



Rosa Meriläinen Sananvapauden puolustajien pelikirja

Helsingin
Sanomain
Säätiön
pamfletti

The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation's first pamphlet:

The Playbook for Freedom of Speech Defenders

September 18th, 2025

Translated from Finnish to English by Translation Agency Lingviini.

The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation supports freedom of speech, journalism, and media literacy. The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation's pamphlets are statements on current media topics. The articles are requested from experts in various fields and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation's board.

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Foreword to the pamphlet: Structures of freedom of speech

“We clearly cannot trust that the Academy of Finland will, in its complete freedom of discretion, direct funding to the targets for which it is intended.”

Minister Wille Rydman (Helsingin Sanomat 27 June 2025)

This is the playbook for defenders of freedom of speech. I argue that independent science, the arts, the press, and civil society organizations together form the structures of freedom of speech, which are currently under threat throughout Europe.

The challenge is about information policy: what are children allowed to be taught, what people should be told. The challenge is philosophical: what does freedom mean, what is a good life, what is our view of humanity. The challenge is about culture policy: what kind of community is good? The challenge is about family policy: what is a woman's place and what is a real man like?

The vanguard of the challengers is a global anti-liberal movement based in Hungary. It reads books that liberals do not read and listens to mentors who have their finances in order. What structures of freedom of speech is Europe, struggling with public finance challenges, prepared and able to maintain so that the liberal elite does not lose the battle for facts before it even admits to being an elite?

The challenge is compounded by polarization, which in itself erodes democracy, and social media, which fuels hatred. We must now do better if we want to preserve the European rule of law and liberal democracy. Our task is to work together to defend and strengthen the structures of freedom of speech.

This pamphlet calls on us to wake up to the fact that the culture counter-revolution against European liberalism proclaimed by the Polish and Hungarian leadership in 2016 has gained many diverse allies across Europe. Surely you are not one of them without realizing it, are you?

It calls on us to remember European history and realize that this is not the first time we have had to consider what freedom requires. You will probably not end up in prison, as Václav Havel did in 1977 after standing up for the freedom of artistic expression of young rock musicians. But defending freedom always requires something.

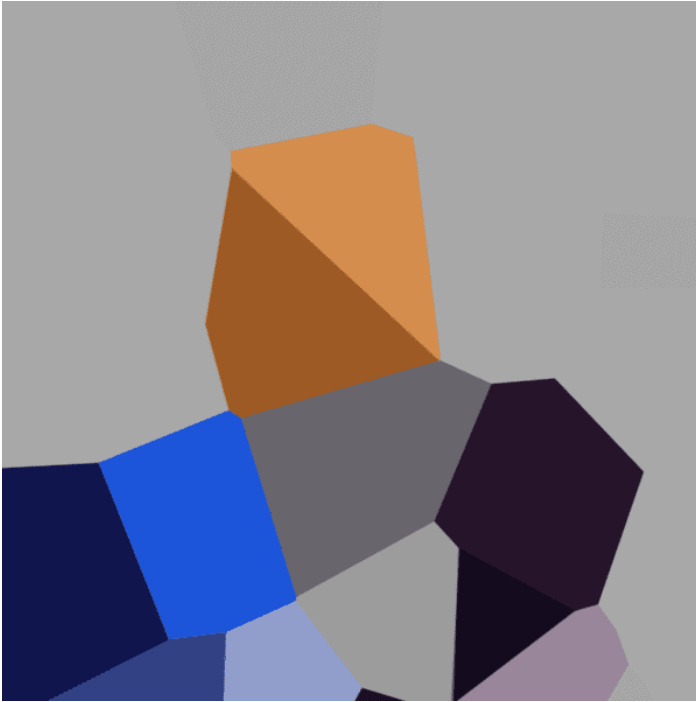
It may also require us all to defend actors and institutions that we are more accustomed to challenging and criticizing. It may require us to reach outside our own bubble and realize that there are many different kinds of people in the same boat. It pushes us out of the safe haven of expertise and into broader intellectual solidarity.

Have your working conditions deteriorated? Are you gripped by fear that you might lose your job and your livelihood? You are not alone! Your boss may be even more afraid for his position. So come and see what is happening in Europe. How Zygmunt Bauman's concept of *liquid fear* is beginning to fill our souls.

Rosa Meriläinen



Rosa Meriläinen is the secretary general of KULTA ry, the Central Organization for Culture and the Arts, and an author with a background in science, art, journalism, and civil society organizations. In addition to her works of fiction, she has also published non-fiction books on a variety of social topics. Meriläinen is interested in classical Arabic and liberal democracy.



Graphic designer Johannes Nieminen designed the cover of the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation's pamphlet using Rosa Meriläinen's photograph as a basis.

1. Liberal and anti-liberal reality

It may sound simplistic to divide the world into liberal and anti-liberal spheres, because neither of them, of course, forms a coherent ideological-political whole. Most people tend to have random opinions on individual issues rather than a grand social plan. However, in this pamphlet, I hope to outline a set of institutions and ideals worth defending, on the basis of which human rights also apply to all minorities, gender does not determine our position in society, democracy and the rule of law protect everyone from arbitrariness, well-being and education belong to everyone, and everyone is interested in facts.

Anti-liberal and autocratic aspirations stem from the idea that once power has been gained through elections, it can also be used against minorities and opponents, undermining the rule of law and the institutions of free education. The anti-liberal agenda can be disguised as religion, nationalism, anti-immigration, economic discipline, or traditional family values. And that is why even liberals can be misled into becoming its allies. So, if a typical liberal scientist has enjoyed attacking the inefficiency of his own university, he may suddenly find himself a pawn in a game of orchestrated propaganda without even realizing it.

Of course, autocratic, anti-liberal tendencies are not just a European challenge. I fully agree with Anne Appelbaum's idea that since autocrats play together regardless of geographical boundaries, democratic forces should do the same. But allow me, dear readers, to make at least this one limitation: I have written this book about Europe so that we can defend the

structures of freedom of speech in Europe. It is in our hands as Europeans, it is our business to take care of it.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to bring together the structures of European freedom of speech, as part of the same discussion and common struggle for democracy and the rule of law.

I have noticed that, for the time being, actors in science, the arts, the press, and civil society organizations are fighting their own desperate defensive battles within their own circles, unaware that we are all in the same boat, with the same eagle tearing our common book from our hands. Or perhaps we are even relieved when the bullies and cutters are picking on a colleague for a change?

2. Journey into fear

Welcome to a journey into the structures of European freedom of speech: how the independence of science, the arts, the press, and civil society organizations is threatened across Europe. The journey begins in Giorgia Meloni's Italy. For many middle-aged people, the name of the Italian state media company RAI brings to mind Berlusconi and scantily clad beauties, but in fact, many independent journalists have worked there doing news reporting. Now they are on strike because, according to RAI journalists, Meloni's government is trying to turn RAI into a mouthpiece for the government. RAI's largest journalists' union, Usigrai, said about the strike: "We are striking to defend the autonomy and independence of public radio and television services from the pervasive control of politicians over the information space."

In Italy, people loyal to the government have been appointed to RAI's management positions before, but since Meloni came to power in 2022, according to Politico Magazine, several hosts and managers have resigned from the company, citing political pressure. Defamation charges are among the means used to pressure journalists. That is why Meloni's party, Brothers of Italy, has also pushed for tougher defamation penalties.

Defamation charges are a familiar tactic used by the far right in Finland as well. Journalist Johanna Vehkoo was forced into limbo for years due to a defamation charge brought by a well-known Nazi. In a private Facebook post, Vehkoo had called the well-known Nazi a Nazi and a Nazi clown. Let the Vehkoo's book *Oikeusjuttu (Court Case)* wear out in the hands of all defenders of freedom of speech. According to Politico, Meloni's government has been accused of strategically using defamation charges.

On Thursday, June 5, 2025, I am standing in the courtyard of the Capuchin Church in Turin, chatting with local young people, a Campari Spritz in my hand. I attended the conference of Culture Action Europe, the European umbrella organization for the culture sector, with local volunteers. I am filled with the spirit of civil society, as the youth culture organization Club Silencio is hosting a party that combines techno music and a museum visit. During the day, I had participated in a Palestine demonstration. I had sung Bella Ciao with high school students and made a video for Instagram, in the comments of which I was accused of supporting Hamas.

I raved to the young people about the awesome graffiti I had found on the walls of Turin, such as “Your friend is my rapist.” I lamented the fact that I had to leave for my home country just as Turin Pride was about to begin. Pride is one of my favorite events: how important it is to give people a place to be themselves in front of others, and how important it is for us allies to be there to tell them that they are safe with us.

I have been to Pride parades all over Europe. The warmest one has definitely been Reykjavik Pride, where it felt like the entire population of Iceland was there, from babies to grandpas. The scariest was Riga Pride, where a handful of marchers trembled with fear behind riot police and riot barriers as thousands of right-wing extremists threw beer bottles at us and shouted obscenities, dressed in T-shirts promoting a ban on anal sex.

I asked the young people what Turin Pride was like. They said that it used to be big, but now many people are hesitant to participate for fear of being arrested as terrorists. At Pride. The young people said that the fear is completely unfounded, but it is still real and restricts people. Later, I find an article online that explains how Turin has played a significant role in the Italian rainbow movement since the 1970s. What civil rights can still be revoked in this day and age?

In Serbia, there were large protests against corruption in 2025, but something unusual was also reported: a sonic weapon is suspected of having been used to disperse the demonstrations. Protesters say a wave passed through them and that the “sound bomb” caused them to feel unwell and even suffer hearing damage. Students and young people have been removed from the streets elsewhere, and not always peacefully. What do we have to fear?

3. Change the leaders and create content that appeals to your own bubble

What happens when fear moves from the streets to the cabinets? The Finnish Museums Association arranged a meeting for me with Julia Pagel, Secretary General of NEMO, the umbrella organization for European museums, and Paulina Florjanowicz, a Polish archaeologist who has written a report on political influence on museums.

I had read the report with my hair standing on end: most museums report that they have been subject to political influence. This has been evident in both budgets and exhibition content. In other words, more than half of European museum operators report that political influence is evident in museum program and exhibition decisions! 75 percent of national museum organizations estimate that museums in their countries are subject to political influence. Independence is wavering in institutions as permanent as memory organizations, whose task is to preserve the legacy of past generations for future generations.

Even before the morning’s meeting, I had heard that in Poland thirty museum directors had been replaced in 2024 following a change in government after the elections. The previous government had done the same. Polarization and becoming a tool of culture wars erodes confidence, and the position of museum director does not seem a prestigious dream

job, despite the possibility of a large corner office with a view. The reason for dismissal is not that you were appointed by the previous government, but rather mistakes in financial management or, for example, inappropriate behavior. Everyone has made a mistake at some point, if you dig hard enough.

We arrived at the Museum Association's office at the same time as Florjanowicz, wet as dogs. Pagel also arrived shortly after, just as cold. The second week of June was rainy and cold throughout Europe. We had coffee, and after a brief small talk, I jumped right into the topic. I told them I wanted to know how they had come to the conclusion that such a report on the impact on museums needed to be made. There had been political pressure before.

The women spoke about the importance of intuition in a gray area. They talked about how, at museum network meetings, people began to discuss the need to talk about difficult issues in safe spaces. Words were chosen carefully. It was noted that it was difficult to find speakers for public events on some topics.

A key observation: no country has been found where such problems do not exist at all. In some countries, people simply do not realize that this influence is happening, I was told. Even though officially there is no censorship in any EU country. What is the point of formal freedom of speech if it cannot actually be exercised, I was asked.

Loaded concepts such as nationalism and colonialism, misunderstandings between East and West, and, on the other hand, the obligation of museums to safeguard their collections at all times, all put different pressures on museum directors. Maintaining independence sometimes seems to take the form of self-censorship and excessive caution.

I was told that it is reassuring if a museum is able to maintain contact with a wide range of audiences and keep up a dialogue with politicians. It is important to stay alert to what is actually happening in politics and choose your allies wisely. In addition to international networks and open discussion, the women emphasized the importance of having public culture policy documents in the country that can be referred to for guidelines and criteria.

I leave the meeting feeling confused. After all, liberals are currently in power in Poland. They, too, cannot resist changing leaders once they have gained power. Poland is a case in point when discussing the destructiveness of political polarization. There is a good non-fiction book on the subject: Antti Blåfield's and Erja-Outi Heino's *Puola on samaa maata* (*Poland is of the same country*). It would be easy for someone like me (I am a member of the Greens in Finland) to blame the far right, but that is not enough. Polarization itself is a problem, and succumbing to it shows the liberals' lack of backbone and strategy. We must be able to do better.

Walking home, I remembered my first visit to Poland twenty years ago. At the time, I was a young member of parliament who was exhausted by the social demands of my work. I set off alone on a backpacking trip to Poland so that I wouldn't have to talk to anyone. I ended up wandering around Auschwitz, thinking that at least in Europe we remember that never again. Do we remember?

4. Persistent bullies

Researchers do not have it easy either. In Hungary, for example, gender studies have been completely abolished: in addition to research questions, there are entire fields of research that are unacceptable to national conservatives.

Courage is required throughout Europe if you want to engage in public debate on controversial topics, or if you happen to be a woman. Harassment of researchers in Europe has been linked to issues such as the coronavirus and climate change and is more common among female than male researchers. Harassment of female researchers is also often sexist, personal, and long-lasting.

According to the Academic Freedom Index published in autumn 2025, my home country, Finland, has fallen 38 places in two years. In an interview with Yliopisto Magazine, education policy researcher Mikko Poutanen says that prominent politicians engage in unfounded criticism of science: "They single out a single research grant and repost it without familiarizing themselves with it or discussing it. The message is often that public funds are being used recklessly".

Unfortunately, online hate speech also serves as a technique for silencing people. Some researchers have stopped actively communicating about science. Understanding the mechanisms of self-censorship is an important part of the whole discussion. A good description of the topic can be found in Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless*, which starts with a question related to a greengrocer: When a Czechoslovakian greengrocer hung a sign next to the tomatoes in his shop window saying "Proletarians of all countries, unite," why did he do so?

In his most famous essay, Havel reveals the mechanisms by which people in an unfree country end up repeating phrases with extreme caution and under pressure in order to be left in peace and remain safe. And to avoid telling the truth.

Another classic is Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, in which he describes a person who is subject to total surveillance and who completes the surveillance by observing himself.

Male classics fail to grasp how gendered and sexist harassment, especially against women, can erode the self-esteem of researchers, journalists, artists, and activists. When a person no longer believes in themselves, it is a tragic form of self-censorship.

But there is resistance too: in France, Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, a brave woman who has studied Islam, took the death threats she received to court. Verdicts were handed down.

Finnish researchers Saresma et al. published a report on online hate in 2022. The report emphasizes that online hate is a complex phenomenon produced by both individuals and extremist groups with different motives. The most influential are ideologues who give direction and purpose to the online hate of individual internet users.

Some trolls receive funding for their activities. They are part of a network of organized social movements that do not aim for equality and pluralistic democracy.

It is time to turn our attention to Hungary.

5. The rule of law as the underdog

I had requested a meeting with Tuija Brax, Director of the Rule of Law Centre at the University of Helsinki, as well as Aleksi Kalenius, a senior official at the Ministry of Education and Culture, as he has a broad view of information production across the entire administrative sector. Kalenius's commitment to his work is evident in the fact that he arrives at the meeting on a hot day – even though he is on vacation.

"If I may show you a few slides," Tuija Brax begins. The title of the slide series is: *The Rule of Law as the Underdog*. Our note-taking equipment begins to rattle and clatter. Brax takes us on a breathless journey, the highlight of which is the idea that the rule of law, democracy, and human rights form an interdependent triangle that is being destroyed by corruption.

I understand that the actual realization of freedom of speech involves not only fundamental rights and economic, cultural, and social rights, but also the overall level of security: It is no use if the Supreme Court's decisions contain fine arguments based on fundamental rights if people are afraid to walk down the streets – this example comes from outside Europe – from South Africa. But people are afraid in Europe too.

Tuija Brax shows me a diagram with the words "fundamental rights" in one corner and explains that Rosa's question about freedom of the arts belongs in this corner.

Aleksis Kalenius wisely adds the question of schools to the discussion. Schools are institutions whose curricula in Finland are developed through a democratic process. But once they have been written, schools must be safe from all forms of pressure. It might be justified to include the entire school system, with its high schools, daycare centers, and agencies, in this pamphlet's list of structures of freedom of speech.

But are all institutions too big and therefore wrong targets to defend? How can we defend institutions while also recognizing their need for development? How can we get every inner circle to accept criticism? Of course, the autonomy of an institution does not mean that it cannot be criticized – and yet we must defend the autonomy and operating conditions of institutions.

This requires all of us to be precise and understand the role of each institution. We must resist the undermining of institutions under the guise of efficiency, while at the same time always striving for efficiency, i.e., ensuring that taxpayers' money is not wasted. The question of the sustainability of public finances is also relevant.

6. The battle for information

The image of the huge education and research institute being built on top of Budapest's famous Gellért Hill, which appeared in Tuija Brax's slideshow, sparked my imagination. I contacted Annastiina Kallius, a researcher familiar with Hungary.

When I first contacted her, Kallius challenged my entire question about who and how we liberate, saying that the most important point is probably that anti-liberal forces do not so much want to challenge freedom, but rather follow a different definition of what freedom actually means – and promote this idea through diverse information production.

The financier of the educational institution rising on Gellért Hill is not hard to find – according to Kallius, it is Hungarian taxpayers. Hungary has already succeeded in implementing an anti-liberal information policy revolution, in which taxpayers' resources are directed towards producing content that is pleasing to those in power. There are several anti-liberal institutions and structures in Hungary. Pluralism is not one of their values.

The sister organization of the MCC educational institute on Gellért Hill in Brussels – also funded by Hungarian taxpayers – organizes events where it is stated that (my free translation of a direct quote): “At the heart of all this is the EU’s desire to define what is true and what is fake news. A new report reveals the scale at which the EU funds an entire ecosystem of NGOs, media publications, and paid “civil society” actors who are paid to monitor, report, and suppress political views that do not fit the approved script. ”

I actually got a dazzling private lecture on all this from Annastiina Kallius at the University of Helsinki’s multidisciplinary Research Collegium. There, dozens of researchers from different fields tell each other about their research and offer sharp, constructive peer criticism. Albert Einstein and Tori Amos stare at me from the walls of Kallius’s office.

I took a photo of Kallius holding up two publications and saying that this is what an information policy exchange looks like. The liberal magazine is an ugly rag printed on cheap paper. In contrast, The European Conservative is printed on lovely paper. It pampers the skin of your fingers, it is thick, it is beautiful, it is inviting. You really want to leaf through it. It has been made without skimping on money. The aesthetics of the anti-liberal movement are nostalgic and beautiful.

Annastiina Kallius taught me that the political transformation in Hungary is specifically an information policy transformation that continues the traditions of counter-enlightenment. The liberal intelligentsia continues to view all this with confusion: how can a lie be claimed to be the truth? We still cannot respond to this new view of truth and objectivity other than by indignantly insisting that this is not the case. We are shocked when anti-liberal forces are inconsistent and unintelligent in their arguments, while we are accustomed to our own inconsistency and unintelligence.

The goal of the anti-liberal thinkers is a new post-liberal order in which the liberal elite has lost its jobs and its respected position. In Hungary, the replacement of the liberal elite is already well underway – it has spread from organizations and universities to events. Hungary wants Hungary’s path to be Europe’s path.

7. Kleptocracy challenges democracy

Tuija Brax gave me a reading package, the top item of which was Frank Vogl’s book *Enablers – How the West Supports Kleptocrats and Corruption, Endangering Our Democracy*. Serbian youth have noticed the same thing, with the fight against corruption being the main focus of the massive protests in 2024. Corruption threatens democracy.

Vogl’s book was published in 2022, and the author has extensive experience in the international financial system. It examines the billion-dollar scams of oligarchs and dictators rushing to help each other with both financial challenges and maintaining their

power, and especially those power brokers in politics and banking who enable all this secrecy, tax evasion, and theft.

After reading the book, one key argument stood out in my mind: fighting corruption and defending freedom of speech are two sides of the same coin, because freedom of speech requires transparency and independence, while corruption thrives on secrecy and connections that benefit various parties. In the Nordic reality, politicians live middle-class lives, while in kleptocracies, presidents have billion-dollar fortunes.

The scale of money is staggering: according to Vogl's estimate, approximately 8 percent of global GDP is hidden in financial centers such as the Cayman Islands. When talking about the flows of dark money related to international trade – the money of oligarchs, kleptocrats, and organized crime – I start to get confused between billions and trillions. I always suspect a translation error when people talk about trillions of dollars in Finnish.

The billions generated by illegal trade are a common problem. Our democracy depends on the rule of law, and international capitalism cannot operate outside it without undermining the foundations of our entire system.

In other words, those who enable billion-dollar secrecy are destroying democracy and the rule of law, which enable us to maintain the structures of free speech, i.e., independent universities, media houses, cultural institutions, and civil society organizations. Of course, they must be managed well, with an eye to quality and renewal. But without adequate funding, nothing can function effectively. Without proper operating conditions, a profession becomes a hobby, work becomes a chore. Taxation is not theft. Tax evasion is.

8. What are we talking about when we talk about freedom?

For decades, I have written in many places that fear and poverty are the greatest constraints on our freedom. But I have been less inclined to write about what we are supposed to use our freedom for. The strength of Timothy Snyder's book *On Freedom* is that he constantly answers the question of why freedom matters by explaining the fundamental prerequisites for freedom. What kind of support and conditions does a person need in order to be free to follow their own path?

That is why it is important for us to study not only history and social sciences, but also philosophy: to see the ways of thinking and values that underpin concepts. When I have discussed the topic of this pamphlet with different people, I have been advised to abandon the whole concept of freedom, because it has been twisted to suit each person's own purposes.

When a coronavirus denier harasses a medical researcher with dick pics and rape threats, he claims to be doing so in the name of freedom. The same goes for those who stir up xenophobia and those who take funding away from basic research in the humanities. Some also feel that freedom is used to protect privileges and outdated practices in universities, public service media houses, and cultural institutions.

I have named freedom as my favorite value precisely because we cannot avoid this conflict. We must tirelessly engage in discussion about what the concept of freedom means. If we cannot even win this debate, what are we even striving for?

One of the central arguments in Timothy Snyder's book *On Freedom* is that our actual freedom is threatened by the understanding of negative freedom as the essence of freedom. When freedom is thought of as freedom from something, especially in the form of the absence of the state, it overlooks the importance of the welfare state, science, journalism, equality, and solidarity for freedom.

9. Production and consumption of facts

Snyder points out that freedom of speech is not the freedom of words, but the freedom of the people who use them, who need the protection of institutions and the support of others. He sums it up as follows: "Proclaiming freedom means proclaiming freedom of speech. Proclaiming freedom of speech means taking the side of facts. Taking the side of facts means supporting the institutions that give facts a home." (Snyder, p. 340)

Facts, and thus freedom, are challenged, for example, by those who seek to censor and undermine libraries and museums. Facts cannot even come into being if the producers of new knowledge – researchers, artists, and journalists – do not have the conditions necessary for professional work, Snyder also points out. When we defend freedom, we must support the production and consumption of facts. This, of course, requires vigilance to ensure that work within the structures of freedom of speech is carried out with the best possible professional skill – even if the end result is not always pleasing.

Hanna Partinen, Niina Mäntylä, Jonna Kosonen, and Jari Autioniemi have written an article entitled *The Importance of Freedom of Research in a Constitutional State* in the anthology *Knowledge, Power, and Influence in a Constitutional State*. The article states that academic freedom and freedom of research have individual, communal, and institutional dimensions. In the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, freedom of research is linked to freedom of expression, which includes both the freedom to conduct and disseminate scientific research and freedom from institutional censorship, as well as the right to information.

The above-mentioned article emphasizes that problems related to freedom of research cannot be limited to internal matters of individual states, as funding problems and risks, as well as pressure on international publishers, affect freedom of research across national borders.

There are a couple of established indicators of academic freedom. The Academic Freedom Index measures freedom based on freedom of choice of research topics, incentives, restrictions, self-censorship, freedom of publication, and access to research materials. Unfortunately, there is no similar index for the arts. It would be worthwhile to develop one, similar to the indicators for academic freedom.

The international organization Reporters Without Borders publishes an established index describing press freedom. It includes both qualitative and quantitative indicators. The

criteria assessed in the qualitative section are diversity of values, media independence, media environment and self-censorship, legal framework, transparency, and the quality of the infrastructure supporting news and information dissemination. The quantitative data concerns violence and abuse directed at journalists.

The freedom and operating conditions of civil society organizations are assessed in practice whenever the democratic nature of a society is measured. One example is The Civil Society Index, whose strengths include country-specific recommendations. For example, Albania is recommended to adopt a long-term strategy to strengthen relations between civil society organizations, the state, and interest groups, and to take measures to improve the public image of civil society in order to increase the influence of organizations on social processes. Organizations and associations are an essential way to make people's voices heard in a democracy, because together we are stronger and more influential.

10. From polarization to self-censorship

Autonomy and independence are concepts that are just as loaded as freedom, even though they offer a way to avoid using the word freedom. Just as with freedom, you can only be independent in relation to something. Independent from what, autonomous in what, to do what?

The Western concept of the rule of law is linked to democracy, and its essential elements are the independence of the courts and freedom of the press. Its core principle is that the actions of the state are based on law rather than arbitrariness. But the rule of law can be undermined by first winning elections and then using the law as a weapon. The weak development of the rule of law in Poland, for example, used the law as a tool: by changing the law, the composition of the courts was changed.

God, country and family serve as perfect excuses across Europe. A narrow view of security can undermine well-being and education, which are prerequisites for freedom and democracy. In a mental dead end, people are not free.

Various forces of widespread intolerance can join forces to weaken the position of other people, such as sexual minorities and immigrants. By exploiting people's fears and moralism, civil rights can be weakened, which decent people do not have to deal with.

Our fears can be exploited if we are forced to choose between our jobs and livelihoods and the need to courageously defend freedom and autonomy – our own or that of others.

That is why defense techniques must be based on solidarity, with all parties understanding that their turn may yet come. It is not worth standing by and watching as the autonomy of another sector is being dismantled, because soon it may be your institution's turn. Universities should therefore defend the autonomy of organizations, the freedom of the press of civil society organizations, journalists, writers' museums, actors' judges, trade union researchers, and citizen activists.

In 2024, inspired by SAK influencer (*Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions*) Jyrki Konola, I took part in a campaign to share Martin Niemöller's poem, which reminds us that solidarity is ultimately in all our interests, because even in a mass grave, we are not alone.

Niemöller's famous poem is called *First They Came*, and it is also appropriate for this pamphlet:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak out for me.

11. Democratic dialogue is fearless

Political polarization as a mechanism puts many actors between a rock and a hard place. Freemus's *State of Artistic Freedom 2025* report emphasizes that political polarization and social conflicts have significantly weakened the functioning and autonomy of cultural institutions in many countries in recent years. The polarized atmosphere has led to both direct censorship and more subtle forms of pressure, such as the politicization of funding and appointments.

In Germany, for example, the politically charged situation surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to the cancellation of exhibitions and the withdrawal of funding or performance opportunities for artists. Criticism of Israel's genocide in Gaza has sometimes been labeled as anti-Semitism, which has created an atmosphere of self-censorship.

According to the report, political polarization weakens the position of cultural institutions through two main mechanisms: funding becomes politicized, with the result that public subsidies are directed only to projects that support the government's values. Secondly, self-censorship is fueled both by the requirement for neutrality, which causes cultural actors to avoid taking a stand, and by the fear of donors withdrawing their support. Fear of public protests or media hype causes many organizations to voluntarily restrict content that could provoke political opposition. To be on the safe side, they become lukewarm.

As a result of political polarization, the role of cultural institutions in social debate and in addressing difficult issues is narrowing. This not only affects artists' freedom of expression, which is of course an important issue in itself, but also the public's opportunity to encounter diverse views and participate in democratic dialogue through the arts.

12. When social influence remains the preserve of the few

I myself have a long background in Finnish organizational life, having started my career at the age of 19 as the equality project secretary of the Tampere University Student Union.

I am currently the secretary general of KULTA ry, the Central Organization for Finnish Culture and the Arts Associations, where my job is to influence society to improve the appreciation and operating conditions of culture and the arts.

As part of my job, I served as chair of the Beneficiaries' Network of the Finnish Lottery Veikkaus at the turn of the decade. Finland had a system in which the license to organize gambling was granted only to Veikkaus, a state-owned gambling company, whose profits were directed to good causes listed in the law, such as the arts.

The Ministry of Education and Culture directed the distribution of Veikkaus's profits, most of which were allocated as state subsidies to municipalities that maintained museums, theaters, and orchestras according to certain criteria. The Ministry of Education and Culture also used Veikkaus's profits to fund national arts institutions and arts festivals. In addition, funds were distributed through the Arts Promotion Centre Finland, a state agency, and the Finnish Film Foundation for the production of domestic films. Smaller sums were also allocated to other causes that helped implement the state's culture and arts policy.

The system was changed thanks to an effective smear campaign targeting all the representatives of the organizations to which the state directed Veikkaus's profits: from the Boy Scouts to shelters for abused women. It was decided that Veikkaus's profits would be directed to the state coffers without a separate lottery law, which allocated the money to public benefit purposes. The state's gambling monopoly was broken.

The Ministry of Education and Culture's practice of funding culture through systemic change had no impact, but social and health organizations that originally operated slot machines to fund their own activities feared in advance that their autonomy would be reduced. This is what has happened.

On a beautiful summer day, I had lunch with Sari Aalto-Matturi, executive director of the prominent mental health organization Mieli ry, to talk to her about the autonomy of civil society organizations. Behind us, a group of members of parliament from The Finns Party and parliamentary group staff sat down at the table next to us. I greeted them cheerfully but lowered my voice as I continued my conversation with Aalto-Matturi. It was as if I had something to hide and fear, even though I didn't.

Aalto-Matturi reminded me how she had been quite alone in speaking out in favor of the autonomy of organizations. I admitted that I had felt that my own task was to defend culture funding and I had not been able to remain steadfastly supportive to show solidarity. I was ashamed of this and apologized.

I had been frustrated after years of being the target of a smear campaign related to Veikkaus without any defenders. I had stood in front of the media microphone answering strange accusations and experienced how journalists disputed my entire expertise because I was a "beneficiary," i.e., somehow a corrupt scoundrel. I felt like shaking all that crap off my shoulders.

In 2025, Mika Pyykkö, an investigator appointed by Minister of Social Affairs and Health Kaisa Juuso, proposed changing the funding of social and health organizations in such a way that the state would, as it were, commission services from the organizations that it considered effective, instead of the organizations receiving funding for their core tasks, such as defending the poor and sick in social debate. Advocacy work had become dirty, partisan, and ineffective.

Democracy is not an individual effort. If civil society is fragmented into individual influencers instead of organized and professional organizations, it will no longer change the world or act as a bridge and partnership builder between civil society and state decision-making. The party system alone cannot fill this gap. We also need strong organizations to defend freedom of speech. In a democracy, the state must dare to share power and fund critical voices.

Funding is an essential part of the structures of freedom of speech: do civil society organizations have the actual conditions to operate? I repeat this because it is essential. This is why autocratic countries prohibit foreign funding for structures that promote freedom of speech, such as civil society organizations: so that even the last source of funding that would enable professional work by independent actors is taken away.

Of course, organizations must operate transparently, manage their finances properly, be necessary, and modernize in a timely manner. However, defenders of freedom of speech must understand that mistakes made within these structures – because human weaknesses cannot be completely eliminated from science, the arts, the press, and civil society organizations – do not prevent the defense of the independence and operating conditions of these structures.

13. Social media needs to be regulated

On a hot morning, I met researcher Oula Silvennoinen at an Iraqi café in a shopping center in eastern Helsinki. The breakfast was rich and fatty, and completely unfamiliar to me. I had requested the meeting so that I could discuss with Silvennoinen who is challenging what and why. It seems that the whole issue is obvious, yet difficult to grasp in clear terms. Silvennoinen has recently drawn up guidelines for The Committee for Public Information (TJNK) on how to deal with harassment directed at researchers. As a historian, he has studied fascism and has certainly had his share of online hate.

As I munched on beans seasoned with herbs, I recalled Silvennoinen's sharp observations. According to Silvennoinen, what is now being challenged is the shared reality in which journalists, researchers, and artists live. He described this shared reality as a world where human rights, democracy, and facts matter.

There are challengers at every turn. They may be authoritarian leaders, but they may also be ordinary citizens. In addition to the ideological basis for the challenge – and sometimes instead of it – Silvennoinen believes that it is essential to recognize the emotion behind the challenge: anger. Thus, polarization is, in itself, a method of challenging shared reality, regardless of which direction each person is pulling the cart. That is why curbing and avoiding polarization is a method of defending freedom of speech. Building bridges and encounters work against polarization.

Another key challenger to shared reality is lies. Anger and lies are at the heart of the social media giants' revenue logic and algorithms, and we don't even notice how we are being drawn in. In conversation with Silvennoinen, it becomes clear that we must be able to create European regulations that prevent targeting and change algorithms and operating principles so that they do not feed hatred and allow lies.

I argue that Havel will become trendy. This is what he wrote (Havel 2020, p. 88) in 1978 in his most famous essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, at a time when the ability of social media to destroy our thinking was unimaginable:

“It would seem that traditional parliamentary democracies are unable to offer a solution to the self-propelling momentum of technological civilization in an industrial consumer society. They too are at the mercy of this momentum. People are manipulated in much more cunning and sophisticated ways than in a post-totalitarian society. Behind this lies a static entity consisting of rigid, conceptually shaky, and politically tactical mass parties, led by a professional political machine, which has freed citizens from all concrete forms of personal responsibility. This entire complex structure, which focuses on secretly manipulating and expanding capital, this omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, trade, and consumer culture, and this flood of information – so much already analyzed and researched – make it really hard to see all this as a way for humanity to find itself again.”

Conclusion: you are responsible for everything I have written in this pamphlet.

14. Solidarity is a method of defending people

Clausewitz's theory of war advises isolating the enemy. Therefore, it must be countered with an alliance. Solidarity as an ethos and joint broad efforts for better social media regulation could mean, for example, that the copyright lobby and opponents of online harassment would work together.

Solidarity requires that we be able to defend real, living people, who are always imperfect and prone to mistakes. Because we must be able to protect brave journalists, researchers, artists, activists, politicians, and civil servants, we must protect and support them even when they are not flawless. Similarly, we must be able to defend institutions, even though they are inevitably imperfect. Otherwise, we will be unable to defend anyone or anything.

Institutions must defend individuals, and individuals must defend institutions. This applies both to those who work for an institution and those who work as freelancers. Both institutions and individuals must have the financial means to work professionally. If we are unable to defend this, we will lose the game and be isolated in our little pockets, each of us alone in our righteousness, our voices no longer heard. So let us never become gullible fools who are practically ready to undermine the institutional conditions for freedom when an individual or institution makes a mistake.

Solidarity can also have structures. Joint movements and declarations. At the administrative level, however, monitoring and reports are needed that bring together the operating conditions of the arts, science, press freedom, and civil society organizations. For example, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, which is the constitutional advisor to the EU, must include in its framework all the structures of freedom of expression that are currently being challenged in Europe. So far, the Venice Commission has only made

isolated comments on artistic freedom, for example, and does not have its own clear guidelines. Such guidelines should be drawn up.

Even more importantly, the third paragraph of the EU's annual Rule of Law Report should be renamed "Freedom of Expression" and include separate chapters on academic freedom, artistic freedom, and freedom of the press.

Currently, the European Commission's Rule of Law Report, like the Venice Commission's Rule of Law Checklist, is based on the premise that the rule of law, democracy, and human rights form an indispensable trinity: one cannot exist without the others. In addition, the Rule of Law Report assesses the fight against corruption, press freedom, and the state of civil society. The latest report, for example, notes that scientific autonomy in Hungary has been weakened by funding decisions and that cultural actors in some Member States feel political pressure.

Science and the arts should be included in rule of law reporting because they are being challenged in the name of nostalgic populism and many other polarizing scourges. At EU level, the Scholars at Risk Europe network has proposed science as a separate heading, while in the field of the arts, the European umbrella organization for culture and the arts, Culture Action Europe, and the Bratislava Declaration are promoting a similar approach.

Overall, I propose that freedom of artistic expression, which includes the independence of cultural institutions, be included in both European and national rule of law reporting and in the rule of law framework at the headline level. This requires the development of indicators, but it is not rocket science. Legal or social sciences are sufficient.

15. The power of words and crowds

The structures of freedom of speech – science, the arts, the press, and civil society organizations – can be broken down using legal methods and budgetary power, with the crowds cheering. When defending these structures within the framework of democracy, it is therefore necessary to know how to utilize democracy – its ability to build institutions and structures based on ideas that take practical administrative forms.

Sector-specific defense structures are also needed to ensure that politicians keep their hands off matters that are none of their business. These include decisions on which research or the arts projects receive funding. These decisions should be made on the basis of open criteria and peer review, by an independent body.

One excellent recent example of a sector-specific defense structure can be found in the field of the arts: *the Bratislava Declaration*, which I referred to earlier.

In May 2025, an influential group of European arts leaders published the Bratislava Declaration to draw the attention of European leaders to how freedom of artistic expression is being challenged across Europe and how cultural institutions are pressured on political grounds to produce content that is politically acceptable. Among the signatories from Finland is Thomas de Mallet Burgess, artistic director of the Finnish National Opera. The

declaration is addressed to the European Union, whose leadership in defending artistic freedom is being called into question. In addition to the rule of law, it also highlights issues such as non-discrimination and equal pay. Without these, there can be no freedom. A shared understanding within the field of what we mean by freedom and independence helps us to stand by each other.

One important means of defense is to be relevant to the masses. Timothy Snyder has written that “Freedom of speech means the right to facts.” This right must reach large numbers of people. Otherwise, the foundations of the democratic system will crumble, and people will be exposed to forces that oppose freedom, to the depths of polarization.

Ignorance is, in itself, a restriction of freedom, as is believing in lies, because they take away the opportunity to understand society and thus the ability to act. Citizenship requires civic competences.

Jussi Niemeläinen, in his excellent book *Valko-Venäjä – haava Euroopan sydämessä* (*Belarus – A Wound in the Heart of Europe*), tells the compelling story of an ordinary working man who enjoys combat sports and who was summarily arrested and brutally beaten, even though he had not in any way participated in protests against the government. He was completely distraught, having previously believed that he was living in a democracy. In Lukashenka’s Belarus, people can believe that they are living in a democracy if they mind their own business and do not try to be socially active.

We must also measure and report on things that are difficult to measure, such as freedom and democracy. We must ensure that decisions and practices are open and transparent. We must reform so that we are not open to criticism simply because we have actually done our job poorly: when we are efficient, it is easier to defend ourselves against budget cuts that are justified on the grounds of efficiency.

Culture must belong to everyone, the mass media must reach the masses, science communication must appeal to more than just academics, and civil society organizations must open up to new and new actors. When times are tough, we simply have to be smarter. We must understand the key concepts and commit to defending them, even when our own heads are not on the chopping block. And in the name of all that is beautiful: don’t polarize.

The reward awaits at the end of the journey. It is a thoughtful, self-improving, and empathetic person.

16. The Playbook for Defenders of Freedom of Speech

1. Strengthen the financial basis of free speech structures.
2. Increase the production and consumption of facts.
3. Defend both institutions and individuals who use free speech.
4. Do not polarize, even if “others” are stupid and wrong.

5. Report and measure the state of freedom of speech.
6. Demand transparent processes and criteria for decision-making.
7. Promote pro-education and pro-culture attitudes, learn concepts.
8. Work through organizations, together with others.
9. Regulate social media.
10. Show solidarity when your own interests are not directly threatened.

To ensure that these guidelines do not remain vague, high-level suggestions, I will now illustrate with a few examples what all the above could mean.

1. For example, individuals can strengthen the financial base of the press by paying for professional quality journalism, and politicians can strengthen the financial base of science by increasing funding for basic research.
2. For example, individuals can visit libraries and politicians can ensure their funding.
3. For example, everyone, especially politicians, can restrain themselves when they want to join in the discussion like “ in my opinion, this podcast that has fallen prey to social media is completely stupid and bad”. Media companies, for their part, can give work to freelancers who have been targeted.
4. You should not choose only like-minded people as your colleagues, bosses, and subordinates, but also give opportunities to qualified people who represent the so-called other side.
5. This advice is especially for those who report on the development of the rule of law and democracy: make sure that all structures of freedom of speech are included.
6. This advice is especially for those who work directly with structures of freedom of speech: All secrecy, favoritism, and insider deals weaken the structures of freedom of speech, so transparency, openness, and clear criteria must also be demanded from your own workplace.
7. Now is the time to benefit from having studied human sciences and philosophy, because we all need to be able to engage in a value-based discussion about freedom. Politicians can also take care of the resources of the education administration – from education to the arts and sciences – without choosing their favorites and excuses.
8. For example, it is the duty of civil servants to be open and reliable partners for organizations.
9. If your circle of friends only includes representatives of one political side, we are all like butterflies trapped in a glass jar. But the most important thing is still to promote European legislation so that algorithms do not feed hatred and lies.
10. Defend the structures of freedom of speech with which you have no direct professional connection. Because if you live in a democracy, you have a voice and a responsibility.

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