Empowering Europe's Creatives: Better Working Conditions, Innovation, and Cultural Sovereignty

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Introduction: Reclaiming Europe's Cultural Strategic Sovereignty

Europe's **cultural and creative industries (CCIs)** are at the heart of its economy, contributing nearly **4% of EU GDP** and employing over **7.7 million people** (Eurostat, 2023a). However, these figures mask a structural vulnerability: **precarious work**. Around **one-third of cultural workers** are self-employed, with **freelancers** dominating sectors like creative arts, design, and entertainment (KEA & PPMI, 2021). This dynamic fuels **entrepreneurial spirit**, but simultaneously leads to **fragmented careers** and limited access to **social protection** (Eurostat, 2023a).

This paper argues that Europe's ability to remain a **cultural powerhouse** and **global leader** is fundamentally tied to **improving working conditions** in the CCIs. The concept of **cultural strategic sovereignty** demands not only the protection of artists' rights but the empowerment of all **creative professionals**—from designers and coders to visual creators and cultural managers.

Agency, Smart Power, and Cultural Sovereignty

The **EU** must recognize that strengthening the **working conditions** of creatives is not just a social issue but a **strategic one**. By **improving agency** for creatives—providing them with the power to choose, innovate, and collaborate on their own terms—the EU enhances its **smart power** globally, turning cultural **soft power** into economic, technological, and political leverage.

This is particularly true as we face challenges from global platforms and AI technology. **Without control over its creative workforce**, Europe risks losing its **cultural sovereignty**—its ability to tell its own stories, protect intellectual property, and project its values globally.

Core Problems: Lack of Agency in a Precarious System

Despite contributing significantly to Europe's GDP, creatives are often caught in precarious **working conditions**:

- **Freelance status** and **bogus self-employment**,
- **Irregular income**,
- **Limited access to social protection** and **pension schemes**,
- **Unpaid work** and **informal labour practices** (e.g., unpaid internships, speculative projects).

As the **European Labour Authority** has shown, these conditions result in a **grey zone of employment** that weakens creatives' **agency** and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Without real agency over their work, creatives cannot fully **participate in Europe's innovation ecosystem** and **cultural diplomacy** .

Three Levers for Change: Skills, Procurement, and Intellectual Property

In response to these challenges, CreativeFED proposes focusing on **three strategic levers** that can reshape the working conditions of creatives across Europe:

1. Skills – Building Creative Agency

Skills development is at the core of empowering creatives to navigate changing markets, develop new competencies, and command fairer pay for their work. **Creative self-determination** can only be achieved through accessible, **recognised skills**.

1. **Recognition of CCS as a Strategic Skills Ecosystem**

- We call for the **Union of Skills** to explicitly **recognize the cultural and creative sectors (CCS)** as a strategic **ecosystem** in Europe's **skills agenda**. Freelancers and micro-enterprises should be included in **EU policies** that primarily target large employers .

2. **European Creative Skills & Micro-Credentials Framework**
   - Establish a **European Creative Skills Framework** that validates non-formal learning (residencies, mentorships, peer learning) for creatives across all sectors. This would **formalize informal learning** and enable creatives to prove their **skills**, helping them negotiate fairer terms and gain access to social protection.
3. **Paid Learning Time as Standard**
   - Require **EU-funded projects** to include **paid learning time** as a standard component. This ensures that creatives are supported to **upskill** continuously, reinforcing their **long-term sustainability** in the workforce. Skills are critical to **agency**—they unlock **better career pathways** and increase bargaining power in the market .

2. Procurement – Using Public Spending for Fair Creative Work

Public procurement is one of the largest **EU levers** to improve working conditions for creatives. However, it is currently underused to support **fair work**.

1. **No Public Commission Without Fair Practice**
   - We propose that **fair-pay clauses** and **transparent contracts** become mandatory in all EU and **public cultural tenders**. These clauses should include respect for **sectoral fee guidelines** and **limits on unpaid work** (e.g., unpaid internships or speculative projects) 【95†sourcecourage Smaller Lots and Freelance Participation**
   - In procurement, we recommend **lotting** contracts into smaller sections and allowing **freelancers and micro-enterprises** to participate. This would make public commissions **accessible** to a broader range of creatives and prevent the market from being dominated by large enterprises .
2. **Link Procurement to Innovation & Skills**
   - Develop **EU guidelines** for procurement that include **skills-building components**, such as mentorship and paid internships, in all tenders. This would not only improve working conditions but also drive innovation and **skills development** in the creative industries .

3. Intellectual Property – Protecting Creatives' Rights and Cultural Sovereignty

Intellectual property rights (IPR) are foundational to creative professionals' long-term income. **Fair remuneration** for the use of their work is critical for securing their **economic agency**.

1. **Fair Remuneration & Transparency**
   - Enforce the **EU Copyright Directive** (2019/790), focusing on **fair remuneration** for digital uses of creative work. We recommend developing **contract templates** and **standardizing terms** that guarantee **fair pay** for the reuse and commercialisation of creative work .
2. **Default to Licenses, Not Full Buy-Outs**
   - Promote **licensing agreements** over **full buy-out contracts**, particularly in public procurement and **EU-funded projects**. These agreements ensure that creatives retain control over their work and receive **additional remuneration** for success, reuse, or exploitation in new markets .
3. **Cultural Data Sovereignty & AI**
   - Ensure that **AI models** trained on creative content are subject to **transparency**, with **fair remuneration** for creatives. Collectives, rights organisations, and **data trusts** can help creatives protect their **digital rights** and ensure they are compensated for the use of their work in AI development.

Conclusion: A Roadmap for Action

To make these ideas operational, CreativeFED calls for:

1. **EU-Level Research**: A comprehensive **study** to map artists' and creative professionals' working conditions across the EU, with consistent data collection to fill existing evidence gaps (Creatives Unite, 2025).

2. **Social Protection**: Development of **tailored welfare models** for creatives, such as **portable benefits** and **artist stipends**, to ensure that all artists and creative professionals, regardless of employment status, can access **healthcare, pensions**, and **unemployment benefits** .
3. **IPR Enforcement**: Systematic **enforcement** of fair-remuneration clauses in IPR, and the development of **standard contracts** to guarantee fair compensation for digital exploitation and AI training .

CreativeFED is ready to collaborate with the Commission, Member States, and social partners to implement these **policy changes**, ensuring that Europe's creatives can thrive, contribute to Europe's innovation ecosystem, and protect Europe's **cultural strategic sovereignty**.

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