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## 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 sketches a troubling reality: censorship is alive and well, just harder to see. The guide is providing cultural professionals with the tools they need to identify risks, understand the legal landscape and take action to defend and promote artistic freedom.

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 Ultimate Cookbook for Cultural Managers.”](#) is a comprehensive guide published by the European Festivals Association and Pearle\* under the [Care for and Share the Alliance project](#), that offers an insight into what artistic freedom means by considering current challenges to artistic freedom in Europe. The cookbook offers a practical guide for cultural managers to address issues.

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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

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— 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...

During the past few years, there was an expanding list of events, some covered by Creatives Unite in its editorial:

Germany: 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](#), back in 2022, several artworks and curatorial decisions sparked controversy over alleged antisemitic content, leading to political criticism, artwork removal, and organisational resignations.

In France, back in 2021, Swedish artist Anna von Hausswolff [cancelled planned concerts](#) in France (Nantes and Paris) after threats and protests from fundamentalist groups deeming her music "satanic."

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.

## 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 guide notes.

Hungary's governance reforms over the past decade have [concentrated decision-making power](#) and reshaped institutional boards, prompting international concern about artistic autonomy.

In Poland, changes to [museum and theatre leadership have sparked controversy](#) in the not so distant past, with directors dismissed following disputes over programming perceived as

politically contentious.

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.

The Cookbook maps the existing legal framework that already protects artistic freedom in Europe, showing how it works. It roots artistic freedom in international human-rights law (UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR), Council of Europe standards and ECHR case law, and the EU's fundamental-rights framework, where the freedom of the arts is recognised but culture remains largely a national competence under EU treaties. As a result, protection is strong in principle but fragmented in enforcement.

The report stresses that artistic freedom is upheld through a “web of norms and institutions”, not a single rule. When one strand weakens — funding independence, governance autonomy, security decisions, copyright interpretation or mobility rules — the overall space for artistic freedom shrinks.

One of the Cookbook's strongest recommendations is procedural: cultural managers are urged to document every form of interference, especially when it appears informal or ambiguous. Similarly, rather than waiting for a ban, the guide encourages institutions and professionals to treat certain patterns as warning signs. These include vague appeals to “public order”, repeated unexplained rejections, or sudden postponements instead of formal decisions. Public funding is identified as one of the most sensitive pressure points. The Cookbook advises managers to insist on clear criteria, written explanations, and arm's-length governance structures. While acknowledging genuine risks, the guide warns against allowing threats to dictate programming choices. It urges proportional responses — additional security, adjusted formats, or relocation — rather than default cancellation.

## EMFA is the model

Overall, PEARLE & EFA point to the European Media Freedom Act, adopted in 2024, [as a potential model](#) for inspiration. 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.