



All CCS and Cross-sectoral Festivals Inclusion

The Quiet Erosion of Artistic Freedom in Europe

Artists across the European Union enjoy strong legal protections on paper, but a new report by PEARLE/EFA reveals a troubling reality: censorship is alive and well, just harder to see.

Rather than outright bans, cultural institutions are facing a subtler form of control through funding pressures, governance interference, and security concerns that are reshaping what audiences get to see. The findings come from [“The Ultimate Cookbook for Cultural Managers,”](#) a comprehensive guide published by the European Festivals Association and Pearle* under the [Care for and Share the Alliance project](#), that examines artistic freedom across the EU. The report positions cultural pressure as an early warning sign of democratic decline.

In Europe, artists benefit from some of the world's strongest legal safeguards: Artistic freedom is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights, explicitly recognized in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and reinforced by UN treaties ratified by all member states. The European Court of Human Rights has consistently ruled that artistic expression deserves protection in democratic societies, even when it offends or shocks.

But legal strength doesn't always guarantee real-world freedom. “In practice, however, it can be limited in indirect ways — for example, through restrictive venue rules, vague appeals to ‘public order’, or the strategic use of copyright and defamation laws,” the report warns. The dominant trend isn't formal prohibition but rather anticipatory withdrawal.

As the guide puts it, “across Europe, restrictions rarely appear as outright bans. More often, they accumulate through programming pressure, funding conditions, legal ambiguity, security concerns, and online backlash.” Practically, performances get “postponed” without explanation, funding becomes tied to vague values, boards are reshaped to police content and events are cancelled citing security or reputational

concerns...

German cultural organizations report avoiding controversial programming that could trigger funding scrutiny, particularly around Middle East politics. While formal bans remain rare, institutions describe internal pressure to “de-risk” content. For example, in the lead-up to and during Documenta 15 in Kassel, several artworks and curatorial decisions sparked sustained controversy over alleged antisemitic content, leading to political criticism, artwork removal, and organisational resignations.

In France, venues have dropped programming after receiving legal threats over defamation or copyright, even when claims were unlikely to succeed. The legal pressure itself proved sufficient to deter institutions. Swedish artist Anna von Hausswolff cancelled planned concerts in France (Nantes and Paris) after threats and protests from fundamentalist groups deeming her music “satanic.” Similarly, threats related to religious or cultural content have at times led organisers to cancel or adjust performances in Belgian cities (Brussels and Antwerp). Shows have proceeded under police protection or been postponed due to concerns over safety and insurance coverage.

In Italy, concerns have emerged over leadership changes at publicly funded institutions, with appointments perceived as politically aligned narrowing programming choices without explicit directives. In Italy, changes in leadership at publicly funded theatres and cultural institutions have been linked in press reports to disputes over programming and perceived political alignment (for example, RAI cultural programme adjustments post-elections).

Funding as a Weapon

While EU and national rules require transparency and non-discrimination, subsidies increasingly function as informal leverage. “Public funding is at times weaponised, with support made conditional upon conformity to specific values or norms,” the report states.

Hungary's cultural governance reforms over the past decade have concentrated decision-making power and reshaped institutional boards, prompting international concern about artistic autonomy. Critics argue that funding access now depends more on ideological alignment than artistic merit.

In Poland, changes to museum and theatre leadership have repeatedly sparked controversy, with directors dismissed

following disputes over programming perceived as politically contentious. Courts have sometimes intervened, but often only after artistic damage has occurred.

The EU has limited intervention tools. Cultural policy remains largely national under Article 167 TFEU, resulting in uneven enforcement dependent on domestic checks and balances.

Security Concerns and the Threat Veto

Venues across Belgium, the Netherlands, and Northern Europe have cancelled events following threats linked to religion or geopolitics, typically citing insurance constraints or lack of police support. The consequences extend beyond cancelled shows. The report stresses that “artistic freedom holds little meaning if the public cannot access or engage with the resulting works.”

Repeated cancellations, conservative programming, and rising ticket prices are narrowing cultural participation, particularly outside major cities. Access to challenging or experimental art is shifting from a shared civic right to a privilege for those with resources or proximity.

Another consequence is that third-country artists face fragmented visa systems. Festivals across Spain, Italy, and Central Europe report last-minute visa denials or delays for artists from the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia, sometimes following scrutiny of past performances or political expression. Similarly, displaced artists from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Iran often obtain legal residence but still face barriers to funding, work permits, and professional recognition, limiting their ability to continue artistic careers in exile. The report stresses that the right to participate in cultural life — enshrined in international law — is inseparable from artistic freedom itself.

EMFA is the model

PEARLE & EFA point to the European Media Freedom Act, adopted in 2024, as a potential model. While focused on journalism, it introduced EU-level safeguards for editorial independence, transparency in funding, and protection against arbitrary content removal.

Cultural organizations argue that a comparable mechanism could help monitor threats to artistic freedom, even without harmonizing national laws. So far, artistic freedom remains absent as a dedicated category in the Commission's annual Rule

of Law Reports, though the European Parliament has urged its inclusion. But, “protecting artistic freedom is both a legal task and a cultural practice.”

The question, then, is whether Europe can and will act before the quiet erosion becomes irreversible.