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Doing fair pay. Implications from the Austrian experience

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Since 2020, Austria has introduced measures for fair pay in the independent arts and culture sector as part of a broader fairness reform. Drawing on policy documents and monitoring reports, this policy brief analyses the first years of the framework's implementation. The learnings show that the Fair Pay initiative demonstrates a strong commitment to closing remuneration gaps, while a structural transformation of longstanding precarious working conditions requires a broader systemic approach. The Austrian case reveals that sustainable reform of working conditions in the independent non-profit arts and culture sector hinges not only on fiscal commitment but also on governance coordination, interest-group representation, adequate statistical visibility, cross-domain cultural awareness, and supportive transnational regulation. These insights contribute to the growing movement across Europe that aims to strengthen cultural policy commitment, the status of artists and professionals, and the principles of public goods.

KEYWORDS

cultural awareness clauses, cultural labour protection, cultural policy commitment, fair pay policies, interest group representation, non-profit arts and culture sector

Introduction

In recent years, debates on fair remuneration and working conditions in the arts and culture sector have intensified across Europe, forming a central pillar of frameworks in European cultural policy and advocacy efforts ([Council of the European Union, 2022](#); [European Commission, 2023](#); [German Commission of UNESCO, 2024](#); [Culture Action Europe, 2025](#)). Persistent challenges—low and unstable earnings, atypical employment relationships, fragmented social protection, and limited collective bargaining coverage—highlight the precarities confronting artists and professionals ([Snijders et al, 2020](#); [European Commission, 2023](#); [Daughtry and Whiting, 2025](#)).

Across Europe, exemplary measures have been introduced, including Ireland's basic income scheme for artists, Germany's minimum fee thresholds for artists and cultural professionals, and the Netherlands' Fair Pay Guide in the local culture sector ([European Commission, 2023](#); [Platform ACCT, n. d.](#); [Dagg, 2025](#)). However, progress remains dispersed and slow, while urgency is high. Economic downturns and the curtailment of artistic freedom through right-wing political agendas may lead to a regression in the diversity of cultural expressions ([European Commission, 2023](#); [Lindqvist, 2025](#)) and a further deterioration in professional working conditions.

In Austria, cultural policy measures concerning fair pay are being implemented in the independent sector as part of the Fairness Process launched in 2020. This sector has become an essential part of the professional cultural landscape since the 1980s. However, its cultural relevance has long coexisted with economic fragility and vulnerable conditions, as reflected in the advocacy for fair pay by interest groups over the past three decades ([Teissl and Reid,](#)

2025). Precarity affects artists, mediators, translators and professionals in cultural centers, community spaces, off-theaters, and festivals (Kulturrat Österreich, 2024). Bogus self-employment, hybrid professional roles, temporary contracts, and multiple jobholding cause a highly individualized form of precarious circumstances (Wetzel et al, 2018; Snijders et al, 2020; European Commission, 2023; Abfalter, 2024; Kulturrat Österreich, 2024). Currently, the pioneering generation is at risk of poverty in old age, and the subsequent generation needs prospects for the future.

The commitment to fair pay in Austria's cultural policy marks a milestone in sustaining, if not advancing, the independent cultural sector. Nevertheless, while higher incomes present a significant progress, early implementation also reveals obstacles such as federal disparities and a lack of both adequate statistical visibility and cross-domain cultural awareness, all of which underscore the need for systemic reform (Schindler, 2012; Council of European Union, 2022; German Commission of UNESCO, 2024; Culture Action Europe, 2025).

This policy brief aims to contribute to the advancement of fair pay policies by examining challenges arising from their implementation. The Austrian case offers a valuable opportunity to highlight structural interrelationships addressed in European research and to support the creation of a framework for greater effectiveness.

The analysis progresses as follows: Section *Methodological Approach* outlines the qualitative methodology; Section *Structural context: the independent cultural sector and persistent precarity* contextualises funding architectures of Austria's independent arts and culture sector that made the Fair Pay initiative politically salient. Section *The Fairness Process and the core instrument of Fair Pay* introduces the Fairness Process and the Fair Pay policy; Section *Implementation constraints: structural barriers to transformative reform* addresses barriers to implementation constraints; and Section *Implications and Lessons Learned* synthesises implications for advancing fair pay policy in Austria and beyond, followed by a conclusion.

Methodological approach

The methodology combines thematic document analysis and qualitative reviews, drawing on monitoring reports issued by interest groups (Kulturrat Österreich, 2024); cultural policy documents related to the Fairness Process and the Fair Pay Strategy of the Federal Authorities (BMKÖS, 2021; BMKÖS, 2022); the Fair Pay Gap survey (Gallup-Institut, 2022), and an evaluation of Fair Pay in Vienna (Educult, 2022). These sources are examined thematically and interpretively in order to identify patterns of institutional alignment and misalignment across funding regimes, employment classifications, federal governance structures, and statistical knowledge infrastructures. Additionally, the Dutch Fair Pay model (Platform ACCT, n. d.) is considered a comparative benchmark, illustrating enforceable regulatory strategies useful to fair pay policies in the independent cultural sector. Furthermore, informal interviews with three representatives of the cultural administration and with interest groups involved in the design and implementation of Fair Pay were conducted to provide a better understanding of embedded complexities. These exchanges

took place from October 2025 to January 2026 and complement the document reviews.

Structural context: the independent cultural sector and persistent precarity

The Fair Pay initiative emerged against the backdrop of longstanding structural precarity in Austria's private nonprofit cultural sector, rooted in the field's historical development, funding architecture, and labour organisation. Since the 1980s, the independent sector has played a significant role in ensuring diversity of cultural expression and innovation, going beyond major cultural institutions and folklore. Originating in movements for cultural democracy and sustained through public funding, these professional nonprofit organisations have specialized in contemporary arts and cultural formats that are innovative, discursive, and participatory (Lungstraß and Ratzenböck, 2019; Teissl and Reid, 2025).

Despite Austria's investment in the independent cultural sector, vulnerabilities are ingrained in the funding system. Thus, project-based funding has become a common way of supporting a wide range of middle and small-sized organisations as well as artists (applying the so-called "watering can principle"), conditioning (bogus) self-employment, unstable income situation, hybrid roles, and multiple jobholding. The latter is not merely common; it is necessary to sustain professional continuity and compensate low income (European Commission, 2023; Kulturrat Österreich, 2024; Abfalter, 2024). This prevalence of atypical working conditions has evolved into an exemplary characteristic of the sector, blurring legal and statistical labour categories, and weakening access to comprehensive social protection.

While accountability mechanisms in Austria's cultural funding system are not designed to enforce labour standards or ensure adequate social security (Ebrahim, 2003; Teissl and Reid, 2025), legal frameworks prior to the Fair Pay initiative have partially improved social protection. This included the introduction of artists' social insurance in 1983 and mandatory insurance for self-employed individuals without trade licences (coined as 'new self-employed') in 1998. The latter covers health, accident, and pension schemes but excludes unemployment insurance and continued wage payments during illness. Multiple and seasonal employment frequently results in double contributions without benefit accumulation, and low pensions lead to poverty in old age. In 2010, the Theatre Employment Act was released; however, its implementation in the independent sector remained partial due to double insurance burdens, limited budgets, and high ancillary wage costs. Nationwide collective agreements for both permanently employed and freelance musicians have recently been introduced. Finally, multi-year subsidy agreements were established, enforcing planning security (Kulturrat Österreich, 2024).

In parallel with the Fairness Process, the interest group of independent cultural professionals, IG Kultur Österreich, and the trade union agreed on a labour-law-based social partner recommendation. The latter formulates collective-agreement-like recommendations concerning remuneration and working conditions, including working time, leave regulations, and legal

security. Approximately 30,000 employees of nonprofit cultural organisations are affected by this “historic pact” (IG Kultur Österreich, 2024; GPA, n. d.). Nevertheless, employment rights and status classifications of these cultural professionals remain insufficiently regulated.

The Fairness Process and the core instrument of Fair Pay

The Fair Pay reform process unfolded in successive stages. The commitment to fair pay was already enshrined in the 2019 government agreement (Teissl et al., 2021), and the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for corresponding activities. In 2020, the Federal Ministry initiated a Fairness Process involving sectoral interest groups, grounding it in collaborative governance (BMKÖS, 2021). The initiative’s normative foundations were articulated in a Fairness Code and the principle of voluntary commitment. In 2021, a nationwide survey on the fair pay gap was conducted (Gallup-Institut, 2022), and in 2022, the Federal Authorities adopted a “Fair Pay Strategy” (BMKÖS, 2022). This strategy acknowledges the shared responsibility of the federal, state, and municipal levels for funding arts and culture, and builds on a non-mandatory commitment to improving remuneration.

The Fair Pay process distinguishes between two areas of action: one focuses on fair wages in employment contracts, while the other addresses service contracts involving self-employment and project-based contracts. Between the pilot phase in 2022 and 2024, the funding amount of the earmarked support program increased from 6.5 million euros to 10 million euros (Kulturrat Österreich, 2024), signaling incremental fiscal consolidation of the reform. Beyond Fair Pay, the framework addresses transparency and cooperation, simplification in funding procedures, respectful professional interaction, the prevention of abuses of power, and the strengthening of diversity in programming, audiences, and decision-making bodies (BMKÖS, 2021). Fairness is thus conceptualized not merely as wage correction but as a broader governance principle encompassing structural conditions (European Commission, 2023). Economic precarity, however, creates an exploitative environment, which is why improvements in earnings and working conditions are a core prerequisite.

Austria’s fair pay concept contrasts with the Netherlands’ model in decisive aspects: The latter makes fair pay mandatory for organisations in sub-sectors as well as for municipalities as subsidy providers, thus going beyond voluntary commitment for suppliers and providers. Furthermore, it comprises a collective agreement (Platform ACCT, n. d.).

The core instrument of Austria’s Fair Pay initiative consists of an earmarked support programme open to artists and cultural organisations, complementing traditional funding programs. Applicants must submit standardised data forms to document the gap between actual and fair remuneration so that the difference may be covered by the earmarked programme provided for this purpose. In an effort to help operationalise fair remuneration in an unregulated and diverse working environment such as the independent arts and culture sector, interest groups provided discipline- and profession-specific salary schemes for

employees as well as fee guidelines for freelance work and services (Kulturrat Österreich, 2024; TKI, n. d.). These schemes serve as normative reference points and are disseminated by funding authorities and interest groups. The designation “fee guidelines” aims to counter potential accusations of anti-competitive agreements in occupational fields classified as liberal trades—a conflict that has been addressed in European research and advocacy (European Commission, 2023; German Commission of UNESCO, 2024; Cultural Action Europe, 2025; European Commission, 2026).

To date, comprehensive longitudinal impact data of the Fair Pair Policy are not available. This prevents insights into the level of participation on behalf of artists and organisations, as well as sectoral impacts. Monitoring documents on the implementation, however, reveal structural constraints associated with the reform, providing valuable learnings for improvement.

Implementation constraints: structural barriers to transformative reform

Inadequate consideration of hybrid professional circumstances

Fair Pay in Austria targets artists as well as professionals engaged in cultural offerings that developed during the cultural democracy movement and have created new opportunities for emerging and local artists. Since the Fairness Process emphasises artistic activity, the evaluation of Fair Pay measures in Vienna identifies positive effects on artists (Educult, 2022). However, this focus has marginalised the varied professions of cultural work and thus has led to unintended tensions in the sector regarding equal consideration. It has also brought to light hybrid engagement. In smaller institutions it is common for employers and employees, as well as artists and organisers, to act in these roles simultaneously preventing from clear classification of fair pay remuneration.

Asynchronous implementation and federal fragmentation

Austria’s federal system distributes cultural funding across federal, state, and municipal levels, each operating under distinct legislation and budgetary priorities. Although the 2022 ‘Fair Pay Strategy of the Federal Authorities’ articulates shared financial responsibility (BMKÖS, 2022), implementation varies in commitment, timing, and fiscal contribution. This results in an asynchronous implementation, incomplete gap closure due to uneven co-financing, and limited participation in rural municipalities, where remuneration gaps are often highest (Gallup-Institut, 2022). The Netherlands model appears to be more promising to reduce such disparities for fair remuneration by obliging municipal mandates.

Beyond these asymmetries, political positioning further shapes trajectories. As responsibility for cultural affairs lies with the state governments, this has enabled the right-wing political party FPÖ in one state to oppose the implementation

of Fair Pay on the grounds that folklore should take priority for granting (FPÖ Landespartei Steiermark, 2026). In their efforts to prevent Fair Pay on these grounds, politicians disregarded the distinct paradigms of voluntary engagement in collective cultural practices and professional cultural labour, as well as Austria's ratification of the UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005) in 2006.

Inadequate statistical visibility

Effective remuneration reform requires a robust statistical foundation. However, Austria's cultural statistics do not systematically differentiate between public and private nonprofit employment structures or comprehensively register independent initiatives, leaving the nonprofit sector unclassified, underexplored, and only partially visible (Teissl et al., 2021; Kulturrat Österreich, 2024).

These gaps also affect the 'Fair Pay Gap' survey. Missing population data and biased sampling led to misrepresentation (Gallup-Institut, 2022). As a result, the survey only identifies large-scale trends in pay disparities, leaving Fair Pay to operate within an incomplete empirical infrastructure. To understand the characteristics and needs of the hybrid labor market, which is characterized by precarious conditions and conditioned by the special status of the principles of public goods, comprehensive data collection and transparency regarding work realities is required (European Commission, 2023).

Employment barriers impeding structural change

A central constraint lies in the sector's prevalence of project-based funding and work (European Commission, 2023; Kulturrat Österreich, 2024). Weak social security and low incomes are disproportionately higher in project-based models than in permanent institutions (Gallup-Institut, 2022), underscoring the individualized vulnerability of self-employed and freelance labour. A reform of the Theater Employment Act to improve the implementation of employment contracts for off-theaters is one of the initiatives under the Fairness Process. However, a sector-wide structural change to reduce bogus self-employment while maintaining diversity in offerings would require both an expansion of employment laws and valorising plus increasing cultural budgets significantly—to an extent that is currently unrealistic. On contrary, multi-year receivables agreements were temporarily suspended due to national austerity measures. Alternative strategies to project-based funding, such as the adoption of collaborative sectoral organisation might provide new fair pay pathways (European Commission, 2023; Bradshaw, 2025).

Lack of cultural awareness clauses under the current austerity agenda

Broader welfare reforms further limit Fair Pay's impact. Recent restrictions on supplementary earnings during unemployment disproportionately impact the arts and culture sector, where multiple jobholding and hybrid roles are structurally embedded

(Kulturrat Österreich, 2024; Abfalter, 2024), and may undermine both cultural sustainability and the efficiency of public expenditure. These spillover effects demonstrate that remuneration reform cannot be treated as an isolated sectoral intervention. As labour law, welfare policy, and cultural funding regimes operate as an interconnected system, they require cultural awareness beyond the sector allowing for efficient protective regulations (Schindler, 2012).

Implications and lessons learned

The conceptualization of fair pay as a transformative process requires national cultural policy action, robust interest group representation, and transnational regulatory support. The following key takeaways offer actionable pathways to advance fair pay measures.

National cultural policy intervention

Fragmented governance structures and non-mandatory measures prevent the fair pay gap from closing, prompting a call for governance coordination. Harmonising standards across territorial authorities and instituting mandatory municipal fair pay requirements, as conceptualized in the Netherlands, could reduce disparities and enforce consistency (Platform ACCT, n. d.).

Occupational diversity and cultural market's distinctiveness require adequate statistical visibility including the integration of the independent sector (Teissl et al., 2021; European Commission, 2023; Kulturrat Österreich, 2024).

Strengthening interest group representation is critical to addressing fair pay and labour law gaps and accelerating policy reforms in collaborative governance models. In Austria, interest groups have contributed to the establishment of the independent sector for decades (Teissl and Reid, 2025), even while being themselves subject to a high pay gap (Gallup-Institut, 2022). This underscores that interest groups can reduce the 'lack of representation' the sector often faces (European Commission, 2023).

Finally, collaborative economy and cross-sector partnerships can reduce systemic problems like project-based funding while fostering diversity and relational value creation (European Commission, 2023; Bradshaw, 2025). To gain acceptance within the sector, such models should be developed jointly.

Supportive transnational regulation

European frameworks play a pivotal role in advancing fair pay policies by exerting normative influence. Austria's non-profit cultural sector exemplifies challenges echoed across Europe, as reflected in the efforts of UNESCO (2025) and EU bodies (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2026). The resulting frameworks highlight the urgent need for interventions that address employment fragility, regulatory inconsistencies, and equity in cultural labour representation.

Key transnational support strategies include:

- European Status for Artists and Professionals: Establishing a classification for cultural workers to standardise employment

protections and resolve ambiguities (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2023).

- Public Goods Principles: Recognizing cultural labour markets as distinct, with protective regulations addressing their unique role in society alongside social protection equity for artists and professionals (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2026).
- Cultural Awareness Policies: Promoting cultural awareness clauses and enforcing the goal of including culture in the Sustainable Development Goals (Schindler, 2012; UNESCO, 2025).

Self-confident narratives to drive cross-domain cultural awareness

Narrative framing complements systemic changes by fostering cultural awareness and legitimacy across policy domains. Enhancing the strategic use of narrative framing at both the national and transnational levels may add force by providing credible evidence of the societal contribution of arts and culture, thereby strengthening cultural policy. Since Schindler's pioneering proposal (2012), social impact analysis has developed into a widely applied, methodologically refined instrument and can be used to derive equitable solutions across the arts and culture sector. Finally, reframing public cultural expenditure as a societal investment rather than a subsidy can drive more sustainable policy positioning.

Conclusion

Austria's Fair Pay initiative demonstrates a significant commitment, both normative and fiscal, to enhancing working conditions and social protection within the independent arts and culture sector. For the time being, increased incomes and the maintenance of a diverse range of cultural offerings seem to promise positive results. However, legal frameworks regarding social security remain a work in progress. The analysis of the implementation process highlights actionable steps that can reduce systemically embedded barriers to effective institutional reform, including a mandatory commitment to closing fair pay gaps, adequate statistical data, cross-domain cultural awareness, interest group representation, and equal consideration of artists and professionals in fair pay policies.

The analysis presented in this study reinforces findings and objectives of international research (Council of European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2023; Kulturrat Österreich, 2024). This is particularly evident in the requirement to conceptualise fair pay beyond an income correction. Moreover, comparative studies of

fair pay measures and their implementation across countries can lead to common improvements in fair pay policies. The coordination of cross-sector domains and transnational efforts is equally important and intertwined. The opportunity to establish the status of artists and professionals at the European level can have a major normative impact.

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VT wrote the manuscript, YU further developed the argument and improved linguistics, style and structure. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

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