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Securitizing Culture: Artistic Freedom and Radical Nationalism in Post-2022 Latvia

Kultūras drošībošana: mākslinieciskā brīvība un radikālais nacionālisms pēc 2022. gada Latvijā

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Atslēgvārdi:
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* In 2016, the Terminology Commission of the Latvian Academy of Sciences decided to approve "drošībošana" as the Latvian equivalent of the term "securitization" used in political science. The theory of securitization was originally proposed by Ole Wæver, and in political science research, this concept provides an opportunity to analyze the formation of security issues and their objectivity.

Summary This article explores the conceptual relationship between populism, post-2022 securitization and artistic freedom in Latvia. In the last decade, culture wars have intensified in Europe, whereby the moral and normative values underpinning society have become a battleground for competing groups with differing visions of society. Latvia presents a unique case due to its post-Soviet history, ethnic divisions between Latvians and Russians, the revival of Baltic paganism, and the contemporary impact of Russia's war on Ukraine, which has amplified nationalist, religious, and populist discourse around identity and culture. Latvia, as a case, also illustrates how art, as a site of culture wars, can be constituted by a complex interplay of multiple competing groups with differing moral visions of society.

This article presents a three-part typology for analyzing how art can be securitized: the securitization of art itself, art as the medium of securitization, and art as resistance to securitization. The framework is then applied to two cases of art censorship in Latvia. The first concerns the withdrawal of ceramics by Sander Raudsepp from the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils in 2022, and the second concerns criminal proceedings initiated against artist Kristians Brekte in 2025. These cases show how art can be deployed as a site of struggle over national identity, belonging, morality and the limits of free expression, but also illustrate the power of art, even when attacked and criminalized, to unsettle and renegotiate such cultural boundaries.

Kopsavilkums Šajā rakstā tiek pētīta konceptuālā saikne starp populismu, drošībošanu pēc 2022. gada un mākslinieciskо brīvību Latvijā. Pēdējā desmitgadē Eiropā ir pastiprinājušās kultūras cīņas, kurās sabiedrības morālās un normatīvās vērtības ir kļuvušas par cīņas telpu konkurējošām grupām ar atšķirīgiem redzējumiem. Latvija ir unikāls gadījums, ņemot vērā tās pēcpadomju vēsturi, etniskās atšķirības starp latviešiem un krieviem, Baltijas pagānisma atdzimšanu un Krievijas kara pret Ukrainu ietekmi mūsdienās, kas ir pastiprinājusi nacionālistiskās, reliģiskās un populistiskās diskusijas par identitāti un kultūru.

Šajā rakstā tiek izklāstīta trīsdaļīga tipoloģija, lai analizētu, kā māksla var tikt drošībota: mākslas drošībošana pati par sevi, māksla kā drošībošanas līdzeklis un māksla kā pretestība drošībošanai. Pēc tam šī sistēma tiek piemērota diviem mākslas cenzūras gadījumiem Latvijā. Pirmais attiecas uz Sandera Raudsepa keramikas darbu izņemšanu no Rothko muzeja Daugavpilī 2022. gadā, bet otrais attiecas uz kriminālprocesu, kas 2025. gadā tika uzsākts pret mākslinieku Kristianu Brekti. Šie gadījumi parāda, kā māksla var tikt izmantota cīņai par nacionālās identitātes, piederības, morāles un vārda brīvības robežām, bet arī ilustrē mākslas spēku, pat pret to vērstu uzbrukumu un kriminālatbildības gadījumā, satricināt un pārskatīt kultūras robežas.

Introduction

For at least the last decade, the idea of culture wars, in concomitance with populism, has permeated the public sphere in Europe and beyond (Moran, Littler 2020; Barša et al. 2021; Isaacs et al. 2021; Rodrik 2021; Petsinis, Wierenga 2021; Featherstone 2022; Baro and Jenssen 2025).[1] Culture wars, understood in the first instance as 'political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding' (Hunter: 1992, 42), have traditionally taken place in different political and social domains. This was very much the case with the culture wars of the 1980s in the US, as a divide between the secular and the sacred crossed issues such as abortion, free speech, family values, and religious freedom (Lewis 2019). However, the culture wars of today are distinct. We are now witnessing the emergence of opposing groups battling for supremacy over which moral imperatives and social and cultural values form the basis upon which a society can be constructed. For example, in contemporary Europe, if not beyond, the recent manifestation of culture wars and how they are interconnected with the discourses, strategies, and politics of right-wing populists, now cross many different issues including migration, welfare chauvinism, health policy, 'anti-gender' ideology, and national identity (De Cleen et al. 2018; Van Der Waal et al. 2013; Kuhar, Paternotte 2017; Lindström 2020; Isaacs, Rudzite 2021; Barša et al. 2021).

Art as a site, and artistic expression as a practice, is an area which has been given less scholarly attention regarding the relationship between emergent right-wing nativist political and cultural discourses and their manifestation in culture wars. This seems an odd lacuna given how cases of right-wing populists censoring artists or interfering in the management of galleries and museums have become commonplace in Europe. For example, in Poland, the PiS government during its eight-year tenure dismissed museum directors, defunded art which exhibited LGBTQ+ content, and arrested Elżbieta Podleśna for her work on the grounds of 'offending religious feelings' (Harris 2021; Sethi et al. 2022). Similar dismissals and government control over cultural institutions have taken place in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party (Fitzgerald 2023), while other right-wing populist and nationalist governments and political parties have sought control over cultural institutions and placed pressure on artistic expression in Italy (Rankin 2024), Serbia (Rädle 2019; Oltermann 2024), Spain (Moreno 2023; Jones 2024), and France (Azimi, Guerrin 2024).

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1 In this article, we understand populism and culture wars as two distinct concepts which emerge from two separate but interlinked bodies of scholarship. We argue that it is important not to conflate the two terms, and in this article, we define populism and culture wars distinctly in their own right.

These examples illustrate how art has become a battlefield for the political and ideological clashes of contemporary culture wars in Europe. An attack on the arts can also act as a warning sign of democratic regression, the diminishment of pluralism, the influence of transnational spillover, as well as the potential for new modes of creative resistance to the pull and appeal of right-wing nationalist populism. Yet, the relationship between right-wing populism and its impact on the arts remains under-researched or largely focused on the most obvious instances of its influence in cases such as Hungary and Poland, where populist governments have been in power. Less focus has been on broader public discourses, and the complex myriad of state and non-state actors pushing those discourses, specifically the confluence of interests between right-wing populists and religious organizations, who attack the arts for unpatriotic content, or the way it may undermine traditional, religious, national, and cultural values.

This article addresses the relationship between right-wing populist, nationalist, and religious discourses, and their impact on art in Latvia. Latvia makes a compelling case for several reasons. In the scholarship on cultural policy and populism, Latvia is an unresearched case compared to Hungary and Poland, Latvia offers new geographic and comparative terrain providing for a distinct perspective from the Baltic region. Second, Latvia also illustrates how populism can shape art in contexts where there is a complex form of identity politics. Latvia's cultural politics are shaped by intersecting cleavages pertaining to the Latvian majority and Russian minority, memory politics, post-Soviet nostalgia among ethnic Russian Latvians, the history of Soviet occupation, the politics of language, religious beliefs, and the tension between promoting ethnic nationalism alongside a commitment to the liberal democratic values of the European Union. This multitude of normative and ideational conflicts play out against the background of the war in Ukraine. Since Russia's invasion and occupation of parts of Ukraine, questions of language, identity, belonging and morality have acquired a new dimension; they have now also become matters of national security and defense.

Like many countries, Latvia is now subject to a growing right-wing populist nationalist discourse which pushes forward traditional, folkloric, Christian, or national-historical values, and which in the context of art seeks to marginalize feminist, queer and more experimental art. Latvia is not an illiberal state like Hungary under Orban. Yet, as we argue, it is experiencing instances of an illiberal creep through populist and nationalist discourse into the sphere of art, and thus it offers an ideal site to understand how cultural institutions, artists, and the state respond to emerging populism in this way. In studying Latvia, we gain a greater understanding of the broader trends enveloping the arts in Europe, allowing scholars and artists the opportunity to develop strategies of resistance.

While culture wars are often presented through a binary opposition between progressive and conservative forces, the Latvian case is more complex. Cultural conflict in Latvia does not align neatly with a conventional left-right spectrum. Rather, it emerges through shifting alliances between nationalist parties, religious authorities, Russian-speaking political actors, local communities, and liberal defenders of artistic freedom. This complexity is particularly visible in debates over art, where multiple actors compete to define the boundaries of morality, national identity, and acceptable expression.

This article is driven by two central questions, which reflect upon developments regarding securitization, culture wars, right-wing populism, and art in Latvia: how is art being securitized in the context of culture wars in Latvia; and what might that tell us about the role of contemporary art in political and cultural discourse (in Latvia specifically, but also more broadly).

In response to these questions, by exploring two specific cases of artistic censorship in Latvia, we argue that art is being securitized by a panoply of different political, religious, and cultural actors who securitize cultural production in the name of defending traditional and moral values and national identity. In seeking to police the boundaries of cultural legitimacy and artistic expression, these actors frame art which challenges and provokes their national, cultural, and religious sense of self as an existential threat. Through the two case studies, we demonstrate how the securitization of art illuminates broader dynamics of populism, identity politics, and democratic regression in Europe today and, most importantly, its complexity, which cannot be reduced to straightforward binaries of left versus right-wing populism.[2]

Methodologically, this article employs qualitative discourse analysis of political statements, media coverage, institutional responses, and public debates surrounding the two case studies. It does not seek to provide an independent aesthetic analysis of the artworks themselves but rather examines how these works became framed as threats within broader political and cultural discourse.

The article is structured into four sections. Firstly, we set out a framework for understanding the relationship between art and the concept of securitization within the context of rising right-wing populism and culture wars. The framework we construct establishes a typology where art can be securitized for *protection*, it can be the *medium* of securitization, and it can be the site of *resistance* to securitization. Secondly, we place the case of Latvian art in a contemporary political and social

2 This article focuses primarily on the securitization of art by nationalist, religious and populist actors. However, post-2022 Latvia has also witnessed forms of securitization directed at Russian and Russian-funded cultural production, reflecting a broader climate in which culture increasingly becomes entangled with questions of national security.

context regarding some of the broader issues playing out in the country in regard to discourses of nationalism, identity, and religion. Thirdly, we explore the securitization of art in Latvia through two case studies. The first case is the withdrawal of experimental ceramic artwork from the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils in 2022. The second case refers to criminal proceedings against Latvian artist Kristians Brekte in 2025. Both cases take place after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and against the background of increasingly heated public discourses of identity, belonging, culture, and values. Through an analysis of these two cases, we explore the intricate interplay between culture and security in contemporary Latvian society.

The securitization of art in the age of populism and culture wars: A three-part typology

How can we theorize and understand art in relation to security? The notion of securitization is rooted in international relations, where, in the work of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998), security is no longer viewed as an objective material condition, but as a speech act through which specific issues are framed as existential threats. Policies are then introduced to address those threats, such as the US Homeland Security Act in response to the War on Terror. While securitization has largely focused on perceived threats to referents such as the state, collective identity, health, and the environment, art can also become a referent object framed as under existential threat. From this perspective, art moves beyond its aesthetic, symbolic, ideological, and economic value to become something that must be defended and protected.

Conceptually, art's relationship to securitization has been observed in three different ways. Firstly, cultural heritage and monuments have been subject to securitization in the context of wars, conflicts, and political violence. In this way, international actors construct a discourse of the *protection* of historical and archaeological sites which seeks to integrate cultural diplomacy with civil-military cooperation. We have witnessed this in relation to ISIS's attack on Palmyra and other sites in the Middle East (Giusti et al. 2018; Russo, Giusti 2019). Secondly, art can also be a *medium* through which art is securitized. Exhibitions and performances can play a role in identifying 'at-risk' referents and can use visual representation to dramatize insecurity. For example, Alice Massari (2021) demonstrated how relief organizations' visual depiction of Syrian displacement contributes to reproducing and reinforcing the securitization of refugees. Simultaneously, artistic practices and cultural programming can also act to de-securitize minority groups (Jašina-Schäfer 2023). Thirdly, art can act as a site of *resistance*. This has been demonstrated through work

which explores how migrant artistic expression resists securitized framings of mobility, subverts narratives portraying migrants as existential threats, and how theater can provide a site for counterhegemonic discourse (Innes 2015; Marschall, Simke 2022).

How does the securitization of art relate to contemporary forms of right-wing populism in the context of culture wars? Populism is a contested concept, but scholars have coalesced around an orthodox definition which understands populism as "a thin-centered ideology which divides society into two antagonistic camps: the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite"'" (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2017: 6) that privileges popular sovereignty above all else. Right-wing populism tends to be characterized by ethnonationalism, social conservatism, anti-immigration stances and a propensity to scapegoat "the other" (Stavrakakis et al. 2017). Art, therefore, is a space within which cultural production and artistic freedom become subject to securitization by populist actors. These actors use art in its multiple forms to instigate culture wars in which they frame the protection and purity of cultural values and national identity to justify exceptional control over cultural institutions and narratives, specifically when it comes to questions of ethno-national and cultural identity.

It is important to acknowledge that art is also securitized by progressive and left-wing actors that might be termed 'left populist'. Petitions to remove a controversial painting by Balthus from the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Kinsella 2017) and the (temporary) removal of a Waterhouse painting from the Manchester Art Gallery (Luke 2018) emerged in the context of the MeToo movement, while the cancellation of Philip Guston's retrospective (Charlesworth 2020) and the toppling of statues in America and the UK (Beech, Jordan 2021) are two examples of securitization in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. These, and many more examples (see Harris 2022 for a comprehensive account), often sit within broader debates about decolonizing art museums. As already mentioned, the securitization of art can also come from non-populist or anti-Russian directions, and this has intensified in Latvia and the Baltics in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We acknowledge them, but they fall outside the purview of this article.

In this article, we will apply our three-part typology to two cases of the withdrawal of artworks in Latvia. This will facilitate understanding of the relationship between art and securitization in the context of populism and culture wars in Latvia, and potentially shed light on securitization, culture wars, right-wing populism, and art more broadly. Our first case study concerns the censorship of the Estonian artist Sander Raudsepp at the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils; the second concerns criminal proceedings initiated against the Latvian artist Kristians Brekte. The table below stakes out the typology and its application to the two cases.

Table 1.

Art as Securitized Object Requiring Protection	Art as Medium of Securitization	Art as Resistance to Securitization
Pressure and complaints from religious and political organizations regarding specific art works.	The use of art to spark debates over 'traditional Christian values', reinforcing morals and cultural boundaries.	Art instigating public debate regarding resisting censorship of artistic production.
The potential to lead to criminal investigations for artists.	The use of performance to highlight nationalist tensions and anxieties.	The use of art and performance to deliberately provoke critiques of contemporary nationalism in Latvia and emphasize the role of artistic freedom in promoting societal freedom.

Before proceeding to our discussion of the Raudsepp and Brekte cases, we provide some context to contemporary nationalist discourses, right-wing populism, and culture wars in Latvia.

The political context of the securitization of art in Latvia

This section addresses the political, social, and cultural context underpinning the relationship between art and securitization in the case of Latvia. The two cases of artworks discussed in this article were produced by the Estonian ceramist Sander Raudsepp and the Latvian artist Kristians Brekte. The exhibition *Afterlife: Dying to get there* of Raudsepp's work was held in the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils, while Brekte's performative artwork was published as part of his ironic video series 'Cooking with Kristians Brekte' on his social media accounts. The underlying ideas – religion and nationalism, respectively – of the two artworks diverge significantly, as do the respective public receptions and the actors imposing censorship and their rationale for doing so. The Rothko Museum in Daugavpils is in the southeastern region of Latvia, Latgale. The region has historically presented unique challenges owing to its distinct cultural, demographic, and historical characteristics within the Latvian national context (Plakans 2011). Compared to the rest of Latvia's regions, political life in Latgale has historically been intertwined with the Catholic Church. Additionally, demographically, the region has been more multi-ethnic, with a lower percentage of ethnic Latvians living in the region. As post-1991 national politics in Latvia has emphasized Latvian culture, language, and ancestry in reconstructing the Latvian state, while excluding

Russian-speakers from the core construction of national and state identity, the high proportion of Russian-speakers in Latgale has posed significant challenges (Adams et al. 2006; Cheskin 2013).

Following the expansion of Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022, and observing increased hybrid war activity in the EU, especially the Baltics, the Russian language and the use of Russian mass media in Latvian public discourse have been increasingly seen as a threat to national security. Threats to national security also question the formation of national identity and what it requires for people to belong (Katzenstein 1996). Since gaining independence from 50 years of Soviet rule in the early 1990s, Latvians have placed paramount importance on safeguarding their values and shared historical memories. The mass deportations and exile of local cultural, economic, and political elites, the suppression of Latvian language and culture, as well as the forced migration of non-Latvians to the Latvian territory during the Soviet period reshaped local demographics, and the cultural and ethno-politics of post-1991 nationalism (Lazda 2009). In 1989, just prior to independence in 1991, just under half of Latvia's population (45 percent) was made up of ethnic groups other than Latvians, principally Russian and other Slavic peoples.

This demographic and political legacy is important for understanding the development of nationalist, religious, and radical populist right politics in Latvia since the collapse of the USSR. The emergence of radical right, nationalism, and populist discourse in Latvia stretches back to the Latvian National Independence Movement (LNNK) of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which pushed for independence from the USSR. Discourses and parties which emerged from this front, such as the mid-1990s hardline nationalist Popular Movement for Latvia led by Joachim Siegerist, advocated a highly populist, Russophobic, and anti-corruption campaign. Thus, the language of radical-right populists, specifically regarding conservative nationalism, has long been a part of the Latvian political mainstream, and became gradually normalized by the *Nacionālā apvienība Visu Latvijai! – Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK* (National Alliance [NA] "All for Latvia! – For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK") (which also emerged from the LNNK). The NA has long promoted a pro-Latvian language and culture policy, ethnic nationalism, conservative family values, and anti-immigration stances. The NA, having served in government several times, has ensured that its radical, nationalist, and populist discourse has become normalized into the mainstream of Latvian public discourse (Auers, Kasekamp 2013; Auers 2023).

However, debates regarding national cultural values and identity are not monolithic, and there is space for alternative discourses and intra-national complexity, both from the liberal left and political parties, which are seen to be more aligned with Russian interests. For example, in 2017, the party *Progresīvie* (Progressives) emerged

as a new political force dedicated to enhancing social cohesion and mitigating ethnic fragmentation within the society. The party has since achieved notable success, obtaining 10 out of 100 seats in the 2022 Saeima (parliament) elections and the mandate for Minister of Culture, among others, as well as 11 out of 60 seats in the 2025 *Rīgas dome* (city council), along with the mandate for the Mayor of *Rīgas dome*. The presence of a center-left party has reoriented the coalition toward center-left ideologies. In 2023, for the first time in 12 years, the NA was relegated to opposition in the Saeima, publicly citing ideological differences, particularly regarding human rights, as justification for their unwillingness to cooperate with the Progressives. Within the Latgale region, the 2022 parliamentary election results indicated the highest level of support for the Russian-speaking populist party *Stabilitātei!* (Stability!), with the *Progresīvie* and NA each obtaining a single seat. In the 2025 municipal elections, Andrejs Elksniņš (previously a member of the predominantly Russian-speaking party *Saskaņa* [Concord]) established a new party, *Sarauj, Latgale!* (Let's Go, Latgale!), which won 14 out of 15 seats, leading to his re-election as the Daugavpils City Mayor. Elksniņš has been ambiguous about his stance regarding the war in Ukraine, while the *Sarauj, Latgale!* pre-election program addressed 'unprecedented geopolitical events' and the need for the Latgale region to be prepared to respond effectively to economic and military challenges (Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija 2025, LETA 2025a).

In the context of the securitization of art, this political complexity regarding national cultural values and identity points to tensions and conflict regarding the role of art and culture in society. The NA, who had a long-standing position within the Kultūras ministrija, has shaped cultural policy and institutions to focus largely on a greater Latvian nationalist lens (Auers 2022). At the same time, the revival of Baltic paganism and neo-traditionalism in the post-1991 period has promoted folk-art, national identity, and a pre-Christian spirituality, which has helped shape a religious cultural identity which is securitized in public discourse (Stasulane 2019; Petsinis, Wierenga 2021). Traditional religious organizations have also sought to intervene in public debates, pushing forward an agenda which supports their interpretation of 'family values', abortion, and the protection of women against domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) (Stankevics 2023; Isaacs, Rudzite 2021). The role of religious organizations in this way has been likened to their acting as 'moral guardians', creating a public climate in which criticism or alternative depictions of national and family values face calls for censorship (Spriņģe 2016).

This context tells us several things. Firstly, the tradition of right-wing populist and nationalist politics in post-1991 Latvia has embedded a discourse of 'cultural threat' to Latvian national culture and self-perceived traditional values (whether

religious family values, or the pagan neo-traditional spiritual values under threat from Western capitalism). As our analysis below illustrates, art can become the securitized referent object as part of this broader public discourse, where protecting Latvian art is not just a matter of cultural policy but one of national security. Secondly, the context of culture wars in art features a multiplicity of actors, which can include the nationalist right, the liberal left, anti-Russian, pro-Russian, religious organizations of differing spiritual orientations, and the artists themselves. Finally, debates regarding what is acceptable artistic expression can also vary depending on the region of the country. Regarding the two case studies in this article, the censorship of Brekte aligns with the radical right populist rhetoric of the NA, aimed at preserving and protecting national values. However, the censorship of Raudsepp's art at the Rothko Museum aligns with a historical regional rhetoric that remains more closely associated with church clergy than the rest of the nation, highlighting a divergence in values compared to the western parts of the country. The cultural values of various parts of society, from different parts of the country, consist of contradictory memories (Hanovs 2022) that are continuously negotiated through political power and legislation related to cultural practices.

Case Study 1: The withdrawal of artworks at the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils in 2022

Pressure and complaints from religious and political organizations regarding Raudsepp's exhibition The Rothko Museum is a municipal institution focused on arts and culture. It is named after Mark Rothko, a globally acclaimed artist of Jewish descent born in Daugavpils – the largest city in Latgale, the southeastern region of Latvia that borders Russia and Belarus. The museum, which consists of more than 5,000 square meters of art space located in the historical Daugavpils Fortress, has been a cultural boost for Daugavpils, attracting around 100,000 visitors annually, setting an example for culture-driven regional development. In 2022, the Rothko Museum showed Sander Raudsepp's exhibition, *Afterlife: Dying to Get There*, a series of visual representations of popular beliefs related to life after death. Raudsepp is an emerging artist, who is part of the Estonian Ceramists Association. He has exhibited across Europe and as far away as South Korea. The following censorship of Raudsepp's work at the Rothko, although executed by the municipal authorities, originated from religious leaders representing various Christian denominations within Latgale.

The controversy stemmed from the way Raudsepp depicted religious iconography. *Juzi* featured the likeness of Christ as a 'gangsta' with what appeared to be Uzi guns in each hand and a large automatic firearm emerging from his chest – or

perhaps Christ is seated in this gun, as one would sit in a kayak. Another ceramic sculpture featured a head, reminiscent of the Easter Island statues, with several crucifixes emerging from the scalp (*On the Edge*). *Dicksus* featured a crucifix adorned with images of penises and a sculptural penis in place of the crucified body. The sculptures did not all relate to Christian iconography. Others featured animals or pagan imagery. Others were ambiguous in their relation to Christianity: *Bad Thoughts* resembles a container with human faces on each side, and what appears like white souls emerging from the center. Upon closer inspection, the figurines resemble men in military uniforms, one fist raised in the air, recalling Chairman Mao shaking his little red book. These various figurative sculptures are modest in scale and rendered in monochrome, earthy colors, installed on mustard-yellow plinths.

The use of art to spark debates over 'traditional Christian values', reinforcing morals and cultural boundaries The exhibition solicited a response from religious authorities in the region. In a letter addressing the Daugavpils City Mayor, Elksniņš (from the pro-Russian *Saskaņa* party), bishops jointly asserted that the exhibition of specific artworks in a public setting was inappropriate and an intrusion into sacred life. They contended that these pieces foster animosity toward Christianity and disrupt the harmony with Christian values, which they consider foundational to Latvian society (Latvijas Kristīgais Radio 2022). Two weeks after the exhibition opened, complaints by the Church led to the removal of *Dicksus*. Shortly after, two more artworks were removed. The first deputy chairman of the Daugavpils dome, Aleksejs Vasiļjevs from the *Latvijas Krievu savienība* party, visited the exhibition with letters of complaint in hand to pressure the Rothko Museum to remove the works. The removal of specific artworks was touted as a compromise between leaving all the works on display and closing the whole exhibition.

In recent times, it is relatively rare for the Church to call for artworks to be censored, yet there have been some high-profile cases. Andres Serrano's *Immersion* (*Piss Christ*) (1987) is a photograph of a plastic crucifix immersed in a glass jar of the artist's own urine. The photograph is beautiful, luminous, and even spiritual. The controversy comes from the title, which alludes to how it was made and, consequently, the notion of pissing on Christ's image. Two key questions arose then and are still applicable to the Raudsepp case. Firstly, we must consider whether the artwork in question is offensive to Christians, and secondly, whether this perceived offense justifies censorship. The titling of *Piss Christ* (as it is more commonly known) might understandably offend some Christians. However, offense is subjective. Even within the Christian community, there exists a diversity of opinions. Sister Wendy Beckett, a prominent television art historian and nun, for instance, interpreted Piss

Christ not as blasphemous, but as an admonitory work reflecting the mistreatment of Christ (Heartney 1998: 45). Lucy Lippard notes how Serrano takes a cheap and commercialized image of Christ and turns it into an act of rebellion (Lippard 1990: 239). This prompts the question whether Christians should find offense in the plastic crucifix, instead of the artwork that represents it. While some may view the creation and use of plastic crucifixes as idolatrous, others may take issue with their commercialization. This was Serrano's position. The fact that he was raised in a strict Roman Catholic environment and continues to identify as Christian raises questions about whether the artwork is universally offensive to Christians, who speaks on behalf of Christians, and who is allowed to criticize the Church.

Art instigating public debate regarding resisting censorship of artistic production

The second question is whether offensive artworks like Piss Christ or the various ceramics in *Afterlife: Dying to get there* should be censored. When Archbishop Jānis Vanags spoke out about the Daugavpils controversy, he recognized that while the artworks in question were offensive, there is a need for dialogue, where all sides are heard, rather than condemnation (Ašmane-Vilsone, Kaukule 2022). Understanding the diverse range of Christian sensibilities, as well as artistic intent, reveals the artwork as a platform for engaging with faith and organized religion. Furthermore, banning artworks based on offense sets a precedent that could lead to the suppression of all art deemed offensive, ultimately undermining artistic expression and diversity.

The *Piss Christ* scandal from the 1980s in the United States is relevant to our analysis of the Mark Rothko Museum incident of 2022 in Latvia because it is a well-known case study regarding the censorship of art on religious grounds. Prominent art historians, such as Eleanor Heartney and Lucy Lippard, have published on the case, and we have had nearly forty years to reflect on the ramifications. Furthermore, it is widely associated with the beginning of what we now term "the culture wars". As the touring exhibition and prize money were partly publicly funded, right-wing religious groups such as the American Family Association lobbied to have the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) defunded. Like Serrano, Raudsepp was a prize-winner, having been selected by an international jury at the Baltic States Ceramics Competition.

Could it be that the control over what is allowed to be exhibited – in the USA or in Latvia – was actually politically motivated, using religion as a foil? As a post-Soviet country, Latvia has a particular perspective on art used for political propaganda. The director of the *Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs*, Māra Lāce, addressed the Minister of Culture, Nauris Puntulis (NA), warning that political correctness and self-censorship – especially when influenced by social media pressure and fear of

cancellation or defunding – are not to be dismissed, as they can snowball into an avalanche that could wipe out the artistic freedoms gained in the early 1990s (BNN 2022). Latvia takes these post-Soviet artistic freedoms of expression seriously. Indeed, another anti-censorship letter by *The Latvijas Muzeju biedrība* addressing the Minister of Culture, the Ombudsman, and Daugavpils City Mayor, among others, cited the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, highlighting stipulations of freedom of artistic and other creative expression (Article 113), freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief (Article 99), as well as the prohibition of censorship (Article 100).

We argue that Raudsepp's artworks were censored because they were perceived to challenge traditional moral values as much as for the religiously sensitive content. Religion and 'traditional values' often go hand in hand, and we argue that – in this case – such values required securitization via their protection. The Daugavpils incident sparked a broader debate about the role of contemporary art in regional Latvia, where conservative values often dominate public discourse. The head of the Rothko Museum, Māris Čačka, emphasized the need for public education on contemporary art, suggesting that the removals reflected a lack of cultural literacy rather than deliberate suppression (BNN 2022). In response to censorship of Raudsepp's work, the Minister of Culture at the time (Nauris Puntulis, NA) soon responded that "political censorship of art is unacceptable in a democratic society, it is a path to nowhere" (Arterritory 2022). He further elaborated that the ongoing war in Ukraine fosters simplistic, binary viewpoints and hinders constructive discourse and called for a meeting at the Parliament and invited the members of the municipality to meet.

The case of the Rothko Museum scandal illustrates the complexity of the securitization of art in the context of culture wars. Daugavpils dome called for the removal of Raudsepp's ceramics but asserted that it was not censorship (Ašmane-Vilsone, Kaukule 2022). Arguably, this is disinformation. The Daugavpils scandal demonstrates the ways in which multiple actors can converge within a culture war – in this case, the combined authority of the Church and the State (in the form of a local council) – to generate pressure toward self-censorship. Church leaders appeared to call for the works to be censored, and the Rothko Museum subsequently removed them. Upon closer inspection, however, we find that some Church leaders expressed offense but did not want the art to be censored. Čačka acknowledged that neither the local government nor the Church have the authority to interfere with the Rothko Museum's artistic programming, yet he chose to self-censor because of "further possible consequences that could not have been foreseen at that moment" (Ašmane-Vilsone, Kaukule 2022). It would be excessive to imply that *Daugavpils dome* was intentionally implementing such strategies. However, this incident exemplifies

the paradoxical nature of the securitization of art in this context, where censorship is denied even as it is enacted, and choice is presented as autonomy while shaped by invisible pressures, potentially obscuring state coercion.

Case Study 2: The criminal proceedings initiated against artist Kristians Brekte in 2025

The use of performance to highlight nationalist tensions and anxieties. In 2024, Latvian artist Kristians Brekte held a performance in front of Latvia's central national monument in Riga, holding a raw beef heart, which he subsequently posted on his TikTok channel (17 November 2024). His performance solicited complaints, this time from NA politicians. Kristians Brekte, an Associate Professor at the *Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija*, is a highly visible and prolific Latvian artist known for his provocative work. His social media channels, including TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, where his video series are published, have between 3,500 and 5,500 followers.

The video, which is part of his *Cooking with Kristians Brekte* series, begins with the artist standing with his back to the camera in front of the Brothers' Graves Ensemble, near the Mother Latvia monument, during a national holiday. Dressed entirely in black, with a full-length trench coat and large gothic boots, he turns to face his viewers. He holds the raw heart up to the camera. The video quickly cuts to a shot of Brekte running through a field carrying the Latvian flag, before cutting to the artist seated at a table against the backdrop of a wall covered in crucifixes. The setting is almost medieval, and the artist appears to have transformed from goth to pagan, now wearing a headband and a green tunic. He then uses ceremonial daggers to puncture the heart in a frenzied manner, with an insane look on his face. He cuts the heart into strips as he reads from a cookery book while wafting herbs around. He then 'sneezes' a white powder over the meat, then suddenly appears with a long blond wig and makeup. Later, he has a swastika drawn on his forehead, and his eye sockets are painted deep red to match his lipstick. Often screaming, this bizarre performance results in the preparation and consumption of what appears to be a normal casserole.

Brekte's performance occurs within a contested terrain of national memory, highlighting deep-seated anxieties within Latvia's nationalist and populist discourse. The staging of the performance in front of the Mother Latvia monument represents a deliberate challenge to a sacralized site of Latvian national pride (a monument dedicated to national sacrifice). The performance switches between nationalist symbolism (the Latvian flag, the national monument of heroic sacrifice for the nation), religious symbolism (the crucifixes), Latvia's pagan traditionalism (the

headband and green tunic), grotesque parody (fascist imagery, the swastika, the trench coat, and cross-dressing), and culinary banality (the casserole). In doing so, this assemblage of contested and ill-fitting imagery and symbols illustrates the vulnerability of nationalist constructions of identity and memory to parody and desacralization (Dević, Vermeersch 2023).

The performance drew immediate political backlash, particularly from NA deputies, rapidly demonstrating how nationalist and right-wing populist actors can seek to securitize art. NA deputy Ilze Indriksone tweeted on X that:

> The video by Kristians Brekte, published during the national holiday, which touches on our national values, is inappropriate, unacceptable, and offensive. What is presented as an expression of art does not seem witty but rather creates a feeling of disgust. It is necessary to realize that artistic freedom is not absolute. (Indriksone [@IIndriksone] 2024)

Indriksone's reaction, among those of other NA members, reflects how nationalist politicians can construct art as a threat to cultural heritage and then cast the artist as an internal enemy who undermines national and family values (Petsinis, Wierenga 2023: 8). Brekte's performance, therefore, actively induced anxieties within the nationalist and populist political class regarding their cultural and national safety. This may explain why there was then a push to criminalize Brekte's performance.

The securitizing of art leading to the potential for criminal investigation of the artist

Following a complaint filed by members of the NA, the police instituted criminal proceedings concerning the video that Brekte had published online. While politicians publicly deemed the video offensive to national values and questioned its artistic merit, the criminal proceedings focused on a potential violation of Article 229 of the Criminal Code, specifically concerning the destruction, damage, or desecration of a cultural object (Nekā personīga 2025). The Cambridge Dictionary defines "desecration" as "the action of damaging or showing no respect toward something holy or very much respected." The video shows no such damage, and yet the criminal proceedings progressed.

As Brekte did not physically damage the monument, the police are believed to consider desecration in broader terms. These are likely to include disrespect or perhaps, following Indriksone's comments, incitement of "feelings of disgust" (Jauns 2025). However, feelings of disrespect and disgust are subjective and there are rich artistic traditions that evoke disgust. After the Second World War, while Germany was reckoning with the atrocities it committed, Austrians returned to regular life, as if they were not complicit in the Holocaust. By the 1960s, members of

what would become known as Viennese *Aktionism* made street performances designed to shock the public out of this state of denial. Some of their strategies involved nudity and pouring blood over themselves. Like Brekte, they were often prosecuted for violations of decency laws, or degrading symbols of the state. For example, Günter Brus was prosecuted for a performance where he masturbated while covered in feces and singing the national anthem. Otto Mühl and Hermann Nitsch also received prison sentences. In other performances, Nitsch used blood, milk, and even entrails. Other "Aktionen", such as self-flagellation, were shocking in '60s Vienna, but commonplace in certain religious communities. *Blood Organ* (1962) was the first truly group performance. It closed with the crucifixion and disembowelment of a dead lamb. By comparison, Brekte's performance is a mild version of a widely recognized and lauded artistic tradition. Remarkably, the element where Brekte stands in front of the monument only lasts a few seconds, and yet it was reported that he could face up to three years in prison (Nekā personīga 2025).

Brekte and his legal team believe that these measures are politically motivated and that they breach constitutional safeguards for artistic freedom of expression (Jauns 2025). They may have a point. The Minister of Culture, Agnese Lāce (*Progresīvie*), issued a statement about the censorship initiated by Nauris Puntulis from NA in 2022. Lāce emphasized that, in the democratic state of Latvia, censorship is prohibited and limitations of artistic freedoms should not become instruments of political rhetoric (Delfi 2025). Furthermore, this was not the first time political forces had called for the censorship of Brekte's work. Art historian Santa Hirša dedicated an article on censorship in Brekte's case, saying that:

> Commenting on current cases of censorship, advocating for freedom of speech, and explaining the functions of art to society is important but tiring. Mainly because they don't change in their essence, only the venue, the artist's name, and the genre of provocation change (2025)

This indicates the coercive and tiring effects of censorship, prosecution, and the threat of incarceration on artists like Brekte.

The use of art and performance to deliberately provoke critiques of contemporary nationalism in Latvia and to emphasize the role of artistic freedom to promote societal freedom. Sometimes art deliberately provokes. Even "traditional" art can be shocking. *Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600–1700* at the National Gallery (London, 2010) featured Christian art created "to shock the senses and stir the soul" (The National Gallery, 2010). These religious artworks depicted the crucifixion and the lamentation of Christ in shockingly realistic detail, including detailed injuries resulting from torture. Why should visitors not feel disgust at such depictions? Evoking

disgust at the unfair treatment of Christ, or a fellow human being, is a perfectly valid artistic strategy. Therefore, the conflation of 'disgusting' art with the need for censorship is flawed.

The difference between these two examples, according to Indriksone, as noted earlier, is that Brekte's performance is merely "presented as an expression of art" and "artistic freedom is not absolute" (Indriksone 2024). This accusation is fraught with problems. Who decides what qualifies as art – politicians or artists? As with the Raudsepp case, it is important to note that Brekte is a recognized artist. In fact, he comes from a long line of artists. He is a painter, sculptor, ceramicist, and performance artist with a horror aesthetic. His rural upbringing developed a deep affinity with Latvian mythology. He was later drawn to Black Metal culture. He initially trained as a scenographer at the Latvian Academy of Arts. He quickly became a prolific artist, with over 30 solo exhibitions, and he participated in a similar number of group exhibitions in Latvia, Europe, America, and Russia. Brekte was nominated for the *Purvītis* Award, and he won the *Best Foreign Artist* in the under-thirty-five age group at the international contemporary art fair *Art Vilnius*. According to the Institutional Theory of Art – the most widely used and accepted definition of art today – art is whatever the 'art world' (galleries, art schools, curators, critics and historians) deem it to be (Danto 1964; Dickie 1969). Following this logic, Brekte is clearly accepted as an artist.

Brekte was not critiquing Latvian complicity in World War II. Nor was he critiquing the church. The artist explained that the intention was to question superficial nationalism, emphasizing "I am a great patriot of Latvia" (Brekte 2025a). We can assume that this is satirical. However, a critique of national values, including how art movements develop from transgressive acts into cultural capital, can be inferred from his performance. The difficult transition from freedom of expression into securitization of arts has probably been best summarized by Brekte himself: "Art shows, in a direct way, how much freedom there is in the country. If you are not free to express yourself in art, it indicates that you are not free in other fields too. And the politician, in my view, should promote freedom, not restrict it" (Brekte 2025b).

Conclusion This article has brought art together in dialogue with securitization. We conceptualized the different ways art can be securitized: the securitization of art itself, art as the medium of securitization and art as resistance to securitization. We used this as a framework to understand how art is being securitized in the context of culture wars in Latvia. Using Latvia as a case study, we extended the

analysis of culture wars beyond the cases of Poland and Hungary that are typically referred to when discussing culture wars in Europe.

Taken together, the cases of Raudsepp and Brekte demonstrate the interplay between multiple and often competing actors and how, in combination, they shape the securitization of art in the context of contemporary culture wars. The removal of Raudsepp's work from the Rothko Museum demonstrates the role of religious leaders, local politicians, and cultural institutions in coming together to police the boundaries of what is considered culturally legitimate. While Raudsepp's art was subject to censorship, it was also securitized, particularly by religious authorities, as a threat to 'traditional Christian values.' Brekte's performance, on the other hand, illustrates the role of right-wing nationalist and populist politicians seeking to frame provocative art as an existential threat to national identity, and, in the process, seeking to criminalize artistic expression, suggesting a deepening entanglement between state power and cultural policing. Both cases illuminate how populist discourse, typically couched in the need to protect traditional values, can be mobilized to attack and suppress those artists who challenge the normative cultural boundaries of the state. These instances are demonstrative of art becoming a specific site of culture wars over competing visions of Latvian national identity. What is also revealing is how, in the specific case of Latvia, we can observe the convergence of Latvian traditional, conservative, and nationalist narratives (in the case of Brekte) with that of Latvian Russian nationalists (in the case of Raudsepp). Both perspectives favor the banning of art and the persecution of artists for 'desecration' and lack of patriotism.

The article's findings illustrate two wider implications. Firstly, these two cases show how freedom of artistic expression can be a litmus test for democratic freedoms. The more censorship and securitization of art taking place in public discourse, the greater the strain on the fundamental democratic precept of freedom of expression (see also Treļs, Mihailovs 2026). Secondly, the process of the securitization of art in liberal spheres does not just concern the role of central government; rather, a panoply of actors is at play, and that complicates accounts which view populist or illiberal governments solely as the agents of cultural securitization (Bonet,Zamorano 2020; Kurylo 2022).

This article is not without its limitations. The Raudsepp and Brekte cases are very recent. A more longitudinal focus is required to understand the long-term implications, especially for liberal democratic publics. A study of the artists chosen to represent Latvia on the international stage, through events such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Manifesta, could serve this purpose. This research article has also largely adopted a discursive approach, whereas a greater ethnographic understanding is needed regarding the lived experiences of artists facing censorship

and a curtailment of their artistic expression within culture wars. Finally, the Baltic perspective here needs to also be understood within a comparative European perspective.

In sum, the two Latvian cases of art censorship discussed in this article demonstrate how art can be deployed as a site of struggle over national identity, belonging, morality, and the limits of free expression. The Raudsepp and Brekte cases exemplify how nationalist, populist, and religious actors seek to securitize art by framing it as an existential threat to national, cultural, and sacred values. At the same time, the two cases illustrate the power of art, even when attacked and criminalized, to unsettle and renegotiate such cultural boundaries. Thus, the two cases deepen our understanding of the nature of culture wars in Europe, how they intersect with nationalist, populist, and religious actors and accentuate the importance of art as a site in the struggle for democratic freedom in Europe and beyond.

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