



SUBTLE SUPPRESSION

ARTISTIC CENSORSHIP IN THE POST- SOVIET REGION

SANJAY SETHI IN PROFILE

By Masha
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In 2019, Hungary's biggest contemporary art museum removed an art installation because it portrayed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in an unflattering light. In 2017, the director of a Polish historical museum was dismissed and replaced by someone who would rewrite history in accordance with the ruling party line. That same year, a famous Russian theater and film director who had criticized the government was accused of embezzling funds and placed under house arrest. These are three public examples of how right-wing governments in some former Communist countries repress cultural activity, but the trend is pervasive and the repression tends to be subtle—reallocated funding; external pressure that leads to self-censorship; legal challenges.

During the Communist period, governments used to publicly denounce artists and cultural figures who criticized them, sending them away to work camps or worse. Now, more than three decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain, authoritarian regimes have shifted tactics. "A lot of what's happening is behind the scenes," says Sanjay Sethi (SIPA, 2002; Harriman Institute Certificate, 2007). "Today's dictators are getting smarter."

The repressive landscape in some parts of the former Communist region has led increasingly to artists leaving their home countries. Sethi, who has been an immigration lawyer for more than a decade and who cofounded the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) in 2017—an organization that provides pro bono legal services and housing for artists fleeing censorship or persecution, started noticing an influx of artists from Central and Eastern Europe a couple of years ago. He also noticed that, while human rights and illiberal trends in the region were well-documented, trends in the art world were being underreported. "The situation for artists in the region is getting more and more precarious," he says, "but the public isn't really aware of the scale."

Sethi, who has a background in human rights and in East European and Eurasian studies, decided to change this. Last year, he and his team at AFI began conducting research for a human rights report to document repression in the art world. Shortly after they started, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States. This meant they could no longer do any of their reporting in person, but the pandemic also opened up opportunities. With other AFI projects on hold, there was more time for research. And, now that all interviews had to take place using Zoom, they could fit more of them into

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a shorter period of time. The more they worked on the report, the longer it became. “We started out thinking we’d produce a 50- to 60-page report, and now it’s pushing 100 pages, which speaks to the scale of the problem in the region,” Sethi says.

He is enjoying the work—so much so that he has decided to come back to Columbia for another master’s, this time in Slavic cultures. He enrolled in January 2021 with a focus on the intersectionality of law and culture in Eastern Europe, and he’s taking courses on topics ranging from Ukrainian avant-garde art to litigating free expression cases in international courts. “It’s a personal interest,” Sethi says. “But, in many ways, it has already had a practical impact on my career.”

Meanwhile, the human rights report, titled “Subtle Suppression,” is in the final stages of completion. It is scheduled for release this summer and will be the first-ever human rights report focused on artistic repression in Central and Eastern Europe. Sethi is planning a virtual launch event with the Harriman Institute, and, after the pandemic ends, an on-campus conference and artistic exhibition.

Recently AFI started a fellowship program, enlisting Columbia students, including some from the Harriman Institute, to help with the report. Sethi recalls the fellowship he received from Columbia Law School’s Public Interest Law Initiative, back when he finished graduate school. “In large part, I got it because of my work at the Harriman Institute,” he says. “I’m thrilled to be in a position where I can give back to Harriman and provide students with an opportunity to develop their professional and regional expertise.” ■

Opposite page: Sanjay Sethi at an Artist Freedom Initiative event on exiled artists. Photo courtesy of Sanjay Sethi.