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State of culture

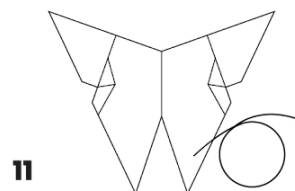
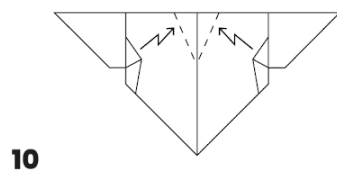
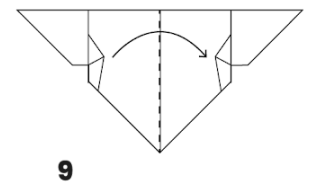
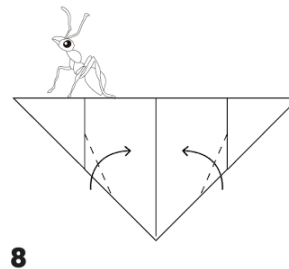
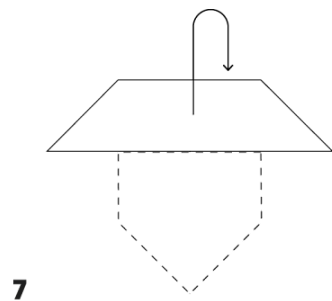
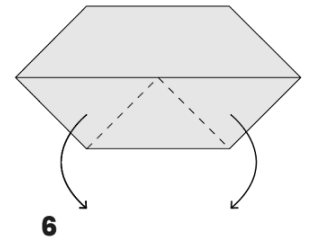
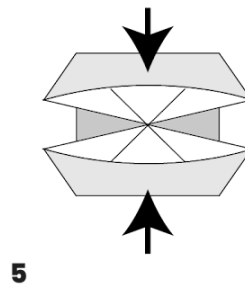
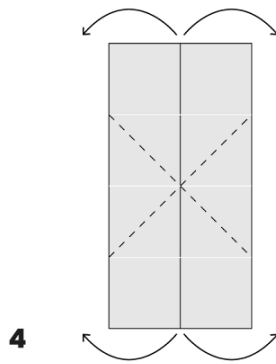
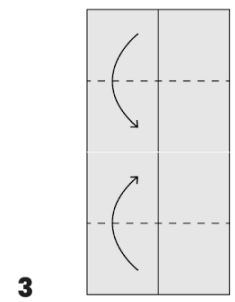
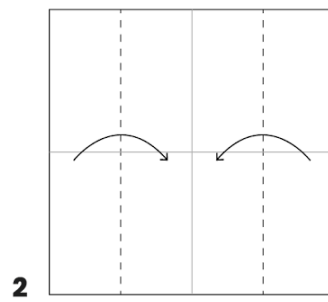
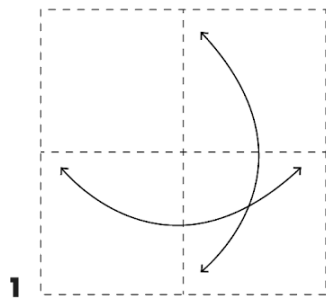
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Culture Action Europe (CAE) has commissioned this report primarily as a mirror for ourselves, our members and our sectors: how are we seen by others, e.g. policy makers, and how do we see ourselves? The *State of Culture* is thus a conversation starter that challenges and provokes our ecosystem to address some critical questions central to shaping our collective advocacy in the years to come. This conversation throughout our ecosystem, with our members and their constituencies, requires designing tailored approaches, formats and questions to their various missions. At CAE we will offer a central online and live platform to bring voices together.

Culture Action Europe hopes that this facilitated conversation will give the sectors more clarity on how to effectively advocate within today's political landscape and help to collectively imagine a new paradigm of action for the cultural ecosystem in Europe and beyond.





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Introduction

Democracies need a future and the promise of change. Such visions of a better future motivate citizens to exercise their freedoms and participate in democratic life. It is in the arts and culture that futures are imagined and citizens gain their democratic agency.

In the light of the big, and often disorientating, transformations that our societies undergo, arts and culture are where we find meaning, critical reflections on the past and the present, and compelling images of the future. To paraphrase Brian Eno: in a world that is developing so fast and yet is fragmenting so quickly, culture is this “fantastic conversation” that keeps societies together and is crucial for our collective future¹.

UNESCO defines culture as “the distinct spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features characterising a society. It encompasses arts, lifestyle, human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs. Culture shapes individuals and societies, fostering unity through shared values and traditions.” Following this definition, it is difficult to think of any other concept that is as all-encompassing and fundamental to everyone’s life.

Isn’t it then, well, ‘weird’ that culture plays such a marginal role in politics and the public discourse? Culture is not part of the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, and is only referenced in it as an indicator for a limited number of specific goals; nor is it mentioned in any State of the Union speech by the President of the European Commission. Culture is dependent on ‘breadcrumb’ funding and subject to heavy restrictions through what can often be very narrow funding priorities.

¹ Brian Eno’s BBC Music John Peel lecture 2015 as cited in O’Connor, p.135





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So, why is the cultural sector in such a fragile condition? Is it possible that, when fighting for our emancipation among the big family of important political portfolios, we are distracted into using arguments that may actually not be ours?

Culture Action Europe (CAE) is driven by its belief in culture as a fundamental building block for the common future of a Europe open to the world, for the sustainability of our planet and for plural, open and caring societies. Yet, as the major European network of cultural networks, organisations, artists, cultural workers, activists, academics and policymakers, we experience in our daily work a reality of distrust that keeps us from unfolding that potential.

Distrust by funders, politicians and opinion leaders, keeps culture largely isolated in the margins, and keeps its institutions and workers in a precarious situation.

This same distrust is at the root of another very serious problem: it keeps us, the cultural and creative sectors and its workers, in a defensive state, fending off constant threats of elimination and arguing for our value and our right to exist.

These defensive arguments mean answering questions from others that we might ask differently ourselves. For example, what do we contribute to the economy, how can we make cultural institutions carbon neutral and how do we contribute to health and wellbeing? While these are very relevant questions, they keep us so busy that we hardly get the breathing space to act upon our own questions: how can we rebuild our economy to be fair and just; how will we change the narrative to gain broad support for climate action; how can we ensure representation of our societies' diversity in its institutions; and where are our compelling images of a better, sustainable future?





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But while we answer ‘their’ questions for our survival’s sake, our ability to free ourselves from the self-inflicted dependency on others’ agendas becomes further constrained. Our questions remain behind expedient and ‘acceptable’ masks, our arguments conforming to other disciplines or to the expectations of funding organisations.

Policymaking in the post neo-liberal era apparently still depends on a kind of ‘hard evidence’, on indicators of success such as returns on investment to justify the spending of taxpayers’ money. So, we keep answering those questions and produce study after study to justify that we are worthy of investment. But is there really ‘no alternative’ to these ‘calculated futures’?

Where is our political argument concerned with how we see humans in our society? In other words, how people relate to each other in communities and how they can not only enjoy the ‘negative freedom’ to consume, to vote and to ‘like’, but also the ‘positive freedom’ to make informed choices, build communities, take political responsibility and lead a life that allows for meaning making? These voices are hard to hear in the political discourse, and even when we do hear them, such as in the Cáceres Declaration², they sound like a faraway echo shortly afterwards.

Consequently, when, during our struggle to survive, we eventually summon the energy to take the floor and articulate our belief in the ‘intrinsic value of culture’, perhaps we could give an answer that might not be satisfying to everyone but which is concise and that we can stand behind.

CAE’s mission is to maintain an “ongoing dialogue and knowledge sharing between the European cultural sector and policymakers. CAE advocates for

² Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union - News - Cáceres declaration 26 September 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/caceres-declaration/>





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transformative cultural policies that recognise and support culture as a sector in its own right and a catalyst contributing to other sectors.” So here is the challenge: what is the sector’s own right?

In 2023, we have embarked on a year-long joint exercise between the board of CAE and its team and membership to co-develop a new strategy. Three areas of focus have been identified: (1) Cultural Democracy and Cultural Leadership; (2) Sustainability; and (3) The Cultural Ecosystem.

Whereas many of CAE’s ongoing and new activities were subsumed under the categories of Sustainability and The Cultural Ecosystem, the heading Cultural Democracy and Leadership infers an ambition to ask more fundamental questions: how can we as cultural sectors be a foundational element in our societies – one that is shaped by everyone and leaves no one behind? It also asks what kind of leadership is needed within the sector and how it can be empowered to unfold its transformative potential.

We have introduced two guiding principles. The principle of Care, that we have developed with our members during the 2023 annual conference, on the basis of the ethics of care, in which we not only ask ‘what is just’, but also ‘how to relate’. We have called the second principle ‘Beyond’, in which we put attention to the future to not only ask where we can go, not only to react to urgencies, but to proactively define where we want to go.

Care and Beyond underpin the strategic priorities of Cultural Democracy and Cultural Leadership. However, to address those priorities we need to determine our point of departure. Of course, we have a dream and an embodied knowledge of what culture’s place can be. But we must also ask what is the State of Culture today, if we spell it out? Can we find an intersubjective positioning and how does that relate to how others see us? We need to determine the main questions, we need to address and gain a ‘snapshot’ of the current situation to use as a metaphorical map with which





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to navigate the terrain in our quest to strengthen Cultural Democracy and Cultural Leadership.

We have commissioned this report mainly for ourselves as culture advocates, and for our members and our sectors, as the basis for a discussion within our ecosystem. But of course, that discussion is part and parcel of our advocacy. With the arm's-length principle in mind, we are always in conversation with policymakers whom we are sure will also benefit from this snapshot. However, the main challenge is ours: despite the poly- and perma-crises that require us to address many urgencies during our daily missions, we must take a step back and look at the bigger picture – and then move forward together with confidence.

I would like to thank Elena Polivtseva for proposing such a bold approach and for its thorough implementation. Our ongoing conversation has been a great source of insight and Elena's critical distance, rigor and empathetic exchange with the CAE team and its members has been a joyful and rewarding experience.

The process alone has allowed us such a fundamental understanding that we envisage the State of Culture project as an ongoing, biennial exercise – and therefore as a constant monitor of sorts. There are dozens of ways in which a State of Culture report can be imagined. This time, we selected a few themes that we consider crucial in the present moment, while consciously leaving out some other important topics. Future editions may choose a similar approach of stocktaking on a broader or more narrow range of themes, or may 'zoom in' on specific aspects arising from the discussions to come.

Meanwhile, I want to stress the obvious: this report belongs to you, the CAE membership, our ecosystem, who made it possible and should use it and benefit from it. As CAE, we will derive a series of questions from it for us to use when addressing our role of networks' coordination and caring





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for the ecosystem, as well as in our research, our projects, our events – and, overall, in our advocacy.

There are many points of convergence between the findings of the report and our advocacy strategy, and these are geared towards the momentum and political agendas of the forthcoming EU cycle and the global, post-2030 agenda. Those who follow and support our flagship campaigns – the global Culture Goal campaign and the EU-wide Cultural Deal for Europe – will realise how much this study offers ‘meat on the bones’ of what can often be abstract policy calls. The State of Culture challenges us to address some pointed questions in the years to come. This will require a conversation throughout our ecosystem, with our different members’ constituencies and questions will need to be specifically tailored to their missions. Together these will form a bigger picture that we will look at in the next State of Culture report.

Let this emerging monitor be a benchmark for the Cultural Sectors in Europe, as well as for our stakeholders, policymakers and those that shape public opinion regarding the nature of culture and what it can be: the driving force at the heart of our societies, our policymaking and the big transitions towards a better future.

Lars Ebert
Secretary General
Culture Action Europe





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Key Observations

1 Growing instrumentalisation of culture does little to improve the sector's situation

The celebration of culture for its intrinsic value and unique merits is largely missing from cultural policy discourse in European countries and the EU. Instead, culture is increasingly viewed as a tool, product or resource for achieving external goals. This trend of hyper-instrumentalising cultural policy has not improved the sector's situation – neither in terms of public investment nor in its integration into key policy agendas. Rather, it undermines the sector's agency and diverts it from fulfilling its true purpose and values.

2 There is a gap between how policymakers value culture and how the sector sees its own role

The cultural sector sees itself as vital to social progress, climate action and democracy, yet resists being narrowly instrumentalised for these ends. This contradiction arises from a disconnect between how culture's role is understood and applied in political discourse and how the sector itself perceives its mission. Policymakers often expect short-term, concrete outcomes, while culture's true impact is deeper, broader and less immediately measurable. Additionally, there is a mismatch in focus: areas like economic growth, national identity consolidation and cultural cohesion – often emphasised in policy – do not align with the sector's view of itself as a catalyst for critical thought, pluralism, societal transformation and civic engagement.

3 In times of crisis and waning political trust, the sector conforms to the imposed instrumental view of culture

The crises and rapid changes challenging our world have led to a rise in pragmatism, caution and short-term thinking in political strategies. The holders of power prioritise clarity, calculability and the practical utility





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in their policies. In this context, culture – with its ephemeral, unpredictable yet immense power – does not seem to enjoy the implicit trust of contemporary politics. Cultural advocates and institutions facing heightened public scrutiny and shrinking resources adapt to the instrumental view of culture, which in turn affects the potential for transformation and innovation within the arts sector.

4 AI compels us to confront critical questions about why we value human creativity

Public understanding of AI's implications, along with legislative efforts to regulate it, is lagging behind the pace of the AI revolution. The EU Artificial Intelligence Act, a pioneering law, is just a starting point and has several gaps that still need addressing. Concerns about AI's impact on the cultural and creative sectors currently outweighs its perceived benefits. Key issues include the erosion of human labour, reduced opportunities in creative fields and challenges related to transparency, intellectual property and remuneration. Crucially, the AI debate brings to the forefront important questions that will be a major focus in the coming years about how and why we value human creativity.

5 The autonomy of culture shrinks in the face of new threats to artistic freedom

There is concern about the interaction between culture and politics. This stems from various factors, including the rise of political forces that view culture as a means of consolidating national identities through singular perspectives – an area the cultural sector generally does not see as its primary role. The cultural heritage sector has long advocated for pluralistic narratives of the past that contribute to the inclusivity of today's societies. The freedom of the arts is also being challenged by societal polarisation, increased public awareness of social issues and a shrinking space for public debate. The primary factors undermining artistic freedom today are different from those of previous decades: they include self-censorship driven by an instrumentalised approach to





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culture, heightened caution among institutions and artists in balancing their freedoms with social responsibility, and the profound precarity of sustaining a living and career within the sector.

6 Culture is recognised for celebrating the past but is overlooked as a catalyst of the future

From treaties to policies, EU discourse consistently emphasises two key concepts: a shared history and heritage, and the cultural diversity of Europe's population. While a shared heritage is crucial for fostering unity, there appears to be an imbalance, with more focus on a shared past rather than celebrating the power of culture to shape and imagine a shared future. To cultivate a sense of Europe as a place of belonging amid its diversity, we need to develop pluralistic and inclusive narratives about a shared European future through culture. These narratives should draw on heritage, values, history and customs, but also address contemporary Europe, embracing its current nuances, challenges, hopes and visions for a better future.

7 Culture can save democracy – but only if it is democratic itself

There was a time when culture was promoted and supported by policymakers as a tool for integrating migrants into European societies. Today, as the migration crisis (and other matters, such as climate change) have fueled populist sentiments and contributed to social polarisation, culture is seen by policymakers as a means to bridge ideological and emotional divides and to rescue democracy, which is under pressure from that polarisation and the individualisation of societies. However, culture has also become a battleground for competing identities and ideologies, with cultural consumption increasingly shifting to individualised, on-demand experiences. While culture is foundational to democracy, it must itself be democratic to fulfil this essential role.





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8 The 'culture and climate' debate is marked by unresolved contradictions

The role of culture in climate action is not prominently addressed in cultural policy making but when it is, tensions often arise between the cultural sector and policymakers. Current policies mainly focus on reducing culture's environmental impact or protecting culture from climate change. While these goals are important, the cultural sector believes it can play a bigger role in climate action – for example, in reimagining societal and economic foundations for greater sustainability. The sector feels undervalued in the green transition but fears that recognition of its role might result in untoward pressure without additional support, potentially threatening the sector's sustainability. A better approach would be to include culture as a standalone goal in sustainability agendas, but global discussions on this are making little progress.

9 The role of the EU in cultural policymaking is limited yet crucial

Despite the legal constraints of the role of the EU in the field of culture, the Union serves as a driver of innovative and forward-looking approaches, supporting these efforts financially, legally (where possible) and through ongoing debate and knowledge creation. Whether it is through regulatory and political interventions, funding initiatives and their guiding values, or spaces and tools for peer exchange among member states, the EU's strength is in seeding and planting innovations that flourish across Europe in many fields, including cultural policy. Today, amid global reflections on what culture as a public good can look like, the EU has the potential to be at the helm of the ship advancing innovation in cultural policymaking. Yet bold change in the form of an amendment of treaties must be necessary for a truly ambitious and impactful EU cultural policy.





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10 We need a 'policy scaffolding' for culture as a field in its own right

The cultural sector has shown severe fragility amid multiple crises. While integrating culture into various policy agendas is important and needs to be advanced in a meaningful way, it is not enough to address the sector's deep vulnerabilities. Culture must be firmly established on the policy map as a distinct and legitimate field, supported by a robust policy framework. This framework – a kind of supportive policy scaffolding – should address the challenges posed by market forces and other pressures to ensure that culture can thrive and serve its vital role in society. The essential elements of this framework include: a policy of trust and autonomy for culture; a balanced approach to creative sectors; broad social engagement with the arts; and sustainable working conditions for the whole cultural ecosystem.





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Methodology

The methodology employed for this report involved multiple steps to explore how culture's role and value are framed in cultural policies at both national and European levels, as well as to gather insights from key stakeholders in the cultural and creative sectors on key challenges and opportunities they face in the present world.

National government document review: we conducted a comprehensive review of cultural policy documents from the national governments of the 27 member states of the EU. The range of sources included current strategies, plans, agendas, and other documents produced by ministries responsible for culture (where available), as well as their websites, and/or broader government documents, such as national sustainable development strategies. To identify sources, we consulted the official websites of ministries responsible for culture, national profiles from the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends, or sought guidance from national experts. This analysis focused on how the role of culture is framed in these documents and how specific topics, such as culture and climate; cultural heritage; culture and democracy, and others, are addressed within national strategies. See annex III for the list of documents.

EU cultural policy review: we also examined key documents from the European Union's cultural policy framework, tracing how the discourse on culture has evolved over the past decade. This allowed us to assess changes in the EU's approach to culture and its priorities in relation to the cultural and creative sectors.

State of Culture Barometer Survey: a survey was disseminated through the channels of Culture Action Europe and received 579 responses. The survey explored key questions such as how the cultural and creative sectors perceive their current and future roles, their views on culture's societal role, the responsibilities they attribute to national governments and EU institutions, and their perspectives on their own status as cultural workers. The survey results were used to analyse how well current policy discourse and priorities align with the predominant views within the sector. Beyond the quantitative data, we also drew on insights gathered from the open comment fields. See annex II for more information about the survey respondents.





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Workshop at Beyond the Obvious Conference: after analysing the survey results and finalising the review of national policies, we presented key findings to Culture Action Europe members during the network's annual conference, *Beyond the Obvious*, in Malmö. Approximately 50 participants engaged in a World Café-style discussion in four groups, addressing two key questions: 'What is the transformative power of culture?' and 'How can governments support CCSs in unleashing this power?'. The underlying aim was to critically look into the mismatch between how governments and cultural and creative sectors see the transformative role of culture.

Interviews with sector representatives: we conducted online interviews with representatives from 17 European and international sector-specific networks and associations. These interviews aimed to identify the most crucial global trends affecting each sector, the opportunities they foresee in the next five years, and their key requests to EU policymakers. This step helped map the most pressing issues in the sector and informed the directions for conducting desk research and for structuring the final output.

Desk research: the final step involved desk research, which included a review of sector-specific academic literature, publications and books, and policy papers from members of Culture Action Europe. Desk research also included an environmental scan aimed at depicting the broader context, incorporating data from areas such as economic development, climate, the global state of democracy, freedom of expression, and more.

The outputs of all these steps were synthesised and analysed for producing final recommendations and proposals.

This report is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Certain areas of the cultural and creative sectors in Europe, such as local and regional policy levels, were not included in the review, and some creative sectors were insufficiently represented, both in the survey and in the interviews. While we do not aim to provide a complete or entirely objective picture of these complex and vast domains, we do highlight some of the most pressing and urgent issues identified by sector representatives, offering a critical and at times provocative exploration of these topics.





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Where is Culture, What For?

The colourful snapshot of instrumentalisation

Where is culture today on an imaginary value map? Does it have its own unique place? Or does the policy discourse in European countries view the value of culture rather through the lens of external areas? Has the tendency to instrumentalise culture only increased in recent years?

Instrumentalisation refers to imposing concerns from other policy sectors onto cultural policy³ and understanding the value of culture through other domains, such as economics, social cohesion, well-being, or international relations. Specifically, instrumentalisation shifts the focus to these external values, moving away from viewing culture as a self-sufficient entity with its own unique worth. This unique or ‘intrinsic’ value of culture remains challenging to articulate in advocacy and policy terms. At the same time, the very dichotomy between instrumental and intrinsic value is increasingly being questioned as a component of ‘sterile debate’ or ‘a product of neoliberalism’⁴.

There are many different ways in which culture’s importance is framed in the national documents outlining cultural policy strategies, agendas, plans, and visions of the EU member states. Our analysis focused only on the discourse and rhetoric used in these documents, rather than the actual measures for implementing these strategies and agendas. Nonetheless,

³ Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) *Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?*, *Cultural Trends*, 26:2, 95-106, p. 96, DOI:

10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836

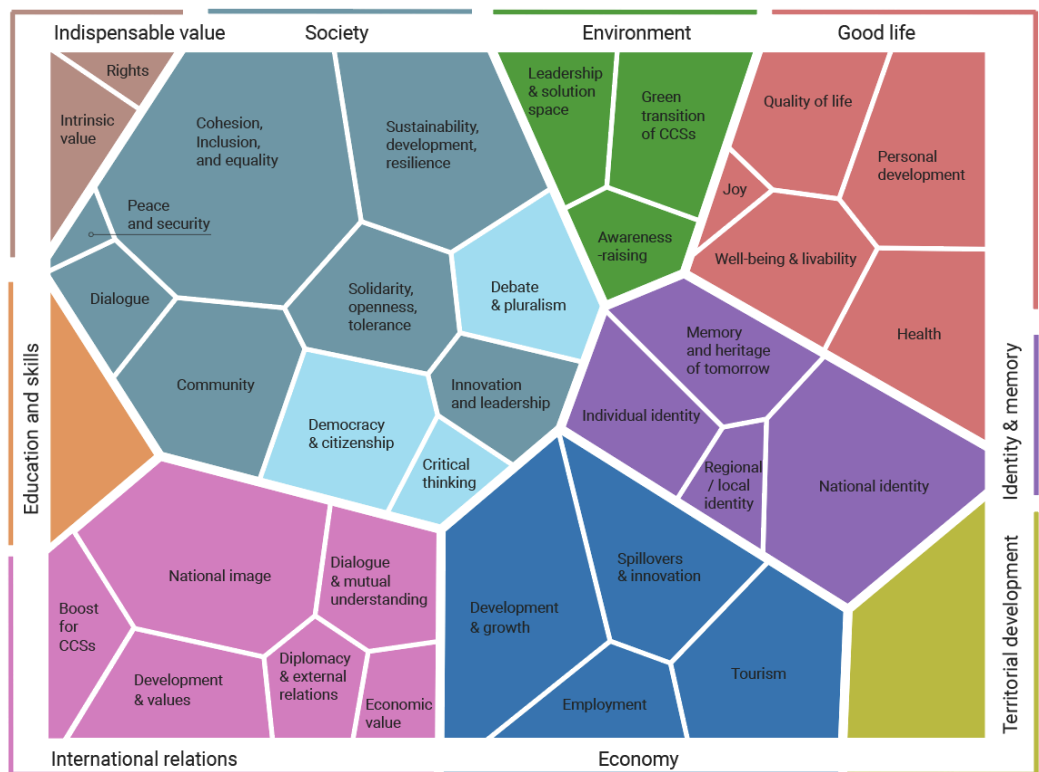
⁴ *Ibid*, p. 95; Polivtseva, E ‘Culture as an Industry Won’t Solve Sector’s Problems’, 4 July 2024, Culture Policy Room, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/if-culture-is-not-an-industry-what-is-it-then>





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synthesising the dominant trends in articulating culture's value can be useful for understanding the nature of today's cultural policy-making.



Graphic 1. Values attributed to culture by national governments

Through our content analysis, we traced and mapped all instances where culture, or a specific cultural sector, was mentioned as important⁵. This

⁵ We mapped and counted the various fields where governments emphasise the importance of culture, art, specific cultural sectors or disciplines, and participation in cultural activities. For instance, statements like 'culture is a foundation of social cohesion', 'attendance at museums enhances individual wellbeing and health', or 'culture is the glue of national identity' were recorded. We counted each country that mentioned these values across all reviewed documents, but we did not count repeated mentions of the same value area within a single country's documents. We then clustered these articulations of culture's value into the groups presented in Graphic 1.





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includes being recognised as a resource, contributor, or driver for various fields of public life. The snapshot (Graphic 1) reveals the diverse values attributed to culture by national governments. These values span across society, economics, international relations, wellbeing and quality of life (grouped under 'good life'), environment, identity, and more. Let's take a closer look at this snapshot.

The society piece is by far the largest one among the various ways for national governments to explain culture's value. It includes the various social missions culture is believed to perform, all closely interdependent. Under social cohesion, which is the largest element in the snapshot, we grouped all types of notions referring to the contribution of culture to the process of creating cohesive (in some documents understood as 'homogeneous', in others as 'inclusive' or 'equal') societies, in which minorities, typically local ethnic groups or migrants, are included in the public life of the country - through learning and adopting local culture, or gaining equal opportunities through cultural participation. Furthermore, a smaller yet significant number of governments sees culture as an important driver of social progress - for instance, in terms of developing the intellectual capital of societies, or making them more resilient in the face of global and local challenges. Building communities, which is obviously linked to the cohesion piece, but more typically referred to as creating the actual sense of belonging to a group and shaping some sort of a shared identity, is an important role attributed to culture too. Finally, rather significant value areas are related to strengthening democracy, creating space for pluralism, enhancing freedom of expression and critical thinking.

International relations and the economy are the other two important pieces of the cultural value snapshot. When it comes to using culture as a tool for international relations, national governments still predominantly see its role as a promoter of their countries abroad, referred to the national image, prestige, brand, creative potential, global significance, visibility,





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leadership, presence worldwide, and more. Other ways of seeing culture's role in international relations include promoting democracy, human rights, and sustainable development in the world; building mutual understanding with other countries and peoples; or seeing culture as a classic diplomacy tool. Finally, some documents refer to the economic reasons of embedding culture in international relations alluding to the trade of cultural goods, or justifying the internationalisation of cultural and creative sectors as a way to boost their development, mainly through enlarging markets, and acquiring new knowledge and skills.

The economic value aspect is quite straightforward: while most references to economics focus on how the cultural and creative sectors directly contribute to GDP, trade and economic growth, there is also a recognition that these sectors generate spillover effects across various economic sectors. They are believed to contribute to business innovation primarily by enhancing creative skills, facilitating experimentation, and testing new solutions. Additionally, tourism represents a crucial economic dimension often closely linked to culture in many cultural policy documents.

The 'good life' area of the snapshot is quite visible too. Some of its elements are linked to the social dimension, in particular the one on personal development and enrichment; some, related to the quality of life, partly overlap with the economic value in the way they are framed (some documents mention social and economic quality of life and wellbeing). The parts on health and physical and mental wellbeing are also considerable pieces of the puzzle.

Finally, the identity piece is a curious field of the diverse references to culture's importance in nourishing, building, protecting, or sustaining various types of identities. The most commonly mentioned is national identity, followed by individual identity, which can also be understood through the lens of personal development or as one of the ways of defining the intrinsic value of culture. Special importance is attached to culture as a





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vehicle of memories and identities over time, fostering the self-awareness of peoples and nations throughout history. Furthermore, the idea about culture connecting the past and the future is a significant component of the national discourse on the value of culture.

One may get dizzy diving into this long list of at times abstract and at times barely distinguishable types of framing culture's importance in different fields of our life. But where is the narrative which celebrates culture in its own right, does it exist, how does it sound?

Reviewing the national cultural policy and strategies documents, we have remained keenly attentive to any mention of culture as an essential aspect of people's lives, a fundamental right, a public good, and other similar expressions emphasising culture's importance in its own rights. These references, highlighted in the 'Indispensable value' section of the graphic, are remarkably few in number and generally lack detail compared to the more outward-focused explanations of culture's importance, such as those related to economics, social inclusion, international relations, or health.

Often intrinsic value is mentioned as part of a detailed list of other various roles attributed to culture. For instance, Malta's Cultural Policy 2021 reaffirms the intrinsic value of cultural and creative sectors, but in the same phrase refers to 'the role culture has in tackling global issues such as democracy and collective action, climate change, and other matters related to social and environmental sustainability'⁶. The document explains this by 'a shift in cultural policy from a focus on cultural and creative development to a wider understanding of the links between the cultural sector and the rest of society'⁷. The Strategic Vision Statement for the Arts of the Flemish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Culture, Digitalisation, and Facility Management (2019-2024), explains that in evaluating projects 'the intrinsic

⁶ Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, Malta 2021, National Cultural Policy 2021, p. 13

⁷ Ibid





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quality of artistic work is the starting point', further stating that 'focal points in project evaluation is the potential to reach an international level or to be comparable to international references'⁸. The Principles of the Cultural Policy 2021-2024 of the Netherlands state that 'culture holds significant intrinsic and connecting value'⁹, not unfolding what the two types of values mean and how they are different.

In some papers, the 'intrinsic value' is brought up together with the state support for culture. For example, Romania's 'Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2023-2030' states: 'In the European space, cultural goods and services benefit from the protection of the state and their intrinsic spiritual values, bearing the emblem of rituals, models, or cultural practices that are significant for a people or certain geographic communities'¹⁰.

Do the authors of all these documents share the same understanding of the notion of 'intrinsic'? We can only speculate why 'intrinsic' is rarely elaborated in such documents: perhaps it is assumed to be easily understood by the reader, or maybe there is no solid definition of it compared to the usually elaborate and precise nature of the rest of the document in which it is featured. In any case, as mentioned earlier, references to intrinsic value are notably scarce compared to the numerous, more persuasive and clear ways of articulating culture's contribution to other domains of public life.

The shifting rhetoric on culture's value

Understanding culture primarily as a tool, product, or resource for achieving external goals is not only a distinct but also an increasingly prevalent trend in cultural policy-making in Europe. There is a growing

⁸ Flemish Government 2020, Strategic Vision Statement for the Arts, p. 7

⁹ Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Netherlands 2021, Principles of the Cultural Policy 2021-2024, p. 16

¹⁰ The National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (INCFC), The Sectoral Strategy in the Field of Culture 2023-2030, p. 13





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demand for cultural organisations to demonstrate their social impact through contributions to health and social inclusion, and the expectation that cultural investment will foster the development of creative cities and urban regeneration has become a global phenomenon¹¹. The argument that culture contributes to the economy has gained strength in Western policy discourse since the 1980s and remains prominent today¹². Furthermore, the trend of utilising culture in populist discourse has been recognised and discussed¹³.

As a consequence or as a symptom, there is a growing tendency among grant-giving bodies in different parts of Europe to prioritise certain perspectives in artistic content, often driven by the focus on specific topics and policy areas¹⁴. Multiple voices, including those of experts interviewed for this study, attest that over the past decade, policies and funding programmes they apply for have become significantly more precise, detailed, and meticulous in defining how and why a cultural project can be useful. ‘There are too many boxes to tick these days’, we heard repeatedly from cultural sector representatives throughout our research and beyond.

Have cultural policies in Europe become more instrumental than before?

We did not compare the current national policy frameworks of the EU member states with those from 5-10 years ago, but we did track how the EU rhetoric on culture has changed. For this, we have analysed the evolution of the EU’s cultural policy discourse in recent years. This includes examining the EU’s Agendas for Culture (2007 and 2018), the five Work

¹¹ Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) *Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?*, *Cultural Trends*, 26:2, 95-106, pp. 96-97 DOI:10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836; Tobelem, J-M

¹² O’Connor, J 2024, *Culture is not an Industry*, pp. 32-45

¹³ Jakonen, O., Renko, V., & Harding, T. (2024). *Challenging the Nordic model? The cultural policies of populist parties in Finland and Sweden*. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2313520>

¹⁴ Whyatt, S 2022 *Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe*, p. 39





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Plans for Culture adopted since 2008, including the current one from 2023 to 2026, and the legal framework of the Creative Europe programme, comparing the 2013 regulation to the one adopted in 2021.

Before diving into the analysis of these papers, it's important to acknowledge the EU's limited competency in the field of culture. This historical limitation explains the Union's tendency to frame its actions on culture as contributions to other policy areas rather than treating culture as an independent domain. For instance, the two key documents of the EU's cultural policy framework - the European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World (2007) and its successor, the New European Agenda for Culture (2018) - set clearly instrumentalising objectives, each focused on promoting culture in specific fields, such as social cohesion and wellbeing, intercultural dialogue, economics, and international relations¹⁵.

However, it may be insightful to trace the evolution of the EU's discourse on culture over time: whether it has become more instrumental or less so. The key conclusion drawn from this analysis is that over the past decade, the EU's rhetoric on the value of culture has become more versatile and explicit, encompassing an expanded range of roles that culture is associated with.

To begin with, an interesting insight emerges from examining the guiding principles of the EU Work Plans for Culture. Originally, these principles¹⁶ primarily focused on how the cultural field should be governed at the EU

¹⁵ Commission of the European Communities 2007, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World, pp. 7-11; European Commission 2018, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A New European Agenda for Culture, pp. 2-8.

¹⁶ The EU's Work Plans for Culture for the periods 2008-2010 and 2011-2014 did not include a specific section called 'guiding principles'.





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level and how the plan should be implemented. For instance, the guiding principles of the Work Plan 2015-2018 emphasised the role of culture in achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy, but placed greater emphasis on and implementation- and governance-related aspects. These included strengthening links of the Work Plan with the Council and its rotating Presidencies, as well as with Creative Europe; pursuing evidence-based policy; enhancing cross-sectoral collaboration; and mainstreaming culture into other policy areas¹⁷. The principles adopted for the 2019-2022 period are somewhat more explicit about the value of culture, specifically citing its contribution to sustainable social and economic development. However, they still primarily focus on governance and management aspects, such as adopting a holistic and horizontal approach to cultural mainstreaming; promoting regular dialogue among Member States, European institutions, and civil society; improving governance by clarifying responsibilities and engaging all stakeholders; and more¹⁸.

In contrast, the guiding principles of the current plan (2023-2026) shift away from detailing its implementation modalities to articulating what culture can contribute to society and why it is important. This Work Plan specifies, for instance, that ‘freedom of artistic expression and creativity are fundamental to the human ability to address challenges, to think critically, to innovate and to invent’; and that cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are crucial for promoting and protecting human rights, preventing and resolving conflicts, and fostering mutual understanding. The principles further affirm that ‘culture makes a significant contribution to sustainable development, the economy and social inclusion, enhancing territorial cohesion’, and that it ‘has the potential to promote equality and mutual respect, and to fight against all

¹⁷ Official Journal of the European Union 2014, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018), C 463/4 - C 463/5

¹⁸ Official Journal of the European Union 2018, Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, C 460/13





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forms of violence, discrimination, intolerance and prejudice'. The sole reference to implementation in the plan is about the necessity for 'optimised use of quality data and statistics'¹⁹.

'Intrinsic value' has been clearly featured in the EU's Work Plan for Culture since 2014, when the document put forward 'Intrinsic value of culture and the arts to enhance cultural diversity'²⁰. 'Culture has an intrinsic value,' the first guiding principle of the Work Plan 2019-2022 stated²¹, and its successor, the Plan adopted for the period 2023-2026, clarifies: 'Culture, including cultural heritage, has an intrinsic value and contributes to strengthening European identity'²².

If we dive into how the rhetoric of the legal basis of Creative Europe evolved in the period between 2013 and 2021, we can also see that the framing of the value of culture featured in the 2021 Regulation is more multifaceted than the one in the Regulation adopted in 2013, with various new value fields mentioned, such as environment, human rights, and education.

Moreover, the second edition of the Creative Europe programme is expected to be consistent with more different policy areas than in 2013²³.

¹⁹ Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/3

²⁰ Official Journal of the European Union 2014, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018), C 463/4

²¹ Official Journal of the European Union 2018, Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, C 460/13

²² Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/3

²³ Official Journal of the European Union 2013, Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC, L 347/230; Official Journal of





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Furthermore, in 2013, all priorities for the Culture sub-programme focused on the cultural and creative sectors themselves, featuring such aspects as skills development, international touring, events, exhibitions and festivals²⁴. In contrast, in 2021, three out of seven priorities set for the Culture strand of Creative Europe are clearly external to cultural sectors: promoting societal resilience and enhancing social inclusion (1); strengthening European values and identity, and social resilience (2), and contributing to the Union's global strategy for international relations through culture (3), and one priority is focused both on the sectors themselves and their economic value: 'to enhance the capacity of the European cultural and creative sectors, including the capacity of individuals working in those sectors, to nurture talent, to innovate, to prosper and to generate jobs and growth'²⁵.

The economic aspect is present in both editions, but we can trace a slight difference in how it is framed: in 2013, main focus was placed on strengthening the business capacity and financial autonomy of the sector itself (with the focus on business and management models and alternative financing methodologies), while in 2021, there is more interest in how the sector can contribute to 'sustainable growth and job creation', and how 'the

the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, L 189/51

²⁴ Official Journal of the European Union 2013, Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC, art. 12

²⁵ Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, art. 5





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promotion of creativity and new knowledge contributes to boosting competitiveness and sparking innovation in industrial value chains²⁶.

Instrumentalisation – a strategy, a compromise, or a deadlock?

It is important to note that we do not attempt to establish a clear-cut dichotomy between the external and intrinsic value of culture. Culture is not separate from society's political and social challenges; instead, it is very sensitive to them. The debate about culture's political and social role is especially relevant in times of crisis, and the discussion is often about how that role sits together with the intrinsic value. For instance, the 'Thinking Group' of the European Festivals Association wondered in their 70-Years-On Agenda whether the Association 'should increase its activist engagement and inspire its stakeholders to follow suit.' 'Or should festivals capitalise first and foremost on the intrinsic power of culture?' They further reflect on the dilemma that presents itself: 'The shift to the right in many parts of Europe may also lead festivals to focus more on art (and art alone) rather than a broader agenda'²⁷.

So, as culture advocates, we do not dream of erasing culture from important social and political debates. But we are aware that instrumentalisation as such is about how serving external goals can strip the sector of its own agency. In the cultural sector, we tend to agree that instrumentalisation of culture can be a compromise strategy for culture advocates but a problematic tendency for the cultural sector in the long term. The most ardent opponents of instrumentalisation warn that a high degree of it weakens the self-sufficiency of cultural policy, dilutes its culture-specific objectives, and reduces culture to a means of achieving non-cultural ends.

One of the arguments is that while the cultural sector can make progress in various 'non-cultural' areas, its success in these fields can be limited or

²⁶ Ibid, L 189/35

²⁷ European Festivals Association 2023, 70-Years-On Agenda, Update 2023





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secondary compared to other sectors. Moreover, it is also recognised that these expected impacts typically lack tangible evidence²⁸. Hyper-instrumentalism of cultural policy can also erode the validity of culture as an autonomous policy domain, reflected in the removal of culture-dedicated government bodies, or its merger with other departments²⁹, as well as the weakening or demolition of the arm's-length model³⁰. Finally, instrumentalisation of culture does not only limit artistic autonomy³¹, but also shifts the focus away from how cultural sectors operate and what they need, towards the specific policy outcomes expected from them. This affects the funding modalities, application processes and reporting requirements, as well as the broader understanding and perception of artistic and cultural labour, in particular such features as valuing experimentation, and the focus on predicting and modelling the final impact of artistic projects.

In our State of Culture Barometer survey³² we asked respondents about the areas in which their organisation or activity contributes the most, and about the areas in which the role of their organisations is likely to become more prominent in the future. All response options were related to specific external areas, such as social inclusion, economic development, promoting the national image of their countries, rural development, and more. We formulated these options based on insights gathered from the review of national cultural policy agendas, reflecting how national governments typically frame the value of culture.

²⁸ Steven Hadley & Clive Gray (2017) Hyperinstrumentalism and cultural policy: means to an end or an end to meaning?, *Cultural Trends*, 26:2, 95-106, pp. 96-97 DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2017.1323836

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 100

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 104

³¹ Whyatt, S 2022 *Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe*, p. 40

³² The survey was conducted as part of the State of Culture research process and collected 579 responses. See Annex for more details.





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While the majority of respondents answered the question without additional comments, a few struggled with it, perceiving it as either promoting heightened instrumentalisation of culture or lacking truly relevant options to choose from. They emphasised the importance of valuing culture for its intrinsic worth or suggested alternative ways to articulate culture's role. Comments such as 'Culture and art exist for their own sake - as art forms - and not as tools or products' and 'Culture cannot accomplish most of these tasks; at best, it can create a space where some of them may occur' were among the typical responses left in the comments field.

Several experts we interviewed as part of this research also expressed concerns about the irrelevance of the current approach to assessing cultural value through the lens of various other fields. 'I think we promised something that we couldn't really fulfil, and we act like we're not co-responsible for this', one of the interviewees said, explaining why, in their view, culture has been shoved to the bottom of policy priorities. They reflected that jumping from one advocacy narrative to another, for instance, from the industry perspective to the wellbeing card does not make much sense, as those areas tend to ultimately prove to be secondary to culture's real strength and value in society.

The problem appears to be not only the emphasis on non-cultural arguments, but a sole, rigorous, even blind focus on one or just a couple of these specific arguments, which ultimately distorts the real picture of what culture is all about. As one of the interview contributors noted: 'You cannot watch an elephant with a microscope', suggesting that it is important to move away from zooming into just one or very few values of culture, singling out its specific contributions, such as economic or social one. It is essential to take an approach which recognises the interconnectivity of all these values, and such an approach may be less of a scrutinising one, leaving more autonomy for the cultural sector.





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It seems that the concept of ‘instrumentalisation’ has gained a negative connotation in the cultural sector and academic circles. But has this trend solved anything for the political and social perception of culture, or let alone for the situation of the cultural sector?

On the question ‘Do you agree that culture’s role is sufficiently recognised in today’s policy agendas?’ only 5.5% of the State of Culture Barometer participants responded positively, and 15.3% said ‘yes, but not in the right way’. Almost 80% answered the question negatively (with 55.6% of all respondents selecting ‘Rather not’, and 23.6% opting for ‘Not at all’).

Furthermore, respondents do not feel cultural and creative sectors are recognised by societies either, even if with a slightly less negative outlook. In total, 78% think societies do not sufficiently value cultural and creative sectors (with 54% of all respondents choosing ‘Rather disagree’ and 23.9% selecting ‘Strongly disagree’³³). Only 2.8% ‘strongly agree’, and 19.2% ‘rather agree’ with the statement.

Analysing the multiple contributions provided in the comment field, we can detect several levels at which the recognition gap plays out for our survey respondents. Firstly, many point out a distinct lack of consistency between the discursive recognition of the different values of culture, and the actual support provided to the sector. Respondents referred to the weak or non-existent protection systems for artists and cultural workers, dwindling budgets for culture, removal of art programmes from education curricula, and absence of the cultural sector at policy tables discussing crucial issues, even those affecting the sector directly, such as the development of the Artificial Intelligence (AI).

There are also the gaps between how much people appreciate culture and how much of the public budget they are ready to allocate to it: ‘Population studies show that culture and arts are valued by society as a whole but

³³ The question was formulated as ‘Do you agree that society sufficiently values the role of cultural and creative sectors (CCSS)?’





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there is disagreement to the extent of how much they should be publicly funded’, a person from Northern Ireland shared.

Moreover, many respondents face a gap of understanding by societies and governments of what it takes to produce culture and to bring it to audiences, how the sector works or that art is actually a profession: ‘Culture is considered a fun activity without any impact. The artist and culture workers are not supposed to have "real jobs"; ‘Culture in our country is considered as something that should be accessed for free and artist and cultural work is not valued rather considered to be a privilege’.

It appears contradictory to some respondents that the vocabulary on the many values culture brings to society becomes ever more detailed and developed, and yet this does not affect the perception of the sector as a professional segment of the labour market which needs regulatory protection and appropriate support. Some participants in the workshop we organised as part of Culture Action Europe’s Beyond the Obvious conference emphasised the existence of an implementation gap: while culture may be featured in various policies, this often does not translate into the creation of concrete tools and programmes, nor the structured integration of the cultural sector into specific projects and agendas.

Is the picture really so grim? The data at hand suggests that the situation of the cultural and creative sectors in Europe, and globally, is not improving at a rapid pace, to put it mildly. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 10 million cultural jobs have disappeared in 2020 alone, exposing and worsening the vulnerabilities within the cultural sector³⁴. Although many new policies and frameworks have been put in place to enhance the conditions for cultural workers, global studies consistently

³⁴ UNESCO 2022, *ReShaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good*, p. 48





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reveal persistent structural weaknesses within the cultural ecosystem³⁵. The recent survey on working conditions in the cultural and creative sectors conducted by Panteia and Culture Action Europe testifies that pursuing a career in these sectors remains to be a challenge: 68% of artists and creative professionals surveyed worked more than one job, with 34% of these second jobs being outside of the CCS; 71% indicated that they lack sufficient social protection; and 84% either ‘strongly disagreeing’ or ‘disagreeing’ with the statement ‘I believe I am remunerated fairly for my work’³⁶.

It is also apparent, that despite the multiplying number of new studies and data piles on culture’s role in social inclusion, urban development, economic growth, and many more - there is a general trend of public budgets for culture to decrease or stay stable. According to the data compiled by UNESCO, the global level of cultural investment has dropped in the last decade³⁷. In the EU, the average level of government expenditure on cultural services does not exceed 0.5% of GDP, and this level has remained stable since 2014. Only in six countries of the EU, this indicator has slightly grown between 2014 and 2022 (on average by 0.2%), while in nine countries it has decreased, and in 12 member states it remained the same³⁸.

³⁵ Examples of such studies include UNESCO’s report on the implementation of the 1980 Recommendation on the Status of the Artist (2023), the EU’s Report on Working Conditions (2023), the ILO paper on the African cultural and creative economy, and many national studies, such as the ‘Good work review’ by the Creative PEC (UK), report ‘Profile of Creative Professionals New Zealand’ by Creative New Zealand, Arts and Culture Barometer by the Arts and Culture Promotion Finland, and more.

³⁶ Panteia, Culture Action Europe 2024, Creative Pulse A survey on the status and working conditions of artists and CCS sector professionals in Europe, pp. 12, 18, 20

³⁷ UNESCO 2022, ReShaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good, p. 34

³⁸ EUROSTAT 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp_custom_1111466





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There is also evidence that support for culture coming from other, non-cultural ministries remains to be limited. In 2022, UNESCO looked into how the parties to the 2005 Convention on Cultural Diversity cooperate with other ministries and government agencies on governing culture. It appeared that 96% of parties engage in inter-ministerial cooperation when designing regulations, laws, policies and strategies. However, only 6% of all policies and measures reported as direct support to the cultural and creative sectors involve one or more ministries without direct responsibility for these sectors³⁹.

At the same time, it is essential to recognise that culture has been included in a growing number of EU funding programmes over the years⁴⁰. Furthermore, the Creative Europe programme saw a 67% budget increase, rising from €1.46 billion for the 2014-2020 period to €2.44 billion for 2021-2027. Despite this increase, Creative Europe remains relatively small compared to other programmes, given the scope and value of cultural contributions (for comparison, the budget for Erasmus+ for 2021-2027 is €26.2 billion, and Horizon Europe's budget is €95.5 billion). Furthermore, despite the Cultural Deal EU campaign and extensive evidence of the pandemic's devastating impact on the cultural sector, only 14 EU member states included culture in their National Resilience and Recovery Plans⁴¹.

Furthermore, in more strategic and political terms, some researchers' analysis shows that culture is marginalised in mainstream development

[7/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=97e0e001-2826-4d20-bafc-11e667bce4df](https://bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=97e0e001-2826-4d20-bafc-11e667bce4df)

³⁹ UNESCO 2022 Reshaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good, p. 49

⁴⁰ The European Commission's CulturEU funding guide, presenting EU Funding Opportunities for the Cultural and Creative Sectors 2021-2027, offers an overview of 20 different programmes (excluding Creative Europe).

⁴¹ Culture Action Europe 2021, Culture in the EU's National Recovery and Resilience Plans, p. 5





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discourse⁴², and culture's contribution to societal transformation processes is still largely undervalued or ignored in policy fields other than cultural policy, and even if culture might be mentioned or rhetorically recognised in environmental and industrial policies, it is typically not integrated in these frameworks in a substantial way⁴³.

So, it appears that the growing trend of promoting culture as a means to achieve non-cultural objectives does not help to anchor culture as an autonomous and equal player at the policy level, nor does it lead to the proportionately increasing support to the cultural sector.

However, promoting culture's value through its contribution to non-cultural ends still seems to be the most obvious advocacy path we pursue, probably as part of 'politics of survival' as Steven Hadley put it⁴⁴. We can cite dozens of policy papers written by various cultural networks, including by Culture Action Europe, starting with a paragraph which would list the variety of rationales why policy-makers should pay attention to and continue reading this paper - basically arguments why culture is important, and none of these arguments would resemble a 'culture is its own right' notion. Sometimes we view this phenomenon as a communication exercise, believing we need to adjust our rhetoric to be understood by policymakers. However, the reality is that we are failing another important exercise: telling the story of what culture truly

⁴² O'Connor, J 2024, Culture is not an Industry, p. 78

⁴³ A. M. Ranczakowska, M. Fraioli, A. Garma, Just Sustainability from the Heart of Communities. The Transformative Power of Socio-Cultural Centres, ENCC, May 2024, p. 15. Link: <https://encc.eu/articles/qualitative-research-on-the-roles-of-socio-cultural-centres-in-just-sustainability-transitions>. For further information please contact: office@encc.eu.

⁴⁴ Hadley, S Arts Professional, 4 October 2014, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/will-policy-trend-spell-end-arts-funding>





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represents. Why do we struggle to propose an alternative approach which would go beyond ‘spill-over effects’ and the ‘contributions to’?

A typical answer could be: ‘Well, because no matter what other ‘art for art’s sake’ argument we come up with, we are not going to be listened to’. Let’s try to understand how we ended up in this situation.

Art for other sakes only: how did we get here?

There are various reasons why the instrumentalisation of culture has been gaining traction, which have been studied and discussed in academic, policy, and advocacy circles for many years. Here, we aim to outline some of the factors that emerged through our State of Culture research.

Perpetual state of emergency

Many experts we spoke to for this study said that they have noticed that these days, the position of culture is challenged by many other priorities governments juggle with. From rising military expenditure to social inequalities, from inflation spikes to natural disasters - today’s decision-makers seem to be overwhelmed with concrete, immediate dangers to stability.

Indeed, we live in a time marked by multiple emergencies, including the climate crisis, social divides, terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, human displacement, health crises, economic slowdowns, and more. Experts and opinion-makers use various terms, such as ‘polycrisis,’ ‘perma-crisis,’ and ‘meta-crisis,’ to characterise our current reality⁴⁵. The data indicates that it’s not merely our heightened awareness causing increased concern about the future; the world is indeed experiencing an era that is objectively more challenging than preceding decades.

⁴⁵ Polycrisis n.d., last seen 5 September 2024,
<https://polycrisis.org/lessons/who-else-is-using-the-term-polycrisis-today/>





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First of all, the escalating climate transformation and the governments' failure to slow it down are widely recognised and discussed: the COP 28 UN Climate Change Conference held in late 2023 concluded progress was too slow across all areas of climate action – from reducing greenhouse gas emissions, to strengthening resilience to a changing climate⁴⁶. As the map of the Ecological Threat Report shows, climate change has been playing out differently across the world, with Africa, Asia and the Pacific region being in greatest danger. Yet, Europe is facing serious environmental threats too: in 2024, the European Environment Agency identified 36 major climate risks for Europe, and warned that the European states are not prepared for these risks⁴⁷. Climate change is felt by people all across Europe, with 2023 having been the warmest year on record⁴⁸ and impacts of environmental disasters having grown considerably in the past 40 years⁴⁹.

A real war is unfolding on the borders of the European Union: Russia's aggression against Ukraine having profound impact on the EU's agenda and contributing to the sense that 'Europe is in danger', as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission Joseph Borell put it in

⁴⁶ United Nations Climate Change n.d., COP 28: What Was Achieved and What Happens Next?, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://unfccc.int/cop28/5-key-takeaways#:~:text=Having%20shown%20that%20progress%20was,to%20accelerate%20action%20across%20all>

⁴⁷ European Environment Agency, 28 June 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/climate-change-impacts-risks-and-adaptation?activeTab=07e50b68-8bf2-4641-ba6b-eda1afd544be>

⁴⁸ Copernicus Climate Change Service 2023, pp. 3, 5

⁴⁹ European Environment Agency, 6 October 2023, Economic losses from weather- and climate-related extremes in Europe, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/economic-losses-from-climate-related>.





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his speech in January 2024⁵⁰. The instability is further aggravated by the conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. In general, the Global Peace Index⁵¹ has never been as alarming as it is this year, since its inception in 2008: there are currently 56 conflicts across the world, the most since World War II, and they have become more international with 92 countries involved in conflicts outside their borders⁵².

These challenges, as well as other major trends, such the ageing of the European population, put significant pressures on the European economy⁵³. The economic activity was in a state of stagnation in 2023. Despite some positive signs of the recovery of growth rates⁵⁴ and the gradual decrease of the EU-average inflation levels⁵⁵, international bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund, constatate that European

⁵⁰ European External Action Service - Europe between two wars, 3 January 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/europe-between-two-wars_en

⁵¹ The Global Peace Index is a composite index measuring the peacefulness of countries made up of 23 quantitative and qualitative indicators, such as perceived criminality in society, homicides, jailed population, access to weapons, political instability, terrorist activity, military expenditure, external and internal conflicts fought, and more.

⁵² Vision of Humanity, Key Trends in the Global Peace Index 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>

⁵³ International Monetary Fund 2024, Regional Economic Outlook Europe, Soft Landing in Crosswinds for a Lasting Recovery, p. 5

⁵⁴ European Commission - Economy and Finance, 15 May 2024, Spring 2024 Economic Forecast: A gradual expansion amid high geopolitical risks, last seen 5 September 2024,

https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/spring-2024-economic-forecast-gradual-expansion-amid-high-geopolitical-risks_en

⁵⁵ Eurostat, HICP - monthly data (annual rate of change), 2 July 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/prc_hicp_manr/default/table?!ang=en





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governments have a lot of work to be done to make their economic development more sustainable⁵⁶. Mario Draghi, the former European Central Bank chief and Italian prime minister, who was asked by the European Commission to produce the report on European competitiveness, predicts a ‘slow agony’ for the EU economy if radical measures, including massive investments, are not implemented⁵⁷.

In the meantime, another trend - the digital transformation - has reached its unprecedented pace. It is not seen solely as a problem; however, the discourse framing ‘digital revolution’ as an opportunity has long been counterbalanced by the perception of it as a potential threat and a source of disruption⁵⁸.

How does this backdrop impact our perception of reality? As one may guess and sense for themselves, not in the most positive way. Climate anxiety has become a significant trend for the European population, especially among younger people⁵⁹. Some surveys show that many people

⁵⁶ International Monetary Fund 2024, Regional Economic Outlook Europe, Soft Landing in Crosswinds for a Lasting Recovery, p. 5

⁵⁷ EU Debates / eudebates.tv, 10 September 2024, European economy faces ‘existential challenge,’ Draghi warns Europe!, last seen 17 September 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9Tz6DoCYwY>

⁵⁸ World Economic Forum, 27 February, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/this-timeline-charts-the-fast-pace-of-tech-transformation-across-centuries/>

⁵⁹ European Union - European Climate Pact, Anxious about climate change? Here’s what you can do about it, 30 January 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, https://climate-pact.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/anxious-about-climate-change-heres-what-you-can-do-about-it-2023-01-30_en





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are increasingly more fearful about the future, thinking that the financial situation will be worse for their children and grandchildren⁶⁰.

The multiplicity of interrelated disasters facing Europe and the world contributes to the political sense of the time running out and the narrow space for a mistake. This, undoubtedly, has a profound effect on policymaking - from setting priorities and shaping agendas to allocating budgets and selecting stakeholders to be around the table. The political discourse has increasingly become a warning of a 'now or never' moment⁶¹. 'The world is at the crossroads', the first thing we read on the webpage of the UN's Pact for the Future⁶². Ursula von der Leyen's Statement at the European Parliament Plenary on 18 June 2024, the day she was reelected as the European Commission President, says: 'Choices are the hinges of destiny. And in a world full of adversity, Europe's destiny hinges on what we do next. Despite the momentous things we have done and overcome, Europe now faces a clear choice'⁶³.

Johnathan White, Professor of Politics of the London School of Economics, described the tactics and strategies of governments in the present 'age of

⁶⁰ Clancy, L, Gray, R & Vu, B Pew Research Center, Large shares in many countries are pessimistic about the next generation's financial future, 11 August 2022, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/08/11/large-shares-in-many-countries-are-pessimistic-about-the-next-generations-financial-future/>

⁶¹ White, J 2024, In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea, p. 162

⁶² Summit of the Future, Pact for the Future, last seen 17 September 2024,

https://summitofthefutureun.org/pact/?_gl=1*1sudin4*_ga*MjA5OTI3MzI5MC4xNzE2NDY0NTA4*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTcyNjU2NTY3NC4xNC4xLjE3MjY1NjU2ODYuMC4wLjA

⁶³ European Commission 18 July 2024, Statement at the European Parliament Plenary by President Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for a second mandate 2024-2029, last seen 5 September 2024,

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-european-parliament-plenary-president-ursula-von-der-leyen-candidate-second-mandate-2024-2024-07-18_en





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emergencies’ in his book ‘In the Long Run. The Future as a Political Idea’. According to him, in a volatile world, policymaking becomes responding to necessity rather than pursuing chosen goals; short-term predictions are more reliable and pertinent than long-term thinking; and the major focus is placed on immediate and practical steps⁶⁴. He further reflects:

Whenever we are short of time, we tend to evaluate things for their utility. The meals we eat quickly are valued less for the pleasure they give than for the hunger they satisfy and the energy they provide. The umbrella we buy when caught in a downpour is picked less for its looks than its capacity to keep us dry⁶⁵.

There is something about the impact of culture that is hard to demonstrate and promote as essential in such a political climate. In the last two decades, evaluation and measurement of the impact of art and culture were widely recognised as challenging tasks, to put it mildly, especially with the tools and metrics used by governments to detect ‘tangible’, quantifiable impacts⁶⁶. Even more so today, as Europe is evidently shaken by too many emergencies, the genuine value of culture, such as being an essential part of people’s life and a vital element of social foundations, is hard to trace with tools of short-term, emergency-driven strategies.

An important part of the story is the longevity of culture’s impact. Many of our survey respondents struggled with the idea of expecting a direct, immediate social endorsement of what they are doing. As one of the respondents put it: ‘As a writer my role is to create, not change society. History will judge my work’.

⁶⁴ White, J 2024, *In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea*, pp. 162-165.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 187

⁶⁶ Eliassen, K, Hovden, J, & Prytz, Ø (eds.), *Contested Qualities, Negotiating Value in Arts and Culture*, p. 229





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Justine O'Connor, Professor of Cultural Economy at the University of South Australia, in his book 'Culture is not an Industry' talks about the different 'temporalities of impact', referring to how culture is more of a component of the long-term 'social reproduction of life' rather than a response to immediate need. O'Connor warns, however, that these temporalities of impact should not be establishing the hierarchy of what is important based on how quickly its impact can be seen⁶⁷.

It is hard to disagree that societies often take much longer to notice the degradation of the cultural sphere in their country compared to the decay of food logistics, healthcare, or education systems. Yet, looking back at history, each era often emerges for us through the lens of the artistic movements of that time, alongside other scientific and technological advancements. Whether it's the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, pop-art of the 50s, or the counterculture of the 1960s, it is clear art played a crucial role in Europe's progress in history and the development of critical thought.

On the contrary, if we try to capture the immediate, 'here and now' role of artists in today's reality, this role seems rather ephemeral, or to say the least, debatable. The ambiguity that the arts are naturally giving space to can be a helpful model for dealing with the complexity of our living together in today's world. Yet ephemeral, debatable, ambiguous are not the characteristics policy-making in times of emergency leans towards. On the contrary, today, there might be an unprecedented quest for clarity and predictability. As White put it, 'calculating the future means identifying key measures of success and policies that can lead to their demonstrable attainment. It means leaving out the messier stuff - the things on which people disagree, and the ways in which values and deeper structures might change'⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ O'Connor 2024, *Culture is not an Industry*, p. 112

⁶⁸ White, J 2024, *In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea*, p. 166





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If history is to judge culture's value, it will certainly do so. However, present-day politics, driven by emergencies and calculations, tend to overlook or misunderstand this value. Could this be why we are pressured to abandon culture's intrinsic worth and instead chase (the illusion of) its multiple external benefits - those that can be clear and concrete?

Imagination replaced by calculation

We asked the State of Culture Barometer survey respondents how they think the culture value gap should be addressed. The majority of survey respondents (almost one third) believe that to fix the problem of culture's recognition in society, a social and political transformation is needed. One of the survey respondents, who 'rather disagrees' with the statement that culture is sufficiently valued by societies, wrote: 'Unfortunately, Western(ised) society is burdened with the mentality of attaching economic value to every aspect of existence'.

Many of the people we spoke to as part of the interview series, agreed that there is indeed something wrong with the 'system'. Yet some pointed out that culture might be a 'special outcast' of this system, more so compared to other fields. 'We live in neoliberal society that is obsessed with numbers', one of our contributors said, further reflecting on how such society shows a high degree of distrust towards culture:

Look at the medicine sector: there is an accepted possibility for side effects for every medication. But if a cultural project deviates from the originally planned design, or fails, there might even be a need to return the money. Culture does not fall under the umbrella of a direct value exchange.

One of the (old) explanations for this could be that culture is hard to measure in quantitative terms, which makes it especially vulnerable on the political priority ladder of the systems where calculation is the key means of decision making. Yes, medicine tends to produce side-effects, but the probability of those can be quantified. The impact of a cultural project is





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much harder to forecast, and this is the problem. Moreover, forecasting such impacts might be counter-intuitive and even harmful for the cultural project itself. As written in IETM's publication 'Lost in Transition?' which captured voices of over 150 performing arts professionals:

Art should remain liberated from assumptions about communities, avoiding the reinforcement of societal compartmentalisation. While it is common for policies to outline aims and target audiences, it is equally reasonable for artists not to predetermine who will engage with and benefit the most from their work⁶⁹.

This goes at odds with the tendency to calculate and forecast which has been gaining ground since centuries. Jonathan White points to the overshadowing of 'imagined futures' by 'calculated' ones - a trend which is not only connected to emergencies and crises but also to a broader system defining how politics operate today. 'It has been a money economy which filled the daily life of so many people with weighting, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms'⁷⁰. This tendency gave ground for the growing number of various forecasting techniques used by governments, studies of consumer behaviours, predictions of market dynamics, opinion polls, and more. White further reflects that 'a desire to apply calculative techniques encouraged a focus on the things that can be measured' and gave priority to relatively short-term perspectives, simply because they are easier to forecast compared to long-term outlooks requiring speculation⁷¹.

However, even when it comes to long-term perspectives and to something that is much more complex and overarching than a number-based target, it is still often spelled out in quantitative terms. 'Even climate change, that

⁶⁹ IETM 2024, *Lost in Transition. Report from the IETM Focus Luxembourg Meeting*, p. 18.

⁷⁰ White, J 2024, *In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea*, p. 62.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, pp. 78, 81.





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most profound of threats, tends to be turned into a problem of calculation in policy-making circles', brushing away a range of other sustainability-related concerns and compromising a system vision of the problem⁷². Interpreting progress or achievement of success through quantitative targets became a trend in many other fields, including ours: think of the campaign led by Culture Action Europe advocating for 2% for culture in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans⁷³.

As cultural policy is tuned to serve multiple external goals, cultural activities and practices have come under the quantitative measurement. For example, the European Commission has established a comprehensive set of indicators to assess the Creative Europe programme, described as 'qualitative and quantitative' in both the 2013 and 2021 Regulations establishing the two editions of the programme. However, in the 2013 Regulation, all 18 indicators primarily focus on numerical data⁷⁴. In 2021, while there is now an indicator for 'success stories', the majority of indicators remain predominantly quantitative⁷⁵. Moreover, these indicators are designed to allow for short evaluation periods, with beneficiaries required to demonstrate their achievements in the final project report at its conclusion.

⁷² Ibid p. 167

⁷³ Culture Action Europe, 17 November 2020, Open Letter | European Recovery and Resilience Plans and Civil Society, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/open-letter-european-recovery-and-resilience-plans-and-civil-society/>

⁷⁴ Official Journal of the European Union 2013, Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2014 to 2020) and repealing Decisions No 1718/2006/EC, No 1855/2006/EC and No 1041/2009/EC, art. 18

⁷⁵ Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, art. 3, Annex II





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But if we want to capture the real and full value of culture, it is neither about the short-term nor - and even less so - about the quantitative. The world of culture, composed of symbolic expressions, objects, images, melodies, stories, movements, styles, techniques, practices, and more, offers more of an ‘imagined future’ rather than a ‘calculated one’, and drives a long-term shaping of social foundations.

Culture is about activating societies, but in the words of White, ‘an active public is one of the many things that can make the world more unpredictable’⁷⁶. This might be one of the reasons why instead of cherishing that perspective on the long-term, imagined and unexpected elements of our life, we are pushed to regard it as part of the calculated and forecasted system.

But does the cultural sector itself play any role in shaping the policy rhetoric about culture and art?

Staying true to who we are, or trapped by self-instrumentalisation?

There is a wide-spread opinion that these are the cultural policies and funders' pressures that make the cultural sector tick the various boxes of social cohesion, wellbeing, innovation, economic development, urban regeneration and many more, often at the cost of their artistic worth. An interviewee referred to the homogenisation of the cultural offer fostered by the overprescription of the culture funding programmes, all putting forward similar expectations driven mainly by instrumental approach to culture and art. IETM's report ‘Lost in Transition?’ states: ‘Cultural policy

⁷⁶





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must allow art to be unexpected again⁷⁷, as an appeal to put an end to the hyper-instrumentalisation of art.

But what if there is also something about today's art and the art institutions themselves that makes the discourse on culture instrumental or at least nourishes the ongoing instrumentalisation of cultural policy?

Some scepticism towards the tactics and strategies of the cultural sectors themselves has been expressed in the survey comments. Respondents refer to the lack of self-confidence within the sector to be an agent of transformation, and many talk about the disconnectedness of the cultural sector with societies: 'We are not learning to drive forward discussions and are instead reacting to requests. It is important that we start to develop a new message and new picture of the future, rather than depend on what may or may not have worked in the past'; 'CCSs should become drivers of technological change instead of adapting to technological disruptions. CCSs must be the disruption instead of facing the disruption'.

To understand what is in reality happening, let us for a moment shift away from advocacy to the arts.

For a few years now, a growing number of art critics and cultural experts discuss the general standstill or inertia of cultural progress characterising our age. For them today's 'state of culture', mostly referring to the Western culture, is not more than the perpetual recycling of the artistic innovations of the past decades and centuries, a replication of tried-out styles and pathways. They talk about 'cultural stagnation', 'monoculture', 'cultural inertia', 'cultural immobility', even 'cultural sclerosis'⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ IETM 2024, *Lost in Transition*. Report from the IETM Focus Luxembourg Meeting, p. 6.

⁷⁸ See, for example, articles 'The Age of Cultural Stagnation' by Aaron Timms and 'Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill' by Jason Farago; and books 'The





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Jason Farago, an art critic for The New York Times, wrote in October 2023: ‘Today culture remains capable of endless production, but it’s far less capable of change’, referring to the erosion of the arts’ capacity to renew its forms and styles⁷⁹. Claiming that our era will be ‘the least innovative, least transformative, least pioneering century for culture since the invention of the printing press’, Farago reflects on how present times miss the previous centuries’ radical renewal of artistic languages and styles:

When you walk through your local museum’s modern wing, starting with Impressionism and following a succession of avant-gardes through the development of Cubism, Dada, Pop, minimalism, in the 1990s you arrive in a forest called “the contemporary,” and after more than 30 years no path forward has been revealed⁸⁰.

In resonance with Farago’s ideas, Aaron Timm, New York-based author, wrote in March 2024: ‘From the academic heights to popular bestsellers, from Christian theology to secular fashion, from political theory to pop music, a range of cultural forms and intellectual pursuits have been stuck for decades in a pattern of recurrence’⁸¹, and provocatively wondered: ‘We are stuck, progress has stopped, culture is bad, and it’s someone else’s fault. But whose?’.

For Kyle Chayka, author of the book ‘Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture’, one of the major reasons for this development is the

Decadent Society: how we became the victims of our own success’ by Ross Douthat and ‘Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture’ by Kyle Chayka.

⁷⁹ Farago, J Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill, The New York Times Magazine, 10 October 2023, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/magazine/stale-culture.html>

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Timms, A The Age of Cultural Stagnation, The New Republic, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation>





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influence of the Big Tech and the algorithmic system they have imposed on producers and consumers of the cultural content - both now stripped of their 'vitality and individuality'. For an artistic work to achieve commercial success, it must be tailored to maximise engagement on digital platforms, often resulting in the creation of many similar-looking and sounding pieces. In the meantime, as people's cultural consumption is closely intertwined with the Internet and the algorithms governing it, the version of culture they are encountering is replicable and accessible, rather than challenging and disturbing. Indeed, platforms are not interested in 'adventurous directions'; they are interested in high numbers of users⁸².

Farago also talks about how the modalities of the Big Tech platform culture are pushing cultural producers to make clearer, more communicable, more taggable content, in order to be embraced by the platforms, suggested to or discovered by consumers. He also highlights a few other reasons for why we are not living through cultural revolutions anymore: there is a general slowdown of breakthroughs compared to previous centuries; and the plunge into an 'infinity of information' driven yet again by the Internet - the new reality, in which information can surpass the limits of time, 'everything is recorded, nothing is remembered', and, in this sense, the notion of 'an era' is losing its significance.

Finally, for Fagaro, the very urge to be innovative, which has been a trend of cultural development since at least a century, is the factor that suffocates progress. 'To audiences in the 20th century, novelty seemed to be a cultural birthright'. It might be true that something is recognised as 'art' only because it is unique and offers something new compared to what people have already seen. Today's decay of stylistic innovation has not, however, helped the world of culture to emancipate from this 'modernist trap'. Driven by the innovation hunger and 'commitment to novelty', cultural producers and institutions are now more interested in delving into new topics rather than inventing new forms and styles. According to

⁸² *ibid*





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Frago, this shift of the expectation of new stories vs new languages to tell them nourished the interest of young people in political activism ('plant a tree and call it a sculpture'), and the focus on socially-engaged issues:

This evangelical turn in the arts in the 21st century has been conflated with the long-overdue admission of women, people of colour and out sexual minorities into the culture industry [...]. A gay rom-com is trotted out as "the first"; a Black Little Mermaid is a "breakthrough"; our museums, studios and publishing houses can bring nothing new to market except the very people they once systematically excluded⁸³.

In other words, while socially- or politically engaged work is certainly valuable, the problem lies in the growing (self-)expectation within and from the cultural sector to address particular topics, tell specific stories, for the sake of being fresh and thus relevant.

Can it be that this trend of cultural decay amidst enduring commitment to novelty has also been conflated with the systemic quest for calculation, clarity, predictability and communicability that we discussed above? Has it also resonated with the emergency and crisis politics which does not see value in anything that is not immediately useful and easily comprehensible?

Fatoş Üstek, an independent curator and writer, reflected in her book 'The Art Institution of Tomorrow: Reinventing the Model' that amidst the multilayered global crisis, art institutions are in stagnation, 'fixated on their current circumstances'. They are also challenged by the fact that, in the digital age - when everyone has a platform to express their opinions -

⁸³ Frago, J Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill, The New York Times Magazine, 10 October 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/magazine/stale-culture.html>





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there is much more scrutiny of art institutions' actions⁸⁴. Üstek reflects further:

The consequence of institution's constraining finances, underpaid and overworked staff, authoritarian demeanour, archaic operational frameworks, and financial dependencies all play a crucial role. I believe the majority of art institutions are at the moment standing still in the fear of any movement that might precipitate their demise. It is painful to see art institutions in this frozen state, lacking the resourcefulness to imagine new horizons⁸⁵.

One of the values of the world of culture and art - being unexpected - has been losing its vitality in present systems. Out of survival instinct, culture has slowly abandoned its 'sense of self', as Timms put it, its self-confidence, and is now giving in to its position of being 'subordinate to higher forces'⁸⁶.

Certainly, the message is not that the art and culture field must abandon its social and political role and withdraw into its own world. The worrying trend, on the contrary, is that this role - or the perception of it, even within the sector itself - is becoming blurred and watered down.

In times of disruption, this lack of self-worth can be especially pronounced. One of the manifestations of it was the provocative statement by Ariane Mnoushkine, French stage director, who said to 'Liberation': 'People are fed up with us [the art sector - E.P.], with our helplessness, our

⁸⁴ Üstek, F 2024 'The Art Institution of Tomorrow: Reinventing the Model', pp. 11, 12

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 12

⁸⁶ Timms, A The Age of Cultural Stagnation, The New Republic, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,
<https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation>





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fears, our narcissism, our sectarianism, our denials⁸⁷, after the French right-wing party National Rally achieved its highest-ever result in a nationwide election in June 2024 and the President Emmanuel Macron dissolved the Parliament.

How can culture escape algorithmic capitalism, the overall obsession with measurements and calculations, the politics of catastrophe and urgency, and finally the growing uncertainty about its own worth?

Perhaps, a starting point should be the restoration of this eroded 'sense of self'. As O'Connor put it: 'start by asking yourself and answering, as a collective, some fundamental questions: What are we for? What do we stand for? What is our most essential contribution? Politics change, narratives shift. Start with consolidating your own understanding of what your value is'⁸⁸.

In resonance with this, during our Malmö workshop as part of Culture Action Europe's Beyond the Obvious annual conference, one of the participants, observing the dynamics and moods of the discussions, reflected:

'When asked to discuss our transformative value as a cultural sector, we are inspired and brimming with ideas. However, when it comes to envisioning how governments can harness this power, our enthusiasm wanes, our vocabulary shifts, and we start speaking a different language,

⁸⁷ Pillet, E «Narcissique», «sectaire», «dans le déni»... La culture est inoffensive face au RN, selon Ariane Mnouchkine et Éric Ruf, Le Figaro, 18 June 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/narcissique-sectaire-dans-le-deni-la-culture-est-inoffensive-face-au-rn-selon-ariane-mnouchkine-et-eric-ruf-20240618>

⁸⁸ Polivtseva, E 'Culture as an Industry Won't Solve Sector's Problems', 4 July 2024, Culture Policy Room, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/if-culture-is-not-an-industry-what-is-it-then>





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*emphasising other values. Shouldn't we strive to stay true to who we are,
regardless of whom we are speaking to?'*

We will explore rethinking the narratives in our final chapter. For now, let's examine the other issues the cultural sector faces today. To do this, we'll shift our focus from how culture is perceived and framed by the cultural sector, society, and politics, to some of the major global trends and developments that have the greatest impact on the cultural sector today.





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State of Culture: What Matters

In this section, we examine key trends, issues, and challenges faced by the world of culture that we identified in our research, drawing from the analysis of the current national and EU agendas, policy and research documents by Culture Action Europe members, the State of Culture Barometer survey results, and interviews with sector representatives. Each interviewee was asked to highlight up to three major global trends expected to impact their sector over the next five years. Here, we focus on the topics that emerged as some of the most relevant for today's agenda. However, our research process also uncovered a wide array of other diverse issues facing cultural and creative sectors, each deserving attention. While acknowledging that many more things matter, this report confines its scope to the selected topics presented below. We plan to continue exploring other themes in future editions of the State of Culture report and through various other formats in the years ahead.

Artificial Intelligence: 'the largest theft in human history' or a jump into 'a brave new world'?

During our conversations conducted as part of this study, more than half of the interviewees identified Artificial Intelligence (AI)⁸⁹ as a major trend affecting their specific sector. Organisations representing authors, translators, and creators are particularly concerned about AI's impact on the economic situation and social status of creative workers. Libraries, museums, and higher education institutions are exploring how AI development affects the standards of quality of knowledge and

⁸⁹UNESCO defines AI systems as 'systems that have the capacity to process data and information in a way that resembles intelligent behaviour, and typically includes aspects of reasoning, learning, perception, prediction, planning, or control'; UNESCO 2021, Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence





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information, including broader implications for the notion of 'truth', undermined by AI-native biases and misinterpretations. Associations representing festivals, live arts, and cultural centres view AI as a significant contemporary issue they are addressing as part of their broader social roles. Key concerns raised also include transparency and governance of AI, its implications for democracy and the pluralism of public knowledge, and the possible expansion of digital inequalities.

Importantly, some in the sector also feel that the issue of AI is being imposed on them, and they do not fully understand why they need to address it. This section explains why AI matters to all of us.

One of the unique features of AI as a global trend is the gigantic speed of its development. It makes it difficult to grasp even the current scale of the problem, let alone to foresee its future evolution. As one of our interviewees expressed it: 'It is hard to summarise the impact of AI, because it is really not known'.

At the EU level, the impact of AI on cultural and creative sectors was not much of a concern even a few years ago, when there might have only been a few occasional references to AI, seeing it, for instance, as 'an enabler to address key challenges for the CCS'⁹⁰. When the EU Directive on copyright and related rights in the Digital Single Market (2019) was discussed, AI was not yet an issue to consider, which led to some of the problems for right-holders that are of a high concern today (read more below). Similarly, as our research shows, only very few of the EU member states have a clear reference to artificial intelligence in their official cultural policy documents.

People's understanding of AI's social, economic, and ethical implications, as well as the legislative efforts to regulate it, are far too slow to keep up with the AI revolution. It is not without reason that in March 2023, the

⁹⁰ European Commission 2019, *Creative Europe Monitoring Report 2018*, p. 8





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Future of Life Institute published an Open Letter titled ‘Pause Giant AI Experiments’, calling for a halt to AI developments. ‘Powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable’⁹¹, the letter demands.

Yet the AI boom has not slowed down since then. In July 2023, a Showrunner AI was launched, a new AI application that can create 22-minute generative AI TV fan and parody episodes of popular shows⁹². In March 2024, a start-up named Cognition AI showcased a programme called Devin performing tasks of software engineers, namely, writing, testing and implementing codes⁹³. In May 2024, Chat-GPT progressed to level 4o, which is supposed to have an increased sense of context and better deal with ambiguities and complexities⁹⁴. In the meantime, investment in Generative AI skyrockets⁹⁵.

Just like most other sectors, cultural organisations and workers have been utilising AI for a variety of purposes. Generative AI systems assist them with communication tasks such as drafting texts, creating social media posts, and designing posters. AI can also help cultural organisations archive content and make it accessible to the public. Furthermore, AI is

⁹¹ Future of Life Institute, 23 March 2023, *Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/>

⁹² Forbes 30 July 2023, *New Showrunner AI: The Sum Of All Hollywood's Fears*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charliefink/2023/07/18/new-showrunner-ai-the-sum-of-all-hollywoods-fears/?sh=151e24855b72>

⁹³ Kulesz, O 2024 *Artificial Intelligence and International Cultural Relations*, p. 19

⁹⁴ Medium 29 May, 2024, *Comparing Chat GPT-4o and GPT-4: Key Updates and Differences*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://medium.com/@ranam12/comparing-chat-gpt-4o-and-gpt-4-key-updates-and-differences-8835b2c192c2>

⁹⁵ Stanford University 2024, *Welcome to the 2024 AI Index Report*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://aiindex.stanford.edu/report/>





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increasingly employed in tools for direct consumer interaction, such as ticket sales and chatbots⁹⁶. Overall, AI is recognised to make workers more productive and lead to higher quality work and contribute to scientific progress⁹⁷.

In the audiovisual sector, AI tools have been used for years to enhance visual experiences for audiences. As the policy paper of the Society of Audiovisual Authors (SAA) explains: ‘AI applications can generate ideas and concepts for screenplays and film plots; they can suggest dialogues, scenes and drafts that the authors can play with. AI can help authors to experiment with different tones, genres, and voices in their work, etc.’⁹⁸.

However, listening to some of our interviewees and reading the policy documents produced by their organisations, the concerns for the cultural and creative sectors associated with AI have been so far outweighing the benefits it brings. The discourse on AI as an opportunity to foster creativity or optimise working processes is quite insipid amidst the stories about legal cases against AI companies⁹⁹ or strikes of writers triggered by the AI advancement among other factors¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁶ Pearle*, EFA 2023, *The Ultimate Cookbook for Cultural Managers. Connecting the EU Digital Strategy with Live Performance Organisations*.

⁹⁷ Stanford University 2024, *Welcome to the 2024 AI Index Report*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://aiindex.stanford.edu/report/>

⁹⁸ Society of Audiovisual Authors 2023, *Artificial intelligence must serve society and enhance human creativity*, p. 1

⁹⁹ JDSupra 21 July 2023, *Five Takeaways From the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Intellectual Property’s AI and Copyright Hearing*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/five-takeaways-from-the-u-s-senate-6730697/>; Lanz, J A 5 June 2023, *AI Art Wars: Japan Says AI Model Training Doesn’t Violate Copyright*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://decrypt.co/143461/ai-art-wars-japan-says-ai-model-training-doesnt-violate-copyright>

¹⁰⁰ Koblin, J & Barnes, B 27 September 2023, *The New York Times, What’s the Latest on the Writers’ Strike?*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/wga-writers-strike-hollywood.html>





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No surprise that policymakers' and legislators' interest in AI has been on the rise in the past couple of years¹⁰¹. The EU Artificial Intelligence Act entered into force on 1 August 2024, which is a unique law of such type worldwide. One key provision requires generative AI systems to disclose that the content was AI-generated and to provide detailed summaries of the copyrighted material used for training the AI tool¹⁰². Some of the sector experts who spoke about AI during our interviews, said that the AI Act is a step forward, but just the beginning, as there are still some gaps to be addressed¹⁰³.

In the meantime, some professions, such as translators, photographers, writers, designers, illustrators, and music composers, are being challenged by the prospect - and for some, the reality - of being replaced by generative AI applications. The dilution of human labour and decreasing work opportunities reported across various creative sectors are compounded by the transparency, intellectual property, and remuneration issues, related to how creative works are used to train AI.

¹⁰¹ Stanford University 2023, Welcome to the 2023 AI Index Report, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://aiindex.stanford.edu/ai-index-report-2023/>

¹⁰² European Parliament 13 March 2024, Press Release, Artificial Intelligence Act: MEPs adopt landmark law, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240308IPR19015/artificial-intelligence-act-meps-adopt-landmark-law#:~:text=It%20aims%20to%20protect%20fundamental,risks%20and%20level%20of%20impact.>

¹⁰³ The text and data mining exception (TDM) of the Article 4 of the 2019 Copyright Directive allows any AI company to use copyright-protected works, unless right holders have reserved this use, putting the burden of action and proof on the right holders instead of on AI companies. SAA demands that the Commission 'clarifies that the TDM exception does not apply to generative AI and that the right to authorise or prohibit such a use shall remain with the authors of protected works and apply in a generative AI context'. Society of Audiovisual Authors 2023, Artificial intelligence must serve society and enhance human creativity.





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Some of the experts in the sector we spoke to attest that these developments negatively impact creative workers' livelihoods, and some professions such as literary translators might be facing a talent exodus. In other sectors, generative AI systems tend to distort the creative labour ecosystem, putting especially junior and mid-level jobs under strain. 'Established authors might experience fewer troubles, while those who need to try things out and gain experience can be particularly challenged by AI, yet this phase is also important in one's career', one of our interview contributors reflected, 'Look at Justine Triet, who won the Cannes Film Festival last year with *Anatomy of a Fall*. This was her fourth film, and the first three went mostly unnoticed, yet they were important for her career to advance'.

It is widely acknowledged that many jobs, well beyond the cultural sector, are at risk due to the current AI boom, which shows no signs of ending¹⁰⁴. The disruption of the job market at large, without robust solutions in place such as basic income, risks causing profound problems for the welfare system and widening inequalities. In this regard, Teemu Mäki, Finnish artist and theatre director and President of the International Association of Art (IAA) Europe, provocatively wondered: 'Will we be able to create a society in which technology truly liberates us from the yoke of irksome jobs, the rat race of production and consumption, and the increasingly fierce competition on the labour market?'¹⁰⁵.

As some of the interviewees affirmed, the promise of technologies to emancipate people from 'boring' jobs and make their lives more fulfilling simply does not match the economic system we live in. For this to happen,

¹⁰⁴ Clark, E 18 August 2023, *Forbes*, *Unveiling The Dark Side Of Artificial Intelligence In The Job Market*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/elijahclark/2023/08/18/unveiling-the-dark-side-of-artificial-intelligence-in-the-job-market/>

¹⁰⁵ Mäki, T 25 May 2023, *AI is coming – who is ready?*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.artists.fi/en/ai-coming-who-ready>





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there might be the need for a drastic redistribution of wealth. But the current development of the AI business has nothing to do with this and may even be at odds with it.

Naomi Klein expressed it in her article ‘AI machines aren’t “hallucinating”. But their makers are’:

We live under capitalism, and under that system, the effects of flooding the market with technologies that can plausibly perform the economic tasks of countless working people is not that those people are suddenly free to become philosophers and artists. It means that those people will find themselves staring into the abyss – with actual artists among the first to fall¹⁰⁶.

According to the interviewed experts, AI does not only erode the livelihoods of authors, visual artists, illustrators, composers and other creative workers, but also undermines their dignity. As one of them put it: ‘Culture is hurt by the bizarre idea that machines could be better. Cultural professionals were robbed. It is hardly possible to go back and pay for stolen content.’ Naomi Klein called this the ‘largest and most consequential theft in human history’ committed by the richest companies, such as Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta, and Amazon, who decided to use all the human knowledge that exists on the Internet, without asking for any permission, and turn this knowledge into proprietary products¹⁰⁷.

Is it possible that we - not as a cultural sector but as the society at large - actually accept this theft and believe in the ‘bizarre idea that machines could be better’? Mäki is quite pessimistic in this regard: ‘we are not safe,

¹⁰⁶ Klein N, 8 May 2023, AI machines aren’t ‘hallucinating’. But their makers are, The Guardian, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/08/ai-machines-hallucinating-naomi-klein>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid





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because generative AI can also alter our mediascape so that our literacy skills and understanding deteriorate¹⁰⁸. Geoffrey Hinton, often referred to as ‘the godfather of AI’, left a job at Google to speak freely about the threats AI poses, including the possible perspective that we will ‘not be able to know what is true anymore’¹⁰⁹. He also asked for a pause in AI development, yet we know how things have gone.

What might create a distance between today where not everything is lost yet, and the gloomy tomorrow in which AI companies or AI systems themselves are absolute world rulers, is the value of human creativity. Ultimately this debate is about *how and why we value creativity*.

We can refer back to the unique value of art to be unexpected, to be disruptive, impactful, surprising, touching, shocking. ‘I’m sure that one of the main reasons why people go to concerts and dance, theatre and opera performances is the fact that they offer experiences that are completely different from anything they experience using digital devices¹¹⁰’, Mäki reflects.

We can also consider that interacting with art and culture is, in one way or another, a dialogue with another human being. By trying to understand the artist’s message, intentions, and standpoints, we may agree or disagree, but we engage in a meaningful exchange. Art, created with intention and imbued with values, drives our debate about what we are as a society. While AI might have biases, it lacks intentions, commitments, and values. Therefore, interacting with AI-generated products is a completely different

¹⁰⁸ Mäki, T 25 May 2023, AI is coming – who is ready?, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.artists.fi/en/ai-coming-who-ready>

¹⁰⁹ Kleinman, Z, Vallance, C BBC News 2 May 2023, AI ‘godfather’ Geoffrey Hinton warns of dangers as he quits Google, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65452940>

¹¹⁰ Mäki, T 25 May 2023, AI is coming – who is ready?, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.artists.fi/en/ai-coming-who-ready>





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experience. Finally, making art - being involved in an artistic process, writing, drawing, painting, or composing - brings a unique type of joy that we cannot simply relinquish to technology.

Some believe that human creativity will persevere no matter what, and the more AI-generated content there is, the more people will appreciate the human essence of man-made art. The future might be that we have both types of art - human-made and artificial one, and both will have their fans, but the latter will not replace the former. If AI is properly regulated and made human-centred, the world of human culture will continue to thrive, valued for the unique features it offers.

But to get there, we must foresee a battle as there are some serious risks involved. First, AI experts themselves starkly warn that these systems will only get smarter. It is important to remember that our judgement on what AI can do is always based on what AI can do today; what it can do tomorrow is not (publically) known. Second, some of the powerful governments are not immediately supportive of human creativity over machines: for instance, during the negotiations of the EU AI Act, Germany, France, and Italy risked undermining all progress, as the rules for advanced AI models would constrain Europe's AI champions, such as France's Mistral and Germany's Aleph Alpha¹¹¹. Meanwhile, AI-generated artworks are starting to win awards meant for humans: a German photographer, the 'author' of an AI-generated piece, had to confess that his submission was an experiment and rejected the award, or else no one would have noticed that the awarded piece was actually machine-made¹¹².

¹¹¹ Volpicelli, G 2 February 2024, POLITICO, EU countries strike deal on landmark AI rulebook, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-countries-strike-deal-ai-law-act-technology/>

¹¹² Grierson, J 17 April 2023, The Guardian, Photographer admits prize-winning image was AI-generated, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/apr/17/photographer-admits-prize-winning-image-was-ai-generated>





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It seems that *trust* is the key pillar emerging as vital in this story. Can we trust businesses to halt in time, recognising when something more dangerous than profit loss is emerging? Can we trust that algorithms will adopt the consciousness that will prevent them from destroying the notion of knowledge and truthfulness? Will governments be vigilant enough to resolve this dilemma before irreversible damage is done? Will people eventually miss art created by human artists, having messages to convey and intentions to share? Will they finally realise that for art to be there, artists need to be protected and remunerated? Can we believe in artists to recognise the red lines, and to opt-out when necessary? Will art remain powerful no matter what?

This chapter can be concluded with the words of one of our interviewees:

We are in the most interesting debate of humankind, and it is only the beginning. We have to ask ourselves an important question: should we use machines against humans? In fact, humans and machines are already standing in opposition to each other. The new Members of the European Parliament and the new European Commission will shape the future. They need to have a standpoint. They are the ones to blame or celebrate. They have only five tiny little years.

The key demands put forward by European and International sector associations and networks encompass several aspects. Firstly, they advocate for a right for authors to authorise or opt-out from the usage of their work for generative AI purposes. Furthermore, if copyrighted material is used for commercial purposes, such as AI training, right-holders must be remunerated for their work. Collective Management Organisations should play a role in licensing the use of the audiovisual works on behalf of the authors who wish so.

The transparency obligations introduced by the EU AI Act appear unsatisfactory for several sector representatives. As SAA stated in their policy paper, 'We believe that a





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summary of training data alone is not sufficient to ensure that authors can enforce their claims. Instead, a comprehensive and up-to-date list of the protected works used by generative AI systems for training purposes is required. In addition, we ask for clear and strict rules on the labelling of AI generated production as such.' They also oppose granting copyright protection to AI-generated production with no author attached. The 'Authors', performers', and other creative workers' organisations joint statement on generative artificial intelligence and the EU AI Act' calls on EU decision-makers to engage in a comprehensive and democratic debate to establish a clear legal framework that preserves the rights and integrity of creators' works. This framework should address the numerous open issues linked to the TDM exception and clarify the terms of its possible extension to generative AI. The European Council of Literary Translators' Associations (CEATL) also demands that there should be no public funding for publishing with generative AI: 'Public policies are crucial for the industry: the market alone cannot sustain the vibrant cultural life of a modern country. The economic interests behind AI do not need to be incentivised'. The Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO), advocates the Establishment of a European AI innovation hub for cultural heritage - a dedicated competency centre, to foster creativity, innovation and collaboration, to centralise expertise and knowledge and to face challenges for the sector associated with AI.

Autonomy of culture: a shrinking space?

The waning agency for the cultural sector, amidst Europe's shifting political landscape and the overall reality of polycrisis, was brought up by almost all experts we spoke to. Political pressure on cultural institutions, political instrumentalisation of the arts, and the dwindling support for diverse cultural work were highlighted either as current events or something that is likely to characterise the future. 'In many places in Europe, the arts might soon be faced with difficult decisions, balancing between preserving public support and retaining their autonomy', one of our interviews reflected.

Others spoke about the growing political pressure on cultural institutions, recognising that it is a trend that is hard to measure at this point, for many





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reasons, including because many institutions are hesitant to discuss these issues publicly. For instance, to grasp the scale of the trend, NEMO - the Network of European Museum Organisations has conducted an anonymous survey to gather an overview of the status quo of political influence and effects of polarisation on museums in Europe¹¹³.

The unease with the modalities of how the world of culture interplays with the world of politics was also distinctly traceable in the survey comments. A representative of a network defending cultural rights and community culture, shared: 'As we see the turn toward more authoritarian and populist regimes also across all government levels, we are aware of the likely intensification of the need to be both resilient and resistant in our everyday actions and strategies in the next five years.' Other respondents referred to the lack of autonomy as a long-standing trend: 'Being a public agency sometimes means to depend on political winds. That is the work of cultural professionals. More bureaucracy, more politicised agendas and a use of culture for the image and the political brand.'

¹¹³ Network of European Museum Organisations 18 July 2024', Contribute to questionnaire on museums and political influence, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.ne-mo.org/news-events/article/contribute-to-questionnaire-on-museums-and-political-influence>





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What is happening to artistic freedom¹¹⁴ in Europe? How has this issue, long associated with undemocratic regimes, become a growing concern for the cultural sector in countries that traditionally scored high on guaranteeing rights?

State of artistic freedom in Europe

Looking at the Global Expression Report 2024 by Article 19, the level of freedom of expression worldwide is stagnant, with 40 countries labelled as being in a situation of crisis¹¹⁵. However, the majority of EU member states are categorised as ‘open’ countries: out of 38 ‘open’ countries on the map, 19 are EU members. Additionally, seven EU member states fall into the ‘less restricted’ category, and one - Hungary - is labelled as ‘restricted’¹¹⁶.

To the extent it matters, it is important to note that freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitutions of all EU member states. Specifically, artistic freedom is protected in the overwhelming majority of EU member

¹¹⁴ UNESCO defines artistic freedom as ‘the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the wellbeing of societies’. According to UNESCO, Artistic freedom embodies the following rights: the right to create without censorship or intimidation; the right to have artistic work supported, distributed, remunerated; the right to freedom of movement; the right to freedom of association; the right to protection of social and economic rights; the right to participate in cultural life. UNESCO 2019, last seen 5 September 2024,

https://www.unesco.org/creativity/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/01/artistic_freedom_pdf_web.pdf

¹¹⁵ Article 19 n.d., Global Expression Report 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.globalexpressionreport.org/#regions>

¹¹⁶ You can read here about the methodology applied by Article 19 to track data on freedom of expression, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.globalexpressionreport.org/methodology>





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states, primarily through their constitutions or dedicated laws¹¹⁷. However, the various exceptions to this guarantee - the situations in which restrictions of freedom are made legal - are usually stipulated within the same regulatory frameworks or in a special law, and encompass a wide range of instances, such as insult to the head of state and officials, security threats, or blasphemy¹¹⁸.

Some advancements happened in this domain in the last decade: there has been a positive trend in recent years towards abolition of blasphemy laws, notably in Ireland (2021), Greece (2019) and Malta (2016)¹¹⁹. Furthermore, in 2023, Malta passed the Artistic Expression (Enhancement) Act, which serves to amend both the Criminal Code and the Electronic Communications (Regulation) Act. According to this new law, spoken or written words expressed on the Internet will not be considered an offence if they are part of artistic, satirical, comic, or cultural expression¹²⁰.

Furthermore, artistic freedom has been one of the priorities of the EU Work Plan for Culture since 2019, and freedom of artistic expression was for the first time featured as one of the guiding principles of the EU's Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, which recognises it as 'fundamental to the human ability to address challenges, to think critically, to innovate and to invent'¹²¹.

The increasing political and discursive value attached to the freedom of artistic expression might however be at odds with what is happening on the ground. Stories from various corners of Europe bring evidence that

¹¹⁷ Creatives Unite n.d., This is how we work, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://creativesunite.eu/work-condition/> (see section 'Artistic freedom')

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Whyatt, S 2022 Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe, p. 28

¹²⁰ Creatives Unite n.d., This is how we work, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://creativesunite.eu/work-condition/> (see section 'Artistic freedom')

¹²¹ Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, Annex I (1)





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publicly funded institutions have been increasingly under political pressure. Examples include political removals of cultural institution directors in Poland¹²²; discontinuation of hiring foreign directors for Italian museums¹²³; the resignation of the Documenta 16 Finding Committee in Germany¹²⁴; and more.

State interference in public institutions has triggered distrust among some artists, leading them to seek out commercial, private, fringe, and alternative spaces instead¹²⁵. However, the situation of independent cultural players seems to be challenging too. As Reset!, The European network of independent cultural and media organisations, stated in their Atlas of Independent Culture and Media (2024):

From war, to obscurantist, reactionary, and authoritarian forces coming to power in several countries - exerting an unusual pressure of censorship on freedom of expression and cultural exchange - to private corporations massively buying up entire fringes of the cultural and media space,

¹²² Shaw, A 30 May 2022, The Art Newspaper, 'A shock to the community worldwide': directors of Tate, Guggenheim and MoMA condemn ousting of Polish museum head, last seen 5 September 2024

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/05/30/a-shock-to-the-museum-community-worldwide-leading-museum-directors-condemn-ousting-of-polish-museum-head>; Lawson-Tancred, J 11 September 2023, artnet, The Ouster of a Warsaw Museum Director Has Incited Outcry Among Culture Workers Who Say the Move Was Politically Motivated, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/wasilewska-ousted-polish-asia-museum-2360829>

¹²³ Imam, J 6 February 2024, The Art Newspaper Is Italy's government meddling in who runs top museums?, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/02/06/is-italys-government-meddling-in-who-runs-top-museums>

¹²⁴ e-flux 16 November 2023, Documenta Resignation Letter Simon Njami, Gong Yan, Kathrin Rhomberg, and María Inés Rodríguez, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/575919/documenta-resignation-letter>

¹²⁵ Whyatt, S 2022 Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe, p. 34





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*independent scenes are now, more than ever, under multiple threats
[...]¹²⁶.*

One of their five policy proposals featured in the Atlas is the establishment of an Observatory on Threats to Independence in the Cultural and Media Sectors, with a specific mandate to monitor ownership and antitrust concentration in the European cultural and media sector¹²⁷.

Sara Whyatt and Ole Reitov, artistic freedom experts and authors of the report ‘The Fragile Triangle of Artistic Freedom’ (2024), confirm that violations and censorship of artistic freedom are under-reported. This is because few civil society organisations work in this area, and those that do are often understaffed, suffer from insecure funding, and face many challenges in collecting, monitoring, and analysing information. Unlike media protection organisations, which receive verified reports on attacks from professional unions and individuals worldwide, the organisations documenting artistic freedom violations rarely get information from organisations representing artists¹²⁸. Moreover, the support of democratic countries to the promotion and defence of artistic freedom started to decline¹²⁹.

For Whyatt, these trends explain the increasingly fragile situation of artistic freedom in Europe, aggravated by the myriad ‘under-radar’ threats. Those ‘under-radar’ factors - unlike the obvious freedom violations, such as arrests, prosecution, or physical threats - can be as harmful and are typically more difficult to detect, monitor and address. These issues are diverse and include undue government pressure on cultural institutions,

¹²⁶ Reset! 2024, Atlas of Independent Culture and Media, p. 4

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 14

¹²⁸ Reitov, O & Whyatt, S 2024, The Fragile Triangle of Artistic Freedom A Study of the Documentation and Monitoring of Artistic Freedom in the Global Landscape, p. 9

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 10





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artists being ‘blacklisted’ for their political views, gender, or minority status, and more. Pressure on art organisations and artists from individuals who may or may not be affiliated with governments can also prevent free expression¹³⁰.

Artistic freedom can also be hindered in more subtle ways, like restricting access to infrastructure and funding opportunities, and simply creating unsustainable economic conditions for artists and cultural workers. These obstacles create an environment that encourages self-censorship¹³¹.

Self-censorship has indeed become one of the most discussed barriers to artistic freedom in today’s Europe. But as such self-censorship never appears in a vacuum, it is rather a by-product of a reality characterised by other barriers for freedoms, even if not recognised as such¹³². First of all, we live in a context of shrinking resources and multiple shocks, such as conflicts, climate disasters, and social unrest. Emergency policy-making, as was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be a pathway to compromising freedoms and possibly surpassing the limits of the necessary¹³³. In parallel, crucial ethical and social agendas, such as equity, security, public health, climate crisis, and privacy - all emerging simultaneously - pose a challenge to the balance between our rights and responsibilities. This balance has long been observed and discussed, but as our growing awareness amplifies our responsibilities, the ways in which we exercise our rights seem to evolve too.

Moreover, our public domain has never been as fragmented and polarised, which is a result of several factors, one of which is the algorithmic culture of the digital world we interact with, such as search engines, social media

¹³⁰ Whyatt, S 2022 *Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe*, p. 33

¹³¹ IFACCA 2023, *Summit Report Safeguarding Artistic Freedom*, p. 12

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 20

¹³³ Whyatt, S 2022 *Free to Create: Artistic Freedom in Europe*, p. 31





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and streaming platforms. As IETM's report 'Lost in transition?', describes it:

A diminishing sense of community confines individuals to their personal lives or bubbles, including digital ones. A symptom of this polarisation is the declining ability to read social moods and predict changes, exemplified by the genuine shock people experience when a politician they don't follow is elected or a measure they deemed unrealistic is voted on in a referendum¹³⁴.

The fragmentation and polarisation of the public domain mirrors and amplifies the political and public opinion divide in Europe. Both conservative and progressive movements spark heated debates on issues like harassment, racism, abortion, immigration, and minority rights. This political polarisation often surfaces in the cultural arena, where art becomes a symbolic battleground¹³⁵. In the meantime, as everything increasingly becomes a matter of 'their vs. our' opinion, we are learning to frame our messages to fit societal expectations. This way, we avoid undermining our position or being misunderstood by our 'echo chambers'.

Could it be that we are proactively exercising self-censorship? Will there be a moment when we will need to unlearn it? Could it be that we will struggle to unlearn it then?

The shift to the right

The political shift to the right in several European countries in recent years has raised concerns among our interviewees about the autonomy of artistic creation. They specifically point to potential or ongoing budget cuts for the cultural sectors and the risk of funding being used to promote nationalist narratives.

¹³⁴ IETM 2024, Lost in Transition. Report from the IETM Focus Luxembourg Meeting, p. 10.

¹³⁵ IFACCA 2023, Summit Report Safeguarding Artistic Freedom, p. 24





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However, some of our interlocutors noted that the impact of the right-wing shift varies across different European countries and does not necessarily mean the same in all of them. It largely depends on factors such as the wider political and social context, the historical relationship between institutions and governments, and the country's discursive connection to its own past. These elements can determine whether right-wing political forces view the cultural sectors as potential partners in promoting specific narratives, or see art and culture as the very sources of everything these parties are fighting against.

The State of Culture Barometer survey results demonstrate that respondents are rather uncomfortable with the task of promoting national identities: more than 45% of respondents disagree with the statement, 'Culture's key role is to shape, preserve, and promote national identities', while 28% are neutral about it, and 27% endorse it. This statement received the least agreement among the eight statements about culture's role proposed in the survey. Moreover, only 13% of respondents selected 'Shaping/promoting/preserving your country's national identity' as one of the areas in which their organisation/activity contributes the most.

However, there is less unease among respondents in accepting 'consolidating national identity' as a priority for their national ministry of culture. A majority of respondents - 36.7% - are neutral about it, 33.3% find it irrelevant, and 29.6% think it is relevant. It is still one of the 12 proposed priorities in the survey that is deemed irrelevant by the highest number of respondents. This is followed by 'Enhancing the global standing of the country's culture,' which was marked as relevant by 42%, irrelevant by 21%, and 36.7% of respondents are neutral regarding this as a priority for the ministry of culture.

When it comes to the contraposing national cultural identity and immigrant cultures, respondents' position is more explicit: almost 67% disagree with the statement 'As a cultural worker, I prioritise preserving the cultural identity of my country over learning about the cultures of immigrants'; 23% are neutral, and 10% agree with it.





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In short, respondents do not see their work as instrumental in strengthening national identities, especially over learning about other cultures. However, slightly more people accept national ministries of culture focusing on consolidating national identity.

At the same time, there are many similarities in how these political movements approach culture. Examining manifestos and programmes of some of the right-wing parties, we see that culture is often conflated with broader concepts like language, traditions, values, and identities. For instance, the first lines of the party programme of Vlaams Belang / Flemish Interest state: ‘Culture is more than art. In addition to artistic activities such as painting, drawing, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, making music, writing, or filming, culture also includes a shared language, religion, heritage, traditions, customs, norms, and values’¹³⁶. This conflation of culture with broader notions is also detected by the research by Olli Jakonena, Vappu Renko and Tobias Harding, who analysed the cultural policies of two populist parties: the Finns Party in Finland and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden¹³⁷.

In some manifestos, culture as such is much less distinctly featured, but the framing of it appears evident from the type of other things it is lumped together within the same chapter. For instance, in the section ‘Democracy, Culture, and Public Broadcasting’, the Party for Freedom / PVV (the Netherlands) talks about protecting traditions (referring to Christmas and Easter) and the rights of ‘native Dutch people’ who became victims of ‘positive discrimination’ and ‘affirmative action’ which, according to the party, the arts, together with broadcasting, politics, academia and many municipalities, have been promoting¹³⁸.

¹³⁶ Vlaams Belang 202, Vlaanderen Weer Van Ons, p. 76

¹³⁷ Jakonen, O., Renko, V., & Harding, T. (2024). Challenging the Nordic model? The cultural policies of populist parties in Finland and Sweden. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2313520>

¹³⁸ Partij Voor Vrijheid 2023, Nederlanders Weer Op 1, pp. 29–30





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Rassemblement National (France) does not feature ‘culture’ as a separate theme of its programme, but does offer a 20-page plan and vision on heritage. This document extensively talks about historical monuments, highlighting their role for boosting tourism and ‘convention cultural and civilisational values’, and putting forward various measures such as teaching heritage at schools, and introducing ‘a six-month renewable national heritage service, open to 18-24-year-olds on a voluntary basis’¹³⁹. When it comes to the past, the Dutch PVV aims to protect ‘historical heroes from leftist hatred’ and retract ‘apologies for the slavery past and police actions, such as those made by the King’¹⁴⁰.

In relation to public funding, the approaches are quite different. Vlaams Belang proposes to raise the cultural budget up to 2% of the Flemish budget, stressing that ‘only initiatives that promote Flemish culture or have social utility will be financed with Flemish tax money’¹⁴¹. They also want a ‘full-fledged place for cultural education’ and less administrative burden for artists. PVV of the Netherlands puts forward a very brief promise ‘to stop art and culture subsidies’¹⁴². The French Rassemblement National aspires to rebalance the budget between heritage and creation, allocating half for each¹⁴³.

The concern about freedom of expression is not alien to right-wing and populist parties either. The Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats link it with the perceived ideological influence of traditional media on one side, and the potential benefits of digital and social media in advancing a conservative-nationalist agenda on the other¹⁴⁴. For many right-wing

¹³⁹ Rassemblement National n.d., *Le patrimoine*, p. 7, p. 14, p. 15, p. 17

¹⁴⁰ Partij Voor Vrijheid 2023, *Nederlanders Weer Op 1*, pp. 29-30

¹⁴¹ Vlaams Belang 202, *Vlaanderen Weer Van Ons*, p. 77

¹⁴² Partij Voor Vrijheid 2023, *Nederlanders Weer Op 1*, pp. 29-30

¹⁴³ Rassemblement National n.d., *Le patrimoine*, p. 16

¹⁴⁴ Jakonen, O., Renko, V., & Harding, T. (2024). Challenging the Nordic model? The cultural policies of populist parties in Finland and Sweden. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2313520>





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parties, freedom of expression is also about liberating cultural space from ‘political correctness’. For instance, CHEGA!, a right-wing party in Portugal ‘promotes a true culture of political and cultural freedom, strongly opposing the constraints that persist in the public space and in political debate [...]’¹⁴⁵. For some of them, it is about liberating from ‘one-sided’ view of history; for example, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), affirms: ‘The current narrowing of German culture of remembrance to the period of National Socialism must be broken in favour of a broader view of history that also includes the positive, identity-forming aspects of German history’¹⁴⁶.

What is artistic freedom today?

The emergence of differences and conflicting with each other (or not?) interpretations of freedom of expression are brightly illustrated by such cultural events as the exhibition ‘Political Art’ at the Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw (2021) and the launch of the Museu de l’Art Prohibit (Museum of Forbidden Art) in Barcelona (2023). Both are dedicated to giving a platform to art censored in different countries worldwide.

The ‘Political Art’ was created under director Piotr Bernatowicz, who was appointed in 2019 by Poland’s conservative ruling party. The exhibition was announced as a celebration of free speech, and a challenge to political correctness and ‘cancel culture’ on the political left, providing space for rebellious artists banned elsewhere, such as those from Iran and Yemen critical of oppression in the Muslim world, but also artists that were forbidden because of the use of swastikas or Holocaust symbols, for

¹⁴⁵ CHEGA 2021, Programa Político 2021, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://partidochega.pt/index.php/manifesto/>

¹⁴⁶ Alternative for Germany (AfD) – Policy programme for Germany n.d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.afd.de/grundsatzprogramm/#7>





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instance, Dan Park, a Swedish provocateur who has been jailed on hate crimes in Sweden¹⁴⁷. The Museu de l'Art Prohibit, also consists of works that have been denounced or removed from exhibitions. This includes drawings by former prisoners in the Guantánamo Bay internment camp, some censored paintings by Pablo Picasso, and photographs of Ai Wei Wei; some works criticise consumerist society, others address gender inequalities¹⁴⁸.

While both events could describe themselves in similar terms, their content and messages raise the question: what do we understand by 'artistic freedom' today?

'Artistic freedom' might have been on people's tongues much longer than many of the global challenges faced by the cultural sector today, such as the boom of generative AI, the climate crisis, or social fragmentation. Yet, what do we mean by 'artistic freedom'? Even if we brush away the political diversification of discourses about it, it seems that even cultural workers themselves have a fragmented understanding of artistic freedom.

It might be true that in certain political contexts we may prefer to name issues differently to avoid controversies or simply miss the attention of policy-makers who still think that artistic freedom is 'a matter of the third world'. Yet there seems to be another level of our fragmented understanding of this concept.

¹⁴⁷ Gera, V 18 August 2021, AP, Polish art show defies 'cancel culture' but some see racism, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-business-europe-arts-and-entertainment-race-and-ethnicity-5falc7ba22916dca671efacf7bd91242>

¹⁴⁸ Burgen, S 24 October 2023, The Guardian, A triumph of freedom of expression': censored art museum opens in Spain, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/oct/23/museum-censored-art-opens-barcelona-museu-de-art-prohibit>





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Looking at the results of our State of Culture Barometer, the majority of respondents (43%) indicate that existing funding schemes do not provide them with sufficient creative freedom, while 21% disagree with the statement and 37% are neutral. More than 70% confirm that it is difficult to earn a living solely through arts and culture in their country, with only 11% thinking otherwise. Additionally, the majority of respondents (44%) do not believe that decision-making in cultural policies in their country is open and allows citizens to influence outcomes, while 33% agree with the statement. However, when asked whether they can express their artistic views freely and safely in their countries, more than 80% responded positively, and only 8% said they cannot.

Although these conditions are different from each other, it appears that respondents do not directly link their social and economic situation, access to funding, and ability to influence cultural policies with ability to express themselves freely. However, ultimately, these factors are critical in enabling or preventing one from exercising artistic freedom - in today's Europe, perhaps, more than direct censorship or repression.

IFACCA's Summit Report (2023) identified a fragmented approach to artistic freedom as one of the barriers to its protection and exercise: 'Individual elements of artistic freedom – like social rights, freedom of expression, or the right to participate in cultural life – are often addressed in isolation, with some receiving disproportionate attention while others are neglected'¹⁴⁹.

This leads to the reality in which artistic freedom is excluded from important regulatory frameworks and policies. For example, certain laws focusing on disadvantaged groups may protect people as citizens but fail to recognise their cultural rights, hindering their access to culture and artistic careers and undermining their right to participate in cultural life. Furthermore, artistic freedom is sometimes treated as an isolated issue,

¹⁴⁹ IFACCA 2023, *Summit Report Safeguarding Artistic Freedom*, p. 21





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without considering the broader ecosystem that supports its exercise, including factors such as climate, equality, intellectual property, international relations, and labour¹⁵⁰.

When listening to workshop participants in Malmö discuss what governments should do to unleash the transformative power of culture, it became clear that for the cultural sector to be powerful and impactful, it must be provided with sustainable and respectful conditions. This means creating an environment where cultural workers can develop and work freely, without constraints from lack of funding, dysfunctional protection systems, or hyper-instrumentalisation. Trust is the vital component of an environment for culture to thrive. The autonomy of culture shrinks when there is no trust in its true value.

Some may argue that debating terminology is rather sterile, if not useless. We can simultaneously fight for fair working conditions, minority rights, and gender equality without lumping everything under the umbrella of 'artistic freedom.' Indeed, there might be no need for it. However, as we continue to raise the issue of artistic freedom, which may become even more relevant in the years to come, it is essential to understand the root causes of why we may feel our autonomy is shrinking.

Past, present, and future: repairing the bridge, fixing the balance

In July 2024, Ursula von der Leyen was re-elected the European Commission President. Her candidate programme 2024-2029 assured: 'We will focus on the things that make up our European way of life: our culture and history. I want to make it easier for people – especially younger generations – to benefit from our rich and diverse cultural heritage'¹⁵¹.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ursula von der Leyen 18 July 2024, Europe's Choice, Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029, p. 20





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This is the only reference to culture in the 31-page document, hinting that, over the next five years, the European Commission's central perception of the value of culture for Europe will be shaped through the narratives of its heritage.

This aligns with the programme of the European People's Party (EPP) group, the largest political group in the newly elected Parliament, holding 188 seats, and the largest group in the newly formed Committee for Culture and Education, with eight out of 30 members representing the EPP¹⁵². The culture part of EPP's manifesto places particular attention on cultural heritage, which is for them the foundation of the European integration process. Among EPP's envisaged initiatives in the field of culture are the creation of a Digital Museum of European Culture, which 'digitally connects the most important museums', and the establishment of a European Cultural Heritage Fund. They view culture as essential to the 'European way of life' and perceive cultural heritage as a potential driver for tourism¹⁵³.

The Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union stipulates the competencies of the EU in the field of culture as 'to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States'¹⁵⁴. The treaty does not explicitly broadcast the idea of a 'European culture' or a 'shared culture' among Union member states'; however, it does refer to a 'common cultural heritage':

¹⁵² European Parliament - Committees - CULT - Members n. d. last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/cult/home/members>

¹⁵³ European Peoples' Party n. d., EPP's 2024 Manifesto, Our Europe, a safe and good home for the people, p. 19

¹⁵⁴ Official Journal of the European Union 2016, The Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, art. 6





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The Union shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore¹⁵⁵.

The treaty further refers to ‘conservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage of European significance’ as one of the areas in which the Union encourages the cooperation between the member states, as well as supporting and supplementing their actions¹⁵⁶.

As noted by Roel During, the ‘pluralist cultural perspective’ which highlights the differences that exist among European cultures, was nourished in the process leading to this Treaty. For instance, the Declaration supporting a European Charter of Culture states: ‘acceptance of the Constitutional Treaty for Europe involves the adoption of cultural diversity as a spearhead of the EU’¹⁵⁷. Indeed, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union emphasises the cultural diversity of the EU; yet, if there is anything considered shared, common, or European in the field of culture, it is cultural heritage. As Nina Obujen observed, this article (referring to its almost identical version in the Amsterdam Treaty) ‘at once pointed to a tension between two crucial concepts - an assumed shared history on the one hand, and the cultural diversity of the people now living in Europe on the other’¹⁵⁸.

In the last decades, significant efforts have been made to define, depict and articulate what the shared European heritage is, as well as to develop, preserve, and sustain it. Below we describe some of the initiatives in this field.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, art. 167(1)

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, art. 167(2)

¹⁵⁷ During, R 2010, *Cultural heritage discourses and Europeanisation: Discursive embedding of cultural heritage in Europe of the Regions*, p. 12

¹⁵⁸ Obuljen, N 2004, *Why we need European cultural policies*, p. 34





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Past and present: realigning the balance

One of the most famous EU initiatives in the field of cultural heritage was the designation and celebration of 2018 as the European Year of Cultural Heritage. More than 23,000 events in 37 countries were organised during that year, involving activities with schools, research, and actions fighting against illicit trafficking of cultural goods. In 2019, as a lasting legacy of the European Year, the Commission published a European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage, laying out 65 actions, and an expert group on cultural heritage was established¹⁵⁹.

Several initiatives aimed at highlighting the European dimension of heritage deserve mention. The European Heritage Awards / Europa Nostra Awards, launched in 2002, seek to identify and promote best practices in the conservation of cultural heritage while recognising innovative developments and new knowledge in the care and promotion of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage¹⁶⁰. Additionally, the European Heritage Days, co-organised by the European Union and the Council of Europe since 1985, involve thousands of monuments and sites opening their doors to the public, including many that are usually closed throughout the year¹⁶¹.

As part of the European Heritage Days, two other significant initiatives aim to explore the European dimension of heritage. The first is the Call for European Heritage Days Stories, which seeks to identify the European

¹⁵⁹ European Commission - Culture and Creativity - Cultural heritage - European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/eu-policy-for-cultural-heritage/european-year-of-cultural-heritage-2018>

¹⁶⁰ European Commission - Culture and Creativity - Cultural heritage - European Heritage Awards, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/initiatives-and-success-stories/european-heritage-awards>

¹⁶¹ European Commission - Culture and Creativity - Cultural heritage - European Heritage Days, last seen 5 September 2024,





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Dimension of heritage sites and the work undertaken by communities across Europe by sharing past or existing stories¹⁶². The second initiative is the Young European Heritage Makers, a competition for children and young people to encourage exploration, discovery, and expression of their heritage. This project aims to collect experiences and stories that show how children and young people understand the European dimension of their local heritage. Both tangible heritage, such as monuments and buildings, and intangible heritage, such as dancing, singing, or local cultural traditions, are eligible for these initiatives¹⁶³.

Furthermore, 67 heritage sites have been designated as the European Heritage Label sites. The label recognises European heritage sites that are ‘milestones on the way to the creation of today's Europe’; ‘they honour and symbolise European ideals and values as well as European history and integration’. The sites applying for label are required to prove that they have played an important role in the history and culture of Europe, or the European integration¹⁶⁴.

Moreover, heritage has been gaining more articulation, detail, and weight within the EU's cultural policy discourse in recent years, moving towards a more autonomous recognition, not just as part of the general ‘culture’. To start with, heritage receives a specific mention within the guiding principles of the current EU Work Plan for Culture: ‘culture, including cultural heritage, has an intrinsic value and contributes to strengthening

¹⁶² European Heritage Days - European Heritage Days Stories n. d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.europeanheritagedays.com/Story>

¹⁶³ European Heritage Days - Young European Heritage Makers n. d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.europeanheritagedays.com/Young-European-Heritage-Makers>

¹⁶⁴ European Heritage Days - European Heritage Label sites n. d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/initiatives-and-success-stories/european-heritage-label>





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European identity¹⁶⁵. In the Work Plan 2019-2022, this was about ‘culture’ in general, while the guiding principles back in 2015-2018 spoke about the intrinsic value of ‘culture and the arts’¹⁶⁶. Cultural heritage has long been included in the specific priorities and actions of the Work Plan for Culture. The notable feature of the current plan is that heritage is addressed within other priorities, such as sustainability (specifically in relation to climate adaptation and risk preparedness, renovation and re-use of cultural heritage, and the fight against illicit trafficking), and international relations (in relation to preserving cultural heritage in Ukraine)¹⁶⁷.

The rhetoric on cultural heritage has also evolved within the legal basis of the Creative Europe programme. Notably, it is more articulate and specific in the 2021 Regulation compared to the 2013 version. This change is related to the progress made in shaping the EU policy framework for cultural heritage, particularly the Commission's communication ‘Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe’ (2014) and the legacy of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, which resulted in the adoption of the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage. The 2021 document provides more recognition of the various values of cultural heritage and articulates the scope of what heritage includes in a more specific way, now extending to crafts and traditional trades related to

¹⁶⁵ Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/3

¹⁶⁶ Official Journal of the European Union 2014, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018), C 463/4; Official Journal of the European Union 2018, Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, C 460/13

¹⁶⁷ Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026





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cultural heritage restoration, as well as audiovisual archives and libraries¹⁶⁸.

The more elaborate framing of cultural heritage is also evident in the New European Agenda for Culture (2018) compared to the Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World (2007). This shift, inspired by the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, is reflected in a more detailed articulation of the role of heritage. Moreover, ‘protecting and valorising cultural heritage’ is one of the two cross-cutting actions of the New European Agenda for Culture¹⁶⁹.

It is often suggested that EU cultural policy was intentionally initiated in the 1970s-80s to foster a common European identity and sense of belonging, particularly in the context of the first EU enlargement. Imagining, debating, articulating, and cherishing what may be the ‘shared European heritage’ or ‘heritage of European significance’ is undoubtedly valuable for solidifying the European project and strengthening both individual and collective connections to a shared past. Can we imagine an equal portion of rigour invested in defining what the ‘shared cultural future of Europe’ might be? Could there be a pluralistic, provocative, yet productive debate about it, that would go beyond including some at the cost of excluding others?

In the documentary Take5* produced by the European Festivals Association, five renowned artists and a guest - a representative of the European Commission - discuss the issue of what makes Europe a united

¹⁶⁸ Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013

¹⁶⁹ European Commission 2018, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A New European Agenda for Culture, p. 8





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cultural entity. Georg Häusler, Director for Culture, Creativity and Sport in the European Commission shared his thoughts:

History is, perhaps, not a good building block, because we tend to have different points of view on historical events, even within small circles. I struggle with this idea of how to make people fall in love with the European Union, something which comes from the heart, not the brain. I believe it is the greatest invention of human mankind in politics, but it is not enough to base it on legal, technical and economic terms only. I think you need something else. And this something else is a very sensitive issue.

One of our interviewees reflected:

It is normal to seek a sense of belonging, a sense of a homeland. It seems to me Europe has abandoned the homeland concept to the right-wing. We need to work on a democratic, inclusive notion of Europe as a homeland.

To foster a sense of Europe as a homeland, we may need to assemble pluralistic, non-exclusionary narratives about what constitutes a ‘shared European cultural future’. While many of these narratives will be rooted in heritage, values, history, customs and ways of living, others will extend far beyond, exploring contemporary Europe and embracing its present-day nuances, challenges, hopes, and projections of a different, better future. Both the divergences and synergies among these various narratives can be equally surprising and valuable, just as the process of assembling them is itself significant.

‘History’ is still the second one mentioned by Eurobarometer respondents as the issue that creates a feeling of community among EU citizens. But the first one is ‘culture’¹⁷⁰.

¹⁷⁰ European Commission 2017, Standard Eurobarometer 87 - Graphs - European Citizenship, p. 47





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Today, there might be greater clarity in the cultural sector regarding the concept of 'European shared heritage' compared to 'European culture'. According to the State of Culture Barometer results, over 41% of EU-based respondents strongly disagree with the statement 'There is no such thing as a shared European cultural heritage,' while around 32% disagree with it. About 16% are neutral, and 7% and 3% respectively agree and strongly agree. In contrast, opinions on the statement 'There is no such thing as European culture' are slightly less polarised: 35% strongly disagree and 32% disagree, while 20% are neutral, and 7.5% and 4% respectively agree and strongly agree. The higher percentage of 'neutral' responses may be due to the vagueness and breadth of the term 'culture' compared to the more concrete notion of 'heritage'.

Among non-EU respondents, there is slightly more agreement and neutrality on both statements, with a more positive outlook on 'shared European heritage'. Specifically, 36% and 30% strongly disagree and disagree, respectively, with the statement on heritage, while 33% and 28% strongly disagree and disagree, respectively, with the statement on culture. Nearly 18% of non-EU respondents are neutral about both statements.

In summary, most EU residents who participated in the survey have a clearer understanding of shared heritage compared to the concept of 'European culture.' Non-EU residents are somewhat less certain or positive about the existence of both concepts.

From present to future: repairing the bridge

Cultural heritage is a major concern for national ministries responsible for culture in the EU member states; for the majority, it is a key part of their official mission. Our review of national cultural policy documents revealed a strong focus on four main areas related to heritage: the digitisation of cultural heritage, innovative forms of restoration and preservation of tangible heritage, adaptation to climate change and energy transition, and the role of cultural heritage in boosting tourism. Additionally, cultural heritage is seen as vital for shaping national identity, understanding the nation's past, and fostering a sense of belonging. There is a strong emphasis on the role of culture and art in 'connecting the past and the





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present', ensuring cultural continuity. This reflects both an expectation for contemporary artists to revive heritage narratives and an aspiration to innovate heritage institutions to make them more relevant to the present day.

Cultural policy discourse seems to embrace and propel the idea that understanding today's reality requires finding its roots in the past. By examining our history and heritage, we can shape contemporary perceptions of our identity as a community, society, or nation. While some policy approaches prioritise preserving the past over exploring its interaction with the present, the concept of culture as a bridge between yesterday and today is widely embraced in both European and national cultural policy-making. This narrative is evident not only in discourse but also in practical interventions. For instance, this was a key theme of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, reflected in its slogan, 'Our heritage: where the past meets the future'.

Yet, what is more challenging to find when analysing culture's role framed in policy terms is its concrete mission in guiding the pathway from present to future. Culture, beyond just cultural heritage, is rarely recognised within EU and national cultural policy discourse as an agent of transformative power, a key ingredient in reimagining societies, or a driver of profound change.

While cultural policy frameworks may acknowledge that culture helps us understand and imagine our world beyond the 'here and now,' the power given to culture is often constrained by expectations to propose ameliorative solutions to current problems. Instead of imagining what can come next, culture is pressured to focus on 'solving' existing issues, be it social disintegration, public health problems, traumas caused by conflicts, a lack of awareness about climate change, or other present-day issues.





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Political recognition of a bolder role for culture is not entirely absent. For instance, the European Green Party acknowledges culture's role in envisioning solutions and driving transformation. Their manifesto even includes a section titled 'Culture as a Spark of Change', highlighting the importance of experimentation and artistic freedom. They advocate for integrating culture into their Green and Social Deal. However, when reading other sections of the manifesto, it becomes apparent that culture is not given a central role in leading change, and the focus on its transformative power is limited to minimal references to cultural participation and culture for mental health healing strategies¹⁷¹.

Imagining the future is a tremendous and critical task today, whether it involves building on memories of the past or starting from future thinking. In her closing address to the Conference on the Future of Europe in May 2022, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said:

For Europe, the memory of our past has always framed our future. And that is all the more important at a time when the unthinkable has returned to our continent. Russia's flagrant attempts to redraw maps and rewrite even the most tragic parts of our history have reminded us of the dangers of losing our grip on both our past and our future. Of living in a perpetual present and thinking that things can never be different. That there cannot be better ways of doing things. And even worse: Those things will always stay the same if only we do not change. That is so wrong! Standing still is falling back¹⁷².

Culture, however, was not featured as a full-fledged change- and imagination-driver in the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of

¹⁷¹ As adopted by the 7th Extended Congress, Lyon, 4th February 2024, pp. 16, 18, 35.

¹⁷² European Commission 17 June 2022, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; Conference on the Future of Europe; Putting Vision into Concrete Action, p. 1





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Europe, which do not propose any new initiative related to culture and refer to the three proposals which had been already put forward: ‘recommendation on a common European data space for cultural heritage’; ‘peer-learning scheme on cultural heritage for cities and regions’; and ‘Voices of Culture, structured dialogue with the cultural sector’¹⁷³.

There might be various reasons why the political space for culture is saturated with interactions with the past but seems to be neglected when it comes to discussions about the future. As one of our interviewees observed: ‘It might be easier to engage with memories and history because these interactions rely on our interpretation. Contemporary creation is more autonomous in this regard; it may respond to - and disagree with - and challenge how you frame it’.

Another reason culture is not recognised as a catalyst of the future is yet again the issue of political trust in it. While the past, as a political concept, plays a significant role in shaping present-day narratives about identities and power, discussions about the future also have their own crucial dimension. Who do you trust to speak about your past? Who do you trust to influence your future? Both questions are essential, yet they are very different. Currently, culture - with its ephemeral, unpredictable, yet immense power - does not seem to enjoy an absolute trust by contemporary politics.

Nowadays, as we discussed in our first chapter, the future is typically viewed through various forms of calculation rather than through imaginative exercises. In the realm of politics, there is a demand for

¹⁷³ European Commission 17 June 2022, Annex to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; Conference on the Future of Europe; Putting Vision into Concrete Action, p. 28





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clarity, predictability, risk aversion, and the ability to understand and control the future; ‘a future of targets, dates, and deadlines’¹⁷⁴.

Political recognition of culture's role in driving transformation would require a high degree of trust in its potential. So, what would this role entail? Firstly, it would mean not being a mere tool, but rather an active agent. For instance, it would involve not just influencing people's behaviour to limit unsustainable consumption, but proposing an alternative model to a consumerist society. Instead of merely 'decorating' urban projects, culture would be the very foundation and goal of those projects. Rather than experimenting with methods to include people in social spaces, it would create spaces where everyone is a full-fledged member from the outset. Instead of just addressing mental health issues like depression and anxiety, it would reimagine systems to prevent, on a long term, these problems from arising in the first place.

What kind of shift in the cultural policy paradigm is needed to enable such a role for culture? We explored this issue in Malmö, and the responses were varied. One common theme in several contributions was the need for governments to move away from further instrumentalising culture. Instead, they should focus on empowering as many people as possible to actively participate in cultural activities. This involves supporting the cultural sector by ensuring sustainable and fair working conditions, as well as implementing strategies that engage society as a whole. A policy framework providing autonomy and sustainability for the cultural sectors, along with a ‘virus of culture’ that would reach every corner of society and every citizen, are essential for culture to unleash its imaginative and transformative powers.

What role for heritage?

Nowadays, heritage can hardly be discussed in isolation from current political shifts. It is widely noticed that heritage, memory politics and

¹⁷⁴ White, J 2024, *In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea*, pp. 10, 166





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nostalgia are of particular interest for right-wing, nationalistic parties - be it for the purpose of constructions of national legacies and identities, mobilisations of a 'better past', or historical revisionism¹⁷⁵. Some of the sector representatives we spoke to mentioned that they either observe or predict a shift in attention towards the heritage sector in terms of funding and policies, potentially at the expense of contemporary creation and support for artists' livelihoods.

As our interviewees noted, today, it is essential for the cultural heritage sector to remain consolidated and clear about its values and position within the entire cultural ecosystem. The European cultural heritage sector has long been mainstreaming the inclusivity and plurality of narratives about history, heritage and memories, equally advocating sustainable funding and support to all cultural sectors, and individual artists. Today, more than ever, it is vital to bolster the role of cultural heritage in discussing and reflecting upon the narratives about the past in a more pluralistic way, challenging societal assumptions about history, and nourishing important contemporary conversations and processes. The questions of belonging to and ownership of a place must be discussed in the ways that empower people through providing multiple pathways to understanding and connecting with it, instead of following one top-down thread focused on consolidating pride and building national identities.

Moreover, it is essential to balance the focus between tangible and intangible heritage, recognising the value of traditional skills, stories, songs, techniques, methods, art forms - 'everything you cannot touch with your hands'. 'Cultures that do not have monuments are easier to erase from the story about the past', an interviewee reflected.

¹⁷⁵ Stefan Couperus, Lars Rensmann & Pier Domenico Tortola (2023) Historical legacies and the political mobilization of national nostalgia: Understanding populism's relationship to the past, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31:2, 253-267, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2023.2207480, pp. 259, 260





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Finally, can heritage play a crucial role in shaping new narratives about culture, inspiring political trust in it, and restoring the sense of self-worth of the cultural sector? As discussed earlier, while culture's most powerful impact may often be long-term, it is typically visible through the retrospective lens of history. As Aaron Timms put it:

*If the past two centuries teach us anything, it's that politics, material reality, and culture are co-constitutive, that new forms of sociality and meaning owe as much, possibly more, to the freaks and haircuts of the artistic scene as they do to the suits and adults of the establishment. The utopian experiments of the twentieth century are inconceivable without the social awakening touched off by works like Louis-Sébastien Mercier's 1771 novel, *The Year 2440*, or Edward Bellamy's 1888 fantasy, *Looking Backward*¹⁷⁶.*

He further highlights the urgency for culture to recover a sense of its historical importance: 'That means complete immersion in culture, the culturalization of everything, the rediscovery of culture's vocation as the motor of history rather than the scenery we all pass on the way to whatever is next'¹⁷⁷.

Cultural heritage is already certainly serving this mission, but can we envision new ways for it to underscore culture's tremendous role in history, so that today's political doubts about its value fade away?

Democracy: from the right to vote to the right to be voted

One of the questions we posed to all our interviewees concerned the opportunities that the cultural sectors will encounter in the coming years.

¹⁷⁶ Timms, A *The Age of Cultural Stagnation*, *The New Republic*, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation>

¹⁷⁷ Ibid





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For many, key opportunities arise from today's crises. Some highlighted the unique value their specific sectors offer to today's anxious, polarised, and fragmented societies. They talked about the ability of culture to connect, inspire, and challenge, as well as to awaken the community spirit and rebuild life in the real world. They believe these abilities of culture are and will be - in the next years - noticed and appreciated more than ever.

Culture and society emerged as one of the most crucial topics for survey respondents too. The majority identified 'promoting equity and inclusion' as the area where their organisations contribute the most (41%), followed by 'people's individual development, enrichment, and identity' (39%), and trans/international relations (36%). Looking ahead, respondents anticipate their organisations' roles will increase in the areas of 'climate change' (23%), 'promoting equity and inclusion' (21%), and 'strengthening democracy and civic engagement' (18%).

When asked to choose the three most important elements of culture's social role from eight options, respondents ranked 'promoting dialogue and pluralism of ideas and cultures' (69.7%), 'promoting the freedom of expression and critical thinking' (65.4%), and 'fostering civic engagement, democracy, and debate' (39%) as the top three. Notably, 'integrating minorities/newcomers into the country's culture' was prioritised by only 14%, even though it is a key aspect of 'social cohesion' emphasised as an important role for culture by national governments (see graph 1).

This indicates that respondents primarily see their role in embracing diversity, fostering pluralism, and facilitating democratic and free debates. Reflecting this perspective, social polarisation was identified as the most pressing challenge for the cultural sector in the next five years (49.5%), surpassing climate change (40%), conflicts and wars (29.9%), and digital technologies (26.3%).

Cultural diversity: from celebration to management

The social role of culture has long been central to the EU cultural policy, even if it has historically been consistent with and supportive of the





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community's primary economic objectives¹⁷⁸. Since its early stages, cultural policy has been deeply intertwined with the EU's efforts to build a European identity, to strengthen economic, political, and cultural unity across Europe¹⁷⁹. Cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue have been key pillars of the EU's cultural policy, emphasising the rich diversity among its member states; and the focus on celebrating diversity has become especially relevant as new countries have been joining the Union¹⁸⁰. As Oriane Calligaro observes, the scope of cultural diversity for the EU has been significantly transformed since the 1970s, from diversity of national cultures to diversity due to migratory flows and multi-ethnic populations, and 'the focus has also shifted from celebration of/support to diversity to management of diversity'¹⁸¹.

The role of culture in 'managing' this evolving diversity has gained particular attention in times of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, when the flow of migrants increased dramatically from 153,000 in 2008 to more than 1 million in 2015. This was mainly due to the growing number of people from Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Eritrea fleeing war, conflict or economic hardship¹⁸².

In the aftermath of this refugee influx, the EU undertook several initiatives exploring, enhancing and promoting the role of culture for integrating

¹⁷⁸ During, R 2010, *Cultural heritage discourses and Europeanisation: Discursive embedding of cultural heritage in Europe of the Regions*, p. 12

¹⁷⁹ Lähdesmäki, T, Mäkinen, K, Čeginskas, V. L. A. & Kaasik-Krogerus, S, *Europe From Below*, Chapter 3 EU Cultural Policy, pp. 45–72, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449800_003

¹⁸⁰ Obuljen, N 2004, *Why we need European cultural policies*, pp. 38-39

¹⁸¹ Calligaro, O 2014, *From 'European cultural heritage' to 'cultural diversity'? The changing core values of European cultural policy*, p. 63

¹⁸² Peters L, Engelen PJ, Cassimon D. Explaining refugee flows. Understanding the 2015 European refugee crisis through a real options lens. *PLoS One*. 2023 Apr 20;18(4):e0284390. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0284390. PMID: 37079636; PMCID: PMC10118136.





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newcomers. In 2016, Creative Europe launched a specific call ‘for refugee integration and fostering intercultural dialogue’. As stated in the Creative Europe Monitoring Report 2019:

This was an opportunity to implement activities recognising and celebrating the contribution refugees and migrants make to cultural diversity in Europe. The 12 selected projects were moved by a common conviction: culture can be a means for refugees and migrants to meet, communicate with and become part of local communities¹⁸³.

In June 2016, the Commission organised a structured dialogue with sector representatives working at a local level to discuss the role of culture in promoting the inclusion of refugees and migrants. In 2017, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund allocated €9.5 million for projects on integration of third-country nationals, including for their participation in cultural life¹⁸⁴. Cultural projects for migrant inclusion were supported by other programmes, such as the Rights, Equalities & Citizenship programme, Erasmus+, Europe for Citizens, and the European Structural and Investment Funds¹⁸⁵. Furthermore, the Regulation establishing Creative Europe 2021-2027 is explicit about the ‘migration issues and integration challenges’, highlighting the role of culture in integrating

¹⁸³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Creative Europe – Monitoring report 2019, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/758> p. 92

¹⁸⁴ Pasikowska-Schnass, M n. d., European Parliament Research Service, Integration of refugees and migrants: Participation in cultural activities, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://epthinktank.eu/2017/02/08/integration-of-refugees-and-migrants-participation-in-cultural-activities/>

¹⁸⁵ European Commission 2018, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A New European Agenda for Culture, p.5





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refugees and migrants in receiving societies¹⁸⁶. The EU's Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 also recognises the role of culture and cultural participation in integrating newcomers and promoting intercultural dialogue¹⁸⁷.

In recent years, there has been a shift towards exploring the role of culture in a related yet another domain - supporting democracy, combating disinformation, and addressing social polarisation. This is in synergy with the Commission's priorities for 2019-2024, one of which is 'A new push for European democracy' that paved the way to the adoption of the European Democracy Action Plan in 2020.

In the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, 'Citizenship, values and democracy' was put forward as one of the sub-topics of the larger priority theme 'Cohesion and wellbeing'. As part of this plan, the European Commission undertook a study to analyse the link between culture and democracy, which brought a significant pile of evidence that participation in cultural activities boosts people's engagement with voting, volunteering, and other 'civic-minded behaviours'¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸⁶ Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013, L 189/37

¹⁸⁷ European Commission 2020, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, pp. 9, 20, 21

¹⁸⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Hammonds, W., *Culture and democracy, the evidence – How citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion – Lessons from international research*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/39199>, p. 29





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In the current Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, the role of culture for democracy is addressed within the topic ‘Culture for people: enhancing cultural participation and the role of culture in society’, featuring several issues, including media literacy, dialogue and debate, social integration and community engagement, and combating disinformation, hate speech and fake news¹⁸⁹. Some of these topics are rather new for the EU’s cultural policy field. In 2023, Horizon Europe launched a call inviting research projects to explore how culture and the arts can foster democratic participation and political expression, both online and offline.

Although, as highlighted earlier, cohesion, inclusion and community-building come up much more frequently in national cultural policy agenda, culture’s value for democracy, critical thinking, and pluralism are also featured in many of them. For instance, Lithuania’s 2021-2030 Culture and Creativity Development Programme discusses the importance of culture for building ‘a conscious and civically active society’ and fostering critical thinking¹⁹⁰. According to the French Ministry of Culture, access to culture ensures ‘exercise of citizenship’ and is a ‘guarantor of democracy’¹⁹¹. A strong focus on culture as a driver of democracy can be identified in Germany’s current coalition agreement (2021-2025), which states: ‘Promoting the diversity of art and culture and improving the social situation of artists contribute to securing our democracy in these times’¹⁹². Finally, culture as ‘the heart of democracy’ is the first out of 16 definitions of culture listed in the Cáceres declaration

¹⁸⁹ Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/4

¹⁹⁰ The Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2021, Resolution on the approval of the Culture and Creativity development programme of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania for 2021-2030

¹⁹¹ Ministry of Culture France – Thématiques n. d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/fr/Thematiques/developpement-culture/>

¹⁹² Coalition Agreement 2021-2025 between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90 / the Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP), Dare more progress. Alliance for Freedom, Justice and Sustainability, p. 82





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adopted by the EU member states in September 2023 in the framework of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU¹⁹³.

State of democracy

The increased focus on culture as a contributor to democracy can be linked to a growing awareness that European democracy itself is under strain. According to the Eurobarometer, only 47% of EU citizens surveyed are ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ with the way democracy works in their country, against 31% ‘not very satisfied’ and 20% ‘not at all satisfied’¹⁹⁴.

The latest Democracy Index¹⁹⁵, an annual publication by the Economist Intelligence Unit, reveals a global decline in democracy. While EU member states still score high on democracy indicators, and some Western Europe has even made some progress compared to last year, there has been an overall degradation of European democracy since the first Index in 2006¹⁹⁶. Out of 27 EU member states, only three - Estonia, Finland, and Ireland - have improved their democracy rankings. Four countries - France, Germany, Greece,, and Latvia - maintained their levels, while the remaining 20 countries experienced a decline in their democratic

¹⁹³ Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union - News - Cáceres declaration 26 September 2023, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/caceres-declaration/>

¹⁹⁴ European Commission 2023, Eurobarometer, last seen 5 September 2024 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2966>

¹⁹⁵ The Democracy Index assesses each country across five categories - electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties (Democracy Index 2023, p. 6)

¹⁹⁶ Economist Intelligence Unit 2023, Democracy Index 2023 Age of Conflict, pp. 4-5





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systems¹⁹⁷. According to the report, one of the key factors driving this trend is anti-immigration sentiments boosting support for populism¹⁹⁸.

Immigration is one of the key issues, together with climate change, that drives ideological and affective divides in Europe¹⁹⁹, which have grown increasingly polarised in recent years²⁰⁰. Other issues over which societies have been to some extent polarised include social benefits, COVID-19 pandemic, gender equality, sexual minority policies, and the war in Ukraine²⁰¹.

Existence of different political ideologies within the same political system is as such not an issue; it is rather a sign of a healthy democracy than a symptom of a democratic backsliding.

However, high degrees of social polarisation, where people hold vastly different views and beliefs, can threaten democracy by creating conditions for conflict, unrest, and even violence, as has recently been seen in Europe

¹⁹⁷ World Population Review, Democracy Index by Country 2024, last seen 5 September 2024,
<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/democracy-index-by-country>

¹⁹⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit 2023, Democracy Index 2023 Age of Conflict, p. 37

¹⁹⁹ Herold, Maik / Joachim, Janine / Otteni, Cyrill / Vorländer, Hans 2023: Polarization in Europe. An Analysis of Ten European Countries. Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM), Dresden, p. 12

²⁰⁰ McNeil-Willson, R, Gerrand, V, Scrinzi, F & Triandafyllidou, A 2019, Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today: An analytical framework, p. 4

²⁰¹ Herold, Maik / Joachim, Janine / Otteni, Cyrill / Vorländer, Hans 2023: Polarization in Europe. An Analysis of Ten European Countries. Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM), Dresden, p. 12





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and the US²⁰²,²⁰³. Additionally, in deeply polarised settings, citizens become less attentive to the deterioration of democracy and more inclined to tolerate breaches of democratic principles to ensure their side's victory²⁰⁴.

Another trend undermining democracy is the insufficient participation of people in their countries' political life, even though participation levels vary across countries. According to the Political Participation Index, in 12 EU member states, citizens became more active in political life between 2006 and 2022. However, in 10 countries, political participation declined, which is significant²⁰⁵. Although turnout for the European Elections reached a highest rate within the last 25 years (50,74%) in 2024, this figure is still relatively low, ranging from 21% in Hungary to 89% in Belgium (where voting is compulsory)²⁰⁶.

²⁰² Euronews 17 May 2024, Political violence is on the rise in EU, driven by extremism and disillusionment, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/05/17/political-violence-is-on-the-rise-in-eu-driven-by-extremism-and-disillusionment>

²⁰³ Robertson, C & Fahrenthold, D. A., New York Times 23 July 2024, Police Commander Provides More Details on Trump Rally Shooting, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/23/us/politics/trump-rally-shooting-police.html>

²⁰⁴ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung n.d. FES Democracy of the Future - Topics - Polarization & Autocratization - Identity, Partisanship, Polarization – How democratically elected politicians get away with autocratizing their country, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://democracy.fes.de/topics/polarization-democracy>

²⁰⁵ Our World in Data n.d. Political participation Index, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-participation-index-eiu?tab=chart®ion=Europe&country=~ERI>

²⁰⁶ European Parliament 15 July 2024, European Elections 2024 - Election results, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/turnout/>





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There is an interesting trend where political participation is increasingly becoming a matter of individual rather than collective action. In 2023, the Allianz Foundation surveyed young adults from Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the UK to explore how the young generation imagines and shapes the future. Their Next Generation Study 2023 reveals that young adults want to have a say in their country’s future. A clear majority of them already do have a say in individual ways, such as by voting, donating money, boycotting products, and engaging in political conversations. However, young adults are more hesitant to amplify their individual voices and collectively pressure decision-makers and the public by participating in protests or citizen initiatives. Their motivations for political and social activity are also quite individualistic: some see it as their civic duty, but a significant portion (41% and 45%, respectively) view such actions as opportunities for personal growth and as a way to ensure that they personally did everything they could for the future²⁰⁷.

What about culture?

According to Jonathan White, since the mid-20th century, consumer culture has increasingly shaped people's outlook on life, training them to envision the future in individualistic terms. These ‘micro-futures’ focused on personal paths and gains. For example, advertisements once promoted owning a car as the ‘aesthetic of the modern’, embodying a personal dream²⁰⁸. Today, digital marketing algorithms further amplify individualised consumption by profiling and grouping people based on their online behaviour and preferences. As White concludes, ‘this is a story

²⁰⁷ Allianz Foundation Study, *The Movers of Tomorrow?*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://allianzfoundation.org/study/movers-of-tomorrow/>

²⁰⁸ White, J 2024, *In the Long Run. Future as a Political idea*, p. 138





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of social fragmentation, but at the same time of ever tighter personalisation²⁰⁹.

While culture is often seen as a powerful force for uniting people, it is important to realise that cultural consumption has not been immune to these transformations either. The platformisation of culture results in a reality where not only cultural products but also cultural consumers are ‘manufactured’²¹⁰, as they are clustered and continually offered new content based on their registered preferences. As one of our interviewees reflected:

Now we have video on demand, digital bubbles, TikTok, and countless individually customised cultural triggers, but we no longer share common enjoyment. We don’t live the same experiences, we don’t discuss the same things on Monday morning anymore. But we are human. We like to be in a community.

Furthermore, the rise of streaming platforms and on-demand culture not only contributes to individualised consumption but also challenges traditional methods of creating and distributing films, weakening the position of broadcasting services that are typically key investors in film production.

Moreover, as we discussed in the section about artistic freedom, culture itself becomes a battlefield between identities and ideologies. Cultural workers, generally socially engaged and politically aware, are part of the same society, in which, according to research, the right-wing camp is more

²⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 148, 151

²¹⁰ Caliandro, A, Gandini, A, Bainotti, L & Anselmi, G 2024, *The Platformisation of Consumer Culture. A Digital Methods Guide*, p. 232





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likely to overlook the breach of democratic rules²¹¹, but affective polarisation is strongest among supporters of left and environmental parties²¹². The value of culture as a topic might also have become a matter of social disagreement. As one of the survey respondents put it: ‘I believe there is a divide between those in society who value culture and those who do not. This gap is related to age, education, and economic status’.

Looking back, it appears that the responsibility placed on the cultural sector to ‘integrate newcomers’ during the refugee crisis has not been fulfilled sufficiently to prevent societies from polarising and becoming antagonistic over migration (of course, the cultural sector is not the primary party to blame). Now, the cultural sector is being called upon to rescue democracy and ease social divides, despite itself being influenced by some of the trends that fragment our societies into bubbles and factions.

It is important to emphasise that how we interact with the world of culture is not solely characterised by fragmentation and increased individualisation. Digital technologies grant us the freedom to explore the cultural landscapes of other countries and cultures, allowing us to comprehend at least a small slice of the world's cultural diversity - certainly a larger fraction than what we were exposed to when limited to national television services or local vinyl shops. However, it is more vital than ever to be aware of the tendencies shaping our societies today and to remain vigilant about how culture interacts with these tendencies. Does it reinforce or challenge them?

²¹¹ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung n.d. FES Democracy of the Future - Topics - Polarization & Autocratization - Identity, Partisanship, Polarization – How democratically elected politicians get away with autocratizing their country, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://democracy.fes.de/topics/polarization-democracy>

²¹² Herold, Maik / Joachim, Janine / Otteni, Cyrill / Vorländer, Hans 2023: Polarization in Europe. An Analysis of Ten European Countries. Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM), Dresden, p. 5





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Democracy: imagine the ‘we’

Jonathan White points out that democracy relies on the concept of a ‘shared future’, vs an ‘individualised future’. A fundamental building block of democracy is the notion of the people, the entity in whose name laws are made. Individual ideas only become political if they resonate with and reach collective groups. White cites multiple examples of how utopian creative thought played a crucial historical role in bringing this concept to life by presenting an image of a society extended over time, as a ‘we that endures’. Utopians envisioned coordination between strangers, transcending the immediate bonds of kinship. Democracy is, therefore, a community extended through time²¹³. A ‘we that endures’ requires visualisation, imagination, and practice.

Art and culture, even if being vital for individual development, enrichment and wellbeing, are essentially social goods. Justine O’Connor, reflecting on the distinction between intrinsic value of culture and its social or economic value, accounts that the notion of ‘intrinsic’ reduces the relationship with culture to its interaction with an individual. ‘Art and cultural values are actually established and shared socially, and the individual judgement of a particular piece of art (song, video game, film) is part of our ongoing conversation about what we value as a society’²¹⁴, he observed.

There are countless ways in which the world of culture makes the sense of ‘we as a society’ tangible beyond the limits of imagination and enduring through time. Festivals bring people together beyond their predefined identities and points of belonging. Libraries engage in conversations around social justice, promoting open knowledge and open culture as

²¹³ Ibid, pp. 8, 23, 25, 28

²¹⁴ Polivtseva, E ‘Culture as an Industry Won’t Solve Sector’s Problems’, 4 July 2024, Culture Policy Room, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/if-culture-is-not-an-industry-what-is-it-then>





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shared goods. Live arts provide shared, moving experiences in the moment, while literature represents a centuries-long conversation of humanity about our collective existence as a society. The list can go on.

Another core democratic principle is the belief that reality can be changed, that it is not predetermined. It is a precondition of pursuing political freedom, and of uniting with others to shape power. In true democracy, people can be dissatisfied with the current order and then ‘invoke the future to signal a different world beyond it’²¹⁵.

True participation goes beyond merely accepting an invitation to vote in a referendum, choose a candidate, express an opinion on a reform, or support a cause. Democracy is not just about responding to invitations; it’s about having the power to invite, and to set the agenda, imagine new possibilities, and shape a setup aligned with your values and aspirations. Democracy isn’t only about contributing your piece to the broader picture but also about inventing and creating the picture itself. It takes awareness, empowerment and will to engage in such forms of democratic participation. People typically do this not only for personal development or reassurance ‘they did all they could’ but, above all, for the future of the imagined ‘we’.

How can democracy be revived through culture? Only if culture itself is democratic. As one of the interviewees noted, “The relationship between democracy and the arts is often misunderstood, as it usually focuses on access to culture. But providing access alone is like merely allowing people to vote. In a democracy, people can also be voted!”

This resonates with the Porto Santo Charter, adopted three years ago in the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU:

²¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 32, 41





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We can live in a democratic state and yet the different dimensions and institutions of community life remain authoritarian. In this sense, it is necessary to promote a conception of cultural citizenship based on pluralism: on the recognition of the multiplicity of voices and on the valuing of differences. Reductive and single interpretations of cultural identity in essence deny the democratic, inclusive and open vision of cultures²¹⁶.

Providing ‘access to culture for everyone’ is one of the typical goals of national governments, however, it can be tokenised in different ways. Many initiatives can be undertaken under this same objective: programmes for cultural education, mediation, translation of books, building a new museum, or concert hall and more. These initiatives are certainly essential, yet the notion of access as such can be problematic if it is vague (access to whose culture, on which conditions?), but also if it is narrow - access is just one of the elements of the broader concept of cultural rights²¹⁷, which also includes the right to practise and co-create different cultures not only to access them.

As highlighted in the report by the IN-SITU Network, led by Lieux Publics, European and National Centre for Artistic Creation in Public Space: ‘The shift from recognising the right to access culture to exercising cultural

²¹⁶ Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship, p. 4

²¹⁷ UNESCO defines cultural rights as those that ‘protect the rights for each person, individually and in community with others, as well as groups of people, to develop and express their humanity, their world view and the meanings they give to their existence and their development through, inter alia, values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, institutions and ways of life’. Bringing forward Cultural Rights: What’s next after Mondiacult? UNESCO & Human Rights: Geneva dialogues for enhancing cooperation & effectiveness (p. 2)





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rights by actively participating in cultural activities, both as creators and consumers of culture, is in reality a challenge of democracy'²¹⁸.

The Porto Santo Charter compares two notions: the 'democratisation of culture' and 'cultural democracy'. The first paradigm, established in the late 1950s, aims to make humanity's masterpieces, especially national cultural heritage, accessible to as many people as possible and to encourage the creation of new art. This top-down approach assumes a single, monolithic culture, which needs to be made more accessible, open, and 'democratic', without assuming a possibility for people to contribute or propose an alternative²¹⁹.

The concept of 'Cultural democracy', strongly advocated by the Charter, emerged in the 1980s with roots in the 1960s. It promotes active cultural participation and recognition of diverse cultural practices. This paradigm advocates a new relationship between institutions and communities, turning culture into a platform for collective engagement and responsibility. This model shifts from mere cultural consumption to cultural commitment, valuing individual knowledge, traditions, and voices. Rather than importing culture into a territory, it acknowledges and enhances existing local cultures, fostering dialogue between local experiences and universal cultural expressions²²⁰. Cultural democracy is about promoting art practice in all its forms, for everyone, not just artists.

As Brian Eno put it: 'The most important thing is that we have been all together - that doesn't mean just 'the artists', so called, it means everyone, it

²¹⁸ Lieux Publics 2024, Audience Development & Art in Public Space by European Let's Get Inspired Practices, p. 6

²¹⁹ Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship, p. 5

²²⁰ Ibid, p. 6





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means all the people actually in the community, everybody - has been generating this huge, fantastic conversation which we call culture'²²¹.

Importantly, cultural democracy is not about discarding the notion of 'artist' as a profession or questioning the value of art education. Instead, it aims to make these fields more inclusive and pluralistic. Cultural democracy is also not about allowing the digital world to undermine people's ownership of their creative work and their right to be remunerated for it.

The concepts of democratisation of culture and cultural democracy emerged in the middle of last century. If we truly care about the future of our democracy, and if culture is truly to play a role in it, can we make this old²²² debate progress to a new level? For once, we may not need 'another consultation on another urgent matter', as the Porto Santo Charter offers a solid starting point.

Culture and sustainability: navigating ambivalences

As part of the State of Culture Barometer survey, we asked respondents about the areas in which they anticipate the role of their organisations or activities to change over the next five years. They were given 16 different fields and asked to select up to three options. While a bit more than a third of respondents indicated that the role of their organisations will not change, 'climate change' was the most selected field by the

²²¹ O'Connor, J 2024, Culture is not an Industry, p. 108

²²² François Matarasso 18 June 2023, Cultural democratisation and cultural democracy – a critical distinction, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://arestlessart.com/2023/06/18/cultural-democratisation-and-cultural-democracy-a-critical-distinction/>





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remaining respondents (37.8%), followed by 'promoting equity and inclusion' (34.1%) and 'strengthening democracy and civic engagement' (30.2%).

Interestingly, only 17.6% of respondents selected 'climate change' as one of their current areas of activity, ranking it lower than nine other fields among the 16 options. Despite this, the majority of respondents (46%) agree with the statement 'Climate action is an area where the role of culture should be particularly recognised,' with 21% agreeing strongly, 24% being neutral, and 5% and 3% respectively disagreeing and strongly disagreeing.

Therefore, climate change is perceived by respondents as one of the most significant challenges facing the cultural sector, although it does not top the list. It is an area where the sector anticipates a significant change in its role in the future, compared to its current level of engagement.

Climate in cultural policy

Environmental sustainability is not the most commonly addressed issue in national cultural policy strategies of the EU countries. It is discussed much less frequently than social issues and is overshadowed by topics such as international relations, the economic contribution of culture, and wellbeing. The role of culture in shaping and preserving identities - whether national, regional, or individual, often referred to as the sense of belonging and self-determination - is also more prominent in national cultural policy discourse than environmental sustainability.

When examining how the culture and climate theme is framed in national cultural policy documents, three distinct narratives emerge. The first and most prominent one focuses on the green transition of cultural and creative sectors themselves. This includes energy-saving measures for cultural institutions, eco-certification of museums and festivals, integration of circular economy principles, adoption of green production





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methodologies in specific sectors, and stimulation of private investment in greening cultural and creative sectors.

For instance, Austria's Ministry of Arts, Culture, Public Service, and Sport introduced the Climate Fit Cultural Enterprises funding programme, which provides incentives for ecological investments in the cultural sector, such as renewable energy sources, heating and lighting optimisation, and green roofs and facades²²³.

Green energy renovation of cultural buildings is a widely adopted priority, typically as part of overarching national energy and climate strategies. The narrative of the green transition in cultural and creative sectors also addresses the crucial issue of protecting and preserving cultural heritage in the face of climate change.

Some countries have designed dedicated green strategies for the cultural sector or introduced greening as a selection criterion for public funds. In France, the Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with various stakeholders, developed an 'Orientation and Inspiration Guide' for the ecological transition of culture for the period 2023-2027. The guide sets concrete targets, with an associated timetable, covering five main themes: 'creating differently with new sustainable practices; developing a low-impact digital culture; inventing the architecture, territories, and landscapes of tomorrow; preserving, conserving, and saving for the future; and rethinking public mobility for always-accessible culture'²²⁴. Furthermore, Malta's Cultural Policy promotes 'environmental sustainability as a

²²³ Ministry of Arts, Culture, Public Service, and Sport, Austria n. d., Arts and Culture - Focus - EU/International - EU Recovery and Resilience Facility - Climate-fit cultural institutions, last seen 5 September 2024,

<https://www.bmkoes.gv.at/kunst-und-kultur/schwerpunkte/eu-international/eu-aufbau-und-resilienzfaezilitaet/klimafitte-kulturbetriebe.html>

²²⁴ Ministry of Culture, France n.d. Themes - Ecological transition, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/Thematic/ecological-transition>





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requirement in the selection criteria of public funding programmes, including the declaration of how the expected negative impacts on the environment are going to be mitigated and/or compensated²²⁵.

Another, less distinct narrative on the culture and climate theme is the view of culture as a space or tool for inventing and testing solutions for green transitions that other sectors can learn from, as well as for proposing new visions. Germany's current coalition agreement (2021-2025) states: 'They [artists] create utopias and blueprints for a society in which we wish to live in the future. In doing so, they can initiate and convey innovations and new narratives for sustainable living'²²⁶. Another example is Malta's Cultural Policy that refers to arts and culture as 'laboratories' for testing and developing new approaches that leverage the unique skills of creative professionals in addressing climate change and contributing to environmental sustainability²²⁷.

Finally, a third perspective on the relationship between culture and climate, closely related to the previous one, is the ability of the cultural and creative sectors to influence people's behaviours by educating them and shaping their values, consciousness, and perceptions. For instance, this perspective is evident in the Czech Republic's State cultural policy for 2021-2025, which emphasises the role of culture in environmental education, social debate, and communicating the risks of climate change to citizens²²⁸. A similar perspective is reflected in several other cultural policy documents.

²²⁵ Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, Malta 2021, National Cultural Policy 2021, p. 74

²²⁶ Coalition Agreement 2021-2025 between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90 / the Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP), Dare more progress. Alliance for Freedom, Justice and Sustainability, p. 12

²²⁷ Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, Malta 2021, National Cultural Policy 2021, p. 74

²²⁸ Ministry of Culture, Czech Republic State cultural policy for 2021-2025, pp. 33, 35





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At the EU level, green transition is the major goal defining the course for other policy areas, including culture. The Green Deal is the Union's overarching framework, consisting of a package of policy initiatives aimed to set the EU on the path to a green transition. The ultimate goal of this transition is reaching climate neutrality by 2050.

The EU's Report on the cultural dimension of sustainable development in EU actions, published in December 2022, recognises that culture is currently not at the heart of the Union's key strategies to implement the sustainable development, but culture-specific frameworks are expected to contribute to its implementation:

The most important strategic EU actions for delivering on the SDGs include an intrinsic cultural dimension, despite the lack of a specific reference to culture. For instance, deeply transformative EU policies and key strategies such as the European Green Deal [...] rely on a strong contribution from the cultural and creative sectors (CCS) and on their diversity at local, regional and national levels²²⁹.

In line with this, the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 features 'Culture for the planet: unleashing the power of culture' as one of its four priorities, including a variety of topics, such as risk preparedness in cultural heritage, strengthening cultural heritage's resilience to climate change, fight against illicit trafficking of cultural goods, and the digital transformation of cultural and creative sectors²³⁰. Another priority 'Artists and cultural professionals' features green transition of the cultural and creative sectors,

²²⁹ European Commission 2022, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions on the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development in EU Actions, p. 2

²³⁰ Official Journal of the European Union 2022, Council conclusions on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, C 466/4





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highlighting the focus on energy crisis, cultural dimension of sustainable development and cultural heritage resilience²³¹.

This is a more expanded outlook at the climate topic compared to the previous Work Plan, in which it was framed as ‘Sustainability in cultural heritage’ covering a range of heritage-specific topics, one of which was ‘adaptation to climate change’²³².

As for the Creative Europe programme, its 2014-2020 edition did not include greening requirements in its legal basis. The 2020 monitoring report suggests introducing these requirements, such as incorporating greening priorities into future Media strand calls and requiring sustainability strategies in proposal applications. Today, in line with the Green Deal, Creative Europe 2021-2027 is expected to address environmental sustainability by reducing GHG emissions in the cultural and creative sector, to achieve net zero by 2050, ensuring that 30% of Union budget expenditure supports climate objectives while respecting the 'do no harm' principle. However, climate mitigation and environmental protection are not listed among the programme objectives, and there are no indicators to monitor performance in this field²³³

Culture for climate: change the world or comply with procedures

There are at least two general concerns among cultural professionals regarding the culture and climate policy agenda. The first relates to the limited role attributed to culture in environmental debates and policies - either due to the lack of autonomy granted to culture within these agendas, evident in the advocacy for standalone sustainability goals, or the failure to recognise the transformative potential culture can offer in the face of the

²³¹ Ibid, C 466/6

²³² Official Journal of the European Union 2018, Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, C 460/15

²³³ European Commission 2022, Greening the Creative Europe Programme, pp. 25, 37, 39





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climate crisis. The second concern somewhat contrasts with the first: many in the sector struggle with the climate responsibilities placed upon them and the implications these have, such as funders' pressure, greening criteria for funds, or expectations to scale down operations, including cross-border mobility. Is there any contradiction? Let us delve into this ambivalence.

The first concern relates to policymakers and other sectors misunderstanding the true potential of culture to help us reimagine the world and renew our value systems. The policy focus appears to be primarily on preventing culture from further harming the planet. While it is important to ensure that cultural organisations and operations adopt green practices and to protect culture in the face of climate disasters, this focus seems to overshadow the broader role culture can play in addressing the climate crisis.

In our State of Culture Barometer survey, we asked respondents to identify the most important aspect of culture's role in addressing climate change. The majority, 38.8%, selected 'Harnessing the transformative power of culture to reimagine the foundations of societies and economies'. Twenty-one percent chose 'CCSs as a laboratory for inventing and testing innovative solutions for the green transition,' while 16.1% opted for 'Using CCS to promote, normalise, and gain social endorsement for the green transition.' 'Leveraging CCS as a tool to raise awareness about the climate crisis' was selected by 14.7%. Lastly, the element most visible in cultural policy agendas - 'Facilitating the green transition of CCSs themselves' - was chosen by only 9.5%.

So, the cultural sector believes it has a larger role to play in climate action beyond just reducing its own environmental impact. And this role is already performed, discussed and imagined in various parts of the cultural sector.





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One of the interview contributors reflected that making heritage more resilient and sustainable is only one side of the story:

It is true heritage is affected by climate change and needs to be protected. Yet it is also crucial to bring the heritage sector as part of the solution. We must use the untapped potential of traditional knowledge and crafts, which are the essence of the cultural heritage sector, as resources for a transition into a more sustainable and resilient way of living.

Another interviewee spoke about the important capacity of museums to unravel complex issues in a way that impacts social intelligence: ‘How can one comprehend a system in which everything is interconnected on an abstract level and which requires concrete changes in one’s day-to-day life? Museums are known for being able to do this,’ they said.

The aspiration to contribute to a more sustainable future also stimulates museum organisations to rethink their collections, as summarised in NEMO’s statement on future sustainable museum collections:

Our ethical and professional priority is to work with our communities for the future sustainability of the planet. Museums have a critical role to play in environmental sustainability and imagining our possible futures. Our commitment is that we will use our diverse collections and the stories that they hold to inspire people and facilitate change. We realise that it is no longer possible to preserve all heritage and collections in their current conditions. We are committed to re-evaluating our collections in terms of their social, historical, environmental, and educational impact²³⁴.

²³⁴ NEMO 2023, NEMO’s statement on future sustainable museum collections, p. 1





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FAST45 - Futures Art School Trends 2045 is an Erasmus+ project aimed at envisioning and shaping the future landscape of higher arts education²³⁵. In their report, ‘The Future of Higher Arts Education: Shaping a Trajectory’, project partners propose four future scenarios for higher arts education. One scenario, ‘Slow Eco-Life’, envisions a future focused on slow and responsible growth for artists:

Arts universities are active actors in achieving sustainability goals and finding ways to deal with wicked problems such as ecological crises. They creatively use regenerative and indigenous practices and boldly experiment with interspecies collaboration to find new ways of being an artist and a citizen within planetary boundaries. Hierarchies are flat, and students actively participate in decision-making, aiming for consensus, flexibility, and community well-being. Slowness and degrowth are faced as positive challenges for creativity. What is essential is constantly asked. Renouncing, reducing, and the scarcity of resources are fundamental parts of growing as an artist²³⁶.

Furthermore, many other players in the world of culture play their part in the green transformation of societies. Even without being widely recognised for it, cultural centres act as agents of a just transition, serving as hubs for resource allocation and community engagement. They can help mitigate the risk of unequal distribution and ensure that marginalised groups are not disproportionately burdened²³⁷. Performing arts

²³⁵ Led by LUCA School of Arts (Belgium), the partnership includes ELIA - European League of Institutes of the Arts, and ACE - Association Européenne des Conservatoires

²³⁶ Garofalo, I & Hinnekint, K (ed.) 2024, The Future of Higher Arts Education: Possibilities to Shape a Trajectory, p. 29

²³⁷ A. M. Ranczakowska, M. Fraioli, A. Garma, Just Sustainability from the Heart of Communities. The Transformative Power of Socio-Cultural Centres, ENCC, May 2024, p. 17. Link:

<https://encc.eu/articles/qualitative-research-on-the-roles-of-socio-cultural-ce>





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organisations are pushing boundaries to test innovative solutions for sustainable and inclusive touring, radically rethinking how ideas, artworks, and concepts can move and enrich both themselves and local communities with minimal environmental impact²³⁸.

This is just a small part of the culture's broader role in climate action. This goes well beyond decarbonisation of the cultural sector itself. As Vania Rodrigues, Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Coimbra, wrote in *On the Move's Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2024*, '[It] seems to me to be vital to secure a role for the arts and culture in the green transition that is truly transformative, and not merely a mechanistic compliance with procedures'²³⁹.

The mismatch between what culture can do for climate and how its role is understood or endorsed by policymakers is not the only concern in the cultural sector. Preservation or sustainability of culture in the face of climate change has another aspect: will the cultural sector be able to endure the pressure to go green, comply with prescriptions, stop travelling, scale down events, and more? Can art and culture workers escape the precarity and shrinking space of their autonomy to invoke their transformative power for sustainable change? And will increased political acknowledgment not result in added pressure without the necessary support?

One important aspect raised during our interviews concerns the potential or assumed increase in local engagement over international activities,

[ntres-in-just-sustainability-transitions](#). For further information please contact: office@encc.eu.

²³⁸ Perform Europe - Selected projects, n.d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://performeurope.eu/selected-projects/>

²³⁹ Ellingsworth, J., Persson, B. and Rodrigues, V. (March 2024). *Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2024*. Brussels: *On the Move*, available at on-the-move.org/resources, pp. 46-47





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driven by the aspiration to reduce carbon footprints. This shift is easier for some countries than others: key factors are the availability of resources and the sizes of local audiences. Moreover, for art forms like dance, which are intrinsically transborder, reducing mobility poses a significant challenge.

Importantly, the EU's Green Deal does not suggest reducing mobility. On the contrary, the European Commission emphasises that the free movement of people is a precondition for economic and social life and one of the fundamental pillars of the European Union and the internal market. Policy efforts are instead focused on making transport systems greener²⁴⁰.

However, the world of art and culture is known to be bolder and less patient than the world of government policies. The debate has gone as far as discussing whether travelling by plane is acceptable at all, fueled by Jérôme Bel's famous statement that he would stop taking planes for ecological reasons, and Lázaro Gabino Rodríguez's response looking at this issue through the lens of global inequalities²⁴¹. Today, the discussion seems to have shifted towards rethinking mobility - either through different dramaturgies or by adopting greener modes of travel - rather than stopping it altogether.

However, as research shows, cultural funding for green forms of travelling remains to be very scarce²⁴². Moreover, green culture, as it is often imagined, is slow, more engaged, less extractive, and focused on the process rather than producing end products. This approach clashes with

²⁴⁰ EFA, Pearle* 2023, *The Ultimate Cookbook for Cultural Managers - The EU Green Deal and Live Performance Organisations*, p. 32

²⁴¹ E-tcetera 2021, *Open Letter to Jérôme Bel*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://e-tcetera.be/open-letter-to-jerome-bel/>

²⁴² Ellingsworth, J., Persson, B. and Rodrigues, V. (March 2024). *Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2024*. Brussels: *On the Move*, available at on-the-move.org/resources, p. 7,





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the nature of many funding programmes, which frequently push art workers to rush from production to production. These projects often have very short life spans and are shown to the same slice of audiences rather than broadening and deepening engagement with communities²⁴³.

Vania Rodrigues spoke about the complex interrelation between three types of sustainability. Sustainability *through the arts* emphasises the narrative and communicative power of the arts to raise awareness and change behaviour (socio-cultural sustainability). Sustainability *in the arts* focuses on reducing the environmental footprint of the arts and integrating environmental sustainability into cultural practices and policies (environmental sustainability). Sustainability *of the arts* highlights the need for organisational, career, and project sustainability in the arts, including financial stability and working conditions (financial sustainability)²⁴⁴.

The complex question that often goes unaddressed is: how can we ensure that the first two types of sustainability do not undermine the sustainability of the arts themselves?

This question is complex within current systems, where culture is often misunderstood or absent from sustainability agendas. Would this question arise if we imagined culture's role, power, and value for climate action (and beyond) were fully grasped and recognised? Such recognition would be reflected in the creation of a sustainable framework - a scaffolding for culture encompassing legal, financial, political, and social and ethical dimensions - that would allow it to unleash its true transformative role in green transitions, and protect from the so-called 'global trends' that most

²⁴³ IETM 2024, *Lost in Transition*. Report from the IETM Focus Luxembourg Meeting, p. 10

²⁴⁴ Rodrigues, V., & Ventura, A. (2024). Embracing ambivalence: responsibility discourses around 'greening' the performing arts. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2024.2358765>





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of the time turn out to be shocks or at least challenges. This framework would assume ingraining cultural participation throughout society, and fully developing culture's potential to transform visions and value systems, with all autonomy and political trust given to it. Is this what they call culture as a right, as a public good, or as a standalone goal of sustainable development?

Culture as a sustainable development goal

Climate change is just one aspect of sustainable development, though a significant one, given that 92 out of 247 indicators of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) are climate-related²⁴⁵. It is hard to find anyone in the cultural sector working internationally who is unaware of the long-standing debate on the underappreciated role of culture in this very detailed sustainable development framework.

Back in 2013, seven international and regional cultural networks²⁴⁶, including Culture Action Europe, launched a joint global campaign entitled #culture2015goal, advocating for the integration of culture into the United Nations' future sustainable development strategy. In 2015, the 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' was adopted, establishing a framework of 17 goals for sustainable development. Culture was not featured as an autonomous goal in this framework but was included in some of its implementation indicators. As the agenda is being implemented and progress assessed, the global campaign evolved into #culture2030goal. This campaign promotes culture

²⁴⁵ [UN Environment Programme, Sustainable Development Goals, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.unep.org/article/sustainable-development-goals-0#:~:text=The%20SDG%20framework%20has%20a,including%20the%20interactions%20between%20topics>.](https://www.unep.org/article/sustainable-development-goals-0#:~:text=The%20SDG%20framework%20has%20a,including%20the%20interactions%20between%20topics)

²⁴⁶ The campaign members are Arterial Network, Culture Action Europe, ICOMOS, IFCCD, IFLA, International Music Council, and culture21 UCLG Committee.





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as the fourth pillar of sustainable development (alongside social, economic, and environmental pillars) and advocates for including culture as a standalone goal in the post-2030 sustainability agenda²⁴⁷.

Culture's role in driving sustainable development has steadily gained some political recognition, which was reflected in the 'historic' MONDIACULT Declaration of UNESCO²⁴⁸. Signed by 150 Culture Ministers in September 2022, the Declaration called for culture's recognition as a global public good and a standalone sustainable development goal.

Last year (2023) was the midpoint in implementing the UN's SDG Agenda, prompting extensive discussions on progress and prospects. As part of the mid-term review of the implementation achievements, the UN Secretary General has recognised that culture has not been sufficiently valued in the SDG progress²⁴⁹. In resonance with this, in November 2023, the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, a statement by heads of states, emphasised the urgency of recognising culture as 'transformative driver of SDGs' and a sustainable development goal²⁵⁰.

Culture has made it into the first revision of the UN's Pact for the Future, a document addressing current and future global challenges. It will be a central focus at the upcoming UN Summit of the Future in September 2024, where countries will negotiate and ratify the Pact. Initially, culture was scarcely mentioned in the 'zero draft' of the Pact. But then, a specifically dedicated paragraph of the first revision called 'to integrate

²⁴⁷ #culture2030goal n.d. Our Strategy, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://culture2030goal.net/our-strategy>

²⁴⁸ UNESCO 30 September 2022, Press release, MONDIACULT 2022: States adopt historic Declaration for Culture, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mondiacult-2022-states-adopt-historic-declaration-culture>

²⁴⁹ United Nations 2023, The Sustainable Development Goals Report Special Edition, p. 49

²⁵⁰ G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration 2023, p. 11





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culture into economic, social, and environmental development policies and strategies as a standalone goal²⁵¹. However, in the most recent revision of the Pact (27 August 2024), there is no reference to culture being a standalone goal, and culture is lumped together with sport within the same paragraph²⁵².

At the time of writing this report, it is still not clear where this discursive battle will lead. There is no doubt that the ‘standalone goal’ frame is strategically important, and recognising culture as such would be more than just a rhetorical breakthrough. The wording of the first revision was rather promising and the current version seems to be a setback. Yet it is anyway not clear whether a standalone goal within ‘economic, social, and environmental policies’ as it was featured in the first revision of the Pact would lead to further instrumentalisation of culture or mark the beginning of rebuilding culture’s agency, autonomy, and unique role in the sustainability agenda.

State of Culture: the Way Forward

Seven puzzle pieces of the recognition of culture

The EU has an elaborate definition of cultural and creative sectors. These are all sectors that ‘have potential to generate innovation and jobs in

²⁵¹ Pact for the Future: Rev.1 14 May 2024, p. 3

²⁵² Pact for the Future: Rev.3 27 August 2024, pp. 7-8





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particular from intellectual property’; ‘are based on cultural values and artistic and other individual or collective creative expressions’; and ‘include the development, the creation, the production, the dissemination and the preservation of goods and services which embody cultural, artistic or other creative expressions [...]’²⁵³.

This definition encompasses a broad spectrum of professions, including film directors, photographers, archivists, poets, literary translators, designers, dancers, painters, actors, sculptors, tour agents, exhibition producers, festival managers, and many more. At times it seems contradictory to lump these different roles and disciplines together under one ‘leaky roof’ of culture. Are there any common threads that unite this diverse world?

Let us look at some differences first. While cultural sectors face some shared challenges, each also grapples with its own specific issues. For example, AI is viewed as a direct threat by some, while others see it as an intriguing topic of discussion. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on certain areas of the sector but also fostered growth in others. The climate crisis poses significant challenges for all of us, yet it is a matter of preparedness to energy transitions and heat waves for some, while others prioritise rethinking mobility and assessing their digital footprint.

Our interviewees identified a range of global trends and challenges beyond those discussed in the previous chapter. These include the decline in arts education, cuts in public funding for culture, reduced support for international cultural collaborations, the dominance of streaming platforms, the spread of misinformation leading to a ‘crisis of knowledge’, widening income gaps for cultural workers, the rise of ‘smart shopping’,

²⁵³ Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013





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and the increasing use but decreasing value of images, among others. While not all of these trends result in immediate disruptions, some cause significant upheavals, such as talent drains or complete overhauls of business models. Many sectors grapple with questions about the role they play and the value they bring during times of turbulence.

Economic, social, and political changes continually reshape all fields of economy and public life, but is there any sector as vulnerable, exposed, and unstable as the cultural sector in the face of current and future challenges?

What unites the diverse disciplines and sectors within the cultural world is that the challenges they face - whether negative trends in public funding caused by political shifts, the dominance of STEM over STEAM, or the unregulated technological boom - ultimately lead to the same question: How much is culture truly valued in society?

None of the current or future 'global trends' would cause profound disruptions if there were a solid, enduring foundation: a widespread recognition of culture's importance, embedded throughout social and political fabrics. The value of culture has been the centre of focus for culture advocates for decades. But what does the value of culture look like today?

Following the key reflection threads from all previous chapters, we can shape the list of today's puzzle pieces of the recognition of culture as follows:

1. Artistic freedom





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‘Culture is not the ward of technology; it *is* technology, a miracle of transformation that allows us to see and experience a different world’²⁵⁴, Aaron Timms wrote. Is this true no matter what, or only if certain conditions are in place? We often say that culture's power will persist even in the harshest times and through all pressures. Some even argue that the best art is created in the midst of disruption. Yet culture constrained by hyper-instrumentalisation, dwindling resources, and self-censorship is not the same ‘miracle of transformation’ as culture that thrives in freedom. The value of culture must come with and start with the recognition of the value of its autonomy. The value of culture through the sole lens of external needs and goals can only be accepted as a survival tactic, not as a sustainable strategy.

2. Human creativity

When we refer to the value of culture, we mean the culture created by humans, not by artificial intelligence. Valuing human creativity transcends mere commodification. It's not just about purchasing a picture or text because it's appealing, resembles what you have seen or read before and is worth paying for. It is about appreciating the message and values the human creator imbued in it. You engage with an art piece because you value the author's intent, whether it challenges or enriches your perspective, and you seek genuine interaction with something you have not yet encountered. Recognising human creativity means acknowledging that diverse, pluralistic, and free human expressions are essential for shaping our collective future and advancing as a society.

3. Creative practice

Valuing culture in its entirety involves rebalancing the appreciation for both processes and products. While owning a piece of art or consuming a cultural product holds value, it may not surpass the worth of the process

²⁵⁴ Timms, A The Age of Cultural Stagnation, *The New Republic*, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation>





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involved - whether it's writing, painting, acting, singing, crafting, dancing, or exercising these skills. Engaging in the arts brings joy, evokes a range of emotions and senses, reduces digital alienation, and helps people to engage with their identities and express themselves. This can help overcome the urge for other ways of self-identification, such as excessive consumption or engagement with populist narratives. This perspective can shift socio-political dynamics, renew appreciation for the arts, and promote a more sustainable mindset. Additionally, prioritising the process allows the arts sector to adopt more sustainable practices, not just obsessing with project outcomes but adapting to the dynamics and emerging needs of communities.

4. Community

Everyone has a personal relationship with culture, which today is shaped by the vast array of cultural products available for on-demand engagement. However, culture is fundamentally a social good that we come to appreciate through social interactions and a long-standing collective reflection about our identity as a society. It is a resource created and shared collectively, binding us together across generations. Renewing our appreciation for culture means reaffirming our commitment to collective values and a 'shared future', using the term of Johnathan White, rather than succumbing to alienation and individualism. Culture is about embodying what it means to be a 'society', a collective with a voice and power, rather than just a group of individual voters or consumers.

5. Plurality of culture(s)

The value of culture today lies in its diversity. Discussing the value of culture makes little sense if it is defined in a singular, monolithic manner, as a culture of one specific group. Such a perspective is unlikely to endure and may even backfire. Culture can affirm the diversity of the world, which





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is a necessary condition for living together in a multicultural reality²⁵⁵. Such an approach should emphasise a culture that is shared, co-created, and equitable, fostered through collaboration and active listening, and balanced in terms of power and ownership. The plurality of culture lends it legitimacy as a genuine social good; without this plurality, it risks becoming a source of further polarisation of societies or a political tool.

6. Distant future

Valuing culture means daring to believe in a distant future. Not only does culture strengthen our imaginative capacities, but its impact also unfolds over long periods. Today, faced with numerous threats and risks, and often reminded of our unpreparedness, we struggle to envision ourselves, our communities and cities, our world decades ahead. Our focus tends to be on immediate concerns, overshadowed by potential disasters. Can we learn to envision a distant future once more? This is not merely an exercise in imagination; it's about understanding the connections between various trends and agents, the systemic nature of our environment, and the impact of things that are currently invisible. Long-term thinking fosters solidarity and helps us move beyond self-centred, short-term impulses. Valuing culture is about believing in a distant future.

7. Democracy

Arts and cultural participation empower people to envision a different future, see their active role in it, and foster a sense of collective purpose needed for change. However, there is another dimension to the relationship between culture and democracy: when democracy falters, culture's value often diminishes as well. Social polarisation, rising individualism, and crisis-driven politics erode respect for democratic

²⁵⁵ Culture as a Public Good: Navigating its role in policy debates, 2024, International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, Sydney, Australia, p. 23





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principles and weaken public trust and participation. Democracy starts being perceived as a system that is too complex for the reality strained by shocks and existential crises. Its true value and impact are more apparent over the long term, not in the midst of immediate crisis responses. Similarly, culture, with its unpredictable nature, long-term impact, and the aspiration to cherish pluralism and handle conflicting differences, struggles to be valued during crises and often becomes a battleground of polarised views. Valuing democracy and valuing culture share similar principles and can reinforce each other.

Finally, it is crucial to point out that culture begins with the people who create it, and valuing culture means respecting these people's rights. The unique dynamics and rules governing creative labour and causing challenges have long been recognised and discussed. Therefore, specific protections for creative workers are needed - not only to ensure their rights are on par with other workers but also to highlight the unique value their work brings to society. Simply recognising art professionals as 'workers' without acknowledging their distinct social contributions risks reducing the creative sector to *minimum* labour standards - but cultural workers deserve more than a minimum. Furthermore, culture is made up of individual and collective expressions that hold value for their integrity and their unique relationship with their creators. Valuing this relationship - through copyright - is essential for maintaining creators' dignity, social status, and economic sustainability. Importantly, without human authorship, there should be no place for copyright protection.

This list outlines some of the elements that constitute the value of culture, and it is of course just one of many ways of seeing it. But to understand why societies might not fully appreciate culture and why it is often sidelined in political agendas (as evidenced in the survey results and discussed in the first chapter), we must first examine our current environment. Are people concerned about the future of democracy? Are they motivated to rebuild communities, counter hyper-individualisation,





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and collectively envision a different future? Do people consciously aspire to cherish human creativity and are aware of the joy of exercising it? Is there a genuine celebration of diversity, rather than just its management?

Act as an ecosystem

The inner rod

It is highly contextual, but not all of these questions may receive a positive answer in many places across Europe. This could explain why advocating for culture is particularly challenging today. These issues are both systemic and arising from awareness gaps. To address them, the cultural sector might just continue doing its core work. But some renewal of approaches is also needed.

In the previous chapters, we discussed the long-standing need for the cultural sector to solidify its own sense of identity, examining its values, as well as social and political importance beyond external narratives or internal adjustments to fit broader contexts. There is a contradiction between the sector's belief in its crucial role in social progress, climate action, and democracy, and its reluctance to be instrumentalised for these purposes. The reason for this contradiction may lie in the difference of how this crucial role is understood, defined, and utilised in political and social discourse, and how it is known by the sector itself.

The cultural sector needs to articulate its value on its own terms and according to its own temporality, rather than relying on externally imposed KPIs. While this may not immediately address the problem of underappreciation and misunderstanding of culture, it is essential for the sector to strengthen its internal understanding of its own role, develop its own 'inner rod' of confidence. This 'inner rod' shall not be eroded every time there is another hit of the 'wind of trends'. Given the sector's diversity and varying contexts, it is crucial to conduct this conversation on a local,





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sector-specific, and smaller scale, but also find a common ground on a translational level.

Once we have clear messages about who we are, it is useful to identify to whom these messages should be broadcasted. Policy-makers are certainly the primary audience who should understand and embrace these messages. However, if the cultural sector's direct interlocutor is the society, we, as culture advocates, should not focus solely on governments as our major guarantors and providers. Although the locus of power is evident, it is important to remember that, in democratic societies, citizens play a crucial role in shifting this power from one force to another. Therefore, in the coming years, investing in deepening and expanding relationships with citizens - to co-create shared impact - can be more effective than over-focusing on how to demonstrate this impact to policy-makers.

Become an ecosystem

It is important for the world of culture to become and act as a true ecosystem. While 'ecosystem' is often used to describe value chains within a specific creative sector, we are referring here to viewing the diverse cultural sectors as a complex network of interconnected components. We need to understand how various sectors and disciplines are interrelated and identify the specific challenges they face, which often stem from the same structural deficiencies. There are several levels to this ecosystemic thinking.

Firstly, it is essential to recognise that, in the long term, no sector - be it film, theatre, visual art, or music - can thrive on its own if other sectors are in decline, affected by talent drains, subsidy cuts, unfair competition, poorly regulated digitalisation, social distancing measures, or any future crises. Different art communities learn from and inspire each other, borrowing creative elements from various artistic fields. They benefit from, contribute to, and depend on the global progression of creative





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thought and the expansion of culture as a social good. In this sense, we can compare culture to scientific knowledge, where advancements in specific branches and individual breakthroughs ultimately contribute to the broader field of science, enabling the development of products (such as vaccines) that benefit society as a whole²⁵⁶.

Yet, as Teemu Mäki, Finnish artist and theatre director, reflects: ‘the history of art policies knows at least as many examples of disloyalty between the art forms as those of compassion and understanding the common good’. He cites examples of how different sectors fail to grasp the impact of AI or unfair remuneration practices in some parts of the sector on the entire ecosystem; even professionals within the same industry may not engage with the problems faced by their colleagues, such as film directors who might show little concern for the challenges that AI poses to scriptwriters²⁵⁷. Mäki illustrates this lack of ecosystemic ‘loyalty’ further:

Many visual artists play the victim and wonder how anyone could be against paying exhibition fees; why people cannot understand that visual artists often work without receiving any financial compensation for their work, even if thousands of people visit their exhibitions. And yet most of these artists, who lament how miserable their lives are, listen to music mainly or exclusively through streaming services that do not generate any income for the majority of music makers²⁵⁸.

Furthermore, an interviewee suggested that the cultural ecosystem might be experiencing a ‘tragedy of the commons’, a concept defined as a situation in which individuals with access to a public resource, also called

²⁵⁶ Culture as a Public Good: Navigating its role in policy debates, 2024, International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, Sydney, Australia, p. 22

²⁵⁷ Mäki, T 25 May 2023, AI is coming – who is ready?, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.artists.fi/en/ai-coming-who-ready>

²⁵⁸ Ibid





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a common, act in their own interest and, in doing so, ultimately deplete the resource²⁵⁹. They reflected that everyone in the sector is trying to safeguard their own interests while fighting for the same shrinking 'cake', viewing each other as competitors rather than considering a common interest. Could there be a way to restore the communitism within the cultural sector, overcoming the fear of individual collapse? Importantly, the foundation for seeing ourselves as an ecosystem requires long-term thinking, as some vital connections only manifest through years.

While many sub-sectors contribute different forms of value - some excel in economic impact, others are crucial for preserving memory and identity, and some are effective in community building - it is essential to establish a unified framework in society and policy for valuing culture as a whole. With a strong foundation of value and support for the cultural sector overall, individual sectors may find it easier to advocate for their specific needs and contributions.

Such a foundation should enable creatives to continue surprising, educating, and inspiring citizens without facing disruptions or pressures to reinvent themselves, engage in irrelevant advocacy discourses, or disappear from the market altogether. Through culture, citizens should be free to choose, experiment, learn, step out of their comfort zones, and embrace challenges. For this to happen, there is a need for a strong foundation for recognition of culture, in all its diversity. What can this foundation look like?

²⁵⁹ Harvard Business School Online, Business Insights, TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS: WHAT IT IS & 5 EXAMPLES, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/tragedy-of-the-commons-impact-on-sustainability-issues#:~:text=The%20tragedy%20of%20the%20commons%20refers%20to%20a%20situation%20in,so%2C%20ultimately%20deplete%20the%20resource>.





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Build a scaffolding for culture

Culture as a public good

This foundation is about the legal and political recognition of culture as a vital sphere in its own right - crucial for societies, the economy, and the planet's sustainability - while also ensuring its own agency and a distinct place within key political agendas.

This resonates with the concept of culture as a ‘public good’ that has gained momentum in the discourse of the United Nations in recent few years. In 2021, the UN Secretary General issued a report *Our Common Agenda*, putting forward some key axes for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and imagining global collaboration beyond 2030. The report discusses the concept of ‘global public goods’, which are defined as goods that ‘benefit humanity as a whole and that cannot be managed by any one State or actor alone’, such as health, Internet, biodiversity, and the global financial system²⁶⁰. These goods must be collectively governed, delivered, and protected by all countries. Culture was not yet listed as a ‘public good’ in this report, yet in 2023, culture was declared as such by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals Report²⁶¹.

This could mark the beginning of a new era for culture, even though concrete policy features of ‘culture as a public good’ are not yet officially established in global policy discourse. Nonetheless, some ideas surrounding this new narrative are emerging in various parts of the policy and research community.

²⁶⁰ Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General Published by the United Nations, p. 18

²⁶¹ United Nations 2023, The Sustainable Development Goals Report Special Edition, p. 49





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For Justin O'Connor, Professor of Cultural Economy at the University of South Australia and author of the book 'Culture is not an Industry', this discussion is about the relationship between culture and economics. The first element of the debate is the emancipation of culture from the logics of transactional, innovation- and profit-driven economy and the 'industry' rhetoric, and recognising it as 'an integral part of social and political life, essential in defining citizenship, [and] one of the foundational services that contribute to creating a livable society'²⁶².

The other dimension is the rethinking of the economy itself. As O'Connor reflects: 'How can we create economic development that benefits everyone, not just a few? For culture as a sustainable development goal to make sense and thrive, the economic paradigm must be rethought at a global level'. He advocates shifting away from the current extractive, GDP-driven growth system towards an economic paradigm that addresses everyone's needs and enhances humanity's collective capacities for development²⁶³.

The International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA) has recently published a report 'Culture as a Public Good: Navigating its role in policy debates'. The study affirms that the recognition of culture as a public good can have important implications for policy making, resource allocation, and societal values. Among the key recommendations put forward by the report is the call to avoid the homogenisation and commodification of culture and see it beyond economic terms. Furthermore, Maru Mormin, one of the authors, proposes regarding culture through the notion of an 'irreducible social good':

²⁶² Polivtseva, E 'Culture as an Industry Won't Solve Sector's Problems', 4 July 2024, Culture Policy Room, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/if-culture-is-not-an-industry-what-is-it-then>

²⁶³ Ibid





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Culture and knowledge are prime examples of goods that are irreducibly social because both are realised and sustained through social relationships [...]. They cannot be decomposed into individual benefits because they are simultaneously produced and enjoyed collectively. They are a feature of society – that is, inextricable from society – and valuable to society as a whole – that is, they cannot be understood as the aggregation of goods to individuals²⁶⁴.

The report affirms the need for building cultural capabilities of societies, the opportunities to simultaneously and collectively create and enjoy culture through inclusive, equitable and diverse participation in the social life of the community²⁶⁵.

Shifting gravity centres

For culture to be anchored on the policy map as a legitimate branch on its own terms, several key elements need to be part of the supportive framework designed to shield it from disruptions and help it flourish. This framework acts as a superstructure provided by the state to address various challenges, including those posed by market forces, and to ensure that culture can thrive and fulfil its essential role as a foundation of society and a crucial element in every person's life.

1. Autonomous space

There is an urgent need to address the core elements of artistic freedom in Europe today and to identify the various factors that undermine it, such as self-censorship caused by the evolving relationship between on the one hand, our heightened awareness and responsibilities, and on the other hand, our rights. Other factors are political pressures, instrumentalism,

²⁶⁴ Culture as a Public Good: Navigating its role in policy debates, 2024, International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, Sydney, Australia, p. 21

²⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 16





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polarised and shrinking public spaces, the behaviour of tech platforms, unsustainable working conditions, and inequalities.

Cultural policy must create a space where the cultural community can thrive and fulfil its social role without being constrained by the tight expectations of other policy agendas. But autonomy does not imply isolation; rather, it is crucial that other policy domains recognise the value of culture and integrate it into essential debates and policy processes. This integration should respect the freedom of artists and cultural workers to co-shape the agenda from the outset, rather than being invited to support predefined causes or compensate for shortcomings. Artists must have the freedom to use their own methods, narratives, and languages to achieve shared goals, and the impact of their work should be evaluated qualitatively and given the time it needs. Arm's length principle is crucial for sustaining the autonomy and freedom of art institutions, artists, cultural organisations and professionals.

→ Why should policymakers care about the autonomy and freedom of culture?

Because without freedom, the role and impact of culture are compromised and diminished to mere auxiliary purposes. When culture lacks autonomy, its power becomes fragmented, and the sector fails to fulfil its essential mission as a cornerstone of societal and individual life.

2. Diverse and balanced ecosystem

Culture, as an ecosystem, requires a mindful and vigilant approach to protect and enhance all art forms, disciplines, and sectors, regardless of their audience size. Each must be treated equally as essential elements of culture as a social good. Political priorities, such as interest in the nation's history or emphasis on economic growth, should not disrupt the balance of this interconnected ecosystem or favour some areas over others.





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Additionally, emerging or underrepresented cultural sectors and forms need continuous support to be integrated into and shape the ecosystem. No sector or art practice should face extinction due to market forces or competition with artificial intelligence. The government should implement strategies to ensure that diverse cultural forms remain accessible to audiences. While a comprehensive cultural strategy is necessary to address common issues, each sector also faces unique challenges that require tailored agendas. Furthermore, the cross-sectoral branch, as a distinct sector itself, must be recognised, promoted, and supported equally alongside other forms and disciplines.

→ Why should policymakers care about a diverse and balanced ecosystem?

Because an imbalance in support can, over time, disrupt the creative labour market and hinder the renewal of culture as both a product of creative thought and a valuable social resource.

3. Social muscle of creativity

This point addresses the idea of ‘complete immersion in culture’²⁶⁶, described by Aaron Timms, or the ‘cultural pandemic’, as a participant from Malmö put it. It envisions a future where the primary goal of cultural policy is to involve every citizen actively and collectively in culture and creative practice. Cultural democracy, discussed in the previous chapter, is the framework that can strengthen society’s cultural capability - the concept also reflected in the EU’s New European Agenda for Culture.

As Maru Mormin notes, realising the cultural capability involves established institutions where collective identities and culture are formed. This includes not only dedicated cultural buildings or small-scale spaces but also institutions like care homes, prisons, and even the home and

²⁶⁶ Timms, A The Age of Cultural Stagnation, *The New Republic*, 19 March 2024, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://newrepublic.com/article/179432/age-cultural-stagnation>





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online spaces²⁶⁷. Achieving this requires integrating art education at all levels and recognising amateur practice as vital. Additionally, there needs to be a policy shift from merely developing audiences to engaging communities by building relationships between cultural organisations and other entities in fields such as education, healthcare, sports, and research.

→ Why should policy-makers care about the ‘social muscle of creativity’?

Because cultural participation is fundamental to a healthy democracy. A fragmented society that lacks engagement and trust in political processes cannot sustain long-term visionary politics or effective reforms, regardless of their political nature. Engaging diverse communities and sectors is crucial for fostering meaningful interactions between culture and other fields. Additionally, cultural participation - whether through education, amateur practice, or collaborative art-making - cultivates audiences for the arts, vital for keeping cultural sectors vibrant and robust.

4. Sustainable framework for working conditions

The inadequate regulation of the digital environment and a lack of legal awareness regarding the unique nature of cultural labour undermine the livelihoods of artists and cultural workers. To ensure that the cultural sector remains a robust and autonomous driver of social progress, comprehensive legislative frameworks must be established to protect the status of cultural workers. These frameworks should address all aspects of working conditions in the sector, including social security, labour relations (such as collective bargaining and various types of employment), remuneration standards, taxation, access to funding, education, lifelong learning, and the legal protection of artistic freedom. Additionally, copyright laws and regulations governing AI should be adapted to reflect the evolving landscape of cultural work. Promoting cultural work as

²⁶⁷ Culture as a Public Good: Navigating its role in policy debates, 2024, International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, Sydney, Australia, p. 24





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legitimate and essential labour is crucial, both within other sectors and government branches and among cultural professionals themselves.

→ Why should policy-makers care about working conditions in the cultural sector?

Because there is no other alternative. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, awareness of the precarious conditions faced by cultural workers has surged, prompting significant legislative action across many European countries. Cultural workers have been actively discussing their challenges, raising awareness about their rights (or the lack thereof), identifying gaps, and learning from progress made in other countries. Although progress is slow and shifting priorities can impact policy, returning to the acceptance of injustices in the sector is unlikely.

5. Policy of trust

One of the goals of creating a supportive framework for culture is, as John Holden, Professor at the University of Leeds, puts it, to shape a ‘strong’ culture that is confident in its own worth, rather than a ‘weak’ culture focused solely on producing ancillary benefits²⁶⁸. Developing a strong culture involves instilling political trust across various levels of cultural governance, including policies, funding programmes, and evaluation practices.

The paradigm should be based on two perspectives: first, each individual cultural project must be viewed as an integral part of a larger common good, shaped, enriched, and renewed by societies over time; second, the impact of such a project should be considered in terms of its belonging to the long-term, overarching value of culture as a social good, and not as an isolated process reduced to an end-commodity.

Policy of trust means pairing the recognition with meaningful support, without pressuring organisations to justify every potential effect of their

²⁶⁸ Holden, J 2004, *Capturing Cultural Value*, p. 10





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work in advance or conform to evaluation formats used in other sectors. It calls for rethinking funding models to allow cultural sectors to excel in their expertise without being constrained by narrow policy themes or having to predict community engagement outcomes. Additionally, evaluation processes should focus on helping organisations improve rather than collecting exhaustive evidence. Each organisation should have the flexibility to design its own evaluation methods in line with its specific objectives. New funding modalities may require the restructuring of the relationship between the funder and the beneficiary.

→ Why should policy-makers imbue trust in their policies for culture?

Because history has shown that culture propels societies and nations forward, inspires their future, and provides them with an enduring identity. On a more practical level, a policy of distrust forces cultural workers to devote more and more resources to proving their value, for instance, through writing applications and preparing extensive reports. While taxpayers need transparency about how public funds are allocated and spent, they would likely prefer that the cultural sector focus more on creating vibrant art and culture rather than producing meticulous reports about it.

6. Mapping cultural participation

There has been a long standing interest in developing indicators to measure the economic and social impact of culture, as well as in designing frameworks for evaluating cultural projects and activities. While these efforts are important, recent history shows that despite the wealth of data and methodologies used to assess culture's contribution to other policies, there has been no drastic improvement in the situation of cultural workers, nor has culture been elevated as a central player in key policy agendas.





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As we propose viewing culture as a social service or public good, it is crucial to shift the focus to mapping the situation of cultural access and participation across the EU. This includes assessing available infrastructure and its accessibility, the state of artistic education, the institutional framework and public infrastructure for amateur practice, and the levels and forms of cultural and artistic self-realisation among various groups, including people with disabilities, displaced individuals, young people, and others. As we are interested in enhancing participation of every citizen, the focus should not only be on analysing what exists, but also what is missing. These studies should be institutionalised as a policy ‘routine’, independent of political shifts and changing priorities.

→ Why should policy-makers map cultural participation?

Because it seems counterproductive to design long-term policies and strategies without a profound understanding of the key aspect - the relationship between the cultural sector and the society. Moreover, establishing these new ways of ‘measuring’ the sector, will not only bring evidence and help identify gaps, but will also revolutionise the policy focus and shift gravity centres from culture’s external impacts to its inner strength and ruptures.

Europe for Culture

As we witness a global shift towards redefining the narrative on culture, what role can the EU play in leading a truly new era for culture in Europe and beyond?

The role of the EU in the field of culture is summarised on its website as such: ‘The EU works to preserve Europe’s shared cultural heritage and to support and promote the arts and creative industries in Europe’. It is further noted that there are cultural aspects in many EU policies, including education, research, social policy, regional development and external





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relations²⁶⁹. There are other areas relevant to culture where the EU has exclusive or shared competencies, such as the internal market, state aid, and industrial policy, among others.

How this role manifests in national cultural policies, especially in less regulated areas, is highly contextual and varies by member state²⁷⁰. Studies have shown that factors such as a country's size, its level of national cultural investment, and current political priorities influence how each state absorbs and utilises the EU's tools and political rhetoric on culture. For example, research on how member states employed their National Plans for the European Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) to support culture found that countries with stronger cultural sectors were more likely to use these funds for transformation and innovation. In contrast, countries with weaker cultural sectors used the RRF to address structural deficiencies²⁷¹.

When analysing how the EU is referenced in national cultural policy agendas and strategies of member states, we identified several roles that national governments attribute to the EU in the development of their cultural sectors and cultural policy-making.

One of the vital aspects is financial support. The EU's funds, such as the Structural Funds, Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, the EU

²⁶⁹ European Union Home - Priorities and actions - Actions by topic - Culture n.d., last seen 5 September 2024, <https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/culture/en#:~:text=The%20EU%20works%20to%20preserve,and%20creative%20industries%20in%20Europe>.

²⁷⁰ See, for instance, Xuereb, K 2024, Informing and Implementing European Cultural Policy: Citizenship, Society and Subsidiarity in Malta; and Obuljen, N 2004, Why we need European cultural policies

²⁷¹ Betzler, D., Loots, E., & Prokúpek, M. (2024). Arts and culture in transformation: A critical analysis of the national plans for the European Recovery and Resilience Facility. *European Policy Analysis*, 10, 101–127. <https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1188>





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Solidarity Fund, and other programmes, are highlighted as crucial boosters for national cultural sectors. Structural Funds are essential for purposes such as renovating heritage infrastructure, including energy upgrades, monument restoration, and the digitalisation of museums, cultural centres, and libraries. The Creative Europe programme is recognised for driving the internationalisation of the cultural field and fostering innovation, a role also repeatedly attributed to Horizon Europe. Additionally, interactions with EU funds create significant ripple effects at the national level. For example, certain quality standards are required to apply for these funds - such as compliance with ICOMOS principles for monument restoration²⁷² or the criteria of Creative Europe - and governments often need to elevate their sectors to meet these standards. Some governments emphasise increasing their cultural sectors' participation in EU programmes as an important goal²⁷³.

The second aspect frequently highlighted in national cultural policy documents is the EU's strategic priorities and initiatives, such as the Green Deal, the Davos Declaration, the European Strategy for Growth and Employment, the Action Plan for European Democracy, and the Porto Santo Charter. These are cited as overarching frameworks providing policy direction. The Work Plan for Culture, and less often the New European Agenda for Culture, are used as one of the ways to justify or validate the national prioritisation of certain topics. Additionally, several countries, including Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, and Latvia, refer to the New European Bauhaus initiative as a flagship project or exemplary practice. Some of these documents also incorporate definitions developed by Eurostat and other EU interventions.

²⁷² Ministry of Culture, Latvia 2022, *Cultural policy guidelines 2021-2027. for the year "Cultural State"*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/330444-kulturpolitikas-pamatnostadnes-2021-2027-gadam-kulturvalsts>

²⁷³ Ministry for the National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government, Malta 2021, *National Cultural Policy 2021*, p. 102





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Some governments highlight their own role in shaping EU priorities, often through their presidency agendas or other policy and regulatory channels. For instance, the Ministry of Culture of France states on its website: ‘The ministry monitors the place given to culture, works and artists in all public policies of the European Union and participates in the construction of EU cultural policy’²⁷⁴.

Importantly, the EU also serves as a space for cultural policy benchmarking, self-audit, and peer learning for many member states. Eurostat, and occasionally Eurobarometer, are cited in cultural policy documents to highlight the strengths of a country's cultural sector or policy compared to others, or to identify gaps and issues that need addressing. National governments most commonly compare themselves with other EU countries in areas such as cultural participation, public investment in culture, and cultural employment. Rhetorically, Eurostat appears to be a crucial tool for national governments to improve their performance in these key areas and adjust their policies accordingly. Another, though less frequently mentioned, indicator is the country's success rate in the Creative Europe programme, which reflects the quality, strength, and degree of internationalisation of the national cultural sector.

The EU is also frequently cited by national governments as a key platform for showcasing their culture. Programmes like the European Capital of Culture and the various initiatives of the EU Presidency are often emphasised as significant tools for development and visibility. Notably, some governments also view the EU context as a space for shaping their national identities - whether by highlighting their culture as distinctly different yet integral to European culture, acknowledging the influence of European culture on their national identity, or noting that European culture is composed of diverse national cultures.

²⁷⁴ Ministry of Culture, France n. d., *Themes - Europe and International*, last seen 5 September 2024, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/europe-et-international>





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This overview highlights the role of the EU for national cultural policymakers in various ways. Beyond the most apparent benefits, such as financial support and its ripple effects on innovation and local cultural development, the EU also provides visionary frameworks and serves as a frame of reference in priority-setting. It also appears as a soil for some countries to enhance their cultural self-identification and promote their national cultures internationally. Moreover, even though the EU does not legislate in many areas crucial to cultural policy-making, it serves as a platform for peer learning and comparison, which can advance national discussions, though its impact remains highly context-dependent.

How do cultural workers perceive the role of the EU in shaping cultural policy in their countries? To explore this, we included this question in our survey, asking respondents to select up to three roles for the EU from a list of nine. While we acknowledge that many respondents may not be experts on how EU cultural policy is formulated and interacts with national governments, it is still valuable to identify emerging trends in perception within the cultural sector.

The majority of survey respondents (65.7%) believe that the EU's primary role is to financially support innovation and development in the cultural and creative sectors, which reflects the importance national governments place on EU funds in their cultural policy strategies. However, despite extensive references by member states to EU investments in heritage, only 24.8% of respondents think the EU should financially support the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. Additionally, just over half of the respondents (51%) agree that the EU should provide a general strategic vision for cultural development in Europe. In line with this, 38.8% believe the EU should promote better policies and regulatory frameworks. Nearly 43% see the EU's role in stimulating peer learning, benchmarking, and the exchange of best practices among member states, a view that aligns with how Europe is often presented in national cultural policy documents. Finally, only 10% think the EU should serve as a platform for member states





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to promote their national culture at the EU level, and just 6% believe it should help member states consolidate their national cultural identities.

Let us revisit our original question - what role can the EU play in leading a truly new era for culture in Europe? Can the EU initiate, support, steer, guide and advance the building of the scaffolding for a strong culture to revive its sense of self and unleash its transformative power?

Combining these two analyses, we can conclude that the EU does serve as a motor of innovative and forward-looking approaches, supporting these efforts financially, legally (where possible), and through ongoing debate and knowledge creation. Be it through regulatory and political interventions, funding initiatives and their guiding values, spaces and tools for peer exchange among member states - the EU is strong in seeding and planting innovations that flourish across Europe. With all the constraints in legal competencies, the EU has the potential to be at the helm of the ship advancing innovation in cultural policy-making too.

This innovation, characterised by bold and progressive thinking, can begin with a proactive new strategic framework championing the value of culture on its own terms. This involves focusing on the seven key puzzle pieces of the recognition of culture we discussed earlier (but not only), such as human creativity, fostering community, cultural pluralism, cultural autonomy, and, importantly, democracy.

Political trust in culture as such would be a key innovation. The EU should insist on promoting cultural democracy and put a plan of making it a reality, lead the progress on working conditions and pave the way for a sustainable, central and autonomous place for culture closely interlinked with other policy domains.

Many of the value pieces and the elements of the scaffolding for culture we outlined above have been already in the spotlight of the EU's agenda. But so





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far, they have been loose pieces that require a bold political vision that sees culture for what it is worth: a foundation of a sustainable future for Europe.

It is important to recognise, however, that for Europe to truly lead in innovation and adopt a bold new approach to culture, a shift in the foundational treaties is necessary. Specifically, the Treaty needs to expand the focus on the shared past to embracing the possibility of a shared future through culture, recognising culture's essential role in today's democracy in Europe. Moreover, a developing culture in its own right and emancipating it from hyper-instrumentalisation, requires a stronger role for the EU in the field of culture. As Commission President von der Leyen stated in her 2024-2029 programme, 'I believe we need Treaty change where it can improve our Union²⁷⁵'. We believe a stronger Union is unimaginable without culture.

Let us build on the progress made with confidence, identify new gaps and address them with all nuances, and include the cultural sector in all vital debates. Let's build the scaffolding for a true cultural ecosystem and create a vision of a better Union, where culture plays a central role.

²⁷⁵ Ursula von der Leyen 18 July 2024, Europe's Choice, Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029, p. 30





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Afterword

A better world is possible - this belief among citizens is essential for democracy. If no one believes in change, no one will engage in sparking and driving it forward.

Let us extend this fundamental belief to our own 'bubble': a different cultural policy that values culture for its own worth is possible. A whole-of-government agenda that places culture at the heart of building the future is possible. A world where culture is an active agent of change - not just a 'bubble' - is possible.

However, it takes courage and a strong will to make these things happen. From policymakers, it requires trust in culture and an understanding of its true value - its temporality and nature. For us in the cultural ecosystem, it





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requires stepping out of our daily survival struggles, uniting beyond sectoral boundaries, strengthening the ‘inner cord’ of our self-awareness, and staying true to our values. It may also take the power to break free from policy paradigms that are suffocating and undermining, and proposing alternatives.

Europe has long been a champion of innovative, progressive, human-centred policies. Today, as the world is brimming with ideas about transforming culture into a public good, it is time for the EU to step up and plant the seed for a renewed, long-awaited cultural policy for the 21st century, in which culture shapes the future.

Inês Bettencourt da Câmara
President of Culture Action Europe

Key Messages

- 1** The value of culture lies in its autonomy. Valuing culture solely through external needs and goals can only be a survival tactic, not a sustainable strategy.
- 2** It is high time to assert and protect the value of human creativity against content produced by AI. Recognising human creativity means acknowledging that diverse, pluralistic and free human expression is essential for shaping our collective future and advancing as a society.
- 3** Culture is not only about products; it is equally about processes. While owning a piece of art or consuming a cultural product holds value, it





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does not surpass the worth of the process and the value of being involved in it.

- 4** Valuing culture means reaffirming our commitment to collective futures rather than succumbing to alienation and individualism. Culture is about embodying what it means to be a society – a collective with a voice and power – rather than just a group of individual voters or consumers.
- 5** The value of culture today lies in its diversity. The plurality of culture lends it legitimacy as a genuine social good, and without this plurality it risks becoming the source of further polarisation of society or a political tool.
- 6** Culture begins with the people who create it. Specific protections for creative workers are needed, not only to ensure their rights are on a par with other workers but also to highlight the unique value their work brings to society.
- 7** Valuing culture means daring to believe in a better short- and long-term future. Not only does culture strengthen our imaginative capacities but its impact also unfolds over long periods. Long-term thinking fosters solidarity and helps us move beyond self-centred, short-term impulses.
- 8** Democracy can be seen as too complex for a world under the stress of numerous crises, with its true value only evident in the long term. Similarly, culture, with its unpredictable nature and long-term impacts, struggles to be valued during crises. The valuing of democracy and culture shares common principles, and each can mutually reinforce the other.





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Glossary

Artistic freedom: refers to ‘the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the wellbeing of societies’. Artistic freedom embodies the following rights: the right to create without censorship or intimidation; the right to have artistic work supported, distributed, remunerated; the right to freedom of movement; the right to freedom of association; the right to protection of social and economic rights; the right to participate in cultural life²⁷⁶.

Cultural and creative sectors: refers all sectors that ‘have potential to generate innovation and jobs in particular from intellectual property’; ‘are based on cultural values and artistic and other individual or collective creative

²⁷⁶ UNESCO 2019, last seen 5 September 2024,
https://www.unesco.org/creativity/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/01/artistic_freedom_pdf_web.pdf





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expressions’; and ‘include the development, the creation, the production, the dissemination and the preservation of goods and services which embody cultural, artistic or other creative expressions [...]’²⁷⁷. Those sectors include architecture, archives, libraries and museums, artistic crafts, audiovisual, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, design, festivals, music, literature, performing arts, books and publishing, radio, and visual arts²⁷⁸. In this report, we use the terms ‘cultural and creative sectors’ and ‘cultural sector’ interchangeably. The former is typically applied when the distinctions between various sectors are relevant, while the latter is used in more general contexts.

Cultural ecosystem: refers to a dynamic and complex network of interconnected cultural and creative sectors that collaborate across and within fields. This ecosystem actively leverages synergies and complementarities, addressing shared challenges and recognising the systemic interdependencies among all its components.

Cultural democracy: refers to a policy concept that promotes active participation and recognition of diverse cultural practices, fostering a relationship between institutions and communities that recognises ‘everyone’s right to create culture. It shifts from passive consumption to collective engagement, valuing local knowledge, traditions, and voices while encouraging dialogue between local and global cultural expressions’²⁷⁹.

Culture: UNESCO defines culture as ‘set of the distinct spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features characterising a society’²⁸⁰. In this report, ‘culture’ refers to a system of creative and artistic activities, sectors, and practices; symbolic expressions, objects, images, melodies, stories, movements, styles, techniques, as well as the world of structures and individuals that produce them,

²⁷⁷ Official Journal of the European Union 2021, Regulation (EU) No 2021/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Programme Europe (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013.

²⁷⁸ Ibid

²⁷⁹ Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship, p. 5

²⁸⁰ UNESCO 2001. Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity





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thus shaping this set of defining characteristics of a society referred in the UNESCO's definition.

Democratisation of culture: refers to the paradigm that aims to make humanity's masterpieces, especially national cultural heritage, accessible to as many people as possible and to encourage the creation of new art. This approach assumes a single, monolithic culture, which needs to be made more accessible, open, and 'democratic', without stressing the possibility for people to contribute or propose an alternative²⁸¹.

Instrumentalisation of culture: refers to the process of imposing priorities and objectives from other policy sectors onto cultural policy; understanding the value of culture solely through lenses such as economics, social cohesion, well-being, education, innovation, international relations, or rural and urban development; and applying measures to extract that value from culture in tangible ways.

Intrinsic value of culture: refers to the worth of culture defined in its own terms and independent of any external benefits. Unlike instrumental value, which defines culture based on its usefulness for other purposes, intrinsic value focuses on the unique characteristics and inherent significance of culture and the cultural and creative sectors themselves.

Self-censorship: refers to the act or strategy of voluntarily restricting or modifying one's speech or actions to avoid causing offence or disturbance to others, without any formal or official directive to do so. The term 'self-censorship', as used in this report, refers to the tendency of cultural and creative workers and organisations to modify or restrict their own expression. This is often done in an effort to maintain or gain recognition, visibility, and support, protect their image and reputation, or shape it in a specific manner.

²⁸¹ Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship, p. 5





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Annex I – Contributors

Note: At the time of the conversation, the contributors worked in the organisations listed; however, some may have since changed organisations.

Interview participants

Circostrada - Stéphane Segreto-Aguilar
 Europa Nostra - Dimitra Kizlari
 European Council of Literary Translators' Association - Justyna Czechowska, Andreas Jandl
 European Creative Hubs Network - Vassilis Charalampidis
 European Dance Development Network - Eva Broberg
 European Festivals Association - Kathrin Deventer
 European League of Institutes of the Arts - Irene Garofalo
 European Music Council - Katharina Weinert
 European Network for Active Participation in Cultural Activities (AMATEO) - Giorgio Bacchiega, Matthias Balzer, Conny Groot, Katerina Klementova
 European Network of Cultural Centres - Martina Fraioli, Anna Maria Ranczakowska
 European Visual Artists - Carola Streul, Susanna Brozzu, Laetitia Nguala Masamba
 European Writers Council - Nina George
 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions - Claire McGuire
 Network of European Museum Organisations - Julia Pagel
 Performing Arts Employers Associations League Europe (Pearle*) - Anita Debaere
 Society of Audiovisual Authors - Cécile Despringre, Annica Ryng

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Annex II – Respondents to the State of Culture Barometer Survey

In total, 579 individuals responded to the survey.





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1. Number of responses by country²⁸²

Country	Number of responses	Percentage of total
Austria	11	1.9
Belgium	44	7.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	0.2
Bulgaria	8	1.4
Croatia	16	2.8
Cyprus	5	0.9
Czech Republic	27	4.7
Denmark	25	4.3
Estonia	5	0.9
Finland	10	1.7
France	35	6
Georgia	1	0.2
Germany	36	6.2
Greece	17	2.9
Hungary	9	1.6
Ireland	12	2.1
Italy	43	7.4
Latvia	1	0.2
Lithuania	3	0.5

²⁸² The question was formulated as follows: 'In which country is your organisation/activity mainly based?' Respondents could choose one country from the list





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Luxembourg	1	0.2
Malta	11	1.9
Montenegro	1	0.2
Netherlands	35	6
North Macedonia	1	0.2
Norway	1	0.2
Poland	9	1.6
Portugal	30	5.2
Romania	26	4.5
Serbia	3	0.5
Slovakia	4	0.7
Slovenia	21	3.5
Spain	41	7.1
Sweden	18	3.1
Switzerland	7	1.2
Turkey	4	0.7
UK	3	0.6
Ukraine	4	0.7
Other	23	4
Pan-European	26	4.3

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2. Number of responses by sector²⁸³

Sector	Number of respondents who chose this sector	Percentage of total
Performing arts	225	38.8
Music	168	29
Visual arts	146	25.2
Heritage	135	23.3
Literature, books and publishing	121	28.9
Museums	105	18.1
Audio-visual	101	17.4
Libraries	74	12.8
Artistic craft	59	10.2
Design	54	9.3
Archives	45	7.8
Architecture	45	7.8
Education	31	5.5
Cultural Policy	27	4.7
Research	18	3.1
Fashion	18	3.1
Other	18	3.1

²⁸³ The question was formulated as follows: 'What are the main sectors in which you or your organisation are/is active?' Respondents could choose unlimited number of sectors





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Advocacy	8	1.4
Cultural Management	6	1
Archaeology	2	0.3

3. Number of respondents by age

Age	Number of respondents	Number of respondents
18-24	7	1.2
25-34	75	13
35-44	138	23.8
45-54	173	29.9
55-64	124	21.4
65+	62	10.7

4. Number of respondents by gender

Gender	Number of respondents	Percentage of total
Female	374	64.4
Male	195	33.7
Prefer not to say	4	0.7
Other	6	1





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Annex III – Sources for the review of national cultural policy agendas

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