking without consent, stripping work of meaning, and enclosing it as property. Culture has long been shaped by systems of ownership and control – from imperial plunder to the market's commodification of art. What AI does is translate those older dynamics into data form and scale them beyond human sight, binding creative life to the same infrastructures of extraction that once fed colonisers.[4] Colonisers once looted artefacts and filled museums, and today's corporations mine cultural archives to train their models. The resources have changed, yet the logic is the same: extraction, enclosure, commodification.

THE MACHINERY OF EXTRACTION

If the gallery walls showcase the spectacle, the supply chain tells the hidden story. Long before algorithms touch a canvas or compose a song, the culture that AI repackages rests on other forms of exploitation: the earth beneath us, the power grids around us, and the human labour hidden behind the screen.

The promise of frictionless creativity hides a material footprint that is anything but light. The computers behind generative models are built on cobalt and lithium, pulled from mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Bolivia, often under hazardous and exploitative conditions. These same minerals power our phones and electric cars, but the hunger of AI accelerates demand at industrial scale. As one Congolese miner told Amnesty International, "We dig to feed the world but remain hungry ourselves."

Once assembled, the machines do not rest. Training a generative model like OpenAI's GPT-3 is estimated to consume over 1,000 megawatt-hours of electricity – about as much as 130 US homes use in an entire year. Keeping those vast server farms cool also requires millions of litres of water. Researchers at the University of California, Riverside have shown that training state-of-the-art models can require as much water as producing hundreds of cars.

And then there is the human cost hidden in the click of a prompt. To make AI systems usable, an invisible workforce of low-paid workers is contracted to filter, tag, and sanitise training data. In Kenya, employees hired to review violent and sexually explicit content for OpenAI earned less than two dollars an hour. "We were exposed to disturbing content every day," one worker told *Time* magazine. "But the pay was barely enough to survive."

3 James Muldoon & Boxi A. Wu (2023). "Artificial Intelligence in the Colonial Matrix of Power". *Philosophy & Technology*, 36(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-023-00687-8>.

4 Graham Murdock (2025). "Artificial intelligence as primitive accumulation: enclosure, extraction, exploitation". *Communication and Change*, 1(6). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44382-025-00004-1>.

This double drain – of natural resources and human labour – mirrors older colonial economies all too neatly. Land stripped for its minerals, workers pressed into survival wages, and the profits funnelled towards distant centres of power.

And all of this leads back to culture – the very thing AI claims to create anew. Just as veins of ore are carved from mountains and shipped abroad, cultural labour is scraped from the Internet and fed into corporate systems. An artist's portfolio becomes a pattern, a song becomes a dataset, a photograph becomes another pixel in a training set. In the process, the works are stripped of meaning, context, and connection, and turned into a slurry of training data ready to be recombined.

To call this merely "data" flattens centuries of meaning and reduces culture to raw material residue. What disappears in the process are the cultural values that made the work significant in the first place – the years of study, the traditions of practice, the communities from which they emerged. Instead, everything becomes flat, interchangeable, and ready to be resold.

Seen together, these layers – the minerals, the water, the labour, the art – form a single picture. AI is not immaterial magic; it is an extractive industry, rooted in the same logics of exploitation and dispossession that have structured global injustices for centuries.[5] The only difference is the resource: today, the mine is not just in the ground but in culture itself.

FROM COMMONS TO COMMODITY

But extraction is only half the story. What makes generative AI so powerful – and so troubling – is what happens next: the transformation of those resources into proprietary products, enclosed and resold as if they were corporate assets all along.

Consider the lawsuits now winding their way through courts, where questions of enclosure come sharply into focus. Getty Images suing Stability AI is just one example. Groups of artists have filed class actions against companies whose models mimic their signature styles without permission. Musicians have raised alarms about voice cloning software that can spit out tracks with a few lines of text. In each case, what was once the product of individual skill or collective heritage is captured, automated, and packaged for profit.

Corporations like OpenAI, Google AI, and Stability AI present themselves as democratisers – offering tools that anyone can use. But while the data that fuels their models is drawn from

5 Paola Ricaurte (2019). "Data Epistemologies, The Coloniality of Power, and Resistance". *Television & New Media*, 20(4), pp. 350–365. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419831640>.

WHERE COPYRIGHT SEEKS TO REWARD CREATION, AI ENCLOSURE MONETISES IMITATION: EXTRACTING COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY WHILE GIVING LITTLE BACK

a vast cultural commons, the outputs are locked behind paywalls, subscription plans, and enterprise licences. A poem written by an unknown writer in Lagos, a sketch uploaded by a student in Manila, a folk song recorded in rural Canada – once scraped, they feed corporate machines the original creators can neither access nor control.

This shift raises more than legal or economic questions. It cuts to the core of what culture is. In mainstream debate, authorship is often reduced to copyright – "If you use my work, you need to pay me." But as critics like Abeba Birhane and Ruha Benjamin remind us, culture is more than property. It is memory, ritual, belonging – the ways people imagine themselves into the world.

The consequences reach far beyond livelihoods. When culture is treated as raw material, imagination shrinks.[6] Sacred traditions are stripped of context and remade as styles; community songs become decorative "aesthetic choices"; political art is fed into the machine and spat back as wallpaper. What was once shared, messy, and alive becomes uniform, smooth, and owned.

This is why many critics now describe generative AI as a form of enclosure.[7] The idea that culture can be owned is not new – copyright and museums alike have long fenced off the commons in the name of preservation or profit. But where copyright seeks to reward creation, AI enclosure monetises imitation: extracting collective creativity while giving little back. In this new economy, commons are not fenced but scraped. What once belonged to the many now circulates through the hands of the few – not as land or artefact but as data, subscription, and algorithmic output.

WHEN THE SACRED IS SCRAPED

The enclosures of generative AI reach every corner of culture, but their impact is felt most deeply where creation itself is communal and sacred. Across the world, some traditions are inseparably intertwined with their context: songs that live only in ceremony, designs that carry ancestral meaning, stories bound to specific lands and the people who care for them. These are not products of individual authorship; they are collective inheritances – practices of survival and continuity carried through generations.

To call these practices "content" is to misunderstand their very essence. Once absorbed into datasets, their meaning fractures: a

6 Ibid.
7 Graham Murdock (2025). "Artificial intelligence as primitive accumulation: enclosure, extraction, exploitation". *Communication and Change*, 1(6). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44382-025-00004-1>.

ceremonial mask becomes a "style prompt", a sacred symbol re-emerges as digital wallpaper. What belongs to ceremony and ritual is offered up for anyone's remix, stripped of relation and responsibility.

Artists and communities are already sounding alarms. In Nigeria, musicians warn that AI-generated deepfakes are encroaching on Afrobeats itself, with systems able to mimic the voices and styles of cultural icons without consent. In Australia, First Nations artists have raised concerns that their designs and stories are being scraped and remixed by AI tools, a practice they describe as cultural theft. And in Canada, the federal government was forced to apologise after publishing an AI-generated image of an Indigenous woman, sparking new ethics rules and corporate pledges to avoid replicating Indigenous art through AI.

From protest to protocol, Indigenous and community-led movements are setting their own terms for how culture should live in the digital realm. In Canada, the First Nations OCAP® principles (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) enshrine the right of Indigenous peoples to govern their cultural data. In Aotearoa, the Te Mana Raraunga Māori Data Sovereignty Network describes data as a *living taonga*, a sacred treasure that carries mauri, or life force, and insists it must be governed according to Māori values of collective responsibility and handled with care, consent, and authority. And in Brazil, Indigenous technologists are developing sovereignty projects to keep sacred materials out of training datasets. The Indigenous Protocol and AI Working Group has gone further, outlining ethical guidelines for AI – such as the principle that ceremonial stories must not be reproduced outside ritual contexts.

These initiatives reject the colonial and capitalist logic of intellectual property – where ownership is individual and exclusionary – in favour of relational stewardship, where knowledge is held, cared for, and passed on collectively. They remind us that cultural knowledge is not raw material but a living trust, inseparable from the people and places that create and sustain it.

When generative AI scrapes the sacred, it risks reviving one of the oldest colonial patterns of all: the theft of meaning itself.

SEEDS OF RESISTANCE

Still, the story of generative AI is also a story of resistance. Across the world, artists, technologists, and communities are refusing to let culture be reduced to raw material. Their efforts are fragmented, sometimes fragile, but they gesture toward another future: one where creativity and cultural knowledge are protected rather than consumed.

Some of this pushback comes from artists themselves. From the same anger that fed digital demonstrations on ArtStation, practical tools emerged. Spawning, created by artists Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, lets creatives check whether their work is in training datasets and opt out of future use. Experimental projects such as Kudurru – an open-source initiative that embeds hidden "poison" signals into images to disrupt model training – show how artists and technologists are developing new ways to resist extraction through code. Meanwhile, Cara, a portfolio platform co-founded by Singaporean artist Jingna Zhang, offers an artist-first space designed to block scraping and protect creative work, with safeguards that continue to evolve.

Critical researchers are also pointing to alternatives. Timnit Gebru, through the Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR), advances community-driven research that foregrounds justice and accountability rather than profit. Abeba Birhane argues for relational ethics: an approach to AI that acknowledges histories of inequality instead of pretending datasets are neutral. These interventions may not topple Big Tech overnight, but they expand the horizon of what is possible.

Alongside them, some artists are engaging with AI, not to celebrate it but to question it, using the tools themselves to expose bias, reclaim visibility, and imagine alternative futures beyond corporate platforms. Exhibitions such as National Gallery X's *AI: Who's Looking?* in London and *New Realities* at Berlin's Museum für Kommunikation use human–machine collaboration to probe what authorship and creativity mean in the algorithmic age. Rather than surrendering to automation, these projects turn AI into a mirror, revealing who gets to create, who gets copied, and what kinds of stories technology makes visible or erases.

What unites these efforts is a refusal of inevitability. Generative AI is not an unstoppable wave of progress; it is a contested field. Lawsuits are testing the boundaries of copyright and consent. Opt-out tools are forcing corporations to adjust, from Stable Diffusion adding such mechanisms to OpenAI announcing a forthcoming Media Manager for rights holders. And Indigenous frameworks are carving out new protections through data sovereignty and protocol-driven guardrails. Cracks in the AI oligarchy are already visible.

The story is unfinished, but one thing is clear: culture is not waiting to be mined. It is pushing back, planting seeds of accountability in the shadows of an industry that insists it cannot be stopped or steered.

EUROPE'S DIGITAL MIRROR

Across Europe, too, communities are rising against new forms of digital extraction, as

GENERATIVE AI IS NOT AN UNSTOPPABLE WAVE OF PROGRESS; IT IS A CONTESTED FIELD

AI systems absorb and repackage cultural materials without consent.

In Sápmi, Sámi institutions are asserting digital sovereignty through the SODA (Sámi Ownership and Data Access) principles, affirming that cultural and linguistic data must remain under Sámi authority and serve the collective benefit of Sámi communities. For Roma artists and storytellers, projects such as RomArchive mark a different form of resistance – building self-governed archives to reclaim visibility and authorship long denied in Europe's cultural record. And in the Basque Country, the Kultura Data initiative treats digital heritage as a shared commons: open for reuse yet governed collectively to keep culture participatory, accessible, and protected from commercial enclosure. Together, these movements link consent, authorship, and collective governance to the survival of Europe's living traditions in the digital age. And each, in its own way, attempts to reclaim control over how living traditions enter the digital realm and to ensure that technology sustains, rather than erases, cultural plurality.

For Europe as a whole, the stakes are high. Cultural participation is not just entertainment; it is part of democratic life. Through stories, rituals, and creativity, societies negotiate and celebrate differences, include new perspectives, and imagine shared futures. If those spaces are reduced to what algorithms can remix, the danger is cultural homogenisation – a Europe that speaks in borrowed styles but loses its plurality of perspectives and cultures.

Policy debates are beginning to catch up. The EU's AI Act introduces measures such as labelling AI-generated content and limiting the use of copyrighted materials in training datasets. But significant gaps remain: questions of cultural rights, authorship, and community consent are still largely unaddressed. Critics warn that without explicit protections, Europe's digital transition risks replicating the very extractive patterns it once exported.

Compounding this is a shifting political landscape. As far-right movements gain ground across the continent, the space for plurality – cultural, linguistic, and political – is shrinking. In such a climate, the commodification of culture by Big Tech risks aligning with forces that prize uniformity over diversity, echoing what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias describe as "the enclosure of life under data colonialism".

IMAGINATION AS A COMMONS

In the end, the story of generative AI is less about machines than about the patterns they amplify. The enclosures we see today – the capture of art, language, and story –

AI DOES NOT INVENT EXTRACTION SO MUCH AS ACCELERATE IT, TURNING CENTURIES OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE INTO THE RAW MATERIAL OF COMPUTATION

are not new inventions but extensions of older hierarchies:[8] the museum's glass case, the copyright ledger, the colonial archive. What is different now is the scale and speed with which these dynamics unfold, translated into data and automated across the globe – and, crucially, concentrated in the hands of a few powerful corporations.

AI does not invent extraction so much as accelerate it, turning centuries of cultural exchange – including the sacred knowledge of Indigenous and community traditions – into the raw material of computation. What was once held in ceremony is now repackaged as product and profit. But this transformation also makes the stakes unmistakably clear: whether culture will remain a living commons, rooted in plurality and care, or be reduced to an instrument of corporate power.

And yet, across disciplines and continents, resistance continues to grow. Artists and communities are reclaiming these tools to expose bias, recover erased traditions, and reassert creative agency. From Indigenous frameworks of data sovereignty to digital commons projects and opt-out campaigns, they are sketching another horizon – one where technology amplifies, rather than consumes cultural plurality.

Europe now faces a critical challenge: whether to narrow imagination through inherited systems of extraction, or to expand it by recognising culture as a living commons sustained through plurality, reciprocity, and shared stewardship. In the end, the crisis is not technological but political – a struggle over who gets to imagine and for whom.

SEDEN ANLAR
is a Brussels-based journalist, podcast host/producer, moderator, and political communications specialist. She writes and tells stories about intersectional climate and social justice-related issues.
She previously worked for political campaigning organisations such as Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe and political publications like the *Green European Journal*, as well as producing podcasts such as *Green Space* for the Green Party of England and Wales and *Changing the Table* for the Migration Policy Group.

8 James Muldoon & Boxi A. Wu (2023). "Artificial Intelligence in the Colonial Matrix of Power". *Philosophy & Technology*, 36(4).

LEARNING BY ERASURE

CULTURE, RESISTANCE, AND RECOVERY IN UKRAINE

ARTICLE BY
KATERYNA BOTANOVA

In Russia's war on Ukraine, long-buried histories, landscapes, and relations are being recovered and re-forged. The rebuilding not only of Ukraine's physical but also non-physical infrastructure, underway as destruction continues, is a vital part of war resistance.

In July 2022, what started eight years before as the Ukraine Reform Conference reinvented itself as the Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC). Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this annual international event, attended by heads of state, a wide range of government officials, members of parliament, representatives of international organisations, civil society, and the private sector, was primarily focused on economic and democratic reforms in Ukraine. By and large, it was conducted within the discourse of international development aid, at a time when Ukraine was seen as just another country undergoing a lengthy transformation to catch up with the political and economic standards of the "developed world" or, at least, the European Union, and in constant need of supervision and various kinds of stimuli.

The focus change from "reform" to "recovery", inevitably brought by the Russian war on Ukraine and the urgent need to express "support for the only country on the European continent currently affected by armed conflict" (as stated during the first URC in Lugano in 2022),[1] was more than just a change in rhetoric. It was a major discursive transformation

1 Federal Department of Foreign Affairs Switzerland (2022). "Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC2022) in Lugano", 4-5 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/urc2022-lugano.html>.

from the prescriptive certainty of "reform" to the complete uncertainty of "recovery", both the meaning and the goals of which would be defined and redefined in the process. Even if not seen or fully comprehended in 2022, one of the biggest challenges for recovery in the Ukrainian case was that it had to be systematically planned and carried out while destruction was ongoing – an exceptional case in European and global history.

Moreover, this war, now in its fourth year, has proven to be a long one. Peace talks do not mean ceasefire, freezing the frontline does not mean an end to the drone and ballistic missile attacks on the cities deep inside the country, and any peace deal cannot secure a sustainable end to war. The most complicated negotiation point remains security guarantees.

Envisioning recovery and re-construction is not possible without constant witnessing and addressing destruction and de-construction on multiple levels. It is impossible to think about the recovery of the economy, critical infrastructure, energy security, transportation networks, or urban structures without acknowledging the destruction of the core connections and relations between people and their homes, communities, natural and cultural landscapes, but also memories, legacies, heritage, and identities. It is on this horizontal level of human, cultural, and environmental entanglement that the war is lived, destruction is experienced, and daily reconstruction and recovery are already happening.

ZEMLIA

In her recent book, *Ecocide in Ukraine: The Environmental Cost of Russia's War*, Ukrainian researcher Darya Tsymbalyuk writes about death as the episteme of war: "It becomes the dominant morbid frame of learning about one's homeland, when we only find out about the existence of someone or something when they are gone – erased, murdered, or destroyed."[2] The growing number of deaths and the extent of destruction creates a vast network, spreading over the whole society, linking everything and everyone.

In Russia's war of aggression, landscapes, histories, and stories once destroyed, censored, crippled, or marginalised by the empire – first Russian, then Soviet – are being rediscovered through loss. This gruesome paradox of learning by erasure lies at the core of the recovering and regrowing connections between people, lands, and environment, at the core of the grassroots resistance to war and violence.

Tsymbalyuk puts soil and land (which in the Ukrainian language are embraced in one

2 Darya Tsymbalyuk (2025). *Ecocide in Ukraine: The Environmental Cost of Russia's War*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

THE GROWING NUMBER OF DEATHS AND THE EXTENT OF DESTRUCTION CREATES A VAST NETWORK, SPREADING OVER THE WHOLE SOCIETY, LINKING EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE

word, *zemlia* – a word she consistently uses, along with other Ukrainian terms) at the centre of the war experience. Being contaminated or destroyed, occupied or depopulated through the displacement of people and other species, *zemlia* stops being "a territory" and becomes a home, a shelter, a history, a living world.

In fact, the notion of "territory" belongs exclusively to the vocabulary of empire, as imperial imaginations erase peoples, homes, histories, and landscapes, reducing them to allegedly empty spaces and resources awaiting extraction. On the ground, the land – *zemlia* – is always a homeland, which cannot be simply given up, even for promises of ephemeral peace. This Russian war against Ukraine, which started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the temporary occupation of parts of the Ukrainian east, tore people away from their lands and homes and, simultaneously, reconnected them. The imminent threat of yet another erasure unearthed – sometimes in a very literal sense – previous losses and erasures, histories, legacies, and memories taken away.

In personal and collective relations, natural environments transcended their imposed agricultural or industrial functionality and imagery of the last centuries, recovering their meaning as cultural landscapes, which connect generations of people and layers of history, weaving links between them. This war also brought back the notion of "frontier", not as a zone of clashes or conquests but as a space of constant contact, hybridity and complexity of relations, openness and multilayered identities in continuous flux.

DAKH

This year, another Ukrainian word made its way into the global language, trying to get a grip on this war – *dakh*. Originating in Old High German, it means "roof". *Dakh: vernacular hardcore* is the title of the exhibition housed by the Ukrainian pavilion at the 2025 Venice Biennale.

Dakh II and *Dakh III* were presented during the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Rome this year.

The foundation of the project is a 50-year monumental research work entitled "Atlas of Traditional Ukrainian Housing from the Late 19th to the Mid-20th Century", compiled by three generations of women architects: Tamara, Oksana, and Bogdana Kosmina, the latter of whom co-curates the pavilion. "*Dakh* spans the trajectory of the Ukrainian home at war: a site of sanctuary, a terrain of destruction, a project of rebuilding – and a cradle of resistance," writes Michał Murawski, another co-curator of the pavilion.[3] Here, the roof is more than just an architectural element. It is a symbol of safety and protection, a basic structure that shields from violence and destruction, which falls daily from the sky. It is also a symbol of fragility; roofs are among the most damaged parts of houses, the crucial ones that volunteers have to rebuild first.

The *Dakh* structure consists of metal rods that form a load-bearing structure but also signify missiles and shrapnel, metal sheeting used in emergency roof repairs, and a wedge-shaped roof made of reeds. Its shielding capacity is not only spatial but also temporal: elements of traditional architecture come together with both assaultive and protective references to the current war. *Vernacular hardcore*, used in the title of this project, symbolically merges *vernacular architecture* – a sustainable way of building that relies on locally available materials, traditional or local architecture, grassroots architecture without architects – and *hardcore* as a fundamental part of processes, and as a mixture of bricks, rubble, and other hard materials traditionally used to lay foundations of buildings. This project rests against "a vernacular hardcore, rooted in the experience of generations, in the trauma of war, and in the power of resistance," writes Murawski.[4] *Dakh* envelops the space of simultaneity of destruction and reconstruction.

Together, *zemlia* and *dakh* delineate the shape of the renewed, but old, the recovered, but never really lost, the rebuilt, even if destroyed, home – *dim*. This is where solidarity stretches through generations and connects neighbours; where care embraces humans, non-humans, and wider landscapes; where steppe, rivers, estuaries, and forests are active fighters in the war and crucial participants in cultural history; where recovery and reconstruction, which started 11 years ago and never stopped, involves not only tangible assets – buildings, infrastructure, the physical environment – but also intangible ones such as heritage, memories, and identities.

3 Michał Murawski (ed.) (2025). *dakh (dax): vernacular hardcore. Mini-Atlas*. [The guide to the Ukrainian Pavilion at the 19th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia]. Kyiv: Dzherelo; Berlin: Kiosk International. Available at: <https://www.ukrainianpavilion.org/mini-atlas/>.
4 Ibid.

RESISTANCE IN THIS WAR IS, AMONG OTHER FORMS, ALSO EPISTEMIC

DIM

"When the trenches were dug, cultural heritage spilled out of them," states cultural journalist and curator Yuliia Manukian, using a somewhat brutal metaphor to link the changing attitude and understanding of cultural heritage during the war.[5] Once seen as dusty and unimportant, emasculated, erased, or artificially constructed and imposed, cultural heritage has recovered a different meaning and sense of urgency through the episteme of war.

Resistance in this war is, among other forms, also epistemic. It involves careful and scrupulous revision and rethinking of how knowledge has been produced and shared, who has controlled the narratives, and how and why identities have been forged. Here, cultural heritage turns from the inheritance of the past into a living matter being formed in the present, an active liaison between the past and the future. Cultural practices become critical tools of reflection, embracing, acknowledging, and tracking the multiplicity of ways in which society organises, reorganises, and rethinks itself through legacies of the past, experiences of the present, and visions of the future.

Manukian spoke at the conference entitled "Kherson on the Frontier: Steppe, River, Fortress". It was the closing event of the exhibition *Kherson: The Steppe Holds* at the Mystetskyi Arsenal museum complex in Kyiv earlier this year. Both the exhibition and the conference were suggested as a frame to look at the region, which was once seen as inconspicuous and peripheral, brought into existence by the Russian Empire and further resourcified by the Soviet Union, and at the city. Kherson survived the brutalities of the Russian occupation in 2022 and the aftermath of the destruction of Kakhovka dam in 2023; located at the frontline, separated from the Russian-occupied territories only by the Dnipro River, the city was severely damaged, daily assaulted by drones and missiles. Yet it is still very much alive. How and why did people stay or return to the city in the face of permanent danger, looking after each other, temporarily abandoned houses, pets, and plants, and continuing to work on recovery and reconstruction as the daily destruction went on?

Architect and cultural heritage expert Andrii Lutsyk notes that "what is happening in Kherson right now is a cultural heritage of the future. A new or renewed identity is being forged before our very eyes."

In the exhibition, personal stories, family legends, historical inquiries, local mythology, natural and cultural landscapes, and daily urban and rural rituals from the previous 30 years, times before the full-scale invasion, revealed

5 *Херсонщина на фронтирі: степ, ріка, фортеця ("Kherson on the Frontier: Steppe, River, Fortress").* [Conference]. Mystetskyi Arsenal, 26 September 2025. Conference presentations available at: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtj25ZLjRgOtgaKbISEi7vZjJ0y9cqehK&si=z7v_QllSjOTQu6ti>.

the *vernacular hardcore*, a tight interlacing of various simple and often invisible or seemingly unimportant elements that connected people to each other and to their *zemlia*. This forms the core of identities that enable resistance in the face of death.

This exhibition, like the *Dakh* project or Darya Tsymbalyuk's book on ecocide, like an exponentially growing number of other exhibitions, books, artistic and discursive projects and events, is an attempt to make sense of daily life inside the war, to trace the multiplicity of solidarities, local and nationwide caring networks of support and reconstruction – to pay tribute to those people, places, legacies, environments, taken by the war, to preserve their names and identities as a form of much-needed justice. This is culture as resistance, recovery, and security.

"Ukrainian culture in all its forms, with its history of resourceful resistance to imperialism and erasure in the face of Russian efforts to diminish its global reach, is an essential ally of open democratic societies in the fight against totalitarian threats," writes Ukrainian researcher Sasha Dovzhyk in the editorial of the latest issue of *London Ukrainian Review*, dedicated to "Culture as Security".[6]

When spaces for democracies are dangerously shrinking and totalitarian threats are alarmingly growing, radically rethinking the role and place of culture in a new global security architecture and in the ongoing and future recovery of Ukraine is long overdue.

KATERYNA BOTANOVA
is an independent cultural researcher, writer, and curator who lives and works between Ukraine and Switzerland. She is a head of media projects at the Frontier Institute (Kyiv/Lviv).
(Photo credits: Daria Sivirin)

6 Sasha Dovzhyk (2025). "Culture as Security." *London Ukrainian Review*, Issue 5 (October 2025). Available at: <https://www.londonukrainianreview.org/posts/culture-as-security>.

INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONS

A BLUEPRINT FOR THE EU'S GLOBAL ROLE

ARTICLE BY
MAFALDA DÂMASO

The US's retreat from multilateralism should prompt the EU to establish new connections and strengthen its international presence, particularly in the Global South. But can this endeavour succeed without resulting in a form of neocolonialism? European action in the field of cultural relations serves as a positive model to build upon.

As we enter the post-American world order, the European Union must decide what its role in the emerging international system will be, and how it will balance its response to increasingly concerted efforts to spread illiberalism globally – including from within the EU itself – with its historic responsibility as the home of former colonising states. How can the EU respond to the American withdrawal from multilateralism and build coalitions to uphold human rights without engaging in a form of neocolonialism?

The EU's global cultural and media action provides a path forward that can be extended to other forms of cooperation – particularly with the Global South.

THE END OF THE AMERICAN WORLD ORDER

The American retreat from multilateralism and international cooperation has created a space that China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other illiberal state actors have already begun to occupy. They aim to reinforce their image in the Global South as supporters of multilateralism, while at the same time delinking the idea of international cooperation from human rights, pluralism, and fairness. This risk alone should convince the European Commission, the Council, and the Parliament of the need to boost the EU's global presence in response to Trump's destructive foreign policy agenda.

TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST THE INCREASINGLY COORDINATED STRATEGY OF ILLIBERAL ACTORS, THE EU MUST BE BOLD

To fight back against the increasingly coordinated strategy of illiberal actors – which, across Left and Right, are united by the aim to weaken democracies, oppose women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, reduce cultural diversity, preclude global wealth taxes, and limit the bargaining power of the global majority – the EU must be bold. However, its efforts should avoid reinforcing a Eurocentric view of the world, which could be met with a rejection of liberal democratic principles (here understood as the combination of democratically elected governments, the rule of law, and human rights).

Instead, it is time for the EU to strengthen the role that it has gradually and implicitly begun to take on over the last decade in the cultural sphere, as a global enabler, a distributor of power, and a serious ally of the Global South.

A GLOBAL CULTURAL ENABLER

The role of the EU as a global enabler – not just in the sphere of culture – has legal basis in Article 3 of the Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. It makes an explicit link between the protection of the Union's citizens and global cooperation to ensure "peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as [to] the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter".[1]

This positions the EU as a global actor that must not be guided by its own self-interest alone. Of course, profound contradictions remain between these principles and some of the EU's actions – for example, its migration policies, the watering down of climate efforts, extractivist initiatives, and the selective championing of human rights. While these realities must not be forgotten, we can build on a parallel set of positive EU actions, as exemplified by the quiet paradigmatic shift in global cultural and media action that has developed over the last decade.

This shift represents a significant transformation. Traditionally, the global cultural action of EU member states is aligned with cultural diplomacy – the efforts to extend cultural influence beyond the limits of a state, namely through activities led by national cultural institutes. These might range from a personal tour of a heritage site by a head of government to demonstrate generosity and open up new government-to-government engagement to cultural events or exhibitions showcasing a state's culture and are

1 European Union (2012). *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union*. Brussels. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF>.

done in support of a state's foreign policy goals. For example, the French model of *rayonnement culturel* ("cultural radiance" or "influence") is implemented by the branches of the Institut français and the Alliance française.

The European Union's approach to culture in its foreign action is aligned with the British and German model of cultural relations[2] – a bottom-up, two-sided, collaborative model whose emergence in these two countries cannot be separated from their pasts as former colonisers and occupiers – and the recognition of the need to rebuild trust with foreign populations. The adoption of this model by the Union is consistent with the principles underlying the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, published in 2016,[3] which identified five priorities for the EU's global action: the security of the Union; state and social resilience to the East and South (into Central Asia and down to Central Africa); an integrated approach to conflicts and crises; cooperative regional orders; and global governance for the 21st century. The understanding of international relations and of the EU's global role that was implicit in the document – reflecting the approach taken by Federica Mogherini (then High Representative for Foreign Affairs) – focused much more on collaboration and the development of long-term relationships than on security.

In the cultural relations paradigm, culture is understood as more than a means to open up conversations or increase the visibility and strength of a state in support of its foreign policy interests, as is often the case with cultural diplomacy. Instead, cultural relations understand culture as the catalyst for long-term and, crucially, equal relationship building.

The EU's 2016 Joint Communication by the European Commission and the High Representative establishes the bloc's foreign policy position on culture.[4] Its rejection of the language of cultural diplomacy is highly significant. While it does not question the ability of member states to engage in cultural diplomacy, its emphasis is on strengthening ties among EU actors and reinforcing cooperation with partners – in other words, it accompanies and supplements the cultural diplomacy efforts of its member states.

Importantly, the joint communication also gives international cultural relations projects

2 For a summary of the processes explaining the adoption of this model by the European Union, see Mafalda Dâmaso & Andrew Murray (2021). "The EU's Dualistic Regime of Cultural Diversity Management: The Concept of Culture in the Creative Europe Program (2014-2019; 2021-2027) and in the Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2016-)". *Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy*, 7(1), pp. 153–184. Available at: <https://jcmcp.org/articles/the-eus-dualistic-regime-of-cultural-diversity-management/?lang=en>.

3 European Union (2016). *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2871/9875>.

4 European Commission (2016). *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations* (JOIN/2016/029 final). Brussels. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN%3A2016%3A29%3AFIN>.

a clear structure: they are to be designed, implemented, and assessed in a collaborative manner by EU actors, the cultural institutes of EU member states, and local actors. A subsequent document drafted by the Council's Cultural Affairs Committee and approved by the Foreign Affairs Council foregrounded the centrality of "cooperation of local stakeholders and civil society at all levels (planning, design, implementation) and on an equal footing, aiming at a bottom-up and people-to-people approach, local empowerment, participation and co-creation".[5]

In practice, the EU's international cultural relations support and implement a wide range of initiatives. These range from those led by the EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) network, to activities funded by the Cultural Relations Platforms or by EU delegations around the world, to cultural projects initiated by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and other actors.

Although many limitations and paradoxes remain in the EU's global action in the cultural and media spheres (such as persistent asymmetries of power, a superficial approach to cultural cooperation in some instances, and the EU's continued tendency to support free trade norms at the expense of cultural diversity), the EU is beginning to emerge as a global enabler of cultural diversity around the world through trade agreements, policy arrangements and paradigms, financial measures, and modes of governance. To give three examples, the EU promotes cultural diversity in the Latin American audiovisual industry through the EU-funded Ibermedia programme, which involves regional stakeholders and receives input from multiple grassroots associations regarding its implementation. Through this policy arrangement, the EU supports cultural diversity not only from the top down but also from the bottom up.[6] At the same time, through ACPCultures+, the largest audiovisual assistance initiative aimed at cultural workers in the Global South, the EU co-produced multiple African films in ways that, according to African film professionals, were central in their artistic and cultural endeavours and supported their local industries and communities.[7] All films that received this financial support from the EU were shot in – and had casts from – ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries.

The international cultural relations approach has been adopted by not only the EU and

5 Council of the European Union (2019). *Draft Council Conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action* (ST 7749/19 INIT). Brussels – 21 March 2019. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7749-2019-INIT/en/pdf>.

6 Marina Rossato Fernandes (2025). "The influence of the European Union on Latin American supranational media policy", in Mafalda Dâmaso (ed.). *The European Union as a Global Cultural Power*. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 145-164. Available at: <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783111026558-007/html>.

7 Benjamin A. J. Pearson (2025). "Co-Producing Global African Media: Linking ACPCultures+ Co-production Requirements and Textual Outcomes", in Mafalda Dâmaso (ed.). *The European Union as a Global Cultural Power*. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 165-184. Available at: <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783111026558-008/html>.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY SERVES THE FOREIGN POLICY INTERESTS OF A STATE. THE FOCUS OF INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONS IS DIFFERENT

EU member states' organisations but also non-EU cultural practitioners, leading to the gradual emergence of a global cultural network that places international cooperation and intercultural dialogue at the centre of its actions. Importantly, enabling cultural diversity requires a redistribution of power, that is, placing European actors and other interlocutors on an equal footing across projects, policy frameworks, and modes of work.

THE EU VERSUS THE US AND CHINA

By design, cultural diplomacy serves the foreign policy interests of a state. The focus of international cultural relations is different: it lies in co-creation and relationship building rather than in the transmission of ideas through pre-established relations. But it would be insincere to pretend that it is disinterested.

The question is not, then, whether the EU's international cultural relations serve a purpose but, instead, what purpose they serve. The EU's stance as an enabler of cultural diversity is in direct opposition to the ways other global powers understand the role of culture in international relations. Until Trump 2.0, the US aligned its international global action with soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye in the 1990s. The idea was simple: in the context of the Cold War, culture – alongside policies and values – could attract foreign populations and win their hearts and minds. In so doing, it would support the geopolitical alignment of their countries with the US. Soft power was imagined as a new form of power that could be deployed alongside hard power – financial and military – to maintain American global hegemony. That is, soft and hard power worked as aligned pull-and-push forces – the carrot and the stick – to maintain American geopolitical dominance.

China has understood the importance of winning hearts and minds and decided to engage in similar efforts to challenge American domination. In the last decades, it invested significantly in a vast network of Confucius Institutes, and Xi Jinping has mentioned the importance of cultural relations and mutuality in multiple speeches. However, in doing so, China strips cultural relations of a politics of equality and delinks culture from human rights and pluralism. While the US co-opted culture to support its dominating role in global affairs, China co-opted the language of cultural relations to establish itself as an ally of multilateralism – an approach that some would describe as a rhetorical tactic that masks an interest in the establishment of a Chinese-led international order.

In both cases, be it using the language of soft power or cultural relations, and despite the

THE EU COULD BUILD ON ITS OWN WORK IN THE CULTURAL AND MEDIA SPHERES AND BEGIN TO USE ITS WEIGHT TO REDISTRIBUTE POWER

fundamental differences between their regimes, America and China's approaches instrumentalise culture to maintain or assert geopolitical dominance. Under Trump 2.0, however, soft power has been relegated to irrelevance – as revealed by the closure of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the de facto dismantling of the US Agency for Global Media and, subsequently, of *Voice of America*. Nonetheless, this should not be understood as a denial of the importance of cultural elements in politics and international relations. The emphasis on limitless free speech that is shared by Trump's administration and European far-right forces implicitly rejects the principles of pluralism and cultural diversity that are the core of the European project.

In response, the EU could build on its own work in the cultural and media spheres and begin to use its weight to redistribute power. It could redefine itself as a global diversity multiplier and coalition builder. It could recognise its privilege as a historical debt towards the Global South that gives it the responsibility to support the emergence of equal, inclusive, and fair international arrangements, institutions, and multilateral frameworks. This is aligned with calls for the EU to become a "consolidator of global partnerships" as a way "to give birth to a new multilateral order that can tread the path to sustainable peace and development".[8]

Using the EU's privilege to reinforce Global South voices that have been hitherto silenced by their economic and trade dependencies on the US, China, or EU member states is the historically right course of action. At the same time, doing so would weaken the relative power of the US and China. Becoming a global enabler that uses its own power to redistribute power would not be easy – but it would serve the global common good rather than just the EU's own interests.

BEYOND GREAT POWER REALISM

The idea of the EU as a global enabler of cultural diversity and global justice can push back against the great power realism that dominates geopolitics today.

The late 20th century and beginning of the 21st century saw a shift away from a realist understanding of international relations, wherein states are in permanent conflict due to self-interests, towards a liberal school of thought that focuses on the shared benefits of international cooperation and the development of global policy frameworks. The Russian

8 Richard Higgott (forthcoming). *From Globalisation to Geopolitics: The Changing Dynamics of World Order and their Implications for the EU*. LSE/IDEAS and Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung.

occupation of Ukraine, Trump's rejection of multilateralism, and NATO's (and the EU's) ongoing reinforcement of military capacity reflect a return of great power realism – as is also evident in the EU's increasing emphasis on strategic autonomy and competitiveness.

There is space for a different approach, one that, in alignment with the work of Global South thinkers such as Walter Mignolo, delinks power from domination and uses it not to control others but to reinforce them and their own power. Like the liberal school of international relations, this enabling approach would focus on the co-development of shared institutions that respond to common needs and reject zero-sum logics. However, unlike liberalism, which emphasises state sovereignty and has gradually transformed into a non-normative and nonideological framework, this new approach would see diversity, mutuality, global justice, and a fair distribution of power as its ultimate goals. There is space for a global politics of allyship and abundance that rejects economic growth and competition for power as its main priorities and, instead, places vitality and regeneration – cultural, geopolitical, and environmental – at its centre. The EU can enable it.

Some might say that there is no desire for such a role among actors in the Global South. The evidence tells a different story. Cultural professionals from countries outside of the EU value its policy frameworks and call for further opportunities for equal collaboration with their European counterparts to strengthen and diversify their cultural ecosystems.[9] The EU could accelerate this process by convening forums linking EU and non-EU citizens from countries whose global policies have been supportive of cultural diversity, such as South Africa and Brazil, to identify common needs and strategies and begin to imagine new international institutions and frameworks in the cultural sphere and beyond. The time is right.

MAFALDA DÂMASO
is a part-time professor at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute and co-chair of the EU-UK Forum on Cultural & Media Relations. She edited the volume *The European Union as a Global Cultural Power* (De Gruyter Brill, 2025). She writes here in a personal capacity.

9 Mafalda Dâmaso et al. (2025). *The Framings and Strategies of Cinema Professionals: Report on International Understandings of the European Film Industry.* REBOOT project. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16744614>.

POLICY VS PERCEPTION

BARCELONA'S CULTURE WAR OVER URBAN SPACE

ARTICLE BY
ARIADNA ROMANS I TORRENT

A project to transform Barcelona's traffic-choked Eixample district into a greener, pedestrian-friendly urban space has evolved into a contest over identity and belonging, demonstrating how cities today are microcosms of fierce ideological battles raging across Europe. While disagreement keeps dialogue alive, antagonism can paralyse much-needed urban change.

Strolling along Consell de Cent, in the heart of Barcelona's Eixample district, one notices more green space than anywhere else in the centre. It is vibrant and full of movement, with delivery trucks, families, residents, tourists, cyclists, and passersby constantly crossing paths.

The Eixample's distinctive grid pattern, often celebrated as one of the great achievements of modern urban planning, was designed by engineer Ildefons Cerdà in the mid-19th century. It was conceived as a rational and hygienic expansion of the overcrowded medieval centre. Cerdà imagined wide avenues, chamfered street corners, and tree-lined boulevards that would ensure light, air circulation, and equality of access for all residents,

©Catarina Heeckt, 2025

combining social reform with spatial order. Yet over time, much of this vision was undermined by the rise of motorised traffic. The grid that once embodied modernity and progress turned into a dense, traffic-dominated landscape with limited green space.

Today, Barcelona faces the consequences of that transformation. The city regularly exceeds air pollution levels recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to the Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal), cutting traffic by just 25 per cent could prevent around 200 premature deaths linked to nitrogen dioxide exposure annually.[1] Another ISGlobal study estimates that environmental factors such as air pollution, heat, noise, and lack of green areas contribute to more than 1000 premature deaths every year, with fine particulate matter (PM2.5) identified as the main cause.[2]

1 "Reducing Traffic in Barcelona by 25% Would Prevent Around 200 Premature Deaths a Year Linked to Pollution". Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal). 25 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.isglobal.org/en/-/reducir-un-25-del-trafico-en-barcelona-permitiria-evitar-cerca-de-200-muertes-prematuras-al-ano>.

2 "ISGlobal Publishes Ranking of European Cities With Highest Mortality Due to Lack of Green Space". Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal). 8 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.isglobal.org/en/-/isglobal-presenta-el-ranking-de-las-ciudades-europeas-con-mayor-mortalidad-atribuible-a-la-falta-de-espacios-verdes>.

THE GEOMETRIC AND SYMBOLIC HEART OF BARCELON HAS BECOME THE LABORATORY OF THE CITY'S NEW URBAN MODEL

Recognising this urgent need to make the city more liveable, Barcelona City Council launched the "Superilles"[3] programme in 2015, developed from a theoretical framework divised by urban ecologist Salvador Rueda. Academic evaluations and international case studies suggest that the Superilles model offers a replicable blueprint for transforming dense urban environments worldwide, converting traffic-heavy grids into walkable, greener, and socially vibrant spaces.

As the Barcelona City Council described in their original Superilles plan, "the programme sought to transform city streets by reclaiming space from private vehicles and returning it to pedestrians." Conceived as a long-term model for urban transformation, the Superilles programme aimed to "create healthier and greener public spaces, prioritising social interaction, local economies, and safer environments." After initial pilot projects in neighbourhoods such as Poblenou, Horta, and Sant Antoni, the programme expanded to include major interventions in the Eixample district, where it brought the most visible transformations.

The geometric and symbolic heart of Barcelona has become the laboratory of the city's new urban model, featuring *eixos verds* ("green axes" containing extensive vegetation) and squares where pedestrians are prioritised. Stretching across the Eixample from west to east, the Consell de Cent was initially planned to form part of a larger Superilla, a cluster of blocks closed to through traffic. Over time, however, it evolved into the first and most emblematic *eix verd* of the city. What was once a heavily trafficked street became a continuous pedestrian-friendly corridor, with wider sidewalks, tree-lined pathways, benches, and permeable paving. This transformation not only redefined mobility patterns in the Eixample but also became symbolic of Barcelona's attempt to reclaim public space, improve air quality, and foster social life.

3 A *superilla* (literally "super island", translated as "superblock") is a cluster of city blocks closed to through traffic.

INTERNATIONALLY CELEBRATED, LOCALLY CONTESTED

In 2023, the Eixample became the epicentre of a broader political and cultural struggle over the city's future. The Superilles plan had started as an ambitious urban design experiment, but it evolved into one of the most divisive issues in local politics. Internationally hailed as a paradigm shift in urban planning, the initiative received a far more ambivalent response on the ground. While many residents within *superilles* supported the transformation towards greener, more pedestrian-friendly streets, opposition grew among those living elsewhere in the city. Rapidly, a discussion began on how the *superilles* went against the legacy of Cerdà and restricted the free circulation of cars. This unease was amplified by right-wing media outlets and on social media and was strategically channelled by Barcelona's political and economic elites into resistance against the administration of Ada Colau, leader of the left-wing municipalist platform Barcelona en Comú.

As the 2023 municipal elections approached, the controversy over the Superilles project crystallised into a deeply polarised debate, unprecedented in the city's history of mobility interventions. Business association Barcelona Oberta spearheaded a campaign against the project, framing it as a threat to economic vitality and urban identity, and even filed a lawsuit ordering the dismantling of parts of the intervention. This was upheld by the courts. There is no empirical evidence on the extent to which conflict cost Colau re-election, but the contestation over the Superilles programme clearly dented her popularity. Beyond party politics and the usual grievances surrounding construction works, the backlash revealed something more profound: conflicting imaginaries of what the city should be and who it is for.

Colau's administration had positioned itself within a wider Southern European municipalist movement – exemplified by other cities such as Naples, where grassroots coalitions reclaimed public services and common goods, and Zagreb, where citizen-led initiatives advanced

participatory and transparent governance – seeking to democratise urban governance, reclaim public space from private interests, and challenge the blind pursuit of economic growth in urban areas at the expense of residents.

Yet the fierce reaction to the *superilles* in the Eixample showed that transforming urban mobility is never merely a question of engineering. It touches on collective memories, urban attachments, and everyday practices that define urban life itself. The conflict over the *superilles* thus exemplifies how cultural politics can both make and unmake urban transitions.

CITIES, ONCE CELEBRATED AS LABORATORIES OF DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION, ARE NOW MICROCOSMS OF BROADER IDEOLOGICAL BATTLES

URBAN CULTURE WARS

Europe is living through a profound crisis of values. Polarisation, distrust, and disillusionment are eroding the fabric of public life, while digital platforms amplify division at unprecedented speed. What once unfolded in the intimacy of homes or neighbourhoods now reverberates instantly across global networks, shaping narratives in real time. These platforms have opened up new arenas for democratic participation and contestation, but they have also created fertile ground for misinformation, manipulation and political exploitation.

Far-right forces have proven remarkably adept at navigating and exploiting this turbulence by translating widespread discontent into powerful narratives of resentment. For example, they have effectively framed climate action, feminism, and migration not as shared challenges but as elite conspiracies against "ordinary people". Through culture-war tactics, they have successfully recast debates on sustainability and social justice into polarising moral struggles. After a period of genuine momentum, Europe's green agenda faces mounting resistance. This so-called "greenlash" has exposed the fragility of climate consensus across the continent.

Cities, once celebrated as laboratories of democratic innovation, are now microcosms of these broader ideological battles. Disagreements around issues such as housing and mobility policies pit residents against one another and deepen distrust in institutions. Even seemingly mundane debates about bike lanes, low-emission zones, or local urban redesign can turn into symbolic battlegrounds over identity, belonging, and control.

This dynamic is not unique to Barcelona. In Brussels, heated disputes over new bike lanes have exposed divisions between environmental priorities and everyday mobility concerns. In Berlin, the reopening of the Friedrichstraße to car traffic has come to symbolise a retreat from ambitious sustainable mobility goals. In Oslo, controversies

©Catarina Heeckt, 2025

over reversing low-emission zones and cutting climate budgets have illustrated a growing pushback against green urban policies. Meanwhile, in France, protests in cities like Paris and Marseille – where slogans such as *"Fin du monde, fin du mois, même combat"* ("End of the world, end of the month, same fight") link ecological transition to economic precarity – reflect a broader tension between environmental imperatives and social justice.

To counter the far right's surge, progressive forces must urgently rediscover the power of narrative. Understanding the cultural politics of contestation – that is, the processes through which particular cultural representations are created, stabilised, contested, and potentially reassembled (see Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*) – is not an academic exercise but a political necessity. It can help identify new opportunities to build broad coalitions, craft shared imaginaries, and unite people in common struggles against the concentration of power and wealth. To this end, we must learn to read political conflicts, including those around urban futures, not merely as policy disputes but as struggles over meaning. They are spaces where new, more inclusive futures can still be fought for and forged.

ENGAGING WITH CONFLICT

"Consell de Cent has been the scene of a pitched battle. The transformation attacks a bourgeois territory par excellence. *Some people have said to me: 'How dare you act in the Eixample, in the neighbourhood of the bourgeoisie?' I think the Eixample has a showcase effect on what the city means."*

Former Barcelona city official

The transformation of Consell de Cent did not just change a street; it touched a nerve. A thoroughfare that had once thrummed to a steady rhythm of cars, noise, and exhaust became a space for walking, for meeting, for sitting in the sun. For some, this change symbolised a new kind of city life – cleaner, slower, and more human. For others, it felt like an intrusion, an assault on individual freedom and on a "way of life" that had long defined the Eixample. The conflict revealed something deeper than a disagreement over traffic: it became both a mirror and a catalyst of Barcelona's social and cultural divides, reflecting existing tensions while also deepening and crystallising them through new forms of urban conflict.

At first, much of the resistance centred on the Eixample's historical identity. This district has long been associated with the bourgeois values of order, modernity, and prosperity imagined by Cerdà in the 19th century. To many residents, its symmetry and openness represent civic pride and a certain ideal of progress. Blocking cars and reconfiguring intersections seemed, to some, like tampering with the very DNA of that model.

But the reaction was not uniform. The residents of the neighbourhoods involved expressed a range of emotions. There was nostalgia for the old city rhythms but also a quiet hope that the new green corridors could bring cleaner air, safer crossings, and more spaces for children to play.

URBAN CHANGE IS NEVER ONLY ABOUT INFRASTRUCTURE OR DESIGN, BUT ABOUT MEANINGS, IDENTITIES AND EMOTIONS

On social media, especially on Twitter (now X), this ambivalence played out in real time. #ConselldeCent became a popular hashtag, and the debate turned into a citywide performance: engineers and architects argued with residents, local businesses shared "before"and "after" photos, and neighbours exchanged stories, frustrations, and jokes.

"The Eixample *superilla* is a bodge that attacks the avant-garde, hygienist, and rational urbanism bequeathed to us by Ildefons Cerdà," someone complained on X. A resident wrote: "I'm lucky to live in Consell de Cent and that the *superilles* just happened to be here. Those who live on [nearby] Carrer de València […] these poor people are getting all the traffic." Others agreed: "[The Eixample *superilla*] creates more space that isn't dedicated to consumerism. Public space, enjoying it, is a right and should be for everyone."

Such differences in opinion are neither new nor intrinsically counterproductive. Cities are spaces where cultures overlap, collide, and constantly renegotiate their coexistence. As political theorist Chantal Mouffe reminds us, democracy depends on this kind of friction, or what she calls "agonistic pluralism" – disagreement that keeps dialogue alive. The real challenge arises when disagreement turns into antagonism, when opposition stops being productive and becomes paralysing. In moments like these, public space turns from a shared arena into a battlefield of mistrust.

For Barcelona, the lesson is simple but profound. Change cannot rely on consensus alone, nor can it silence contestation. To transform the city, leaders and planners must learn to engage with conflict rather than fear it. That means recognising the attachments people have to streets, cars, and routines, and allowing those emotions to inform design. It also requires honesty about trade-offs and patience with adaptation.

©Catarina Heeckt, 2025

More than two years after the first *eix verd* was completed in spring 2023, most residents agree that Consell de Cent has improved. Children play where cars once sped by, terraces fill with laughter, and trees have begun to offer shade where there was once only asphalt. Yet challenges remain: researchers such as Isabelle Anguelovski warn of the risks of "green gentrification", where environmental improvements may attract the affluent and push out lower-income residents.[4] Others also point to the threat of further touristification, given that fears of overtourism have fuelled some of the opposition to the Superilles initiative and raised concerns about the balance between liveability and global visibility. Still, the overall view is one of general satisfaction. The contest that once defined this street has become part of its story, a necessary tension that forced the project to mature.

The case of Consell de Cent reminds us why cultural politics matter. Urban change is never only about infrastructure or design; it is also about meanings, identities and emotions, and the pace at which

4 Isabelle Anguelovski et al. (2022). "Green gentrification in European and North American cities". *Nature Communications*, 13, 3816 (2022). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-31572-1>.

these can shift. The Superilla project shows that even well-designed policies can falter when they become too tightly tied to a partisan project. The lesson is not that conflict should be avoided, but that it must be managed over time: disagreement can be productive when it remains within an agonistic rather than antagonistic frame.

In Barcelona's case, the benefits of the transformation became visible only after implementation, yet the political polarisation surrounding it risked paralysing debate. Recognising this temporal lag between policy and perception may be key to understanding why cultural change is as crucial and as slow as spatial transformation itself.

LISTENING, DIALOGUE, AND CONFLICT

Barcelona's *superilles* tell a story that goes far beyond urban planning. For many of the city's residents, these changes mean the loss of a familiar way of life, a shared language, or a web of everyday relations. Nostalgia and fears of gentrification coexist with curiosity and hope. What may look like progress from the outside can feel imposed from within. Urban change, after all, is also about emotions, memory and belonging.

These tensions are not unique to Barcelona. Across Europe, projects that seek to rethink mobility or economic growth often face initial resistance before being accepted by majorities. But when the benefits and burdens of change are unevenly distributed, even the greenest urban visions risk reproducing the very inequalities they seek to overcome.

In a context of deep polarisation and a wave of far-right politics, paying closer attention to inequalities is essential. True urban transformation takes more than a mix of asphalt and green. It requires listening, dialogue, and an acceptance of conflict as a natural part of democratic life. If cities learn to address these frictions and turn them into opportunities, they can imagine fairer and shared futures, where

green spaces and conviviality grow together with respect for collective memory.

The author of this article is part of a research project funded by the British Academy and led by an interdisciplinary team from LSE Cities and the University of Amsterdam, entitled "Towards Post-Growth Cities: The Cultural Politics of Mobility Transitions in Barcelona and London". ■

ARIADNA ROMANS I TORRENT
is a junior researcher at the University of Amsterdam and a research associate at LSE Cities. Her research interests include urban cultural politics, feminist political ecology, and water governance. Beyond academia, she also works as a strategic consultant for consultancies and think tanks, leads the Feminisms Section at Ateneu Barcelonès, and has a weekly column in *VIA Empresa*. She is very happy to be in the final stages of her first non-fiction book.

SHAPING WHAT WE VALUE

AN INTERVIEW WITH
MARIANA MAZZUCATO

Arguments in favour of public support for arts and culture tend to focus on either their intrinsic benefits for social cohesion or their contribution to economic prosperity. Economist and professor Mariana Mazzucato argues that we should move beyond this binary by recognising the potential of culture to shape society's imagination and redirect the economy from narrow GDP growth towards sustainability and public value.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: In the neoliberal framing, arts and culture are valued to the extent that they contribute to economic growth. In a recent paper, however, you argue that we should instead value their ability to shape the *direction* of economic growth. What's the key difference?

MARIANA MAZZUCATO: The dominant approach to measuring and appraising the value of arts and culture uses static methods like cost-benefit analysis that monetise short-term outcomes and inputs. More recently, countries have begun to value arts and culture's immense economic multipliers in terms of jobs or gross value added. While these metrics are important, they tell us little about the *type* of growth being generated and whether it is inclusive, sustainable, or enriching for society. We need a shift towards valuing art and culture's dynamic spillovers and market-shaping abilities.

WE NEED A SHIFT TOWARDS VALUING ART AND CULTURE'S DYNAMIC SPILLOVERS AND MARKET-SHAPING ABILITIES

In my paper "The Public Value of Arts and Culture", I argue that arts and culture don't just add to economic output; they reflect and shape what we value.[1] They help us imagine the kind of society we want to build and therefore the kind of economy needed to get there. For example, our study with the *BBC* showed programming has the ability to shape markets. The corporation's coverage of the 2019 Women's Football World Cup catalysed new and inclusive markets for women's sports broadcasting and influenced social norms.[2]

While the creative industries in the UK contribute 124 billion pounds to the economy annually[3] and have been identified as a high-growth sector, the arts also possess the ability to interrogate questions such as "What is economic growth for?" and "How does growth look and feel?" So rather than asking how investment in culture can boost growth, we should ask how it can direct growth towards public purpose. This is what it means to move from market fixing to market shaping.

Could your vision perpetuate the instrumentalisation of culture by the economy, even while providing a more expansive notion of economic indicators than narrow GDP metrics?

In the literature, debates about arts and culture are often framed around a dichotomy between their "intrinsic" benefits, such as empathy, imagination, belonging, and their "instrumental" benefits, such as contributions to health, education, or urban regeneration.

I believe we need to move beyond this binary. Arts and culture can be both a means and an end: a goal of economic policy as well as a

1 Mariana Mazzucato (2025). "The Public Value of Arts and Culture: Investing in Arts and Culture to Reimagine Economic Growth in the 21st Century". *IIPP Discussion Paper* (September 2025). London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/sites/bartlett/files/2025-10/Public_Value_of_Arts_and_Culture.pdf>.

2 Mariana Mazzucato et al. (2020). "Creating and Measuring Dynamic Public Value at the BBC". *IIPP Policy Report* (2020/19). London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/publications/2020/dec/creating-and-measuring-dynamic-public-value-bbc>.

3 Allwell Uwazuruike et al. (2025). "Creative Industries". Debate Pack (Number CDP 2025/0017, 24 January 2025). London: House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0017/>.

precondition for economic transformation. As a "means", arts and culture do more than simply represent their "sector" or "industry". They are also an evolving set of practices that can be "used" to support ambitious missions such as net zero – by helping people to understand the urgency of climate action and to envision what economic transformation might look and feel like.

At the same time, arts and culture can also be their own "end". From 2022, my team and I worked with the Barbados government and Prime Minister Mia Mottley to set out six missions – one of which focused on culture as the goal.[4] Under the broader challenge of social cohesion, the mission aims to "transform Barbados into a society of active, involved citizens, where all Barbadians feel empowered and engaged in the social, economic, and cultural development of the country".[5]

Rather than instrumentalising culture, this approach recognises that culture doesn't just serve the economy – it shapes it. It helps define the purpose, values, and relationships on which a more inclusive and imaginative economy can be built.

Treating culture as an "industry" has led to declining state support. Should we abandon the "cultural and creative industries" framing altogether, or can we envision the likes of a bold industrial policy for the cultural sector?

Declining state support for arts and culture stems from insufficient ways of thinking about value and the role of the state, leading to austerity. When governments treat culture as an "industry," they tend to justify public investment through a narrow market failure logic that intervenes too little, too late – when markets fall short, or when culture can demonstrate measurable returns in terms of jobs or GDP. This approach reduces the "cultural and creative industries" to something that competes for public resources rather than recognising arts and culture as an ecosystem that generates public value across the entire economy and society.

What we need instead is a mission-oriented approach to industrial policy.[6] This means moving beyond focusing on specific "winning" industries and instead galvanising cross-sectoral collaboration to shape the direction of growth to deliver public value. In this approach, arts and culture are active contributors to defining what growth is for.

4 Mariana Mazzucato (2023). A Mission-Oriented Strategy for Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth in Barbados. London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose.
5 Mariana Mazzucato (2025). *The Public Value of Arts and Culture*, p. 15.
6 Mariana Mazzucato, Sarah Doyle & Luca Kuehn von Burgsdorff (2024). "Mission-Oriented Industrial Strategy: Global Insights". *IIPP Policy Report (2024/09)*. London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2024/jul/mission-oriented-industrial-strategy-global-insights>.

THE POINT IS NOT TO ABANDON THE IDEA OF INDUSTRIAL POLICY BUT TO REIMAGINE AND EMBED ARTS AND CULTURE IN ITS DESIGN

We cannot ignore the fact that there is an industry of people doing creative work. The point is not to abandon the idea of industrial policy but to reimagine and embed arts and culture in its design. We need an ambitious industrial strategy that is outcome oriented and invests in capabilities, institutions, and ecosystems – from arts education and public cultural institutions to creative practitioners and civic spaces that foster experimentation and participation. This is not about subsidising the arts but about co-creating the economy and society we want to live in.

Are there any positive examples the EU could take inspiration from in its approach to arts and culture?

Putting culture at the centre of economies is both an enormous challenge and a powerful lever that Europe must confront if it is serious about addressing its policy challenges.

That is why I find examples such as Barbados's culture mission particularly inspiring. It reflects a government actively positioning culture as a mission and as a shared national endeavour that shapes the direction of growth itself. The mission recognises that investing in imagination, identity, and creative capability is essential to building resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable prosperity. It treats artists and cultural institutions not as recipients of public subsidy but as co-creators of public value.

Similarly, in Mexico City, the "Utopías" initiative (short for *Unidades de Transformación y Organización Para la Inclusión y la Armonía Socia*l, "Units of Transformation and Organisation for Inclusion and Social Harmony") is a powerful example of how the state can invest in beauty at the community level to provide care, rebuild trust, and steer the economy towards creativity and inclusive growth. The Utopías are multifunctional cultural and civic spaces co-designed with residents to transform neglected urban areas into hubs of participation, collective healing, and pride.

By embedding art, green spaces, sports, cultural programmes, and social services into public infrastructure, the state demonstrates that all people, especially the most marginalised, deserve dignity, beauty, and joy. This investment in the aesthetic and social fabric of everyday life fosters self-worth and belonging, leading to greater civic engagement and economic participation.

Historical precedents also remind us of what is possible when governments boldly invest in arts and culture. The German Bauhaus and the US Works Progress Administration of the 20th century both treated culture as a foundation for reimagining society, integrating artistic imagination with social purpose and public investment. They understood that to rebuild economies and democracies, we must also rebuild meaning and connection.

These initiatives, alongside work from across the world, should inspire EU budget and cultural policy to value the market-shaping effects of arts and culture. All efforts should be context specific, but the overall goal of Europe's budget and industrial policy should not be to instrumentalise culture for economic growth. Instead, it should direct the economy towards public value through arts and culture. That requires new metrics, new partnerships, and, most of all, a renewed sense of imagination in policymaking.

MARIANA MAZZUCATO
is a professor at University College London (UCL) and founding director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP). Her highly acclaimed books include *The Entrepreneurial State* (2013), *The Value of Everything* (2018), *Mission Economy* (2021), and *The Big Con* (2023).

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

Europe's leading political ecology magazine, the *Green European Journal* helps ideas travel across cultural and political borders, building solidarity and understanding. An editorially independent publication of the Green European Foundation, the Journal collaborates with partners across Europe. Editions explore a topic in depth from different analytical and cultural perspectives. The *Green European Journal* website publishes articles and interviews in various languages.

GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

The Green European Foundation is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate, political education, and to foster greater citizen participation in European politics.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL	**Winter 2025** Printed in Belgium by a CO_2 neutral company 100% recycled paper
PUBLISHED BY	GEF
EDITORIAL TEAM	Alessio Giussani Amir Hashemi Alessio De Carolis
EDITORIAL BOARD	Natalie Bennett Luiza Bialasiewicz Konrad Bleyer-Simon Edouard Gaudot Rosa Martínez Rodríguez Maria Mateeva-Kazakova Adam Ostolski
EDITORIAL SUPPORT	Francis Wade Elena Polivtseva Philipp Dietachmair
PROOFREADING	Katy Nicholson
GRAPHIC DESIGN	Klär.graphics
ILLUSTRATIONS	Bea Crespo www.beacrespo.es
CREATIVE DIRECTOR	Klaas Verplancke
ISSN	2684-4486
ISBN	9789490515232

GEF
GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

Green European Foundation
Avenue des Arts 7-8
1210 Saint-Josse-ten-Noode
Brussels, Belgium
info@gef.eu I www.gef.eu
This publication can be ordered from
www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu

This publication has been produced with
the financial support of the European Parliament.
The European Parliament is not responsible
for the content of this project.

ACTING OUT

ARTS & CULTURE UNDER PRESSURE

The ability of arts and culture to foster a sense of community and help us understand the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future is often celebrated. Yet in today's political climate, these vital human endeavours are both devalued and instrumentalised. Neoliberal economic orthodoxy, the rise of the far right, the dominance of tech corporations, and unregulated AI all add to an already precarious situation for artists and cultural workers. Still, instances of cultural resistance offer reason for hope. Recognising the value of arts and culture and their potential to contribute to a just ecological transformation, this edition aims to open a space for what both the green movement and the creative sectors see as the key to healthy democracies – dialogue, pluralism, and mutual understanding – without erasing productive conflict.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu

ISSN 2684-4486
ISBN 978-9-49-051523-2