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Simona Andra HERCZEG, PhD 
West University of Timișoara, Romania
simonaandra.herczeg@gmail.com

STATE-MODULATED PRECARIETY OF THE INDEPENDENT CULTURAL SECTOR. THE CONDITION OF ROMANIAN CULTURAL WORKERS

ABSTRACT: *The article discusses the concept of precarity of cultural workers who are active outside public institutions (also called independent cultural workers), through an in-depth analysis of the Romanian case. The condition of the Romanian cultural workers is defined by a structural dependency on the state, despite the existence of specific regulations, partly modeled by the European framework on the status of the artist. This dependency on state funding results in what this study terms state-modulated precarity (a condition in which cultural workers are encouraged to operate as cultural entrepreneurs while remaining dependent on seasonal public funding and insufficient regulatory and social protection mechanisms). The article also examines the mechanisms of public funding for the independent cultural sector, highlighting how bureaucratic and financial instruments can reproduce instability, as opposed to the rhetoric that promotes autonomy and creativity. The article equally situates the Romanian context within the broader European dynamics, indicating the specificities of a certain type of precarity, strongly linked to institutional and funding arrangements. The study argues that, far from being an unintended consequence, precarity is structurally embedded in cultural governance and reproduced through the mechanisms by which public support is allocated and administered.*

KEYWORDS: cultural worker; state-modulated precarity; independent cultural sector; public funding; seasonality.

1. Introduction

The cultural sector at EU level brings together a wide range of actors: artists, independent organizations, and public institutions such as museums, theaters, operas, and philharmonics. Despite their different institutional positions, these actors contribute to the production of artistic and community-oriented programmes within an increasingly competitive funding environment. Both the cultural ecosystem and its outputs are fundamentally dependent on cultural workers, whose continuous contribution shapes cultural policy at local, regional, national, and European levels. Understanding the status of cultural workers therefore requires examining their institutional role, their relationships with other actors in the cultural field, and, importantly, their relationship with local and national governments.

Extensive research in Europe and beyond has investigated the precarity of cultural labor (e.g., Banks, 2006; Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2009; Brook et al. 2025), showing how precariousness can emerge as an outcome of policy arrangements that coexist with discourses of creative freedom and autonomy. Within

such a framework, survival in the cultural ecosystem becomes an individual responsibility, embedded in neoliberal market logic that places at its cornerstone competition, entrepreneurialism, and self-management (Brook, Giuliani, O'Brien et al, 2025). Meanwhile, through regulation and funding schemes, the state remains involved in the cultural sector through regulation and funding schemes, without necessarily providing greater professional security for cultural workers. Bureaucratic and well-established instruments such as seasonal grant cycles operate as tools through which the state maintains a dependent and fragmented cultural workforce, one responsive to administrative and political fluctuations rather than artistic continuity (Bel-fiore,2022). This structure produces triangulation of relations: cultural independent actors struggling with chronic financial insecurity, an artistic field attempting to generate socially valuable content, a policy environment in which the state continues to shape the sector through bureaucracy, funding mechanisms and, at times, ideological direction. The central question is therefore not whether the state supports cultural work, but how the design and temporality of that support shape the conditions under which cultural workers act.

To define precarious work, it is useful to investigate the approach of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which describes precarious work as a mechanism through which employers place risks and transfer responsibilities onto workers (<https://www.ilo.org/>). Precarity means a lack of protection, and restricted access to social benefits, through limitations in the social and institutional protections available to workers. Precarious work is defined by ILO: “uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple or ambiguous employment relationships, lack of access to social protection and benefits normally associated with employment, low pay, and significant obstacles to unionization and collective bargaining” (International Labour Organization, 2012). By contrast, decent work seeks to guarantee stability to the worker, to grant access to fair remuneration, rights at work, and access to social protection and dialogue. Decent work is intrinsically linked to sustainable and equitable employment, while precarious work undermines these objectives as well as human dignity. Critical theorists of cultural labor argue that the institutionalization and normalization of insecurity reflect a broader neoliberal rationality in which responsibility for the profession is individualized, being removed from the state's sphere of responsibility and outsourced to everyone (Murray & Gollmitzer,2011).

In this type of social dynamic, the state plays an ambivalent role: on one hand, it withdraws from direct cultural provision under the rhetoric of market efficiency (in order to support entrepreneurship as providential solution in neoliberal society); on the other, it preserves its role as a regulator, through public funding and through highly bureaucratic mechanisms. This duality can be understood through the concept of bureaucratic neoliberalism (Ouellet,2023) and it creates a field in which artists and organizations are simultaneously empowered as entrepreneurial actors and considered mere administrative subjects. The artistic critique of hierarchy (the critique of rules that hinder artistic progress) has been progressively replaced by an ethos of

individuality- individuality as strength of artistic expression or as weakness of the precarious? (Boltanski&Chiapello, 2005). There are characteristics such as project-based creativity and self-management that depict an apparently empowering system, covering up a systemic instability. Within this logic, independent cultural workers experience a state-modulated structural precarity, in which insecurity is not primarily market-driven, shaped and reproduced through state mechanisms. This is what distinguishes state-modulated precarity from precarity generated primarily by market volatility: public institutions remain central to the survival of the sector, while the mechanisms through which support is distributed simultaneously reproduce professional insecurity. As the state remains the main funder of the cultural sector through subsidies and grants, these resources are distributed via bureaucratic procedures that reproduce dependence and inequality. The cultural field thus becomes a space of regulated vulnerability, where freedom and creativity coexist with compliance and economic fragility (Gray,2008).

To situate this discussion within a broader comparative framework, it is essential to examine how these dynamics of precarity and bureaucratic neoliberalism are manifested at the European level. The following sections present the methodology and situate the Romanian case within broader European debates on cultural labour and precarity.

2. Methodology

This study relies on a qualitative analysis of cultural policy to examine the state-modulated precarity of cultural workers in Europe and, more specifically, in Romania. The analysis focuses on four intertwined administrative levels: the European level, the national level, the Europeanized local level shaped by the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) framework, and the level of external representation of culture. Working comparatively across these scales enables the identification of a series of structural patterns that link bureaucratic funding architectures to specific and original forms of institutionalized insecurity, that are intensely experienced by cultural workers and organizations.

The empirical material employed in the analysis consists primarily of public policy and administrative documents produced by cultural authorities and funding bodies (especially from Romania). At the national level in Romania, the 2023 Statute of the Professional Cultural Worker was analysed as a key document regulating the sector. Then I turned the focus to the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN) an institution that supports independent cultural organizations, with emphasis on call frequency, application volumes and success rates, funding ceilings, co-financing rules, implementation calendars, and the introduction of limited multiannual schemes (with reference years 2023–2025). At the Europeanized local level, the research examined Timișoara – European Capital of Culture 2023, focusing on municipal and county instruments created to

administer the programme and on the publicly reported amounts of private sponsorships (2022–2024). At the national/externally oriented level, the study analyzes the procedures of the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) and the Department for Romanians Abroad (DRP) for the years 2024–2025, including calls for proposals, eligibility rules, evaluation criteria, and published outcomes. For contextualization, the study relies as well on secondary statistical sources and policy reports (Eurostat, European Parliament studies, International Labour organization studies) with the purpose of framing the European status quo and terminological baselines (precarious work, self-employment, bogus self-employment).

Data used in the article can be grouped in three thematic categories: a) funding criteria and their justificatory narratives; b) funding dynamics, namely the seasonality, timing, and duration of implementation windows and c) the institutional and professional consequences of these funding arrangements for cultural workers and organizations. Analytically, the study combines policy and funding document analysis with critical discourse analysis of the official narratives that accompany calls, guidelines, and managerial procedures. This is complemented by a descriptive examination of temporal cycles and administrative requirements that shape work rhythms and contribute to income instability. The triangulation of policy texts, administrative rules, and descriptive indicators allows us to link conceptual claims of precarity and state-modulated vulnerability to empirically observable mechanisms.

The research is limited by its focus solely on publicly accessible documentation and officially reported figures, without access to internal documents of institutions and therefore cannot adjudicate individual selection decisions or unrecorded informal practices. The temporal focus on 2023–2025 (with necessary references to earlier European Capital of Culture milestones) is also limited, but relevant for comprehending challenges and characteristics. These boundaries, however, are consistent with the article's objective: to reveal how formal funding architectures and their temporalities produce and reproduce state-modulated precarity in Romania's cultural sector. In addition, I draw on my own professional experience in the independent cultural sector in Romania. This reflexive professional perspective allows me to interpret policy and funding mechanisms not only through their formal documentation but also through lived familiarity with their procedural and affective dimensions. The analysis therefore focuses not only on the existence of public funding mechanisms, but on how their design, timing and administrative requirements shape professional continuity and insecurity.

2. The European Status Quo

In 2024, cultural employment accounted for approximately 3.9% of total employment in the EU (Eurostat, 2024). To address the precarity of independent cultural workers, multiple regulations have been initiated across Europe to define the status of artists and cultural workers and provide solutions for the challenges

in the sector. However, as the European Union's competences in cultural policy are only supporting competences (limited competences), its influence remains largely normative rather than legislative when it comes to working conditions. In the spirit of policy coordination, several member states have nevertheless adopted statutes of the artist, each adapted to national specificities and focusing on the needs of the cultural workers (including Romania). These regulations respond to several characteristics associated with precarious cultural labour, including irregular working patterns, non-standard contracts, multiple employment, unpredictable income and difficulties in accessing consistent social protection.

Cultural workers are more likely than the general workforce to be self-employed, part-time, and multi-employed across different sectors and countries. In 2022, 31.7% of workers in the EU's cultural and creative industries (CCIs) were self-employed-compared with 13.8% in the total economy (Summary of Outcomes-Action Group on Working Conditions in the Cultural and Creative Sectors, 2023). In addition, the OECD (Policy Responses to New Forms of Work, 2019) defines "bogus self-employment" better known as false or dependent self-employment, as a situation where workers are registered as self-employed but, in practice, function as employees, a form of employment also found in the cultural sector, which may transfer employment-related risks and social protection costs from employers to workers.

At EU level as well as in most EU countries, the cultural worker is often assimilated to the artist (even if cultural labour includes a range of other service-oriented professions: managers, organizers, promoters, curators, etc). Especially because of this reduction of the sector to the artist, it is relevant to discuss the European understanding of the status of the artist. The 1980 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist defines an artist as: "Any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or re-creates works of art, who considers artistic creation an essential part of life, who contributes to the development of art and culture, and who seeks recognition as an artist, whether or not bound by an employment relationship" (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382658>). Within the EU, however, there is no unitary definition of the artist, multiple national definitions coexist. Member States variously define artists through: membership in professional associations (e.g., Germany), peer or expert recognition (e.g., the Netherlands), tax authority registration (e.g., Ireland), artistic output (e.g., France, Ireland) or nature of artistic activity (e.g. Romania) (Employment characteristics and undeclared work in the cultural and creative sectors, 2024). These different approaches reflect the lack of a common European framework for artistic labor rights. As the European Parliament's 2021 study about Artists and Cultural Workers and the Post-COVID-19 Cultural Recovery notes, this fragmentation hinders access to social protection and mobility for artists operating transnationally. Despite European-level initiatives addressing working conditions in the cultural sector, the cultural labour market continues to rely extensively on hybrid and non-standard forms of employment (Eurostat, 2024). Focusing on the *status of the artist* is relevant because this category has historically provided the main normative

and policy reference for the entire field of cultural labour.

Recent findings from the European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual (EENCA) study *The Status and Working Conditions of Artists and Cultural and Creative Professionals* (2024) confirm the intrinsic relation between the status of the artistic and that of the cultural worker. The report highlights that individuals working in the cultural and creative sectors “are more likely to be self-employed, freelancers, employed short-term, or in a combination of employment and self-employment,” leading to “precarious working conditions, irregular income and limited access to social security” (*The Status and Working Conditions of Artists and Cultural and Creative Professionals*, 2024). This European context shows that precarity is a broader characteristic of cultural labour; the Romanian case, however, raises a more specific question concerning the role of the state in shaping and reproducing this insecurity through public funding and regulatory mechanisms.

3. The Romanian case

Structural patterns of precarity have been identified through the analysis of the European framework, while the degree and form of state involvement vary considerably across national contexts. Romania, a post-socialist country, represents a particularly revealing case, as the cultural sector remains overwhelmingly dependent on public funding while relying on a bureaucratic system that reproduces both institutional inflexibility and the economic vulnerability of cultural workers. The next section explores mechanisms that support the *state-modulated precarity*, through an analysis of relevant institutions, funding mechanisms, and labour conditions of cultural workers.

This section draws upon critical cultural policy theory (Menger 2015, Banks 2006, Belfiore 2002) to conceptualize the structural condition of state-modulated precarity in post-socialist Romanian cultural sector. More precisely, I examine a form of institutionalized insecurity affecting independent cultural workers and organizations operating outside the formal institutional framework, whose existence is strongly dependent on public funding distributed through bureaucratic channels. The concept emphasizes the dual nature of cultural dependence: economic dependence on subsidies/grants or any type of public funding that is available, and symbolic dependence on state-sanctioned legitimacy.

The dependence of the so-called independent cultural organizations and cultural workers on public funding creates asymmetrical relations of power between government institutions and these cultural organizations, mirroring what Engelstad describes as neo-corporatist workings of cultural policy (Engelstad, 2017). Independence, in this context, therefore, describes an institutional position rather than financial autonomy from the state.

4. Legal framework for cultural labour in Romania

Under Romanian law, cultural workers operate within a hybrid legal framework that combines elements of labour law, copyright legislation, and freelance contracting (Ministerul Culturii- *Registrul lucrătorilor culturali profesioniști*, 2023). Many artists, performers, and independent cultural professionals are registered either as self-employed individuals (PFA) or small enterprises and thus are treated as autonomous economic actors rather than employees. Even with the adoption of Law no. 346/2023 on the Statute of the Professional Cultural Worker, the practical implementation of social rights remains largely individualized. Even if the law formally recognizes artistic and cultural work as legitimate professional activity and grants access, in principle, to social insurance, health coverage, and pension schemes, these benefits are not automatically accessible. They are conditional on the worker's own contributions and administrative compliance, rather than being guaranteed through collective mechanisms or institutional intermediaries.

This legal framing, in line with the public discourse that praises autonomy, reflects a broader tension between recognition and responsibility. The statute acknowledges the cultural worker as a professional subject who as any other employee is entitled to worker rights and protections; by contrast, the statute aligns with the neoliberal logic of self-responsibilities, transferring the financial and bureaucratic burden of social protection from the state onto individuals. In practice, cultural workers are required to pay their own health and social insurance contributions, file their own tax declarations, and secure their own professional stability. This illustrates the paradox of autonomy: a framework designed to empower cultural professionals simultaneously entrenches their vulnerability by isolating them as individual economic units rather than members of a collectively protected workforce. The following section examines several types of funding schemes coordinated by public institutions and available to cultural workers to support their artistic activities and specific projects.

5. The cycle of precarity and project writing as cultural capital: The case of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN)

The Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN) functions as an important benchmark for independent cultural operators in Romania, particularly in terms of transparency and predictability. The Administration of the National Cultural Fund is an autonomous public institution, subordinated to the Ministry of Culture, which has been operating at national level for 20 years (www.afcn.ro). Its mission is to finance projects supporting contemporary Romanian creation and cultural heritage, while its stated principles empha-

size cultural rights, access to culture, civic participation and performance in the development and implementation of cultural projects. (www.afcn.ro). These principles are particularly relevant to the present analysis because they frame AFCN not merely as a funding body, but as an institution expected to contribute to the development and professionalization of the independent cultural sector. The activity of this institution is conducted by a small team, consisting of a decision-making council and an executive branch, who with dedication and vision demonstrate that non-reimbursable financing can contribute to the development of the independent cultural sector, if they are managed properly.

Unlike other funding programmes (which are occasional), AFCN has introduced a predictable system, through 2 annual funding sessions, one opened in March and one in September. These two sessions could guarantee cultural workers with a coverage of the entire year with cultural activities, although in reality both sessions of projects, those submitted in March and those submitted in September are carried out in the same period (April-November for projects selected in September, the previous year and the period May-November for projects selected in March). This overlap is a consequence of the dependence of AFCN funds on national budgets adopted on an annual basis, with funding becoming available to beneficiaries (cultural operators and cultural workers) in March-April. However, being a process with a high degree of predictability, the launch of the sessions being fixed for each year (1st of March, respectively 1st of September), cultural workers plan their activities according to this calendar. AFCN therefore provides procedural predictability without necessarily providing professional continuity, as predictable application deadlines coexist with a concentrated implementation period.

The predictability of the funding calendar does not, however, guarantee access to funding. AFCN provides funding across several cultural fields, including written culture, performing arts, visual arts, cultural heritage, and cultural education. Cultural operators register their applications/bids in a simplified procedure using a digital platform (which was progressively updated and modified in accordance with digital progress), making bureaucratic obstacles a lesser burden. In terms of complexity of the application, it could be argued that the AFCN applications are less detailed and developed than those that must be prepared by cultural organizations for European cultural funding programmes, nonetheless project planning has to be equally rigorous. The planning process may be even more demanding given the short implementation period, which adds more pressure on cultural workers, weakening their relationship with the funding institution and subjecting their statute to vulnerability.

Unlike most funding authorities that rely only on annual funding schemes, AFCN grants multi-annual funding projects, intended to convey a certain stability and predictability to independent cultural operators (making funding available for more than 1 year, for two, even three years). Although this approach is relevant,

the mise en oeuvre is less consistent because multiannual fundings are allocated to a limited number of organizations (13 projects are funded every year), so it would be inappropriate to consider that it leads to a significant improvement of the condition of the cultural worker. In terms of the amounts that are granted, they are established at a maximum of 250,000 lei (roughly 50 000 euros) for annual projects and a maximum of 500,000 lei (cca 100 00 euros) for multi-annual projects, amounts intended to cover all expenses included in the project (artistic, logistic and administrative). Each project has to be co-funded by the grant receiver, and there is no condition by which the 20% co-financing that the organization must ensure must come from economic revenue within the project (ticket sales, tax levies, etc.), so co-funding is usually generated through sponsorship and voluntary work of artists or administrative staff. The absence of a market revenue requirement may represent less conditionality, but it can also reinforce dependence on public funding. For certain types of projects, such as cultural-educational projects implemented in rural communities, the criteria for generating economic revenue would be counterproductive and would discourage applicants from being interested in extending culture to disadvantaged areas. Nevertheless, if public funding covers all the expenses of a project, the motivation to make cultural projects competitive on the private market is reduced. The cost of cultural activities per beneficiary is often difficult to cover through ticket sales and other forms of private revenue. Public funding therefore appears necessary, while simultaneously maintaining a structural dependence on the funding system.

AFCN also has a rigorous selection process of winning applications, and the success rate varies from one third to one fifth of the applications submitted, depending on the thematic area for which the project is being applied. AFCN is widely regarded within the sector as a credible and transparent funding institution, which is why the annual number of applications can reach even 1500. Interest in the funding granted by AFCN has grown in a natural climate of evolution of the cultural sector, which after more than 35 years since the anti-socialist revolution, has acquired a certain autonomy, direction and vision. The competition for obtaining funding is quite high, especially since the opportunities have an increased frequency through seasonality (bi-annual), making project-writing competence an increasingly important form of cultural and administrative capital. To respond to this unwritten conditionality, many cultural operators have focused on developing their skills in writing funding applications, following indicators and evaluation grids designed to improve the quality of these commitment documents drafted with technical mastery. The situation is changing, however, with the increasingly applied use of virtual assistants based on artificial intelligence, the use of which expands access to financing for cultural operators who previously failed to meet those criteria related to the technical quality of project writing. We can thus speak of an increase in competition for the same overall budget (from 1200 annual applications in 2023 to 1500 annual applications in 2025). This increase is an additional proof that the public financing system is considered the only solution for the realization of projects, without however

leading to the consolidation of the status of the cultural worker.

Another issue related to project writing concerns the increasing marketization of the process, as access to public funding becomes structured around competition between projects. This raises the question of whether funding follows project ideas or whether project ideas increasingly adapt to available funding opportunities. Missing a funding deadline may effectively mean losing access to another six-month window of professional and financial stability. The consequences of this situation are related to the quality of the projects, because the time taken for their preparation is not always sufficient, as work calendars overlap. For example, during the period in which a new funding application is prepared (especially in September), the cultural operator and the cultural workers are engaged in the implementation of another project and also in the preparation of the reporting documents, because in November all reports have to be submitted (in the form of massive files-*bibliorafturi*, symbols of the Romanian state bureaucracy). AFCN therefore provides procedural predictability without necessarily providing professional continuity, as predictable application deadlines coexist with a concentrated implementation period.

6. Ephemeral miracles: cultural capitals as symbols of transformation

Another relevant case for understanding the dynamics of the Romanian cultural workforce is the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme. Romania hosted the title in Sibiu in 2007 and in Timișoara in 2023, the latter initially scheduled for 2021. As previous studies have shown (Immler et al., 2014; Tsagkaridis et al., 2017; West, 2022), the ECoC programme can mobilize local cultural ecosystems around cultural, tourism and community-development objectives. For the purposes of this article, however, the relevant question is whether this temporary concentration of public resources produces sustainable improvements in the working conditions of cultural workers or merely suspends precarity during the title cycle.

Timișoara's trajectory after obtaining the ECoC title in 2016 was marked by institutional changes and by a reconfiguration of the programme's governance. The postponement of the title year from 2021 to 2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a change in local administration and the establishment of new institutional architecture. The Timișoara Project Centre became responsible for managing projects funded by the municipality, while the Timiș County Centre for Culture and Arts administered county-funded projects. The municipality remained the main public funder of the programme. Between 2022 and 2024, private sponsorships raised through ATCEC amounted to approximately €1.3 million, while official partnerships contributed an additional €427,000. Although these resources complemented public funding, the available public information does not allow for a systematic assessment of how sponsorship was distributed among cultural operators.

The ECoC cycle significantly altered the conditions under which Timișoara's independent cultural sector operated. Prior to the programme, the relationship between independent cultural workers and local and county authorities was less institutionalized and predictable. Indeed, funding sessions managed by both the city hall and the county council were organized annually, but lacked transparency and predictability, making access to funding less predictable for cultural operators. The period 2021–2024 was characterized by an exceptional concentration of cultural activity and public funding, particularly through the Timișoara Municipality Project Centre. This contributed to the consolidation of networks among cultural operators, supported new creative initiatives and capacity-building processes, and generated a greater sense of institutional predictability. However, similarly to other Romanian public funding schemes, most project implementation remained concentrated between May and November. Increased funding therefore mitigated financial insecurity during the ECoC cycle without eliminating the seasonal structure of cultural work. The Timișoara case thus illustrates an important mechanism of state-modulated precarity: increased public investment can temporarily reduce insecurity while leaving intact the institutional and temporal structures that reproduce it.

The funding mechanism adopted by the Timișoara Municipality Project Centre followed several procedural principles already established by AFCN, including transparent calls, independent evaluation and standardized reporting procedures. These mechanisms increased institutional trust and enabled some independent cultural operators to develop projects and programmes with greater continuity. The sustainability of these programmes, however, becomes uncertain when the exceptional funding associated with the ECoC cycle declines and municipal budgetary priorities shift. This exposes a central paradox of culture-led transformation: temporary increases in public investment may strengthen cultural organizations and professional networks without necessarily creating the conditions for their financial sustainability beyond the funding cycle. At the same time, the expansion of public funding was not accompanied by equivalent mechanisms capable of ensuring professional continuity between funding cycles. Cultural organizations therefore strengthened their capacity to access and implement public grants while remaining structurally dependent on the continuation of those grants. The ECoC programme has left behind important institutional and infrastructural legacies—notably the Timișoara Project Center and four rehabilitated cinemas now serving as cultural venues, employing cultural workers, many of whom originated from the independent sector.

The ECoC experience therefore did not create precarity in Timișoara's independent cultural sector; rather, it temporarily alleviated some of its effects while simultaneously reinforcing dependence on project-based public funding. In this sense, the post-ECoC contraction makes visible the distinction between temporary cultural investment and structural professional security.

7. Cultural representation outside Romania: access and dependency for independent cultural workers

A further dimension of state-modulated precarity concerns access to public resources for the international representation of Romanian culture. This dimension is particularly relevant because international mobility and visibility are important professional opportunities for independent cultural workers, while access to these opportunities remains partly mediated through public institutions (Grincheva, 2024). This activity is carried out primarily through two institutional channels: the Romanian Cultural Institute (Institutul Cultural Român – ICR) and the Department for Romanians Abroad (Departamentul Românilor de Pretutindeni – DRP). Both bodies manage public budgets dedicated to cultural diplomacy and allocate funds to independent cultural operators through competitive grant procedures.

This paper examines the procedures implemented by both institutions in 2024 and 2025, focusing on the value of grants awarded, criteria for allocation, number and type of funded projects, and the degree of accessibility for independent cultural actors. These indicators provide insight into how the state and its subordinate institutions conceptualize cultural participation and the autonomy of the independent cultural sector. Rather than assessing these programmes solely in terms of the resources they distribute, the analysis examines whether their institutional design expands the professional autonomy of independent cultural workers or reproduces their dependence on periodically allocated public resources.

The Romanian Cultural Institute functions as an autonomous administrative authority with legal personality, under parliamentary supervision. Its mission is to represent, promote, and protect national culture and civilization both domestically and internationally. The Institute operates a network of 18 branches in 17 countries and is a member of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC). Each year, the ICR implements a non-reimbursable funding scheme – the Cantemir Programme – open to both public and private or non-governmental cultural operators. Approximately 20 projects receive funding annually (roughly one-third of all applications in 2024 and 2025), covering two main domains: visual arts and performing arts. The evaluation criteria emphasize artistic quality and originality, international visibility, European cooperation and partnerships, audience development, sustainability and intercultural dialogue. (Programul Cantemir <https://www.icr.ro/categorii/programul-cantemir>).

Although these criteria provide a formal framework for evaluation, several of them, such as artistic excellence, originality or artistic relevance- necessarily involve qualitative judgement. The existence of standardized criteria therefore increases procedural transparency without eliminating evaluative discretion. The public call for evaluators represents a procedural mechanism intended to increase transparency in the selection process. The application process itself is relatively straightforward and user-friendly, encouraging participation of independent cultural operators that are confident that they can professionally navigate through the

bureaucratic conditionalities. However, competition remains limited, partly due to the low visibility of the programme and partly due to the recurrence of funding to the same institutions and artists. Where recurrent beneficiaries can be identified, this continuity may reflect accumulated institutional capacity and experience in accessing international cultural funding. At the same time, it raises the question of whether less established independent operators have comparable capacity to access these resources.

The value of the funding granted is 100,000 lei (about 20,000 euros), with beneficiaries being required to contribute 10% of the value of the project for its implementation. The amount of funding covers expenses related to personnel, artists invited to the project, accommodation, transport, promotion, and is intended for small-scale tour projects. In addition to the low amount of funding, the period in which projects can be implemented extends from November to December, which affects the ability of organizations to carry out high-quality projects (the time for planning, implementation and then settlement of expenses is about 6 months - April/May-November). In theory, this period may seem sufficient, but for smaller organizations, without specialized workers on each of these stages of a project, it is a challenge, from which both the workers involved and the quality of the implemented project end up suffering. In this context, the ICR's funding mechanism appears to sustain established actors, while inadvertently marginalizing smaller, emerging or experimental initiatives that lack administrative capacity- a pattern consistent with broader critiques of state-led cultural diplomacy (Immler & Sakkers, 2014). The relevance of the Cantemir Programme to state-modulated precarity therefore lies less in the existence of competitive selection itself than in the temporary and project-based character of the support provided. International visibility may expand the professional capital of cultural workers, but it does not necessarily provide continuity of employment, income or social protection between funding cycles. The same structural pattern identified in domestic funding thus reappears at the level of international cultural representation: the state enables professional opportunities while leaving the economic risks associated with discontinuity largely with cultural workers and organizations.

The funding programme managed by the Department for Romanians Abroad (DRP) provides a different example of state-supported cultural activity outside Romania, combining cultural objectives with policies directed towards Romanian communities abroad. This structure, which at certain times had the statute of a ministry, develops and implements the government strategy in the field of relations with Romanians who live abroad, in accordance with the major foreign policy objectives of Romania and with the Government Program. In 2025, DRP funding was organized around six programmes: Education, Culture, Spirituality and Tradition, Civil Society, Media, and Community.

At the procedural level, the funding scheme provides applicants with published guidelines, evaluation criteria and the documentation required for submission. In the 2025 funding cycle analysed here, applicants could submit a maximum of two projects, provided that they belonged to different programmes. Applications

could be submitted across several deadlines during the year and were subject to continuous evaluation, while the total budget available for the funding cycle was not announced at the opening of the first session. This creates a distinction between procedural accessibility and financial predictability: applicants may know how to apply without necessarily knowing the overall volume of resources against which their applications compete.

An analysis of the publicly available list of projects funded in 2025 indicates that more than 60% of the selected projects were either proposed by religious organizations or centred on themes explicitly associated with national, spiritual or traditional identity. The relevant issue is therefore not whether these forms of cultural expression are legitimate, but whether their predominance narrows the range of cultural practices through which Romanian communities abroad are publicly represented. This pattern may be interpreted as a form of symbolic instrumentalization of culture, in which public funding privileges particular representations of national identity, especially spiritual and traditional ones, over a broader spectrum of contemporary, plural and intercultural cultural expressions. For independent cultural workers, the consequence is not necessarily exclusion from public funding, but a funding environment in which access may depend on the extent to which cultural projects correspond to institutionally prioritized forms of cultural representation. State-modulated precarity thus operates not only through the temporality and administrative conditions of funding, but also through the priorities that determine which forms of cultural production are more readily supported by the state.

Taken together, the ICR and DRP illustrate two distinct yet interrelated models of state involvement in cultural representation: a bureaucratic model of cultural diplomacy (through ICR), which emphasizes artistic excellence and international visibility, but tends to reproduce elite circuits of cultural production; and an identity-driven model of cultural nationalism (through DRP), which promotes symbolic cohesion among diaspora communities, yet marginalizes plural and critical cultural forms. For workers in the cultural sector, these opportunities do not provide stability or real access to platforms for artistic expression and community-oriented projects. The comparison therefore reinforces the central argument of this article: state support and precarity are not opposing conditions. Public institutions can simultaneously enable cultural production and international visibility while maintaining a system in which professional continuity, income stability and the risks associated with unsuccessful applications remain largely individualized.

8. Reflection on cultural labour conditions in Romania. Precarity, gender discrimination and seasonality

The average age of those engaged in these precarious forms of work (cultural sector dependent on

seasonal funding, paid roughly around the national salary average, but not throughout the entire year and with social insurance paid out of pocket), hovers around 35 years. Such precarity becomes increasingly difficult to sustain over the course of a professional career. Employment in the public cultural sector, by contrast, generally provides greater continuity of income and access to employment-based social protection. An independent cultural worker in Romania is typically ineligible for bank credit, whether consumer loans or mortgages, which condition in a consumption-driven society structured by demanding economic and social standards amounts to deep precarity (Murray & Gollmitzer, 2011). From a demographic standpoint, over half of Romanian cultural workers possess high qualifications and solid higher education (Bădulescu, 2017). The persistence of economic insecurity among highly qualified cultural professionals indicates that professional expertise alone does not mitigate the structural effects of seasonal and project-based funding. At the same time, the fragmented organization of cultural work can limit the capacity for sustained collective representation and policy advocacy (Hadley, S., & Gray, C., 2017). The persistence of cultural workers within such an unstable professional environment should not be interpreted simply as an acceptance of precarious conditions. Research on cultural labour has repeatedly shown how professional commitment, artistic identity and the intrinsic value attributed to cultural work can coexist with economic insecurity. This coexistence is important to the concept of state-modulated precarity because professional commitment can make prolonged uncertainty sustainable at the individual level without resolving its structural causes.

Studies also indicate that in Romania the share of women active in the independent cultural sector is higher than the European average (60–70% of all cultural workers) Compendium of Cultural Policies. (2025). The intersection between gender and precarious professional status may therefore produce differentiated experiences of insecurity. Women often occupy secondary, frequently invisible roles behind male artists (management, coordination, curatorship), which leads to the symbolic undervaluation of their work (it is not “creation,” but “planning and coordination”). Part of this dynamic involves self-exploitation, a mechanism that normalizes long-term acceptance of institutionally maintained precarity. Women strive to perform, to be validated, to deliver notable results; these ambitions are sustained by exhausting work unsupported by a social safety net (as reflected earlier). Within the neoliberal logic of culture (“performance, flexibility, network”) (McRobbie, 2009) professional autonomy becomes a constant pressure, internalized as total responsibility (self-exploitation). Women with families experience the seasonal or isolated character of cultural work and domestic responsibilities (childcare and housework). The result is increased precarity, where economic insecurity overlaps with emotional strain due to the erasure of boundaries between professional and private life. Precarity is more than an economic condition; it becomes a *modus vivendi* characterized by perpetual alertness and self-exploitation in the pursuit of “better results”, because beyond their paid tasks, women cultural workers

sustain entire relational networks, teams, collaborators, family, including support to anxious colleagues affected by precarity, and remaining at all costs available for caregiving. This affective labour, crucial to maintaining balance, is undisputedly invisible and undervalued. To navigate seasonal cycles successfully, the woman cultural worker must always be available and confident in her ability to balance competing demands, while this very availability becomes indispensable symbolic capital. In neoliberal terms, the woman is expected to demonstrate transversal management competencies across all domains of life in a perpetual search for equilibrium (Gill & Pratt, 2008)

Precarity also entails temporal precarity: the absence of stable schedules, overlap between implementation and proposal-writing, waves of exhausting work (writing applications, delivering events, preparing reports) followed by quieter periods that must be used to prepare new proposals, thus maintaining the rhythm of living from one grant to the next. The temporality of the independent cultural sector (with its peaks of intensity and competition) is incompatible with family life, which requires calm and predictability. As Judith Butler reminds us in writing on “precarious bodies,” here the woman’s body becomes the site where temporalities collide: fatigue, anxiety, and guilt are material effects of precarity (Zaharijević, 2022). Women cultural workers often articulate not only a strong work ethic but an ethic of passion—“I do this because I love it, not for the money.” Yet when passion combines with precarity and motherhood, a triple guilt emerges: not achieving sufficient results (for not working “enough”), not being sufficiently present in the family, and failing to balance the professional and personal spheres. Self-discipline follows, a form of neoliberal time management (Scharff, 2015) in which managing precarity becomes an individual responsibility rather than an institutional problem within market logic, where each person must find their own solutions and balance. Seasonality should therefore not be understood simply as several months without funded projects. It reorganizes professional time around the funding calendar, transferring the responsibility for bridging the intervals between grants to the individual cultural worker.

This dynamic at the level of individual biographies is paralleled by a broader landscape in which collective action is equally constrained. Although cultural workers participate in consultations, provide feedback, and often maintain professional relationships of mutual understanding with funding authorities, several structural factors limit collective influence: divergent interests between the independent and public sectors, as well as limited capacity to exert influence on political decision-makers. To these adds the lack of unity within the independent field: few common platforms, weak solidarity around key issues (e.g., the abrupt introduction of the SDFC digital platform was criticized by a large group of cultural workers, but such reactions are rare and do not produce specific impact), the persistence of political clientelism, especially at local and regional levels where budgets are managed by entities with limited cultural expertise.

Clientelist mechanisms reproduce themselves with minor change of dynamics over the years, eroding

trust among cultural operators and discouraging attempts to diversify public funding sources because certain sources are de facto inaccessible. This inaccessibility is not openly formalized through direct allocations to specific cultural operators but camouflaged within flawed evaluation processes that selectively open and restrict budgets to specific operators. These practices become the norm, through unsustainable rejection criteria and superficial handling of appeals (with no clear feedback offered to the operators that are rejected), leading to many cultural operators abandoning these funding lines altogether. Such approaches which are visible in some public institutions (at all levels) further vulneralize a sector already marked by precarity and where vulnerability emerges from lack of respect and non-transparent treatment of cultural operators, maintained and tolerated by the state. When the state signals that one cannot rely on what is presented as a competitive process, because political clientelism prevails, the relationship with the state becomes even more fragile. To clientelism mechanisms add the annualized funding schemes, i.e the seasonality of the granting system.

Funding applications that meet eligibility criteria are typically approved for project implementation periods running between April–May and November, amounting to no more than seven months of paid work. Consequently, cultural workers receive income for approximately seven months of the year, with five months of unpaid inactivity. The state provides no compensation or bridging mechanism for these time gaps, leaving cultural operators exposed to economic insecurity and leading many to abandon the sector in search of more stable employment (with social and health security covered). Over the past five years, a few multiannual funding schemes have been introduced (AFCN, Center of Projects Timisoara), but they maintain the same structural limitations: funding nominally covers several years, but in reality each fiscal year must end with a full technical and financial report, and the next tranche is released after the national and institutional budgets are approved—typically in April (so the multiannual funding is rather an annual funding with a multiannual planning). The annual rhythm of uncertainty creates a systemic dependency that undermines the sustainability of cultural work and the capacity of imprinting vision to cultural projects. It also perpetuates the image of the cultural sector as one of “project oriented” rather than “profession rooted” thereby reinforcing the temporary and fragmented character of artistic labour.

The systemic reliance on fragmented, project-based rhythms is further intensified by the bureaucratic infrastructure, one of the main challenges for cultural operators. The beneficiaries must submit extensive documentation at the end of each project cycle, making the procedures for non-reimbursable grants a complete burden to cultural operators. Each expenditure must be justified with multiple supporting documents (in compliance with the legislation in the field of procurement and finance): requests for quotations, price offers, minutes of service-provider selection, delivery and acceptance reports, consumption receipts, and others. These rules formally ensure financial accountability, but in practice they also develop a bureaucratic labyrinth that is misaligned with the realities of small-scale cultural production (understaffed and under resourced).

Moreover, the evaluation of the reporting is often conducted by accountants and financial experts within funding agencies, professionals with qualifications in finance and procurement that have minimal understanding of the cultural sector's specificities. The evaluations regarding what constitutes an "eligible" activity are made according to accounting standards with no relation with artistic or social value of the project. This dynamic has created a widespread sense of frustration within the sector: a perception that bureaucratic legitimacy overweighs cultural contribution and value. To reinforce this perspective, many cultural operators, report that the administrative workload overshadows the creative process, diverting time and energy from artistic production to compliance with bureaucratic rules and procedures. This bureaucratization contributes not only to worker exhaustion and precarity but also to the alienation of audiences, particularly in smaller urban areas where cultural participation is already fragile (because less time is dedicated to the actual implementation of the project). The very process of verification and approval process for financial reports is itself a measure of the state's control over the cultural workforce. Because cultural budgets lack predictability and private sponsorship remains minimal, the timing of final payments is essential for the actual survival of the cultural worker, becoming critical. Typically, the last 20% of the grant is reimbursed only after the final report is approved by the bureaucrats verifying procurement and finance documents. This means organizations have to pre-finance the last tranche from their own funds, often through personal loans from cultural workers who, in effect, subsidize the state's cash-flow delay. The difficulty of accessing credit mechanisms for non-governmental organizations in Romania aggravates the situation: cultural actors cannot access bridging loans and must instead rely on personal financial sacrifices (deepening precarity). These mechanisms exemplify how state-led support paradoxically modulates and encourages precarity. While publicly presented as "support for culture," such mechanisms expose workers to chronic financial instability and lack of predictability thus reinforcing the very vulnerabilities they claim to alleviate.

Conclusion

In sum, the dynamics outlined above point to a cultural ecosystem shaped as much by its support structures (institutions, funding mechanisms, bureaucratic instruments) as by its vulnerabilities (seasonality, no social and health security, work overload, etc). The Timișoara European Capital of Culture case demonstrates that concentrated public investment can temporarily strengthen a local cultural ecosystem without necessarily altering the project-based mechanisms on which professional continuity depends. More broadly, the Romanian case reveals a central paradox: public funding enables independent cultural production while its seasonal, project-based and administratively demanding organization can simultaneously reproduce professional insecurity. This is the condition conceptualized in this article as state-modulated precarity. The prevalence of competitive project applications also makes administrative competence an increasingly important

component of cultural work, alongside artistic and professional expertise. The challenge for cultural operators is not to produce better applications, but to build sustainable frameworks that recognize cultural work as continuous, socially valuable labour, with a solid and predictable system of funding and protection for cultural work.

The Romanian cultural funding system reveals a strong contradiction between discourse and practice: while promoting autonomy and creativity, it embeds cultural work in precarious, bureaucratically controlled structures (that complicate rather than create accessibility through the procedures they set up and implement). The neoliberal ideology of “competition” and “project efficiency” legitimizes instability as a natural condition of artistic labor, not in an authentic market competition but in a competition regulated by state, leading to the state-modulated vulnerability. Meaningful change is required through redefining the relationship between the state and cultural workers, from a transactional model of project writing and execution to one of partnership and long-term investment (where cultural workers can regain control over their professional decisions and over their personal lives that are significantly transformed by the seasonality of work). Should there be no paradigm shift, public cultural policy will continue to sustain the very vulnerabilities it claims to address, perpetuating a cycle where support turns into a mechanism of dependence and autonomy remains rhetorical, enhancing the state-modulated precarity.

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