



Media & Press Working Conditions

## Social Europe | An EU framework for artists' working conditions, finally?

# A framework for conditions in the cultural sector is back on the agenda. This time it must stay there.

The pandemic demonstrated that working conditions in the cultural sector are fragile and unsustainable. Hundreds of creative workers lost incomes and some lost jobs. In many countries, the professional status of artists did not allow them to benefit from social-security systems. A simple increase in subsidies is not sufficient to rescue the cultural sector. Structural changes in regulatory frameworks are needed to protect its workforce across the European Union.

Several member states have thus started, or revived, debates and processes, recognising that the current situation is unsustainable. An unprecedented number of national initiatives have sought to improve the living and working conditions of artists and cultural professionals. Just a few examples from the last couple of years: Austria [initiated](#) a Fairness Process, Spain [advanced](#) the creation of the Status of the Artist, Belgium [introduced](#) an arts-sector work allowance, and Ireland [launched](#) a Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme.

Widely discussed

Nor has debate on the status of the artist bypassed the EU. In the past three years, the European Parliament has issued three documents on working conditions in the cultural sector—the last just last month. All three recommend setting up an ‘EU framework’ for working conditions in the cultural sector.

This concept has been widely discussed among cultural advocates, recognising the uneven legislative and policy landscape across the union and the need to facilitate cross-border collaboration among artists and cultural workers. Interpretations of such a framework have ranged from developing EU-wide minimum standards to providing guidelines for national governments, and from establishing a ‘status of the artist’ across the EU to enhancing co-operation and exchange of best practices among member states—so varying from unifying rules and binding standards to co-ordination of policies and exchanges of experience.

In 2020, a resolution by the parliament on the '[cultural recovery](#)' of Europe [proposed](#) such a framework, taking into account the specificities of the cultural sector. It would introduce guidelines and principles to improve the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals, paying particular attention to transnational employment.

A resolution the following year on the [situation of artists](#) and the cultural recovery [provided](#) more. It referred to 'coordination with EU policies' in various fields with an impact on working conditions in the cultural sector. It highlighted the importance of monitoring progress by member states in tackling working conditions and sharing best practices. The resolution also proposed a European Status of the Artist, described as common standards for artists' working situations. The European Commission welcomed this part of the resolution but did not refer to any concrete solution, saying it would tackle the issue through an already-planned dialogue among the member states using the [open method of co-ordination](#) (OMC).

### Substantial outline

The first substantial outline of an 'EU framework for the social and professional situation of artists and workers in the cultural and creative sectors' has only come with a [draft report](#) to the culture and employment committees of the parliament by the MEPs Antonius Manders (European People's Party) and Domènec Ruiz Devesa (Socialists and Democrats), published on June 13th. It differs from the two prior resolutions in presenting detailed recommendations.

According to the MEPs, the framework should be a tool for benchmarking, structured co-operation and standard-setting, through collecting relevant data and the exchange of best practices among member states. It could establish criteria for the recognition of professionals working in the cultural sector, develop guidelines on improving their conditions and evaluate progress. The framework could also stimulate member states to undertake joint activities and explore shared solutions to facilitate cross-border mobility.

Basically, this would be a tool for raising awareness, exercising peer pressure and stimulating transnational co-operation. The report also puts forward the idea that EU funding for culture, such as the [Creative Europe](#) programme, 'must comply with a set of fair work principles and practices for collaborations'.

Importantly, a couple of weeks later, the member states' experts [published](#) the outcome of the OMC process. Their paper, 'The status and working conditions of artists and cultural and

creative professionals’, also recommends an EU framework. It would provide guidelines and minimum standards via a Council of the EU recommendation or non-binding measures via council ‘conclusions’.

## Peer pressure and review

Can such a tool make a difference nationally and lead to real improvements in the working conditions of artists? Some may fear a light-touch approach allowing those states offering the least support to their artists to continue disregarding working conditions in the cultural sector. In the [joint committee debate](#) in the parliament on June 29th, Daniela Rondinelli (S&Ds) argued that the EU rather needed legal tools that went beyond mere exchange of information and co-ordination. She named several areas in which action could be taken, such as cross-border recognition of diplomas, social conditionality of public funding and classification of creative workers.

While binding instruments, if approved and adopted, can lead to more tangible results, the value and impact of non-binding frameworks aiming to stimulate benchmarking and exchange of information should not be underestimated. Peer pressure and a continuous review of progress can spread and institutionalise particular concepts and aspirations, even without EU-wide rules.

In those member states in which the ‘status of the artist’ is less appreciated and working conditions in the sector are at the bottom of policy agendas, a permanent framework for data collection, co-operation and review can ‘domesticate’ these concepts. Incorporating principles of fair collaboration in EU funding programmes may also have a ‘trickle down effect’ on the national level, stimulating governments to consider fairness as a guiding criterion in their own programmes.

There are several examples of international co-operation and exchange advancing change at the national level, without unification of policies or imposition of common standards. For instance, since the 1960s, the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation has promoted the concept of cultural policy worldwide. As Pertti Alasuutari and Anita Kangas [have shown](#), UNESCO’s efforts to institutionalise cultural policy have led the great majority of UN member states to establish a Ministry of Culture—thanks to the system of international comparison ensured through national reporting and peer pressure among countries, especially those belonging to the same reference group.

Similarly, establishing an EU framework for working conditions,

as detailed in the most recent parliament report, should help incorporate the social and economic situation of artists into national public and policy discourse. Such institutionalisation, supported by growing awareness, relevant data and systematic tools for progress review, will ultimately create a firm terrain for designing strategies that fit national contexts.

While adoption of the report and the commission's response are awaited, it is vital to instil confidence that such a framework for data-gathering and exchange can bring change, even if not creating binding mechanisms. This time, the idea of regularising and systematising the European approach to improving working conditions in the cultural sector must materialise in a permanent, EU-wide tool.

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