

## BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS? OLD AND NEW BARRIERS TO SOCIAL COHESION IN ARTS, CULTURE AND MEDIA. WARSAW, POLAND, MAY 11, 2023

Artists and journalists warned audiences—attending a public event in Warsaw on 11 May—not to stay silent when freedom of speech and expression are under threat and encouraged them to be proactive in tackling polarization and divisions in society. The warnings came during the event, ‘Breaking Down the Walls? Old and New Barriers to Social Cohesion in Arts, Culture and Media’ organized by the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies at the University of Warsaw, in collaboration with the Media Diversity Institute Global and with the support of the Museum of Modern Art.

Photo 1. Event poster



Author: Media Diversity Institute Global

Hanna Azemsha, a TV journalist and reporter from Belarus, who is working in Poland for Belsat TV, made a powerful warning about being complacent. She said change in her country didn't happen overnight and people didn't take it seriously at first. As a result, freedoms have been lost and many of her fellow journalists as well as opposition figures and activists are in jail. Reporters Without Borders highlighted in its 2022 Round-up that Belarus is one of the world's top jailers of journalists with more than 30 behind bars. Azemsha encouraged

audience members to “take action every time you see freedom of expression being threatened. Don’t close your eyes when you see something wrong”.


It was a message repeated by other speakers at the event, part of the MEDIAdelcom project, exploring the role of the creative and media sectors in preserving freedom and promoting deliberation.

Well-documented problems facing the media and arts in Poland and the wider EU include censorship and financial and political pressure. Poland has slipped down the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in its *Liberties Media Freedom Report 2023* said that media freedom in the EU is in steady decline.


### Photo 2. Discussion moderators and participants

A discussion examining the role of the creative sector in preserving freedom, fighting polarization and promoting deliberation in Poland. How can artists and cultural figures help save democracy and what role can deliberative communications - the sharing of ideas through respect - have?

**MODERATED BY**




**MILICA PEŚĆ**  
Media Diversity Institute




**MICHAŁ GŁOWACKI**  
University of Warsaw


**SPEAKERS**




**MICHAŁ JANICKI**  
Painter, creative/art director



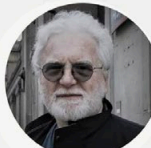
**SHADY LADY**  
Drag queen, artist & activist




**AGATA SZCZĘŚNIAK**  
Journalist  
OKO.press



**HANNA AZEMSHA**  
Journalist  
Bielsat TV



**ANDRZEJ KRAKOWSKI**  
Director, film producer



**WILLIAM TAYEEBWA**  
Ugandan media professor

Author: Media Diversity Institute Global

There have also been warnings about the state of the creative sector in Poland. Artistic Freedom Initiative in partnership with UC Berkeley School of Law and Columbia University's Harriman Institute compiled the *Censorship and Suppression of the Arts in Poland* report. The report claims there have been attempts in recent years to align the country's arts and cultural landscape to more closely reflect the ruling party's socially conservative and nationalist ethos. It also reported that independent cultural institutions have been under pressure and often steer away from controversial programming.

Both the media and arts sectors are navigating the changing norms, pressures and restrictions of a new societal and data-driven media reality. The event explored the role of the arts and culture sectors in facilitating and promoting deliberation and enhancing social cohesion in an era of growing threats to democracy and rights. Artists as well as media practitioners shared their experiences and explored practical solutions.

Agata Szczeńśniak, a journalist, sociologist, columnist and activist, who works for OKO.press, a fact-checking and investigative journalism outlet in Poland, said people need to fight any actions that lead towards authoritarianism. She said presenting the facts and informing people about issues is not enough.

"There is a presumption that when facts are presented to people they become enlightened. It is not true." Szczeńśniak added that people read and absorb facts in the framework of their own culture and beliefs, but she still believes the media plays an important role in presenting the facts and making them available to the public. She urged people to support the media, especially independent media, to ensure its survival and ability to present responsible reporting.

Speakers agreed common ground was needed for deliberation to succeed in tackling the problem of polarization, especially in Polish society.

Professor Andrzej Krakowski, film director, producer, teacher, writer and cartoonist who lives in the US, spoke about his experience being expelled from Poland during anti-Semitic purges in 1968. He called for people to listen to each other and enter into dialogue to exchange ideas. "We can't keep putting bandaids on wounds when we don't understand where the wounds come from." Krakowski said there is an overload of information and media options, and people don't know how to communicate.

Shady Lady, a Polish drag queen, artist and activist whose performances touch on the issues of the LGBTQ+ community, agreed it was important to listen and not just consume information. "For us in the LGBTQ+ community, we are open to discussion and to communicate and describe issues, but sometimes the other side doesn't want to listen." Shady Lady added that there was still a lack of respect for the LGBTQ+ community in the country.

In Poland, authorities in one-third of the country have adopted anti-LGBT resolutions since 2019, declaring themselves free of "LGBT ideology" which

includes so-called LGBT “free-zones”. Some towns have since had their “zones” annulled by courts.

Shady Lady said polarization is the biggest issue facing society and the arts provide an avenue for connecting people.

Michał Janicki, painter, creative art director, and head of painters and animators in BreakThru Films in Poland, agreed art has a role to play in helping solve problems. He said artists can provide a space for people to meet and exchange ideas. “I think art can do a lot, we just need to be brave. Deliberation is possible if only we are willing to meet in the same room.”

Krakowski also appealed to the audience to listen to each other and be more proactive in solving problems. “The most effective way is to do. Let’s not push for change, let’s make change.”

Dr. William Tayeebwa, Senior Lecturer of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University in Uganda, sent a video message saying freedom of expression was also under pressure in many African nations, but artists have been speaking out on issues including governance, human rights and freedom of expression. He urged artists in Europe to do the same. “With the rise of right-wing politics in Europe, the work of artists and cultural figures is even more important to spread the message of love and empathy towards the other.”

Audience members were impressed with the diversity of panelists and views and they took Hanna Azemsha’s warning seriously. They said the panel discussion prompted them to think about the power of expression and individual responsibility.

The public event was held at the end of a two-day meeting in Warsaw for MEDIAdelcom project members, who were finalizing plans for the next stage of the project, which includes the publication of a book. MEDIAdelcom is a research project finding risks and opportunities for European media landscapes concerning deliberative communication and social cohesion. It will develop a diagnostic tool that will enable modelling and management of multiple scenarios and instruments for media-related risks prediction. The 14 EU countries project is financed by the EU’s funding programme for research and innovation Horizon 2020.

The event also featured art by Warsaw University students including a digital photographic display, Freedom! Where are you? and a dance performance interpreting freedom.

*Tanya Sakzewski*

MEDIA DIVERSITY INSTITUTE GLOBAL