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Displaced Culture(s)

DISPLACED CULTURE(S)

DISPLACED CULTURE(S):

Georgia | Azerbaijan | Belarus in exile | Armenia | Ukraine | Moldova

MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT, AND THE SHIFTING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE(S) OF THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD COUNTRIES

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Displaced Culture(s): Migration, Displacement, and the Shifting Cultural Landscapes of the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries examines how recent waves of migration, forced displacement, and political transformation have reshaped cultural ecosystems across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Developed within the framework of the Independent Cultural Organisations Network | ICON× in collaboration with the Danish Cultural Institute | DCI, the publication brings together interdisciplinary perspectives from researchers and cultural practitioners, as well as the collective expertise of ICON× member organisations that have been directly engaged with these issues since 2020.

Through country-specific case studies, the authors critically analyse cultural migration as a structural condition affecting cultural production, memory politics, and institutional frameworks. It highlights how cultural actors are disproportionately impacted by political repression, war, and shrinking civic space, while also foregrounding their role in sustaining dialogue, resilience, and alternative narratives.

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Content

PREFACE

Henriette Borg Reinholdt

When I tell my family and friends what I do for a living, I often say that I work with the backbone of our communities, the infrastructure of our societies, and the identity and values of humankind. I realise these are rather grand words, and they sometimes leave people slightly puzzled. "I thought you worked in the cultural sector," they will say. And I do. But as I understand culture, it is so much more than entertainment or artistic production. It lies at the very centre of who we are as human beings. It comforts us, gives us strength, mobilizes and inspires us. It can serve as a form of defence, but can also be a pathway to dialogue, relations, reflection and trust.

Much of this understanding has grown from the years I have spent travelling and working in the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries. The people and societies in the region made me understand culture with a different set of eyes. **They have also challenged some of the assumptions I brought with me: what counts as culture, whose knowledge is recognised, and which forms of expression are considered legitimate.** In contexts shaped by political transformation, conflict, and uncertainty, culture becomes something profoundly tangible: a space where communities safeguard their memory, assert their dignity, and imagine their future.

Coming from Denmark, I have observed that we have only relatively recently begun to discuss culture in similarly expansive terms. For many years, public conversations about culture focused primarily on the arts themselves. Today, however, a broader understanding is emerging - one that recognises culture as a cornerstone of democratic life and social resilience. New conversations are beginning to take shape in public debate, and I feel both proud and grateful to contribute to these discussions by bringing perspectives, examples, and insights from the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries.

Across the region, culture plays a vital role in shaping democratic societies. Cultural institutions, independent artistic

communities, researchers, writers, and cultural workers contribute not only to creative expression but also to the civic space in which societies reflect on their histories, negotiate identities, and debate their futures. In contexts marked by political transformation, conflict, or shrinking civic space, the cultural sector often becomes one of the most important arenas for pluralism, critical reflection, and public dialogue.

Recent developments across the region have made the connection between culture and democratic resilience increasingly evident. Armed conflicts, political repression, and broader geopolitical tensions have placed significant pressure on cultural ecosystems throughout the region. Cultural actors face censorship, funding cuts, and in some cases direct persecution, while cultural heritage, archives, and independent institutions have become vulnerable to destruction or political instrumentalization.

These dynamics demonstrate that culture is not a peripheral sphere separated from political and social realities. Rather, it forms part of the broader civic infrastructure that enables societies to sustain democratic values and open public discourse. Through language, literature, historical research, artistic practice, and cultural education, cultural actors contribute to preserving collective memory and strengthening critical thinking. This enables societies to engage with complex and contested histories. In this sense, a diverse and independent cultural sector is an essential component of democratic resilience.

Across the region, cultural communities continue to sustain spaces for dialogue and reflection even under challenging circumstances. Cultural ecosystems that are diverse and institutionally supported enhance the capacity of societies to respond to crises, counter disinformation, and sustain open and inclusive public discourse. In periods of uncertainty and instability, culture provides spaces in which societies can preserve continuity while also imagining alternative futures. Importantly, these futures are not only about recovery or resilience, but about redefining cultural and political horizons beyond inherited frameworks. At the same time, cross-border collaboration, translation, and international cultural exchange play an important role in connecting societies and strengthening mutual understanding beyond national contexts.

Supporting strong and independent cultural sectors is therefore not only a cultural policy objective but also a strategic and crucial investment in democratic development.

This publication grows directly out of these realities. *Displaced Culture(s): Migration, Displacement, and the Shifting Cultural Landscape(s) of the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries* is the result of long-term collaboration between cultural organisations from the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries and Danish Cultural Institute within the framework of the Independent Cultural Organisations Network | ICON×. Over the past five years, this network has created a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and knowledge exchange among cultural actors committed to strengthening cultural rights, democratic values, and international cultural collaboration.

During this period, questions of mobility, migration, and displacement have increasingly shaped the experiences of cultural communities across the region. Conflicts, political repression, and shrinking civic space have compelled many cultural practitioners to leave their countries of origin, while at the same time new diasporic networks and transnational cultural collaborations have emerged. These developments raise important questions about how cultural communities can remain resilient under conditions of displacement and how international cooperation can support cultural actors navigating these realities. They also invite reflection on how displacement transforms cultural authority, authorship, and belonging.

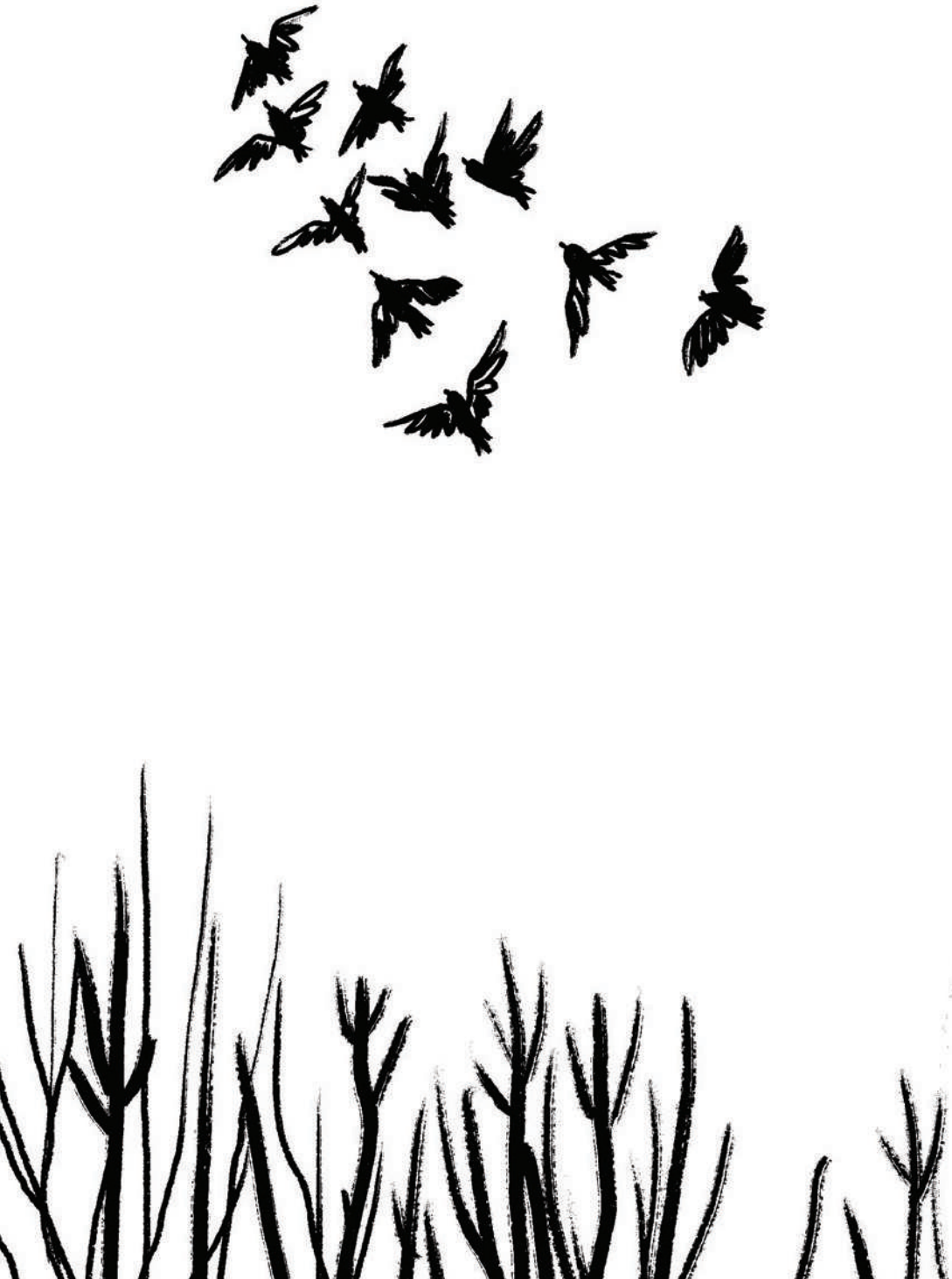
The essays collected in this publication explore these dynamics through six country-specific perspectives from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Each contribution examines how migration affects cultural life within its particular context, highlighting both the challenges faced by displaced cultural actors and the strategies through which cultural communities continue to sustain creativity, dialogue, and critical engagement.

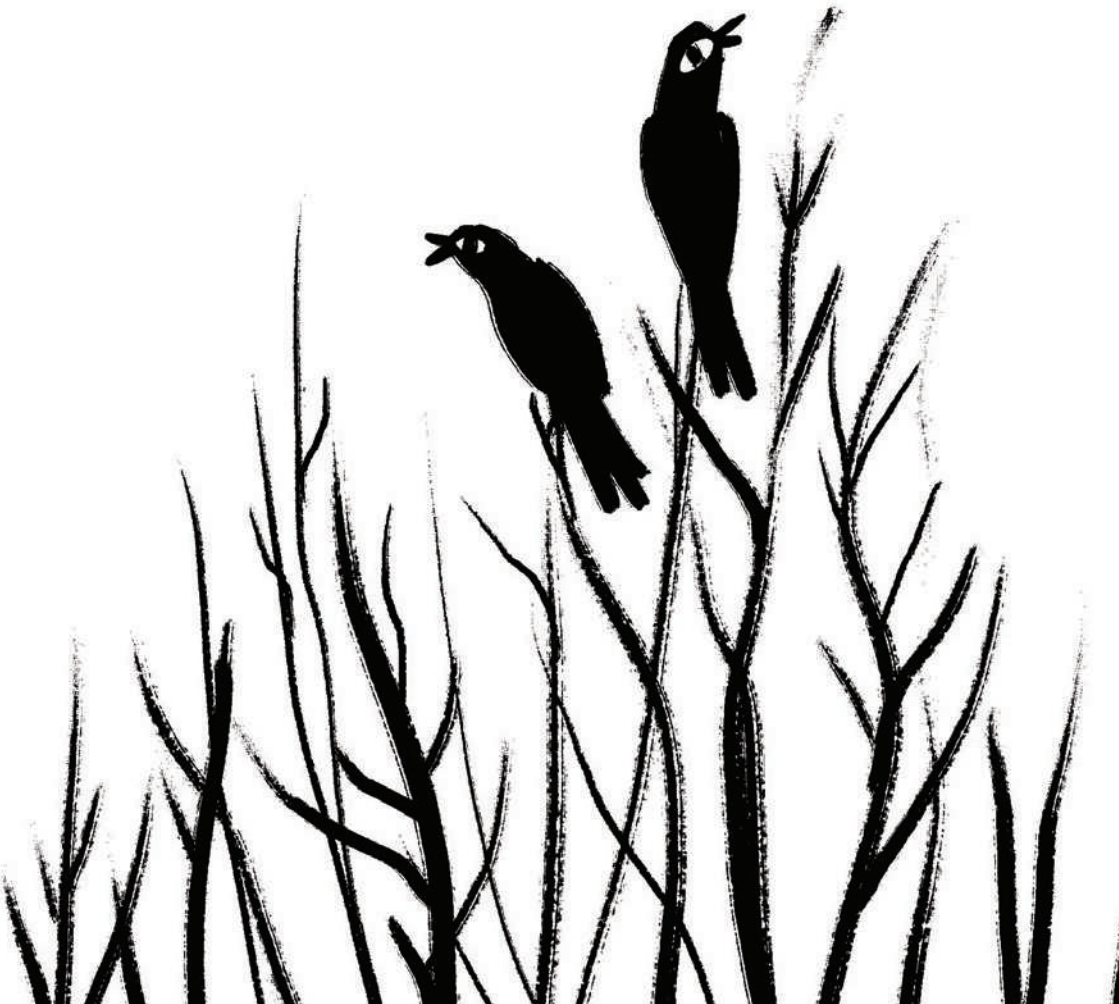
By bringing together these perspectives, *Displaced Culture(s)* contributes to a deeper understanding of how migration and displacement are reshaping cultural landscapes across the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries. Rather than presenting a single narrative, the publication foregrounds multiple situated perspectives that reflect the diversity and complexity of the region. At the same time, it underscores the importance of continued support for independent

cultural sectors as a cornerstone of democratic resilience, cultural cooperation, and sustainable cultural development in the region.

The question is not whether culture matters in times of crisis. It is whether we are willing to treat it as the infrastructure it already is.

The articles are written by independent researchers responding to a Terms of Reference developed by the ICON× Network – without interference or involvement from Danish Cultural Institute.





FROM EXTREME IMMOBILITY TO CRITICAL MOBILITY

Tigran Amiryan

Since 2020, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have experienced an unprecedented intensification of migration processes shaped by armed conflicts, political repression, economic instability, and the gradual erosion of civic and democratic space.[1] These overlapping dynamics have generated large-scale displacement across the region[2], transforming migration from a temporary or exceptional phenomenon into a structural condition that increasingly shapes social, political, and cultural life. Rather than isolated crises, these processes form a continuous landscape of instability in which mobility, displacement, and exile have become persistent features of everyday reality[3].

Although migration affects all sectors of society, its consequences are unevenly distributed. Cultural communities—including artists, writers, researchers, cultural workers, and activists—seem to have emerged as among the most immediately

[1] CIVICUS Monitor, *Europe and Central Asia*, 2023. **See:** https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/europeandcentralasia/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] *Eastern Neighbourhood region or Eastern Neighbourhood Countries (ENC)* refers to the group of countries included in the European Union's Eastern Partnership framework: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The term is used in EU policy and cooperation contexts to describe a shared geopolitical and programmatic space characterised by historical interconnections and ongoing political, social, and economic challenges. In this publication, it serves as an analytical and operational framework for addressing regional dynamics of cultural production, migration, and cooperation, while recognising the internal diversity and specificity of each country.

[3] International Organization for Migration (IOM), "International Migration Flows," *in World Migration Report* chapter 2, 2024. **See:** https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-2/international-migration-flows [available as of 01 March 2026]

and severely affected groups.[1] This heightened vulnerability is closely linked to the position of culture within contexts of militarisation, authoritarian governance, and ideological consolidation, where cultural practices produce alternative narratives, symbolic languages, and critical forms of expression that challenge dominant historical interpretations, disrupt official discourses, and question hegemonic representations of identity, nationhood, and power. As a result, cultural actors are frequently perceived as politically destabilising and are among the first to be targeted through censorship, intimidation, surveillance, and repression, rendering them particularly exposed to forced displacement.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a phase of extreme immobility, during which border closures and movement restrictions severely constrained artistic mobility and transnational cultural exchange. Cultural actors were compelled to suspend international collaboration, reorganise production processes, and experiment with alternative formats of dialogue and dissemination under conditions of isolation and uncertainty. While this period exposed the structural fragility of artistic mobility, it also accelerated experimentation with digital and hybrid practices. However, the pandemic did not represent an endpoint; rather, it preceded a rapid shift toward a phase of critical and often forced mobility driven by successive political crises and armed conflicts. In this context, defined by extreme ups and downs in terms of capacities for movement, cultural communities were required to adapt at unprecedented speed, navigating displacement while attempting to sustain professional practices under fundamentally altered social, political, and institutional conditions.

These regional dynamics are reflected in a series of interconnected country- and context-specific developments that illustrate the scale, diversity, and persistence of cultural migration. In Belarus, mass protests following the 2020 presidential election, which was widely regarded as fraudulent, were met with systematic and violent state repression. Artists, writers, and cultural workers, highly visible within protest movements and public debates,

[1] Freemuse. *The State of Artistic Freedom 2019: Whose Narratives Count?*, 2019. **See**: https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/saf-2019-online.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

became direct targets of arrests, intimidation, and forced exile. As a result, significant segments of the Belarusian cultural community relocated to European countries, particularly Poland and Germany, as well as to other states in the region such as Georgia, forming new diasporic cultural networks under conditions of political displacement.

In the South Caucasus, unresolved tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated into full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and culminated in the complete removal of the Armenian population from the region in 2023. This process of forced displacement is the culmination of a deep history of ethnic violence in the region that has had profound and long-lasting consequences for cultural heritage, memory, and cultural rights. The loss of access to place-based cultural practices, religious and historical sites, archives, and landscapes has produced deep ruptures in cultural continuity, while displaced communities face complex challenges of integration, recognition, and cultural sustainability in host societies.

The most extensive disruption of regional migration patterns has been Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, launched in February 2022. As the largest war in Europe since the Second World War, it has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, the widespread destruction of urban, rural, and natural environments, and the large-scale devastation of cultural heritage. Millions have been displaced internally and across borders.[1] Beyond its immediate humanitarian impact, the war has fundamentally reshaped cultural production in the region, activating new cultural codes, narratives, and strategies of resistance, while simultaneously exposing cultural workers to extreme precarity, trauma, and institutional instability.

Moldova has emerged as one of the primary host countries for Ukrainian refugees, while simultaneously navigating complex internal processes of decolonisation, geopolitical reorientation, and European integration. The Moldovan cultural sector has

[1] According to the UNHCR Operational Data Portal – Ukraine Refugee Situation, by mid-2025 approximately 6.9 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded worldwide, with the majority residing in European countries following the full-scale invasion in 2022. This estimate reflects registered refugee movements and protection needs. UNHCR, *Ukraine Refugee Situation*, Operational Data Portal. **See:** https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine [available as of 01 March 2026]

undergone significant shifts in thematic focus and strategic orientation as cultural institutions and practitioners responded to new social realities and responsibilities. At the same time, political repression, censorship, and militarisation within Russia has prompted the migration of millions of Russian citizens, many of whom have relocated to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Cultural infrastructures in host countries have proved to be largely unprepared—both in terms of capacity and institutional frameworks—to accommodate such large numbers of politically motivated migrants, revealing structural gaps in cultural policy, funding mechanisms, and access to participation.

In Azerbaijan, marginalised cultural actors faced renewed repression during and after the Second Karabakh war. Prolonged land border closures following COVID-19, increasing state control over independent cultural spaces, arrests of opposition journalists, and targeted persecution of LGBTQ+ communities have all contributed to instability in migration flows. As a result, Azerbaijani cultural practitioners increasingly relocate to European countries, Turkey, and other destinations with fewer visa restrictions, often under conditions of legal uncertainty and limited institutional support.

In Georgia, anti-democratic measures introduced since 2024 have progressively displaced members of civil society, particularly cultural practitioners and LGBTQ+ communities. As artists and activists leave the country, they form new diasporic networks across Europe. While facing significant integration challenges, including language barriers and limited access to funding and cultural infrastructure, these communities continue cultural production and sustain transnational forms of resistance against authoritarian governance in their country of origin.

Across Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the consequences of cultural migration remain insufficiently articulated and under-researched. Forced displacement entails not only physical relocation but also profound emotional rupture, the loss of professional and informal networks, restricted access to cultural infrastructures, and long-term economic precarity. Many cultural migrants[1] struggle to sustain creative work outside familiar social,

[1] *Cultural migrants* refers to cultural practitioners, artists, cultural institutions, and their representatives who relocate across borders

political, and aesthetic contexts, often experiencing reduced visibility, professional marginalisation, and exhaustion. At the same time, cultural migration produces regressive effects for countries of origin. The departure of artists, writers, researchers, and cultural activists weakens pluralism and democratic resilience by reducing the capacity for critical public debate and collective reflection. Cultural actors traditionally play a crucial role in critically engaging with history and the present, questioning dominant narratives, and imagining alternative futures beyond censorship and restriction. Their forced removal narrows the space for freedom of expression and undermines culture's role as a driver of democratic imagination.

Cultural migration also poses serious risks to the preservation and accessibility of cultural heritage, both material and immaterial. Displacement frequently restricts access to archives, collections, cultural sites, and artworks, while intangible heritage becomes especially vulnerable through the erosion of languages and dialects, disruptions in the transmission of practices, fragmented memory politics, and limited access to knowledge infrastructures. These risks are particularly acute in conflict and post-conflict contexts, where cultural loss compounds social and political fragmentation. Moreover, cultural actors have long sustained fragile yet essential cross-border dialogue in the region, even as it has been shaped by conflict, unresolved histories, and political division. Cultural cooperation has often functioned as one of the few remaining channels for communication, trust-building, and mutual understanding between societies. Forced cultural migration weakens local cultural fields as well as the transnational dialogues and networks that sustain them, while also diminishing the presence, continuity, and impact of cultural actors inside their countries. As a result, dialogue becomes more difficult, and the prospects for peacebuilding and reconciliation are significantly reduced.

or within their countries due to political, economic, or security-related pressures and risks. The term encompasses both forced and voluntary forms of mobility, including exile, displacement, and relocation driven by restricted freedom of expression, lack of access to cultural infrastructure, or the search for sustainable working conditions. It highlights the specific experiences of those engaged in cultural practice, whose mobility is shaped not only by general migration dynamics but also by the political and symbolic role of culture in society.

Despite its vulnerability, culture remains a key space for resilience, and cultural practices articulate dignity, sovereignty, and self-determination and play a central role in developing decolonial perspectives across the region. While cultural communities are among the most affected by displacement, they also possess a unique capacity to reshape public discourse, challenge dominant narratives, and foster new forms of solidarity across borders. These developments outlined above point to the necessity of rethinking existing frameworks of cultural cooperation and support. Rather than short-term or reactive responses, the current context requires approaches that recognise cultural mobility as a structural condition of the region. Cultural migration must therefore be addressed as a long-term process shaping cultural production, institutional practices, and transnational relations, requiring sustained engagement, cross-border coordination, and long-term responsibility from European and international actors.

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2.0.2.0.2.5.(.) Displaced Culture(s) is the result of a long-term collaboration between cultural organisations from the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries (ENC) and Denmark. Over a period marked by profound political, social, and humanitarian challenges, these organisations, in partnership with the Danish Cultural Institute, have worked to strengthen cultural resilience and support democratic development within regional cultural ecosystems.

Over five years, the Independent Cultural Organisations Network | ICON× developed as a sustained space for dialogue and cooperation, functioning as a platform for cultural development, the promotion of democratic narratives, and the protection of human rights. Within this framework, participants engaged with cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary themes, including culture and reconciliation, culture and gender, culture and human rights, cultural rights as a core focus of the network, as well as culture in relation to environmental justice, spatial justice, decolonisation, and cross-border exchange.

Mobility, forced migration, and displaced culture have remained a constant point of reflection throughout this period. For many

ICON× members, these questions have not only been analytical but also deeply personal, as the network includes organisations and practitioners with direct experience of displacement, exile, and the loss of access to cultural infrastructures in their countries of origin.

Within this context, the present publication has emerged as an outcome of five years of collective work. ICON× members invited experts from Eastern Neighbourhood Countries to focus specifically on the intersection of culture and migration. Six authors from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine examine the dynamics of cultural migration in their respective contexts, offering situated perspectives that reflect the diversity of experiences across the region.

Beyond documenting individual cases, this publication functions as a shared space for dialogue created by ICON× and the Danish Cultural Institute. Taken together, the contributions provide an analysis of a changing cultural landscape shaped by displacement, resilience, and structural constraint. They identify both the challenges faced by cultural communities under conditions of forced mobility and the practices through which resilience is sustained, with the aim of contributing to more resilient, inclusive, and interconnected cultural ecosystems across the region.

THE REAWAKENING OF THE SOVIET SYSTEMIC MIND

Giorgi Shaishmelashvili
& Sophia Kilasonia

"How did you go bankrupt?
Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly."
—Ernest Hemingway

Introduction

Georgia's recent democratic backsliding and foreign policy U-turn have deep roots; however, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine significantly accelerated these processes and exposed the governing logic of the Georgian Dream party. As a result, a country that once stood at the forefront of reforms among the Eastern Partnership Countries is increasingly drifting into Russia's sphere of influence. These tectonic political shifts are affecting not only Georgia's political trajectory but also its social fabric, with cultural migration emerging as one of their most consequential manifestations.

For much of the post-independence period, migration from Georgia was predominantly driven by socio-economic factors and disproportionately affected lower-income groups with limited social capital.[1] Labor migration functioned primarily as a survival strategy in response to structural unemployment and restricted economic mobility. During this period, cultural, academic, and civic elites largely remained embedded within domestic institutions. Universities, independent media, and civil society organizations provided opportunities for professional development, international cooperation,

[1] Chkhikvadze, Vano, "Looming Emigration from Georgia – Run, Forrest, Run!", *GEOpolitics*, May 8, 2025. **See:** https://politicsgeo.com/looming-emigration-from-georgia-run-forrest-run/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

and social mobility. As a result, emigration was widely perceived as an economic rather than a political or cultural phenomenon.

The emergence of cultural migration in Georgia must be analyzed through the repressive legal frameworks that institutionalized democratic backsliding after 2023, when between 2023 and 2025, the Georgian authorities adopted a series of legislative measures that fundamentally altered the legal environment governing civil society, cultural institutions, academia, and public expression.[1] These laws were justified technically in terms of transparency, national sovereignty, or the protection of social values. In practice, however, they constructed a coherent system of legal constraints aimed at limiting foreign cooperation, narrowing civic freedoms, and redefining the boundaries of permissible cultural activity. Legal uncertainty became a permanent condition of professional life for cultural and intellectual communities. This transformation directly accelerated the dynamics of cultural migration identified in the preceding section.

The adoption of the Transparency of Foreign Influence Law[2] in 2024 marked a decisive moment in Georgia's authoritarian consolidation. The law required organizations receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources to register as entities "bearing the interests of a foreign power". This designation introduced a powerful mechanism of stigmatization, framing international cooperation as inherently suspect. The Ministry of Justice was granted extensive oversight powers, including access to internal documentation and authority to impose substantial administrative fines. Cultural institutions dependent on international grants and partnerships became particularly vulnerable. As a result, many organizations reduced or suspended cross-border cooperation to mitigate legal and reputational risks. It should be noted, however, that the overwhelming majority did not register in the relevant registry, prompting the authorities to introduce an additional repressive mechanism.

[1] "Democracy Under Siege: Georgia's Autocratic Takeover," *NYU School of Law*. **See:** https://www.law.nyu.edu/rule-law-lab/democracy-under-siege-georgias-autocratic-takeover [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Khubua Keti, "Georgia at the Crossroads: Competing Narratives on the 'Transparency of Foreign Influence' Law," PhD diss., Vilniaus Universitetas., 2025.

This repressive logic was further intensified by the adoption of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (GEOFARA) in 2025.[1] Unlike the earlier law, GEOFARA introduced criminal liability and extended state control to individuals as well as organizations. Freelance artists, academics, curators, and cultural managers became subject to mandatory disclosure requirements for any foreign-funded activity, irrespective of its political nature. The Anti-Corruption Bureau was granted broad investigative powers, including access to financial records and personal communications. The possibility of asset freezes and criminal prosecution significantly heightened professional precarity. Routine cultural and academic activities were thus transformed into potential legal liabilities.

Repressive legislation was accompanied by tighter restrictions on freedom of expression, the media, and public assembly. Amendments to broadcasting regulations expanded the authority of regulatory bodies to sanction content deemed harmful to public morality or national interests.[2] Defamation provisions and restrictions on insulting public officials further constrained political satire and critical commentary. Journalists covering protests faced intimidation, detention, and physical violence, reinforcing a climate of fear. The organization of public gatherings, including cultural performances and artistic demonstrations, was subjected to increased administrative barriers. These measures substantially reduced the space for independent cultural expression and public debate.

The adoption of the so-called Law on Family Values introduced an explicitly ideological dimension to Georgia's repressive legal framework. Officially framed as a measure to protect minors and traditional family principles, the law imposed broad restrictions on the "promotion" or "positive representation" of LGBTQI+ identities. Its vague language enabled discretionary interpretation by authorities, exposing a wide range of cultural activities to potential sanction. Theatres, galleries, film screenings, and educational

[1] Veronika Bílková et al., Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 144th Plenary Session (Venice, 9-10 October 2025), n.d.

[2] Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Legislative Package on "Family Values and Protection of Minors" | EEAS. **See:** https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-legislative-package-family-values-and-protection-minors_en [available as of 01 March 2026]

programs addressing issues of gender or identity became particularly vulnerable.

These legislative measures derived much of their coercive power from patterns of selective enforcement. Protesters, including artists and cultural workers, were subjected to arbitrary detention and expedited prosecutions. Law enforcement agencies exercised broad discretion, while abuses were rarely investigated or punished. The courts, shaped by political influence, frequently prioritized regime stability over the protection of individual rights. Legal ambiguity thus functioned as a governance tool, producing chronic insecurity rather than predictable regulation. This environment further discouraged public engagement and reinforced incentives for cultural migration.

Taken together, the Foreign Influence Law, GEOFARA, the Law on Family Values, and related restrictions constitute an integrated legal architecture of authoritarian consolidation. This system simultaneously regulates foreign cooperation, restricts cultural expression, and enforces ideological conformity. Cultural rights have not been incidentally affected but systematically undermined through legal design. Independent cultural production has become increasingly difficult to sustain within this framework. As professional risks accumulate, relocation emerges as a rational response for many cultural and intellectual actors. In this sense, repressive legislation functions not only as an instrument of governance but also as a direct driver of cultural migration.

It is also important to recognize that the government's education "reform" initiatives[1] reflect a broader geopolitical reorientation away from European integration and toward Eastern alignments. In late 2025, the Georgian government proposed sweeping changes to both the general and higher education systems, including shortening the duration of compulsory schooling and university programs, weakening alignment with the Bologna Process, and creating conditions that could restrict access to Western universities.

[1] "International Group of Academics Call on Kobakhidze to 'Rethink' Education Reform," *Civil Georgia*. **See:** https://civil.ge/archives/714985 [available as of 01 March 2026]

Crisis, Resistance, and Migration Horizons

In contemporary Georgia, the ongoing political confrontation is increasingly interpreted as a manifestation of a deeper cultural crisis. One segment of society aligns with Western liberal democratic values, while another, supporting a growing authoritarianism, remains influenced by Soviet nostalgia and the belief that no viable alternative exists beyond Russia, framing the Soviet period as stable and prosperous.

These dynamics pose significant challenges to pro-Western democratic development. Progressive and democratic groups experience the present existentially, perceiving political failure not only as a threat to material security but also to the conditions necessary for professional activity, social participation, and meaningful life. Public discourse is dominated by narratives of dispossession and displacement, frequently expressed through the assertion that 'the homeland is being lost', alongside the anticipation of forced emigration.

Approximately one year ago, a cultural-sector protest crystallized around the question: "Whose is Georgia?" The response "Ours" reflected anxiety regarding the potential re-emergence of unresolved Soviet cultural legacies within unprotected social and symbolic spaces. This struggle exemplifies the enduring influence of systemic logic from the Soviet era on contemporary political and cultural life.

The prospect of migration, at times imminent and at times receding, highlights the material consequences of this unresolved past. In Tbilisi, which has attracted migrants from Belarus and Russia fleeing authoritarian rule and conscription, immigration has become a tangible phenomenon. Despite sharing a political space, the cultural environments, resources, and traditions of Georgia, Russia, and Belarus remain substantially distinct. Consequently, no significant cooperation has emerged between local communities and incoming migrants. For migrants, Tbilisi functions primarily as a refuge rather than a collaborative environment.

The Constitution of Georgia[1] recognizes creative freedom as a fundamental value, guaranteeing freedom of expression and citizens' participation in cultural processes, while framing the country's future within European integration. State policies in education and culture[2] are expected to align with Western democratic standards. However, a significant gap persists between constitutional principles, legislation, and actual practices, particularly in the cultural sphere. Annually, approximately 200 million[3] GEL are allocated to key cultural institutions, yet most operate within outdated 1990s laws[4] and their minimal updates, and the Ministry of Culture maintains centralized authority while also financing independent artists. This combination has prompted international recommendations, including those linked to the EU Association Agreement, emphasizing the need for institutional democracy and creative autonomy.

Partial compliance with European integration obligations facilitated temporary improvements, granting NGOs and independent artists access to Western knowledge, platforms, and resources, and influencing state institutions. Concepts such as independent management systems and creative funds emerged, fostering debates on sector democratization and encouraging experimental and alternative practices in both state-run and independent spaces. Terms such as 'experimentation' and 'alternativity' became central. Even as Georgian Dream increasingly displayed anti-Western tendencies, countercurrents in the cultural sector strengthened.

[1] Constitution of Georgia, *The Legislative Herald of Georgia*, 1995. **See:** https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36 [available as of 01 March 2026]
[2] Georgia's Culture Strategy 2025. **See:** https://shorturl.at/tVg9S
[3] Georgia's State Budget for 2025, The Legislative Herald of Georgia. **See:** https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6366063?publication=1 [available as of 01 March 2026]
[4] Law of Georgia on Culture, Law of Georgia on Cultural Heritage, Law on Museums, Law of Georgia on Theatres, *The Legislative Herald of Georgia*. **See:** https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/31402?publication=16
https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/16180?publication=1
https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/21076?publication=22
https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/15508?publication=10
[available as of 01 March 2026]

Between 2020 and 2023, rapid, radical policy changes disrupted institutions with international collaborations and participatory projects. The National Book Center, known for translation programs and European festival participation, was closed. Creative Georgia, which was established under the Ministry of Culture of Georgia for the management of open calls in different cultural fields, and to become a cultural foundation operating semi-independently from the Ministry, was later reorganized and basically deprived of the declared functions. Similar interventions affected institutions within the Georgian National Museum network, the Writers' House, state theatres, the University of Theatre and Film, the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, and the Georgian National Film Center.

Staff audits led to numerous dismissals, changes in organizational statutes, and the appointment of ministry representatives to supervisory boards. Long-serving staff members were replaced by individuals from unrelated fields, including the penitentiary system. Competitions were sometimes announced and then canceled, with appointments made directly by the Ministry, while some candidates were asked to withdraw. Many employees appealed to the courts. With some cases successful and the others still pending, none of the former staff members have been reinstated. Reports describe verbal abuse and threats of accusations of treason for protest participation, reflecting systemic political persecution.[1]

Transparency in cultural-sector decision-making declined over the past four years. Official websites, including the Ministry of Culture, Heritage Protection, and Sports, were shut down, and public information requests remain largely unanswered. State officials increasingly publicly expressed their views on art, regularly evaluating which works were acceptable. Competitive funding programs for independent artists were abolished, including support for mobility, festivals, and experimental contemporary

[1] The sources of this information are the court testimonies, as well as the interviews with artists and scholars, including theatre directors Lasha Chkhvimiani and Mikheil Charkviani; scholars Ana Mgeladze, Nino Guruli, Eka Kiknadze, Nana Chichinadze, Iulon Gagoshidze, and others; **See:** https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32974431.html, https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31703213.html https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miWo7g_YNkM [available as of 01 March 2026]

art. The selection committees are currently largely staffed with ministerial appointees.

Overall, centralized control intensified, politically motivated repression increased, and censorship strengthened within affiliated media. Principles of democracy and pluralism were undermined, and professionals who resisted the state's foreign-policy orientation while maintaining creative freedom were systematically marginalized.

Resistance and Migration

Between 2024 and 2025, a rupture emerged between Georgia's governing institutions and independent cultural professionals. Mass protests targeted the Ministry of Culture and other centralized institutions. Approximately 400 filmmakers boycotted the Georgian National Film Center, refusing state funding and participation. Writers, visual artists, and theatre groups subsequently joined the boycott, extending resistance across the cultural sector.

Cultural actors responded by creating alternative structures and securing limited non-state funding, enabling some international visibility, including participation at the Berlinale and the Frankfurt Book Fair. Nonetheless, these initiatives remain fragmented, and new Georgian Dream legislation has further restricted international funding and cooperation.

Migration pressures intensified concurrently. Politically critical artists, as well as queer and gender minority artists, have left Georgia or sought asylum amid growing ideological risks. The 2024 election campaign emphasized "war and peace" and framed LGBTQI+ issues as related to Western moral decay, reinforcing social hostility toward minorities. Artists were disproportionately targeted during protests, with detentions including theatre actors Andro Chichinadze and Vepkhia Kasradze, humorist and stand-up comedian Onise Tskhadadze, and writer-translator Zviad Ratiani, each being sentenced initially to 5–15 days, but later to several years. Opposition to state policy has become a defining professional stance within the cultural field, alongside the emergence of protest art, particularly in underground theatre practices.

In conclusion, Georgia currently stands at the threshold of significant migration, a phenomenon that continues to represent a contested space of political and cultural struggle. The interplay

of authoritarian governance, systemic control over cultural institutions, and emerging forms of resistance underscores the ongoing tensions between state power, professional autonomy, and societal transformation.

WITH A FRIENDLY TOUCH, THE MOTHERLAND WATCHES OVER YOU[1]:

[1] The title alludes to the famous Soviet song 'The Motherland Listens' with music by Dmitri Shostakovich and lyrics by Andrei Dolmatovsky, 1950.

ARTISTS ABROAD WITHIN THE ORBIT OF AZERBAIJANI CULTURAL POLICY

Mina Narimanli

"You never know what they will understand and how"

In early December 2025, Baku hosted the latest international film festival, Baku Cinema Breeze 25, organised by the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan and the Cinema Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ARKA), an institution established by presidential decree in 2022. Mahsati, a short feature film directed by Suad Gara, was submitted to the jury. The title refers to a poetess who is believed to have been born in medieval Ganja, a city located in present-day Azerbaijan. The exact dates of her life remain unknown; scholars generally place her activity in the late 11th to early 12th centuries. In the 20th century, Mahsati was incorporated into the canon of great Azerbaijani poets. Members of the Artistic Council at the Film Agency deemed the film irresponsible, disrespectful to the "outstanding Azerbaijani poetess," and unethical. On these grounds, the film was denied permission for public release.[1]

This recent event can be compared to an incident that occurred in early June 2011 at the Venice Biennale. Two sculptures by Aydan Salakhova were covered with white sheets at the last minute. One of them depicted a woman in a burqa. The second one "shows the religious relic the Black Stone of Mecca contained in a vagina-like marble frame".[2] Official statements were made

[1] Farhadova, Aytan, "Baku Film Festival removes film over 'immoral depiction' of 12th century poet," *OC Media*, 2025, See: https://oc-media.org/baku-film-festival-removes-film-over-immoral-depiction-of-12th-century-poet/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Sharp, Rob, "Venetian mask: Azerbaijan censors its own Biennale entry," *Independent*, 2011, **See:** https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/venetian-mask-azerbaijan-censors-its-own-biennale-entry-2292827.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

that the works had been damaged during transport and therefore it was decided not to exhibit them at the Biennale. However, it immediately became known that the demand to remove these sculptures from the exhibition came from Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev or First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva. The exhibition was funded by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and Tourism. These works were apparently considered to undermine the country's prestige and be offensive to Islam.

What do these two events have in common? Both artists are representatives of Azerbaijan's cultural and political elite. Suad Gara is the daughter of Abulfaz Garaev, who has held various ministerial posts since 1994. From 2006 to 2020, he was Azerbaijan's Minister of Culture. Aydan Salakhova is the daughter of one of Azerbaijan's most titled artists, Tahir Salakhov. He was one of the most prominent representatives of the Soviet "severe style" in painting. For a long time, he was vice-president of the Russian Academy of Arts.[1] Both artists spent long periods living abroad—Suad Gara in London and Aydan Salakhova in Moscow—while maintaining professional and symbolic ties with Azerbaijan. In this sense, they function as potential representatives of Azerbaijani art and culture abroad, particularly when this role aligns with state interests. Despite their financial independence, both artists were compelled to comply with official demands. Their proximity to state power simultaneously enables visibility and imposes constraints.

The Azerbaijani authorities actively seek to mobilise the cultural resources of the diaspora, frequently inviting artists living abroad to participate in exhibitions, concerts, and public events. For many artists in exile, these contacts are of crucial importance. Lacking stable social capital in their countries of residence, they often depend on institutional support from Azerbaijan. Opportunities to exhibit or perform in Azerbaijani cultural centres[2]—or to participate in prestigious international events such as the Venice Biennale—are rarely available without direct state support. At the same time, this system is marked by profound ambiguity. As one interlocutor explained:

[1] Zinger, Elena, *Tahir Salakhov*, Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1980.

[2] A network of cultural centres attached to Azerbaijani embassies, established in recent years in various countries. For example, in France, Germany and other countries.

> "The problem in our country is that you never know what they [the authorities] will understand and how. My biggest problem is grasping the logic, but there is no logic, no consistency. You don't understand what is possible and what is not. Which topics you can work with and which you cannot. Because today a certain topic may be okay, but tomorrow it may suddenly become problematic."
>
> (female interviewee, approximately 40 years old, residing in Baku and Prague; interview conducted in October, 2025)

This article seeks to address the following questions: How does this transnational system of directives and their implementation operate? Why are many Azerbaijani artists living in exile willing or even eager to build relationships with their country of origin? What, if anything, has changed over the past five years? Or do the cases of Suad Gara and Aydan Salakhova suggest a persistent continuity in the relationship between the Azerbaijani authorities and cultural figures abroad? This analysis is based on nine biographical, problem-oriented interviews conducted with artists from Azerbaijan in the autumn of 2025. All interviews are anonymised. In addition, twelve publicly available video interviews were analysed; when citing these materials, the interviewees are identified by name.

Context: The Politicisation of Culture and Diasporas

Following Sergey Rumyantsev, I conceptualise the Azerbaijani diaspora as a political project implemented by the authorities of the country of origin. Within the framework of official diaspora discourse, the Republic of Azerbaijan is presented as the homeland for all Azerbaijanis living outside its borders.[1] The specificity of this political project is shaped by four main factors:

[1] Rumyantsev, Sergey, "The State and the Diaspora: Bureaucratic and Discursive Practices in the Construction of a Transnational Community," in *Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Migration, Democratization and Inequality in the Post-Soviet Era*, ed. Sophie Hohmann, Claire Mouradian, Silvia Serrano, Jacques Thorez, London: J. B. Tauris, 2014, pp. 291- 331.

1. the functional peculiarities of the personalist authoritarian regime in their country of origin. In this regard, the organisation and governance of cultural institutions are of particular importance;

2. the impact of the Karabakh conflict, which began before the collapse of the USSR and continues to this day. For the purposes of this paper, the situation that has developed since the Second Karabakh War (autumn 2020)[1] is especially relevant;

3. the postcoloniality of the situation (this term is used here somewhat conditionally). In Azerbaijan, a common view holds that the country's incorporation into the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union left it little known beyond its own region by the time it gained independence. Azerbaijan was largely unfamiliar in key "centres of influence" and "decision-making", such as the European Union and the United States. Many believe that this lack of visibility contributed to the country's loss in the information dimension of the First Karabakh War (1991–1994). In response, the cultural resources of the Azerbaijani diaspora have been used to present Azerbaijan's perspective on the causes and outcomes of the conflict in the EU, the US, and other parts of the world. The activities of ethnic entrepreneurs within the diaspora also aim to counter the efforts of the Armenian diaspora, which actively promotes the interests of the Republic of Armenia.

4. This factor is directly related to the previous one. The same cultural resources of the diaspora are used to represent the Azerbaijani political regime as democratic and modern in the EU and the United States, aiming to improve its image abroad.

The influence of the authorities on the formation of the cultural agenda has always been significant. The state remains

[1] Gamaghelyan, Phil, & Rumyantsev, Sergey, "The road to the Second Karabakh War: the role of ethno-centric narratives in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," Caucasus Survey, 9: 3, 2021, pp. 320-226, and Rumyantsev, Sergey, "'Otechestvennaya voyna' za Karabakh: predposylki i posledstviya", *Ab Imperio*, 3, 2023, pp. 199-243.

the most significant customer. However, this does not imply that artists themselves do not actively seek to meet the expectations of the regime. Not all, and indeed not even a majority of artists abroad are critics of the authorities. All of the above factors are stable and long-standing.

Azerbaijan's Personalist Regime and Cultural Figures in the Diaspora

The current regime in Azerbaijan was established by Heydar Aliyev in 1993. In 2003, his son, Ilham Aliyev, succeeded him as president and has ruled the country ever since. Following the death of Heydar Aliyev, the political significance of the first lady and vice-president, Mehriban Aliyeva, increased substantially. The president's daughters, Leyla Aliyeva and Arzu Aliyeva, also take an active interest in cultural affairs and regularly participate in exhibitions abroad. Leyla Aliyeva is herself a painter. Her works have been exhibited at the Venice Biennale under the pseudonym 'Infinity'. Nargiz Pashayeva, the first lady's sister, is married to the artist Altai Sadykhzade. Her daughter, the artist Aida Mahmudova, who lives between England and Azerbaijan, is considered the founder of the contemporary art space YARAT in Baku.

> "Everything is a monopoly, everything belongs to the president's family and his nieces. Since [...] 2011, it seems, YARAT has appeared. This organisation brought contemporary art to Baku. Before that, there was none. Our Art Academy is post-Soviet, which is also good. We are drilled to draw bodies, objects [...]. In Europe, this has long since disappeared. [...] We have preserved all of this. And this niece, Aida [Mahmudova], seems to have studied in London and brought [...] it to us. What they do is this: either you are with us, or you are against us."
>
> (female interviewee, 37 years old, residing in Germany; interview conducted in October, 2025)

> "Yesterday, I went to an exhibition about the Caspian Sea at YARAT, which had been running all summer. It was very weak. I left and thought: which of these

works actually caught my eye? I realised that there were none at all. They showed artists from the 1960s, the 1970s, and contemporary artists. But I couldn't pick out anything that I found interesting, emotional or important. [...] I don't want to sound arrogant about this, but the level of art in our country is very low. And this is knowledge that is not coming into the country."

(female interviewee,
approximately 40 years old,
residing in Baku and Prague;
interview conducted in October, 2025)

In most contexts, contemporary art is often highly politicised. It frequently attempts to find answers to complex questions, protest against various forms of discrimination and racism, and call attention to environmental issues, etc. In present-day Azerbaijan, critical statements by artists, musicians, or writers are subject to strict control. At the same time, not all artists aspire to criticise the regime. A popular genre exists that some artists in the diaspora use to attract the attention of, and secure support from the Azerbaijani authorities: the depiction of the country's top political figures. Ashraf Heybatov, an artist from Azerbaijan who has lived in Germany for many years, has painted portraits of Mehriban Aliyeva.[1] Another artist from Azerbaijan, Gunay Shamsi, has also made a name for herself with her portraits of Mehriban Aliyeva and Heydar Aliyev.[2] These direct gestures do not necessarily attract attention to the artist, however, the tradition of producing portraits of the regime's top figures remains popular.

[1] "Mehriban Aliyeva pobyvala v vystavochnom zale «Berlin-Baku-Gallery» v Berline i posol'stve Azerbaidzhana v Germanii" [Mehriban Aliyeva visited the Berlin-Baku-Gallery exhibition hall in Berlin and the Azerbaijani Embassy in Germany], *Heydar Aliyev Foundation*, 30 September 2011. See: https://heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/ru/gallery/view/1/282/content//az/content/rss/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Gunay Shamsi Art. **See:** http://gunay-shamsi.com/de/portfolio/659-2/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

The Second Karabakh War and Artists in the Diaspora

The nature of the Karabakh conflict leaves room for personal expression, provided that such expression does not contradict the official narrative. There is a broad consensus on the conflict within Azerbaijani society and the Azerbaijani diaspora. Only a small group of political and civil activists, many of them consistent critics of the Azerbaijani regime who left the country and obtained political asylum, including several artists, have taken an anti-war stance. The vast majority supported the Second Karabakh War as the most effective means of 'resolving' the conflict. The majority not only welcomed the military victory with enthusiasm but also shifted toward supporting the regime they had long criticised.

The results of the 2020 war have contributed to certain changes that have taken place over the past five years. Since then, many artists have enthusiastically participated in commemorative practices related to the victory. In contrast, prior to the 2020 war, the genre of representing Azerbaijanis as victims of Armenian aggression, including themes of refugees, displaced persons, civilian losses, and the Khojaly tragedy, was more prevalent.

> "You know, when we started advancing, during the 44-day war [Second Karabakh War, autumn 2020], I began painting a large mural, already knowing intuitively, genetically that we would win. And I painted a large mural. It is called *Qarabağda Zəfər Bayramı [The Victory Day in Karabakh]*. It is three metres long. I donated it to the military museum [Military History Museum in Baku]. There was a big presentation, lots of guests. Works like this cannot be sold. I presented it as a gift".[1]

Ashraf Heybatov, an artist living in Germany, has articulated his views on the conflict through his paintings for many years. He always supports the official narrative. This position is shared

[1] Heybatov, Ashraf, "Azerbaidzhantsi dolzhny donosit' pravdu o svoey strane i istorii" [Azerbaijanis must convey the truth about their country and history], Trend.az. **See:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQqaf-4KNkw [available as of 01 March 2026]

by many poets, writers, and other artists living in the diaspora. However, after the Second Karabakh War, some artists who had previously criticised the regime and had even sought political asylum in EU countries also adopted this position. Composer Elmir Mirzoev, who received political refugee status in Germany, describes his cooperation with the State Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Work with the Diaspora:

> "Our first project was with Alekper Aliyev.[1] He is one of our writers [...] who has been living in Zurich for a long time. [...] Then there were several projects related to our victory. And then the 30th anniversary of the tragic events in Khojaly. [...]. It was on this day that my specially commissioned piece was performed. It is called Epitaph. It was on February 26th, 2022 in Zurich, in the Volkshaus hall, that this piece was performed. I must mention the help I received in publishing my book.[2] It is very difficult to publish outside Azerbaijan and talk about our culture".[3]

Successful military operations in Karabakh provided a convenient justification for cooperation with the regime. Several artists declared themselves patriots, expressed support for the military actions, took part in propaganda and information

1 Writer Alekper Aliyev has repeatedly declared himself a critic of the Azerbaijani government. He has called himself a political emigrant, a writer in exile. It is clear that his position has changed significantly. Otherwise, cooperation with the Committee would have been impossible. He now acts as a critic of the 'West' and supports Azerbaijan's official policy. Aliyev, Alekper, "Azerbaijan Will Have to Be Respected—and Its Interests Respected Too," *Caspian Alpine Society*. **See:** https://caspian-alpine.org/azerbaijan-will-have-to-be-respected-and-its-interests-respected-too/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

2 This refers to the book "Between Modernity and Archaism: Transregional Influences in the Musical Culture of Azerbaijan in the 20th Century". Akhundov, Anar, "V Germanii opublikovana unikal'naya monografiya Elmira Mirzoeva" [A unique monograph by Elmira Mirzoeva has been published in Germany] Azertaj. **See:** https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/v_germanii_opublikovana_unikalnaya_monografiya_elmira_mirzoeva-3774783 [available as of 01 March 2026]

3 Ataev, Teymur, "Elmir Mirzoev: Tvorchestvo – vsplesk podsoznaniya. Svoi korni zabyt' nevozmozhno" [Creativity is a surge of the subconscious. It is impossible to forget one's roots], Strength in Unity. **See:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBuSeDWk5jk [available as of 01 March 2026]

campaigns, and publicly endorsed President Ilham Aliyev, thereby 'rehabilitating' themselves in the eyes of the regime. This, in turn, opened up new opportunities for financial support.

Postcolonial Syndrome

As discussed above, propaganda promoting Azerbaijan's position in the Karabakh conflict has always been closely linked to the idea of disseminating information about the country abroad as widely as possible. Cultural events organised by the authorities, allowing artists to exhibit, composers to perform their works, and writers to publish their books, have always been subordinated to this goal. Most émigré cultural figures willingly comply with this agenda. In the words of the aforementioned artist, Ashraf Heybatov:

> "This is my mission. To promote only positivity. Our homeland. Our native Azerbaijan. This is my mission. [...] And, in general, the mission of cultural figures from Azerbaijan—let's not be afraid of this word—is to lobby for our homeland [...]. We are like agents of influence in favour of Azerbaijan. [...] The guarantor of our republic's security is our army and our president's 'iron fist' [the main symbol of victory in the 2020 war]. That is why I am calm. [...] I believe that the mission of an artist living outside Azerbaijan is to convey the truth. To convey the truth, [and] not just paint landscapes and women, still lifes".[1]

Art and culture in the diaspora are deliberately politicised in this manner. If an artist, writer or musician expects support from the regime, their actions or public statements must align with official propaganda. The authorities produce a nationalist-patriotic discourse, into which many artists easily fit. Being a patriot of Azerbaijan abroad is fashionable and meets with widespread public approval. In addition, support from the

[1] Heybatov, Ashraf, "Azerbaidzhantsi dolzhny donosit' pravdu o svoey strane i istorii" [Azerbaijanis must convey the truth about their country and history], *Trend.az*. **See:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQqaf-4KNkw [available as of 01 March 2026]

Azerbaijani authorities is often the only available resource for continuing artistic work.

> "We are foreigners. Nobody needs us there [referring to the situation of artists in Azerbaijan]. Nobody needs us here [in EU countries]. But when we are here, the government needs us because we can do something. Here is an exhibition for you, and you say that we [the Azerbaijani authorities] are good. We give you perks, and you praise us. It will all be beautiful, all presentable. But they do not understand that this makes us look ridiculous."
>
> (female interviewee, 37 years old, residing in Germany; interview conducted in October, 2025)

Instead of a Conclusion

For many artists, transnational ties and contacts, as well as the opportunity to emigrate, are perceived as their only chance to continue their careers. Emigration from the country is particularly important for those who are not prepared to submit to the demands imposed by the authorities.

> "We only have state support or [...] state-affiliated structures. We don't have any relevant independent resources. And there are only a few venues, galleries or exhibition halls. No more than ten in the whole of Baku. There are also few resources for self-expression. This is because the authorities control cultural and artistic organisations and exhibitions. Most exhibitions are devoted to Karabakh and the war, to victory. If you want to exhibit in state institutions, you have to participate in this, work with this theme. Specifically with the theme of victory. That's why I wanted to leave this year and not participate in this. [...] And there are very few artists left here. Many have left the country. [...] That's why I want to escape from here as well."
>
> (male interviewee, 29 years old, residing in Baku; interview conducted in November, 2025)

Transnational connections offer a means of preserving the possibility of free self-expression. No matter how hard the authorities attempt to control the cultural sphere, they are unable to completely suppress dissenting voices. Despite the difficult situation, new opportunities are emerging that did not exist previously.

> "Over the past five years, I have seen talented young directors emerge and enter the international arena. They present their projects, some of which are already successful films, at festivals, and some are already known [abroad]. There has been a breakthrough in the film industry. And it seems to me that with the suppression of journalism, there is a kind of freedom of... It's not so much freedom of speech or freedom of expression. It's not even freedom, but rather a need for self-expression [...]. And cinema works, because it is currently safer."
>
> (female interviewee,
> approximately 40 years old,
> residing in Baku and Prague;
> interview conducted in October, 2025)

Recommendations

It is evident that the Azerbaijani regime will neither disappear in the coming years nor significantly change its long-standing policies. The only viable option for artists who refuse to bow to pressure from the authorities is a well-developed support programme provided by the EU and the United States.

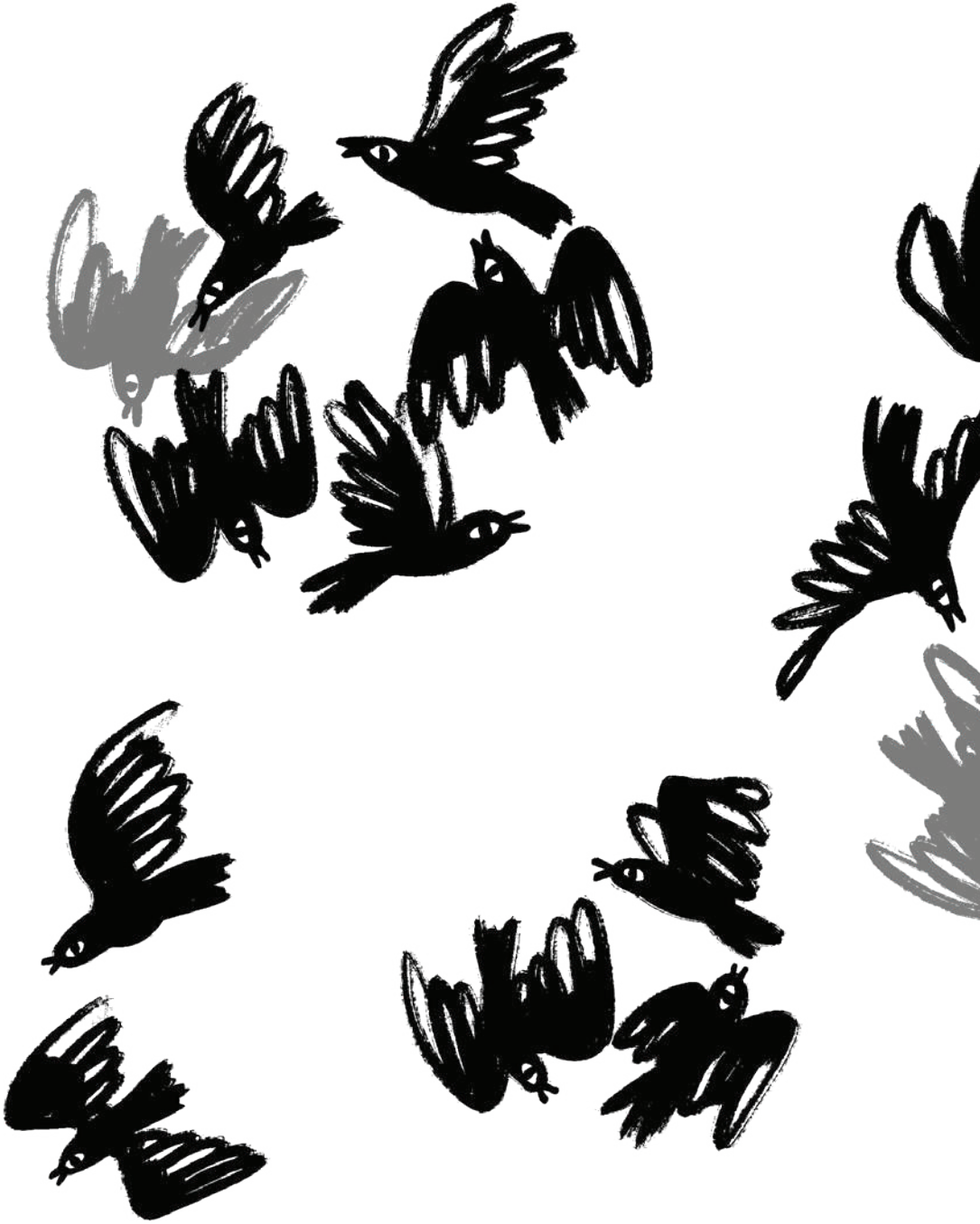
1. More artist residencies are needed, and they should be designed in such a way that participants have sufficient time to complete their ongoing projects. In other words, residencies should not be limited to short-term formats. There is a particularly acute lack of such residencies for writers and literary practitioners compared to those working in the visual arts. Authors who work in national languages and do not have publications in English are in an especially vulnerable position.

2. Grant programs are often limited to predefined themes (such as conflict, women's rights, or ecology), forcing artists to adapt their work to these frameworks rather than pursue their own artistic research. Expanding and diversifying eligible themes would give artists greater creative freedom and support more diverse practices.

3. There is a need for training and educational programs that help artists develop skills to monetize their work internationally. This includes learning how to present and market their art, as well as gaining awareness of existing opportunities for artists, photographers, writers, and other cultural practitioners.

4. Political education. It is necessary to organise educational schools where participants can learn about the traditions of dissent and successful practices of resistance to authoritarian political regimes.

5. It is important to create a group of experts who could inform foundations and international organisations about the positions and risks faced by artists seeking to emigrate or obtain grants.



HOW CULTURE SURVIVES AND IS REBORN IN MIGRATION (2020–2025)

Lizaveta Stecko

Introduction

Belarusian independent culture has historically developed without stable institutional support. After the instability of the 1990s, the independent cultural field remained vulnerable: cultural spaces disappeared, projects existed only seasonally, and artists and cultural managers were forced to navigate between freedom of creative expression and possible provoking repression. Despite these conditions, a vibrant independent scene emerged—the Ў Gallery, OK16 Culture Hub, Cultkorpus, various festivals, and a diverse music ecosystem. This environment was sustained by enthusiasm and self-organisation, which over time became distinctive features of the Belarusian cultural sphere.

The conditions in which Belarusian culture has evolved—and continues to evolve—are shaped by DIY principles, where culture survives through horizontal initiatives, mutual support, and distributed responsibility. The state has not created a stable infrastructure for contemporary art, humanities research, or cultural management, and has systematically restricted or replaced these fields with ideological priorities. As a result, artists and cultural workers themselves take responsibility for knowledge production, heritage preservation, and cultural memory—functions that are carried out in many countries by state or academic institutions.

Economic pressures, censorship, and limited opportunities for development prompted a gradual migration of cultural professionals long before 2020. The events of 2020 (mass protests, pandemic, and so on) only intensified this trend: violence towards peaceful protesters, repressions against cultural workers, and the destruction of independent cultural spaces sped up the emigration

of artists, researchers, and cultural managers. In exile, they faced the challenge not only of adapting to the cultural economy of new countries, but of rebuilding their cultural field from the ground up—now outside the state.

In this context, the DIY approach works like a mechanism for sustaining culture through self-organisation and the creation of networked communities, archives, research platforms, and independent initiatives. Today, Belarusian culture functions as a decentralised network supported by the efforts of its participants rather than state institutions. DIY is no longer a temporary strategy but a mode of cultural existence—one that enables the cultural field to operate in the absence of institutional guarantees.

2020: A Point of No Return

The COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be only a prologue for Belarus. In the summer of 2020, peaceful protests—the largest in the country's modern history—were met with violence on a scale unimaginable for Europe in the twenty-first century.[1] For cultural actors, this was a shock not only politically but also existentially, as evidenced by the creative practices of the period.

One of the distinctive features of the Belarusian protests was that culture became one of the main languages of resistance. Professional artists were joined by people who had never considered themselves active cultural producers. The streets filled with installations, posters, costumes, and performative gestures that emerged spontaneously. Among the most emblematic examples included: the YouthBloc's performance with a symbolic 'coffin of the regime' carried through the streets by a chanting crowd, turning urban space into a stage of political theatre; a performative public 'prison cell' installation, in which volunteers took turns standing behind bars—a way to articulate fear and demonstrate solidarity with detainees; and the Volny Khor [Free Choir], whose singers formed a living shield during protests and sang directly in front of paramilitary police units, voicing out loud what many protesters were afraid to shout. These actions were

[1] "Piać hadoŭ represij u Biełarusi: bolš za 100 000 zafiksavanych faktaŭ pieraśledu," *Spring96*. **See:** https://spring96.org/be/news/118452 [available as of 01 March 2026]

not only political, they became a form of collective voice, a way to reclaim one's body, voice, and subjectivity.

It can be assumed that this is, at least in part, why culture came under attack first. Over the subsequent five years, more than 2,000 representatives of the cultural field experienced various forms of repression, and at least five people lost their lives.[1] For many, 2020 became a threshold after which returning to their previous life was no longer possible.

After the brutal suppression of the protests, a new wave of emigration began—the largest in the recent history of Belarus. Among those who left were many middle-class professionals, researchers, cultural managers, musicians, and artists.[2] According to some estimates, around 600,000 people left the country.[3] Based on 2026 data, this is 6.71% of the population.[4] Significant share of whom had been involved in cultural processes. Emigration split the cultural field into two realities: an underground one inside the country and a diasporic one abroad.

From Protest to Reflection: Transformation of Identity

The first years of migration were a time of acute trauma. They also gave way to a period of reflection—deep, painful, but also productive. One of the key shifts in Belarusian identity was the growing awareness of the need for decolonial processes. This became particularly evident after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 and the involvement of the

[1] PEN Belarus, PEN International, PEN America, "Universal Periodic Review 2025 Joint Submission". **See:** https://penbelarus.org/en/2025/08/06/upr-2025-joint-pen.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Narodowy Bank Polski, "The living and economic situation of migrants from Belarus in Poland in 2024." Report of the questionnaire survey. **See:** https://nbp.pl/wp-content/uploads/ 2025/01/Sytuacja-uchodzcow-z-Bialorusi-2024-ANG-DS.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] Socjolog: Od 2020 roku z Białorusi wyjechało ponad pół miliona ludzi, *banker.pl*. **See:** https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Socjolog-Od-2020-roku-z-Bialorusi-wyjechalo ponad-pol-miliona-ludzi-8742694.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

[4] Countries in the world by population, 2026. **See:** https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

Belarusian regime in that war, which coincided with accelerated Russification inside the country. According to observations by PEN Belarus, the cultural sphere was rapidly flooded with Russian content: theatres work with invited directors from Russia, venues are constantly booked with tour dates of Russian performers, while Belarusian authors are pushed out of libraries and bookshops by mass market Russian books. Through the network of Russian Houses, Russian language and cultural programmes are actively promoted, reinforcing the influence of the 'Russian world'.[1]

For many Belarusian cultural actors, this has become a point of internal crisis. In migration, switching to the Belarusian language becomes a gesture of decolonisation—an attempt to return to oneself and create distance from the imperial gaze. At the same time, learning or reclaiming one's own language requires time and resources that those who have left often have to spend on basic integration in new countries. It is also important to note that the displacement of Belarusian language from public life began long before 2020, leaving many migrants with very limited vocabulary in their native language.

This re-thinking of language is only one manifestation of a broader process: Belarusian culture in migration has reinforced the trend of understanding itself through a decolonial lens. The lack of institutional support and the experience of violence have pushed artists and researchers to search for new ways of speaking about power, memory, and identity.

One of the central platforms for modern Belarusian decolonial thought is Antiwarcoalition.art, which brings together artists and researchers from Belarus and neighbouring regions.[2] As an archive, it uses artistic projects to create space for reflection on war, coloniality, the language of violence, and transnational solidarity. For example, the 2024 project *Sense of Safety* at the YermilovCentre in Kharkiv, Ukraine, explores the notion of 'safety' in wartime, a term which describes rather an infrastructure of care and resistance rather than a state of calm. The 2022 art exhibition *Coalition / Коаліція / Koalicja / Кааліцыя* in Poznań, Poland, featuring

[1] "Rusifikacyja Belarusi. Sfera kultury", *PEN Belarus*. **See:** https://penbelarus.org/ 2023/12/26/rusifikaczyya-belarusi-sfera-kultury.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Antiwarcoalition.art, platform and archive. **See:** https://antiwar-coalition.art/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

Belarusian and other artists, gathers artistic statements on war, solidarity, and de-imperial gestures. The 2022 programme *TO APPEAR IS TO MATTER* held at *Manifesta 14* in Prishtina, Kosovo reflects on acts of appearance as a form of political resistance in conditions of imperial erasure. All of these demonstrate that Belarusian culture in exile does not simply respond to political events but articulates a new, engaged vocabulary. At its core lies a shift from an experience of subordination to an experience shaped by resistance to imperial pressure.

One of the most striking international examples of working with lived experience is the production *Dogs of Europe* by Belarus Free Theatre, staged entirely in exile. It is a political drama set in a dystopian super-state future which explores how authoritarianism changes a person, how fear becomes normalised, and how culture responds to systemic violence. The premiere at the Barbican in London not only recognised the troupe, but also became a symbol of a new reality: Belarusian culture exists transnationally and shapes the international context.[1]

Similar dynamics can be observed in literature and knowledge production. The project *Banned Books* by PEN Belarus is not just a catalogue of censored publications, but an important tool for protecting cultural memory and defending freedom of thought. It documents cases of Belarusian books, authors, and ideas declared "extremist", "harmful to national interests", or "undesirable" by the state—showing that censorship in Belarus is not an exception but a systemic policy. The project's broad perspective is particularly important: the website includes sections on banned books from the Soviet period (1917– 1991) as well as works by foreign authors.[2] The experience accumulated by *Banned Books* demonstrates how vulnerable culture becomes under conditions of state repression and censorship. When cultural initiatives inside the country can be rapidly suppressed, there emerges an urgent need, beyond its borders, for sustainable infrastructures capable of preserving and developing cultural heritage.

[1] Belarus Free Theatre, "Dogs of Europe", Barbican Centre digital programme, **See:** https:// www.barbican.org.uk/digital-programmes/belarus-free-theatre-dogs-of-europe [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] "Banned Books", *PEN Belarus*. **See:** https://bannedbooks.penbelarus.org/en/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

Belarusian Culture in Exile: Institutional Challenges and New Initiatives

Before 2020 the Belarusian diaspora lacked stable institutional structures that could systematically support culture abroad. There were scattered initiatives, but no shared venues, networks, or infrastructure capable of providing long-term support to artists, researchers, cultural managers, or independent projects. The mass wave of migration in 2020–2021 made it necessary to create new anchor points—organisations, platforms, and archives that would compensate for the absence of independent institutions inside the country and enable the development of culture beyond its borders.

At the same time, it is important to note that Belarus has a long tradition of independent cultural organisations that were gradually dismantled inside the country for political reasons. Many of these institutions, after being pressured, liquidated or deprived of legal status, re-emerged abroad in modified forms, with renewed structures, missions, or names. A telling example is the Union of Belarusian Writers, which was reconstituted in exile as the International Union of Belarusian Writers. Similar transformations occurred in other segments of the cultural field, where displaced professionals rebuilt their organisations outside Belarus, preserving continuity while adapting to transnational conditions.

One of the most influential structures to emerge in this context was the Belarusian Council for Culture, founded in 2020 in the immediate aftermath of the protests. The organisation attracts significant international funding and positions itself as a community of experts, managers, and creators supporting Belarusian culture in exile.[1]

Another key project is *Ambasada Kultury*, which arose as a response to the destruction of independent cultural infrastructure inside Belarus. The organisation functions as a horizontal network that connects artists, researchers, and activists. Its initiatives include the nomadic organisation Open Muzej, the PerspAKTIV support network, residencies in partnership with European institutions, and participation in international platforms such

[1] Belarusian Council for Culture [Belaruskaja Rada Kultury], research and analytics. **See:** https://byculture.org/dasledavanni/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

as *Secondary Archive* and Antiwarcoalition.art. *Ambasada Kultury* secures a visible presence of Belarusian culture in the global context, acting as a form of independent cultural diplomacy.[1, 2]

Institutions in exile seek to remain flexible, horizontal, and independent of party politics, with transparent structures and participatory decision-making. In the Belarusian context, however, this work is complicated by the risk of reprisals against staff and their families who remain in the country. As a result, lines of responsibility for public representation, decision-making, or evaluation of projects are often blurred, which can generate frustration or mistrust. In such conditions, transparency of funding and the presence of credible partner organisations become critically important, as do voluntary donations.

The main task of these structures is to provide long-term support for culture. Yet limited budgets create a cultural precariat, in which professionals are forced to work in conditions of uncertainty, limiting possibilities of independent production and long-term planning. Migration might open up new opportunities for artistic growth and collaboration, but it also reinforces inequalities within the cultural field, especially for those who lack social or financial capital.

Archival and Research Initiatives of Belarusian Culture in Exile

Despite difficult working conditions, one of the key tasks of the Belarusian cultural field remains the documentation of events and the preservation of knowledge, both inside the country and abroad. Archiving has become not only a tool of documentation but also a form of cultural resistance, providing a basis for critical re-evaluation of history and heritage. In the context of disrupted documentary traditions and the destruction of materials within Belarus, the creation of archives and research platforms has become a central element of the institutionalisation of Belarusian culture in the diaspora.

[1] *Ambasada Kultury* **See:** https://ambasada.art/ [available as of 01 March 2026]
[2] Open Muzej **See:** https://ambasada.art/Open-Muzej [available as of 01 March 2026]

Among the most important archives and research initiatives are: PEN Belarus, which has systematically documented repression against cultural actors since 2020, recording the scale of political pressure; the Belarusian Council for Culture, which carries out systematic data collection and analysis of Belarusian cultural processes; the digital art archive *Kalektar*, which catalogues the work of independent artists; the Open Muzej, functioning as a 'living archive' of reflections on creating a museum of contemporary art of Belarus; the Museum of Free Belarus, which collects artefacts of the contemporary Belarusian struggle for independence and trains communities in civic archiving; and the VEHA archive, which gathers thematic collections of photographs and consolidates visual social history up to the 1980s in digital form.[1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

Taken together, these archives and research platforms create a decentralised, networked, and transnational ecosystem of Belarusian culture, forming tools for re-imagining identity, historical continuity, and cultural autonomy. The main limitations of their work are the absence of a shared methodological framework, weak connections between initiatives, a lack of long-term funding, and insufficient integration into European research programmes—and, of course, the very limited possibilities of studying Belarusian culture in Belarus.

[1] Museum of Free Belarus **See:** https://www.mwb.center/ [available as of 01 March 2026]
[2] VEHA archive **See:** https://veha-archive.org/info [available as of 01 March 2026]
[3] "Piać hałoŭnych pojntaŭ – 2022. Ahulny ahlad biełkultu," *BYCulture*. **See:** https://byculture.org/pyacz-galounyh-pojntau-2022-agulny-aglyad-belkultu [available as of 01 March 2026]
[4] "Cienzura v Biełarusi – hłavnyj elemient udjeržanija vłasti i total-noj bor'by s 'ekstrjemizmom,'" *Spring96*. **See:** https://spring96.org/ru/news/117595 [available as of 01 March 2026]
[5] Socjolog: Od 2020 roku z Białorusi wyjechało ponad pół miliona ludzi, *banker.pl*. **See:** https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Socjolog-Od-2020-roku-z-Bialorusi-wyjechalo ponad-pol-miliona-ludzi-8742694.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

Inside the Country: Suppression, Silence, and Fragmented Continuity

After 2020, the cultural sphere inside Belarus found itself in conditions of near total suffocation. Repressions dismantled infrastructures, eliminated publishing houses, art spaces and cultural NGOs, and forced hundreds of professionals out of the field.[1] Those who have stayed work in an atmosphere of constant risk: self-censorship becomes the norm, and independent initiatives shift into a mode of invisibility. Cultural events take place in apartments and secret locations, artists show under pseudonyms, which is often the only way to protect participants from persecution.[2, 3]

At the same time, it would be wrong to describe the internal field as empty of significant cultural activity. There are pockets of independence—informal creative groups, isolated research or educational initiatives, and local projects operating almost underground. There are also transcultural practices in which the core of a project is located outside Belarus, while people inside the country primarily consume content produced by those in exile.[4] However, the possibilities of such actors are extremely limited. Unlike the diaspora, which can build museums, archives, and open platforms, those inside Belarus are forced to remain invisible to the state. This necessary caution also complicates data collection: even for researchers abroad, the Belarusian internet space is opaque due to censorship and pervasive state control.

[1] "Rusifikacyja Belarusi. Sfera kultury", *PEN Belarus*. **See:** https://penbelarus.org/ 2023/12/26/rusifikaczyya-belarusi-sfera-kultury.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] "Piać hałoŭnych pojntaŭ – 2022. Ahulny ahlad biełkultu," *BYCulture*. **See:** https://byculture.org/pyacz-galounyh-pojntau-2022-agulny-aglyad-belkultu [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] "Cienzura v Biełarusi – hłavnyj elemient udjeržanija vłasti i totalnoj boŕby s 'ekstrjemizmom,'" *Spring96*. **See:** https://spring96.org/ru/news/117595 [available as of 01 March 2026]

[4] "Klyuchavyya aktary nezalezhnaj belaruskaj kultury na pamezhzhy prastory i chasu", *BYCulture*. **See:** https://byculture.org/klyuchavyya-aktary-nezalezhnaj-belaruskaj-kultury-na-pamezhzhy-prastory-i-chasu/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

Conclusion: Belarusian DIY as a Mode of Existence

The experience of Belarusian culture in 2020–2025 shows that migration of culture has become not a temporary condition but a new mode of existence. The destruction of independent institutions inside the country, mass repression, violence, and accelerated Russification have forced a large part of the cultural field to relocate beyond Belarusian borders. Yet this rupture did not destroy culture. On the contrary, migration has become an impulse for a deep re-thinking of identity, language, and historical memory, as well as formation of new institutions and networks based on horizontality, participation, and solidarity.

These years also demonstrate that Belarusian culture in migration has learned to survive and create according to a DIY principle, much as it did in previous decades. The destruction of independent institutions, the disappearance of public spaces, mass emigration, and the trauma of violence did not eliminate the cultural field; they instead highlighted its defining feature: the ability to rebuild itself from minimal resources, horizontally, in networks, driven by enthusiasm and solidarity.

Belarusian culture in exile has turned into a transnational ecosystem without a single centre but with many anchor points: archives, research platforms, artistic initiatives, and networked communities. This ecosystem is vulnerable—it depends on limited funding, on the emotional and professional resources of people who have experienced trauma, and on the heterogeneity of the diaspora. At the same time, it possesses significant strength: freedom of articulation, international connections, broad expertise, and new models of institutional practice.

Inside Belarus, despite pressure and fear, spaces of independence continue to exist—small groups, underground projects, and local cultural practices. Their fragility demands special caution: excessive attention from the diaspora or foreign partners can expose people in the country to additional danger. Future strategies for the development of Belarusian culture must therefore take into account this dual situation: supporting those in exile while protecting those who remain inside.

Cultural migration is not the end of Belarusian culture—it is its transformation. The challenge for the community is not just to survive, but to forge a new understanding of cultural autonomy,

historical memory, and collective responsibility. The future of Belarusian culture now lies in a network that stretches across countries, institutions, languages, and practices. This network could become the foundation for Belarus' cultural revival once the current regime falls. Belarusian DIY is no longer a temporary strategy; it is a way of existence for a culture that has learned to endure, to resist, and to grow, even when faced with a state that seeks to erase it.

Recommendations

For international organisations and donors:

1. Create multi-year (3–5-year) support programmes for Belarusian cultural workers in migration, including stable grants, medical and psychological assistance, legal support, and funded residencies.

2. Support sustainable transnational cultural infrastructure—archives, digital platforms, research projects, and libraries—that document Belarusian culture under conditions of repression and exile.

3.Fund collaborative projects between Belarusian and European cultural institutions in order to integrate Belarusian culture into international networks and provide professional development opportunities for migrants.

4. Invest in programmes that develop Belarusian-language and decolonial cultural content, including translations, educational courses, workshops, and media projects, thereby supporting the linguistic and symbolic shifts described in this chapter.

5. Strengthen political advocacy at the level of the EU and international bodies (such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe) to: recognise repression against culture as a systemic human-rights violation; introduce targeted sanctions against officials responsible for destroying cultural institutions; and protect persecuted cultural workers and political prisoners through monitoring, legal aid, and international solidarity campaigns.

For civil society organisations and cultural NGOs:

6. Create networks of safe residencies for cultural actors at risk, ensuring the possibility of rapid relocation, temporary housing, and conditions for continuing professional activity.

7. Develop horizontal research and archival initiatives—such as Open Muzej or VEHA—and connect them via a shared platform with a common methodological framework and stronger international visibility.

8. Support peer-to-peer communities of mutual aid for artists, researchers, and cultural managers in exile,

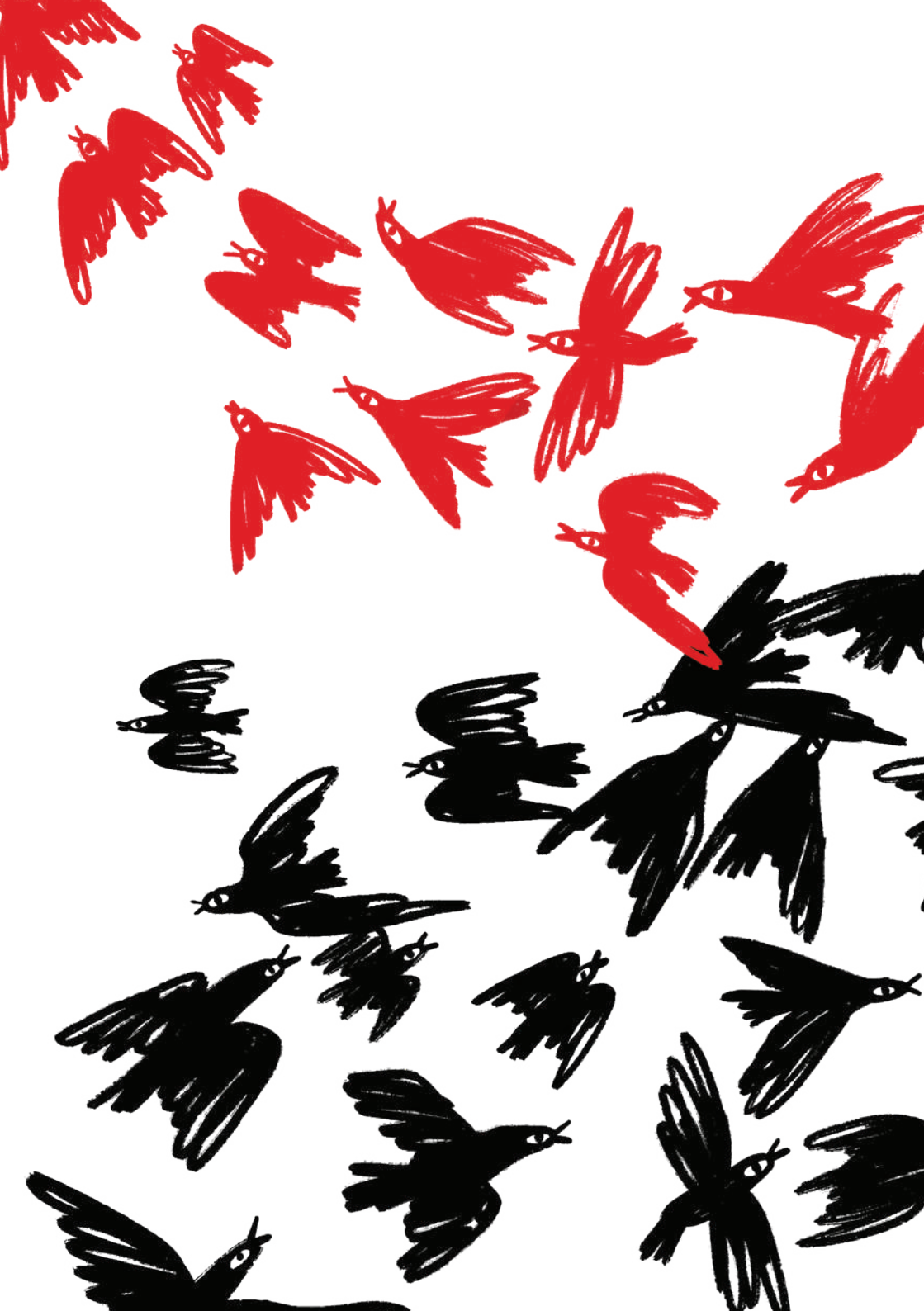
including skill-sharing, mentoring schemes, and shared access to resources.

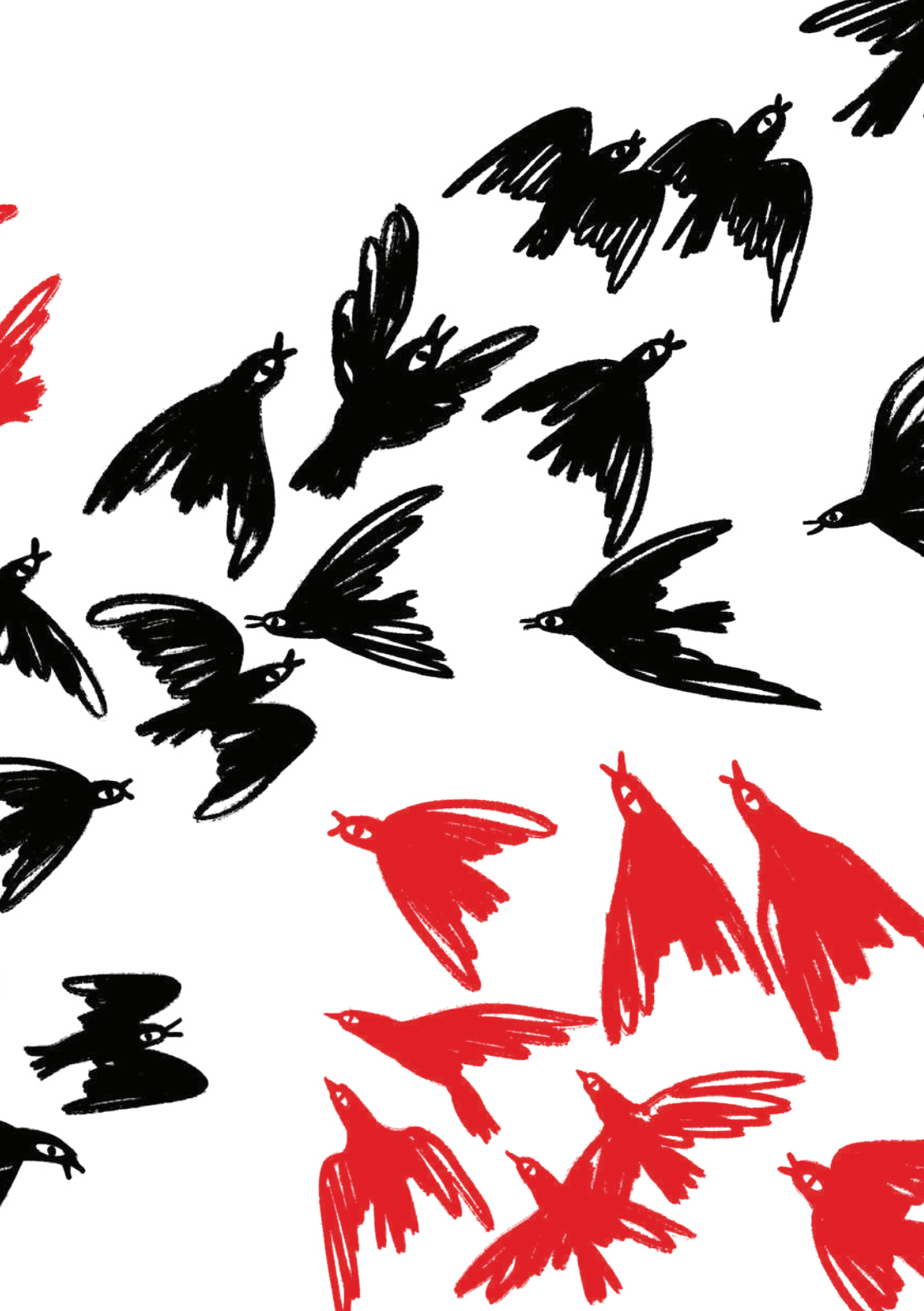
9. Design integration programmes for cultural migrants in host countries that include professional training, language support, and access to local professional networks.

For local and regional authorities in host countries:

10. Expand access for Belarusian artists and cultural managers to public cultural institutions—museums, theatres, galleries—through open calls, participatory programmes, and residency schemes.

11. Support cultural centres and spaces for the Belarusian diaspora where exhibitions, festivals, educational programmes, and Belarusian-language initiatives can take place, helping to preserve and develop Belarusian cultural identity in exile.





AND THEIR IMPACT ON ARMENIA'S CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

Tigran Amiryan

Armenia has historically experienced migration as a complex and multidimensional process, alternating between significant episodes of both emigration and immigration across different political periods and geopolitical contexts. Refugee flows from the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century; forced internal relocations during the Soviet period associated with regional and urban restructuring, including forms of eco-migration; political repression and the experience of the GULAG; professional and labour migration; and ethnically driven resettlement policies implemented by Soviet authorities all form part of Armenia's migration history. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia entered a period of recurring political turbulence that generated new forms of displacement, refugee movements, and resettlement.

Major migration waves affecting Armenian society have been closely linked to political and economic developments, as well as to cultural dynamics at national and regional levels, making migration a lived experience that has affected nearly every family. This history has shaped a distinct cultural ecosystem in which nostalgia for lost places, the legacy of forced displacement, the trauma of exile, and the realities of labour migration form an integral part of social and cultural memory. These experiences are deeply embedded in Armenian culture and literature and continue to inform social practices and collective identities.

When approaching culture and migration in the Armenian context, three interrelated analytical perspectives are particularly relevant.

Perspectives

The first perspective concerns historical experience and diasporality. Migration following the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire represents both a foundational historical trauma and the moment of formation of a global Armenian diaspora that remains active today. Significant Armenian communities in the United States, Russia, France, Argentina, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere constitute a broad diasporic geography that enables sustained cultural exchange between Armenia and Europe, the Arab world, nations of the former Soviet Union, and transatlantic contexts. More than a century later, diasporic cultural institutions continue to play a visible role in Armenia's cultural life and policy through financial support and programme development by organisations such as the Gulbenkian Foundation[1], Hovnanian Foundation, the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), Creative Armenia[2], and others.

The second perspective relates to Armenia's experience as a country from which people have emigrated. Since the 1990s, Armenia has witnessed large-scale labour migration, primarily to post-Soviet states such as Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. Over time, this pattern has produced a specific social and cultural reality with long-term consequences. Labour migration has generated both economic opportunities and structural vulnerabilities, while also shaping cultural policy priorities and institutional development.

The third perspective concerns Armenia's role in receiving immigrants. Although often perceived primarily as a country of emigration, Armenia has repeatedly functioned as a host country within the region, providing refuge not only to ethnic Armenians

[1] For many years, the Portugal-based Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has actively supported educational, cultural, and mobility initiatives, primarily aimed at preserving cultural heritage and the Western Armenian language. Notably, since 2020, the Foundation has also begun supporting contemporary art through a dedicated annual programme արդիեւ - in|view: **See:** https://gulbenkian.pt/armenian-communities/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Since 2020, the Foundation, supported by the Armenian diaspora in the United States, has actively supported cultural practitioners displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, including through fellowship programmes, residency initiatives, artistic publications, and other forms of professional support. **See:** https://www.creativearmenia.org/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

but also to political, economic, and other categories of migrants. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenian authorities have worked almost continuously on refugee integration programmes, within which cultural integration has remained a central principle and challenge.

Since independence, Armenia has experienced several significant waves of refugee reception. The first occurred in the early 1990s, when ethnic Armenians forcibly displaced from Azerbaijan sought refuge in Armenia under conditions of severe economic crisis, commonly referred to in the country as the "dark years". Beyond immediate conflict-related displacement, transnational trajectories emerged as many were unable to secure stable integration and continued to move in search of viable settlement[1], laying the groundwork for longer-term forms of cultural and social mobility that continue to shape Armenia's cultural landscape. A second major wave followed after 2012, when Armenian families from Syria relocated to Armenia in response to the escalation of the Syrian Civil War. More recently, large-scale displacement following the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and subsequent military developments reinforced Armenia's role as a country of refuge while placing additional pressure on its social and cultural infrastructures. Against this broader historical background, developments since 2020 represent a qualitative shift in the scale and configuration of migration shaping Armenia's cultural ecosystem, with lasting effects on cultural, institutional, and social dynamics.

Overlapping Migration Processes

The first of these defining processes occurred in the wake of the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh. As a direct result of the hostilities, approximately 90,000 people were forced to leave their homes and relocate from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. This displacement culminated in 2023 with the complete forced displacement of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. In

[1] Hovhannisyan, E. (2023, December 6). Karabakh–Kramatorsk: *The Karabakh conflict instigated a multi-stage forced resettlement*. Heinrich Böll Foundation Tbilisi. **See:** https://ge.boell.org/en/2023/12/06/karabakh-kramatorsk-karabakh-conflict-instigated-multi-stage-forced-resettlement [available as of 01 March 2026]

total, Armenia became a host country for nearly 150,000 displaced people within a relatively short period. Beyond its immediate humanitarian dimension, this movement profoundly affected cultural infrastructures, community-based practices, patterns of cultural participation, and loss of intangible and tangible cultural heritage.[1]

A parallel process unfolded in connection with Russia's war against Ukraine and the intensification of political repression within Russia. According to various estimates, between 100,000 and 200,000 Russian citizens relocated to Armenia after February 2022, a portion of whom were members of the Armenian diaspora in Russia. This group included economic migrants seeking to mitigate the effects of sanctions, as well as political migrants in search of relative safety and a more open civic environment. Their arrival further reshaped Armenia's cultural landscape, introducing new actors, languages, professional networks, and cultural practices into an already strained cultural ecosystem, while raising questions of integration, accessibility, and coexistence within cultural spaces.

To these two almost parallel waves, a quantitatively smaller but politically significant migration trend can also be added. Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia, seeking closer ties with the European Union and deeper democratic development, has come to be regarded as the most secure democratic country in the region. Since 2018, it has increasingly functioned as a shelter and destination for cultural migrants and for migrants from various vulnerable groups from Iran, Iraq, and Egypt seeking refuge[2], while, since 2024, it has also served as a temporary shelter and rehabilitation space for migrants from Georgia due to the political situation there.

Long functioning primarily as a country of emigration, Armenia was not prepared to absorb such a rapid and large influx of migrants. Two qualitatively and socio-economically distinct migration flows arrived almost simultaneously, creating a particularly complex

[1] Ghulyan, H., Smith, A. T., Khatchadourian, L., and I. Lindsay. *Monitoring Report #8*. Caucasus Heritage Watch. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies, Cornell University, July 2025.

[2] UNHCR Armenia. (2024). *Refugees and asylum-seekers*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. See: https://www.unhcr.org/am/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers#:~:text=Armenia%20continues%20to%20be%20a,case%20of%20a%20mass%20influx [available as of 01 March 2026]

situation. The displacement of Karabakh Armenians constituted an extremely traumatic experience for those forced to leave their homes, but it also represented a profound shock for Armenian society as a whole. Following the 2020 war and ceasefire, the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh endured a nine-month blockade that cut the region off not only from food, medicine, and other basic necessities, but also from engagement with cultural life itself. The isolation severely disrupted everyday cultural practices, access to education and heritage, and constituted a systematic violation of the cultural rights of the population, preceding and conditioning the mass displacement of 2023.[1] Particularly, this period was marked by heightened psychological vulnerability, where displaced communities faced a wide range of challenges that Armenia was neither economically nor infrastructurally equipped to address.

As a result of their mass displacement, Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were forced to abandon many local practices and institutions, including museums, schools, universities, and cultural initiatives encompassing visual arts, theatre, music, and dance. Everyday cultural life in Nagorno-Karabakh had been closely connected to a specific ecological environment and a strong sense of attachment to landscape and nature, connections that could not be fully recreated after displacement. In response, Armenia received support from the European Union[2], primarily addressing emergency needs such as food, housing, and basic assistance. At the political level, the EU has repeatedly issued resolutions condemning the forced displacement[3] and cultural erasure of

[1] Cultural and Social narratives Laboratory, *Conflict and cultural rights*, ZINEadadar series, Yerevan, CSN Lab, 2023.

[2] European Commission, Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. (2025, November 25). *2 ways the EU supports displaced Armenians*. European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. **See:** https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/2-ways-eu-supports-displaced-armenians_en [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] Post-migration trauma and adaptation difficulties among Karabakh Armenians were further exacerbated by the parallel processes of destruction of the cultural heritage they had left behind by Azerbaijan. **See:** European Parliament (2022, March 10), *Resolution on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh (P9_TA(2022)0080; 2022/2582(RSP))*. European Parliament. **See:** https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0080_EN.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians, including the violations of cultural rights.[1]

For displaced Karabakh Armenians, cultural rights were closely tied to access to material cultural heritage[2]—churches, cemeteries, museums, as well as to the safeguarding of intangible heritage. One of the most sensitive issues concerned language, as Karabakh Armenians speak a distinct dialect that differs significantly from standard Armenian. Following displacement, Armenian civil society played an active role in sustaining linguistic continuity by creating platforms for cultural expression in the Karabakh dialect. Podcasts, radio, and television programmes emerged, helping to preserve language use and cultural presence. Everyday cultural practices, including food traditions and community-based activities, also required support, and many local organisations assisted displaced communities in maintaining these forms of daily life. In parallel, numerous initiatives focused on collecting and analysing oral histories and spatial memory, preserving narratives and experiences tied to places that had been lost.

While the state concentrated on providing minimal humanitarian assistance, often with the support of the European Union, cultural integration and psychological support for vulnerable groups, including women and LGBTQ+ individuals, were more actively advanced through cultural practitioners from Karabakh themselves, supported by local initiatives and diaspora-based actors. These efforts proved essential in creating safer spaces, sustaining cultural agency, and addressing needs that remained largely outside the scope of formal state programmes.

The arrival of a large number of Russian migrants also had tangible economic and institutional consequences, further complicating Armenia's already strained social and cultural environment.[3] A sharp

[1] Dinev, I., & Douglas, N. (2024). *The political and cultural fate of Karabakh Armenians in Armenia.* ZOiS Spotlight 16/2024, Centre for East European and International Studies. **See:** https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-political-and-cultural-fate-of-karabakh-armenians-in-armenia [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Amiryan, T. "Cultural Rights In Armenia", The Contemporary Human Rights Situation in Central and Eastern Europe, ed. By Ayvazyan, A., Pikl, S., Dravograd: Institute Novum, 2023, pp 5-15.

[3] For a detailed analysis of Russian cultural migration to the South Caucasus in 2022–2023, see Amiryan, T. (2024). *Relocating the Russian cultural scene: The Case of Russian Migrants in the South Cauca-*

rise in rental prices affected not only housing but also cultural infrastructures, including studios, practice spaces, small venues, and offices for cultural and civic initiatives. For local cultural actors, many of whom were already operating under conditions of limited funding and fragile institutional support, this created additional barriers to access and sustainability. In this context, the simultaneous presence of different migration waves with highly unequal resources intensified existing structural imbalances within the cultural field, with Russian migrants generally arriving with significantly greater economic capital and mobility, while displaced Karabakh Armenians arrived after prolonged deprivation and dispossession.

At the same time, the migration of Russian cultural actors remains an ambivalent and contested phenomenon within Armenian society and the cultural sector. Some practitioners view this influx as a potential stimulus, bringing new competencies, international networks, and formats of cultural production into a relatively small and resource-constrained ecosystem. Others approach it more critically, shaped by Armenia's historical experience of cultural and political dependency within Russian and Soviet imperial frameworks. Against the backdrop of an ongoing war, the visibility of cultural mobility from Russia, rather than from Ukraine, the primary victim of aggression, has raised ethical and political questions. For many local actors, the dominance of Russian-language initiatives and limited efforts toward contextualisations or translation risk reproducing familiar patterns of cultural hierarchy and symbolic domination, rendering the presence of Russian cultural actors not merely an issue of migration, but a sensitive matter of post-colonial memory, power, and responsibility.

Conclusion

Armenia's contemporary cultural migration landscape is multilayered and shaped by overlapping historical experiences of displacement, mobility, and diaspora. Past migratory trajectories continue to influence how Armenian society navigates and integrates new migration flows, situating developments from

sus (Armenia and Georgia). ifa – Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen. **See:** https://culturalrelations.ifa.de/en/research/results/relocating-the-russian-cultural-scene/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

2020–2025 within a continuum of forced mobility and cultural adaptation.

During this period, two distinct migration flows—the forced displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and the relocation of Russian migrants to Armenia—exposed deep structural tensions in the country's approach to cultural rights. Russian migration has largely been framed through economic benefit, while issues of linguistic accessibility, participation, equity, and hierarchical cultural presence remain unaddressed at the state level. In parallel, displaced Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh face persistent cultural rights violations, including the loss of tangible heritage and insufficient support for preserving intangible practices such as local dialect, everyday traditions, and community-based cultural expression. State responses have prioritised humanitarian assistance, while long-term cultural integration, memory preservation, and cultural agency have remained largely outside formal policy frameworks.

In this context, Armenian civil society actors and cultural institutions have assumed a crucial mediating role. Often supported by European Union initiatives and transnational partnerships, they have worked to fill gaps left by state migration and cultural policies, responding to a turbulent situation for which institutional infrastructures and regulations were not prepared.

Recommendations

Within the multilayered and complex configuration of cultural migration in Armenia, a number of improvements in migration policy and the cultural ecosystem are necessary.

1. In responding to emerging migration situations and creating conditions for receiving migrants, **Armenian authorities** have often focused primarily on humanitarian assistance and economic needs or benefits, frequently overlooking cultural and psychological factors.

- Given that Armenia has adopted the UN framework on cultural rights and ratified the relevant conventions, responses to migration should systematically include measures to protect and facilitate the cultural rights of migrants. Ensuring and clearly articulating cultural rights would contribute to more sustainable integration, strengthen dialogue between migrants and local communities, enhance the resilience of cultural actors, and reinforce the cultural ecosystem as a whole.

2. During several years of turbulence, Armenia has repeatedly received external assistance aimed at improving migration processes and policies. However, external facilitation does not always sufficiently account for local contexts and the specific conditions that require deeper analysis.

- **International organisations** and actors working on cultural migration in the Armenian context should take into account the **country's complex and multilayered migration** landscape, including its historical experiences, as well as contemporary aspirations toward democratisation and integration within a European context.

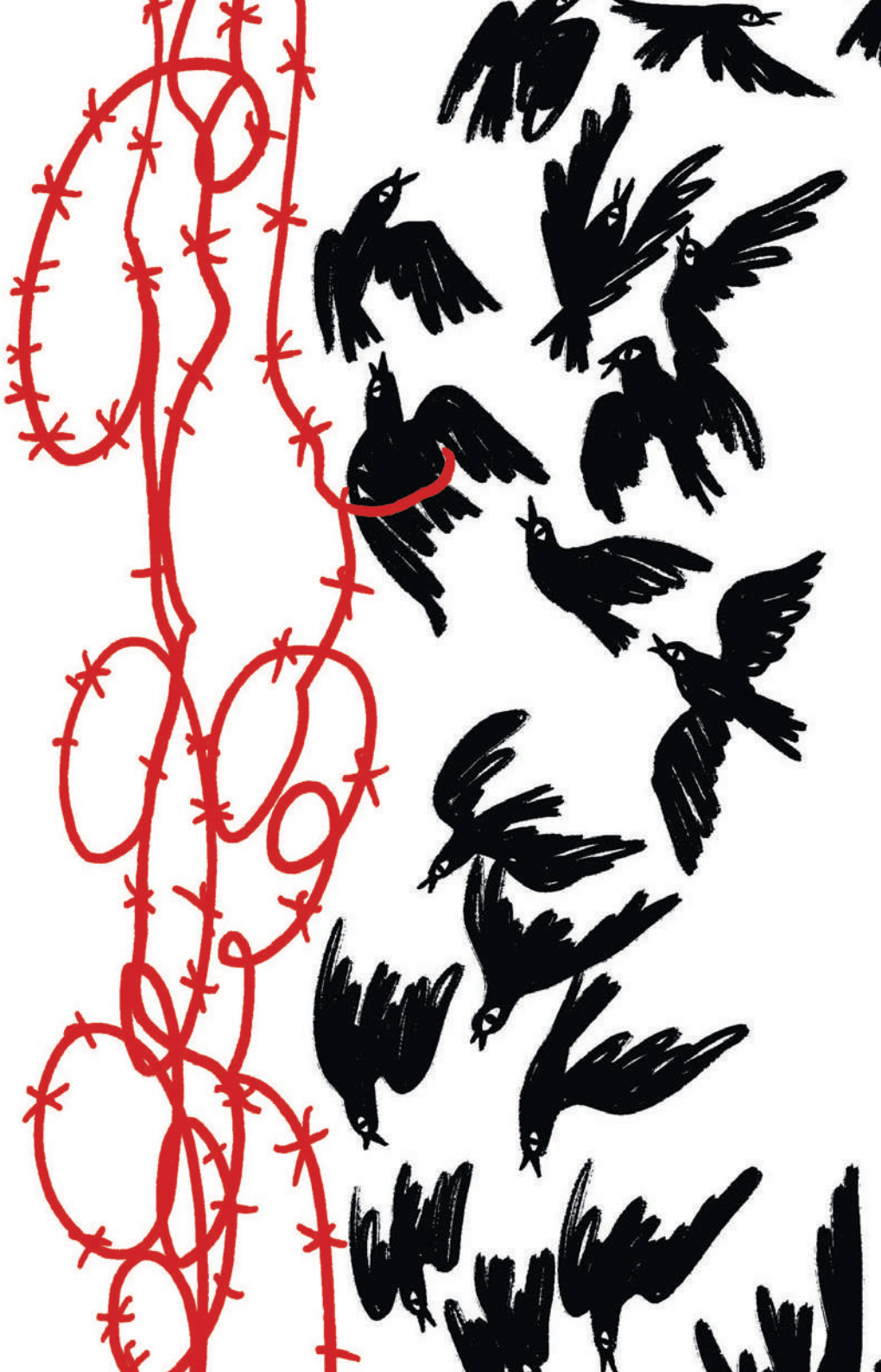
3. Throughout recent years marked by multiple migration crises related to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the war in Ukraine, Armenia has often been unprepared to receive large numbers of migrants in terms of infrastructure, policy frameworks, and

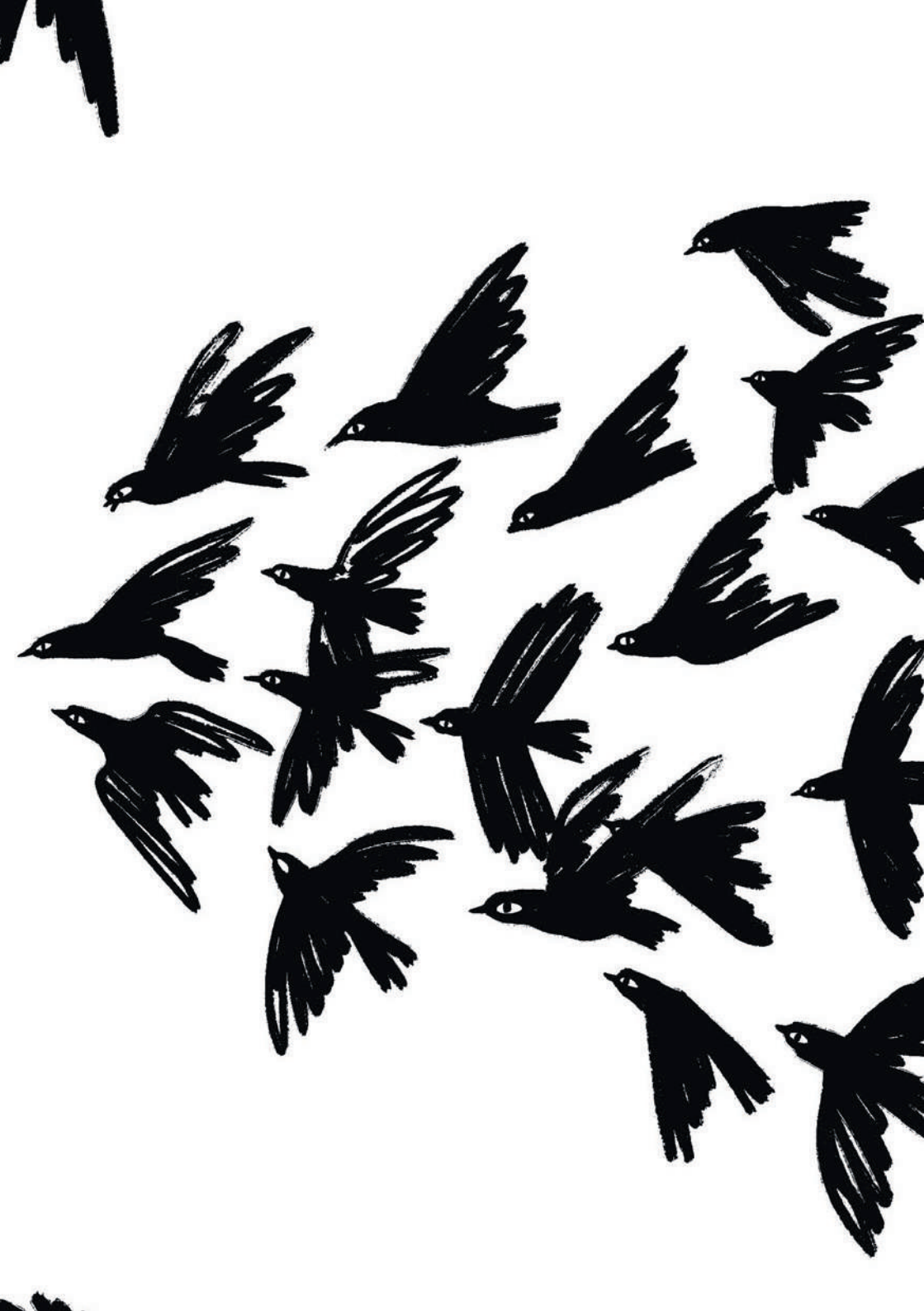
economic capacity. In many cases, **civil society** and non-governmental organisations provided the most substantial support. In particular, the facilitation and protection of vulnerable groups such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and cultural practitioners were largely sustained through civic initiatives and local NGOs.

- While Armenian authorities continue to pursue democratic transition, the role of Armenian civil society remains critical and irreplaceable. Experience in addressing cultural migration highlights the **need for more consistent and in-depth support** for civil society from international donors, particularly the European Union and EU member states.

4. Several years of political turbulence and large-scale migration flows after 2020 have made it necessary to involve almost all sectors of civil society in the reception of displaced persons and refugees. However, not all **cultural and human rights organisations** possess sufficient experience or preparedness to work within a multilayered migration context.

- Local institutions working with migrants should recognise cultural migration as a particularly fragile category within broader migration dynamics and develop **specific policies and methodologies** for engaging with cultural migrants. It is recommended that these approaches draw on the experience of countries with established cross-sectoral practices, integrating migration policy with the development of the cultural ecosystem.





Ukraine

AS A SOURCE OF AGENCY

Marina Pesenti

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine resulted in displacement of millions of people, among them artists and intellectuals, researchers, academics, and culture managers. Many, moving from the east and south (the areas most affected by the war) relocated to the central and western regions of the country, while still others made their way abroad. The process of displacement, which started, albeit on a smaller scale, in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, the seizure of the Donbas region by pro-Russia militias, and the establishment of so-called Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics", which, following the mass exodus of professionals from all walks of life, have become corrupt enclaves, characterized by an absence of economic and cultural life.

This chapter looks at the experience of displacement of Donbas's flagship independent cultural institution—IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives, an NGO that suffered violent expulsion from Donetsk in 2014, and embarked on a long journey of re-inventing itself elsewhere. I will analyze the extent to which displacement defined Izolyatsia's identity and its approaches towards curatorial practice, and its strategy. I will also look at displacement not only as a phenomenon of physical uprooting, but as an *epistemic displacement*—a shift in the way knowledge structures are assessed, both in Ukraine and in Europe, which was experienced both by Izolyatsia's team and the artists in its orbit as a result of their physical displacement.

Re-thinking center and periphery

Izolyatsia, one of Ukraine's most innovative and vocal cultural platforms, was founded in Donetsk in 2010 on a former Soviet insulation plant (hence the name, which is the Ukrainian word for both *insulation* and *isolation*, an allusion to the cultural isolation of eastern Ukraine). It was the first centre of its kind for contemporary arts, in a part of Ukraine otherwise dominated by behemoth

industrial plants from the Soviet period. Izolyatsia was regarded as the main driver of cultural activism in the Donbas region and pulled local artists and activists into its orbit.[1]

Izolyatsia pursued an agenda that can be considered revolutionary by the standards of the day: promoting contemporary art and urban studies, re-inventing former industrial spaces and engaging Donetsk's public in debate about the future of the region. In 2014, with the city's takeover by Russia-backed militias, the centre was violently seized. It has been used as a prison camp and munition storage site ever since. Much of the artwork, along with the infrastructure, equipment, and library could not be evacuated and was destroyed or looted.

Izolyatsia's first displacement (but not its last!) was to the capital city of Kyiv. Despite the loss of its material base in Donetsk and trauma experienced by its team (with some team members even losing family members), Izolyatsia's responses displayed agency, not victimhood. Having leased space in a former ship-repair yard by the river in a historical neighborhood of Kyiv, it relaunched and expanded its activities, re-purposing one multi-story industrial building on the grounds into an art gallery/event space/arts and crafts workshops. In no time, Izolyatsia became an unmissable part of Kyiv's artistic and cultural life.

In parallel, it established itself as an important voice in the nationwide discussions about national identity by shifting the focus to Ukraine's regional identities. "Many members of the team originated from the east of the country, many got displaced. This circumstance led to solidarity and a joint position: to redefine the relationship between the centre and the periphery, to create opportunities where they did not exist before," said Kateryna Filyuk, Izolyatsia's head curator from 2017 to 2021.[2]

The revision of the centre–periphery relationship was therefore taking place on two parallel tracks: the national track involved the deconstruction of historic and cultural narratives, symbols and memory practices of the imperial (Russian) centre, while the regional track meant growth in the assertiveness of intellectuals and artists from Ukraine's varied regions seeking to

[1] Biedareva, Svitlana, "Arts Communities at Risk: On Ukraine," *MIT Press Direct*, (2022).
[2] Research interview with Kateryna Filyuk, London, 2025.

articulate their local histories and identities and to weave them into the national canvas.

Both strands have a distinct post-modernist and post-colonial underpinning, as they stood for more plurality and hybridity as the basis of Ukraine's overarching sense of identity. "There's no such thing as 'the voice of Donbas'[1], maintained Lyubov Mikhailova, Izolyatsia's founder, referring to the ethnic and cultural mix hidden behind the cliché of the region as simply the Soviet 'industrial heartland'.

Izolyatsia thrust itself into the centre of this process by launching *Donbas Studies*[2], an interdisciplinary research project focused on art practice, debate, and publishing related to Donbas and at the intersection of history, anthropology, arts, and urban and environmental studies. This drive was dictated by the state's perceived inability to shape cultural policy towards the region. The organisation turned its gaze towards Donbas's smaller industrial towns by supporting local history and urban regeneration projects, opening up these places for residencies and encouraging cultural activism.[3]

Soon after establishing its base in the Ukrainian capital, Izolyatsia gave floor to displaced artists from the east of the country, and its curatorial team encouraged them to reflect on the trauma of displacement. In 2016, it unveiled the exhibition *Reconstruction of Memory*[4], which featured memory objects of memories contributed by eleven Ukrainian artists from Donbas and Crimea who had had to leave their homes without any hope of return, and in some cases without the possibility of taking any family memorabilia.

[1] Badyor, Daria, «Lyubov Mikhailova: "Donbas's single voice does not exist", "Livy Bereh" newspaper, (2014). **See:** https://rus.lb.ua/culture/2014/08/06/275296_lyubov_mihaylova.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Donbas Studies. **See:** https://donbasstudies.org/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] These activities took place in Mariupol, Bakhmut, Pokrovsk, Lysychansk, Starobilsk, Soledar. All these towns remained part of Ukraine until 2022, but were lost to Russia during its full-scale invasion of Ukraine over the period of 2022–2025.

[4] "Izolyatsia Foundation opens an exhibition of displaced artists in Kyiv, "Livy Bereh newspaper.", 22 January 2016. **See:** https://lb.ua/culture/2016/01/22/326185_fond_Izolyatsia_otkrivaet_kieve.htm [available as of 01 March 2026]

The element of co-creation was very visible in *Gurtobus*, a bus converted into a mobile art venue, serving as a gallery/cinema/workshop, and even kitchen. The *Gurtobus* mission was "to promote contemporary arts and culture in Ukraine's smallest cities".[1] It criss-crossed not just the Donbas region but the whole of Ukraine to respond to requests for cultural programming at the local community level.

In 2020, Izolyatsia surprised observers with what might be described as a homecoming-cum-self-imposed displacement: it wrapped up its public activities in Kyiv and re-located back to Donbas—to Soledar, a town of just 10,000 people, centred around a salt mine and in close proximity to the occupied territory. It asserted a participatory stance on curatorial practice: people of Donbas are not objects to be studied, but co-creators.[2] Lia Dostleva, one of the Donbas artists involved in the program in Soledar, explained: "It's not right to go to the region to get one's entrenched stereotypes validated. People on the ground have to be treated as equals, as co-creators."[3] This participatory approach included residencies in which artists from other regions of Ukraine worked with Soledar's urban landscapes and local minerals (such as salt). Izolyatsia exhibited their work and encouraged discussion around it, as well as curating local artists and directing cultural activism on site.

Izolyatsia's audacious return to its native Donbas lasted little more than a year and ended with an emergency evacuation once again, following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion. Izolyatsia had to grapple with its third relocation—its second forcible displacement—and subsequent re-invention, with its team scattered and grant funding hastily re-directed towards safe evacuation from the war zone.

[1] "Community Culture Bus/Gurtobus", Izoliatsia website, **See:** https://izolyatsia.org/en/project/community-culture-bus/ [available as of 01 March 2026]
[2] Research interview with Izolyatsia head curator between 2017-2021 Kateryna Filyuk, London, 2025.
[3] Ivantsiv, Anastasia, "Ukrainians talk of themselves not as of victims, but as of people facing an attack of a more powerful force, says artist Liya Dostleva," 2022, Suspilne Novyny. **See:** https://suspilne.media/286805-ukrainci-govorat-pro-sebe-ne-and [available as of 01 March 2026]

Agenda split

Izolyatsia positioned itself at the forefront of the socially progressive activism in Ukraine by actively advocating for the rights of racial and gender minorities: it condemned violence against the LGBTQI+ community by police and far-right groups; showed support through cultural engagement; hosted residencies for Ukrainian queer activists that were mentored by their peers from abroad; and attempted to break entrenched prejudice against queer people by giving a platform to gay servicepeople.

At the same time, it stayed highly critical of what it saw as Ukraine's militarization and "prevailing ideology of violence".[1] In 2019, it launched a video-series exhibition of experimental short films grouped under the title of *Armed and Dangerous*[2], in which artists were given a platform to explore "an aggressively conservative environment" that they saw as threatening levels of far-right indoctrination.

In 2019, its public events in support of LGBTQI+ voices provoked attacks from members of the far-right community[3] and generated critical headlines in the Western press.[4] This highlighted tensions in Ukraine's cultural scene of this period, a feeling of "being squeezed between the newly acquired political freedoms and the ravaging and devastating war in the east, between the overwhelming joy of getting your own country back and the unthinkable death toll".[5]

[1] "Right-wing representatives disrupt lecture criticizing radical movements," Kyiv, Ukraine," Izolyatsia's website, 17 February 2019. **See:** https://izolyatsia.org/en/project/armed_dangerous/armed_dangerous-disrupt/?utm_source=chatgpt.com [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] "Armed and dangerous video-series exhibition," Izolyatsia website, 2019. **See:** https://izolyatsia.org/en/project/armed_dangerous [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] "Right-wing representatives disrupt lecture criticising radical movements, Kyiv, Ukraine," Izolyatsia's website, 2019. **See:** https://izolyatsia.org/en/project/armed_dangerous/armed_dangerous-disrupt/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[4] Unwin, Richard, "Ukrainian nationalists target lecture at Kiev art centre as far right activity rises," "Arts Newspaper," 18 March 2019. **See:** https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/03/18/ukrainian-nationalists-target-lecture-at-kiev-arts-centre-as-far-right-activity-rises [available as of 01 March 2026]

[5] Botanova, Kateryna, "Between hopes and dreams of the bigger world," in "Between Fire and Fire. Ukrainian Art Now, ed. by Alisa Lozhkina (Ukrainian Institute, 2019), p. 103-110.

Izolyatsia's confrontational stance was illustrative of a wedge Ukraine found itself in. On one hand, it was (and still is) fighting a war of national liberation, and this struggle is associated with the struggle for national identity and a cult of heroism and sacrifice, while, on the other hand, some segments of the liberal West see these values as conservative and as being on the right of the political spectrum. The significance of these values has been accentuated further by the aggressor's tactics of terror, as well as its consistent campaign of identity erasure in the occupied territories.

As the country made a decisive U-turn towards Europe in 2014, progressive causes of equality, inclusion, and the rights of women and those of ethnic and gender minorities became more widespread in Ukrainian society, especially with its young, urban, and educated segment. These ideas more sharply became the focus of Western donor organisations operating in Ukraine, and of Ukraine's cultural institutions and civil society.

While Ukraine navigated its path between right and left, it found itself bordering Russia-controlled spaces of lawlessness on its eastern flank, including Izolyatsia's former home in Donetsk, where the art centre had been transformed by militants into a prison camp with torture chambers reminiscent of the Dark Ages. Here, to match the theory of *bare life* described by Giorgio Agamben, inmates are stripped of any political value and reduced to mere existence[1], their plight hardly visible to the outside world.

Izolyatsia's approach to programming and curating reflected Ukraine's complex and multi-layered cultural context of this period dictated by external political events (Ukraine's U-turn towards Europe since its 2014 Revolution of Dignity and the subsequent Russian aggression) and Ukrainian society's robust response to them. Ukraine forged its civic identity in the fire of war, while navigating a difficult conversation about civic freedoms and human rights, as well as the rights of minorities (those of ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI+ community, and women).

[1] Potts, John, "The Theme of Displacement in Contemporary Arts," The Macquarie University, 2012, **See:** https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/publications/the-theme-of-displacement-in-contemporary-art/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

Displacement as a source of agency

Izolyatsia pulled many artists into its orbit, including those coming from Donbas and Crimea, and offered them a platform for artistic expression. Many of them—Lia Dostleva, Maria Kulikovska, Alevtina Kakhidze, Roman Minin—have gone on to build successful careers in Ukraine and abroad, exhibiting works in the international arts circuit.

Themes of forced/violent displacement, erasure collective memories and landscapes of families and communities, and a sense of dislocation characterize many works of artists who have worked with Izolyatsia. With the onset of the full-scale war, and Ukraine's new visibility in media headlines worldwide, many Ukrainian artists become acutely aware of the need to find formats, images, and messages which would appeal to global audiences. At the 2024 Venice Biennale, the group exhibition *Net Making*, curated by Max Gorbatskyi and Viktoria Bavykina for the Ukrainian National Pavilion, included a work about displacement by artists who had previously worked with Izolyatsia. *Comfort Work*, by Lia Dostlieva and Andriy Dostliev perfectly matched the Biennale's overarching theme of *Foreigners Everywhere*.[1] The video installation series featured perceived stereotypes of Ukrainian war refugees seeking shelter in the West. A dazed, disheveled female figure wrapped in thermal blanket, a young office worker in demure plain clothes with minimal jewelry, a gaunt-looking old lady clutching a shopping trolley—the images exposed rigid stereotypes about refugees prevalent in Western societies. Non-Ukrainian actors were employed to act out the role of 'Ukrainian refugees' on camera, while cultural commentary was provided by Ukrainian participants, exposing the colliding viewpoints of 'coloniser' and 'colonised'. This work revealed an unconscious colonial gaze that the Western media and public harbour towards parts of Eastern Europe, its peoples and cultures.

> "Host societies have a baseline idea of what refugees look like, but they cannot imagine what war is. They start with the idea that poverty is the worst thing that

[1] Biennale Arte 2024: Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere, 15 November 2024. **See:** https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-stranieri-ovunque-foreigners-everywhere [available as of 01 March 2026]

> could happen to these people. They cannot grasp that refugees could represent very different social classes and statuses. Yet, there's a societal expectation in the West that these people must be poor, in dirty clothes, unwell. That way, they are more worthy of compassion,"[1]
>
> explained Lia Dostlieva.

Artists from Ukraine, a nation which could be categorised as 'colonised' in post-colonial theory terms, experience *epistemic violence*, whereby, according to Gayatri Spivak's terminology[2], their voices are dismissed, silenced or misinterpreted, while their traumatic experience is interpreted by someone else, and viewed through an external lens. Furthermore, their physical displacement due to war and subsequent relocation to the West also brings a sense of what I call *epistemic displacement*. Dostlieva describes her sense of bewilderment upon hearing feminists in the West speaking against arming Ukraine—defenders of women's rights denying the right to self-defense to the Ukrainian people. This stance posits that national liberation cannot supersede liberation of women. As a result, lived experiences of the newly formed subaltern group—Ukrainian women during the Russian occupation—are ignored. The cycle of *epistemic violence* is thus perpetuated. Ukrainian artists therefore come to the sad realization of a disconnect between feminist theory and post-colonial theory, which they learned and internalized as equal elements of Western emancipatory theories.

Comfort Work demonstrates that artistic practice resulting from the trauma of displacement is not defined by victimhood. This display of agency goes beyond the paradigm of 'miserable

[1] Kachkovska, Yana, "What will Ukraine's presentation by Lia Dostlieva and Andriy Dostliev at Venice Biennale look like? – interview", Suspilne Nyvyny, 28 March 2024. **See:** https://suspilne.media/culture/714316-vismiuvanna-stereotipiv-pro-ukrainskih-bizenciv-ak-lia-ta-andrij-dostlevi-pidgotuvali-proekt-na-venecij-sku-bienale/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] *Epistemic violence* is one of the central concepts of Gayatri Spivak's theory about " subaltern groups" which are denied access to the structures of knowledge and have no voice. My term, *epistemic displacement*, refers to Spivak's work, but updates it to include the experience of being displaced. See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Ukrainians aided by magnanimous Europeans', and attacks the very nature of this epistemic hierarchy. It deprives Western society of its superiority and sense of comfort, expressed in its occasional displays of charity vis-à-vis Ukrainians, and lays bare the responsibility Europe has to face in allowing a genocidal war to unfold on its doorstep.

Izolyatsia stood in the centre of another facet of this agency: an active civic position in its approach to curating. This activism was spurred by Izolyatsia's violent expulsion from its base in Donetsk. Uncovering the horrors of the prison camp on its own former grounds became one of the principal focuses of its activities. This political advocacy—with demands for justice for inmates and punishments for perpetrators—spilled into their curatorial practice. In 2015, Izolyatsia organized a symbolic flashmob of Ukrainian artists and activists 'occupying' the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.[1] This trolling of real events (Russia's unlawful seizure of Crimea and the Donbas region) was a post-modern critique of the national pavilion approach of the Biennale, whereby pavilions stand for sovereign territory, hence can be 'seized' by unknown people in military fatigues.

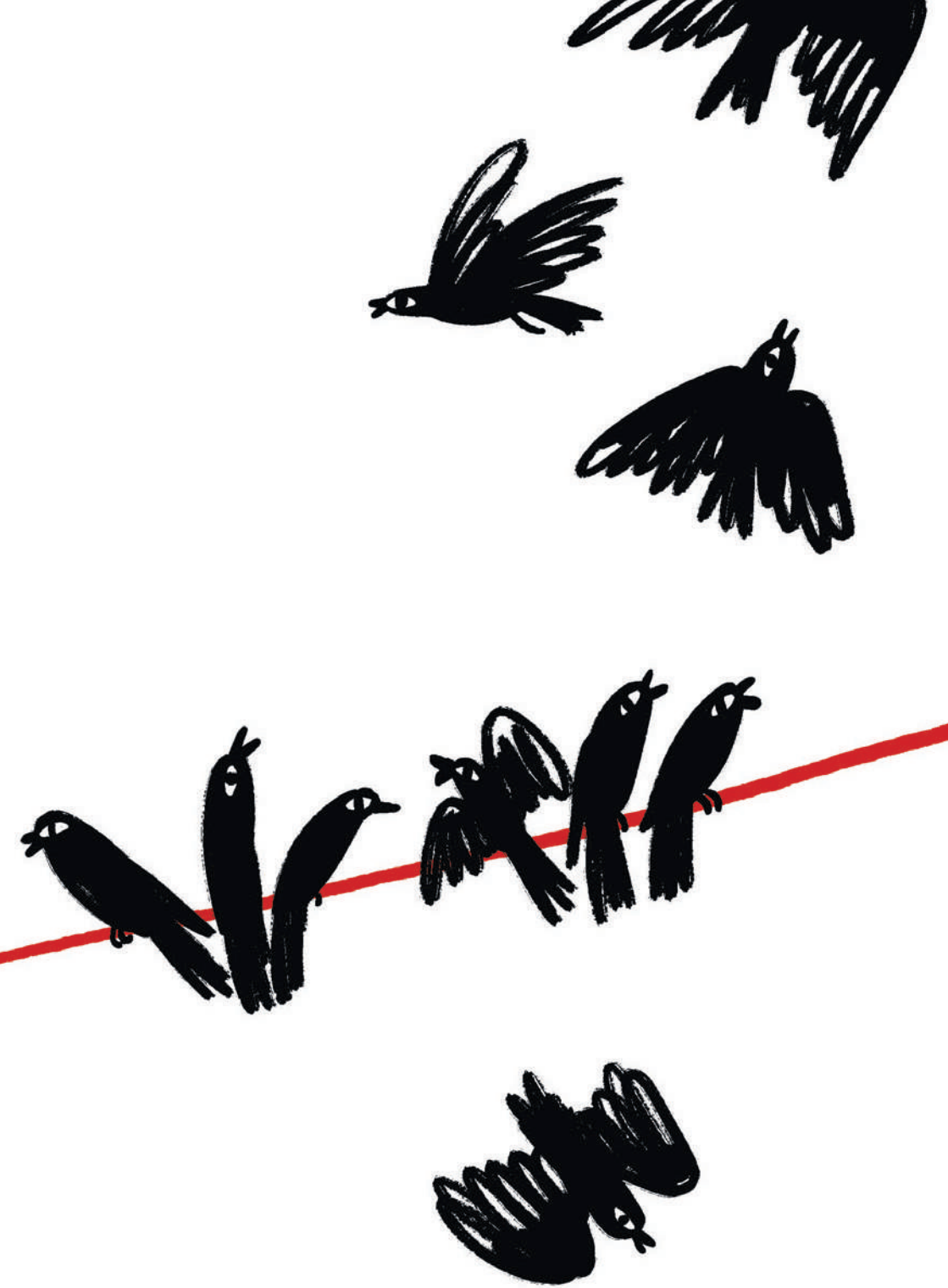
Conclusions and recommendations

The case of Izolyatsia demonstrates that displacement of a cultural organization can result in the institution re-thinking its strategic purpose and redefining its identity in a new and rapidly changing environment. Displacement can be physical, as well as epistemic, as displaced actors have to grapple with new structures of knowledge and hierarchies. In a situation of large-scale conflict, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, these hierarchies get increasingly questioned. In Ukraine, displaced actors have shown agency by reconstructing these hierarchies of knowledge. The violent displacement of a cultural agent, as Izolyatsia's case shows, causes trauma, and this trauma can produce a blend of political advocacy focused on correcting injustices and cultural activism, where international platforms (such as Venice Biennale) are used to articulate a political and decolonial message.

[1] #onvacation, 9 June 2015, Izolyatsia. **See:** https://izolyatsia.org/ua/project/on-vacation [available as of 01 March 2026]

Displacement is a powerful trigger for redefining center–periphery relationships, and Izolyatsia has played an important role in galvanizing discussions about regional identities and making Ukraine's overarching civic identity more inclusive and pluralistic. Strengthening regional cultural networks and institutions should remain in the focus of donors' activities. Displacement of cultural actors in Ukraine also meant that processes of nation-building, formation of new narratives, collision of conflicting (liberal vs conservative) agendas take place on multiple tracks, simultaneously and at great speed. Ukraine must uphold a fragile balance between these tracks. The displacement of Ukrainian artists has positioned them at the center of decolonial processes, vis-à-vis Ukraine and Eastern Europe more broadly, and in Western scholarship, curatorship, and media discourses, and has thus made them agents of change.

Imprisonment and torture, which replaced the activities of Izolyatsia's art centre in Donetsk, are chilling reminders of the fragility of the liberal order in Europe. They hint at the possibility of a civilizational reversal, at the return to brutal force and subjugation, exercised by former empires towards former colonies on one level, and by authoritarian rulers towards their citizens on another. Ukraine's resilience in the face of the erasure of its identity by a brutal force rests on two pillars: strong state institutions and an agile civil society. Both require systemic and systematic donor support.



Moldova

MOLDOVAN OR OTHERWISE

Teodor Ajder

This chapter explores the compilation process of *The Snails' Commune*, an anthology of immigrant-Polish poetry, undertaken by the editors of the Warsaw-based cross-border magazine *Mămăliga de Varșovia*[1], and the challenges that came along with this process. Work on the anthology began in 2020, and it continued, with breaks, until 2026. As of the time of writing, it is slowly approaching a state of completion. In spite of a certain sluggishness in the editorial process induced by COVID-19, the escalation of the War in Ukraine, the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, the lengthy process has also included a lot of unexpected discoveries linked to the history of immigrant cultural workers in Poland. With contributions from over 150 migrant authors, many of whom come from the Eastern Neighborhood Countries (ENC), the anthology, with its multi-voice format, is an attempt to reopen and strengthen a media project in which cultural workers, both newcomers and locals interested in immigrant culture, can discuss and cope with the ever growing institutional and personal challenges they have to face in the new economic and political constellation of Eastern Europe, within the frames of the art world.

Migration as an Intrinsic National Feature of Moldovans

The factors that push someone towards migration might be an intrinsic part of one's culture, and they do not necessarily have to be a catastrophic development. The figure of the unbounded wanderer, of a pilgrim on his or her path, is an ancient and still a potent role model in Moldovan/Romanian, and also Slavic

[1] *Mamaliga de Varsovia* was established in 2015 and published 4 thick annual issues until 2019. **See:** mamaligadevarsovia.wordpress.com/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

geography, which many might still want to follow, in a more or less adventurous way. Itinerants don't necessarily have to transfer their ideas or values. Diasporas too, are often quite ghettoized. Immigrants, however, can leave their comfort zones, and in such cases it is often they who end up as the modernists and revolutionaries. The itinerant represents doubt.

I understand cultural migration not as transference of ideas, concepts, or fashions by migrant individuals or cultures into host environments, but rather as the existence of cultured individuals engaged in an ongoing and fluid quest of gathering and sharing experiences, as they journey or escape by means of cultural synapses, a journey which becomes a culture in itself—*immigrant culture*. These individuals have the potential to disrupt traditions and expose their hosts to new contexts and influences, negotiations and meaning-making processes.

They do induce shifts that might be insignificant, even though some come with great material means of expression, or have major consequences for the host cultural landscape, but what matters is the culture they carry within. However, each landscape is specific. Poles are champions in hosting and embracing migrants, while at the same time, the vast majority vote for xenophobic political parties. Poland also has one of the most potent (although underpaid) translation industries, which ensures at least the visibility of the traces left by the migrant cultural workers of the world, and yet the same intellectual industries rarely ensure the visibility of the traces left of those who live and work in Poland.

One way to translate what the cultural sphere might refer to as "changing cultural landscapes", would probably be "integration" in the language of policy. Let us just look briefly at the definition of integration of migrants in Poland. Cultural workers are usually more vague about it, policy-makers are quite straightforward, and academics, who are not afraid of direct contacts with migrants, are in between. The snail pace with which the definition for 'integration' is evolving in Polish law can be a topic for a separate paper, but no doubt there is traction.

In 2008 the Polish Department for Foreigners, in its documentation[1], defined integration as a process, during which a

[1] Marciniak, Tomasz & Potoniec, Katarzyna, Social Integration and Survival Strategies of Armenian Refugees in Poland between 1992-

settling person adapts to independent life within a host society, complies with its local laws, and respects the values recognized and protected by the host country in its constitution and legislation. The authors, however, considered that the host society cannot and should not be excluded from this process. Therefore they suggested Polish lawmakers look into the definition of integration used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which describes integration as a "two-way process of mutual adaptation of the behavior of people within a group" (refugees and members of the local community), which, through gradual acquaintance and mutual understanding, leads to the creation of a harmonious and stable social system. The 2008 Polish definition was changed a couple of times. Although the suggestion to refer to the UN definition has not yet been fully incorporated, and no gradual approach to acquainting the locals and newcomers was introduced in the subsequent definitions, this and similar suggestions by other researchers were nevertheless taken into consideration. In an amendment from 2012[1], integration was defined as a long-term and two-way process of change consisting in mutual adaptation of foreigners and the host society, aimed at enabling foreigners to fully participate in the social and economic life of the host state while respecting their cultural identity. It was rewritten again in 2020[2], just before the COVID-19 pandemic, with additions regarding labour market and self-reliance, to the extent that migrants would no longer be dependent on social benefits or assistance. The upgraded 2025 policy[3] keeps the 2020 definition

2008/ (In Polish) Integracja społeczna oraz strategie przetrwania uchodźców ormiańskich w Polsce w latach 1992-2008, in *Refugees: Theory and Practice/ Uchodźcy: teoria i praktyka*, ed. Izabela Czerniejewska & Izabella Main, (Poznań, Stowarzyszenie "Jeden Świat", 2008), pp. 111-126.

[1] Committee for Migration Affairs/ Zespół do Spraw Migracji, *Poland's Migration Policy - the Current Situation and Recommended actions/ (In Polish) Polityka migracyjna Polski – stan obecny i postulowane działania.* (Warsaw, Ministry of the Interior, 2012)

[2] Committee for Migration Affairs/ Zespół do Spraw Migracji, *Poland's Migration Policy – Baseline Assessment/ (in Polish) Polityka migracyjna Polski – diagnoza stanu wyjściowego.* (Warsaw, Departament Analiz i Polityki Migracyjnej MSWiA, 2020)

[3] *Regain Control. Ensure Security. A Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for Poland for 2025–2030*/ Annex to Resolution No. 120 of the Council of Ministers of October 15, 2024 *(In Polish) Odzyskać kontrolę. Zapewnić bezpieczeństwo. Kompleksowa i odpowiedzialna strate-*

but adds the xenophobic twist that integration is tied to social cohesion and state security.

Poland has been for some time at the center of immigration debates within Europe. Keep in mind that the country hosts close to two millions immigrants from ENC, including persons with special protection status, temporary workers, students and numerous naturalized citizens. These numbers were high even before the last five years of hardships and the millions of war refugees from Ukraine and an increase in the refuge of political emigres from Belarus. To be more precise, just before COVID, there were over a million temporary workers from Ukraine[1], some thirty to forty thousand Belarusians, and a similar number of Moldovans. Even higher numbers were cited when talking about immigrants from Georgia and Armenia.[2] These data came from the statistics of individual voivodeships and reflected the number of issued/registered working permits, which was higher than the number of residential permits, for example, issued by

gia migracyjna Polski na lata 2025–2030. Załącznik do uchwały nr 120 Rady Ministrów z dnia 15 października 2024 r.

[1] *The living and economic situation of Ukrainian migrants in Poland - the impact of the pandemic and the war on the nature of migration in Poland*, National Bank of Poland. Department of Statistics Warsaw, 2023. **See:** nbp.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Raport_Imigranci_EN.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] As tough and ruthless as Poland is towards immigrants nowadays, with over 8,000 deportations in 2024, and some 3,000 deported by mid 2025, in previous years the legislature passed three amnesty procedures for unregistered foreigners living in Poland: The first in 2003, Article 154 of the Act of 13 June 2003 on foreigners (the regularisation clause); the second in 2007, an amendment to the "Act on Foreigners", and other legislation, Dziennik Ustaw 2007, Nr 120, poz. 818 (see also footnote 2 of this chapter, p. 119). Over a thousand Armenians took advantage of this. A third amnesty was passed in 2011. The rationale for the new amnesty legislation, as presented by president Komorowski's cabinet, contained an outstanding humanism that today's liberals choose to dismiss. "The President signed the laws on amnesty for foreigners" (In Polish) "Prezydent podpisał ustawy o abolicji dla cudzoziemców" *Interia*. **See:** wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-prezydent-podpisal-ustawy-o-abolicji-dla-cudzoziemcow,nId,904452 [available as of 01 March 2026] .
For the third amnesty law, see Dziennik Ustaw 2011, Nr 191, poz. 1133. **See:** dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2011/s/191/1133?utm_source [available as of 01 March 2026]. Note that the texts of the immigrant abolition laws from 2003 and 2007, although originally published on a governmental portal, at the date of writing this are not accessible.

the country's Migration Department or the number of entries for these nationals.[1] Many Moldovan citizens (of various ethnicities), were engaged in short term jobs, and one might argue they were little interested in diasporic exchanges or in the politics in their home or host countries. For example, to this day, there is no ethnic Moldovan NGO registered in Poland. This however, and the fact that only a few hundred voters typically participate in key national elections using the single voting station set up by Moldovan government in Poland (on the grounds of its embassy), doesn't really mean that the Moldovan *gastarbeiters* are not interested in their home country's politics. It could be just a reflection of their precarity as temporary workers in Poland. One might assume that a trip to Warsaw on a Sunday, just to cast a vote, can be fairly taxing. The implementation of electronic voting might probably increase voter participation of migrant workers. Alternatively, each voivodeship's data might not reflect the reality, as many Moldovans, and other temporary workers like them, could work in other European countries under a Polish business's umbrella. Few marry Polish partners and decide to settle. Some Moldovans are returnees as third or fourth generation Poles, via Karta Polaka.[2]

2020 a.

The first attempt to publish *The Snails' Commune* was as a thin booklet with over a dozen texts from a few English speaking poet friends. *The Snails' Commune* is actually the title of the winning poem by Ida Dzik in the first Migrant Slam organised in Poland at the Powszechny [Universal] Theatre, by the immigrant collective *Mamaliga de Varsovia*. The event took place on Friday, January 24th, 2020. It was advertised on social networks in four languages: Romanian, Russian, English, and Polish. It was the eleventh slam on the Powszechny's basement stage, each dedicated to various progressive activist groups and often as a fundraising event.

[1] For a review of migration to Poland since 2014 see: cgomobility.pl/en/publications/immigration-to-poland/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] On Karta Polaka (Pole's Card) and its popularity among Moldovans with Polish ancestry see Kowalski, Mariusz, research report on Pole's Card holders, (In Polish) "Raport z badań na temat posiadaczy Karty Polaka", Studium Europy Wschodniej, 2015, p. 32.

MC'd by the poet and writer Tomasz Gromadka, each slam also featured a co-host from the collective the event was promoting (I served as co-host at this particular event). The participants were encouraged in the description of the event to bring new or older texts that touched upon their migrant experiences, contested discriminatory institutional practices and state policies, had the potential to tear down walls and shatter fences, and empowered humans of all ethnicities that want to move freely between countries and continents. The authors were encouraged to read in any language they desired. The winners were to be decided by audience vote. Up to three days prior to the event we offered the option of translating the texts sent to us into Polish from the following languages: Russian, Ukrainian, English, Romanian, French and Japanese. Some seventy people showed up for the event, and some fourteen authors declared their willingness to take part in the slam. In the intermission, the public was treated to a performance by artivist Pamela Bożek. Known for the setting up refugee empowering social enterprise like *Notebooks from Łuków*, she was also the editor of the bilingual Polish-Russian newspaper *Wiza-Wis*[1] aimed at refugee readers. As it was an evening of living poetry. Bożek shared some of the voices of the refugees strained at the Terespol border crossing, who were denied the right to ask for asylum in Poland. Ida Dzik's poem *The Snails' Commune* was performed in the finals. The text is a raw, defiant, and tender meditation on belonging, identity, and resistance. Through the recurring metaphor of snail-like individuals, Dzik's narrator reclaimed vulnerability as a form of strength. The tone oscillated between rage and intimacy, between confessional humor and political protest. Dzik's language was visceral and unfiltered; it blended the mundane ("the squeaking door of an Uber, whose immigrant driver knows more about the city than its locals") with the poetic ("hug a birch it's yours yours yours"), grounding the universal search for home in personal trauma and social alienation. The poem critiqued patriarchy, nationalism, and homophobia, while transforming anger into a communal vision of solidarity "shared

[1] You can find the electronic version of the newspaper under the following link: Wiza-Vis, nr, 1, *The Road*, / (In Polish and Russian) *Droga*, Muzeum of Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2020. **See:** archiwum.artmuseum.pl/pl/publikacje-online/wiza-vis-nr-1-droga-publikacjaonline [available as of 01 March 2026]

with badgers, refugees, lesbians, priests, butchers". Ultimately, *The Snails' Commune* imagines a fragile yet radical hope: that even amidst hatred and displacement, softness, shared space, and the body itself can become both refuge and revolution.

2020 b.

I had already published works of immigrant-Polish poets previously.[1] The time had come for these works to have an anthology of their own. Over the next five years we continued inviting immigrant-Polish writers to send us their works. We had hoped that the volume would be ready by the end of 2020. But the completion year kept changing in our calls to 2021, then 2022, then 2023, then 2024, and now, at the time of writing, it is 2025. We asked for a maximum of three texts that should not exceed 5,000 characters, and a few sentences about authors and why they are interested in writing about migration. We promised that we would pay the contributing authors in homemade pumpkin soup and artisanal bread, and we were able to honor this promise in many cases.

Partially inspired by Tomasz Gromadka's slams, and together with a colleague and poet, Alan James, we successfully ran two other poetry slams at the American School of Warsaw (ASW), directed at and for refugees. The participants were residents of refugee centres located on Warsaw's outskirts. Poetry workshops were part of both events. Some of the poems were published on ASW's web page.[2] On March 9th, 2020 we were about to organize a third Refugee Slam at ASW. It had to be canceled, as ASW had to close due to the COVID pandemic. Powszechny Theatre also closed, but the slams reopened online for a couple more sessions.

[1] *Sputter Scadron, New Polish Protest Poetry, (In Romanian) Șcadronul șondoroirilor, poezie poloneză protestatară nouă, (In Polish) Szwadron szwargotań, nowa polska poezja protestu*, (Warsaw, Mamaliga de Varșovia, nr. 4, 2019) **See:** drive.google.com/file/d/1BXUjR-fnKq0uz-plJQxKDM5LgDhpR5GsG/view?usp=drive_link [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] "A Room of Strangers /Second Annual ASW Outreach Slam Event" **See:** aswarsaw.org/about-us/news/post/~board/service-learning-programs/post/a-room-of-strangers-second-annual-asw-outreach-slam-event [available as of 01 March 2026]

Besides online work, we did what many other Poles did: stayed in segmented cues at supermarkets, watched our kids as they were struggling with forced online classes, ordered many books, read some of them, and began writing journals. In my case, the journal turned into the artbook *Całolud [Allofus]*. It was my first attempt to write a book in Polish. It described the immigrants in the pandemics and their attempts to advocate for their rights, including the process of voting remotely, as some of them did in the Polish presidential elections, by means of the mediation of the Polish 'vote donors'—Polish citizens who did not want to vote, and offered their votes to immigrants who could not vote.

...

We wanted *The Snails' Commune* to be as accessible as possible. From the very beginning we decided to publish the anthology in two languages: Polish, the main language of our host culture, and English, one of the many languages of immigrants in Poland—the latter, we assumed, would make it accessible to an international audience. Original Romanian texts by the Moldovan authors Victor Fală[1] (who wrote about his gastarbeiter experiences), Maria Ivanov (about children who had been left behind while their parents migrate for temporary work), Ionela Hadârcă (who educated children in the foreign—Polish—culture that she admired), Vitalie Vovc (a former contributor to our *Mamaliga* immigrant media collective on traveling back to a reimagined homeland), and later fragments from Tatiana Țîbuleac's acclaimed novel *The Summer in Which Mother Had Green Eyes* (as her main character was a second generation mixed Polish immigrant). These and some other texts were translated either by volunteer professional translators or by high school students in collaboration with their teachers and parents. Together with another colleague, Lolly Errickson also ran a poetry club. The students, third culture kids, translated immigrant-Polish poems, but also, inspired by immigrant texts, wrote their own.

By the end of the year we had received a few dozen contributions for the anthology from people I met at various online events.

[1] In Romanian these poems appeared in his debut book Fală, Victor, *Zvâc*, Chișinău, Cartego, 2023.

2021

Everybody was still on zoom, hidden in their shells. There were two important events that reignited our interest in the anthology. One took place in April, when Justyna Kłosińska-Krikel from You Plan Culture Foundation[1] organised Torun's first Immigrant Slam.[2] Another event was *Living In The In-Between*[3], an evening of Poland-themed immigrant verse that runs through the lives of the seven featured poets. In the meantime, significant numbers of refugees started to enter Poland via Belarus. Our *Mamaliga* collective engaged in aiding them from the very beginning, as professionals and as volunteers. Our co-editor, Claudia Ciobanu was working at that time for the news portal *Balkan Insight*, and was one of the first to cover their story.[4] I on the other hand was engaged in organising cloth and food drives for the refugees at the border. We wrote and performed some of the first manifest poetry and recited it during public readings unrelated to migration.

Between two COVID false-alarms, I managed to complete a report on migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, commissioned by *Platzforma.md* and titled *Sliding Into Irregular Situations*. Immigrants in Covid.[5] The Pandemic amplified the existing vulnerabilities of migrants, while exposing structural inequalities in migration and asylum systems. As expected, to some extent, these people had limited access to healthcare, a high incidence of prior health conditions, were engaged in precarious work, and inhabited overcrowded and marginalised spaces. Many governments used

[1] This foundation was also the organiser of the *Culture of Traveling ŚwiatoPogląd Festival* [*WorldOutlook*]. It had four editions and each was focused also at an ENC. Their keynotes were both by Polish travelers, who were also members of the Disasporas in Poland. In 2019, they focused on Ukraine, in 2020 on Moldova, in 2021 on Georgia, and in 2022 on Belarus. **See:** youplanculture.com/swiatopoglad/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Event Recording. **See:** facebook.com/events/437332564018776/?active_tab=discussion [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] Event description. **See:** exiledwriters.co.uk/2021-2/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[4] Ciobanu, Claudia, "Fate of Migrants at Belarus-EU Border Risks Taking Darker Turn", *BIRN*, 2021 balkaninsight.com/2021/08/16/fate-of-migrants-at-belarus-eu-border-risks-taking-darker-turn/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[5] Ajder, Teodor, "Sliding Into Irregular Situations. Refugees and Immigrants in Covid", (In Romanian) "Alunecarea în situații iregulare. Refugiații și imigranții pe timp de covid." **See:** https://platzforma.md/arhive/390310 [available as of 01 March 2026]

pandemic restrictions (border closures, suspension of asylum procedures) in ways that framed migration as a public-health threat rather than a protectionist issue—worsening the position of already precarious populations. At the global level, the article surveyed publicly available reports completed by international aid organisations studying displaced populations. As some in more privileged countries were debating whether or not to wear masks in public, terrible new and ongoing military conflicts were unfolding just fine. Climate disasters and the pandemic itself forced large numbers of people to move, or become internally displaced, just as the borders were being closed. In Europe, asylum applications fell significantly in 2020, by about 31%, yet migration pressures via irregular routes continued—for example, in the case of crossings via the EU's border with Belarus, where push-backs, human-rights abuses, and lethal consequences were just beginning to be documented. The report also critiqued the European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum[1], shaped during the pandemic. The Pact included tougher border screening procedures and pooled asylum responsibilities, and there was more emphasis on legal migration of qualified workers and quick deportation of the unqualified migrants. It might have deepened detention and limited protection rights. I pointed to positive developments as well: civil society mobilisation, networks of municipalities (e.g., the *Moving Cities* platform), the way that some governments adopted inclusive migration-oriented policies, and numerous grassroots solidarity initiatives that had come into existence. I concluded that migration is a universal human condition, not an exception, and argued that "irregular situations" for refugees and migrants (a term used bureaucratically) can be drastically reduced if societies commit to solidarity, challenge xenophobic laws, and support inclusive policies.

The pandemic has underscored the precariousness of refugee and migrant lives, revealed the limits and biases of migration-governance systems, but has also triggered civic activism and offered a chance to reimagine migration as a positive component

[1] "A fresh start on migration: Building confidence and striking a new balance between responsibility and solidarity", press release, EC, Brussels, 2020. **See:** ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706 [available as of 01 March 2026]

of society rather than a threat—a lesson that mainstream Polish and European politicians did not learn.[1]

As the covid restrictions were loosening up, the poetry contests were back. I reconnected with Aneta Kaminska, a poet and translator from Ukrainian, who introduced me to a number of interesting Ukrainian poets living in Poland, some of whom came from mixed ethnic families, or lived in Poland and had moved to another country in the meantime, like Chrystyna Zanyk, Daryna Popil, Natalia Tkaczyk, Ulana Charpe, and the Belarusian-born Kasia Ioffe.

The beginning of the pandemic meant also a democratisation of grants. A variety of small grants were suddenly potentially available to more marginal creators, which lead to visible manifestations of perhaps less mainstream artists, including those with immigrant background. One such interesting development was *ZA*Group*. It was founded in 2020 in Warsaw by Crimean-Ukrainian Yulia Krivich, Ukrainian Yuriy Biley, and Belarusian-born Vera Zalutskaya. They were explicitly interested in the experience of migration in Poland and how this country's cultural landscape changed through the integration of newcomers. They aimed to empower foreign artists and address issues related to their working conditions. The group published *ZA*zin*[2], a catalogue of selected art projects by immigrant artists living in Poland. There were no subsequent issues, unfortunately, although only one third of the submissions were made public. In 2021 together with *OP ENHEIM*, Wrocław, *ZA*Group* initiated the project *Artysta–Artist–Kunstler–Художник*, in which immigrant artists could reflect on their work in the context of migration, identity, and cross-cultural belonging. I was one of the guests. The audience was invited into a hands-on act of "stitching words," an active communal experience, in which the participant could sew their own volume of my poetry *XV Igiel (XV Needles)*.[3] I introduced the manifesto of *Immigrantism*. Movement is power. The

[1] Thun-Janowski, Tomasz, "Nie widzimy dramatu na granicy z Białorusią, przysłania go populistyczny i brunatny kurz", *oko.press*, 2025, **See:** oko.press/dramat-na-granicy-z-bialorusia-przyslania-populistyczny-i-brunatny-kurz [available as of 01 March 2026]
[2] *Za*zin*. **See:** ikm.gda.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ZaZin_ZINE_druk-compressed.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]
[3] Ajder, Teodor, "XV Needles", (In Polish) "XV igiel", Wroclaw, 2021. **See:** drive.google.com/file/d/1efyo1-ygA2wZtdQcyd6jLrOMeKo9H55Q/view?usp=drive_link [available as of 01 March 2026]

immigrant should be not just a guest or an outsider, but also the author of new content. *Immigrantism* rejects borders as limits of identity and reclaims displacement as a form of creation and self-building. It speaks in many languages, stitches together what was torn apart, and transforms survival into art. To be an *immigrantist* is to insist that belonging is not granted. It is made, over and over again, through presence, voice, and imagination.

2022

At the end of 2021 we learned that the famous Polish-based poet Konrad Gora, the editor of the Papier w dole publishing house had found our immigrant anthology pitch promising and agreed to publish it. I was supposed to send him the manuscript by the end of the year. I was a couple of months late when the escalation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. *Mamaliga's* editors, like numerous other people living in Poland, engaged in a full scale Refugee aiding effort. Between February 24th, 2022 and October 26th, 2023, more than 16.66 million Ukrainian citizens crossed the Polish border (arrivals).[1] As of September 2024, UNHCR data show about 980,000 refugees from Ukraine recorded in Poland.[2] Many Ukrainians did not apply for refugee status. About 700,500 arrivals to Moldova were recorded.[3] Some 127,800 Ukrainians stayed in Moldova (as of February–March 2025[4]).[5] The refugee stories these

[1] Zyzik, R., Baszczak, Ł., Rozbicka, I., Wielechowski, M, *Refugees from Ukraine in the Polish labour market: opportunities and obstacles*, Warsaw, Polish Economic Institute, 2024. **See:** pie.net.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Uchodzcy-z-Ukrainy-eng.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] "Poland Fact Sheet", .UNHCR, 2024. **See:** unhcr.org/europe/sites/europe/files/2024-10/bi-annual-fact-sheet-2024-09-poland.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] Ad Hoc Committee on Migration, *Report on the Field Visit to The Republic of Moldova*, Chişinău, OSCEPA, 2023. **See:** oscepa.org/en/documents/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/ad-hoc-committee-on-migration-1/4735-ad-hoc-committee-on-migration-report-on-the-field-visit-to-the-republic-of-moldova-chisinau-9-10-march-2023/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[4] "Moldova Fact Sheet", UNHCR, 2025. **See:** unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/bi-annual-fact-sheet-2025-02-moldova.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[5] See also the data on returnees, *Ukrainians and Third-Country Nationals, Crossing Back to Ukraine*, IOM, 2023. **See:** dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/DTM2023_Q3_Regional_

people brought with them could have filled whole libraries. This was the point in which we considered dropping *The Snails' Commune* project. Numerous translations of contemporary and immigrant Ukrainian literature started to appear in Poland. Many Cultural institutions transformed into temporary refugee residences, while the cultural workers hosted Ukrainian refugees in their narrow households. Sometimes the arriving refugees transmitted COVID, as happened when one of the volunteers I worked with at the border contracted the virus. COVID vaccination rates were quite low in Ukraine before the escalation of the invasion.

However, despite the incommensurable challenges, in Poland, both Poles and the Novaks (to use a term proposed by Belarusian-born artist and activist Jana Shostak, designating the assimilated, but not necessarily naturalised, immigrants[1]), managed to face this challenge outstandingly.

Meanwhile other refugees, darker skinned, were freezing and dying in the virgin Bialowiezha forests, trying to get from Belarus into Poland, as the non-entry zone declared a year before was intact, and the ruling politicians challenged the country's constitution, arguably by issuing unconstitutional legislation.[2] Eventually, Poland even erected a razor wire wall to stop the "undesirables", while banning journalists from entering the area.

After four editions, each of which was focused also on a different country from the ENC, with keynotes and performers who were members of the diasporas in Poland, as well as Polish travelers, *Torun's The Culture of Traveling ŚwiatoPogląd* [*WorldOutlook*] festival was closed down.[3] In a private communication, Łukasz Ignasiński, the co-founder of You Plan Culture Foundation, the body that ran the festival, said that the escalation of the war in Ukraine was a decisive factor in redirecting their efforts toward more pressing needs.

Crossing%20back_to_Ukraine_report.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[1] Shostak, Jana, Newcomer/ Newcomeress/ Newcomers, (In Polish) Nowak / Nowaczka / Nowacy, *WroArt Cernter*, 2017. **See:** wrocenter.pl/pl/shostak/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Czarnota, Katarzyna, Górczyńska, Marta & colab. *The Lawless Zone: Polish-Belarusian Border Monitoring*, The Warsaw, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2022. **See:** hfhr.pl/upload/2023/09/the-lawless-zone.pdf [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] In 2019, the Festival's featured destination was Ukraine; in 2020, Romania/Moldova; in 2021, Georgia; and in 2022, Belarus.

In Warsaw, on the other hand, *Krytyka Polityczna*, at their quarters on Jasna 10, initiated the wonderful ongoing festival *About Being Together, Warsaw, My Warsaw*.[1] The curators wrote in their statement: "We dream of a diverse Warsaw where migrants don't need to justify their presence, a Warsaw where they are valued as a treasure." The concept is based on collaborative projects run in tandem by an immigrant artist and a local artist. Although, Wojtek Zrałek-Kossakowski, the festival's director, mentioned in a private communication that the 2025 edition did not receive financial support from the city and that it might be that it is the last time the festival will take place.

2023

Over 3 million Ukrainian citizens in total (including pre-war economic migrants) of which approximately 1.8 million are war-refugees (those who crossed after February 2022)[2], are currently recorded in Poland. Hegelian helical changes are unfolding at their best. The National Health System was hardly managing the stress of the new patients. Rents and property prices have skyrocketed. But, all in all, Poles are doing well.

The slams Tomasz Gromadka conducted in Powszechny Theatre also ceased to take place, but slams continue elsewhere in Poland. In fact, the country's Slam Champion in 2025 was the Ukrainian born poet, Ilya Tandur. This is not the first time Ukrainian writers have received acclaim from the Polish public. Two years earlier, Walery Butewicz, known for his aphorisms on social media, won the national literary contest for a pandemic diary organized by the Institute of Literature. His text *The Charm of the Plague Diary* was published in the collection *The World in the Risk Group*.[3] Jana

[1] Warsaw, My Warsaw | a festival about being together, (In Polish) Warszawo, Moja Warszawo | festiwal o byciu razem. **See:** warszawa.krytykapolityczna.pl/dzialanie/wmw/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Korzeniewski, Krzysztof, Shkilna, Mariia & Colab. "Ukrainian war refugees and migrants in Poland: implications for public health" *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 8;31(1), 2023. **See:** pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10823480/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] Butewicz, Walery, *The World in the Risk Group*, (In Polish) Świat w grupie ryzyka, (Cracow, Instytut Literatury, 2021). Also available as an ebook.

Shostak was awarded *Polityka* magazine's prestigious *Passport* in the visual arts category. Shostak, although very involved in helping both Ukrainian and Belarusian refugees entering Poland, as well as the families of political prisoners in Belarus, managed to write and perform a few times *Krzykucha* (The Screameress). A *Stand-Up (for Your Rights) Comedy*[1], a darkly humorous solo show combining her personal story and documentary testimonies to critique the Belarusian regime, and the way it choked the post-2020 protests. Belarusian born, Ala Savashevich became the winner of the Warsaw Gallery Weekend in 2021 for the work *Poza. Pozycja. Sposób* [*Pose. Position. Approach*], which was featured in the *Identity Inscriptions* exhibition at the Biuro Wystaw Gallery (BWA). The gallery dedicated a lot of exhibition space to immigrant artists from Belarus, not just in exhibitions, but also, showcases and conferences.[2] It is run to this day by the Armenian-born, immigrant curator Sarmen Beglarian. What is less known is that he is also a poet.

I introduced Iza Dzik's *The Snails' Commune* in Russian, English and Romanian translations during a three-day long exhibition of the *Lacuna Migrant Gallery*, in Chișinău, Moldova.[3] Throughout the same event, the snails drawn by Warsaw-based artist Tamara Fernandez met the giant *lissachatina fulica* snail photographed on a human child by Tusea Jurminskaia.

2024

Over a hundred living immigrant poets had been invited to contribute to *Snails' Commune*, and a work promoting immigrant writing in Poland was beginning to gain shape, but I also discovered a few dozen immigrant writers who had lived in and written about Poland

[1] Lis, Renata, "The Screameress Does Not Scream", (In Polish) "Krzykucha nie krzyczy", *Dwutygodnik*, nr. 317, September, 2021. **See:** dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9712-krzykucha-nie-krzyczy.html [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] BWA is not the only venue accessible to immigrant artists see also Kaliaha, Valeryia, "The Art of Corporeality: Belarusian Artists at Warsaw Gallery Weekend", *Arthub*, 2024, **See:** art-hub-magazine.com/2024/09/02/the-art-of-corporeality-belarusian-artists-at-warsaw-gallery-weekend/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] Munteanu, Diana, "Recohession, an Ap-art Review", (In Romanian) "Recoeziune – o cronică de apartamentă" *CSCI*, 2023. **See:** culturaindependenta.md/cronica-apartament/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

(or snails) over the last 70 years, or even earlier. I saw these too as valuable context for the publication, and so I set about organizing them into usable fragments together with the contemporary works. Some of these discoveries, however, were problematic. The Azerbaijani poet Abbasgulu Bakikhanov[1], who wrote some of his most famous poems in Warsaw, was also an officer of the Russian Empire, an active member of an occupying army. The Soviet-Moldovan-Jewish poet Iosif Bălțan, might be an awkward read today as well, although he was a translator from Polish, probably through Russian, into Romanian, and pioneered Polish contemporary and classic literature in Moldova. He came to Poland as a soldier of the Soviet Army, fought against the Nazis, and was wounded in Poland, but he also had to stop, along with the rest of the Soviet Army soldiers, on the Praga bank of the Wistula River to wait and watch as the Nazis slaughtered the Polish citizens involved in the uprising, and as they demolished the already ravaged city.

Also, the later dissident and political refugee Vladimir Voinovich spent a few years in Poland as a conscript. He started to write poetry and even received some acknowledgement for it in the Soviet military press of the time. In his later memoir, *Autoportret* (2007), after he had gradually and famously become aware of the imperialistic tendencies of USSR, he decided to shorten by one stanza one of the poems that had been previously published in the Soviet-era novel *Two Comrades*, arguably because the way that the Soviet Army had liberated Warsaw was becoming progressively questionable. The following quatrain was eliminated from the memoir, but exists in the Russian original and the Polish translation of the *Two Comrades* [my translation].

He fought through all the wartime strife,
He knows the wail of shells.
He liberated Warsaw, risked his life,
And also stormed Berlin.

[1] Some of the poems in his "Asrar al-Malakut" (The Secrets of Heavens) were apparently written in Warsaw, in Arabic language. See Akhmedov, E. M. "Introductory article, compilation and preparation of texts, as well as notes and instructions" — In Bakikhanov, Abbasgulu, *Works, notes, letters*, Baku: Elm, 1983. (In Russian) А. К. Бакиханов. Сочинения, записки, письма / Вступительная статья, составление и подготовка текстов, а также примечания и указания Э. М. Ахмедова. — Баку: Элм, 1983.

Is it ethical, in this context, to consider for inclusion those poets associated with the Nazi regime, who lived in Poland and wrote about its land covered in blood, though almost exclusively through the lens of German expansionism (*Lebensraum*) and the justification of the 1939 invasion? Did these authors think of themselves as immigrant writers?[1] Or perhaps, they considered themselves in the terms of what we would call today *expats*—in other words, qualified workers commissioned abroad? Among these were Gerhard Schumann (see his collection *Die Lieder vom Krieg* [*The Songs of War*] 1941). Schumann framed the war not as an act of aggression, but as a "destined" return of the East to German hands. Hanns Jost, another poet laureate, mused about the coming impact of the "German plough" upon the flat, open landscape, while riding with his famous friend Heinrich Himmler through occupied Poland.[2] Or the Swiss-born (and therefore also already an immigrant) Heinrich Anacker, celebrating the grandness of the war and praising the leader of the invaders.[3] They, and others like them, intentionally ignored Polish Culture, describing the land as "neglected" or "wild", until the arrival of German order. Their writings often dehumanized the Poles, while romanticizing the "blood and soil" of the Polish landscape as fundamentally Germanic.

On the other hand, there were also poets like the half-Armenian, half-Georgian, and also Soviet poet and bard, Bulat Okudjawa, who had a very different—intimate, one might say—relationship with Poland. He befriended and dedicated poems to the contestants of the people's regime, and was very much inspired by them, as well as by the new Poland that they were envisioning. Also fairly unknown, but nonetheless important, are texts by Gertrud Kolmar[4], born in a family of Polish Jews who immigrated to Berlin. She was

[1] Many of these texts were connected to the immigrant-specific idea of journeying, and its transformative power, in Schoeps, Karl-Heinz, Dell'Orto, Kathleen M.(Translator), "Literature and Film in the Third Reich", Camden House, Boydell & Brewer Inc., 2003, p.177

[2] "Johst, Hanns Ruf des Reiches, *Echo des Volkes*, 6th ed. Munich, 1942, p. 86. Cited in Furber, David, Lower, Wendy, "Colonialism and Genocide in Nazi-Occupied Poland and Ukraine", in A. Dirk Moses (Ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide (War and Genocide)*, (New York, Berghahn Books,2014, ebook).

[3] See footnote 35, p.173

[4] See Kolmar [i.e. G. Chodziesner], Gertrud, Smith, Henry A., (Translator) "Dark soliloquy : the selected poems of Gertrud Kolmar" (New York, The Seabury Press, A Continuum book, 1975.)

arrested and sent back to Poland, where she died in Auschwitz, probably immediately after her arrival. Or should we consider the essay "I Am a Slav" written by the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachman, probably during her visit to Poland in 1973[1], as another example of empathic and non-violent literary discourse?

Finally, in two untitled short poems in a book by the Moldovan Emilian Bukov[2], the words "snail" and "commune" follow each other smoothly, just like in Ida Dzik's poem. At first reading, Bukov is using the metaphor of the snail to describe a disengaged individual, perhaps a non-communist or a selfish member of the bourgeoisie, who is concerned with his own emotional life and little pleasures, while ignoring the pain and the struggles of others. One could, however, go further and speculate that Bukov is aiming with his snail metaphor at the members of communist nomenklatura—in other words, the privileged and profiting middle and upper middle class of the Soviet Union. This was possible, arguably, due to the Khrushchev thaw. Bukov is using the metaphor in a similar way to Panait Istrati[3], the Romanian bolshevik writer who was once banished from the Communist party and ostracized, and one of the first leftist critics of the newly established USSR. It is conceivable that Bukov knew Istrati's texts. The word "commune" is also used in another poem by Bukov, and both times in a spectacular and celebratory fashion. In one of these poems, Bukov underlines his affinity with the poorer, but also purerer, and engaged class. Interestingly, he is accomplishing this not just by sharing that the

[1] Kuczyński, Krzysztof A., "Ingeborg Bachmann's Trip to Poland" (In German)"Ingeborg Bachmanns Polenreise", Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria, 1984/11. **See:** bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/1034728 [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] In Bukov (Bucov), Emilian, *Today and the Days of Tomorrow*, (In Romanian) *Zile de azi, zile de mâine* (Chișinău, Cartea Moldovenească, 1965). pp. 49-51.

[3] Panait Istrati's 1927 reportage *The Confession of a Loser*, translated into English as Istrati, Panait, *Russia Unveiled*, by Curtis, R. J. S., (Westport, Connecticut, Hyperion Press, 1975, Reprint). "Poor world... Poor art... Poor human conscience. How wretched you are, how contemptible! A little bone for your stomach and a crumb of vanity for your barren heart are enough for you, they overwhelm you with happiness and ease, making you blind, deaf, and mute, turning you into slugs, (he is using the word limax which also served as a root for the Polish word *slimak* [snail]) making you forget the suffering poured out by tyrants over the entire earth. **See:** https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Spovedania_unui_%C3%AEnvins [available as of 01 March 2026]

poem's protagonist's pockets were empty, but that he owns no foreign currency either, probably hinting subversively at the hunts for foreign spies, a pretext for arresting and deporting so many Soviet citizens.

The discovery of Bukov's poems was a sign that the work on The Snails' Commune was approaching the closing of an arc.

...

In one of Chisinau's few alternative cultural spaces, Zemstei House, as part of *Alternative Spaces* cultural festival, some dozen wonderful blue denim snails were showcased. They were a result of five workshops set up for younger Ukrainian refugees that had resettled in Moldova, together with their local peers. It was organized by Iulia Panzari, an art educator, actress and director of performance-based practices. She mentioned, in a private interview for this chapter, that she is very fond of snails, of their beauty and the fractal features of their shells that draw themselves without any intellectual "management". During the workshop, the snail functioned as a totem of survival and flexibility. It faces reality in a straightforward way, overconfident perhaps in the thickness of its shell and leaving a continuous trace. The project was entitled *My Snail* and the sessions were held in a children's creative studio called *The Enchanted Forest*, in April 2022, in Chişinău. Everybody has a pair of jeans that have been worn for a long time, that served faithfully and deserve a better fate than simply being thrown away—why not make some teddy snails? The snails became flagship symbols of direction and optimism in constructing new "personal spaces" in Moldova. All the little snails turned out differently, each with its own character and individuality. Each had a name and a destination. "This is Eva the snail, and she's crawling to the swimming pool"; "My snail has a secret name, and she's going to a party"; "This snail is a nonconformist, and she's heading to the gym." After the exhibition, the children took their snails home. Pinzari hoped the snails they made will help the participating adolescents to make good life decisions. She also showed them that enchanted forests do exist, and that often they are the creation of our own hands and wishes.

October, 2025

These days, activists hardly write about what is happening on the Polish-Belarusian border. Some retreat into a *deep internal emigration*.[1] The breaking of the law by the Polish army[2], border guards and the ruling politicians, by introducing *brownish*[3] amendments to the existing regulations or decisions has become the accepted norm—the suspension of the right to asylum in Poland, the buffer zone at the Polish–Belarusian border, the prosecution of activists involved in humanitarian aid to refugees, and so on. Prime Minister Donald Tusk even mentioned a withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights[4], as new bodies are unearthed in the vicinity of the some 200 km-long wall built in Bialoviezha Forest. The remains of 103 bodies were just found in the area at the time of writing.

On a better note, a first-instance ruling in the case of the so-called "Hajnówka Five"[5] was a partial antidote to the fairly poisonous political atmosphere that is spreading like a COVID pandemic in Poland. The court mentioned in its acquittal declaration for the activists—accused by the state prosecutors of bringing humanitarian help—that the established law has supremacy over enacted law, meaning that the court should note in its judgment that the amendments added during the rule of the right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) Party [Law and Justice Party] and

[1] This is a paraphrase from a post on facebook by the lawyer and human right advocate Kamil Syller. **See:** facebook.com/kamil.syller/posts/2492015593427946 9?ref=embed_post [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] Skibińska, Regina, "7 months without asylum. What is the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border?" (In Polish) "7 miesięcy bez prawa do azylu. Jaka jest sytuacja na granicy", *Oko.press*, 2025. **See:** polsko-białoruskiej?oko.press/7-miesiecy-bez-prawa-do-azylu-jaka-jest-sytuacja-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej? [available as of 01 March 2026]

[3] In Polish liberal mass-media "brownisation" is a fairly common wording that describes the alt-right turn in policymaking and anti-immigrant rhetoric. It is referencing the infamous brown shirts of Nazi 'stormtroopers'. See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturmabteilung [available as of 01 March 2026]

[4] Krzysztoszek, Aleksandra, "Tusk under fire over remarks on quitting ECHR", Euroactiv. **See:** euractiv.com/news/tusk-under-fire-over-remarks-on-quitting-echr/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

[5] "'Hajnówka Five' Acquitted" (In Polish) "„Piątka z Hajnówki" uniewinniona"', *Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka*, 2025. **See:** hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/-piatka-z-hajnowki-uniewinniona [available as of 01 March 2026]

the current, allegedly more liberal Koalicja Obywatelska Party (KO) [eng. Civic Coalition Party)-led governments are contrary to the Polish Constitution and international law. The courts should rule according to stronger, established norms consistent with the principles of European civilization. The majority of the Poles seem to be happy enough with Minister of Internal Affairs Maciej Duszczyk's assurances about the fact that "human rights are being respected". After all, even if some happen to be beaten, striped of goods, or dying in the Polish forests from Belarusian dogs bites, being pushed back countless times by Polish and Belarusian border guards, hunger and thirst, or frost, or drowned in the Bug River, even if they are Christian and their names happen to be Christ[1], they are not our people, and not even white people. Meanwhile, newcomers continue to suffer as the state-backed perpetrators let them die, or actually kill them, in the name of 'Europe'.

After diplomatic tensions, Tusk announced the opening of border crossings in Kuźnica and Bobrowniki. Lukashenko might also relent and push fewer people into Poland, or at least not on the same scale as before. But for now, things are not well.[2] It seems that migration is going to be the main topic of the next parliamentary elections campaign, which has already begun, as declared by PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski at an anti-migration rally earlier in this october[3]—in other words, the competition for which party/politician hates immigrants the most is on.

Fingers crossed, the *Snails's Commune* will hopefully be published in the Summer of 2026—in many ways also thanks to the invitation to write this chapter, as the process has given me additional impetus, motivation and energy to return to the project.

[1] Szczęśniak, Agata, "Jesus Died on the Polish Border. A 24-year-old Syrian Christian", (In Polish) "Jezus zmarł na polskiej granicy. 24-letni Syryjczyk, chrześcijanin", *oko.press*, 2021. **See:** oko.press/jezus-zmarl-na-polskiej-granicy-24-letni-syryjczyk-chrzescijanin [available as of 01 March 2026]

[2] See footnote 38.

[3] Sitnicka, Dominika, Szczęśniak, Agata, "Is Europe cracking up before Karol or Donald? Migration Pact – facts and lies", (Podcast In Polish) "Europa pęka przed Karolem czy przed Donaldem? Pakt migracyjny – fakty i ściemy" oko.press/europa-peka-przed-karolem-czy-przed-donaldem-pakt-migracyjny-fakty-i-sciemy-program-polityczny

Recommendations

The silvery trail that snails leave behind in Francis Ponge's poem *Snails* is both expressive and self-erasing. It marks life's expression, but also signals exposure and vulnerability. It is both a gentle material artifact—a signature—and also a death sentence. It has been argued that Ponge's play with the word "silver", understood as "money"[1], was his critique of economic exchange in arts. The "silvery trail" functions as "ghost money"—a crypto-culture currency—as this is a trace of value that cannot circulate in any economy of exchange. It embodies what Jacques Derrida called the *aneconomic*: acts that cannot be commodified or fully appropriated. Poetic writing, and artistic practice in general, resists economic logic; its value lies in its excess, its waste, its refusal of equivalence. But cultural workers, in order to produce, need to live. Policy makers, cultural organizers and art patrons need to make sure that *the snails*—artist-immigrants, and immigrants (whom I assume to be artists by default, although they prefer, or are reduced to pursuing non-creative jobs[2])—have access to their flowers, or green/s, which in American English, interestingly, also has the meaning of money. This boils down to a minimum income, studio and exhibition spaces, and access to materials, all of which point to the value of longer-term, or even micro-grant schemes and proper promotion, accompanied hopefully with decision-making transparency, and a reduction in unneeded bureaucratic requirements. Access to education, reprofiling, and personal and organisational development should be facilitated as much as possible. Grants should cover living costs, rents, meals, pensions, procurement of equipment, furniture, and communal fees. In

[1] On the relationship between economic questions and poetry see Derrida, Jacques, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.)

[2] Artists are included sometimes by sociologists in marginalized/disadvantaged groups, along migrants, people with disabilities, minorities and others. More on this in Neculau, Adrian, Ferréol, Gilles, Ed. *Minorities, Marginalized, Excluded* (In Romanian) *Minoritari, marginali, excluși,* (Iași, Polirom, 1996.) pp. 10-11. **See:** academia.edu/5362769/Minoritari_marginali_exclusi [available as of 01 March 2026] On the precarity of contemporary Moldovan artists also see a recent report by Nenescu, *Lilia, Working conditions and access to social protection in the independent cultural sector in Moldova*, (in Romanian) *Condițiile de muncă și accesul la protecție socială în sectorul cultural independent din Moldova*, CSCI, 2025. See: culturaindependenta.md/studiu-conditiile-de-munca/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

Moldova, there is definitely a need for a consultation office for cultural civil society within The Ministry of Culture, for example. The government could commission university students to run culture-focused sociological research. The normative framework in the field should be harmonized with European and international practices, but not blindly. Snails have eyes, even if their anatomy is unusual.

I would encourage politicians to welcome immigrants, and create legislation that will facilitate their integration. Help them to familiarize themselves with local language, contemporary culture and also heritage. Let them move in, settle and work freely, in whatever field they want, in whatever place they want. Oftentimes this will be creative industries. The more people there are, the stronger the culture economy will be.

The NGOs that represent workers, cultural or not, need constituents like unions and support clubs. Their funding does not have to only be project-based. In case of emergency, they should also be able to raise money, for example by phone calls, or fundraising platforms, and requesting donations for specific goals. Significant funding could come from members' contributions. Independent doesn't have to mean noncommercial—if not money, artworks can be exchanged for pumpkins, potatoes, soups, and bread. A social enterprise mindset could enable new artwork and help reinvest in materials or necessary services. It is very important for independent initiatives to have alternative income streams. All funding paths should be kept open, and should not be dismissed.

In both Poland and Moldova, I encourage civic-public, educational, business and legal partnerships for ensuring cultural actors' access to support, production and presentation infrastructure. Public or educational institutional spaces can and should be used for meetings, development, production and performance/exhibition. It could happen as it did at ASW, with poetry slams for refugees, or as it did in Zemstvei House in Chișinău, with workshops for young adults. When public properties are offered to culture workers, communities emerge. These collectives, fragile, but with tremendous generative capabilities, can and should be consulted about administration, programming, and development of the local cultural spaces they come to inhibit, as they are "on the ground". They can also be invited to run programs in institutions of power. In fact, the latter is already happening. The

Polish Presidency and Council of Ministers lent their patronage to exhibitions of visual arts made by Ukrainian artists, who are immigrants too. Often these were sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. The Polish government also supports networks of minority culture houses, like Warsaw's Ukrainian House, which run independent art residences and galleries. In Moldova, works produced by Ukrainian refugee children were showcased in the Parliament. The state institutions could also open their premises to professional independent artists instead of indulging in acts of censorship—see the case of *The Invisible*, a play by David Schwartz, whose production was aborted recently at the Luceafarul Theatre, because of an intervention by Angela Brașoveanu, the former presidential advisor for culture to the venue's artistic director.[1]

Existing spaces used by artists and independent cultural initiatives like Zemstvei House in Chisinau should be renovated and updated to minimum functional capacities. The existing Zemstvei community should not be dismantled. The artists should have the option of keeping their studios and exhibition spaces. New spaces dedicated to contemporary art and culture should be considered, with participatory governance mechanisms. Social, medical, economic protection measures should be initiated for independent artists and they should be granted legal status, so that they are eligible to apply for public funds with non-commercial projects. A basic income program for independent artists could be implemented, following the example of countries like Ireland.

However, artists should also be able to fight for their rights and to self-organise into more consistent formations than NGOs—by forming professional trade unions, for example. Incipient lobby groups already exist—a good example would be The Coalition of Independent Cultural Sector (CICS). Some kind of collaboration should be achieved between CICS with the existing Union of Moldovan Artists, which seems to be a hermetically closed club that is being paid by the government to stay obedient to the state, instead of advocating for artists rights and needs. The Union could be a self-educational body, but it could also engage in advocacy

[1] "Censorship Trumps Theater… An Epilogue to the Aborted Production of the Play "Invisible"', (In Romanian), "Cenzura bate teatrul…epilog la piesa nemontată „Invizibil"", Platzforma, 2024. **See:** platzforma.md/arhive/394131 [available as of 01 March 2026]

on behalf of its constituency and develop a non-state sponsored support network. Among other formats, this could also be achieved to some extent by the publication of a newspaper, or even a cultural workers magazine or printed bulletin, for better promotion of the events it organises, and a more open formula of access to these events. The culture cells that currently still operate in Casa Zemstvei have extremely limited access for the public, and potential patrons. Such a periodical could share news on the events that various artists and collectives are preparing, at home and abroad. It will also teach the practitioners how to communicate about their work. It could be fun to make, and as a bonus it can generate some income by means of subscriptions.

A festival for independent publishers would be an event that I would encourage and gladly visit. The first edition of *Zine Fest* was unfortunately the last.[1] A publication can be done cheaply, within zine-specific modes of production, and it can grow into something more significant over time. A contemporary art centre, or even a museum, could materialize in a scaled-down version—or stay in the realm of wishful thinking. The same can be said about programs for promoting Moldovan culture abroad and supporting local residency programs, or the Moldovan National Museum could buy works of contemporary art for its collection, even if these works expand outside traditional understandings of artistic crafts, or contain bits of critical content.

[1] One can still find the trace of the festival online. **See:** facebook.com/events/strada-alexei-mateevici-60-chi%C8%99in%C4%83u-moldova/zine-fest-chi%C8%99in%C4%83u-2018-edi%C8%9Bia-i/1908765105822543/ [available as of 01 March 2026]

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Displaced Culture(s): Migration, Displacement, and the Shifting Cultural Landscape(s) of the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries

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