

“BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS? FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AS A COMMON VALUE”, DAUGAVPILS, LATVIA, FEBRUARY 27, 2024

The concept of freedom is multifaceted, encompassing both independence and the ability to pursue one's goals, construct, develop, and transform imagined boundaries. Artists and journalists intimately understand this concept through their experiences. They often navigate the borders of one of the fundamental freedoms enshrined in constitutions across the EU and other democratic societies—the freedom of expression. But how does the exercise of freedom of expression within the realms of media and arts aid in dismantling barriers between disparate societal groups? How can it foster social cohesion and bridge divides, particularly amidst today's often populist-driven public discourse and rapid technological advancements reshaping our modes of communication?

These critical questions were the focus of attention at the event titled “Breaking Down the Walls? Freedom of Expression as a Common Value,” held at the Rothko Museum in Daugavpils, Latvia.

Daugavpils, the second-largest city in Latvia, situated in the southeastern region near the border with Belarus, has a unique cultural background for a discussion on this topic. Historically, it has been a convergence point for Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Belarusian, Latvian, and Jewish cultural influences. Today, Daugavpils is home to a diverse population, predominantly Russian, alongside significant Latvian, Polish, and Belarusian communities. It stands as both an industrial and cultural center, hosting a university, a professional theater, media outlets (primarily in Russian), an artist community, and the renowned Mark Rothko Museum—a tribute to the city's native son, one of the well-known American avant-garde artists of the 20th century.

The discussion aimed to draw on the creative resources of the locale while grappling with its cultural, linguistic, and ideological complexities. Diverse perspectives were brought to the fore by speakers, including journalists, artists, and academics, reflecting the multidimensional nature of freedom of expression. The discussion was moderated by professor Michał Głowacki, University of Warsaw and Tanya Sakzewski Media Diversity Institute Global and organized by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Riga Stradins University in collaboration with Rothko Museum and the Media Diversity Institute Global as part of the Mediadelcom research project.

The event commenced with an artistic intervention—a choreographic interpretation of the theme performed by two young dancers Viktorija Kovaļova and Kristina Kovaļova, symbolically mixing the idea of talking through differences directly to the audience. The ensuing dialogue highlighted the varying interpretations of freedom of expression within Daugavpils' heterogeneous community.

Participants – all locals – including sculptor Ivo Folkmanis, photographer and assistant professor of Riga Stradins University Alnis Stakle, marketing specialist and journalist Vladislava Romanova and Inna Plavoka, editor-in-chief of the local news outlet Chayka.lv, actively engaged, reflecting on the role of culture, education and societal norms in shaping perceptions of freedom. Ivo Folkmanis pointed on the importance of family that sets the first standards. Inna Plavoka emphasized the importance of engaging with audiences across cultural divides, advocating for dialogue grounded in shared humanity. Vladislava Romanova, who recently became well-known in Latvia with her documentary “Daugavpils – the city of (Im)possibilities”, ignited debate by labeling Chayka.lv as the city's sole bastion of media freedom, prompting reflections on the nuanced dynamics of press freedom within the community.

Yet, amidst these discussions, questions lingered. What are the limits of freedom of speech, artistic expression, and press freedom? How do societal shifts impact the contours of freedom of expression in public life? Do we probably need to keep boundaries to maintain our privacy or identity? What can be done, if the community does not want to be involved? Alnis Stakle voiced pessimism, both because of the potential erosion of freedoms and the widening gap between social groups.

As Daugavpils grapples with its cultural mosaic and the complexities of freedom, one thing becomes clear—dialogue, collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to fundamental values are indispensable in fostering a cohesive society. As examples voiced by participants of the audience showed, it can be achieved through mutual tolerance, understanding the perspective of the other and collaboration, including artistic and journalistic projects. “It is important to find love for each other, mutual understanding, trust and commonalities – where we are similar. To reach it You have to invest Your time – all sides involved,” so Ivo Folkmanis summarized the conclusions of the discussion.

The discussion was the second public discussion event in the “Breaking Down the Walls?” series. These discussions were developed in collaboration between the University of Warsaw and Media Diversity Institute Global, London in the framework of public events of the Mediadelcom project, a comparative research initiative searching for the risks and opportunities for deliberative communications in Europe. The project supported by HORIZON 2020 program involved 14 countries including Latvia, Poland, Czechia, Romania, Estonia and Germany representatives of which participated in the discussion. The fact that the conclusions of the project were revealed in form of open, deliberative conversations

at the edge of EU, the event at the Rothko Museum and a “warming up” session to it entitled “Scenarios of our freedom” in Daugavpils University) does not only have symbolic meaning. In the given geopolitical situation city of Daugavpils and the neighboring border region of Latvia, which has become an ideological battlefield, a place of daily advocacy for liberal values such as free speech and independent media, and deliberation.

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