Workshop Documentation & Outcomes

Resisting Pressures: Protecting Artistic Freedom as a Human Right

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The Workshop took place in Vienna on 30 September 2026 and was organised by *kulturen in bewegung*, *Austrian Commission for UNESCO* and *VIDC – Global Dialogue*.

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Overview

This document summarises the outcomes of the workshop "Resisting Pressures: Protecting Artistic Freedom as a Human Right, held in Vienna on 30 September. Bringing together artists from diverse international backgrounds, cultural professionals and human rights representatives, the workshop examined the conditions for protecting artistic freedom. Following the speakers' contributions, group discussions addressed social and labour conditions, counterstrategies and the limits of boycotts, transnational infrastructures, resistance to authoritarianism, and art's role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

It became apparent that pressures on artistic freedom follow a similar logic in very different contexts. They rarely start with open censorship. More often they begin with economic pressure, politicised appointments, hostile rhetoric, and the undermining of the conditions that make artistic work possible at all. Hence, artistic freedom is not only a formal right. It depends on material, social and transnational structures, and it can only be defended collectively.

Opening statements

Klara Koštal opened with UNESCO's broad understanding of artistic freedom, expanding beyond a purely liberal notion of freedom of expression: it includes the conditions needed to exercise that freedom, such as mobility, access to funding, fair pay and adequate working conditions. UNESCO's recent report "Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: we share, we act, we build"[1] nonetheless shows a persistent gap between formal recognition and real implementation. Among the major global challenges: artists and cultural organisations are portrayed as acting on behalf of foreign interests ("foreign agent laws") and minoritized and marginalised groups are particularly vulnerable to restrictions and attacks on artistic freedom. Restrictions on artistic freedom were also highlighted in contexts such as Gaza, where numerous reports have documented restrictions despite strong formal commitments to human rights. Austria does currently not have a comprehensive report on artistic freedom. A report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council by the Artistic Freedom Initiative (2025) shows a mixed picture: positive developments around diversity and outreach stand alongside political pressures on cultural institutions, hostility to artists and cultural workers by non-state actors, intimidation around gender-related themes, and conflicts over satire and comedy that may lead to a chilling-effect of political criticism.

Protecting artistic freedom requires proactive structural responses. Key measures include enforcing existing rights through courts and institutions; building solidarity and funding structures for vulnerable artists; protecting against SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation); explicitly framing artistic freedom as a human right; and strengthening cooperation between the arts and human rights sectors through advocacy and support for a pluralistic civil society.
Because institutions themselves can reproduce restrictions, these structures must be in place before individual artists come under attack.

1 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000397330?posInSet=1&queryId=53c2be71-1cd7-4fa4-a98e-1ebfc525fcee

Salomé Jashi described how her film "Taming the Garden" (2021), financed in Georgia and internationally noticed, was never released domestically because it was deemed too political and likely to provoke critical opinions. Public figures attacked it, arguing such works should not receive public funding.

Despite restrictions, small NGOs organised screenings and even watching the film became an act of solidarity in itself. The government practiced "soft suppression": not outright censorship, but pressure through funding, public attacks, and restrictions on cultural institutions. Over time, that pressure broadened into wider political and social pressure. She situated this within Georgia's political transformation: a strong post-independence interest in European integration was followed by growing anti-Ukrainian and anti-European positions after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Cultural institutions and television became propaganda vehicles, and rhetoric that the EU would take away Georgian identity fuelled mass protests and fundamental changes in everyday life.

As pressure intensified, many cultural workers became activists in an environment marked by arrests and imprisonment, closure of major NGOs with frozen assets, exile of cultural figures, and increasingly direct pressure on filmmakers. Public funding mechanisms and funding institutions became inaccessible to Jashi and other filmmakers.

In response, filmmakers built informal solidarity networks: collective discussions and voting on boycotts, structured rather than individual action, fundraising for affected colleagues, a film club as an alternative cultural space, advocacy, alliances across culture and civil society, and international funding where domestic funding became politically restricted. Jashi stressed that international cooperation also carries risks in a hostile political environment.

Vahida Ramujkić reported from Serbia, where the cultural sector played a prominent role in the student-led protests, with theatres, actors and musicians expressing solidarity, while some arts organisations also opened their spaces to students. Political repression soon followed, taking the form of cuts to public funding, dismissals, the non-renewal of contracts and the cancellation of programmes. These measures affected even projects already under way, making it impossible for many artists and cultural workers to continue their work. The cultural scene, which had previously been highly fragmented, began to find new axes around which to unite. Resistance took many forms, including informal platforms, new trade unions and the Community of Arts and Culture (ZUK), which documents cases of political repression through its Chronicle of Political Repression in Culture and collects different practices of resistance through its Chronicle of Resistance.

Major cultural events and festivals, including BITEF, FEST, the Niš Film Encounters and the October Salon, were suspended, radically reorganised or brought under political control. Artists and cultural workers responded by organising parallel festivals, protest actions and other cultural events run almost entirely on voluntary basis.

At the same time, public resources and institutional programmes were increasingly redirected towards EXPO 2027 - a vast urban development and infrastructure project led by the ruling party. While regular funding for artistic production was delayed or withdrawn, substantially greater resources were allocated to the EXPO cultural programme, and public institutions were encouraged by the Ministry of Culture to align their activities with it.

These emerging forms of cultural production attracted broader audiences and participation, demonstrating that the social need for art and culture is much greater than is usually assumed. But they cannot be sustained indefinitely through voluntary labour. Artistic work is work: artists need income, housing, social security, time and resources. When they are expected to create art, organise resistance and build alternative structures without guaranteed remuneration, only those who can afford to work under such conditions are able to continue. Artistic freedom therefore depends not only on freedom from censorship, but also on secure material and working conditions.

Miriam Mona Mukalazi highlighted the role of artists in making the lived experiences of war visible, preserving collective memory and helping societies imagine futures beyond violence. Through graffiti, poetry, theatre and music, artists can express aspirations that might otherwise remain absent from public debate. These visions are also important at peace negotiations, helping decisionmakers understand what people affected by conflict want for their future.

Artistic practices can also preserve memories through oral traditions, music and poetry, passing experiences on to future generations. A key challenge is to identify and support these artists and create opportunities for people to come together through artistic and cultural work.

In Austria, artistic freedom is increasingly recognised as a human right, and policy frameworks acknowledge the potential contribution of artists to peace and security. However, their role remains insufficiently integrated into peacebuilding efforts. The "National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security" offers some opportunities, while Austria's recently published "Africa Strategy" signals further potential through its inclusion of artists. Mukalazi welcomed the interest in supporting African artists, emphasising that cooperation should extend beyond exporting Austrian culture. It should create space and resources to listen to African artists, engage with their perspectives and criticism, and learn from their experiences. Artists receiving state funding may simply need social and economic security to continue their work, rather than opportunities for cultural export or political influence.

Tayo Alemi described the development of a queer collective in Kampala, Uganda, that focused on creating safer spaces for queer communities. They organised events in homes, NGO spaces and bars, alongside a desire to make queer presence and joy more visible in the city. Organising nevertheless involved ongoing considerations of security, logistics and potential police intervention.

Mobility became a crucial safety strategy. Following police raids on queer venues, the collective deliberately changed locations, rarely using the same venue more than twice. Careful selection of venues and collaborators helped minimise risks. Through persistence, experimentation and adaptation, the collective maintained a sense of community across changing spaces. Music helped hold the spaces together, while visual cues communicated these spaces as queer and feminist African spaces, enabling people to recognise and connect with the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic further reduced available spaces, increasing reliance on domestic settings. Repression intensified with Uganda's 2023 "Anti-Homosexuality Act", which heightened risks for individuals and organisations by placing landlords, employers and others under pressure to identify or report queer people, further constraining collective organising and community-building.

In response, the collective's work became increasingly transnational. In collaboration with partners in the UK, it raised funds to help approximately 70 people relocate outside Uganda. However, there are limitations to relocation as a strategy: it is impossible to evacuate an entire queer population. The collective's work thus evolved from creating local spaces of safety towards building broader cross-border networks of mutual support, protection and solidarity.

Group Discussions

A. Social and Labour Conditions with Vahida Ramujkić

The discussion examined the material, social and labour conditions necessary for artistic freedom to become a lived reality rather than remain merely a formal right. Key outcomes:

- **Protecting the social infrastructures that enable artistic freedom**. Human rights frameworks tend to focus on individual rights, while the social infrastructures that make those rights exercisable often receive less protection. The comparison with heritage protection is instructive: buildings and cultural heritage may be protected as structures, while the institutions and collective systems on which artists depend often receive no equivalent protection. These include public cultural institutions, independent organisations, artists' associations, trade unions, communication infrastructure and systems of social protection.

- **Recognising restrictions beyond censorship.** Artistic freedom can be undermined by funding decisions, institutional power structures, informal pressures, limited access to spaces and restrictions on communication. In Iran, internet restrictions have increasingly isolated artists in Europe from colleagues and communities back home, with contact lost in some cases over the past two years. Internet access is essential for international cultural exchange, highlighting the need for technical solutions to maintain communication. However, internet infrastructure is not merely technical, and the actors who control it are not politically neutral: they influence who can communicate, create, participate and sustain an artistic practice.

- **Recognising mixed employment statuses as the norm.** Artists and cultural workers commonly move between self-employment, temporary or part-time employment, short-term commissions, periods of unemployment and reliance on unemployment benefits. These mixed or hybrid employment patterns are not exceptional but form the normal working reality of much of the cultural sector. Social and labour policies need to reflect this reality rather than presuppose a stable division between employment, self-employment and unemployment.

- **Adapting social protection to intermittent cultural work.** Austria's 2026 reform of unemployment benefits was discussed as an example of a policy that fails to reflect these working realities. With only narrowly defined exceptions, people receiving unemployment benefits can no longer combine them with small amounts of additional income from activities such as performances, lectures, presentations or other short engagements. Such rules may force artists to choose between accepting occasional professional work and retaining the basic income on which they depend, making it more difficult to remain professionally active.

- **Ensuring fair and sustainable working conditions.** The idea of artistic work as a passion or vocation can conceal exploitation by encouraging artists to accept unpaid or unsustainable conditions. Fair remuneration, economic independence, social security and a clear distinction between voluntary engagement and unpaid professional labour are therefore central to artistic freedom. These should not be treated as individual difficulties but as structural questions concerning how artistic work is organised and supported.

- **Supporting the conditions of artistic production rather than extracting identity**. Institutions may benefit from an artist's identity, biography or social position without adequately supporting the work and the conditions from which it emerges. Institutional support should therefore extend beyond visibility and representation to include fair fees, production resources, time for research and preparation, and investment in the organisations, networks and communities that sustain artistic practice.

- **Strengthening collective organisation and cross-sector alliances.** Artists and cultural workers need the right and practical ability to organise through trade unions, professional associations and other collective structures, including when they are self-employed or working outside standard employment relationships. Alliances with other professional groups facing comparable forms of precarity are equally important. Collective organisations can represent workers, advocate for better conditions, bring political and social issues onto the public agenda and translate individual experiences into shared demands for structural change.

- **Connecting artistic freedom with broader human, social and labour rights.** Artistic freedom should not be treated as an isolated right or reduced to freedom of expression. It needs to be understood in relation to labour rights, social protection, equality and the material conditions required for artistic work. Relevant points of reference include the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the wider UN human rights framework and international work concerning the status and rights of artists. The introduction of health and pension insurance contributions for independent artists in socialist Yugoslavia in 1955 demonstrates that efforts to secure their professional status and social protection have a much longer history.

- **Closing the gap between recognition and implementation.** The Culture Compass for Europe[2] illustrates the gap that can remain between agreement on general principles and their practical implementation. While effective protection requires concrete policies, institutional mechanisms, adequate funding, implementation procedures, monitoring and accountability, putting these into practice often takes time, leaving urgent challenges in the cultural sector unresolved. Nevertheless, initiatives such as the Culture Compass, which have emerged from years of advocacy and pressure from the sector, are important steps towards change. Even if their impact is not immediate, they help maintain political attention and create momentum for future improvements.

[2] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-compass

B. Counterstrategies and the Limits of Boycotting with Salomé Jashi

Drawing on experiences in Georgia, Austria and Palestine, the discussion examined how artists and cultural workers can respond when political loyalty takes precedence over professional standards and artistic independence within cultural institutions. Key outcomes:

- **Political loyalty and institutional capture.** Individuals aligned with the government can use formally legitimate positions to undermine artistic independence, even without explicit censorship. These dynamics raise questions about the boundaries between working within existing institutions and becoming complicit in practices that erode democratic and constitutional principles.

- **Legal obligations and resistance.** Public employees have obligations towards their institutions and administrations, however, these obligations remain subject to constitutional and legal frameworks. When political demands conflict with these principles, questions arise about where the responsibility of employees lies and when they may need to resist or act against such demands.

- **Possibilities and limits of boycotting.** Collective boycotts can provide a powerful expression of solidarity and opposition. However, they do not necessarily offer sustainable alternatives, particularly for artists whose livelihoods depend on public funding and state-supported institutions. The longer-term challenge is to develop independent cultural structures that reduce this dependence.

- **Austria's public cultural funding - strengths and vulnerabilities**. Austria's well-established system of public cultural funding provides important financial support and creates opportunities for artists and cultural institutions. However, this dependence on public funding can also make the cultural sector vulnerable to political influence. For example, politically motivated appointments and decisions about career advancement can threaten the independence of cultural institutions. It is therefore important to recognise early warning signs of political interference before it undermines the autonomy and independence of cultural institutions.

- **Lessons from Diagonale**[3]**.** The response to right-wing political influence surrounding the Diagonale film festival in Styria, Austria, illustrated how collective action can extend beyond protest. An important lesson was the potential for boycotts to catalyse alternative structures that reduce artists' dependence on state-controlled institutions.

- **Loyalism, self-censorship and disengagement.** Prioritising political alignment over professional judgement can gradually undermine artistic freedom. Self-censorship and withdrawal from institutional life may further accelerate this process, even in the absence of direct censorship.

[3] In 2000, the Diagonale became a platform for Austrian filmmakers to protest against the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government, featuring the special screening „Die Kunst der Stunde ist Widerstand "("The Art of the Hour Is Resistance") and calls for the government's resignation. In 2003, the government's appointment of new festival directors without consulting the filmmaking community sparked widespread opposition, leading to the organisation of an independent counter-festival in Graz in March 2004 and ultimately forcing the appointed directors to resign. (Source: https://www.diagonale.at/rueckblick/)

- **Preparing for restrictions.** Reflections on Palestine reinforced the importance of acting before restrictions become entrenched. Building networks of solidarity, alternative funding mechanisms and independent spaces early can help preserve opportunities for artistic expression when institutional conditions deteriorate.

C. Transnational Infrastructure: displaced or scattered collectives with Tayo Alemi

Challenges facing geographically dispersed artistic collectives, particularly those affected by displacement, restrictive migration policies and unequal access to resources. Key outcomes:

- **Maintaining connections across borders.** Geographically dispersed collectives rely on transnational networks, local communities and professional opportunities to sustain shared practices. Institutional support is essential to maintaining these connections, particularly when physical mobility is limited.

- **Unequal access to mobility and relocation.** The ability to relocate safely is a privilege. Displacement often removes the freedom to choose where to settle, with people relying on existing communities and support structures or, in some cases, placements determined by the UN.

- **Legal and bureaucratic barriers.** Obtaining visas based on artistic practice or restrictions on artistic freedom is extremely difficult. Stricter integration requirements and restrictive migration policies can further isolate displaced artists and collectives.

- **Community networks as essential support.** Where legal frameworks and institutional support are lacking, community networks provide vital assistance with safety, language, social connection and rebuilding professional lives. Displacement often requires improvised, individualised responses.

- **Power imbalances and devaluation.** Displaced artists may face discrimination, limited recognition and pressure to accept lower-status work in their host countries, regardless of their previous experience or achievements. When their skills are measured primarily against European standards, existing expertise can be overlooked, reinforcing unequal power relations and paternalistic approaches to integration and artistic practice.

- **Barriers to artistic participation.** Language difficulties, social isolation and limited access to safe spaces and professional networks can make it challenging to initiate projects, establish connections and participate in local cultural life. Vienna's cultural scene, for instance, was perceived as fragmented into numerous bubbles, which can make it difficult for newcomers to gain access and establish connections. '

- **Collaboration as a bridge.** Artistic collaboration can help overcome bureaucratic barriers, provide access to local knowledge and strengthen networks of support and safety. Matchmaking initiatives and international exchanges can facilitate meaningful encounters and partnerships on

more equal terms. The „International Club Culture Matchmaking Project" by the Vienna Club Commission funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport demonstrates how hosting collectives in another country can connect them with existing audiences, communities and venues. These collaborations can increase the likelihood of successful events while fostering lasting relationships and opening future professional opportunities.

- **Building sustainable relationships.** Long-term collaboration requires stable structures and sustained institutional support rather than relying solely on individual initiatives or temporary assistance. Genuine transnational infrastructure for artistic freedom must extend beyond statements of solidarity to include practical support for funding, mobility and mutual protection.

- **Rethinking integration.** Integration is often framed as the responsibility of displaced artists and collectives alone. This one-sided approach can create frustration and overlook the skills, experience and cultural contributions they already bring. More reciprocal and inclusive processes are needed to support meaningful participation and exchange.

D. The Role of Art in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution with Miriam M. Mukalazi

How artists and civil society organisations can contribute to peacebuilding and influence peace and security policies. Key outcomes:

- **Art as a tool for remembrance and dialogue.** Art can make difficult experiences visible, create spaces for public discussion and support the preservation and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Inclusive cultures of remembrance require critical reflection on whose stories are represented, whose experiences are overlooked and how memory can be appropriated or commercialised.

- **Art and culture as undervalued components of peacebuilding:** Despite their recognised contributions to social cohesion, collective memory and peacebuilding, art and cultural initiatives are often treated as optional and are among the first areas to face funding cuts. The discussion highlighted the contradiction between acknowledging their value and failing to prioritise them when resources become scarce.

- **Creating safe and sustainable spaces for marginalised artists.** Access to funding, residencies, institutional support and platforms is essential for artists facing discrimination. However, greater visibility can also increase vulnerability. Meaningful inclusion therefore requires more than participation or responses to individual incidents; it depends on addressing structural discrimination and enabling marginalised artists to work safely and sustainably.

- **Art is political.** Decisions about representation, visibility and whose stories are told are inherently political. However, artists should not bear sole responsibility for promoting peace or representing entire communities. Art can also provide space for self-expression, relief, hope and connection, all of which can be particularly valuable in contexts of conflict.

- **Art as resistance and community-building.** Cultural activities can help communities maintain relationships, exchange experiences and process difficult circumstances collectively. Their contribution does not necessarily depend on an explicit political message; art can strengthen the social ties and collective resilience that enable communities to endure.
- **Grounding international exchange in local realities.** International cultural programmes should build on local relationships, involve community organisations and prioritise co-creation over one-way exchange. Hyper-local perspectives and meaningful opportunities for marginalised voices are essential to ensuring that such initiatives remain relevant to the communities in which artists live and work.
- **Challenging unequal representation of migrants.** Migrant artists are often portrayed primarily as victims, potentially obscuring the discriminatory structures that shape their circumstances. The discussion highlighted the need to move beyond such representations and address the inequalities that contribute to economic and social vulnerability.
- **Addressing power and inequality in AI and cultural production.** The growing influence of major technology companies raises questions about who controls cultural knowledge, artistic production and its distribution. Rather than automatically democratising culture, AI may reinforce existing inequalities or enable the appropriation of cultural knowledge. Attention must therefore extend beyond how artists use technology to include who controls the infrastructures underpinning cultural production.

E. Before the Crisis: Strategies Against Authoritarianism with Klara Koštal

Strategies to protect artistic freedom and uphold cultural rights in the face of growing authoritarian pressures. Key outcomes:

- **Long-term strategic planning.** The need to move beyond reactive, crisis-driven responses towards proactive, long-term strategies to protect artistic freedom and to address authoritarian tendencies was emphasised - “You can’t react and win. You need a plan.” A growing sense of resignation and pessimism was identified as a challenge to collective action in Austria.
- **Strengthen Networks, international exchange and coordinated action.** Existing connections between the arts, human rights organisations and civil society remain fragile and fragmented. Stable networks, regular cross-border exchange and coordinated advocacy can strengthen collective influence, share strategies and enable rapid responses to threats. Advocacy should extend beyond those directly affected, making artistic freedom a shared concern.
- **Visibility and public engagement.** The importance of keeping artistic freedom and cultural rights visible across sectors and in public debate was stressed. The relevance of art in everyday life and wider social issues needs to be highlighted. Sustained communication, public awareness-raising and cross-sector engagement help keeping these issues on the agenda.

- **Art as a tool for resistance and communication.** Satire, critical language, and artistic practice were identified as powerful ways to challenge government policies and counter authoritarian tendencies. Art was also recognized for its ability to communicate research and information to broader audiences, making complex issues more accessible and fostering public understanding.
- **Collaboration between art and science.** Closer cooperation between the arts and scientific communities offers an opportunity to connect artistic practice with research, evidence and data. Events that bring together different actors can strengthen knowledge-sharing, raise public awareness and create new opportunities for collaborative funding.
- **Artistic freedom and funding dependency.** Tension between artistic independence and reliance on public funding emerged as a central theme. Artists may feel pressure to adapt their ideas to funding priorities or to soften their criticism in order to avoid jeopardising financial support.
- **Diversification of funding sources.** Stable, diverse funding is essential to strengthening artistic autonomy. Beyond government funding, potential sources include private foundations, philanthropic donors, private investors, business partnerships and international funding programmes. Collaboration with scientific institutions and businesses could open up further funding streams, though limited experience, knowledge or confidence in engaging with private-sector actors can be a barrier to building these relationships.
- **Funding expertise and transparency.** Stronger knowledge of funding opportunities and application processes is needed, including for EU funding, which often requires projects to formalise and develop strategically before they qualify for support. Greater transparency around funding decisions and priorities also matters, especially amid growing scarcity.
- **Legal protection and institutional safeguards.** Legal measures can protect artistic freedom and prevent legal intimidation. Dedicated funding for legal proceedings and lawsuits is also essential. Policymakers should address emerging challenges through appropriate legislation, particularly the impact of AI, social media and algorithms on artistic expression and self-censorship.
- **Education and cultural policy.** The declining presence of art and culture in school curricula threatens their visibility and recognition. Integrating art and culture more firmly into education and public policy can strengthen their relevance and ensure their continued support.

Key Takeaways

The discussions showed that protecting artistic freedom depends on acting before a crisis hits and on building structures rather than reacting to individual incidents. Several lessons emerged across all five groups.

Understand artistic freedom broadly. Artistic freedom is more than freedom from censorship. It also depends on material and social conditions: fair pay, housing, social security, funding, safe spaces and access to communication. Without these, the right to create exists only on paper.

Protect structures, not only individuals. Protection often focuses on individual violations, while the structures that enable artistic freedom receive less attention. But the structures that enable equality and artistic work – institutions, unions, networks, independent organisations – need protection too.

Build before the crisis. The clearest lesson from countries where repression has already arrived: start early. Networks, alternatives and trust must be in place before pressure grows. Warning signs should be taken seriously everywhere. Invest in education and awareness-raising to strengthen public understanding of artistic freedom and recognise warning signs.

Those in secure positions carry responsibility. Strategies should not be developed mainly by those most affected. People with privilege, access and resources should use them – by speaking up, funding, and standing in solidarity.

Connect across sectors and borders. Artistic freedom cannot be defended by the cultural sector alone. Alliances with human rights organisations, science, education and civil society, locally, nationally and internationally, are essential and need constant renewal.

Boycotts are a beginning, not a solution. They work best as an impulse that leads to building sustainable, independent structures for artistic production.

Shared responsibility and solidarity as infrastructure. Statements are not enough. What protects artists in the end are concrete things: funding, mobility, mutual protection, safe spaces, and the experience of not being alone.

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