

Annual Report 2025

**Protecting Artists at Risk and Advancing Artistic
Freedom Worldwide**

Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA)

Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA)
Av. de Frontenex 5 - 1207 Genève
+41 22 707 93 65
info@afi-ila.ch

Message de la présidente

La liberté d'expression est un pilier de l'État de droit démocratique et un droit fondamental garanti par le droit international (art. 10 CEDH, art. 19 Pacte ONU II) ainsi que par le droit constitutionnel suisse (art.16 de la Constitution fédérale).

Elle protège non seulement la substance des idées et des informations, mais également la forme par laquelle elles sont communiquées tel que la parole, l'écrit, l'image, le geste, et toute forme de création artistique.

La jurisprudence du Tribunal fédéral suisse, en accord avec celle de la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme, souligne que cette liberté protège non seulement les idées accueillies favorablement, mais aussi celles qui "heurtent, choquent ou inquiètent". C'est une condition essentielle du pluralisme, de la tolérance et de l'esprit d'ouverture.

La liberté de l'art, garantie par l'art. 21 de la Constitution fédérale est une concrétisation de la liberté d'expression, mais elle bénéficie d'une protection renforcée. Elle couvre deux aspects principaux, à savoir le domaine de la création (la liberté de créer des œuvres d'art sans contrainte) et le domaine de la diffusion (la liberté de présenter et de diffuser l'œuvre au public).

La jurisprudence reconnaît que l'expression artistique, notamment la satire, est une forme de commentaire social qui, par nature, utilise l'exagération et la déformation de la réalité pour provoquer et agiter.

C'est pourquoi, les artistes sont souvent les premiers à être réduits au silence par les régimes autoritaires ou par les envahisseurs. Car lorsqu'on veut se débarrasser du débat démocratique ou anéantir une nation, il faut tuer sa langue, sa musique, son art.

Notre fondation, qui vise à renforcer la protection mondiale de l'expression artistique, tout en aidant les artistes à poursuivre leur travail en toute sécurité et en toute liberté, se situe ainsi à l'intersection du domaine de l'art et des droits humains — une mission qui s'inscrit naturellement dans la tradition historique de Genève, en tant que centre du droit humanitaire et de l'art.

Genève c'est aussi un lieu où la communauté internationale formule des revendications morales à l'attention des gouvernements de tous les Etats membres de l'ONU. Il est donc essentiel que les voix des artistes en exil soient également entendues dans ce chœur, et ILA s'y emploie.

En tant qu'ancienne réfugiée politique accueillie en Suisse en provenance d'un pays où la censure étatique était un pain quotidien, et en tant qu'avocate, tout particulièrement sensible à la liberté d'expression, j'ai été fière de contribuer à la naissance d'ILA et de l'avoir accompagnée dans sa première année de vie.

Je profite de ce message pour remercier vivement notre organisation sœur Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) à New York, ainsi que tous les bénévoles et partenaires d'ILA en Suisse et en Europe qui ont œuvré à la réalisation d'un magnifique premier bilan dont vous pourrez prendre connaissance dans les pages qui suivent.

Joanna BÜRGISSE

Présidente du Conseil de fondation

Message from the Executive Director

The past year marked an important milestone for the Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA). 2025 was our first full year of operations, during which we worked to build an organization capable of responding to the growing global threats to artistic freedom. Across our legal services, resettlement assistance, cultural programming, and international advocacy, ILA has sought to ensure that artists facing censorship, persecution, or forced displacement can continue their work safely and freely.

In 2025, we supported more than 120 artists through legal assistance and helped 57 artists relocate and rebuild stable lives in Europe. Among our most significant efforts was the successful relocation of former Afghan Minister of Culture Tahir Zuhair and his family to Germany. We also built key resettlement partnerships with residency programs and universities in Europe, helping to ensure artists in exile have the infrastructure to rebuild their careers abroad.

ILA organized programming that brought artists in exile into dialogue with new audiences. A highlight was the *Heritage & Exile* concert series at Studio Agostini in Geneva, which featured leading artists from Iran, Ukraine, and Afghanistan and sold out each evening—demonstrating the powerful resonance of artistic expression rooted in exile, memory, and cultural resilience. We also partnered with Hospice General, who sent chaperons from the Afghan and Ukrainian refugee communities in Geneva for the event.

At the international level, we actively engaged with global policy processes, including through submissions to UN human rights mechanisms, oral statements at the Human Rights Council, and the organization of side events addressing the global erosion of freedom of expression. ILA also published a key report documenting threats to artistic freedom in Slovakia, while leading an initiative calling on the European Commission to develop a coherent legal framework guaranteeing artistic freedom across the EU through a proposed European Artistic Freedom Act.

Looking ahead to 2026, ILA will continue expanding its work across all program areas while launching several ambitious new initiatives. Among these is the Wahdat Library Preservation Project, developed in partnership with institutions including the University of Basel, which aims to safeguard a rare archive of Afghan cultural publications spanning more than 150 years. Alongside this work, we will deepen our international advocacy, strengthen protection pathways for artists at risk, and continue advancing efforts toward the adoption of a European Artistic Freedom Act. Together with our partners, artists, and supporters, we remain committed to ensuring that artistic expression can continue to flourish worldwide.

Sanjay Sethi
Executive Director
Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA)

1. About ILA

Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA) is a Swiss foundation established in October 2024 and based in Geneva dedicated to protecting freedom of artistic expression worldwide.

ILA works in close partnership with its sister organization, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI), headquartered in New York.

Together, the two organizations provide coordinated support to artists facing censorship, persecution, or forced displacement linked to their creative expression.

Our work combines:

- **Legal protection services**
- **Resettlement assistance**
- **Global policy and advocacy**
- **Cultural programming**

Through these programs, ILA contributes to strengthening legal protections for artistic freedom and enabling artists at risk to continue their work safely.

2. 2025 at a Glance

Since its establishment, ILA has taken concrete action to support artists at risk and strengthen international protections for artistic freedom.

Key achievements

- **120+ artists supported through legal assistance**
- **57 artists assisted with relocation and integration**
- **5 cultural events produced in Switzerland**
- **6 submissions to UN human rights mechanisms**
- **2 side events organized during UN Human Rights Council sessions**

ILA's work connects legal expertise, cultural engagement, and international advocacy to ensure that artists remain able to contribute to cultural life and democratic debate.

3. Our Programs in Action (2025)

A. Legal Protection for Artists at Risk

Legal protection is often the first step toward safety for artists whose work exposes them to censorship, criminal charges, or political persecution.

Through its Legal Services program, ILA provides specialized legal assistance to artists navigating complex protection pathways, including asylum applications, humanitarian visas, and talent-based immigration routes.

In 2025, ILA has supported **more than 120 artists through legal assistance**, helping them access protection mechanisms and continue their work safely.

Working with a network of legal practitioners and in collaboration with Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI), ILA also contributes to improving the understanding of artistic-expression-based persecution within asylum and migration systems.

Program Highlight

In 2025, ILA supported the safe relocation and resettlement of **former Afghan Minister of Culture and Information, Tahir Zuhair, and his family to Germany**.

Because of his public role in Afghanistan's cultural sector under the previous government, Mr. Zuhair and his eight family members faced serious security risks following the Taliban's return to power and were compelled to flee the country.

ILA supported the family through a complex multi-year process, guiding them through applications under Germany's Federal Admission Program and assisting their relocation from Afghanistan to Islamabad and ultimately to Germany. This effort required close coordination with legal partners and international human rights actors.

The successful relocation enabled the family to rebuild their lives in safety and illustrates the type of sustained legal and logistical support required to protect artists and cultural leaders facing persecution.

B. Resettlement Assistance

Artists forced to leave their home countries often face immediate challenges related to housing, employment, and professional continuity.

ILA provides resettlement assistance to help artists rebuild stable lives and continue their creative practice. Support includes:

- relocation assistance
- housing support
- professional development opportunities
- logistical and well-being support
- connections with artistic networks and institutions

By stabilizing artists' living conditions and legal status, these programs allow artists to resume their work and participate fully in cultural life in host countries.

In 2025, ILA has supported **57 artists through relocation and integration assistance**, with the majority of cases taking place in Germany, while also supporting artists rebuilding stable lives and reconnecting with artistic networks across other European countries.

These efforts ensure that artists in exile can continue contributing to cultural life and public dialogue.

C. Cultural Performance Program

In 2025, ILA organized **5 cultural events** showcasing the work of major artists, many of whom are at risk, as well as, are advancing efforts to preserve and defend the cultural heritage of artists in exile.

Program Highlight: *Heritage and Exile* concert series

A central highlight of ILA's cultural programming in 2025 was the *Heritage and Exile* concert series, presented in Geneva and Lausanne. The series brought together internationally acclaimed female artists from Iran, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, exploring music as a bridge between memory, identity, and freedom.

The concerts placed women's voices at the forefront, celebrating female artists whose work preserves cultural heritage while reinterpreting it for contemporary audiences. By connecting artists in exile with audiences in Geneva and Lausanne, the series also strengthened ties between diaspora communities, cultural institutions, and the city's international human rights ecosystem.

- **Niaz Nawab (Iran) – Opening Concert**

Geneva – Conservatoire Populaire de Genève, March 9, 2025

Iranian singer, composer, and multi-instrumentalist Niaz Nawab opened the series with a performance blending Persian classical traditions with jazz and

contemporary influences. Her music carried audiences through themes of memory, poetry, and resilience, reflecting the enduring depth of Iranian cultural heritage.

- **Maryna Krut (Ukraine)**

Geneva – Conservatoire Populaire de Genève, April 6, 2025

Ukrainian artist Maryna Krut, a leading contemporary ambassador of the bandura tradition, presented an immersive concert where ancestral musical forms met modern expression. Through her ethereal voice and evocative melodies, Krut explored the cultural memory, beauty, and resilience of Ukraine.

Lausanne – April 7, 2025

Extending the series beyond Geneva, Krut performed at Lausanne's Jumeaux Jazz Club, bringing her powerful interpretation of Ukrainian musical heritage to new audiences and strengthening connections between artists in exile and Switzerland's cultural landscape.

- **Mashal Arman & Elaha Soroor (Afghanistan)**

Geneva – Conservatoire Populaire de Genève, May 25, 2025

The closing concert of the series brought together Afghan artists Mashal Arman and Elaha Soroor in a rare musical dialogue. Their performance wove together tradition and contemporary interpretation, reflecting the resilience of Afghan cultural identity and the power of music as a form of resistance and cultural continuity in exile.

Through the *Heritage and Exile* series, ILA created spaces where artists, diplomats, cultural professionals, diaspora communities, and the wider public could engage with the artistic expressions of exile while reflecting on the broader relationship between cultural heritage, artistic freedom, and human rights.

D. Global Policy and Advocacy (GPA)

The Global Policy & Advocacy (GPA) Program is at the forefront of global advocacy on freedom of artistic expression and cultural rights. By combining thorough research with active engagement in global policy fora, we help ensure that artistic freedom is recognized as essential to open, democratic societies.

Operating from Geneva, ILA contributes to policy discussions within international and European institutions. Through sustained engagement at the United Nations Human Rights Council, ILA works to draw attention to the repression of artistic freedom worldwide. We contribute to UN resolutions, Universal Periodic Review (UPR) processes, the work of UN

Special Procedures, and joint statements, ensuring that artists' lived experiences inform policy debates and decision-making spaces where they have too often been absent.

Together with AFI, ILA seeks to address the persistent underreporting of violations of artistic freedom through our joint research initiatives. We conduct in-depth, country-specific research on restrictions on creative expression, documenting global and regional trends to inform cultural policy at the national level and assess its alignment with international human rights standards in multilateral fora.

Program Highlights:

In 2025, ILA contributed to international advocacy efforts through:

Engagement with United Nations mechanisms

- Co-hosting a **UN Human Rights Council side event with Amnesty International and Human Rights First** examining the implications of the United States' refusal to participate in its Universal Periodic Review.
- Co-hosting a **UN side event with ARTICLE 19, Open Culture!, and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee** on democratic backsliding and freedom of expression.
- Delivering **three oral statements at the UN Human Rights Council** highlighting threats to artistic freedom and the situation of artists at risk.
- Submitting **two written analyses to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and four Universal Periodic Review (UPR) submissions** documenting violations and proposing recommendations to states.

European policy engagement

- Leading a flagship, long-term civil society initiative calling on the European Commission to develop a coherent and binding legal framework guaranteeing artistic freedom across the Union: **the European Artistic Freedom Act**. ILA acts as penholder on the draft legislation and coordinates the coalition.
- Contributing to the **European Commission's Rule of Law Reports**, advocating for the inclusion of freedom of artistic expression within EU rule-of-law monitoring frameworks.
- Joining the **Council of Europe's Advisory Board of the "Free to Create" initiative**, contributing expertise on the protection of artistic freedom in Europe.

International dialogue and partnerships

- Organizing an **international webinar in the framework of UNESCO’s MONDIACULT process**, bringing together artists, cultural professionals, legal experts, and human rights advocates to discuss global threats to artistic freedom.
- Working with **Global Citizen** to launch a **Call to Action urging the German government to reform visa policies affecting Afghan artists and cultural workers** seeking protection.

Research and documentation

- In collaboration with AFI and a Slovak civil society organization, publishing the report “**Early Warning: The Politicization of Slovak Arts and Culture**”, documenting emerging threats to artistic freedom and democratic cultural governance.

Through these efforts, ILA brings the voices and experiences of artists at risk into global policy discussions.

4. Looking Ahead

As pressures on artistic freedom continue to intensify in many regions, Initiative pour la Liberté Artistique (ILA) will continue expanding its work across its core program areas: legal protection, resettlement support, international advocacy, cultural programming, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Strengthening legal protection pathways

ILA will continue to expand access to specialized legal services for artists and cultural workers facing censorship, criminalization, or forced displacement linked to their creative work. Building on our collaboration with the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) and our network of legal partners, we aim to strengthen access to asylum procedures, humanitarian pathways, and mobility visas tailored to artists at risk.

Resettlement Assistance

In the coming years, ILA will continue to support artists in exile by facilitating their relocation and integration into cultural and professional networks in Europe. This includes assistance with housing, professional opportunities, and connections with artistic institutions, enabling artists to rebuild stable lives and continue their creative work.

Advancing international advocacy for artistic freedom

Operating from Geneva, ILA will deepen its engagement with international institutions, including United Nations mechanisms and European policy processes. Through research, documentation, and policy dialogue, we aim to ensure that artistic freedom is recognized and protected within international human rights and cultural governance frameworks.

Expanding cultural programming and public dialogue

ILA will continue to develop cultural initiatives that bring artists in exile into dialogue with audiences in Switzerland and Europe. Programs such as the Heritage & Exile concert series, film screenings, and public discussions will remain central to our approach, creating spaces where artistic expression, cultural heritage, and human rights intersect.

Protecting endangered cultural heritage

ILA will also expand initiatives dedicated to safeguarding cultural heritage threatened by repression, conflict, and displacement. These initiatives aim to preserve artistic works and cultural memory while supporting artists and cultural practitioners in exile.

Key projects include:

- First Afghan Digital Archive – an innovative digital platform documenting contemporary Afghan artistic production through digital exhibitions, archival initiatives, and collaborations with academic institutions.
- Wahdat Library Preservation Project – a collaborative effort to safeguard a rare private archive of Afghan books, newspapers, and cultural publications spanning more than 150 years, currently at risk. The project involves partnerships with institutions including the Universities of Basel, Harvard, and Stanford.

ILA will also continue exploring projects related to the documentation of traditional music, preservation of historical film reels, and the archiving of artistic works produced in exile, ensuring that cultural heritage threatened by censorship or displacement remains accessible to future generations.

Through these efforts, ILA seeks not only to protect individual artists but also to safeguard the cultural heritage and artistic voices that contribute to pluralistic and democratic societies.

5. Honoring Partners and Supporters

Protecting artistic freedom is a collective effort.

ILA's work is made possible through the collaboration of artists, cultural institutions, legal professionals, international organizations, and philanthropic partners who share a commitment to defending freedom of expression.

We are particularly grateful to our sister organization, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI), and to the many partners, advisors, and supporters who contribute their expertise, time, and resources to this mission.

Above all, we thank the artists whose courage and creativity continue to inspire our work. Their voices remind us that artistic freedom is not only a cultural value—it is an essential component of democratic societies.

Together, we will continue working to ensure that artists everywhere can create, speak, and share their work freely.