

Weaponizing Culture: The Role of Illiberal Cultural Policy in Slovenia's Democratic Backsliding

Kristina Čufar ^{1,2}  and Hana Hawlina ^{1,3} 

¹ Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana, Slovenia

² Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

³ Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondence: Kristina Čufar (kristina.cufar@pf.uni-lj.si)

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Abstract

The weaponization of cultural policy is one of the crucial, yet underexplored strategies of illiberal political actors. This article investigates the multifaceted illiberal cultural policy measures employed to polarize society, influence the interpretation of history, consolidate so-called traditional values and ethnonationalism, and normalize political corruption and increasingly authoritarian political practices. The analysis and typology of illiberal cultural policy measures are based on the case study of a period of extreme illiberalization in Slovenia between 2020 and 2022, which was characterized by overt and frequent political interventions in the artistic and cultural sphere. Rather than treating them as isolated incidents, the article traces their cumulative desired and actual effects, as well as the resistance they provoked. Based on the analysis of the Slovenian case, we propose a typology of illiberal cultural policy measures that is applicable to other contexts experiencing democratic backsliding. Illiberal political actors recognize the significance of art and culture as either the means of reinforcing illiberal ideology and political aims or the site of democratic resistance. By targeting the cultural sphere, illiberal political actors pursue the double goal of amplifying expedient narratives and silencing dissent. Increasing political control over cultural production thus curtails the space for democratic deliberation and permanently reshapes the socio-political landscape. Considering illiberal cultural policy as a pivotal strategy for the indelible transformation of political ideology and practice reveals an important dimension of democratic backsliding and the success of illiberal politics in Europe and beyond.

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic; cultural policy; democratic backsliding; illiberalism; memory politics; resistance; Slovenia

1. Introduction

Weaponization of cultural policy is one of the crucial strategies of illiberal political actors in their attempts to radically reshape the political landscape. The role of cultural policy in the ideological consolidation of illiberalism has so far received relatively little attention in academic literature, even if cultural politics is foundational for the better-understood illiberal strategies to take root (such as undermining the rule of law, civil liberties, press freedom, and dismantling constitutional checks and balances). This article spotlights the function of cultural policy in democratic backsliding through a case study of illiberal cultural governance of the 14th government of independent Slovenia (henceforth referred to as 14SiGov) between 2020–2022. Based on the case study of systematic suppression of the cultural sphere and its consequences in Slovenia, we construct a typology of illiberal cultural policy measures that can serve as a model for understanding and studying similar tactics in other illiberalizing countries, revealing how illiberalism weaponizes culture to achieve lasting political and ideological transformations.

To contextualize our analysis, we explain our use of terminology and the points of departure through a literature review on illiberal cultural policy in general and in independent Slovenia in particular (Section 2) and proceed by outlining the embedded case study methodology (Section 3), followed by an analysis of key events that illustrate the implementation of illiberal cultural policy in Slovenia (Section 4). The identified measures are organized into a typology that allows for an understanding of the wider ramifications of the crackdown on the cultural sphere in Slovenia and beyond (Section 5). In Section 6, we discuss the broader implications and contributions of our analysis, concluding with a synthesis of the main findings (Section 7).

The effects of illiberal cultural policy in Slovenia persisted even after a change of government, underscoring the need for political imagination that goes beyond the reductive and often corrosive dialectics of liberal and illiberal politics. Art and culture serve as vital arenas for critical reflection and collective engagement with the past, present, and future, making them essential to a democratic society. During the studied period in Slovenia, civil society's creative forms of resistance provided significant opposition to illiberal governance. Nevertheless, illiberal policies intentionally fueled polarization and curtailed the space for meaningful public discussion on societal challenges, limiting the scope of civil activism through a combination of calculated misuse of pandemic measures and cultural interventions. Art and culture, albeit often brushed aside as self-indulgent, provide a crucial yet vulnerable democratic forum; whoever desires to control the cultural script endeavors to suppress dissent and ultimately enforce monolithic consensus.

2. Illiberalism and Illiberal Cultural Policy

2.1. *Illiberalism: Contested Theories and the Cultural Turn*

The terminology to conceptualize and discuss illiberal cultural policy is still in the process of consolidation, as the trend of illiberal governance has emerged over the past two decades, assuming unique expressions with each iteration. Accordingly, “illiberalism” is a polysemic concept related to (a) democratic backsliding or gradual degradation of previously established democratic standards due to a variety of causes, not necessarily illiberal governance (Waldner & Lust, 2018); (b) authoritarianism or overt sabotage of political accountability through attacks on instruments such as free and fair elections, checks and balances, etc. (Glasius, 2018); and (c) populism or ideologically flexible political rhetoric that juxtaposes the establishment

elites with the people (Müller, 2017). Illiberalism is fueled by populist majoritarian rhetoric, contributes to democratic backsliding, and is often hard to distinguish from outright authoritarianism, yet illiberalism is a distinct political practice and ideology. While hollowing out democratic institutions, illiberalism typically functions within a formally democratic framework and promotes a distinct ideology centered around traditional hierarchies and cultural hegemony (Laruelle, 2022). Illiberal strategies have become increasingly significant in understanding how political power is consolidated through ideological interventions, moving beyond the typical focus on political institutions.

Right-wing ideology is not always recognized as a key feature of illiberalism (Eklundh, 2024), yet our analysis demonstrates that illiberalism builds on shared ideological foundations, adapted to specific contexts. It exists in dialectical relation with liberalism—a political movement grounded in the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment—establishing itself through a critique and rejection of liberal values (e.g., pluralism, universalism, equality, individual autonomy). Instead, illiberalism centers on ethnonationalism, traditionalist conceptions of gender and sexuality, and strongman leadership (Laruelle, 2022, 2024; Smilova, 2021). Beyond merely challenging liberal values, illiberalism actively undermines the principles of political liberalism instituted to prevent excessive majoritarianism via the protection of minorities, checks and balances, and the like (Wagrandl, 2021). It is not merely a rejection of individual rights and freedoms—core tenets of liberalism (cf. Sajó & Uitz, 2021)—but rather emerges from liberalism’s internal contradictions and its failures to realize the declarative ideals of equality and full political participation (Kauth & King, 2020). Illiberal actors, relying on fearmongering and strongmen leadership style, deftly manipulate popular disenchantment with liberal policies and concentrate power in the executive branch (Weinman & Vormann, 2020).

The term illiberal democracy is widely used both in political (Boyle, 2016; Sata & Karolewski, 2023) and academic discourse (Kim, 2023; Wagrandl, 2021; Zakaria, 1997) to describe the transition from constrained liberal democracy to unrestrained but formally democratic governance. Nevertheless, illiberal democracy is criticized as conceptually flawed and insufficient to describe a multitude of neither fully democratic nor conventionally authoritarian “hybrid regimes” (Bogaards, 2009; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Merkel & Croissant, 2004; Møller, 2008; Ottaway, 2009; Schedler, 2006). Exploiting the inner inconsistencies of the liberal democracy framework, populist illiberal actors sway the entire political spectrum towards a new style of political practice (Curran, 2004), normalizing illiberal ideology. Illiberalization was initially perceived as an issue of democratizing countries, yet the rise of illiberalism is also prominent in longstanding democracies of the West (Esposito, 2019; Smilova, 2021; Vachudova, 2021).

In this article, we do not dwell on regime typologies, but discuss illiberalism as a specific political practice and ideology gaining ground across the globe. Focusing on illiberal cultural policy—a set of norms and strategies implemented by the government to regulate and promote specific cultural activities—our study illustrates the critical role of ideology and, thereby, the artistic and cultural sectors in advancing illiberal politics. Based on the Slovenian case, we propose a typology of illiberal cultural measures and their aims, which can be used to analyze illiberalizing processes across the globe (Section 5). A cultural policy aimed at national identity building, social control, and imposing right-wing ideological hegemony undermines the resilience of civil society (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). Though not all right-wing political actors are illiberal and not all left-wing actors liberal (Scheppele, 2018), illiberals often proudly identify as illiberal, conflate liberalism with the political left, and use the term liberal as a slur. This friction may be conceived as a culture war, successfully instrumentalized by illiberal actors to deepen social polarization and consolidate power (Hesová, 2021). Cultural policy becomes a

tool for suppressing opposition and amplifying ideologically conforming voices in a culture war setting. Thus, illiberal political actors weaponize culture to accelerate democratic backsliding.

Illiberal political actors act opportunistically, eschew accountability, and are thus prone to engage in high levels of corruption and cronyism, expressed not only in the misuse of public power and illicit financial gains but also in the widening economic inequalities and the impunity of the powerful (Goldstein & Drybread, 2022). Corruptive illiberal practices drain public resources, leading to public discontent (Shattuck, 2018), which in turn increases the reliance of illiberal actors on establishing ideological and cultural dominance to pacify the populace. Cultural policy is thus a central, albeit often overlooked dimension of illiberal consolidation of power. Through interventions in the cultural sphere, illiberal regimes aim to reshape collective memory, morality, and national identity (Hesová, 2021). This resonates with Anderson's (2006) concept of a nation as an "imagined community" constructed through shared narratives, primarily disseminated and consolidated via cultural outputs. The imaginary of the nation requires constant ideological reinforcement through everyday practices (Billig, 1995, 2017), observable in illiberal attempts to control cultural production. Arts and cultural sectors are critical arenas for both reinforcing and challenging the expansion of illiberal ideologies, and organizations like the Council of Europe (Whyatt, 2023) and Freemuse (Purser, 2022) observe growing political pressures on artistic freedom well beyond the East-Central European context.

Despite the importance of cultural policy, literature in the field remains scarce and limited. It nonetheless serves as a fruitful point of departure to explore the Slovenian case, as it allows for comparing different contexts and identifying crucial policy measures typified in our analysis. Similar to the results of our investigation of 14SiGov's policy, Polish and Hungarian illiberal governments have used public discourse, political appointments, clientelism, and selective financing to promote ethnonationalism, traditionalist values, and historic revisionism through artistic and cultural expression (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). The ideological takeover of the cultural sphere in Hungary was achieved through institutional and financial changes intended to transform cultural production by creating new, loyal cultural elites (Kristóf, 2017). In Poland, cultural institutions headed by illiberal-affiliated directors systematically propagate illiberal ideologies (Kubik, 2024). Memory politics stand out as a central pillar of illiberal cultural policy: In striving for hegemony and dominance, the Hungarian government used public space management and the rearrangement of statues to establish narratives about the country's 20th-century history and the greatness of the Hungarian nation (Eröss, 2022). Monument displacement without prior public discussion bred novel forms of civic artistic memory activism in Hungary. While these acts of resistance importantly challenged public discourse on historic traumas, their success is limited due to the extreme political polarization of society furthered by illiberal cultural policy (Deim, 2022).

Although academic literature mainly focuses on Poland and Hungary, the phenomenon is not limited to East-Central European democracies; similar illiberal interventions in cultural institutions are taking place in the West as well (e.g., Italy: de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2024; US: Bumiller, 2025). Our analysis focuses on the case of Slovenia, yet it does not conceptualize illiberal cultural policy merely as an East-Central European anomaly, but as a strategy increasingly implemented across the globe, and provides a transferable typology of illiberal cultural policy measures (Section 5).

2.2. Illiberalism and Cultural Policy in Independent Slovenia

To provide some context for our case study, this section outlines the political developments in independent Slovenia, emphasizing the rise of political illiberalism and the trends in Slovenian cultural policy. Like Poland and Hungary (Krastev, 2020), Slovenia was considered a “success story” of transition from socialism to a liberal democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the liberal democratic façade was obscuring structural issues that accelerated democratic backsliding, most obviously in the periods following the 2008 economic crisis and the 2020 Covid-19 crisis (Fink-Hafner, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates a relatively short but intense period of illiberalization during the term of 14SiGov; however, despite a slight improvement after the change of government in 2022, democratic indices remain below pre-pandemic levels. Once the rule of law and civil rights are compromised, it takes significant effort and political will to reinstate them. First, strategic political appointments and policy changes are difficult to uproot, ensuring that illiberal policies and ideology persist even when a nominally liberal government takes office. Second, the change of government does not automatically reverse pernicious illiberal trends. During the term of 14SiGov, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem; Coppedge et al., 2024) indices recorded dramatic drops in the rule of law and civil liberties, along with unprecedented levels of political corruption. The 15th Slovenian government did not ameliorate these trends but benefited from them by continuing the illiberal legacy on several fronts: adopting omnibus legislative packages, resorting to untransparent political appointments, cronyism, eschewing political accountability, etc.

During 14SiGov’s 2020–2022 term, V-Dem indices for the freedom of artistic and cultural expression experienced a sharp drop. At the time, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights issued a memorandum regarding the situation in Slovenia that warned about the deterioration of freedom of expression, listing concerns like hostility and polarization in public discourse, the rise of hate speech, intimidation of civil society actors, and political stigmatization of critical voices and NGOs (Council of

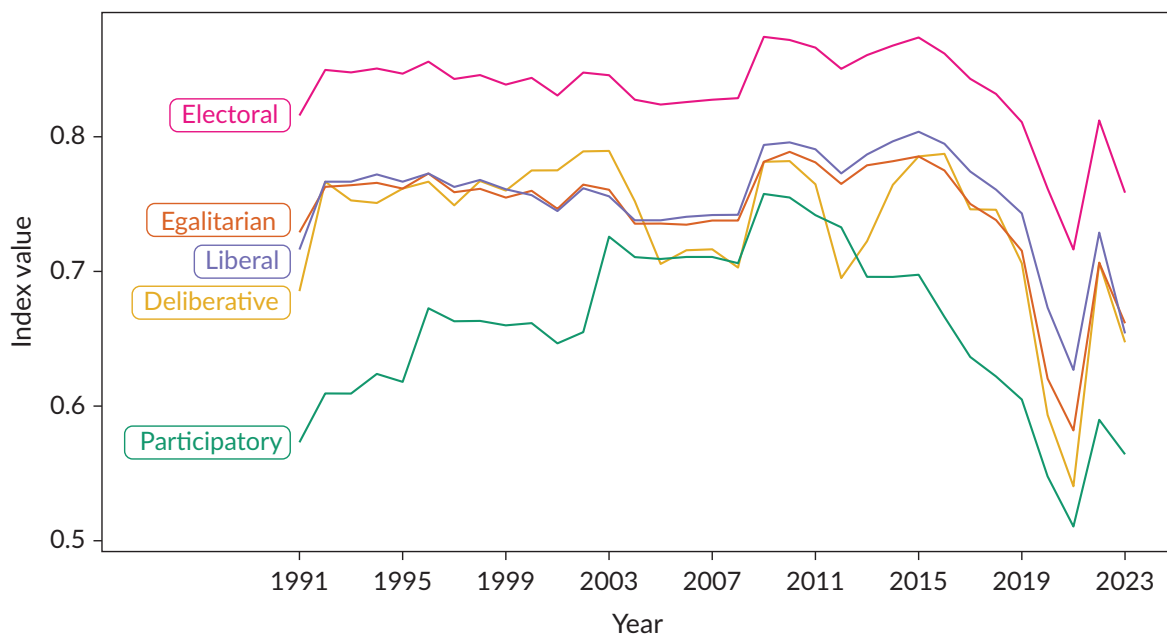


Figure 1. Values of five high-level democracy indices for Slovenia. Source: Based on V-Dem indices (Coppedge et al., 2024).

Europe, 2021). While the Commissioner mainly focused on the attacks on journalists and media institutions, cultural institutions and cultural workers also experienced a crackdown.

The 14SiGov coalition, with Prime Minister Janez Janša, was sworn in in 2020, following the mid-term resignation of liberal Prime Minister Marjan Šarec (see the timeline in Figure 2). 14SiGov was voted out of office in the February 2022 regular elections and replaced by a government led by Prime Minister Robert Golob. We use the abbreviation 14SiGov instead of referring to “Janša’s government,” as such simplification would only play into the illiberal fascination with strongman leaders. The 14SiGov coalition included the socially and fiscally conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS; 26 MPs), the New Slovenia Christian Democrats (NSi; 7 MPs), and a fiscally conservative one-term-wonder Konkretno (8–5 MPs). 14SiGov embraced values like Slovenian ethnonationalism, an anti-migration stance, the heteronormative nuclear family, adherence to traditional gender roles, hatred of “communism” broadly interpreted as any socially liberal or economically redistributive ideas, and a fiscally conservative stance, coinciding with Hendrikse’s (2018) “neo-illiberalism.” While the intensity of 14SiGov’s illiberal strategies stands out as extreme, such developments were not entirely unprecedented or unexpected.

Right-wing populism and hatemongering against marginalized groups have been gaining ground since the 1990s (Rizman, 1999) and the differentiation between liberal and illiberal Slovenian political parties has always been based on cultural issues (Pintarič, 2013). Slovenia diligently harmonized its legal order with the EU, but its rule of law institutions remained politicized and ridden with clientelism and corruption (Bugarič, 2015). Increasing neo-liberalization of the economic sphere, high levels of perceived corruption, and never-ending political affairs contributed to the steady decline of the citizens’ satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions (Kmet Zupančič, 2021). SDS party members and cronies have been involved in countless affairs and corruption scandals since the 1990s and deflected them as conspiracies (Hribar, 1996; Pajnik, 2019; Vidmar Horvat, 2021). This strategy included continuous attacks on the judiciary, media, intellectuals, and political opponents, as well as the dissemination of party propaganda through social media and private news organizations (Delić, 2020; Fink-Hafner, 2023; Pajnik, 2019). Zealous to enact the “Second Republic,” a program inspired by Orbán’s self-proclaimed illiberal democracy (Fink-Hafner, 2024), 14SiGov seized the opportunity presented by a public health emergency to implement its vision of the Slovenian state, society, and culture.

While political appointments in state-owned companies and state institutions are habitual in Slovenian politics regardless of ideological positioning, the political class largely neglected the arts and culture until 2020. A private cultural sector hardly exists in Slovenia, and the state primarily funds the cultural sphere (Murovec et al., 2022). Since the 1990s, state-run cultural institutions and freelance cultural workers have had to adapt to neo-liberalization and meager funding (Grafenauer, 2021). The directors of major state cultural institutions have experienced pressures from politicians of all orientations, and political appointments in cultural institutions have occurred, yet an attempt at a complete ideological takeover of cultural institutions in 2020–2022 represents an unprecedented level of political interference (Badovinac, 2021; Grafenauer, 2021). Illiberal cultural policy, in concert with the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on public gatherings, further deteriorated cultural workers’ financial stability and confidence in the state (Matjaž et al., 2020). In 2021, over half of cultural workers were considering leaving the cultural sector, and the majority believed that 14SiGov was using the pandemic to establish authoritarian governance (Matjaž et al., 2021). They were frustrated that cultural institutions were closed longer than other sectors of the economy

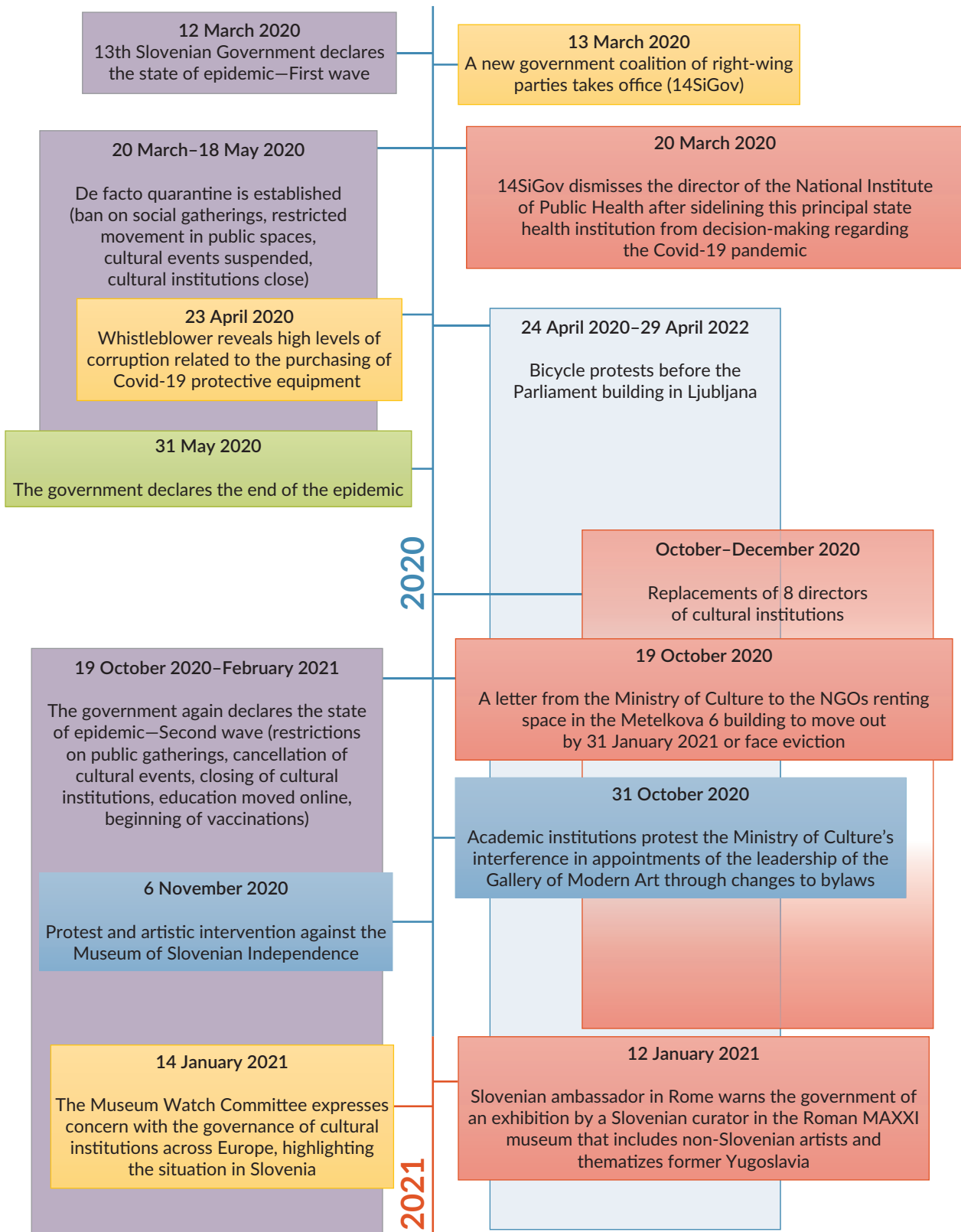


Figure 2. Timeline of significant events related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the political situation, and cultural interventions in Slovenia (2020–2022).

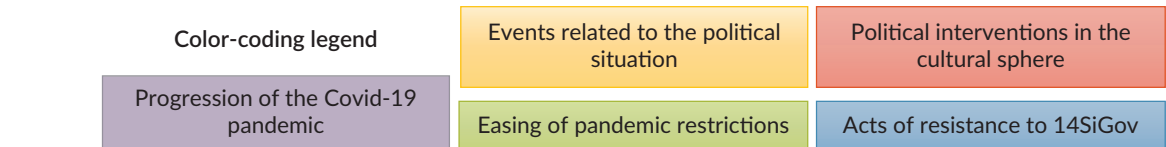
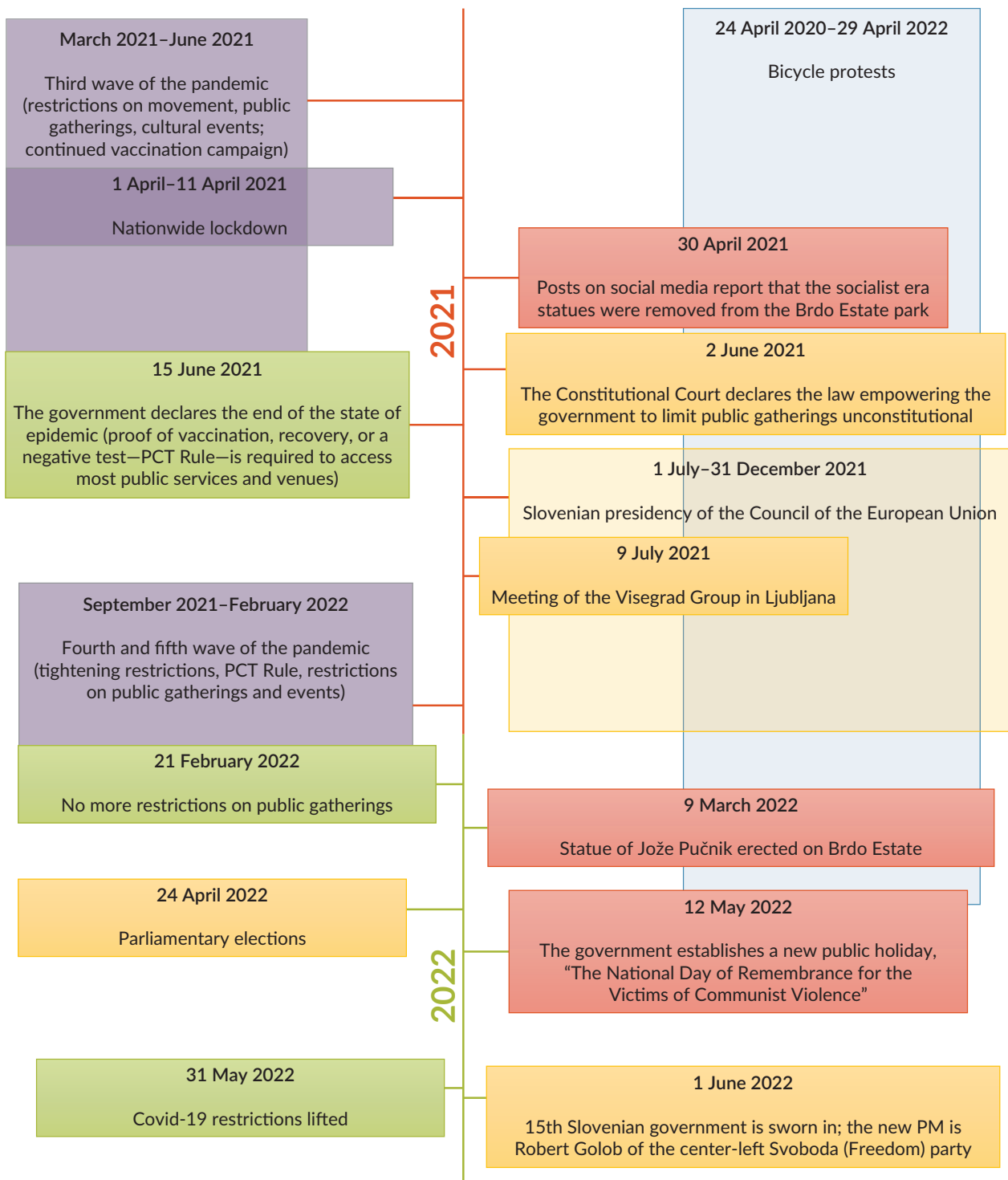


Figure 2. (Cont.) Timeline of significant events related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the political situation, and cultural interventions in Slovenia (2020–2022).

during the pandemic and deemed the state aid inadequate (Uršič, 2021). Many believed that 14SiGov either did not understand or was intentionally trying to destroy the cultural sphere (Matjaž et al., 2021).

To provide more context for our case study of illiberal suppression of the cultural sphere in Slovenia, we constructed a timeline highlighting key events that illustrate the developments in the Slovenian cultural sphere and politics between 2020 and 2022. The timeline is based on the analysis of media reporting, official documents related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia, and interviews with figures from the cultural sector. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the 14SiGov term nearly perfectly coincided with the timeframe of the Covid-19 pandemic.

During 2020–2022, the harshest restrictions on movement, public gatherings, and cultural events overlapped with overt political interventions in the cultural sphere. Illiberal cultural policy measures were strategically launched when the ability of the public to organize and protest was severely limited. Despite this, Slovenian citizens persisted, and the “Friday Bicycle Protests” against the government occurred weekly from April 2020 to April 2022, with protesters finding innovative ways to mobilize while complying with health measures (Fidler et al., 2023). Furthermore, Slovenia’s presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2021 provided 14SiGov with an additional platform to reshape Slovenia’s national image, both domestically and internationally. These efforts coincided with intensified cultural suppression, further promoting a nationalist narrative and disparaging Slovenia’s socialist past while glorifying its independence and ancient statehood.

3. Methodology: An Embedded Case Study of Illiberal Cultural Policies in Slovenia

This study employs an embedded single-case study design (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2009, 2012) to analyze Slovenia’s illiberal cultural policies between 2020 and 2022. This method is particularly suitable for capturing the complexities of political and ideological interventions in the cultural sphere, providing in-depth analysis while allowing for broader theory-building and generalization (Gerring, 2016; Gerring & Cojocar, 2016; Yin, 2012; Zittoun, 2017; Zittoun et al., 2023). The embedded case study approach is particularly well-suited for examining dynamic and multi-layered political interventions, as it facilitates the identification of mechanisms across interrelated subunits while preserving the depth of single-case research (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2012). Given the study’s aim to trace multiple forms of political intervention in the cultural sphere, this design allows for systematic scrutiny of how various cultural policy measures interact within a broader ideological project. While the main unit of analysis is Slovenian cultural governance under 14SiGov, multiple subunits—specific illiberal interventions—are examined to determine how they function as coordinated elements within a broader ideological strategy. An embedded framework enables analytical coherence across different policy tools and events, ensuring that individual interventions are not viewed in isolation but as part of a strategic and cumulative effort to reshape governance (Yin, 2009, 2012).

Slovenia provides a compelling case for gleaning insights into the role of cultural policy in democratic backsliding, particularly because it has been regarded as a stable liberal democracy rather than an archetypal illiberal regime, making the rapid and overt shift in cultural policy under 14SiGov all the more conspicuous. While much of the literature on illiberalism and cultural governance focuses on Hungary and Poland, where illiberal regimes have been more entrenched (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021; Kristóf, 2017; Kubik, 2024), Slovenia could be read as an unlikely case of radical cultural policy shifts (Gerring & Cojocar, 2016), yet as

we demonstrate, the perceived stability of liberalism is much more tenuous and contingent. Thus, it can be conceptualized as an influential case (Eckstein, 1975; Gerring, 2016), illustrating how cultural governance contributes to broader patterns of democratic erosion. This framing situates Slovenia within a larger exploration of cultural policy as a tool for illiberal consolidation, demonstrating that such interventions are not limited to post-communist authoritarian regimes but can manifest in diverse political environments (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). Rather than treating Slovenia as an isolated example, it provides a model for understanding how illiberal actors can instrumentalize cultural governance in other democracies.

3.1. *Embedded Case Study Design*

Within this single-case framework, the study employs an embedded design, analyzing multiple subunits of analysis—specific illiberal interventions in cultural policy. These subunits allow for a systematic examination of mechanisms through which cultural policy is weaponized to achieve ideological goals. The selection criteria for the interventions were:

1. **Salience:** The events garnered significant attention from the media and civil society in Slovenia and internationally.
2. **Diversity of strategies:** The interventions in the cultural sphere exemplify a range of cultural policy measures employed by illiberal actors to suppress dissenting voices while amplifying government-aligned narratives.
3. **Short-term impact:** These measures extended beyond the cultural sector, provoking immediate responses from political institutions, civil society organizations, and the broader public.
4. **Long-term impact:** The consequences of illiberal cultural policy measures persist beyond the 14SiGov term, contributing to structural shifts in governance and Slovenia's ideological landscape.

The subunits analyzed include: (a) public discourse manipulation, such as government-led smear campaigns against progressive cultural workers (Pajnik, 2019; Simonič, 2019); (b) financial coercion, exemplified by the attempted eviction of artists and NGOs from Metelkova 6 (Vladisavljevic, 2020); (c) politicized institutional restructuring, including the appointment of ideologically aligned directors in cultural institutions (Badovinac, 2021; International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, 2021); (d) symbolic interventions in public space, such as the removal of socialist-era statues at Brdo Estate (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, 2021); (e) establishing new cultural institutions, including the Museum of Slovenian Independence (Specialists in Central and Southeast Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020; Združenje Sever, 2020); and (f) memory politics and national mythology, including the promotion of nationalist symbolism (Kovačič, 2024).

This embedded approach enables identifying patterns across illiberal strategies, their comparative analysis, and developing a typology that reveals their interconnected nature. By situating these interventions within a unified analytical framework, the study highlights how they function collectively to reshape governance structures while maintaining the depth and contextual sensitivity essential for single-case research (Elman, 2005; Gerring, 2016; Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2012).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed a multi-source data collection strategy that integrated various forms of documentary and media materials. First, official government documents, including parliamentary debates and decrees, provided insights into the formal mechanisms of cultural policy interventions. Second, we drew on media reporting from a range of Slovenian mainstream outlets, including RTV Slovenia, 24ur, Delo, and Dnevnik, as well as more ideologically aligned platforms such as the liberal Mladina and Necenzurirano and the illiberal Družina and Nova24. Third, public statements, petitions, and open letters from cultural workers and civil society organizations resisting illiberal policies offer a perspective on grassroots opposition and its impact (e.g., Mirovni inštitut, 2020; Specialists in Central and Southeast Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020). Finally, international reports on artistic freedom and cultural governance, such as those by the Council of Europe (2021) and Freemuse (Purser, 2022), contextualize Slovenia's case within broader European trends.

Each subunit of analysis is examined through key analytical dimensions: the targets of suppression, the strategies employed, which values and publics were silenced and which promoted, the intended and actual effects, and the forms of resistance they provoked. This framework ensures consistency and comparability, highlighting how illiberal cultural policy measures systematically silence critical voices while amplifying state-aligned ideological narratives. The findings are integrated into a typology of illiberal cultural policy measures (Table 1), which facilitates comparative studies by offering a framework for understanding how cultural governance can be weaponized in diverse contexts. Overall, this approach contributes to a multi-level understanding of the connections between disparate events and broader illiberal trends (Kubik, 2024; Laruelle, 2022), while also highlighting the potential for resistance, illustrating the dynamic interplay between suppressive governance and democratic resilience (Arslanalp & Erkmén, 2020; Fidler et al., 2023; Jafarova & Buckner, 2024).

4. Analysis of Illiberal Cultural Policy Measures

In this section, we present analyses of key events that illustrate different tactics used by 14SiGov to achieve its twofold aim: to silence critical voices in the cultural sphere and to consolidate the desired narratives. The selected interventions represent the subunits of the case study exploring the suppression of government-unaligned and the promotion of government-aligned narratives in Slovenian cultural policy.

4.1. Public Discourse

Various forms of artistic expression and folklore have historically served as political anchors of Slovenian collective identity (Kočevar, 2022; Tratnik, 2022; Urbanc et al., 2020). Janša's disdain for socially progressive artists and cultural workers was already apparent in the 1990s: He reproofed them for failing to appreciate Slovenian independence, engaging in artistic elitism, celebrating socialist ideology, and disregarding the Catholic Church (Simonič, 2019). When Janša was prime minister, he excluded formally trained artists and members of the Slovenian partisan resistance from their traditional participation in the preparations of official state celebrations; when in the opposition, he organized alternative statehood celebrations (Simonič, 2019).

The politicization of the Slovenian cultural holiday Prešeren Day provides a case in point. On Prešeren Day, Slovenian art and cultural heritage are celebrated, and the Prešeren Awards, the most prestigious national awards in Slovenia, are presented for outstanding achievements in arts and culture. Prešeren Day generates a fair amount of political scandals, often connected to the personae and work of the Prešeren Award recipients. In 2018, multimedia artist Maja Smrekar and dramatist Simona Semenič were among the recipients. Janša, at the time the self-declared opposition leader, posted images of their performances (one depicting Semenič wrapped in a Slovenian flag with the coat of arms cut out to reveal her pregnant belly, and another Smrekar's performance of nursing a dog) on social media. The images were juxtaposed with images of factory workers, a tactic also used by the Soviets (Groys, 1994), and accompanied by text decrying the misuse of working people's money on degenerate leftist art that mocks the Slovenian state and family (Pirc, 2018), a tactic previously used by the Nazi regime to smear modernist art (Grasskamp, 1994). Janša's post was followed by an intense public backlash, online troll activism, and incendiary articles in SDS-aligned media ("Nagrajenki Prešernovega sklada," 2018).

On Prešeren Day 2021, roughly a year into 14SiGov's term and the pandemic, the prime minister's 2021 holiday address rebuked cultural workers for criticizing the government. According to Janša, culture should assume a "state-affirming stance" and "cheer Slovenians on" ("Janša v poslanici," 2021). On Prešeren Day 2022, an SDS member rejoiced at the fact that 14SiGov "normalized" the Prešeren Awards by recognizing "real artists," reminding the readers of past degeneracy (Jeraj, 2022). Janša's formal address on Prešeren Day 2022 stressed the importance of culture for the Slovenian nation and state, boasting about an unprecedented budget for culture in 2021 which included ambitious projects like the new Museum of Slovenian Independence discussed below (Janša, 2022).

Once 14SiGov and its narrative were somewhat consolidated, verbal attacks on social media, government-affiliated media, and political speeches were supplemented by official political communication. The Slovenian ambassador in Rome took issue with a 2021 exhibition, *Bigger Than Myself/Heroic Voices* from Former Yugoslavia, organized by the Roman MAXXI museum and the Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana. In a formal dispatch, the ambassador problematized the topic of the exhibition and the inclusion of artists from former Yugoslavia instead of promoting Slovenia and its artists, especially in the year of the 30th anniversary of Slovenia's independence and Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union (Šašek, 2021). Several Slovenian artists signed a statement supporting the curator and the featured artists, concerned that the dispatch would lead to the cancellation of the exhibition ("Umetnice in umetniki," 2021). The Left Party's demand to recall the ambassador was met with the government's response that the ambassador's concerns were legitimate and his performance exemplary ("Vlada na poziv," 2021). The exhibition in question finally took place, but the surrounding political scandal illustrates the ideological underpinnings of 14SiGov's cultural policy and its prioritization of nationalist narratives along with the distancing from Slovenia's socialist past and ties with other nations of former Yugoslavia.

4.2. Financial Pressures

Financial pressures on cultural workers are an effective tool for silencing critique and fostering self-censorship. A case in point is the threat of eviction of 18 artistic, cultural, and human rights NGOs at the height of the pandemic, one of many funding cuts and limitations of the nongovernmental sector in the analyzed period ("Slovenia: Government uses the Covid-19 pandemic," 2020). In late October 2020, the art

studios, library, and NGOs active in the Metelkova 6 building owned by the Ministry of Culture were informed they should leave the space by 31 January 2021 (“Pet ur razpravljali,” 2020). The government cited that the building—used rent-free by artists and NGOs since 1997—needs renovation before it can be reallocated to the Slovenian Museum of Natural History (Vrečar, 2020). SDS members have long publicly expressed disdain for the NGO and cultural sector as a waste of public funds, and Janša has declared war against “Soros-funded” NGOs (“Janša: Najprej Slovenija,” 2018). Interpretations that the eviction was politically motivated were based on the government’s accusations that Metelkova 6 users were involved in the organization of the weekly bicycle protests against the government (see Figure 2), though they denied direct involvement (Vladisavljevic, 2020).

The threat of eviction of Metelkova 6 was met with heated parliamentary debate, as renovations were only planned in 2023 and the notice period was extremely short (“Pet ur razpravljali,” 2020). Furthermore, the Slovenian Ombudsman of Human Rights supported the Metelkova 6 community and its role in a democratic society, urging the government to help rather than illegally restrict civil society and cultural organizations and to respect the freedom of association and expression (“Varuh ministrstvo za kulturo pozval,” 2020). Metelkova 6 users stressed the role of civil society in Slovenia’s independence process and received support from hundreds of NGOs and thousands of petition signatories (Vladisavljevic, 2020). In an open letter to the minister of culture and the government, Metelkova 6 users refused to leave. They decried a politically motivated crackdown on democracy and artistic freedom, condemning the increasing smear campaigns by political actors (Mirovni inštitut, 2020). The Ministry of Culture began legal procedures to evict them, but all court proceedings were halted in 2022, soon after a new government was sworn in (“Nevladne organizacije ostajajo,” 2022).

An alleged corruption scandal can also illustrate financial pressures and reallocations of funds favoring civil society organizations aligned with illiberal values. The 2021 tender for funding NGOs to assist vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic resulted in awarding grants to several NGOs related to the Catholic Church, most controversially to Zavod Iskreni—an NGO promoting the traditional family and rejecting homosexuality, contraception, abortion, and mandatory vaccinations (Cirman et al., 2021a, 2021b). The responsible minister, Janez Cigler Kralj (NSi party), who is also one of the founders of Zavod Iskreni, appointed members from his immediate team to the tender committee and approved their decision (“Tarča: Je financiranje,” 2021). The generous funding of Zavod Iskreni, favored even over less radical church-affiliated humanitarian NGOs, caused a scandal, yet the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption of the Republic of Slovenia detected no illegality and merely identified significant corruption risks (“KPK pri podelitvi,” 2021).

4.3. Political Appointments in Cultural Institutions

Because Slovenian cultural policy has been neglected for decades, cultural institutions entered the Covid-19 crisis vulnerable to various forms of political interference (Grafenauer, 2021; Pureber, 2021). In 2020, the government appointed eight new directors of major cultural institutions. The directors of the Slovenian Book Agency, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, National Museum of Slovenia, Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana, National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia, Museum of Architecture and Design, and Slovenian Cinematheque were swiftly replaced (Figure 2). The new appointments were criticized extensively for favoring political alliances over professional competence (Grafenauer, 2021). The changes of directors under the guise of pluralizing the purportedly left-leaning cultural scene were interpreted by some as Janša’s revenge for the

role cultural workers played in the revolt against his previous government in 2012 (Pureber, 2021); however, less ideological forms of political corruption and cronyism were also at play.

The minister of culture, Vasko Simoniti (SDS party), used several tactics to replace the existing directors with his preferred candidates: (a) repeating tenders to allow preferred candidates to apply; (b) changing the bylaws of several cultural institutions to lower the required education and work experience of their directors; (c) changing the functioning of the ministry expert groups (intended to protect the selection process from political interference); (d) attempting to influence the expert groups by letting them know which candidate is preferred; (e) personally overruling the expert groups' decisions when the preferred candidate was not selected; and (f) using harsh and degrading language when challenged by journalists (Badovinac, 2021; Marovt, 2020; Pureber, 2021).

To no avail, the changes of directors were challenged by public intellectuals, academics, artists, employees of cultural institutions, and the engaged public. Numerous letters of support for the replaced directors, petitions, and protest actions occurred throughout 2020 and 2021. The intensity of Slovenian culture wars was reported in major international news organizations, which rarely spotlight Slovenian affairs (Marshall, 2021). An open letter addressed to Janša and his European People's Party group, urging against the stifling of academic and cultural freedom in Slovenia, was signed by 175 academics and cultural workers from various notable institutions in Europe, the US, and beyond (Specialists in Central and Southeast Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020). The signatories drew parallels with similar attacks on the cultural sphere in Poland, Hungary, and Russia, stressing the Slovenian government's breaches of the International Council of Museums' Code of Ethics. Concern was also expressed by the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, which warned of the spreading "illiberal political model" (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, 2021). This Committee declared the appointments of unqualified and unprofessional individuals to key positions in cultural institutions a systemic issue, illustrating the point by referring to the 2020 events in Slovenia.

4.4. Public Space Management

In 2021, the controversially appointed new director of the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia organized the removal of socialist-era statues from Brdo Estate, the venue for the meetings of the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2021 (Figure 2). The national heritage status sculptures were part of a memorial park representing art from the late 1940s depicting partisan resistance against Nazi-Fascist occupation during the Second World War (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, 2021). The relocation of the statues caused much controversy, as it occurred unannounced and without expert consultation. Slovenian media reported speculations about attempts to erase the socialist past in the wake of the Council of the European Union presidency, but the official response was that the statues were being restored (Volk, 2021).

However, there was no proof of conservatory works, and experts in the field responded with demands for explanation and return of the statues, stressing the breach of cultural heritage protection laws (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, 2021). After the removal of socialist art, a new statue of Jože Pučnik, Janša's predecessor as the president of the SDS party, was erected in Brdo Estate ("Na Brdu pri," 2022). Pučnik's quote, "Yugoslavia is gone; it's about Slovenia now," is engraved on the base of the new statue, reinforcing the idea that Slovenian

independence is a crucial event that merits remembrance. In 2022, the new government took the reins and began to plan the return of the socialist statues to Brdo Estate. In 2024, the return of the statues was still planned (Vrečko, 2024).

4.5. *New Cultural Institutions*

In 2021, the government established a new Museum of Slovenian Independence, interpreted by some as an attempt to develop a particular myth of Slovenian independence that lionizes the role of Janša and his allies while downplaying the role of civil society. The decision was controversial since the state budget presented in 2020 revealed that a new museum was planned, and diverse organizations of the Slovenian War of Independence veterans protested the decision (Združenje Sever, 2020). The veterans urged the government to appoint an expert group of curators and protested against political actors' appropriation of Slovenian independence. The planned museum was also questioned by a public letter signed by 175 international academics as an attempt to control an entire scholarly field, indicating a possible propaganda institution (Specialists in Central and South East Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020).

When the new museum was established, it had neither a collection nor a permanent exhibition space. The government decided that the 4 million euro project would eventually be situated in the building of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, despite the lack of space the Archives have been lamenting for years ("Sprejet sklep o ustanovitvi Muzeja," 2021). The avalanche of critiques problematized the fact that three state museums already covered the independence process and that contemporary history experts were excluded from designing the project (Rak, 2021). Furthermore, many historians and museum professionals expressed concerns about the ideological agenda, pointing towards the Museum of Slovenian Independence's bylaws, which required lower education and experience for the museum's director than for the director's assistant, indicating a possible political appointment ("Sprejet sklep o ustanovitvi Muzeja," 2021). The veterans expressed their outrage once again after the museum opened, demanding that the independence process be represented objectively and contextualized as a part of Slovenia's 20th-century history (Združenje Sever, 2022).

With the change of government in 2022, the Museum of Slovenian Independence was merged with the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia. The 15th Slovenian government justified the merger with a more transparent and expert-based management of the institution, which triggered counter-protests: Many notable right-wing political personalities protested the ideologically motivated move and a rewriting of history (Porenta, 2023). The saga around the Museum of Slovenian Independence illustrates that memory and cultural politics are not exclusively illiberal undertakings but an ongoing dialectical struggle through which the self-identified liberal and illiberal camps establish themselves and communicate with their voters.

A very similar dynamic can be observed in the case of a new national holiday, the National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Communist Violence, decreed without a preceding public debate during the final month of 14SiGov's term ("Vlada 17. maj," 2022). On the eve of the holiday in 2023, the 15th Slovenian government abolished the holiday with an explanation that it was only instituted to sow divisions, which provoked protest actions and public outrage ("Vlada ukinila dan," 2023). The controversy around the hastily instituted and equally hastily abolished holiday illustrates the mutual dependence of the self-styled illiberal

and liberal political actors and their reliance on historical trauma to mobilize their voting base. While illiberal actors are the first to push, their liberal successors are left in a difficult predicament: Either consent to the continued ideological influence of the new institutions or employ a similar aggressive cultural policy that further intensifies the culture wars.

4.6. Political Mythology

Illiberal actors are not interested only in influencing recent historical narratives but also in mythologizing the glorious ancient history of the Slovenian nation. 14SiGov caused a scandal by including a set of cufflinks with a Carantanian Panther symbol among the gifts for the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union (Krajnc, 2021). The Carantanian Panther is a disputed symbol representing the 8th-century Slavic state of Carantania used by Slovenian nationalist far-right groups (Bajt, 2015). The use of the emblem triggered a protest from historians, archaeologists, and ethnologists who warned that the symbol of a black panther emerged in the 1980s and is not present in historical records (Krajnc, 2021).

Janša is fond of the symbol and had previously caused a stir for wearing a Carantanian Panther badge to EU meetings (“Karantanski panter na Janševem suknjiču,” 2008). The Carantanian Panther also features on the cover of Janša’s 2014 historical fiction novel written during his imprisonment for corruption during a legal process that ended due to the statute of limitation. The book frames Carantania as a re-establishment of an even more ancient 3rd-century-BC Kingdom of Noricum, which Janša proposes as the origin of Slovenian statehood (Žužek, 2014). Janša framed his novel as a proposal to rethink the origin of Slovenians, who are not, according to Janša, genetically related to other South Slavic nations (Žužek, 2014). The Carantanian Panther thus represents a myth of the ancient lost Slovenian state and its second coming with the independence of Slovenia.

5. Typology of Illiberal Cultural Policy Measures

The embedded case study of illiberal cultural governance in Slovenia during 2020–2022 reveals a host of diverse policy measures that work in concert to transform the national cultural script. We identified and classified crucial illiberal strategies in order to make the intentional multilevel weaponization of cultural policy explicit and provide a framework for studying the broader implications of cultural suppression in democratic backsliding (Table 1). While our case study analyzes specific events, the patterns observed and typified facilitate comparative analysis with developments in other contexts marked by illiberal transformations. Our findings reveal similarities to the studied instances of illiberal cultural governance in Poland and Hungary (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021; Deim, 2022; Eröss, 2022; Kristóf, 2017; Kubik, 2024) and offer a framework for a holistic observation of the effects of a multitude of illiberal cultural measures, which span from less to more formal interventions in the fields of memory politics, promotion of traditional and nationalistic values, and entrenchment of illiberal cultural and political elites. Our typology presents a useful analytical tool for understanding how illiberal regimes systematically target the cultural sector to silence dissenting voices while amplifying ideologically compliant narratives.

Table 1. Typology of illiberal cultural policy measures.

Cultural policy measure	Events	Targets	Strategies	Silencing	Promoting	Resistance	Effects
Public discourse	Public attacks on artists and curators (Prešeren Day, MAXXI exhibition)	Socially and politically engaged cultural workers Non-Slovenian artists	Smear campaigns Inciting public backlash in traditional and social media Use of official state communication channels	Critique of nationalism, traditional family structures, gender roles Interpretation of Slovenia's present as linked to ex-Yugoslavia and socialism	State-affirming art Nationalism Art and artists promoting traditional values	Media outrage Letters of support from artists and academics The Left Party demands the recall of the ambassador in Rome	Lowering standards of public expression Hateful rhetoric online Resentment towards the cultural sector as parasitic on taxpayers
Financial pressure	Threat of eviction (Metelkova 6) Reallocation of public funding (Zavod Iskreni)	Progressive NGOs, artists, and cultural workers	Demand relocation under the guise of renovation and more worthwhile use of the property Redirecting funds to preferred NGOs	Socially and politically disruptive NGOs and cultural workers	NGOs promoting traditional values	Public statements by intellectuals and leftist politicians Letters of support from artists and academics Petitions	Diverting NGOs and cultural workers from their work to to fight for the preservation of their organizations and their own financial security
Political appointments	Change of (often internationally acclaimed) directors of major cultural institutions	Directors of state cultural institutions	Tender manipulation Changing institutional bylaws Interference with, attempting to influence, and overruling expert groups Degrading public discourse	Perceived allegiance to progressive values Perceived allegiance to political rivals Interpretation of historical events and featuring artists that clash with the government's vision	Loyal cultural elites Nationalist and traditionalist cultural production Political corruption and cronyism	Letters of support Petitions Media outrage Protest actions Criticism from experts, international institutions, and cultural associations	Permanent changes to cultural governance

Table 1. (Cont.) Typology of illiberal cultural policy measures.

Cultural policy measure	Events	Targets	Strategies	Silencing	Promoting	Resistance	Effects
Public space management	Removing and erecting statues (Brdo Estate)	Public commemoration of partisan resistance	Removing statues Erecting statues	Identification with the values of partisan resistance and the socialist regime in parts of the population Narratives conceiving partisan resistance and the Slovenian independence process as nonexclusive	Celebration of the (government's interpretation of) Slovenian independence movement and its key actors Narratives juxtaposing Slovenian independence and democracy with the partisan resistance movement	Letters of protest from academics Media outrage Social media outrage	Permanent changes in public space Plan to reinstate statues by the new, 15th government coalition
New cultural institutions	Museum of Slovenian Independence National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Communist Violence	Perceived insufficient emphasis and errant interpretation of Slovenian independence National holidays celebrating partisan resistance	Hasty establishment of new cultural intuitions Redirecting public funding to institutions promoting a preferred historical narrative	Celebration of partisan resistance and socialist Yugoslavia	Decontextualized and politically controlled interpretation of Slovenian independence Human rights violations in former Yugoslavia	Protest actions Artistic intervention Letters of protest from Slovenian independence veteran organizations	Outrage and controversy Intensification of culture wars 15th Slovenian government abolished both analyzed institutions
Political mythology	Carantanian Panther	Lack of national pride	Use of historically dubious symbols in national and international discourse	Idea that Slovenian people are culturally and genetically related to other South Slavs	Scientifically dubious theories about Slovenian statehood Slovenian nation as ancient and unique	Media outrage Expert outrage	Normalization of historically questionable symbols used by nationalist far-right organizations

6. Discussion

Analysis of 14SiGov's cultural policy fleshes out an important yet often overlooked dimension of illiberal strategies to permanently alter state institutions and society. The main insights of our analysis discussed in this section are: (a) crises present an opportune situation for the acceleration and consolidation of illiberal regimes; (b) illiberal cultural policy consists of a variety of measures that range from informal practices to legislative changes; (c) illiberal cultural policy permanently impacts the cultural sphere and the governance style of nominally liberal political actors; and (d) art and culture provide crucial forums for political imagination and practice. The autonomy of the cultural sphere and the freedom of artistic expression are crucial in challenging democratic backsliding and exploring novel models of societal organization.

The unprecedented attempt to radically redefine the Slovenian cultural narrative analyzed in this article occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. 14SiGov managed the pandemic through unlawful decrees and abused the public health emergency to erode the separation of powers and checks and balances (Kovačič, 2024), as was eventually confirmed by several rulings of the Slovenian Constitutional Court (Šugman Stubbs, 2024). During the most intense pandemic periods, movement and gatherings were severely limited or prohibited, and most businesses and institutions were physically closed. Illiberal cultural policy measures were most intensely deployed during severe pandemic restrictions, which impeded protest actions and organizing. The loss of income due to Covid-19 preventive measures significantly affected cultural workers, who became increasingly dependent on state financial aid and thus liable to self-censorship. Nevertheless, civil society and the cultural sector vocally resisted attempts at political takeover and received much public support in Slovenia and abroad. Advocacy for the autonomy of the cultural sphere and critique of illiberal measures were expressed through open letters, petitions, memorandums, creative forms of protest, and provocative public art (Grafenauer & Tepina, 2022). While civil society proved crucial in the eventual fall of 14SiGov, its illiberal cultural policy bears permanent consequences for Slovenian society and politics.

Illiberal cultural policy simultaneously targets the narratives produced by cultural institutions and the broader cultural milieu in order to radicalize public discourse and entrench traditional and ethnonationalist values. Based on an embedded case study of key events (Section 4), we constructed a typology of cultural policy measures used to achieve illiberal goals (Section 5): incendiary public discourse, financial pressures, political appointments, public space management, new cultural institutions, and political mythology. These measures are not mutually exclusive but often work in concert. For example, defunding cultural workers might be legitimized through smear campaigns, or political mythology used to justify the founding of new cultural institutions. Illiberal cultural policy measures encompass a broad spectrum of strategies ranging from the less official measures that illiberal actors implement to polarize and transform public opinion even when in opposition (e.g., derogatory public discourse), to more official measures available to illiberal governments (e.g., political appointments). Working across several registers, illiberal cultural policy measures contribute to the likelihood of self-censorship and permanent changes in cultural narratives, public perceptions of the cultural sphere, and cultural governance in general. Deployment of illiberal cultural policy deepens societal polarization and conflict with lasting effects: Redirecting cultural narratives shrinks the space for legitimate democratic critique of the government.

The Slovenian cultural and academic spheres loudly protested 14SiGov's cultural governance and aligned with the nominally liberal political actors to avoid another illiberal term. Nevertheless, the change in government

did not restore the pre-pandemic status quo. First, the effects of illiberal measures persisted regardless of the new government's attempts to undo them. Changes to public perceptions, public spaces, narratives of cultural institutions, etc., are difficult to uproot. Second, as the Slovenian liberal and illiberal camps both embrace the neo-liberal political economy, culture wars are instrumental to their differentiation. Both camps exploit social issues like gender, sexuality, migration, and historical trauma to mobilize their intended voters. Our analysis shows that memory politics regarding the Slovenian independence process and 20th-century history stand out as crucial: Slovenian liberal actors align with the partisan resistance against Nazi-Fascism, while their illiberal counterparts concentrate on highlighting the violence of partisan forces and decrying the human rights violations in former Yugoslavia. Our analysis observes that liberal parties quickly adopted the measures of their illiberal predecessors to reinstate their preferred version of history and the cultural management that supports it. The liberal continuation of illiberal cultural policy is mainly reactive, attempting to “undo” the effects of illiberal governance. This shows that illiberal actors are effectively running the show, illiberalizing politics and transforming liberalism through, among other, the successful normalization of state interference in the cultural sphere. Once certain forms of interventions in the cultural sector are established as acceptable, the recovery to previous levels of autonomy of the cultural sphere becomes extremely difficult.

The use of illiberal measures by liberal actors brings us to the final point of our analysis. Illiberalism is not an antithesis of liberalism but its ever-present bastard child. Inner contradictions have always plagued liberalism: Liberal narratives of equality were consistently complicated by arbitrary exclusions of entire social groups, for example, women and people of color, from political participation (Čufar, 2023; Kauth & King, 2020). In this sense, illiberalism is a return to the origins, not an unthinkable perversion of classical liberalism. Our analysis shows that illiberalism is exceptionally successful at transforming established political practices, building on preexisting cracks in the workings of liberal democracy such as the normalization of political corruption and clientelism. While many ideals connected with the liberal democratic model, like pluralism, individual rights and freedoms, protection of minorities, limitation of the executive power, political accountability, etc., are worth fighting for, we might do well to explore alternatives to the liberal/illiberal model and create a space for political imagination that goes beyond merely conserving the eroding liberal status quo. Art and culture are crucial in this process, as they provide the space in which political communities can criticize, debate, explore, imagine, and experiment with various ideas and approaches to collective pasts, presents, and futures (Duncombe, 2007; Hawlina et al., 2020). If the cultural sphere is transformed into a machinery that serves the interests and ideologies of political actors, an important forum for public deliberation and activation is lost. It is thus imperative to pay attention to the intentional hollowing of the autonomy of the cultural sphere and illiberal threats to artistic freedom observed in Slovenia and beyond.

7. Conclusions

The case study of the weaponization of cultural policy by Slovenian illiberal political actors highlights the critical role of art and culture in consolidating illiberal ideology. Our analysis identified the strategies of illiberal cultural policy that can be observed well beyond the studied context of Slovenia. Furthermore, illiberal cultural policy is not limited to the “new” post-communist democracies, but is alarmingly obvious even in the self-identified beacon and global exporter of liberal democracy, the US. With the onset of the new administration in 2025, illiberal cultural policy measures corresponding to our typology may be observed in the US, signaling a galvanization of the illiberal movement in democracies across the globe. While an analysis of the ongoing events in the US is well beyond the scope of this article, the typology of

illiberal cultural policy measures based on our case study demonstrates that political actors recognize art and culture's enormous potential for achieving political goals and underscores the crucial role of ideology in the phenomenon of illiberalism. Illiberal ideology, forged through a backlash to socially progressive ideas associated with liberalism, is centered around a construct of traditional social values and hierarchies, ethnonationalism, and majoritarianism. Illiberal political actors utilize societal disagreements to mask authoritarian tendencies and political corruption, portraying themselves as the champions of traditional values and the honest, hardworking people. Systematic deployment of a host of illiberal cultural policy measures is targeted and intentional: It contributes to social polarization, normalizes incendiary political discourse, diverts attention from corruption and cronyism, and diminishes space for resistance and critical appraisals of illiberal governments. Our research emphasizes that cultural policy, sometimes overlooked in discussions of illiberalism, is a vital battleground for both authoritarian control and democratic resistance. Furthermore, the enduring effects of illiberal cultural policies highlight the vulnerability of democratic institutions and the long-term risks posed by the capture of cultural narratives, as well as the inner contradictions and limitations of liberalism. Our findings call for greater attention to cultural policy in discussions of democratic backsliding and suggest that safeguarding cultural autonomy is essential for resisting the illiberal turn and exploring possible futures beyond the liberal/illiberal dichotomy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Kristina Čufar is a research associate at the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law, Ljubljana, and an assistant professor in sociology of law at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on social inequalities and dynamics of power in relation to legal regulation, drawing on critical legal and political theory, socio-legal studies, and criminology.

Hana Hawlina is a researcher at the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law, Ljubljana, and an assistant lecturer in social psychology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. She teaches courses on the psychology of power, influence, and social change. Her research interests also include social movement studies, political psychology, and studying conflicting imaginaries of collective futures.