

Seizing the artwork, neglecting the artist?

A call for policy makers to tackle precarity in the cultural sector

Governments all over Europe are increasingly discovering the capacity of culture and the arts to foster social cohesion and economic development. **The cultural sector is already contributing to 4,2% of the EU's GDP - and it is growing fast.** Romanian policy-makers are embracing the paradigm of culture as

This brief is a call for policy makers to take measures against precarity in the cultural field.

development, too – Bucharest's application for European Capital of Culture, for instance, measures the economic impact of culture in jobs, tourism and investments that the city can expect when its image is improved in the world. But even though the economic outcomes of cultural activities are widely

Quality work needs quality working conditions. Tackling precarity is not only important out of respect for cultural practitioners and their contributions to society; it is also urgent because the growth of the sector can only be sustainable when policy makers provide artists and operators with ideal working conditions.

recognized and seized, culture professionals without whom this wouldn't be possible are facing **precarious working conditions.** Unpaid and low paid labor, extensive workloads and low institutional support for practitioners abound in the cultural sector.

A sectorial approach to social security is needed, embedded in a generalized scheme to reduce precarity in the overall population. This double approach accounts for the special needs of workers in culture and the arts while preventing the spreading of precarious working conditions in society in general.

1

Outline of the problem

DEFINITION

A person's livelihood is precarious if they have uncertain long-term access to social resources (see Precarias a la deriva, 2011, p. 61). This is connected to, but ultimately different from poverty because it means that even though this person might have access to resources through a temporary work contract at a given moment of time, this state is potentially instable due to the uncertainty of finding employment after the end of the contract. Low wages contribute to the problem, too, as they prevent individuals from accumulating savings that could help them keep their standard of living in times of unemployment or retirement.

The recent spread of precarity throughout reflects a general **shift from open-ended full time employment to part-time, self-employed and so-called “portfolio work”** (projects that professionals take on, often unpaid, to build their resume). Affected workers “tend to be isolated and individualized, because they do short-term jobs, get by from project to project, and often fall through collective social-security systems.” (Isabell Lorey, 2015, Introduction).

PRECARITY IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR

Precarity is wide-spread in culture and the arts, since atypical work arrangements are prevalent there. Many culture professionals (artists, curators, writers etc.) are freelancers or perform their work on a contractual or project-bound basis. For more information on intermittent work in the cultural sector, see [Bonnin, 2015](#).

IMPLICATIONS IN DETAIL

2.1

The atypical nature of work in the cultural sector restricts the extent to which culture professionals can benefit from existing social security benefits, especially unemployment and retirement benefits. The current social security system is designed to serve the needs of workers with open ended, full time contracts. The idea of unemployment benefits is that they apply to salaried workers who are in between employments, which is why they are tied to the obligation to actively seek a new job. Culture professionals, on the other hand, are working even when they are officially unemployed, that is to say that they need to invest time in building their skills and developing new projects. This is why the current system of unemployment benefits is detrimental to the requirements of cultural work. In addition to that, if they are self-employed, the low wages that are common in the sector pose an unfair burden on them. As far as retirement benefits are concerned, intermittent work situations prevents professionals to make enough contributions to retirement insurance, thus making them more prone to elderly poverty. This is aggravated by the fact that low wages also don't enable them to accumulate significant savings, making them more vulnerable in times of economic downturn as well.

2.3

Especially problematic is the transition from school or university to waged employment in the sector.

Aspiring professionals depend on portfolio work to build up work experience and gain a reputation among their peers. By not paying them for their work, employers are exploiting this dependency.

2.4

Not only self-employed professionals and those who operate on the basis of intermittent contracts are precarious, but also many employees of cultural organizations and the organizations themselves.

Cultural institutions, organizations and small project spaces often lack the resources to ensure the continuity of their staff's employment, but also their professional development, because funding for trainings is not or not sufficiently provided. The financial instability is also the reason why the sector currently does not encourage small project spaces to develop into middle-sized businesses that could support independent professionals. As is, the areas where existing institutions and organizations lack staff, experience and funding are marketing and project management. Consequently, cultural producers do the bulk of tasks on their own even when they are under contract, leading to an excessive workload that is not reflected in wages.

2

Causes

The underlying causes for precarity in the cultural field are heterogeneous. However, these developments have aggravated the problem in the last decades:

3.1

Culture and the arts have **not been a priority for policy makers** for a long time. This is now changing, but up until policy makers discovered the capacities of cultural activity, culture was not sufficiently considered in budget allocations. The dearth of financial resources rendered the sector unstable, impeding development and innovation.

3.2

Traditionally, cultural policy targets traditional forms of culture and the arts: museums, operas, classical music, theaters etc. They are represented in public institutions and even though it is small, they do receive a steady budget. Though there have been attempts to bridge the **divide between traditional and contemporary art**, it persists. Contemporary visual art, contemporary dance and performance art, to name a few examples, are underrepresented in funding and infrastructure, leaving professionals in these fields particularly vulnerable.

3.3

According to a report by the European Expert Network of Culture (EENC) from 2012, public funding for culture and the arts was cut back significantly in 2009 when the **economic crisis** hit Romania, leading to regression in the cultural sector. Independent artists and curators as well as public institutions (museums, operas, theaters) were hit the most by the cuts, since they rely primarily on grants and subsidies. This way, a field that is already dealing with a scarcity of resources was set back once again.

3

Precarity is a policy issue

Romania doesn't provide social security measures specifically for the cultural sector; instead, general legislation applies. But the fact that precarity is widespread shows that those laws are failing culture professionals. Cultural policy makers are called upon to put the problem on their agendas, especially since precarity runs counter to core cultural policy interests:

Cultural policy is concerned with diversity.

Precarity decreases diversity.

Those who can afford to take on unpaid fulltime work (such as internships) and use it to advance in their careers typically belong to segments of the population who already have a relatively good socio-economic standing. This puts an unfair burden on minorities, too.

Cultural policy is concerned with fostering innovation.

Precarity constrains innovation.

The independent scene is one of the driving forces behind innovation in the sector. Still, freelance professionals struggle the most. The lack of support impedes their ability to focus on the core of their discipline and thus hinders their creativity.

Example: Bucharest

According to the bid book for Bucharest 2021, the city spent **3,83% of its budget on culture and the arts in 2015** (see [ECoC bid book, 2015](#), p. 63). Despite the fact that this amount is slightly higher than in previous years, it is still too low to cover the needs of the sector. As a result, the whole sector is financially precarious, but the independent cultural sector is especially affected. According to the [preliminary cultural strategy for 2016-2026](#), there is a **discrepancy between the public and the independent sector in budget allocations** (see strategy paper from June 2016, p. 31-33). One problem that reflects the financial precarity of the independent sector is the **lack of spaces** (see [ECoC bid book, 2015](#), p. 64). There are approximately 70 private galleries and alternative venues that offer spaces for independent operators, but this is a low number compared to other European capitals (Berlin, for example, is home to over 400 private galleries) and not enough to accommodate the amount of professionals, especially given that Bucharest has seven art universities with more than 7500 students (see *ibid.*, p. 6). Thus, a **majority of arts graduates seek employment in other sectors after graduation**, some emigrate.

4

Policy recommendations

GENERAL APPROACH

Precarity is not confined to the cultural sector, even though this is where it manifests itself very profoundly. Precarious working conditions abound in the health sector, too, for example for nursing staff. It is therefore crucial to **collaborate with policy makers across departments** and introduce measures that the whole population will benefit from, like adapting minimum wage to the cost of living and making sure that it is applied to all types of work contracts, internships included.

Social security - as the antithesis to precarity - needs to be understood as a wide principle and not a rigid system. The effects of anti-precarity policies have to be measured not in terms of how many people receive social security benefits and how much, but in terms of whether they achieve the ultimate aim - securing the livelihood of every individual person enough for them to build a fulfilling life on. **The social security system needs then to be adapted to individual life situations, not the other way round.**

SECTORIAL APPROACH

On this basis, each department needs to draft policies specifically for their sector. This way, the specific needs of different professionals can be taken into account. The cultural sector has a unique structure, and therefore cultural policy makers need to tend to the **sector-specific conditions** that sustain precarity beyond the realms of what general legislation can solve. Policy research confirms the needs for such a **double approach** - a generalized scheme supported by all relevant departments and additional sector-specific measures (see Murray and Gollmitzer 2012).

To implement a sectorial approach, the following anti-precarity measures are recommended:

5.1

The overall **budget** for culture needs to **increase**.

5.2

The instruments of public funding need to adjusted so that they reduce precarity. To simply put more money into the old structures won't yield effective results, since the problems are the results of structural flaws as well.

Tools for aligning public funding to anti-precarity objectives:

Scholarships - direct investments into talent

In addition to project-based funding, scholarships can support culture professionals more directly. They should fund individual artists for the **duration of one year** and not be tied to concrete projects, but instead be based on the respective artist's prior experience and **expected future achievements**. Thus, the scholarships are an investment into the artist's talent. Scholarships yield benefits for public authorities, too, because selection and accounting are less bureaucratic than for project-based funding. In order to effectively diminish precarity, the amount of the individual scholarships must be **aligned to the costs of living** at the artist's place of residence, including health, unemployment, retirement and other necessary insurances. Role models for scholarships of this kind could be the so-called "time grants" that the city of Berlin is currently implementing. There, they are included in the 2016/17 budget.

No public funding for unpaid labor

Public authorities should only consider those projects for public grants where **all employees and contractual partners receive wages**. To assess whether the wages proposed in the grant application are adequate, policy makers need to take the cost of living in the respective city or region into account. The overall budget for grants needs to increase to that effect, so that this policy does not have detrimental effects on the productivity and creative scope of projects. Only those projects that meet the standards can be eligible for public funding. The principle that public funding cannot support unpaid labor can be **applied to collaborations as well** - if public institutions only collaborate with partners that pay their employees, private companies and sponsors will be forced to make wages an integral part of their regular budget.

A new financing line for infrastructure

Since the lack of infrastructure, especially spaces, contributes to precarious working conditions for culture professionals, policy makers need to support existing infrastructure and invest in the development of new spaces. Thus, it is necessary to introduce a financing line specifically for infrastructure. **Both existing projects and propositions for new ones need to be eligible**. This way, small spaces that have already overcome the first obstacles will be supported in their efforts to grow and ideally develop into middle-sized institutions, while there will be encouragement for new spaces to open up as well.

5.3

The current unemployment benefit system needs to better accommodate the work realities of intermittent workers in the cultural sector. Since periods of unemployment do not mean that culture professionals are not working, unemployment benefits should not be tied to obligations such as proof of actively looking for employment. Instead, policy makers should work out the specifications of a system of **income maintenance** in which culture professionals receive subsidies in times when they don't generate an income of their own, similar to the concept of an **unconditional basic income**.

5.4

When independent curators organize art shows, the hosting institution needs to support them in finding partners, managing the finances and promoting the show. Institutions need to be financially supported to better fulfill this task. Additionally, there need to be **trainings** for institutions, but also for individual professionals, since the ability to transform an idea into a feasible project is necessary for obtaining grants.

5.5

Legislation needs to make sure that **working conditions are clearly specified in work contracts**. The specifications should include the status of the worker, duration of the contract, working hours and wage details (amount and time(s) of payments).

5.6

So far there is no **comprehensive research data** about precarity in the cultural sector in Romania. Since policies must be evidence-based to be effective, more research has to be undertaken to supply the missing data.

5.7

Since precarity affects the livelihood and work experiences of culture professionals so profoundly, their voices deserve to be heard in all policy decisions that concern them. **Direct consultations with culture professionals** can contribute to the monitoring of policy outcomes and reduce the gap between practice and policy. However, it has proven difficult to keep practitioners interested in consultations over a longer period of time, partially caused by the effects of precarity itself – when professionals are struggling to keep their projects afloat, consultations only consume time they do not have. To enable more practitioners to take part in consultations, policy makers should compensate them for their participation with a fee.

5.8

Regular **monitoring and evaluation tools** have to guarantee the effectiveness of policies so that they can be adapted if necessary. To this effect, an independent research institute should conduct regular surveys.

Without these measures, the rapid growth of the sector that we are witnessing right now will be accompanied by a growth of precarity in the population, too. As is, it is happening already. And since precarity affects some sectors of society more than others, this entails also an **increase in economic inequality**.

It must be a priority for policy makers to make sure that we not only reap the benefits of cultural production, but recognize the labour of culture professionals, too, and not drop their social security needs along the way.

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