

A new Italian culture system: a strategy of change without its protagonists?

Under the Meloni government, Italy's cultural sector has experienced growing political influence, which—while not always overt—has shaped the allocation of public funding and the direction of institutional programming. Although censorship is rarely explicit, there is a subtle pressure to align with a nationalistic or conservative vision of culture.

Italy's Minister of Culture, Alessandro Giuli, recently expressed critical views on the cultural left in Italy, stating that "the left only has comedians left." During a speech in Florence at the "General Assembly of Culture" organized by the political party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), Giuli said: "There used to be a genuinely powerful, coherent, and structured left-wing culture—Gramscian, we must acknowledge that. But over time, it eroded, especially once the divorce between consensus and power occurred. They had intellectuals, and they lost them; they turned to influencers and then discovered that they, too, were just after money. Now, all they have left are comedians." These remarks sparked reactions within the Italian cultural and political landscape, further fueling debate about the role of culture in today's society.

It is clear that one of the objectives of this government has been to replace key figures in cultural institutions with individuals whose vision aligns with that of the government. Unfortunately, on this point, it cannot be said that Meloni has acted all that differently from previous governments. However, it is notable that the radical changes have led to conflicts never before seen—both within the institutions themselves and between event audiences and the organizing bodies. For instance, the **MAXXI Museum in Rome** saw a shift in curatorial focus following leadership changes, with greater emphasis placed on exhibitions promoting a celebratory view of Italian identity, often at the expense of more experimental or critical projects. Similarly, the **Italian Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale** faced criticism for its neutral and apolitical curatorial choices, seen by many as a reflection of a climate where openly critical or progressive voices risk being sidelined. In the performing arts, festivals like **Santarcangelo Festival** have faced funding cuts or political scrutiny, especially when addressing themes such as LGBTQIA+ rights, migration, or social inequality. Certain productions have been openly criticized by government officials, creating a chilling effect that has led some curators and directors to preemptively avoid more politically sensitive topics. In the independent performing art context, these pressures have translated into increased difficulty accessing public funding for projects with a strong social or political dimension. As a result, we have had to adapt our programming—sometimes by focusing more on educational or community-based projects that maintain a critical edge while appearing less politically contentious. We've also turned to international partnerships and private support to preserve our autonomy. These shifts reflect a broader trend: the redefinition of cultural priorities in a way that marginalizes dissent and encourages a narrower, state-approved narrative of Italian identity.

Another very serious example that highlights the government's strategy is what happened last July with the independent association of theaters, [C.Re.S.Co.](#), the only one of its kind in Italy. The association was invited, along with AGIS—the largest Italian association for theater, music, and cinema—to a roundtable discussion about the new regulation now in effect, which will allocate funding for the next three-year period. After an initial preliminary meeting, [C.Re.S.Co.](#) was no longer invited, and under pressure, it was clearly told that its exclusion was a political decision. That table has now produced a regulation not so dissimilar to the previous one, except for one extremely serious detail that may seem minor but will actually allow for a radical change: all references to contemporary or innovative theater have been removed from the regulation. This will allow new private organizations to enter the funding scheme—entities that have nothing to do with contemporary theater but rather with what we can define as commercial theater. So another technique used by the Meloni government has been to divide trade unions and umbrella organizations in order to act undisturbed in modifying the regulations that govern the distribution of funds.

Unfortunately, these methods are bringing Italy closer and closer to countries where democracy is under threat. The methodology is the same: the stated objectives of the law remain unchanged, but the law itself is entirely stripped of its original meaning. In its place, highly irregular evaluation criteria are introduced—criteria that, moreover, do not even align with the law's own stated goals. For example, the law claims to support cultural pluralism but introduces heavy evaluation criteria based on audience numbers—particularly for festivals—thus favoring those organizations that, at the expense of the quality of contemporary productions, are able to attract large crowds.

This is compounded by the disappointment of a long-awaited provision by the sector that was supposed to introduce measures to improve the welfare of Italian artists. In fact, despite the approval of the "Indemnity of Discontinuity in favor of entertainment workers" (<https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.indennit-di-discontinuit-a-favore-dei-lavoratori-dello-spettacolo.html>), the measure turns out to be vastly underfunded compared to the real needs of the sector.

It can be said that in the first year of the Meloni government, there were no radical changes, but rather that the government worked to structurally alter the system in order to undermine it at its foundations. Has culture, under the Meloni government, effectively become just a tool of propaganda (as it is either aligned with the government's ideology or it is strongly obstructed—branded as representative of a left-wing political mindset)? So far, the protests that have taken place have been relatively weak, but we are increasingly seeing flare-ups that are also being reported by the media—such as the recent exchange between film actor Elio Germano and Minister Giuli over the cuts to the cinema sector, or the clash between writer Roberto Saviano and Meloni herself during the book fair in Germany.

The government has stated on several occasions the need to make the system more dynamic by also facilitating generational change. All the professionals are wondering how these changes will take place, given that funding has not been increased (but neither has it been cut—and this is good news in comparison to the international landscape) while applications received are 1/3 more than in the previous triennium (more than 700). The motivation for this growth surely lies in a process started by end the covid time in which the Italian regions began

to radically cut fundings to culture from 10% to 50% depending on the region. This July, funding for the next three-year period will be allocated. This will be the moment that will finally reveal the true intentions of the government, demonstrating the outcome of the structural changes I previously mentioned. We will see if and who will benefit of these changes which will shake the entire cultural infrastructure of the performing arts, particularly the independent sector. Starting in July, we will see whether umbrella organizations will be able to interpret the widespread dismay and find common values on which to build alliances for a share fruitful dialogue with the government.