culture action europe

State of Culture

second edition





2026

We take care
of the cultural
ecosystem

State of Culture Report

Second edition

Author

Elena Polivtseva

Commissioned and published by

Culture Action Europe
Sq. Sainctelette 19, 1000 Brussels
www.cultureactioneurope.org

Introduction

Lars Ebert, Secretary General at Culture Action Europe

Reviewed by

Natalie Giorgadze, General Director at Culture Action Europe
Luiza Moroz, Head of Policy at Culture Action Europe
Rhys Nugent, Advocacy Officer at Culture Action Europe
with additional input from the Board Members of Culture Action Europe

Graphic layout

Sara Bandinu, Advocacy Campaign Coordinator at Culture Action Europe
Maya Weisinger, Head of Communication and Community Development at Culture Action Europe

Co-funded by the European Union
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders. The European Union cannot be held responsible for them.

Table of Contents

Introduction *5*

Key Observations *12*

Methodology *16*

Chapter 1: The Value of Culture: From Narrative Exhaustion to Policy Change *18*

The narrative hunt 18

Who speaks for culture? 21

The orders of worth 25

A snowball of narratives 27

2026: Culture and resilience 30

Conflicts of orders 35

Rebalancing responsibility: the public-good promise 35

How value becomes real 39

Promise and practice: the bridge still under construction? 41

Promise without provision: the funding gap 41

Project obsession: funding culture in fragments 45

The hidden hierarchy of values: the dominance of industrial worth 50

When the 'how' colonises the 'why' 53

Chapter 2: Culture and AI: Human Agency on a Tightrope *56*

2026: more AI 57

AI casualties: nuance, process, shared practice 60

Art as a human act 63

From human worth to human agency 65

Policy Struggles 67

AI for Culture or Culture for AI? 71

Is culture exclusively human? 73

Chapter 3: Artistic Freedom: from Legal Principle to Lived Capacity *76*

Artistic freedom: from isolated cases to a systemic issue 78

Funding scarcity as political pressure 79

Who owns artistic expression? 80

Art and societies: a complex relationship 81

Participation paradox 83

Collective resilience 87

Policy landscape: shifts, advancements, deadlocks 88
Freedom for what? 92
Freedom infrastructures 94
Bring the 'wild punk' back 96
Freedom as a collective good and a collective responsibility 97
Can we commit to freedom? 98
Chapter 4: Europe: A Continent of Culture? ***100***
The Shrinking Space of Global Cultural Collaboration 102
From Projection to Reciprocity — and Back? 107
Cultural Diversity: Inventory or Process? 111
Europe as a Cultural Practice 117
The Doubts of the Missing Architecture 122
Towards A Continent of Culture 125
Conclusion — the State of Culture Today ***127***
Annex I - Interview participants ***130***
Annex II - Survey respondents to the State of Culture Barometer survey ***131***

Introduction

by Lars Ebert, Secretary General at Culture Action Europe

This is not advocacy

Or is it? If there is one aspect that a painting, a policy brief and a report have in common, then it might actually be a representation of an object, a situation or a position. Magritte's point was that the two are never quite the same thing: the image of a pipe is not a pipe. Or is it?

Culture may be the one sector where the gap between facts and imagination starts to close. Where advocacy for agriculture is a second-order activity — protecting, from the outside, the conditions under which an unrelated first-order activity, growing food, can take place — advocacy for culture is harder to separate so cleanly from its object. The act of making art already does, in the aesthetic register, much of what advocacy does in the institutional sphere: it represents realities that might otherwise go unseen, it judges or reframes what it depicts, and it holds open the possibility that things could be arranged differently. Advocacy, for the cultural sector, is therefore less of an add-on than an extension, carrying into the world of policy a movement that culture was already making in the world of aesthetics.

Culture Action Europe's ambition here is simple: to move culture from something Europe applauds, to something Europe governs with confidence and commitment. We are not there yet, but we are no longer where we were just a few years ago. The Culture Compass, the European Commission's most ambitious cultural strategy to date, emerged at the end of 2025. We believe it was shaped, in part, by the vision that our network developed collectively with our members. And we see this vision reflected in the official Compass.

As we continue to pursue our advocacy for culture, we are commissioning this report, State of Culture, as a biennial snapshot of cultural policies across Europe. The first edition was published in 2024. Now, with the second edition, it feels like a good moment to pause and reflect on what this report means for Culture Action Europe, for the sector at large, and, more fundamentally, on what it is and is not. Does it provide a neutral analysis? Does it point towards solutions? And is it a report at all? Let's find out together.

That relationship between EU policymakers and the cultural ecosystem that Culture Action Europe represents has, in recent years, developed into a constructive and productive exchange; one that has moved, slowly but with growing confidence, from

reacting to each other's needs towards a real dialogue that builds realities together, without losing the critical eye and scrutiny that such a dialogue also requires.

This evolution reflects what advocacy actually means to us at Culture Action Europe. We don't see it as simply making noise until someone listens, or defending a narrow set of interests. Advocacy, for us, is an intentional, purposeful and ever-evolving effort to bring about change on behalf of the cultural ecosystem we represent: the many networks, organisations, artists, and practitioners whose voices might otherwise struggle to reach the rooms where policy gets made. At its heart, this is about power: taking the knowledge, expertise, and lived experience and vision of our diverse membership and turning it into something institutions can really act on, while carrying institutional developments back to our communities in return.

None of this works without a degree of freedom, the openness of decision-makers to be challenged, and our own freedom to speak plainly even when it complicates the relationship. And it depends on keeping a certain distance from the institutions we engage with: we sit close enough to influence the process, but not so close that we become part of it or take on the role of politicians ourselves.

In practice, this vision doesn't rely on any single method; it's built from a mix of approaches that reinforce one another. Sometimes it looks like coalition-building, bringing cultural networks together around a shared ask, for instance when more than 150 organisations joined forces to secure the future of the Creative Europe – Culture strand in the future AgoraEU programme[1]. Sometimes it's community mobilisation, rallying our membership around a common cause, as with the *Ask, Pay, Trust* campaign's push for fairer conditions for artists. Often it involves direct dialogue with decision-makers, structured meetings, consultations, and conversations through which trust between stakeholders and institutions is slowly built over years. Our advocacy draws just as much on project work: research, knowledge-sharing, and publications that ground our positions in evidence rather than assertion. It is this combination, applied consistently over time, that has let Culture Action Europe move from simply asking to be heard to genuinely helping shape policy. As mentioned above, one of the many examples of the impact of this approach is the Sector

[1]Culture Action Europe (2026) '150+ organisations call for a more ambitious budget for culture in AgoraEU', *Culture Action Europe*, 7 July, https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/150-cultural-organisations-urge-eu-policymakers-to-secure-a-more-ambitious-budget-for-culture-in-agoraeu/, last seen 1 October 2026.

Blueprint for the Culture Compass, which was co-created with around 30 of our member networks and informed the European Commission's own Culture Compass[2].

This dynamic — sitting near enough to shape the process and carrying our members' realities into rooms that might otherwise not hear them — also makes it hard to judge, with any real distance, whether the progress we describe is as real as we would like it to be. An advocate that only ever measures their own success risks becoming a painter of the very image Magritte warned us not to mistake for the thing itself. So, at set moments, our advocacy needs, just like our organisational structures, something it alone cannot supply: the perspective of a critical friend, standing at the distance of an external researcher rather than an interested party. This is why, every two years, we commission the State of Culture Report.

The State of Culture Report was conceptualised by Elena Polivtseva, and it is worth pausing on that authorship. A project like this only works if someone is willing to hold the line and intentionally stay between consultation and analysis on the one hand and the freedom of a subjective, journalistic approach on the other hand, edition after edition.

The first report, published in 2024, was received by the sector with genuinely open arms, landing at a moment when many were still searching for words to describe what they were living through. It did not stay on the shelf. The report seeded seven in-depth webinars that unpacked its findings one by one, fed into a wider conversation among our members at Culture Action Europe's 2025 Torino Members' Forum, which in turn informed the task forces that went on to write the Sector Blueprint for the Culture Compass. In that sense, the report already did what we hoped: applied the lens of a critical friend, mirrored the sector back to itself, and informed the conversation it was describing.

This second edition carries that dynamic forward in two directions at once. It traces how the discussion has moved on in the two years since, including in ways the first report itself helped set in motion, and it opens up new ground at the same time. Structurally, three of its four chapters align with the topics of Culture Action Europe's own Action Groups, with a fourth given over to the broader discussion on values running beneath all of them. That alignment was not designed in advance, but simply emerged. It shows how closely this report's questions already track the questions our sector is asking itself.

[2]Culture Action Europe (2025) 'Towards the Culture Compass: A Sector Blueprint', *Culture Action Europe*, 30 September, https://cultureactioneurope.org/advocacy/towards-the-culture-compass-a-sector-blueprint/, last seen 1 October 2026.

Read across these four chapters, this year's State of Culture Report tells the same story from four different angles, and it is a story we recognise as our own. Culture's value, the report finds, is praised more than ever and protected less than ever: a public good in every EU institution's vocabulary, and still governed, funded and evaluated as though it were an industrial output, measured in projects, KPIs and short cycles rather than in the years-long relationships that actual cultural work is made of. That is not a contradiction we can wish away with better language. It is the same contradiction we describe when we say that a compass does not move anyone unless someone funds the journey.

The AI chapter shows a clear development: two years ago, our sector's question was whether we could trust the technology, and the companies behind it, to employ a human-centred approach. Today the question has shifted to agency, and whether artists, and Europe with them, retain the power to decide what AI is for, rather than absorbing whatever a handful of companies decide to build. That is precisely why we set up a dedicated digital and AI action group rather than waiting for the debate to be settled elsewhere: agency is not granted, it is what we organise for.

On artistic freedom, self-censorship among cultural professionals now outpaces direct censorship, funding decisions are increasingly used as a political instrument, and a handful of private equity groups now control more of Europe's festival landscape than any single government does. Naming artistic freedom in the Culture Compass is progress. But it is not protection. That is exactly the gap a European Artistic Freedom Act is meant to close, and exactly why we are not waiting for someone else to draft it.

In its final chapter, the report turns outward, to a Europe that is, in its own words, being thrown back on itself by a fragmenting world order. Here too, our reading and the report's converge: culture is being asked, urgently and sincerely, to help Europe cohere, embody its values and shape them in programmes that are fairer and more equitable. Considering that culture remains, structurally, one of the more fragile and least funded parts of the European project, this is a big ask for a bloc that wants to lead through culture and yet keeps treating it as the budget item to trim.

This ask is being made at a genuinely difficult moment. The fragmenting world order the report describes is the material condition in which any request of this size will have to be met. Russia's war against Ukraine, the conflicts across West Asia and North Africa, and the erosion of security guarantees Europe once took for granted have pushed defence and rearmament back to the centre of political life, competing directly for the same budget lines culture is still fighting to secure. At the planetary scale, the climate emergency is no longer a horizon but a present existential threat, even as the instruments and strategies meant to address it, the European Green Deal foremost among them, are being quietly rolled back. Multilateral institutions like the

United Nations are increasingly paralysed or abandoned outright, while disinformation, AI-driven manipulation and democratic backsliding erode the shared civic ground any European project, cultural or otherwise, depends on. None of this is a list of crises for the cultural sector to tackle one at a time, as it has learned, exhaustedly, to do for two decades.

The report leaves us with a Europe in which culture is being asked to carry more — to sustain democratic life, navigate technological change, defend artistic freedom and help hold together a fragmenting political order — while remaining structurally underfunded and under growing pressure. But it is also a report about agency: whether cultural actors can shape the systems and policies that affect them. It is the terrain on which Culture Action Europe's next five years will have to be built, which makes the real question no longer whether the sector deserves a seat at the table, but which tools, relationships and challenges we choose to prioritise, deepen, or let go of, in a Europe with far less room and far less patience than it had when this Compass was first drawn.

The first ambition is holding course. The Culture Compass exists, and several of its flagship actions carry commitments Culture Action Europe fought to see included. This is not the moment to draw up a new wish list; it is the moment to implement the one we already have. From a civil society perspective, that means following each flagship action closely and continuing to push where important commitments remain vague or incomplete. On working conditions, for example, it means ensuring that the forthcoming EU Artists' Charter moves beyond aspiration and becomes enforceable — a goal we work towards through the Sector Blueprint for the Charter developed by our Action Group. It also means following the Commission's own State of Culture report, an initiative whose title has some history with us and which shows, quite straightforwardly, how our own work can find its way into the European policy agenda. We look forward to reading it and to bringing to the Commission's account the same critical, honest, and sharp attention we have tried to bring to our own. None of these actions happen without money: securing a serious cultural allocation in the next Multiannual Financial Framework is not a separate demand sitting alongside this one, it is the precondition for all of it.

The second ambition is broader and goes beyond implementation towards the architecture on which this very implementation depends. Is the EU's current competence over culture adequate for what we want to achieve, or have we been negotiating for years inside a mandate too narrow for our own ambitions? If so, what should that competence look like instead? That question can't be separated from a harder one about the EU itself: how democratic are the institutions we are asking to govern culture with confidence? Culture Action Europe has spent years arguing that

cultural democracy means broadening who gets to shape culture, not just who gets to consume it. It would be inconsistent to hold the cultural sector to that standard and exempt the EU's own institutions from it. Concretely, this means acting now, before the 2029 European elections, whose outcome and parliamentary majority we cannot predict and which may leave us without the pro-European, democratic centre parties we have been able to rely on until now. Waiting until after the election to find out what political will exists for culture means starting, once again, from a vacuum and building relationships from scratch with whichever interlocutors happen to hold office. The alternative is to address political visions at their roots directly: pushing political parties and their European party families to state an explicit position on culture in their own manifestos, so that whoever is elected in 2029 can be held accountable to something they actually committed to, rather than something we hope to persuade them of afterwards.

We will bring the findings of the State of Culture Report 2026, together with these ambitions, back to our members and partners in the months ahead, building towards BEYOND, the 2027 iteration of our biennial conference to be held in Katowice, Poland. That is where we intend to put these findings to the sector directly and to raise the debate on European cultural policy to the level they demand.

If this report amounts to one finding above all the others, it is this: recognition was never the finish line, only the starting condition. Culture's value has rarely been stated this clearly or this often by European institutions and, yet, it still has not been matched by the funding, protection, or governance necessary for it to be realised. Two years ago, the question this report asked was whether culture could be heard at all. This edition asks a harder one: now that it has been, what is it actually allowed to do with that recognition?

Our gratitude, as ever, goes to Elena Polivtseva for a report of this ambition and substance. We opened this introduction by asking whether a painting of a pipe could ever be more than a painting, and proposed that culture might be the one sector where the gap between an image and the reality it depicts starts to close. We commissioned this report to sit outside that claim, at the distance of an external researcher, precisely so it could check our account of ourselves rather than simply repeat it. And yet, if the discussions that this report has already helped shape are anything to go by, describing the sector plainly has never been a neutral act either.

We offer you this account in the same unresolved spirit the title promised: something to learn from, something to argue with, and, either way, a reason to keep testing whether description and consequence are really as separate as we asked this report to be. The context in which we operate has rarely felt less stable. It has also rarely

mattered more to take a stand and act within the system culture operates in, while also questioning it, with the radical imagination that we find at the heart of our sector.

So is this report, after all, advocacy? We think it is.

Key Observations

1. State of Culture 2026 is a demand for agency.

In 2024, the *State of Culture* was largely a state asking for recognition. Today, that struggle is not over, but a more ambitious claim is emerging: *agency*. Democracy depends not only on participation in existing structures, but also on the capacity to imagine and create different ones. Despite — and because of — persistent underfunding, precarious working conditions and growing exposure to political, social and technological pressures, the cultural sector is asking not simply to participate in Europe's future, but to help shape it. Agency means more than being consulted within predefined systems; it means having the freedom to ask *why*, not only *how*; believe in Europe's future while questioning its chosen directions; to challenge concentrated technological power; and to build global cultural relationships on terms shaped together with artists and communities from across the world.

2. Culture is being rediscovered as the infrastructure of collective life.

A new paradigm of cultural value is taking shape. As resilience and security move to the centre of public policy, culture is increasingly understood as part of the infrastructure through which societies withstand disruption. EU and national policy strategies recognise that cultural institutions, heritage, practices, spaces and communities sustain memory, identity, trust, continuity, mental wellbeing, social cohesion, and democracy. In parallel, the language of culture as a public good is gaining ground, potentially reversing the burden of proof: from what culture must *deliver* to deserve public support towards what governments must secure for culture to flourish. These shifts point towards a more foundational understanding of culture: less as a sector expected to contribute to various policy priorities, and more as part of the infrastructure of collective life that needs to be protected and supported in its own right. Whether this emerging discourse will translate into practice remains a big question.

3. The values of cultural policy and the logic of its instruments are drifting apart.

Cultural rights for all, artistic freedom, risk-taking and imagination are invoked as principles cultural policy should protect. Yet the systems through which cultural work is funded and evaluated continue to favour short-term projects, predefined outcomes, measurable impact, administrative control and competition for scarce resources. The contradiction goes beyond the familiar mismatch between rhetoric and resources. It is a misalignment between discourse, conditionality and scrutiny: what policy claims to value, the conditions it attaches to support, and the criteria by which cultural value is ultimately judged. Celebrating freedom and participation in discourse while

designing support instruments around predictability and control risks obscuring the real power and value of artistic work. If the emerging cultural paradigm is to mean anything in practice, these three dimensions need to align.

4. The rise of AI is shifting attention from cultural outputs to the conditions of creation.

The flood of AI-generated content is forcing a fundamental question: what exactly do people value when they value culture? Evidence shows that people often cannot reliably distinguish synthetic content from human-made work, yet overwhelmingly express a preference for the latter. This suggests that cultural value cannot be reduced to the qualities of the final product. The stories, struggles, doubts, intentions and perspectives behind it are also part of how it is valued. Authorship, then, is not only a creators' rights issue; it is part of how audiences assign cultural value. Yet this does not place AI outside culture: it is already embedded in creative processes, while some artists challenge the idea that culture is exclusively human. Cultural policy therefore faces a task that goes beyond policing the boundary between human-made and AI-generated content: shifting attention towards the people, processes, relationships and conditions through which culture comes into being, while ensuring that AI becomes a useful creative tool without compromising authorship, responsibility, human agency and livelihoods.

5. Artistic freedom requires a systemic response: legal protection *and* cultural policy that makes freedom possible in practice.

Artistic freedom has rarely been so visible in European cultural policy discourse and rarely felt so fragile in practice. Its erosion occurs not only through explicit acts of censorship, but through a wider system of pressures: political interference, funding decisions, economic precarity, ownership concentration, social backlash, unequal access, platform power and, as a consequence of these factors, self-censorship. A legal instrument such as a European Artistic Freedom Act is needed to clarify responsibilities, establish safeguards and create mechanisms for intervention. But legal protection alone, even if vital, does not necessarily give artists the capacity to exercise their freedom. Funding, governance and working conditions become questions of artistic freedom when they systematically reduce artists' capacity to experiment, take risks, speak up and make autonomous artistic decisions. Legal protection therefore needs to be accompanied by cultural policy capable of sustaining the conditions in which freedom moves from a legal principle to lived capacity.

6. Artistic freedom needs to be exercised, not only provided.

As momentum grows for stronger legal protection of artistic freedom, the cultural sector should not simply wait for new safeguards to emerge. It also needs to build a

collective infrastructure through which freedom can be practised, tested and defended from within. As pressures become more diffuse, coming not only from governments, but also from markets, platforms, institutions, audiences and peer communities, the boundary between external constraint and internalised restraint becomes harder to draw. Artistic freedom therefore requires an active commitment from professional communities: to examine the pressures they accommodate, protect spaces for disagreement and experimentation, and train their agency, courage, and leadership. Freedom should be understood not only as a legal principle or a condition provided by cultural policy, but as a collective capacity that must be continuously exercised, like a muscle, if it is to remain alive.

7. Culture is becoming more geopolitical just as the space for global cultural collaboration is shrinking.

Governments are increasingly mobilising culture to communicate national narratives, consolidate identities and position themselves internationally. Across major international cultural events, geopolitical tensions increasingly shape cultural expression, or come to dominate the cultural space altogether. Yet the growing geopolitical importance of culture should not be confused with stronger infrastructures for genuine global cultural relations. As culture becomes more strategically useful to states, bottom-up transnational cooperation is becoming more fragile: funding is scarce and fragmented, mobility remains unequal, conflicts create new ethical and security dilemmas, and democratic backsliding complicates cooperation across contexts. Artistic curiosity and partnership-building are no longer enough: cultural actors increasingly need geopolitical judgement, ethical positioning, risk assessment and protection. Culture is thus gaining geopolitical significance precisely as the autonomous spaces needed to build cultural relationships across geopolitical divides are shrinking.

8. A defining tension in Europe's cultural self-understanding: *culture as a given* or *as a process*.

As Europe seeks to consolidate its cultural positioning globally, cultural diversity remains one of its defining assets. Yet the meaning of that diversity is becoming more contested. Conservative and right-wing political actors, who have gained influence in recent years, are giving prominence to a view of culture rooted in fixed identity and continuity — something that can be defined and preserved within recognisable cultural borders and protected from external impulses. Much contemporary artistic practice, meanwhile, proceeds from a different understanding: culture as something continuously made and remade through creation, encounter, transformation, reinterpretation, disagreement and the crossing of borders. There are, thus, different visions of European cultural diversity: one centred on the coexistence and

preservation of distinct cultures, the other on interaction, transformation and the creation of new cultural forms across and beyond borders. As Europe searches for a more consolidated cultural image in the world, this tension shapes both its external cultural policy and the cultural life it enables at home.

9. Europe's global cultural agency will be defined by how open it remains.

The EU's approach to international cultural relations has moved through several paradigms: from projecting European diversity and identity, to mobilising culture for wider global objectives, to emphasising reciprocity and mutual transformation, and now towards seeing Europe's own cultural vitality as a source of geopolitical standing. These paradigms continue to coexist: ambitions for influence, visibility and strategic power sit alongside the language of openness and reciprocity. As Europe seeks greater autonomy and a more consolidated cultural presence in the world, the challenge is to strengthen its agency without narrowing the terms of its engagement with others. A credible 'continent of culture' will depend not only on the conditions Europe creates for culture at home, but also on the relationships it sustains beyond its borders: reciprocal, artist-led spaces for collaboration, shared inquiry, disagreement and solidarity. Greater cultural agency and greater openness need not pull in opposite directions: openness can itself be one of the strongest sources of European cultural agency.

Methodology

The methodology for this report combined several complementary steps:

- State of Culture Workshop, held during Culture Action Europe's Beyond the Obvious conference in Turin in June 2025. The workshop built a bridge from the 2024 edition of *State of Culture* and explored the challenges and opportunities CAE members expect to face in the coming years. Together with the sector interviews, it helped identify the key themes, concepts and directions developed in this report.
- Sector interviews with 27 representatives of 19 European and international sector-specific networks and associations. The interviews explored the most important global trends affecting each sector, the opportunities anticipated over the next five years, and their key requests to EU policymakers. The interviews informed the desk research and played a central role in shaping the report's structure, with the themes most discussed becoming its key areas of focus.
- Review of national cultural policy documents adopted (or renewed) by EU Member States between mid-2024 and the end of the first quarter of 2026 (14 countries in total: Austria, Belgium — Flanders, Belgium — Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain). Sources included cultural strategies, plans, agendas and other documents produced by ministries responsible for culture, as well as relevant ministerial websites and broader government documents, such as coalition agreements and strategies. Sources were identified through official ministry websites and/or national profiles in the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends. The analysis examined how the role of culture is framed and how issues including security, artistic freedom and democracy, are addressed in national policy.
- Review of EU cultural policy, focusing particularly on recent developments, including the Culture Compass and documentation related to the proposed AgoraEU programme. This analysis traced changes in the EU's approach to culture and its priorities for the cultural and creative sectors. Selected EU cultural policy documents, including 46 sets of Council Conclusions adopted between 2000 and 2025, were also analysed to trace the historical evolution of EU narratives on culture.
- State of Culture Barometer Survey, disseminated through Culture Action Europe's channels and completed by 483 respondents. The findings were treated primarily as signals of trends and changes requiring further

investigation through interviews and desk research. Qualitative insights from open comment fields were analysed alongside the quantitative results.

- **Desk research**, including sector-specific academic literature, relevant books, a sample of recent publications and policy papers produced by CAE members, and available data illustrating the broader political, economic, technological, and social context.

The findings from these strands were synthesised and analysed to develop the report.

The aim of *State of Culture* is not simply to provide a snapshot of current conditions, but to critically examine emerging aspirations, concerns and assumptions within the cultural sector; test established convictions; challenge familiar arguments; and expand thinking about the sector's own role and the possibilities for better cultural policy. The report therefore does not claim to be a fully neutral exercise. It deliberately combines evidence and analysis with interpretation and a normative, value-based perspective.

Nor is the report intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Some dimensions of Europe's cultural and creative sectors, including local and regional cultural policy, fall outside the scope of the review, while some creative sectors are underrepresented in both the survey and interviews. The issues examined were selected primarily on the basis of their prominence across the interviews and survey findings. Rather than offering a complete or entirely objective account of these complex fields, the report focuses on issues that emerged as particularly pressing, using them as the basis for a critical and, at times, deliberately provocative exploration.

Chapter 1: The Value of Culture: From Narrative Exhaustion to Policy Change

The narrative hunt

The value of culture is seemingly beyond dispute for people working in the cultural sector, just as it appears self-evident to societies more broadly: nearly four fifths of respondents to the 2025 Eurobarometer say that culture is important to them personally[3]. Yet the value of culture remains one of the most persistent conversations within arts communities and perhaps one of the most heavily invested areas of cultural policy research.

As was discussed at the State of Culture workshop in Turin in 2025, what proves particularly difficult to resolve is the question of how best to frame culture's value: the narratives, arguments and vocabularies through which the value of culture is made legible to funders, decision-makers and the wider public. The urgency and centrality of this debate have remained consistently intense for many years. What is shifting rapidly, however, is the reality in which these approaches and paradigms are being shaped. New political priorities generate new buzzwords; one crisis eclipses another; and each new turmoil presents fresh opportunities for argument-building — or, at least, in the spirit of resilience, we have convinced ourselves to see it this way.

Yet cultural advocacy never seems able to settle on one central argument. Instead, it repeatedly returns to the same fundamental question: how should we speak about culture to funders and decision-makers *now*, so that culture is recognised, trusted, taken seriously and, as a result, protected and supported through funding and regulation?

The first edition of the *State of Culture* report, published in 2024, did not escape this debate either. Two years ago, somewhat unexpectedly, our exploration of the value of culture came to centre on a critical analysis of instrumentalisation[4]. Unexpectedly — because this concern was not a new, moment-specific or under-discussed problem. Yet the issue emerged so strongly through our research that it became impossible to ignore.

The *State of Culture 2024* concluded that the growing instrumentalisation of culture does little to improve the sector's situation. Even if culture is often discussed and

[3] European Commission 2025, Special Barometer 562 Europeans' attitudes towards culture, p. 12.

[4] Culture Action Europe 2024, State of Culture in Europe, pp. 17—22.

measured through the goals of other policy areas, this has not, so far, led to a substantial increase in cultural funding or to a breakthrough in inter-ministerial support for culture. The report also argued that the sector itself had learned to narrate, and even shape, its work through the needs, values and dynamics of other policy fields, whether economics, innovation, diplomacy, urban development or health. Yet, an equal-level cooperation between culture and the other sectors is not yet a reality.

The report's conclusions on instrumentalisation were also among the messages that sparked the most explicit tensions within the sector. In the discussions that followed its publication[5], the issue appeared outdated to some; to others, it seemed to undermine the progress made over the past decades in broadening the arguments for culture. For others still, it appeared too binary, reducing the debate to '*art for art's sake*' versus social and economic utility. All of this unfolded against a backdrop of shared exhaustion within the field: exhaustion with the never-ending necessity and expectation to frame and reframe the value of cultural work, while once again bypassing the so-called intrinsic value of culture.

The role played by the previous *State of Culture* report was one of sounding the alarm and triggering debate. It did not offer clear alternatives to the instrumentalising paradigm; instead, it sought to empower and inspire the sector to consolidate its values, strengthen 'its internal understanding of its own role' and developing 'its own inner rod of confidence' — one that 'shall not be eroded every time there is another hit of the wind of trends'[6].

So, where are we now, two years later? Observing the wealth of new studies produced and the arguments used in advocacy documents, it seems that the narrative hunt has continued its usual dynamic: turning every new crisis, whether geopolitical collapse, security threats, declining mental health or the hyperdigitalisation of life, into a new argument for the 'unique' role culture can play *now*. At the same time, the persistent need to finally define culture on its own terms has not been resolved. Instrumentalisation of culture and the exhaustion it creates within the sector have been felt strongly through the responses to our *State of Culture Barometer* 2026[7], and

[5]Some of these discussions took place as part of a series of *State of Culture* webinars organised by Culture Action Europe, the first of which focused on the instrumentalisation of culture. Learn more: https://cultureactioneurope.org/projects/state-of-culture/state-of-culture-webinars/ (last seen 5 September 2026)

[6]Culture Action Europe 2024, State of Culture in Europe, p. 129.

[7]The *State of Culture Barometer 2026* gathered 481 responses from representatives of a wide range of cultural sectors—including architecture, the performing arts, music, heritage and museums—across 46 countries. Further details are provided in the sections on methodology and the annex on survey responses.

interview conversations. '*I think the biggest challenge is that we are completely lost when it comes to what art and culture mean today, what they serve, beyond helping to solve the endless crises*', one interviewee reflected.

'*We need a new narrative*' — this might be among the most frequently repeated phrases across workshops, keynote speeches and essays in European cultural advocacy circles. But do we really need a new narrative, a new convincing story, a strong argument about culture?

For many readers, especially those who have spent years inside cultural advocacy debates, the question may already sound tired. The field has been asked to explain itself so many times, in so many vocabularies — economic, democratic, social, diplomatic, ecological, therapeutic — that the very call for a 'new narrative' can feel like part of the problem. One may reasonably ask whether a solid, shared and durable narrative on culture is possible at all, or whether the search for one simply repeats the cycle that we actually seek to overcome.

What has become clear from both the interviews and the survey is that many in the field are no longer convinced that the main task is narrative refinement. The urgency is shifting elsewhere: from formal recognition to policy reconfiguration. Almost 80% of survey respondents believe that culture is not *sufficiently recognised* within policy agendas[8], but only 11% think that the reason is that culture is *absent* from these agendas altogether[9]. More than 48% see the main problem in the fact that '*culture is discussed symbolically but not backed by resources*', and 23.3% say that '*culture is instrumentalised for other goals*', while other 9% consider that '*culture is recognised too narrowly*'.

Furthermore, as part of the *State of Culture* Barometer survey, we asked respondents to reflect on the role of culture in the world as it is likely to look over the next five years[10]. Yet instead of elaborating a confident catalogue of culture's roles and values, many respondents used the question to express frustration with the policy conditions under which these roles are supposed to be performed.

---

[8] The question was formulated as follows: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree that culture is sufficiently recognised in current policy agendas?' Response options were: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.

[9] The question was formulated as follows: If you think culture is not recognised adequately, what is the main problem?

[10] The question was formulated as follows: 'Imagine our world in the next five years and the role of culture within it. Choose up to three of the most important roles you envision for culture'. Several response options were provided. Respondents were then invited to share any additional reflections or ideas in an open-text field.

They spoke less about what culture can do, and more about what culture is currently prevented from doing and why. Poor funding, short-term grants, KPI-driven evaluation, unstable priorities, self-censorship, and excessive expectations appeared as the conditions that make any serious account of culture's value difficult to sustain. The question of culture's role did not seem to inspire respondents so much as expose its unease: culture is constantly being asked to carry diverse responsibilities, while the policy frameworks around it remain too fragile, narrow or extractive to support those responsibilities meaningfully.

Many recognise that arguments come and go, while they feel that hardship within the sector has only deepened. Is the challenge, then, not only to tell a convincing story about culture's value, but to ensure that this story points, at its foundations, to the right policy infrastructure — one capable of securing a viable future for culture? Such a story must be attuned not only to wider political priorities, but above all to the needs of the cultural ecosystem itself, because otherwise it is just going to change nothing. This 'new narrative' must also be future-proof: able to withstand the rapid succession of crises we are now facing.

Who speaks for culture?

But today, narrating cultural value is more than asking for political trust and financial support — it has increasingly become a struggle over meaning, possibly even more since our last *State of Culture* report was published. A challenge for the sector has become to reclaim the meaning of culture's value once it has been absorbed into competing political agendas. One interviewee reflected ironically on this issue: '*You ask in the survey whether culture is recognised in political agendas. I think I would answer yes, but I miss the times when it was not recognised*'. They further clarified that the problem is not the lack of recognition, but the '*wrong recognition*' of culture.

2024 was the year of a major political shift, with elections taking place in over 70 countries worldwide. In many cases, including EU member states, elections strengthened populist and right-wing forces[11]. By mid-2026, right-wing or nationalist parties participated in, led or formally sustained national governments in several EU member states, such as Italy, Finland, Croatia, Czechia, Slovakia and Sweden. In several others, including Austria, France, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Romania and the Netherlands, such parties exercised substantial parliamentary, electoral or agenda-setting influence. The European Parliament also emerged from the 2024

[11] Economist Intelligence Unit (2025) Democracy Index 2024: What's wrong with representative democracy? London: Economist Intelligence Unit, pp. 24-25.

elections more polarised and further to the right than at any previous point in its history[12].

The radical-right groups do not control the European Parliament now, but the shift is playing out through agenda-setting and ideological adaptation as much as through formal alliances. New coalitions have already managed to push some boundaries to move migration policy further towards restriction and externalisation; accelerate the rollback of the Green Deal; and tighten control over NGOs. The current European Commission has already faced a record four motions of censure during the 2024–2029 parliamentary term — initiated by both the right and the left, all of which were rejected. The mood of confrontation has also been sensed strongly when Ursula Von der Leyen's September 2025 State of the Union address was interrupted by heckling and shouts of disagreement, including from far-right MEPs.

But the discourse has become more confrontational not only over which values are invoked, but also over the meanings attached to them. The polarisation of the Parliament has unavoidably impacted the grammar and rules through which values are articulated and contested. This trend has already been visible: over the past decade, 'European values' have continued to be invoked, but increasingly with different, and sometimes opposing, meanings attached to them by different political actors[13]. As political fragmentation deepens, this tendency appears to be intensifying: equality, freedom, diversity and related concepts are still mobilised, but in defence of very different causes. The real struggle is over who gets to define what those values mean.

One need look no further than the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT), which is currently politically diverse, with 32 members: 17 from the centre-right or right, eight from the left, and the remainder from liberal and green groups[14]. In March 2025, CULT held a debate on the EU's future strategy for culture,

[12] European Parliament (2024) *European election results 2024–2029*, https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/european-results/2024-2029/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[13] Ahrens, P., Gaweda, B., & Kantola, J. (2022). Reframing the language of human rights? Political group contestations on women's and LGBTQI rights in European Parliament debates. Journal of European Integration, 44(6), 803–819. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.2001647.

[14] European Parliament (2025) *Debates: Plenary sitting of 31 March 2025*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/debate-details.html?date=20250331&detailBy=date, last seen 5 September 2026.

the *Culture Compass*[15]. What emerged clearly from this deliberation was a broad sense in the room that European culture is under pressure. What remained far less clear was what different speakers meant by 'European culture', let alone by 'cultural diversity': is it a diversity of national cultures, diversity of recognised heritage traditions, or the full diversity of cultural expressions present on the continent, including minority cultures? Terms such as *threats* and *attacks* appeared across the political spectrum, and several political groups referred to the need to preserve *freedom*, the *European model* or the *European way of life*. Yet these seemingly shared terms often pointed to different political imaginaries — 'Europeanness' might have been used both as a pretext for antimigratory narratives and a foundation for an inclusive and open vision for society.

For cultural advocates, this means that distortion of meaning and conceptual substitution have become ordinary features of political debate. It is increasingly difficult to claim ownership over a value in general; what can be claimed is a specific interpretation of it. This is not new but newly urgent degradation of shared value systems, or what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre famously diagnosed back in 1981 in *After Virtue* as the fragmentation of moral language: modern societies continue to use moral vocabularies — rights, justice, freedom, responsibility — but often without a shared framework through which these terms can be collectively interpreted or rationally negotiated[16].

This is particularly consequential for culture, because it is a profoundly contested notion. Culture is subjective — it is where societies imagine, question, interpret, stage and dispute truths. It works through ambiguity, contradiction, symbolism, emotion, fiction, memory, provocation and imagination. This is why culture is one of the most obvious arenas of ideological struggle. It shapes whose stories count, who controls the institutions that tell them, who can afford to create and participate, and what a society understands itself to be.

In this context, the prevailing political ideology matters greatly for the cultural sector. Some political forces see culture as a source of creativity and innovation; others as a resource for solidarity within local communities[17]. Some frame culture as a battleground for defending national identity, tradition, and civilisational values, while

---

[15] European Parliament (2026) *Members: Committee on Culture and Education*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/cult/home/members, last seen 5 September 2026.

[16] MacIntyre, A. (1981). After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. (3rd ed. 2007).

[17] Caron B 2024, *Cultuurbeleid en ideologie Kan je het cultuurbeleid politiekideologisch typeren?*, p. 200.

others have no cultural strategy at all, except for defunding the cultural sector or some parts of it[18]. Shifts between these ideological positions can threaten the very survival of certain parts of the sector, especially those that are less established. For instance, as one interviewee noted, independent, emerging and interdisciplinary arts that do not fit regular funding categories suffer immediately when political moods change.

For more established sectors, such as cultural heritage, the situation has become complex in a different way. As an interviewee from the cultural heritage field reflected, when right-wing ideologies are dominant, heritage is not necessarily ignored or defunded. Often, it is placed centre stage: nationalist governments tend to instrumentalise heritage for narratives of unitary identity, reframing history to emphasise some stories while obscuring others. This sits uneasily with the value system many within the heritage sector itself defend: heritage as '*multilayered, plural, contested and composed of many voices*', as our interviewee put it.

Politicisation of cultural value narrative is by no means new, but it might have become more polarised and explicit in today's political climate in Europe. Political actors, however, are not the only players invested in narrating the meaning and role of culture today. Technology businesses also have a significant stake in shaping public perceptions of artists, artistic labour and the nature of creativity itself. AI companies are building technologies that can extract from, imitate, accelerate and in some cases substitute artists' labour. They are, unsurprisingly, interested in shaping the public narrative through which that substitution becomes acceptable. According to recent research by scholars from Canada, France and the USA, today's narratives around AI often separate creativity from the training, skill, judgement, experimentation and time it requires: everyone can supposedly be creative, and efficiency is king. The message promoted by some AI advocates is that output matters more than process and that anyone can produce creative work. What is presented as the democratisation of creativity can therefore also devalue artistic labour[19].

So, today's challenge of cultural advocacy is therefore not simply to create a narrative that convinces power-holders to fund the sector. It is to create a narrative that reflects the value of culture in its full potential and a narrative that the culture can actually own. If we do not lead in defining the meaning, value and role of culture within

[18] Mikola, B., Zagórski, P., Schafer, D., Cirhan, T., Suchanek, J., & Kevicky, D. (2025). Cultural policies of populist governments in central and Eastern Europe: a comparative review. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2025.2477478

[19] Caramiaux, B., Crawford, K., Liao, Q.V., Ramos, G. and Williams, J. (2025) *Generative AI and creative work: narratives, values, and impacts.* arXiv, https://arxiv.org/pdf/2502.03940, last seen 5 September 2026.

broader social and political realities, others will do so on our behalf — political movements, market actors, technology companies, or institutions whose interests may be far removed from the conditions culture needs in order to remain free, plural and alive.

But what should our narrative be today — one that captures culture's true value, convinces those in power, and points towards a policy paradigm that makes this value real rather than merely rhetorical? How can we move on from the old and disfunctioning opposition between instrumental vs intrinsic value?

The orders of worth

Culture is not the only sector that struggles to make its case in social debate and policymaking. More broadly, people tend to disagree about what matters and why. To make sense of the different systems through which value is understood and justified, and move on from the exhausted dichotomy between instrumental and intrinsic value, it is useful to turn to the 'orders of worth' framework developed by French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in their book *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, first published in French in 1991.

Their central insight is that societies operate through different 'orders of worth': distinct moral systems that define what counts as valuable, legitimate and just. Their original framework consists of six orders:

- In the **market world**, worth comes from profitability, competition and growth.
- In the **industrial world**, value is understood through efficiency, expertise, reliability and measurable performance.
- In the **civic world**, worth is created through public goods, equality, solidarity and collective welfare.
- In the **inspired world**, worth comes from creativity, authenticity, singularity, inspiration and risk.
- In the **world of fame**, value is explained through attention, visibility and external recognition.
- In the **domestic world**, worth is grounded in continuity, trust, hierarchy and tradition[20].

Later, Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999/2005) describes the rise of the seventh 'projective order' as an organisational form of post-Fordist capitalism.

[20]Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L. (2006) *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Translated by C. Porter. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

These orders of worth are not merely 'narratives'; they are distinct and autonomous worlds of legitimacy, each with its own vocabulary, beliefs, philosophies and tests through which the worth of things, people and actions is articulated, assessed and made real. While all of these worlds can, in one way or another, embrace culture, two orders may be particularly relevant for our debate: the *inspired* and the *industrial*.

The *inspired* order of worth is explained as follows:

'*In an inspired world, the state of worthiness has the attributes of inspiration itself, in the state of illumination. […] The state of worthiness is spontaneous — both sincere and involuntary. […] It is manifested by feelings and passions, and it is experienced as devouring, terrifying, enriching, exciting, exalting, fascinating, disturbing, and so on. What is worthy is what cannot be controlled or even more importantly cannot be measured, especially in its industrial forms. In the inspired state of worthiness, beings are not subject to industrial measure, reason, determination, or the certainties of technologies. […] To awaken one's 'dormant faculties', […] one must know how to […] not always think about being useful, efficient, logical, rational. […] This mode of translation is opposed to everything that in other worlds, and […] especially in the industrial world, grasps movement in the accomplishment of a determination, in a trajectory that is predictable*'[21].

Boltanski and Thévenot therefore describe the inspired order as a world in which value emerges from both passion and uncertainty, while planning and predictable trajectories — often understood today through the logic of projects — appear as alien elements. The key rule of the game here is to create the conditions for inspiration to emerge: to relinquish control, open oneself to the future, and allow the most authentic forms of expression to flourish. We don't have to understand culture solely through the inspired order of worth, but many elements of it lie at the foundation of artistic work.

In the industrial order of worth, 'the proper functioning of beings extends the present into a future, opening up the possibility of prediction'. 'The quality of worthy beings, beings that are functional, operational, or […] professional, thus express their capacity to integrate themselves into the machinery, the cogwheels of an organisation, along with their predictability, their reliability, and it guarantees realistic projects into the future. People are in a state of unworthiness when they produce nothing useful, when they are unproductive. […] Things are unworthy when they are subjective'[22].

[21] Ibid, p. 159

[22] Ibid, p. 205

Boltanski and Thévenot therefore understand the industrial world as an order of worth in which people, organisations and practices are judged according to their efficiency, productivity, reliability and capacity to function predictably. What is considered valuable is what can be planned, measured and made operational, while uncertainty, inefficiency and disruption appear as deficiencies. This order of worth is relevant to our debate because, in many respects, it appears to stand in opposition to the inspired world, particularly when it comes to the conditions under which value or worth is allowed to emerge and the ways in which it is measured.

So, how can these different orders of worth help us understand how the value of culture is interpreted and tested today?

A snowball of narratives

Before considering what kind of value paradigm may be emerging today, it is useful to look at where we have come from and how cultural policy discourse has evolved over recent decades. Let us attempt to identify several distinct paradigms through which culture has been justified, governed and valued in Europe.

After the Second World War, as Europe sought to rebuild its economy, infrastructure and its moral and social foundations, culture came to be understood as a component of democracy, public welfare and human rights. Established in 1945, UNESCO was founded on the premise that lasting peace requires not only political agreements, but also international cooperation and solidarity in education, science and culture[23]. In 1949, ten European states signed the Statute of the Council of Europe, committing themselves to safeguard '*the ideals and principles which are their common heritage*'[24]. This was also the period in which ministries of culture, public arts funding and welfare-state cultural policies gained ground[25]. In many European contexts, the legitimacy of public support for culture was strongly grounded in what Boltanski and Thévenot would later describe as the *civic* order of worth: equality, solidarity, collective access and the understanding of culture as a component of human rights and democratic citizenship.

[23]UNESCO (2026) *Basic Texts: Section A – Constitution*. Paris: UNESCO.

[24]Council of Europe (1949) *Statute of the Council of Europe*. European Treaty Series No. 1, London, 5 May. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

[25]Daughtry, S., & Whiting, S. (2025). Cultural labour, income support, and the welfare state: Non-arts funding and funding the arts. *Journal of Sociology*, *61*(3), 469-488. https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833241309856

From the 1980s onwards, an economic and neoliberal turn reshaped the policy imagination. The increasingly dominant framework became that of the 'creative industries'[26]. Here, the key anchors of value came from the *market* order: competitiveness, entrepreneurship, city branding, cultural tourism, creative labour and the promise of growth.

The Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, introduced the first explicit legal basis for European Community action in the field of culture through Article 128 of the EC Treaty. The EU's cultural policy has from the early stages been tied to the project of European identity-building. Cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue became central pillars of EU cultural discourse, especially as successive enlargements brought new histories, languages and cultural traditions into the Union[27]. Here, the relevant order of worth was closer to the *domestic* world: culture as continuity, inheritance, shared belonging, Europe as a symbolic home. The task was to narrate Europe as a plural yet recognisable community.

Simultaneously, the creative industry narrative developed further. In 1998, the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), under Tony Blair's government published the first *Creative Industries Mapping Document*, defining creative industries as those '*which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation*'[28]. This framework became highly influential internationally, including across Europe, and resonated with the Lisbon Strategy's ambition, adopted in 2000, to make the EU '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*' by 2010[29]. The creative industries paradigm was further promoted in EU official documents, such as the *Council Conclusions on Culture as a Catalyst for Creativity and Innovation* (2009) and strategic documents, including the Commission's *Green Paper: Unlocking the Potential of Cultural and Creative Industries*.

---

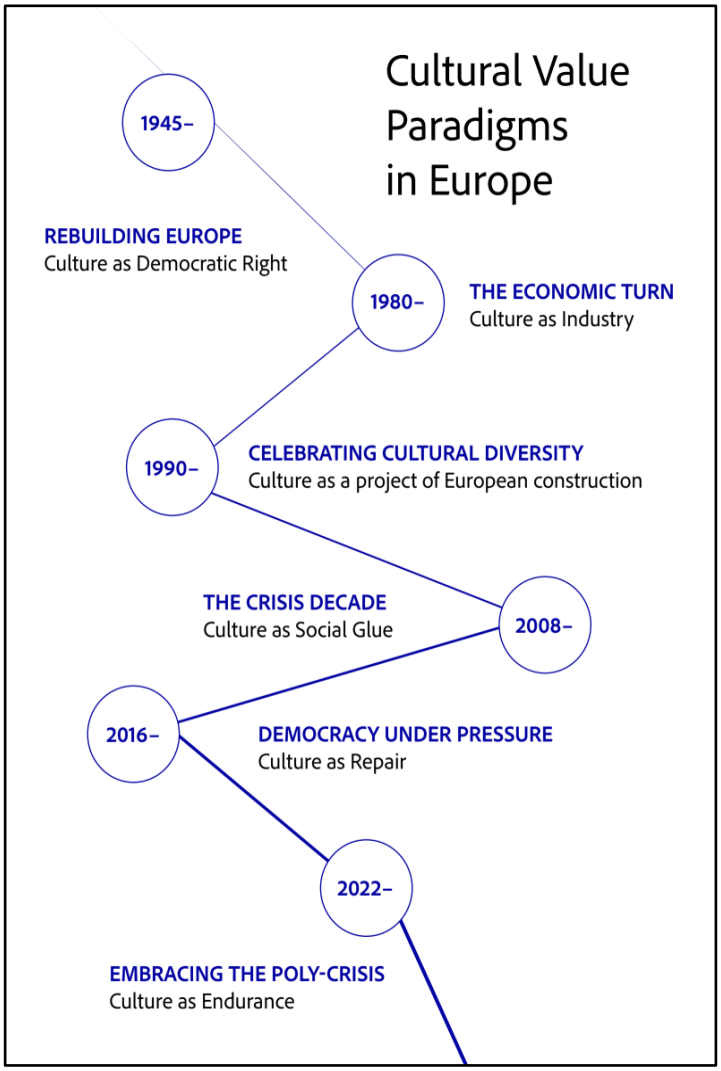
[26]O'Connor, J. (2024) *Culture is not an industry: Reclaiming art and culture for the common good*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. doi: 10.7765/9781526171276.

[27]Lähdesmäki, T., Mäkinen, K., Čeginskas, V. L. A., & Kaasik-Krogerus, S. (2021). "Chapter 3 EU Cultural Policy: Europe from Above". In *Europe from Below*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449800_003

[28]Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (1998), Creative Industries Mapping Document 1998, cited in: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2001), Creative Industries Mapping Document 2001, p. 5.

[29]European Council (2000) *Presidency Conclusions: Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000*. Brussels: Council of the European Union.

The financial crisis of 2008 put these paradigms under pressure but did not displace them. Culture was still — and in some contexts, even more — framed as a creative industry capable of generating jobs and innovation[30]; as a social glue in post-crisis times[31]; and as a shared symbolic resource through which Europeans could maintain a sense of common belonging[32]. Then the so-called 'refugee crisis' followed in 2015, when growing numbers of people arrived in the EU, fleeing war, conflict and hardship. EU and national initiatives increasingly promoted culture's role in integration, intercultural dialogue and trauma healing[33]. The social dimension also gradually became more visible in Creative Europe, a programme originally launched in 2014 with an emphasis on competitiveness, business models and economic impact. During this period, different orders of worth — *market*, *civic*, *domestic* and *industrial* — competed and combined in defining what culture was for.



The political shocks of 2016, marked by Brexit and the first election of Donald Trump in the US came as a surprise to many European publics and leaders and exposed deepening fragmentation in societies, political ideologies and information spaces. Against a backdrop of rising

[30]Zamorano, M.M. and Bonet, L. (2022) 'Legitimating cultural policy after the 2008 crisis: learnings from France, the UK, Spain and Greece', *Cultural Trends*, 31(2), pp. 185–201. doi: 10.1080/09548963.2022.2040333.

[31]Council of the European Union (2010) 'Council conclusions of 10 May 2010 on the contribution of culture to local and regional development', *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 135

[32]Lähdesmäki, T., Mäkinen, K., Čeginskas, V. L. A., & Kaasik-Krogerus, S. (2021). "Chapter 3 EU Cultural Policy: Europe from Above". In *Europe from Below*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004449800_003

[33]Culture Action Europe 2024, State of Culture in Europe, pp. 94—96.

concern about misinformation, polarisation and democratic fragility, culture was increasingly discussed in relation to democracy: as a means of strengthening civic engagement, supporting critical thinking, countering disinformation and bringing divided societies back together[34]. In the *EU Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022*, '*Citizenship, values and democracy*' appeared as a sub-topic under the broader priority of '*Cohesion and wellbeing*'. As part of this plan, the European Commission commissioned a large-scale research into the relationship between culture and democracy[35].

This discourse of culture as repair gradually evolved into a framing of culture as a source of resilience, building on earlier narratives around cultural sustainability and culture's role in the green transition, which had gained ground following the adoption of the European Green Deal in 2019. The resilience framing became especially explicit during the post-COVID-19 recovery period and following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At this point, the so-called polycrisis was increasingly understood less as a temporary shock to be countered than as a reality to which societies must adapt. In 2022, *Collins Dictionary* captured this shift through the notion of '*permacrisis*', understood as a crisis as a lasting condition. The World Economic Forum noted in 2023 that crises had not subsided; rather, people had grown accustomed to them, and risks were increasingly being approached more strategically[36].

2026: Culture and resilience

In this emerging paradigm, cultural policy frames culture as not only as a field in need of resilience, but as a resource for resilience as such. It is increasingly positioned as part of the infrastructure of social, democratic and even mental endurance: bringing people together, preserving and defending values and identities, sustaining unity and social cohesion, and contributing to societies' mental and civic resilience.

At the EU level, this rhetorical shift is particularly visible in the architecture and guiding values of AgoraEU, the new programme proposed by the European Commission in July 2025 as part of the EU's future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–

[34]Ibid, p. 96.

[35] 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

[36] Edmond, C. and Pomeroy, R. (2023) 'Instability, inflation and the "polycrisis" – the Global Risks Report half a year on', *World Economic Forum*, 11 October, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/10/polycrisis-global-risks-inflation-radio-davos-podcast/, last seen 5 September 2026.

2034. AgoraEU would bring together two existing funding instruments: Creative Europe and the CERV programme (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values). The latter supports civic projects focused on democratic engagement and participation, equality, non-discrimination, the rule of law and the protection of core EU values. Support for news media and journalism would also be incorporated into the new programme.

Several recurring terms provide the programme's underlying logic: 'democratic resilience', 'societal preparedness' and 'cultural and civic engagement' unite the diverse fields and actors brought under this umbrella — from artists and creative entrepreneurs to journalists, civil society organisations and human rights defenders[37]. These are some of the key areas of impact to which all the sectors covered by the programme are expected to contribute. Ultimately, the programme, as proposed by the Commission, aims to strengthen civic engagement through participation in different spheres of public life: political, social, economic, and cultural. Its rationale stems from the recognition that the Union's values are under pressure, both internally and externally. This language of '*values under threat*' produces a strong rhetoric of urgency: the need to withstand, defend, protect, preserve and safeguard what Europe understands as vital to its identity.

Another important marker of culture's repositioning within the EU's resilience agenda is the *Declaration on the necessity of culture and media as a safeguard for our European democracies*, signed in late 2025 by 26 Member States, with Hungary as the exception, as well as by five non-EU countries: Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Ukraine. Infused with urgency and even existential concern, the declaration shifts the narrative from the role or value of culture to its *necessity*. It is also one of the first EU-level texts to articulate so clearly the interlinked triangle of culture, democracy and security: Europe's security depends on the resilience of its democratic values and identity, and 'heritage and cultural diversity are woven into the fabric of this identity'[38].

Furthermore, the *Culture Compass for Europe*, the EU's new cultural strategy published in November 2025, recognises the value of culture for multiple forms of resilience: social, territorial and democratic resilience, as well as people's emotional,

[37] European Commission (2025) *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818*. COM(2025) 550 final.

[38] The Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Declaration on the necessity of culture as media as safeguards of our European democracies.

physical and mental resilience, and the resilience of communities[39]. This is a striking development when compared with its predecessors, the *New European Agenda for Culture* of 2018 and the *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World* of 2007, neither of which mentioned 'resilience' at all. The *Culture Compass* also explicitly links culture to security: '*Preserving peace, preventing conflicts, and strengthening international security are part of the Union's raison d'être and one of its key external action objectives. Culture contributes to these efforts as an enabler of peace, a catalyst for sustainable development, and a bridge between people*'[40].

The prominence of security discourse in 2026 is hardly surprising. The world may currently be experiencing one of its most divided periods since the end of the Cold War[41], and experts identify geoeconomic confrontation and state-based armed conflict as the first and second most significant risks facing humanity in 2026[42]. Against the backdrop of Russia's continuing war against Ukraine, and with the United States increasingly questioning the terms of its security commitment to Europe within NATO, the EU has placed security high on its agenda, making it one of the three priorities of the European Council's *Strategic Agenda 2024–2029*, alongside democracy and competitiveness[43]. The central commitment in this area is the *ReArm Europe / Readiness 2030* agenda, which aims to mobilise around €800 billion in additional EU and Member State defence spending[44]. Moreover, the EU countries that are also NATO allies have committed to spending 5% of their annual GDP on defence by

[39] European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[40] European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[41] Whiting, K. (2025) 7 charts that explain the global inflection points of 2025, so far. World Economic Forum, 5 August, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/08/inflection-points-7-globalshifts-defining-2025-so-far-in-charts/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[42] World Economic Forum (2026) The Global Risks Report 2026. 21th edn. Geneva: World Economic Forum.

[43] European Council (2024) *Strategic agenda 2024–2029*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[44] Council of the European Union (2026) *European defence readiness*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-defence-readiness/, last seen 5 September 2026.

2035[45]. In this context, various areas of public life, including culture, are increasingly assessed in terms of their potential contribution to this expanding security endeavor.

Unsurprisingly, the relationship between culture and security is far more prominent in national cultural policy strategies adopted by some EU Member States between 2024 and 2026, compared to the policy documents we analysed for the previous State of Culture edition, most of which had been adopted prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and treated security as a relatively niche concern.

Across newly adopted national government documents, the relationship between culture and security is framed in two distinct but connected ways. First, culture appears as something that must be protected. Buildings, collections, archives, digital repositories, cultural venues, data, copyright and cultural workers are presented as vulnerable to climate change, cyber threats, war, piracy, natural disasters, organised crime and other risks. For example, Croatia's *Action Plan for the Development of Culture and Media for the Period Until 2027* prioritises risk assessment for cultural heritage, raises awareness of risks connected to climate change and the illegal trade in cultural goods, and encourages earthquake-, flood- and fire-resistant construction and renovation of cultural infrastructure[46]. Czechia's *State Cultural Policy 2026–2030+* similarly stresses that growing cyber threats, digital piracy, the climate crisis, organised crime and the risk of war require systemic protection of people, buildings, collections and data[47].

Second, culture appears as something that protects: it is described as a contributor to the foundations of security — social cohesion, democratic resilience, mental crisis resilience, trust, identity, reliable information and the prevention of polarisation. Finland's *Cultural Policy Report* of 2025 connects security with literacy, mental resilience and democracy: '*Efforts will be made to maintain good media literacy and digital information literacy skills among people of all ages amid changes in the media environment, the increasing use of artificial intelligence and changes in the security environment. This will guarantee people's personal wellbeing, national resilience,*

[45] NATO (2025) *The Hague Summit Declaration*, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration, last seen 5 September 2026.

[46] Ministry of Culture and Media, Republic of Croatia 2025, *Action Plan for the Development of Culture and Media for the Period Until 2027*, p. 26.

[47] Ministry of Culture, Czech Republic 2025, *State Cultural Policy 2026–2030+*, p. 39

security and democratic development, which will also be secured during disruptions and crises as well as possible'[48].

This is in line with Finland's *Security Strategy for Society*, adopted in 2025, which is built around the concept of 'comprehensive security': the idea that the vital functions of society are maintained through collaboration between public authorities, the business community, organisations and citizens. One of the strategic tasks under the Strategy's cluster of '*psychological security*' is '*maintaining cultural services and protecting cultural heritage*'. Here, culture is understood as contributing to security by maintaining cultural and library services, protecting cultural heritage, supporting informational rights, sustaining psychological wellbeing and inclusion, and ensuring the right of people to their culture. Culture is also recognised for preserving identities and memory, developing critical media literacy and stimulating active citizenship[49].

What emerges from both EU and national material is that cultural security is becoming increasingly multi-risk. The documents do not focus on a single type of threat: they bring together climate risks, cyberattacks, digital piracy, AI misuse, organised crime, war, vandalism, fire, flooding, disinformation and hybrid influence. This reflects a broader 'polycrisis' logic: cultural policy is expected to prepare for overlapping risks. At the same time, culture is no longer treated only as a symbolic domain requiring preservation in exceptional circumstances. It is increasingly positioned as part of a wider security ecosystem — a sector whose continuity matters for society's capacity to withstand crises.

This marks the emergence of a more infrastructural understanding of culture. Cultural institutions, archives, practices and activities are being recognised as systems whose disruption can weaken identity, trust, continuity and democratic functioning. Culture is therefore moving away from being understood as a self-contained policy domain and is increasingly being drawn into cross-government agendas of preparedness, resilience and security.

The resilience paradigm may not yet constitute a fully autonomous *order of worth*, but it appears instead as a compromise that combines *civic* and *domestic* purposes with *industrial* tests of preparedness, continuity and risk management. But what does this mean for culture, and how does this emerging narrative interact with established paradigms such as the creative industries, soft power, culture as a democratic resource, and more?

---

[48]Ministry of Education and Culture 2025, The Cultural Policy Report, p. 27.

[49]Finnish Government 2025, *Security Strategy for Society*, p. 141.

Conflicts of orders

The *orders of worth* of Boltanski and Thévenot are not simply different vocabularies that coexist peacefully. Each has its own criteria, hierarchies and forms of evidence, and combining them always involves compromise, and sometimes conflict.

When it comes to the cultural value narratives, it appears that successive crises have activated different justifications for culture: social welfare after the war, market value under neoliberalism, shared identity through European integration, social cohesion during austerity and migration, civic resilience amid democratic backsliding, and now preparedness and security in response to war, geopolitical instability, and other crises.

These arguments have accumulated rather than replaced one another. Cultural organisations are now expected to be autonomous and measurable, innovative and rooted, economically productive and socially reparative, nationally meaningful and internationally appealing. This helps explain the exhaustion felt across the sector — reflected in strong criticism of instrumentalisation in our 2024 *State of Culture* research, and in the dissatisfaction expressed in the 2026 survey and interviews with how culture is framed in policy.

One may argue that culture can serve several purposes at once. However, as these purposes have their own modalities, value interpretations and indicators, this multitasking does not happen without tensions and trade-offs. Which expectations dominate is shaped by political ideology, funding systems and administrative priorities.

Just as Boltanski and Thévenot explored the compromises and contradictions between different orders of worth, cultural policy may need to recognise more explicitly that similar tensions exist within its own domain — and that they can be costly. For example, it is essential to examine where social inclusion conflicts with market growth; how experimentation and critical thinking sit alongside efficiency targets, predictable timelines and measurable outputs; and how the pursuit of international recognition relates to the search for local engagement. The decisive issue is the hidden hierarchy of values: which justification prevails, and which forms of cultural value are weakened or made invisible as a result.

Rebalancing responsibility: the public-good promise

The story, however, is not only one of accumulated expectations and growing exhaustion. Over the past few years, European cultural policy has also begun to register, at least rhetorically, the limits of endless instrumentalisation of culture. A different vocabulary is becoming more visible: culture not only as a contributor to

resilience, cohesion, wellbeing or competitiveness, but as a foundation of public life — something closer to a public good in its own right.

The phrase itself — culture as a public good — gained political weight in 2022, when the *MONDIACULT Ministerial Declaration* proclaimed culture a 'global public good'[50]. It has since travelled through several political frameworks and declarations, including the *Cáceres Declaration* adopted by EU Ministers for Culture under the Spanish Presidency of the Council in 2023[51], the *Culture Compass for Europe*, and the *MONDIACULT 2025 outcome document*. The idea of 'public good' asks governments to treat culture not merely as a sector producing outputs, but as a shared condition of life: something that belongs to everyone, that cannot be left entirely to market dynamics, and that public authorities have a responsibility to protect, sustain and make accessible. The significance of the public-good frame lies in connecting cultural value to collective responsibility: culture should not depend solely on its capacity to generate market returns or demonstrate predetermined external effects.

Describing culture as a public good does not replace the different ways in which culture is justified. These operate at another level: they explain why culture is considered valuable, whether because it contributes to civic life, creativity, security or resilience. The public-good perspective asks a different question: what place should culture occupy in collective life, and what responsibilities follow from that? Culture can be justified in many different ways and still be treated as something whose continued existence, accessibility and diversity require public protection and investment. The 'public good' concept gathers different justifications into a broader proposition: whatever the precise reason culture is valued, its significance exceeds private benefit and therefore cannot be left entirely to market allocation or contingent policy priorities.

The significance of the emerging public-good discourse, therefore, lies in shifting attention from what culture must deliver towards what is required to ensure that culture can flourish.

---

[50]UNESCO (2023) 'UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022', *UNESCO*, 16 January. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-world-conference-cultural-policies-and-sustainable-development-mondiacult-2022?hub=758, last seen 5 September 2026.

[51]Spanish Government (2023) 'EU Ministers of Culture approve the "Cáceres Declaration" at the Informal Meeting of Culture Ministers', *La Moncloa*, 26 September. Available at: https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/paginas/2023/20230926_caceres-declaration.aspx (Accessed: 8 July 2026).

The *Culture Compass* gives this shift its clearest EU-level expression. Its motto — '*Europe for Culture — Culture for Europe*' is also the title of the Compass's first deliverable, the *Joint Declaration* signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission in June 2026. The formula marks an attempt to rebalance the long-standing emphasis on what culture can do for Europe with a stronger claim about what Europe must do for culture. 'Culture for Europe' preserves the familiar logic of contribution: culture strengthens competitiveness, resilience, cohesion, innovation and international relations. At the same time, 'Europe for Culture' places cultural rights, artistic freedom, fair working conditions, cultural diversity, arts education and access to culture at the centre of the policy frame[52].

Culture is no longer asked only to demonstrate its usefulness to other agendas; the policy framework also begins to recognise the public responsibility to create the conditions in which cultural life can exist at all. The Compass acknowledges that culture and creativity require freedom, experimentation, protection from censorship and intimidation, and decent working conditions for artists and cultural professionals.

This marks a clear departure from the architecture of the *New European Agenda for Culture* of 2018. That earlier framework was organised around three dimensions: the social dimension, which sought to 'harness the power of culture' for cohesion and wellbeing; the economic dimension, which connected culture-based creativity to education, innovation, jobs and growth; and the external dimension, focused on international cultural relations[53]. The 2018 Agenda, thus, arranged culture around its contribution to other EU objectives, and the 2025 Compass does not abandon this logic, but attempts to shift the balance. Culture itself, therefore, becomes a more explicit object of strategy: as a strategic asset for the Union in itself, and as a field whose freedoms, rights, human resources, institutions and infrastructures require protection and investment.

Some recently adopted national cultural policy strategies also articulate a more foundational understanding of culture. They use different, and not interchangeable, concepts, such as culture as a public good, a fundamental right, an essential service, a resource, or an infrastructure of public life , but all of them point towards a broader

[52]European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[53]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*. COM(2018) 267 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0267, last seen 5 September 2026.

shift: culture is increasingly treated, at least rhetorically, as a domain of public life whose existence and vitality constitute a policy concern in its own right. This is not a revival of the idea of 'intrinsic value', even if that language is also reappearing. The emerging approach goes further by translating the value attributed to culture into questions of rights, access, infrastructure, education, working conditions, legal guarantees, and public responsibility.

Austria's *Federal Cultural Policy Guidelines* (2024) present art and culture as integral to society and as giving life 'a dimension that no other area can offer'. The text acknowledges that art may provide orientation, stimulate reflection or offer distraction, but insists that it is not obliged to fulfil any of these functions. Its value lies also in artistic quality and creativity; value 'in itself' does not need to be explained or justified[54]. In the Netherlands, a similar logic appears in the *Principles for Cultural Subsidies 2025–2028* of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, which affirms that '*art owes nothing, yet it can do a great deal*'. This statement is further reflected in planned changes in funding and accountability, including less emphasis on quantitative performance, more flexibility in funding structures, and more room for trust, innovation and experimentation[55].

Culture is also framed in several strategies as a fundamental right. In the *Strategic Vision Paper: Arts and Cultural Heritage in Flanders 2026–2030*, '*culture as a universal right and public good*' is one of the three basic principles of the renewed cultural policy framework. Culture becomes an 'essential public good' because participation in cultural life is part of what citizens are entitled to in a democratic society[56]. Spain's *Cultural Rights Plan*, adopted in 2025, goes further by placing culture as a fundamental human right and a common good, inseparable from wellbeing, democracy and social justice[57]. With the 'culture as a right' approach the question shifts to whether governments and institutions are fulfilling their obligations to guarantee cultural autonomy and citizens' participation in cultural life.

[54]Federal Ministry of Housing, Art, Culture, Media and Sport Austria, 2024, *Federal Cultural Policy Guidelines*, p. 4.

[55]Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences 2025, Principles for Cultural Subsidies 2025–2028 of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences

[56]Flemish Government 2026, Strategic Vision Paper: Arts and Cultural Heritage in Flanders 2026–2030, p. 9.

[57]Ministry of Culture and Sport of Spain (2025) *Cultural Rights Plan 2025–2027*. Madrid: Ministry of Culture and Sport.

Czechia's *State Cultural Policy 2026–2030+* describes culture as a natural part of life and links its public value to infrastructure, stable financing, fair remuneration, legal certainty and security. A notion of '*self-confident sector*' — which is a stand-along priority of the policy — is articulated as follows: '*If we want culture in the Czech Republic to truly contribute to the quality of life of each of us and have a fundamental influence on the resilience and democracy of our society, we must also build a self-confident and competent cultural and creative sector that will be able to articulate its own social significance and act as an equal and stable partner of public administration*'[58].

Slovenia adds another important inflection by linking culture as a public good to the need to keep culture outside market mechanisms. Its revised national programme places '*Culture as a Public Good*' as a major pillar and insists that the public interest in culture cannot be secured by the market alone: '*Culture and the arts multiply the possibilities for coexistence in a sustainable and socially just community, and this is only possible if culture is understood as a public good and is largely excluded from market mechanisms*'[59].

This shift offers a possible exit from the exhaustion of instrumentalisation without returning to a narrow defence of artistic autonomy. This paradigm does not mean that culture is detached from society. Quite the opposite: the texts present culture as deeply embedded in everyday life, democratic participation, social imagination, education, wellbeing, territorial equality and collective meaning-making. Yet it also suggests that culture's contributions can only be sustained if culture is not subordinated to them, but is equal to them — in shaping policies, vocabularies, values and value paradigms. This also resonates with what emerged from the interviews with representatives of the library and museum sectors: both experts advocated for the social embeddedness of libraries and museums, rather than seeing them solely as 'cultural' institutions.

How value becomes real

This emerging turn towards infrastructural and foundational framing of culture's value and place in society raises a practical question: how does a narrative about cultural value become a policy model capable of changing the conditions under which the sector works?

[58]Ministry of Culture, Czech Republic 2025, *State Cultural Policy 2026–2030+*, p. 28.

[59]Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, Resolution on the National Programme for Culture 2024–2031, p. 21.

As the review of current policy frameworks shows, some of the strongest narratives are already present. Culture is described as a public good, a foundation of society, an infrastructure for symbolic, spiritual and social life, and a condition of democracy. The EU's *Culture Compass* is one of the clearest examples. Even if its implementation promise may be seen by some as too modest, it is an important symbolic statement: a commitment to treating culture not only as an instrument for other objectives, but as a strategic resource for Europe in its own right.

Yet the significance of this rhetorical shift cannot be assessed through rhetoric alone, because cultural value becomes real through at least three crucial dimensions of cultural policy: discourse, conditionality and scrutiny.

Discourse is the language through which culture is justified: 'culture is a pillar of democracy', 'culture is a driver of sustainable development', and so on. It articulates the prevailing vision and political paradigm. *Conditionality* is more decisive, however, because it determines the forms of support, as well as which criteria, objectives and requirements are attached to funding; which projects, practices and behaviours are rewarded; what kinds of work remain possible; and what must be demonstrated in order to continue existing. *Scrutiny*, in turn, determines how cultural value is evaluated and made intelligible: through peer recognition, audience numbers, economic impact, export potential, social-inclusion indicators, media visibility, participation statistics or alignment with policy priorities. These modes of evaluation can sometimes be combined, but they do not belong to the same world of value; they draw on different orders of worth.

It is when we move from discourse to conditionality and scrutiny that the contradictions of contemporary cultural policy become most visible. Policy discourse may increasingly invoke *civic* and *inspired* values: democracy, freedom, inclusion, experimentation, plurality and artistic autonomy. Yet the architecture of funding and governance often continues to operate through *industrial-managerial* logics: measurable outputs, strategic alignment, reporting requirements, quantifiable participation, short-term deliverables, visibility, efficiency and administrative legibility.

Cultural institutions may absorb policy discourse into their self-narration, but their day-to-day reality is shaped by the forms of conditionalty of their relations with funders and scrutiny through which their legitimacy is tested.

Promise and practice: the bridge still under construction?

The current turn we observe in how culture's role and place in society are framed offers a potentially significant rebalancing of cultural policy. But its meaning depends on whether it changes more than political language alone. If culture is genuinely treated as a public good, this should be visible in public investment, funding continuity, working conditions and the degree of trust granted to cultural actors.

Moreover, the emerging paradigm can hardly become meaningful in practice if it simply absorbs the same competing orders of worth without addressing the tensions between them. Cultural policy will inevitably continue to accommodate multiple rationales, but treating culture as a field of public value in its own right requires more than adding another layer of justification. It requires making explicit which principles take precedence when objectives conflict, and which conditions, such as artistic freedom, cultural rights, diversity, access and the sustainability of cultural work, should not be subordinated to the diverse demands of various 'orders of worth'. It is against these tests that the emerging paradigm must now be assessed.

Promise without provision: the funding gap

'*Appreciation is the cheapest currency at the political level*', one interviewee noted, pointing to the fact that the growing recognition of culture has not yet found meaningful practical expression.

Many readers will recognise the tension: the rhetoric around culture is advancing rapidly, but the realities of cultural work are not. Across Europe, culture is increasingly described as a public good, a democratic infrastructure, a resource for resilience, and a condition of social life. Yet the reality reported by cultural workers, sectoral organisations and recent studies suggests something far less settled: the cultural sector remains a long way from the conditions that such language would imply — secure, accessible, diverse, and protected from market pressure. First of all, let us look at the material conditions of the sector.

In the 2024 edition of this report, many expert interviews pointed to funding cuts as a likely consequence of upcoming elections, government changes, and mounting economic pressures. This year, financial hardship is no longer presented mainly as a risk; it is described as an existing condition. Shrinking funding was named as one of the three key challenges the sector is facing by almost all interviewees[60]. The survey data reflects the same shift. In *State of Culture Barometer* 2024, *economic decline*

[60] The question asked to all interviewees was: 'What are the three main challenges your sector is most likely to face in the next three years?'

ranked last among seven proposed challenges, selected by only 23% of respondents, behind *social polarisation*, *climate change*, *conflicts and wars*, *digital technologies*, *political climate*, and the *sector's connection with society*. In this year's *State of Culture Barometer*, *economic decline* has moved into second place, selected by 34% of respondents, behind only *social polarisation* at 39%[61]. More than 60% of respondents find working conditions in the cultural sector '*problematic*', '*bad*' or '*critical*', and only 5% find them '*good*'[62]. The overall level of optimism is also rather low: the proportion of respondents who are '*optimistic about the future of the cultural sector*' in their country is 28%[63].

Other studies point in the same direction. In research on cultural rights carried out by the Performing Arts Coalition (PAC) in 2025, survey respondents (223) were asked to identify recent or forthcoming changes in funding programmes, structures or strategies that, in their view, have affected citizens' engagement with the performing arts. The dominant tone was one of discouragement about the policy and funding environment in which the sector operates. Respondents also expressed serious concern about the state of cultural participation: nearly 56% considered the statement '*people's right to freely engage with the performing arts is under threat*' to be extremely or very relevant, while only around 18% disagreed[64].

Concerns about funding are not just based on impressions and experiences of the cultural sector. Globally, public investment in culture has been notoriously limited for decades. According to UNESCO's *Reshaping Policies for Creativity* Report (2026), global investment in culture remains below 0.6% of GDP. The report highlights that while government spending on culture in 'developing' countries has increased since 2018, it has stagnated or declined in 'developed' countries since 2014[65]. An earlier OECD study similarly shows that government expenditure on culture in OECD

[61] The question was formulated as follows: 'What challenges will be most crucial for cultural and creative sectors in the next five years? Please choose two issues that you think will be most pressing'

[62] The question was formulated as follows: 'How would you characterise working conditions in the cultural sector in your context?'

[63] The question was formulated as follows: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?' The statement was: 'I am optimistic about the future of the cultural sector in my country'.

[64] Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience, p. 14.

[65] UNESCO 2026, Reshaping Policies for Creativity, p. 13.

countries has still not returned to pre-2008 levels after the financial crisis[66]. In the EU, the share of GDP allocated to culture remains strikingly low: just 0.5% on average, with that level not having changed since 2001[67], while Creative Europe, the EU's main programme for culture, represents only 0.2% of the total EU budget.

Although cultural funding across Europe, and even within individual national contexts, remains complex, uneven and dynamic, the predominant trend is one of declining cultural investment, whether through direct cuts or through budgets failing to keep pace with inflation. Between 2024 and 2026, cultural funding cuts have occurred in many countries in Europe, such as Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and more. In many countries, there have been no official budget reductions, already low levels of public funding remain a major obstacle to the sector's ability to create freely and engage meaningfully with the public.

Funding shock has also occurred at the city and regional levels. In Berlin, the city government cut the cultural budget by approximately €130 million, or 12–13%, in 2025, affecting around 450 institutions[68]. According to reporting by the Reset! network, some of these cuts have particularly affected programmes focused on equality, diversity and inclusion[69]. In France, the Pays de la Loire regional government cut cultural subsidies by approximately 62% in its 2025 budget — one of the steepest single-year regional cuts in Western Europe[70].

Several interviewees representing associations working across Europe noted that defunding often affects non-profit and smaller organisations first, especially those working with communities, marginalised groups and challenging social contexts.

---

[66] OECD (2022), The Culture Fix: Creative People, Places and Industries, Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED), OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/991bb520-en, p. 18

[67] Eurostats 2025, Government expenditure on cultural, broadcasting and publishing services — Statistics explained, p. 2., https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/80143.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[68] Connolly, K. (2024) 'Plan to cut Berlin arts budget will "destroy" city's culture, directors warn', *The Guardian*, 27 November, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/27/plan-to-cut-berlin-arts-budget-will-destroy-citys-culture-directors-warn, last seen 5 September 2026.

[69] Duhoo, S. (2025) 'Regional funding for culture is in danger: the alarming precedents set by Berlin and Nantes', *Reset! network*, 9 December, https://reset-network.eu/regional-funding-for-culture-is-in-danger-the-alarming-precedents-set-by-berlin-and-nantes/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[70] Culture Link (2025) 'Coupes budgétaires dans la culture : dans les Pays-de-la-Loire, « la question d'arrêter s'est posée »', *Culture Link*, 23 June, https://www.culturelink.fr/actualites/coupes-budgetaires-dans-la-culture-dans-les-pays-de-la-loire-la-question-darreter-sest, last seen 5 September 2026.

PAC's research confirms this pattern, pointing to a growing support gap for practices aimed at reaching underrepresented voices and building meaningful relationships with them. The lack of support for experimentation and risk-taking contributes to what PAC research contributors describe as a '*monoculture of programming*', driven either by market-friendly aesthetics or by thematic priorities enforced by funders[71]. Such trends sit uneasily with the ambition to promote cultural diversity, artistic autonomy and culture as an essential public good.

The film sector provides another important example. Public support for film in Europe has come under pressure in recent years, with a visible shift from direct grants towards fiscal instruments[72]. According to UNESCO's 2026 report, indirect public expenditure, including tax incentives, is becoming a major policy tool for supporting the cultural sector, notably the audiovisual sector. In some countries, indirect expenditure has surpassed the core cultural funding of national governments. UNESCO notes that while direct public expenditure supports cultural goods with distinct social and cultural value, tax incentives primarily reduce financial barriers for private-sector investment. Their effects are rarely examined beyond a narrow economic perspective, raising critical questions about their purpose, effectiveness and influence on the diversity of cultural expressions[73].

The gap between rhetoric and resourcing was also visible in the negotiations on the Joint Declaration *Europe for Culture — Culture for Europe*, signed by the European Parliament, Council and Commission, in June 2026. One of the most ambitious — and, given the document's bold and future-oriented discourse, most necessary — commitments in the Commission's original declaration draft stated:

'*We commit to supporting continuous, dedicated funding for the cultural and creative sectors and industries, and promoting innovative and alternative models of funding at all levels of governance*'[74].

During negotiations, this was changed to:

[71] Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience, p. 48.

[72] European Parliament 2026, Looking ahead: the future of film financing Ensuring creative and financial risk-taking — Briefing, p. 3.

[73] UNESCO 2026, Reshaping Policies for Creativity, p. 24.

[74] European Commission 2025, Draft Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture - Culture for Europe", p. 4.

'*We commit to supporting the sustainability of the cultural and creative sectors and industries and safeguarding cultural heritage, including by encouraging different forms of funding and considering innovative and alternative modes of funding at all levels of governance*'[75].

The revised wording in the final version still contains an important commitment to the sustainability of the cultural and creative sectors. Yet it is noticeably weaker than an explicit pledge to support 'continuous, dedicated funding'. A collective and straightforward commitment by EU institutions and Member States to sustained public cultural investment remains difficult to secure, despite increasingly strong rhetoric about culture as a strategic objective in itself and as an essential public good.

Moreover — ironically, just a week before the adoption of the Joint Declaration, the Council of the European Union proposed a budget of €7.295 billion in constant prices for the future AgoraEU, down from the Commission's original proposal of €8.6 billion and representing a 33% reduction compared with the Parliament's position — roughly €500 million less per year[76]. Even if this is not yet the final stage of negotiations, it shows that financial support for culture has not blossomed at the same pace as the political discourse.

Project obsession: funding culture in fragments

The shrinking level of public funding is not the only problem: 'Sadly, it is not only about how much money we receive', one interviewee noted, 'it is more and more about the conditions under which we get this money'.

One of the strongest critiques concerns the dominance of short-term, project-centred funding, identified by respondents as the most pressing problem in public cultural funding, with 54% respondents to our survey selecting it from a list of ten funding-related issues[77]. The dominance of project funding is described as misaligned with how cultural work actually happens: not only through defined outputs, but also through relationship-building, open-ended exploration, research, risk-taking, experimentation and continuous practice.

---

[75] Council of the European Union 2026, Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture - Culture for Europe" - Approval, p. 11.

[76] Culture Action Europe (2026) 'The Council's MFF budget proposal: bad news for AgoraEU', *Culture Action Europe*, 16 June, https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/the-councils-mff-budget-proposal-bad-news-for-agoraeu/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[77] The question was formulated as follows: 'What are the most pressing problems with public cultural funding in your context? Choose up to three'.

The dominance of project-based model in cultural work has long been discussed in Europe, including in relation to its effects on artists' working conditions[78]. Yet, this funding model remains deeply embedded. To begin with, EU cultural funding — primarily Creative Europe, remains largely structured through project-centred models, even for entities fulfilling continuous service, such as cultural networks and platforms. As On the Move reports, in 2025, project-based models have also become more prominent in the field of cultural mobility, while support for training, meetings and collaboration has decreased[79].

Recent research by the Nordic Culture Fund on funding models notes that traditional funding systems indeed still operate in linear cycles: funding is allocated, a project unfolds, a report is submitted, and the relationship resets. Discussions with the field, carried out as part of the Fund's experimental programme Globus and the research developed around it, led to the conclusion that this model can create transactional dynamics between funders and grantees, and between partners themselves. The emphasis on short-term, pre-planned deliverables may produce disconnection from the changing dynamics of collaboration, rather than trust, curiosity, and openness to the unknown, which are the foundations of artistic work[80].

The Fund's report does not suggest that the project as such is a wrong model. It argues that the problem lies in the over-concentration of attention and investment on one specific understanding of artistic practice: art as intervention. Performances, exhibitions, publications and showcases are more easily recognised as outputs. But other dimensions of artistic work — research, exploration, experimentation, networks, partnerships and collaborations — which are often difficult to squeeze in project models — are pushed to margins of direct support.

Research by scholars Henrik Fürst and Johanna Pettersson Fürst sharpens this critique further. They argue that the project form requires cultural workers to become project managers, with administrative logic often eclipsing artistic aspects. They talk about 'project sickness', in which socially engaged initiatives must abandon participants

[78] European Parliament 2006, The Status of Artists in Europe; European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual (EENCA) 2020, The status and working conditions of artists and cultural and creative professionals.

[79] Wilson, C. R., Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2026, On the Move, 2026, p. 25.

[80] Polivtseva, E. (2026). Funding Culture for a Changing World: Learning from Globus. Nordic Culture Fund, pp. 25—26.

once funding ends; and a 'rifting' of creative work, where material cannot be reused because each new project cycle demands uniqueness[81].

IETM's 2025 research, based on a survey, interviews, and a series of practitioner workshops involving more than 200 performing arts professionals, points to a similar concern: the 'projectification' of the arts sector and the overemphasis on product over process exacerbate fragmentation and atomisation in the field. This negatively affects artistic quality, audience relationships, the social rights and wellbeing of performing arts professionals, career sustainability, environmental responsibility, and the time and resources needed to develop innovative collaboration models[82].

Others point out that project-based models become problematic particularly when they are too prescriptive, closely tied to thematic priorities, impact requirements and results-oriented logic. Such support models can influence the kinds of art that are produced. Scholars Vieira and Kolbe from the Erasmus Rotterdam University describe this as a strong 'genre-making effect': funding criteria can favour work that is clearly defined, easily classifiable and readily legible, while experimental, hybrid or interdisciplinary practices struggle to fit existing categories[83]. This concern also appeared repeatedly in the survey responses and interviews, particularly among practitioners working in emerging art forms, at the intersection of disciplines.

The research by Vieira and Kolbe further shows that when funding programmes focus on specific priorities or social groups, some artists may feel pressured to present identity in ways that correspond to funders' expectations. This adaptation is often framed as agency, empowerment or strategic self-presentation, thereby obscuring the structural inequalities and barriers that shape the choices available in the first place[84].

This challenges the assumption that public funding necessarily emancipates culture from market logic. In practice, it may reproduce some of the same pressures by rewarding what is legible, classifiable and easily 'packageable'. The 'new ideal artist' becomes one who can respond to funders' demands and translate artistic practice

---

[81] Fürst, H. and Pettersson Fürst, J. (2026) 'The project form in Nordic cultural funding: greedy projects, project sickness, and the rifting of creative work', *Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidsskrift*, 29(1), pp. 4–22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18261/nkt.29.1.2, last seen 5 September 2026.

[82] E. Polivtseva, "The New International - Against All Odds", IETM, Brussels, January 2025, p. 24.

[83] Vieira, S., & Kolbe, K. (2025). Making genre: the aesthetic affordances of governmental funding and its effects on emerging interdisciplinary artists in the Netherlands. *Cultural Trends*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2025.2488308

[84] Idem.

into recognisable policy language[85]. Funders, in this sense, do not merely support cultural production; they participate in shaping taste, form and visibility. These pressures also intersect with those generated by algorithmic platforms, which increasingly favour cultural formats that are taggable, flattened and easy to sort, while shaping expectations about what becomes visible, valuable and desirable[86].

If culture is to be treated as a foundation or infrastructure of society, can it be sustained through targeted, topic-specific and time-limited interventions? Are we sure to create a diverse, continuous and plural ecology of practices in a project-based reality?

The cultural sector is pointing to a deep mismatch between the language of culture as an essential good in its own right and funding systems still organised around scarcity, prescription, thematic alignment and demonstrable results. But the problematic effects of prescriptive project modalities — specific KPIs, administrative control, laborious application processes and demanding reporting procedures — are not only flagged by the sector. They are also increasingly acknowledged by policymakers and funders themselves. Simplification and accessibility of cultural funding has become one of the key discussion points in the negotiations on the future AgoraEU programme. The Commission proposal recognises that the stakeholder consultation reveals 'administrative burden' and complex rules as key obstacles 'preventing the EU budget from fully delivering on its objectives', and simplification is presented as one of the central rationales for merging and reorganising existing funding instruments[87]. In the Council compromise text on AgoraEU, simplification is retained through provisions on streamlined funding actions, single rules and simplified funding forms[88]. In the Parliament's draft report, it becomes more explicitly linked to

[85] Idem.

[86] Chayka, K. (2024). Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture. Doubleday

[87] European Commission (2025) *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818*. COM(2025) 550 final.

[88] Council of the European Union (2026) *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818: Partial general approach*. ST 8313/26. Brussels: Council of the European Union, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8313-2026-INIT/en/pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

access, user-friendly procedures and the reduction of administrative burden for beneficiaries[89].

Similar aspirations can be seen in national strategies. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, for example, explicitly highlights the need to 'reduce the pressure felt regarding the accountability of subsidies'[90]. It proposes a different approach to monitoring, requiring less time from participating institutions while giving public authorities better insight into the context in which each institution operates[91]. Project-based funding is also critically viewed in Slovenia's new cultural policy: 'The allocation of cultural funding is fragmented and creators are poorly paid. The project-based nature of cultural work exacerbates this problem, as it results in the multiplication of the production of works, and new projects are often the only means of securing the necessary funding for the organisation to function or for the artist to survive'[92].

One of the most significant signals in Europe, although outside the EU, is the Hodge Review of Arts Council England, published in late 2025. Commissioned by the UK government and authored by Baroness Margaret Hodge, the review highlights that Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy has been overly prescriptive and rigid, encouraging compliance with bureaucratic priorities over artistic innovation. As consultations revealed, organisations have been compelled to tick too many boxes — often resulting in shallow engagement with social topics and shifting attention away from artistic excellence[93]. In its formal response, ACE acknowledged that its systems

[89] European Parliament (2026) *Draft report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818*. CJ65_PR(2026)787746. Rapporteurs: Emma Rafowicz and Alice Kuhnke. Brussels: European Parliament. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CJ65-PR-787746_EN.pdf (Accessed: 9 July 2026).

[90] Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences 2025, Principles for Cultural Subsidies 2025–2028 of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, p. 14

[91] Idem

[92] Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, Resolution on the National Programme for Culture 2024–2031, p. 44.

[93] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2026) *Arts Council England: an independent review by Baroness Margaret Hodge*. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodge/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodg, last seen 5 September 2026.

have become overly complex and is willing to simplify processes and rebalance its approach toward artistic ambition and local relevance[94].

These shifts in the discourse and practice of public funders suggest that the problem is now getting increasingly more recognised. The question is whether recognition will be followed by a response equal to the scale of the fatigue felt in the cultural sector and equal to the rhetorical shift we are observing — treating culture as an essential infrastructure and a foundation of life.

A public-good approach to culture would require sustained investment, institutional trust, long-term support, space for research and relationship-building, and funding systems capable of recognising cultural value before it has been converted into measurable outputs. If the bridge between promise and practice is to be built, will simplification and mere release of administrative burden of granting systems be enough, will it fix the trust gap and be the game-changer for artists' autonomy? And will the sector itself regain its confidence to refrain from over-absorption of funding narratives and modalities in its imagination and take over the agency in defining their own artistic values and the modes of working needed to fulfill them?

The hidden hierarchy of values: the dominance of industrial worth

The intensified criticism over project-based and prescriptive funding models points to one conclusion: what creates pressure today is that, while *discourse* accumulates diverse values, *conditionality* and *scrutiny* are increasingly governed by one dominant mode of justification. Cultural policy, therefore, has not established clear boundaries between the various orders of worth. As a result, artistic freedom, cultural rights, diversity, access and the sustainability of cultural work may be increasingly subordinated to demands for efficiency, competitiveness and measurable external impact. The *industrial* order of worth has become a prevailing value paradigm of contemporary cultural policy.

The rise of managerial-industrial-project model of value is not accidental. When funding shrinks and demand grows, the project model becomes, perhaps, the most convenient format for allocating scarce resources. Its goal-setting, linear trajectory, delimited timeframe and procedural control mechanisms can make public funding appear precise, fair and governable. It enables time-limited contracting, legitimate rotation among beneficiaries, issue-specific priorities and monitoring systems based on outputs, indicators and cost-benefit ratios.

---

[94] Arts Council England (2026) *Independent Review of Arts Council England: our response*. Available at: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/independent-review-full-response (Accessed: 9 July 2026).

The *industrial* order has also taken hold in cultural policy because it has become the default mode of 'new public management' across the entire public life: efficiency, accountability, evidence and measurable results have long become badges of institutional trust and credibility[95]. Technocratism also assumedly works well in divided contexts, where managerial language appears to offer neutral ground by translating value conflicts into questions of procedure, performance and delivery[96]. And in contested fields such as culture, the *industrial* order of worth makes plural and subjective value appear governable: metrics, outputs, project formats and KPIs provide the reassuring impression that culture can be objectively assessed and justified. This dominance of managerialism is the strategy to objectify and predictify culture. However, as Boltanski and Thévenot have warned, the industrial world does not guarantee objectivity: '*Despite the impressive arsenal of technological objects, the industrial world of efficiency is no less political than the others, and tests in it are just as dependent on a common judgement*'[97].

This order brings its own temporality: effects must be anticipated; impact must be plausible in advance; and results must be expected within a foreseeable timeframe. As we already established above, in the *industrial* order of worth, the '*possibility of prediction*' is central[98]. This means this value narrative does not only serve as an argument for funding culture, but it is often translated into a corresponding expectation: value as such must be articulable, tangible, demonstrable and anticipated.

The 'culture and health' narrative offers a revealing example. In recent years, a growing body of research has shown positive correlations between mental, physical and social health and activities such as singing in choirs, listening to music, dancing, attending theatres, drawing and painting, or visiting museums. These studies have contributed to the development of a new policy and funding focus. Yet many of them are not about people participating in explicitly designed 'arts and health' interventions. They are also about culture in a much broader sense: artistic and cultural experiences produced by people who did not necessarily know, or intend, that their work would later become evidence in arts-and-health policy arguments.

---

[95] White, J. (2024) *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea*. London: Profile Books.

[96] Mouffe, C. (2000). The Democratic Paradox. Verso; Mouffe, C. (2005). On the Political. Routledge.

[97] Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L. (2006) *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Translated by C. Porter. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 194.

[98] Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L. (2006) *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Translated by C. Porter. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Much of this research could be read as evidence that sustaining the arts as an autonomous sector, and culture as a public good, is itself a precondition for a healthy society. Yet when 'arts and health' becomes a funding priority, support is often channelled towards concrete intersectoral projects rather than towards the broader cultural ecology from which those health benefits may arise. Initiatives framed as arts-and-health projects are often expected to collaborate with welfare, care, health or education institutions; often, arts organisations must demonstrate such partnerships before applying[99].

This is not necessarily problematic. Collaboration between artists and health or care institutions can be valuable, and many artists choose to work in these contexts. Moreover, in some cases, bringing art into hospitals is not primarily justified by its potential health benefits, but by the right of people who are ill to access and participate in culture.

The problem begins when the culture and health narrative is translated too narrowly into eligible formats, prescribed partnerships and measurable short-term outcomes. One interviewee spoke at length about evaluation in this field, noting that metrics are too often borrowed from medical or clinical contexts. Even when evaluation tools are adjusted to artistic vocabularies, they frequently focus on immediate results: asking participants how they felt after an experience, or trying to capture wellbeing effects within a limited project timeframe, while impact is often visible on a longer term, beyond the project's timeline.

Many of the methods applied may produce data, but they do not necessarily capture the truth of what has happened. Mental health, care, trust, confidence, social connection and a sense of meaning do not always become visible through direct questioning, immediate articulation or short reporting cycles. The project mode itself can therefore work against the very idea of care, as care is not an ad hoc intervention — it is fostered through continuity, repetition, presence, trust and the ongoing provision of essential services and relationships.

The same pattern appears in other policy fields. The Performing Arts Coalition's study shows that inclusion and wider social participation have gained prominence in policy discourse, but are too often pursued through specific, targeted or temporary initiatives, accompanied by demands for quick impacts and visible short-term results. These can shift existing budgets from one priority to another without producing

[99]European Festivals Association 2025, Festivals in Contexts — the Role of the Arts in Local Cultural Policy, p. 39.

comprehensive strategies or structural reform[100]. Topic-specific policies are sometimes necessary, especially where certain communities or practices have long been ignored. But when attention moves from rural areas today to youth participation tomorrow, from refugee integration to school projects the day after, creating meaningful work becomes a challenge. It is particularly challenging when, at the same time, a more sustainable investment into cultural infrastructure, art education, independent spaces, and experimental capacities are poor or absent.

Culture is, of course, deeply entangled with human, social, political and diplomatic causes. It can move history, reshape perception and transform collective imagination. But it rarely does so by being instructed to deliver a predetermined outcome. If some of the greatest composers, writers, performers or architects had known that, a century later, their work would be placed at the centre of a nation's identity, a geopolitical narrative or even a security imaginary — and if they had been asked to fulfil those expectations during their own careers — would their art have been as free, as powerful, or as capable of moving the imagination?

When the 'how' colonises the 'why'

The current objectification of culture through *industrial* methods is by the end of the day at odds with various justification paradigms, but above all — with the *inspired* order of worth from which much cultural value emerges. Artistic practice thrives on uncertainty, risk, authenticity, digression and the possibility of not knowing in advance what something will become. Yet under current governance conditions, the sector is pushed to make its value explicit before the activity even begins. Could it be that sensing that its real power is not fully released in this environment, the cultural sector is drawn into symbolic overproduction?

Another danger is the slow colonisation of purpose by procedures. The 'toolkit mentality' identified by Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett in cultural policy and research years ago[101] seems to have remained if not deepened. Beyond the familiar focus on impact studies and indicator refinement, cultural policy and the cultural sector itself often move too quickly towards operationalisation of emerging priorities. Before asking what values, assumptions or purposes underpin a given priority — be it greening, adoption of AI, city-branding, inclusion of specific groups, the art

[100]Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience, p. 28.

[101]Belfiore, E., & Bennett, O. (2010). Beyond the "Toolkit Approach": Arts Impact Evaluation Research and the Realities of Cultural Policy-Making. *Journal for Cultural Research*, *14*(2), 121–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580903481280

community is rushing to learn and instruct each other on *how* to implement it efficiently.

Timothy Snyder, in *On Freedom* (2024), identifies this problem in wider society: '*We phrase 'how' questions in terms of 'efficiency', 'maximisation', and 'optimisation'. The idiom of productivity is senseless in itself; it can be meaningful only when we know what we value. [...] When we forget the 'why' and have only the 'how', our imagination seeps into the gully of the status quo. We rationalise using our residual intelligence to explain that the world cannot be otherwise than it is, and that we cannot be otherwise than we have done. In doing so, we collaborate in our own unfreedom*'[102].

For the cultural sector, asking 'why' does not mean rejecting every emerging policy priority. It means examining the assumptions behind them. What is the cultural sector's specific role in greening? Why, and under what conditions, might the cultural sector need AI at all? What is the ultimate purpose of cultural participation as promoted by governments: creativity for economic growth, the integration of minorities, social cohesion, democratic activation, individual expression, or something else?

Overemphasis on the 'how' not only weakens culture's meaning-making role; it also has practical implications. Pearle* reports, for instance, that sustainability reporting duties in the performing arts have become a compulsory administrative exercise that increases workload without creating structural incentives for more sustainable touring[103]. Could this be a symptom of a broader administrative reflex: a tendency to move quickly into compliance, reporting and the adoption of new requirements before properly understanding how they fit within the cultural sector's own value systems and roles?

Finally, there is something troubling in the relationship between culture and democracy under these conditions. As one interviewee put it, artists may of course engage with social issues, but they should be free to choose to do it or not. Whether artists decide to work in a hospital, respond to a conflict, or engage with a specific group in society should remain a matter of artistic freedom, not something imposed by government or funding principles. Artists will ultimately make these choices, but they must be allowed to make them on their own terms. To take that capacity away is to strip artists of creative agency and of their role in making meaning.

---

[102] Snyder, T. (2024) *On Freedom*. London: The Bodley Head, pp. 97—98.

[103] Pearle* 2026, *Unleashing the Potential of the European Live Performance Sector*, p. 24

If we truly care about culture and democracy, the so-called 'new narrative' must become a new policy model that actually walks the talk. If culture is declared an essential part of life and a public good, it should not only be irreducible to other policy agendas, but also to governance and meaning-making modalities that are alien to its nature. The emerging cultural paradigm should provide the infrastructure culture needs: social protection, fair working conditions, spaces, guarantees of artistic freedom, and sustained, sufficient investment grounded in trust. It must recognise that culture as a public good depends on artists' experimentation, long-term practice, courage, agency, deep relationships with communities and openness to the unknown.

Chapter 2: Culture and AI: Human Agency on a Tightrope

Identified as one of the crucial challenges for the cultural sector in *State of Culture 2024*, artificial intelligence (AI) has remained the talk of the town. Experts from various disciplines and sectors, from libraries to museums, and from visual art to music and film, perceive it not simply as one issue among others in cultural policy, but as a development transforming many dimensions of public life.

In 2026, the world is still catching up with what AI does and what it has already done to individuals, societies, economies and art. Some may argue that the confusion around AI has only grown, partly because, like any major issue, AI has now settled into the same polarised dynamics as other public debates. The difference is that conflicting narratives about AI seem, somehow, to transcend information bubbles. What Samantha Oltman wrote in *The Guardian* in June 2026 may resonate with many: '*Everything we hear about artificial intelligence is conflicting, and hearing about it feels inescapable. AI is terrible. AI is wonderful. It will break the world. It will transform the future. It's essential to embrace it. It's a moral imperative to abstain from using it*'[104].

Yet amid this ambivalence, the debate within the cultural sector in 2026 seems more informed, evidence-based and solution-oriented than it was in 2024. *State of Culture 2026* survey responses show that the sector at large is generally neither technophobic nor anti-innovation. It increasingly sees AI, however, as a 'stress test' for almost every unresolved question in cultural policy: labour precarity, the concentration of corporate power, the devaluation of artistic work and the erosion of cultural diversity.

In 2024, the key question that emerged for us in the AI chapter was *trust*: whether we could trust businesses to 'halt on time', trust algorithms not to erode the very notion of knowledge, trust governments and citizens to protect art, and trust art itself to 'remain powerful no matter what'[105].

Today, the key challenge has shifted towards *agency*: the agency of artists over tools; the agency of audiences over their attention and choices; the agency of cultural

[104] Oltman, S. (2026) 'AI absolutism is breaking our brains. The apocalyptic future we're being sold isn't inevitable', *The Guardian*, 11 June, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/jun/11/ai-absolutism-apocalyptic-future, last seen 5 September 2026..

[105] Culture Action Europe 2024, State of Culture, p. 63.

workers over labour conditions; the agency of governments and society over the direction of AI development.

In a nutshell, according to the interview and survey contributors to this research, the solution lies in creatives and citizens more broadly regaining that agency over AI and turning it into indeed just a 'tool' for addressing issues they have democratically agreed upon, rather than allowing AI, or its owners, to lead the way. This vision is not new, but today it looks like an enormous struggle. Before turning to solutions, however, we need to sketch what the relationship between AI and culture looks like in 2026.

2026: more AI

In the past couple of years, AI capabilities have continued to evolve rapidly, outpacing many of the benchmarks designed to measure them. ChatGPT and Claude now release new versions every four to eight weeks or faster, while Gemini Deep Think earned a gold medal at the International Mathematical Olympiad[106]. OpenAI's own study reveals that 800 million users submit an average of 18 billion requests every week to its chatbot[107]. Moreover, AI has moved from experimentation to mass deployment, and the growing trend is no longer only to use AI as a chatbot, but to trust it with increasingly autonomous tasks: agents now complete multi-hour research workflows with limited human intervention. Meanwhile, global corporate AI investment more than doubled in 2025[108].

According to Presenc AI, between 86 and 92% of creators surveyed in 2026 report using at least one generative AI tool. The rise from 18% in 2022 to 86–92% in 2026 represents, in the study's words, 'one of the fastest technology adoption curves ever observed in a professional creative category'[109].

---

[106] Sha Sajadieh, Loredana Fattorini, Raymond Perrault, Yolanda Gil, Vanessa Parli, Lapo Santarlasci, Juan Pava, Nestor Maslej, Russ Altman, Erik Brynjolfsson, Carla Brodley, Jack Clark, Virginia Dignum, Vipin Kumar, James Landay, Terah Lyons, James Manyika, Juan Carlos Niebles, Yoav Shoham, Elham Tabassi, Russell Wald, Toby Walsh, Dan Weld. "The AI Index 2026 Annual Report," AI Index Steering Committee, Institute for Human-Centered AI, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, April 2026. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2606.15708

[107] Chatterji, A., Cunningham, T., Deming, D., Hitzig, Z., Ong, C., Shan, C. and Wadman, K. (2025) *How People Use ChatGPT*. OpenAI, https://cdn.openai.com/pdf/a253471f-8260-40c6-a2cc-aa93fe9f142e/economic-research-chatgpt-usage-paper.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[108] Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (2026) 'Economy', *The 2026 AI Index Report*. Available at: https://hai.stanford.edu/ai-index/2026-ai-index-report/economy

[109] Presenc AI (2026) *Creator Economy AI Adoption Statistics (2026)*, https://presenc.ai/research/creator-economy-ai-adoption-statistics-2026, last seen 5 September 2026.

Artists and creative workers use AI both *inside* cultural work — for example, for ideation, concept development, text and video editing, image and sound enhancement, prototyping and visualisation — and *around* cultural work, for marketing, administration, grant-writing, data collection and analysis, archiving and more. Some artists still see clear limits to AI's relevance for their creative process. Others, as has always been the case with technology, are embracing it in more innovative, bold and integral ways, using it as an instrument to imagine new forms of expression and rethink the relationship between art and technology.

According to the *State of Culture 2026* survey, time-saving is among the key reasons for the sector to use AI: the main opportunity cultural workers associate with AI is '*productivity and efficiency*' (67%)[110]. This is followed by '*creative experimentation and new artistic forms*' (39%) and '*audience engagement and participation*' (23%). '*Quality enhancement*' was chosen by only 6% of respondents. Embracing AI to save time is seen not only as a productive opening for addressing the cultural sector's long-standing work overload, but also as a necessity for keeping pace with the wider economy's accelerated rhythms of work.

Importantly, 8.5% of respondents see no opportunities for the cultural sector in using AI at all. This resonates with the broader unevenness of perceptions: more than half of respondents — 58% — consider AI's impact on cultural and creative sectors to be 'mixed'. There is still slightly more caution than openness, with 29% describing AI's impact as 'negative' or 'very negative', compared with 26% who see it as 'rather positive' or 'very positive'[111]. Between enthusiasm and caution, and between the familiar 'threat vs opportunity' lense, the sector nevertheless seems broadly united around one principle, expressed by an interviewee: '*If AI is just a tool, regulated in the interests of the cultural sector and society, I have no problem with it*'.

Nevertheless, this has not yet fully become reality. Debates on AI regulation in the creative sector have focused largely on the unlicensed use of creative content — books, music, images and other copyrighted works — as training data for AI models. Over the past couple of years, the number of copyright infringement lawsuits against AI companies, including OpenAI, Microsoft, and Meta, has increased rapidly.

[110] The question was formulated as follows: 'In which areas do you see potential opportunities from AI for the cultural and creative sectors? Choose up to two.' Respondents were also invited to share additional reflections or ideas in an open-ended question.

[111] The question was formulated as follows: 'Overall, do you see AI's impact on the cultural and creative sectors to be: very positive, rather positive, mixed, rather negative, very negative'.

The Paris AI Action Summit, hosted by France in February 2025, was the first AI summit of this level to place intellectual property on the agenda. Thirty-eight international cultural organisations issued a joint call for AI development to respect copyright and build ethically governed models. They called for full and effective transparency regarding the copyrighted works and content used to train AI models, encouraged AI operators to seek licences through authorisations properly negotiated with rightsholders, and demanded appropriate and fair remuneration for the use of works and content protected by intellectual property rights[112].

Income losses triggered by generative AI have become tangible across various creative sectors. An analysis of data from 10,000 UK creators shows that many are losing income and work to generative AI: 32% of illustrators report lost commissions or cancelled projects, while among photographers the figure rises to 58%. Authors report similar challenges, with more than half seeing work disappear. Among musicians, 73% say unregulated generative AI now 'threatens their ability to earn a living'[113]. According, to a CISAC study on the economic impact of AI in the music and audiovisual industries, rise in generative AI outputs could put 24% of music creators' revenues and 21% of audiovisual creators' revenues at risk by 2028, triggering annual losses reaching €4 billion and €4.5 billion respectively[114].

As our interviewees testify, freelance artists and cultural professionals also often depend on jobs in adjacent sectors, some of which are being automated even faster than creative work itself. Non-fiction translation, for instance, is being integrated into AI workflows more quickly than literary fiction, undermining the mixed income base on which many literary translators depend. Junior positions are also at risk in several sectors, including audiovisual production, raising questions about entry-level opportunities, apprenticeship and skills development.

Meanwhile, there has been a remarkable surge in AI-generated content. Deezer reports that 75,000 AI-generated music tracks are uploaded to the platform every day — 44% of all new music on the platform as of April 2026 (increase from 10,000 in

[112] *International Charter on 'Culture and Innovation'*, https://fia-actors.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Paris-AI-Action-Summit-Charter-Culture-and-Innovation-070225.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[113] Drury, R., Annetts, D. and Phelan, E. (2026) *Brave New World? Justice for Creators in the Age of GenAI*. London: Independent Society of Musicians.

[114] International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) and PMP Strategy. 2024. Study on the Economic Impact of Generative AI in the Music and Audiovisual Industries; cited in UNESCO 2026, Reshaping Policies for Creativity.

2025), or more than 2 million synthetic tracks per month[115]. Following listener dissatisfaction with human and synthetic artist profiles being mixed, Spotify, for instance, introduced an 'AI persona' badge for AI-generated artist profiles, based on both self-disclosure and Spotify's own review. AI personas are not intended to be included in editorial or algorithmic recommendations[116].

A similar content flood is visible in publishing. In January 2026 alone, more than 1,100 AI-assisted titles appeared on Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing platform in a single week. Amazon has since introduced a three-book-per-day upload limit per KDP account to slow the flood, and launched a 'Human-Written' badge in October 2025, though it remains entirely self-reported and unverified[117].

AI casualties: nuance, process, shared practice

The overload of creative content has made it more difficult for human-created content to stand out and reach diverse audiences. Platform algorithms already have a problematic influence on the discoverability of emerging and diverse content, as confirmed by the European Commission's 2026 study. The flood of AI-generated content makes this exposure-diversity problem even more acute for many creators, contributing to the scarcity of public attention and artistic visibility[118].

Interviewees described the risk of a 'two-speed cultural economy': on one side, an expanding mass of low-cost synthetic content; on the other, a smaller space for human-made, artistically ambitious work. The challenge for the latter is the ability to stand out, to be discovered, rediscovered and recognised. This challenge is even more acute for emerging and minority artists, those creating content in less widely

---

[115] Khouwes, M. (2026) 'Deezer: AI-generated tracks now represent 44% of all new uploaded music', *Deezer Newsroom*, 20 April, https://newsroom-deezer.com/2026/04/ai-generated-tracks-represent-44-of-new-uploaded-music/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[116] Spotify (2026) 'Introducing a New Label for AI-Generated Artist Identities on Spotify', *Spotify Newsroom*, 11 August, Spotify Newsroom article, last seen 15 September 2026.

[117] AI for Automation (2026) 'AI just flooded bookstores with 1,100 novels in one week', *AI for Automation*, 20 March., https://aiforautomation.io/news/2026-03-20-ai-novels-flooding-amazon-publishers-fight-back, last seen 5 September 2026.

[118] European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Panteia, KEA European Affairs, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, DELab – University of Warsaw, Erasmus University Rotterdam, IDEA Consult, Clarke, M., Vroonhof, P., Byrne, C., Petrov, L., Le Gall, A., Antonucci, F., Albertelli, A., Rolando, E., Ranaivoson, H., Salganik, R., Wiratama, V., Afilipoaie, A., Hardy, W., Paliński, M., Rożynek, S., Berkers, P., Calkins, T., Wijngaarden, Y., Vuijlsteke, C., Valintelyte, E.Janssens, J., *Study on the discoverability of diverse European cultural content in the digital environment – Final report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/8868773

spoken languages, early-career creators and, increasingly, anyone who is not yet famous or mainstream. This reality pushes artists to become ever more productive and, crucially, ever more present in digital space.

Furthermore, in the 'attention economy', where attention itself becomes a commercial resource, artists compete not only for funding or audiences, but for people's time, concentration, patience and openness to meaning. While much of the content now circulating may be flattened by AI, as another interviewee reflected, the reality of short attention spans and content overload also produces a tendency to 'shout louder': to be heard, to appear authentic, unique and recognisable, or simply to make a point in the public domain. One may assume that in this environment of exaggerated and amplified expression, the quiet power of nuance struggles to find space, while already polarised opinion environments can make debate even more performative and combative.

Moreover, AI further intensifies the obscuring, and even the perceived irrelevance, of the creative process, creating a situation in which anyone can seemingly produce a 'work of art'. The process is reduced to expressing a wish in a prompt and waiting a few seconds, with very limited understanding of how the output is actually brought into being. At such speed, there is also increasingly little time to wonder about it.

It is not only the way AI works that degrades the meaning of process, but also the narratives promoted by AI companies. In 2025, Mikey Shulman, CEO of the AI music company Suno, suggested that making music is, for many people, not especially enjoyable: '*It takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of practice, you need to get really good at an instrument or really good at a piece of production software. I think the majority of people don't enjoy the majority of the time they spend making music*'[119].

More broadly, AI promises to optimise the process, remove hurdles and setbacks, and make everything faster. In doing so, it risks treating the practice and journey of arriving at a final creative output as burdensome, disregarding the joy and meaning they may contain, as well as the skills they may develop, refine or simply preserve. As Caramiaux *et al.* argue, '*This emphasis on efficiency cultivates the assumption that creative processes are not efficient enough*'[120].

[119] Cited in: Raad voor Cultuur 2026, Kunstzinnig boven kunstmatig — Naar een waardengedreven toepassing van AI in de culturele en creatieve sector, p. 21.

[120] Caramiaux, B., Crawford, K., Liao, Q.V., Ramos, G. and Williams, J. (2025) *Generative AI and creative work: narratives, values, and impacts.* arXiv, https://arxiv.org/pdf/2502.03940, last seen 5 September 2026.

Efficiency becomes valued in itself, and the underlying assumption is that creativity must be rationalised and streamlined. Could this indeed be a true '*industrial revolution for creativity*'[121] — to borrow the phrase used in an optimistic article on FastCompany — making the triumph of the *industrial* order of worth even more evident and embedded than any funding system could have done? Ultimately, the uncritical acceptance of this all-encompassing efficiency pushes creators to produce more and denormalises the very idea of making space for exploration and unproductive time.

Yet there is much to lose if we throw the creative process out of the window. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the cultural sector has long argued against output-oriented funding models and for greater recognition of process, engagement, capacity-building and relationships. In her article 'The End of Reading is Here', Rose Horowitch reflects: '*Writing is hard. Orwell likened the experience to a "long bout of some painful illness". AI promises a simple remedy. The trouble is that writing is not merely the act of transcribing fully formed thoughts — if it were, it wouldn't be hard. Writing is the way people figure out what they think, and how to convey those thoughts to someone who doesn't already share them*'[122]. Can typing a prompt into AI help us figure out what we think?

It may be that the case for process over product has now become even more existential, as we are witnessing the rapid expansion of forms of cultural production in which the product can appear detached from the process that traditionally gave it meaning. This does not mean that AI and the creative process are inherently opposed. Many artists use AI as part of demanding and intentional creative practices: collecting and curating data, training and fine-tuning models, experimenting with outputs, developing new methods and reflecting critically on the results. In such cases, AI can become part of a creative journey marked by learning, struggle, experimentation and transformation.

Yet much of the public and commercial promise of generative AI points in a different direction. Some of its appeal lies in the ability to produce text, images, music or video with unprecedented speed and minimal visible effort. The risk is that the creative process becomes hidden, compressed and devalued.

---

[121] Clugston, R. (2023) 'Generative AI will change the world—but won't put creative jobs at risk', *Fast Company*, 10 April, https://www.fastcompany.com/90877017/generative-ai-will-change-the-world-but-wont-put-creative-jobs-at-risk, last seen 5 September 2026.

[122] Horowitch, R. (2026) 'The End of Reading Is Here', *The Atlantic*, 8 July, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/2026/08/reading-crisis-postliterate-age/687618/, last seen 5 September 2026.

Creating culture is ultimately grounded in shared practices that people initiate, develop, learn and refine together. Some of these practices, such as learning and playing music, are globally shared. While AI can undoubtedly become part of such practices, generating content is not the same as learning a craft, rehearsing with others, negotiating interpretation, inhabiting a tradition or taking responsibility for form.

This brings us back to Alasdair MacIntyre's idea that shared concepts of value depend on common practices, traditions and forms of participation[123]. Are we witnessing a further fragmentation of value when cultural products become increasingly detached from the communities, rituals and practices that give them meaning? Could a culture organised around personalised and on-demand generation gradually erode the human processes of making, judging, transmitting and disagreeing through which cultural value is collectively formed?

Art as a human act

Across creative sectors, there is growing recognition of the threat AI poses to artists' livelihoods. The 'substitution effect', driven by the unfair competition between AI-generated content and human authors and creators, including in markets such as stock imagery, remains a serious concern[124]. At the same time, many interviewees and survey respondents are convinced that there is a strong, and possibly growing, appetite for authentic, human-made art and culture. The interviewee from the literature sector argued that, although AI has advanced in many ways, it has not reached the quality of creative writing that humans are capable of producing, and may likely never do so. A representative of the visual arts sector similarly suggested that there is little reason to assume that human art will simply be replaced by AI-generated images. What serious art audiences value, they argued, is not only the image as an object, but the story of the artist, the history of the work, the journey, the struggle, the relationships, the context and the lived reality behind it. '*Cheaper substitutes for high-quality photography or painting have existed for a long time; the fact that people buy them has not erased the value of real art*'.

The data broadly supports this intuition. A study surveyed more than 5,000 respondents in the USA, UK, Australia, the Netherlands, and Germany, and results

[123] MacIntyre, A. (1981). After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. (3rd ed. 2007.

[124] European Visual Artists (EVA) (2026) 'EVA's contribution on the own-initiative report on cultural and creative sectors in the age of AI', https://www.evartists.org/evas-statement-on-the-own-initiative-report-on-cultural-and-creative-sectors-in-the-age-of-ai/ last seen 13 September 2026.

suggest that most consumers would feel uncomfortable consuming fully AI-generated creative content (70%) or even AI-assisted creative content (54%). Disinterest in fully AI-generated content also appears to be growing: more than a third of respondents (35%) say they would never be happy to consume entirely AI-generated content under any circumstances, up from 29% the previous year. Consumers prefer human-made content because of its perceived authenticity and originality, and because 'it is personal to the creator and their experience'. Almost one in four respondents also prefer human-made content because 'the creator gets paid for it'[125]. The Eurobarometer data points in the same direction: more than eight in ten Europeans say they prefer content created by humans over AI-generated content[126].

A Columbia Business School series of six experiments found that people valued art labelled as AI-generated 62% lower than identical art labelled as human-made. Moreover, human-made art was valued more highly when it was displayed alongside AI-generated art, because the contrast made its human authorship more salient. However, when it was displayed alongside other human-made art, this effect disappeared: without AI as a point of comparison, human authorship did not produce the same increase in perceived value[127].

However, this evidence also complicates any simple defence of human-made art. It has become increasingly difficult to argue that AI-generated art has no audience. The same Eurobarometer shows that only 48% of respondents believe they can distinguish between a work of art created by AI and one made by a human[128]. A Deezer/Ipsos study across eight countries makes the issue even sharper: 97% of listeners could not distinguish AI-generated music from human-made tracks[129]. Stories continue to emerge of AI-generated photographs winning awards without juries realising that they

---

[125] Schomer, A. (2025) 'Most consumers wary of fully AI-generated creative content: exclusive survey', *Variety*, 26 March, https://variety.com/vip/most-consumers-wary-of-fully-ai-generated-creative-content-survey-1236347518/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[126] European Commission (2025) *Special Eurobarometer 562: Europeans' attitudes towards culture*, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3364, last seen 5 September 2026.

[127] Horton, C.B. Jr, White, M.W. and Iyengar, S.S. (2025) 'Bias against AI art can enhance perceptions of human creativity', *Scientific Reports*, 15, article 17572. Available at: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-02162-6

[128]European Commission (2025) *Special Eurobarometer 562: Europeans' attitudes towards culture*, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3364, last seen 5 September 2026..

[129] MusicNews.com Team (2026) 'AI-generated music floods streaming platforms, sparks legal and payment disputes', *MusicNews.com*, 27 June, https://www.musicnews.com/news/2026-06-27-ai-generated-music-floods-streaming-platforms-sparks-legal-and-payment-disputes, last seen 5 September 2026.

were AI-generated. Yet people still consciously express a preference for human-made art.

This tension may reveal something quite fundamental about how cultural value works. If people prefer human-made art even when they cannot reliably identify it, the value of human creativity, then, does not lie only in perceptible aesthetic difference. It also lies in attribution, trust and the belief that a human being intended, struggled, chose, failed, revised and took responsibility for the work. What is valued is not only the output, but the human act behind it: the fact that the work emerges from someone's experience, judgement, labour, vulnerability and relation to the world.

In a cultural landscape increasingly shaped by AI, the value of human-made art does not lie only in its perceptible difference from synthetic content. Authorship matters — not only to the author, but to audiences too — and in times of automation, more than ever.

From human worth to human agency

Already in 2024, artist Mario Klingemann, who works at the intersection of technology and creativity, said in an interview with *CLOT Magazine*: '*Rather than contributing more to the ever-growing pile of "content", artists might need to create less. This seems counterintuitive, but in a world saturated with AI-generated output, the artist might shift towards curation, distillation, and extracting meaning from the noise*'[130].

This is more than the familiar call to rethink working methods in the arts. It is also another way of narrating the evolving role and value of artists in society. It resonates with what we argued in the previous chapter: the logic of our 'value narrative hunt' is such that whenever a new challenge or crisis arises, the cultural sector is sooner or later compelled to treat it as an opportunity to identify a new niche — a 'unique' value or role for culture in the new reality. So, is it now '*extracting meaning from the noise*'?

In the *State of Culture 2026* survey, '*humanising the digital world*' was chosen as only the fifth most important role for culture in the next five years, out of a list of ten suggested roles[131]. Yet it was rated equally with '*preserving and renewing heritage*'

[130] Silva, D. (2024) 'Mario Klingemann, exploring the frontiers of AI, data poisoning, ethical challenges & art', *CLOT Magazine*, 7 August, https://clotmag.com/interviews/mario-klingemann-exploring-the-frontiers-of-ai-data-poisoning-ethical-challenges-art, last seen 5 September 2026.

[131] The question was formulated as follows: 'Imagine our world in the next five years and the role of culture in it. Choose up to three most important roles you envision for culture'. Response options were: Supporting personal growth and wellbeing; Strengthening solidarity and social cohesion; Preserving and renewing heritage; Opening space for critique and alternative futures; Supporting democracy, pluralism, and freedom of expression;

and higher than '*strengthening local, national and European belonging*', '*driving economic innovation and development*' and '*promoting sustainable development*'. Several interviewees reflected on the specific value that art and culture are consolidating in increasingly automated and digitalised realities, stressing their unique capacity to remind us of, and embody, what it means to be human: to stimulate critical thinking, bring people together and preserve spaces of meaning.

Given the persistent, and reportedly growing, appreciation of human culture and art — evident from the data discussed above — these new ways of articulating and distinguishing the 'humanising' value of culture may become more prominent and more refined. Perhaps the 'human-made' label, should it ever become generally mandatory, could become more than a matter of compliance with disclosure rules. It could become a vital marker of quality, realness, truth, authenticity, originality, responsibility and all the other qualities that the 'humanness' of art and culture might imply.

AI may not yet be producing a fully fledged new 'order of worth', in the sense developed by Boltanski and Thévenot — the *human* order, but it is making visible a new criterion of valuation: the human trace. In a saturated environment of automated outputs, intention, embodiment, imperfection, accountability and process may become marks of value.

Such an order of worth would, however, be highly fragile. We have already seen how difficult it is to verify, trust, label and distinguish what is genuinely human. But even before addressing these complexities, one may wonder how we arrived at a point in which human beings may be valued simply for being human — or, rather, for being able to demonstrate their 'humanness'.

Finding ourselves in a situation where the value of culture must be redefined in terms of humanising the digital world, or where artists are cast as vigilant navigators of noise, should do more than prompt another narrative adjustment. It should remind us of the urgency of regaining agency in the debate on AI, emancipating ourselves from its — at least discursive — inevitability, and asking the 'why' questions: what AI is for, what kind of future it helps to build, and whether efficiency for the sake of efficiency is a sufficient horizon for the cultural sector and societies.

Contributing to education and critical thinking; Driving economic innovation and development; Humanising the digital world; Strengthening local, national, and European belonging; Promoting sustainable development.

Policy Struggles

Where, then, do European governments stand in the AI debate? Our policy review points to three unresolved tensions. First, cultural policy now recognises AI as central, but culture remains marginal in AI governance. Second, EU law contains important principles, but its implementation tools remain weak. Third, Europe seeks digital sovereignty and cultural power at the same time, but has not yet found a way to balance AI competitiveness with creators' rights.

Two years ago, our review of EU Member States' cultural policy agendas showed that AI was almost absent from the priorities of ministries of culture. This was partly because many of these documents had been adopted before the widespread emergence of generative AI. Today, the picture is radically different: in recently adopted cultural policy documents, AI is increasingly recognised as an essential issue.

AI is rarely described in national cultural policy documents only as a threat or only as an opportunity. It is presented as a tool that can expand creative expression, support cultural institutions, improve access and drive growth, but also as a source of risks around ethics, deepfakes, piracy, mass reproduction, unequal access and the manipulation of reality. Several documents connect AI directly to copyright, intellectual property, compensation for creators, identifiable AI-generated content and the protection of artists' work. AI is also being made sense of through strategies, training programmes, and methodological guidance designed to ensure that the cultural sector can use AI in accordance with public interest, cultural rights and international standards. At the same time, AI is increasingly connected to competitiveness. Several national cultural policy frameworks place it within the language of high added value, creative-industry growth, research and development, intellectual capital, and new business models. Finally, some texts also explicitly refer to cultural rights, human rights, dignity, transparency, accessibility and fair technological innovation.

Globally, AI has also risen on the agendas of cultural ministries. According to UNESCO's 2026 report *Reshaping Policies for Creativity*, 85% of cultural ministries address digital transition[132]. Yet cultural and creative sectors have historically been marginal in AI policymaking. The same report notes that, of the 148 AI bills passed in 128 countries between 2016 and 2023, only one had culture as its primary subject matter. Furthermore, although numerous AI-related documents and declarations have

[132] UNESCO 2026, Reshaping Policies for Creativity, p. 64.

been adopted by international organisations, most still do not adequately consider the cultural and creative sectors[133].

At the EU level, the 'AI and culture' issue emerged as a crucial priority. The Joint Declaration *Europe for Culture — Culture for Europe*, signed in June 2026 by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, includes among its 12 commitments '*the ethical, sustainable and responsible use, development and governance of artificial intelligence (AI) systems*' that '*foster human creativity through a fair human-centric and rights-based approach*'[134]. One of the 20 flagship initiatives presented in the *Culture Compass for Europe* is an AI strategy for the cultural and creative sectors, scheduled for early 2027[135]. To inform the development of the strategy, the European Commission launched a call for evidence targeting a broad range of stakeholders, including artists, creators and rightsholders, cultural institutions and sectoral organisations, as well as AI providers and developers, researchers and public authorities responsible for cultural policy[136].

AI also appears in the proposal for the new AgoraEU programme, where '*a responsible use of innovative tools and content technologies, notably Artificial Intelligence*' is included as one of the cross-cutting and horizontal priorities[137]. The Member States' compromise text on AgoraEU affirms that '*in the age of artificial intelligence, human creativity remains irreplaceable*', before adding that '*the ethical, sustainable and responsible use of innovative tools and content technologies, notably artificial intelligence, should be promoted*' including through '*the protection and valorisation of cultural and creative data, in full respect of intellectual property*

[133] Idem.

[134] Council of the European Union 2026, Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture - Culture for Europe" - Approval,

[135] European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, p. 18

[136] European Commission (2026), 'Artificial intelligence strategy for the cultural and creative sectors', *Have Your Say*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/18592-Artificial-intelligence-strategy-for-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors_en, last seen 15 September 2026.

[137] European Commission (2025) *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818*. COM(2025) 550 final.

rights'[138]. The CULT Committee Rapporteur's draft report goes further, proposing to make human creative involvement a precondition for AgoraEU funding. Fully or predominantly AI-generated works would therefore be ineligible, since funded actions should be based on 'a substantial and identifiable human creative contribution'[139]. It remains to be seen how further negotiations shape the final reference to AI within the AgoraEU programme.

Yet what matters most to the cultural sector is the regulation of AI. The European Union's AI Act, the first law of its kind in the world, came into force in August 2024. It was initially welcomed by cultural and creative sectors, but by mid-2025 this optimism had faded. More than 40 European creative industry associations representing rightsholders issued a joint statement describing the implementation of the AI Act as a '*betrayal*'. They argued that the General Purpose AI Code of Practice, published in July 2025, does not achieve a '*fair and workable balance*', and that the training-data disclosure template fails to provide sufficient transparency about the copyrighted works used to train AI systems[140]. The exploitation of unremunerated creative labour by AI companies, and the practical impossibility of meaningful opt-in, remain critical concerns.

The European Parliament's own-initiative report, led by Axel Voss and adopted in March 2026, even if non-binding, effectively sided with the creative sector's critique of the Commission's implementation. It stated that '*there is evidence of the widespread violation of copyright rules by GenAI providers*'. It went further by framing the issue not only economically, but existentially: '*the risk of a gradual disappearance of the human dimension of creation [...] poses an existential risk to European society and democracy [...] and disrupts cognitive faculties and critical thinking*'[141].

---

[138] Council of the European Union (2026) *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818: Partial general approach*. ST 8313/26. Brussels: Council of the European Union.

[139] European Parliament (2026) *Draft report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818*. CJ65_PR(2026)787746. Rapporteurs: Emma Rafowicz and Alice Kuhnke. Brussels: European Parliament.

[140] 'Joint statement by a broad coalition of rightsholders active across the EU's cultural and creative sectors regarding the AI Act implementation measures adopted by the European Commission', 30 July, https://www.ifpi.org/joint-statement-by-a-broad-coalition-of-rightsholders-active-across-the-eus-cultural-and-creative-sectors-regarding-the-ai-act-implementation-measures-adopted-by-the-european-commission/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[141] European Parliament (2026) *European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2026 on copyright and generative artificial intelligence – opportunities and challenges (2025/2058(INI))*. P10_TA(2026)0066.

The core criticism is therefore clear: the EU AI Act contains important principles — transparency, respect for copyright and opt-out rights — but its implementation instruments remain too weak. The gap between the law's stated objectives and its operational reality has become one of the central battlegrounds related to culture and AI in 2026.

At the same time, the application of copyright law to generative AI is increasingly being shaped in courtrooms, as litigation exposes continuing regulatory uncertainty around protected training material and AI-generated outputs. For instance, cases such as *GEMA v OpenAI* and *GEMA v Suno* in Germany, and *Getty Images v Stability AI* in the UK, have put before courts questions about AI training, model memorisation, generated outputs and the use of protected works.

In May 2026, the European Commission launched a call for evidence on whether EU copyright rules need targeted updates, particularly in light of the 2019 *Copyright in the Digital Single Market Directive*. The Commission is assessing whether the current EU copyright framework remains fit for purpose in the context of AI, platformisation, piracy, and licensing problems. Depending on the evidence received, it may propose targeted changes to EU copyright law. This review could become one of the first places where the EU is compelled to practically confront whether the existing compromise around text and data mining, opt-outs, licensing and remuneration is adequate for generative AI[142].

Some of the experts we spoke with see this review as an important opportunity. Yet they are also discouraged by recent developments, which suggest a strong governmental leaning towards economic competitiveness. The Draghi Report (September 2024) frames Europe's crisis explicitly in terms of falling behind the United States and China on AI and digital technology — noting that '*only four of the world's top 50 tech companies are European' and that the productivity gap with the US is 'largely explained by the tech sector*'[143]. In this spirit, the EU is moving towards a more innovation-friendly, competitiveness-driven and administratively lighter

[142] European Commission (2026) 'Commission seeks views on the review of EU copyright rules', *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*, 18 May, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-seeks-views-review-eu-copyright-rules (Accessed: 15 July 2026), last seen 5 September 2026.

[143] Draghi, M. (2025) *The future of European competitiveness: Part A — A competitiveness strategy for Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

implementation of AI regulation, with an ambition to become a '*global leader in AI*'[144]. This is reflected in the Commission's *AI Continent Action Plan* and the *Tech Sovereignty Package*, including the Cloud and AI Development Act and the AI Factories initiative, all oriented towards making Europe more AI competitive.

The European Commission therefore seeks to become both a 'global leader in AI' and, in the language of the *Culture Compass*, a 'global cultural powerhouse'. It speaks simultaneously about supporting cultural sectors and accelerating AI development. While these ambitions do not have to be mutually exclusive, one of the most fundamental questions at the heart of the tension remains unanswered: when AI companies' interests clash with creators' rights, which will prevail?

AI for Culture or Culture for AI?

By 2026, AI is no longer a threat that can simply be rejected altogether, nor a mysterious technical box to be delegated to experts and managed at a distance. Nor is it likely to solve humanity's problems automatically if humanity does not actively shape its direction. Across different spheres of public life, a growing range of voices is calling for AI to be brought under democratic and human control.

In July 2026, a group of leading economists and AI researchers, including sixteen Nobel laureates, released *We Must Act Now: A Statement on AI's Transformation of the Economy*. Signed by more than 200 economists and AI researchers, the statement warns that AI could drive an '*economic transformation larger than the Industrial Revolution*'. Its authors argue that it is time '*to act now to understand the economics of transformative AI and to build the incentives, guardrails, and institutions needed to steer AI in a direction that complements humans and benefits society*'[145]. This is a call to recognise that AI can become an opportunity for societies at large only if societies regain the capacity to direct it.

A few months earlier, Pope Leo XIV spoke of '*new forms of slavery*' *emerging from the digital economy and called for AI to be 'disarmed*' — not in the sense of rejecting technology, but of preventing it from dominating humanity. He also criticised the

[144] European Commission (2026) 'European approach to artificial intelligence', *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-approach-artificial-intelligence, last seen 5 September 2026.

[145] Stanford Digital Economy Lab (2026) '"We Must Act Now": Sixteen Nobel Laureates join leading economists and AI researchers in call to prepare for AI's economic transformation', *Stanford Digital Economy Lab*, 13 July, https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/news/wemustactnow/, last seen 5 September 2026.

'*culture of power*' driving the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and warned that the technology must be subject to the '*most rigorous*' ethical constraints[146].

Citizens, too, are beginning to voice publicly the concerns previously raised by researchers, digital experts and economists. In spring 2026, London saw one of the largest anti-AI demonstrations to date, the '*March Against the Machines*', with participants protesting against the expansion of data centres, the flood of 'AI slop' and the lack of democratic control over AI development[147].

Different proposals are also emerging for how citizens might regain such control. In June 2026, Bernie Sanders, the senior US senator from Vermont, introduced the *American AI Sovereign Wealth Fund Act*, which would give the public a 50% ownership stake in the largest AI companies in the US. If passed, the Act would create an Independent Commission for Democratic AI to manage the fund in the public interest, using voting shares to block harmful decisions and push for policies that serve citizens. The fund is estimated to be worth $7 trillion, with a 5% annual dividend potentially providing direct payments of more than $1,000 to every person in the US[148].

What these developments suggest is that many stakeholders no longer accept AI's future as predefined and that an unregulated AI trajectory is inevitable. This creates a particular opportunity for the EU, which is currently seeking to turn digital sovereignty into reality, to lead a genuinely ethical and human-centred model of AI development. Such an approach would begin from the recognition that the planet is already facing multiple urgent crises — the familiar *polycrisis* we have become accustomed to naming. Rather than allowing the 'digital boom' to become yet another crisis layered on top of the others, societies should ask a different question: how can AI help address the problems we already face?

As one interviewee reflected, '*AI should not be there simply because it happened, simply because it is made possible*'. Instead, they affirmed, AI should serve the tasks

---

[146]Giuffrida, A. (2026) 'Pope Leo denounces "culture of power" driving rise of AI', *The Guardian*, 25 May, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/may/25/pope-leo-encyclical-ai-artificial-intelligence-slavery, last seen 5 September 2026.

[147] O'Donnell, J. (2026) 'I checked out London's biggest-ever anti-AI protest', *MIT Technology Review*, 2 March, https://www.technologyreview.com/2026/03/02/1133814/i-checked-out-londons-biggest-ever-anti-ai-protest/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[148] Sanders, B. (2026) 'Sanders introduces legislation to create $7 trillion AI sovereign wealth fund', *Bernie Sanders: Senator for Vermont*, 22 June, https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/news-sanders-introduces-legislation-to-create-7-trillion-ai-sovereign-wealth-fund/, ast seen 5 September 2026.

that governments and societies consciously entrust it to solve. An approach to AI that is democratic, human-rights-centred and attentive to the planet, cultural diversity and people's wellbeing could resonate far beyond Europe. Could the most significant form of 'digital progress' ahead be the capacity to direct technological progress towards the common good? And could the EU become a leader of that kind of progress?

The same logic must apply to AI and culture. Instead of asking what role artists can play in an AI-shaped world, cultural policy should ask what role AI can legitimately play for artists.

As our interviewees and survey respondents see it, a human-centred approach to AI would keep human creativity at the core. AI's role would be to support, not replace, artistic agency and the artist's voice: to help artists explore alternatives, prototype ideas, experiment with form, refine materials, test possibilities, edit or sharpen expression. In this sense, AI can be understood as an instrument in the artist's hands, and a source of an untransparent control that reshapes their professional realities. As Mario Klingemann put it, '*Just as a pianist can create intricate melodies and harmonies beyond what human vocals could achieve, AI allows us to create visual and conceptual compositions that stretch far beyond what our hands alone could craft*'. Yet the same comparison also makes clear where authorship belongs: '*We don't credit a piano for a musical performance. The credit goes to the person who performs on it, who brings their skill, emotion, and intention to the keys*'[149].

When the creator's intention, skill and emotional judgement remain present, a human-centred use of AI is not about removing the creative process, nor is it necessarily about becoming more efficient. Artistic creation, fully owned by human artists, whether assisted by AI or not, continues to depend on what cannot be optimised: values, emotions, meanings, symbols, passions, uncertainties and forms of judgement. Art remains an inquiry and a journey — never fully linear, often challenging, and driven by inspiration, risk and curiosity. These are not things that can simply be generated by a prompt.

Is culture exclusively human?

Much of the conversations conducted for this report asserted that AI is not more than a tool, and culture remains to be human. Yet maybe this premise itself also deserves

[149]Silva, D. (2024) 'Mario Klingemann, exploring the frontiers of AI, data poisoning, ethical challenges & art', *CLOT Magazine*, 7 August, https://clotmag.com/interviews/mario-klingemann-exploring-the-frontiers-of-ai-data-poisoning-ethical-challenges-art, last seen 5 September 2026.

some scrutiny. A human-centred approach assumes that human agency should remain at the core of cultural creation. Whether we welcome it or not, however, AI raises a fundamental question — one increasingly explored in literature and artistic practice: is culture necessarily an exclusively human act? Does something cease to be culture because it is produced, partly or even substantially, by a non-human system? Generative AI may ultimately challenge, and it is already doing so, what we understand by culture, creativity and authorship.

If culture can emerge through increasingly complex interactions between people and machines, cultural policy faces an important task. Its role cannot simply be to police a fixed boundary between 'human' and 'non-human' culture. It instead has to ask what exactly needs to be protected and enabled within this changing landscape. And cultural advocates have already voiced the answer: human agency, cultural diversity, meaningful participation, experimentation, respect of authorship, and creators' capacity to make a living from creative work[150].

This also means that expanding our understanding of creativity and authorship cannot come at the expense of creative labour and creator's responsibility. Recognising more distributed forms of creation should not make the human work on which AI systems depend invisible, nor provide an excuse for avoiding remuneration, consent and attribution. The challenge for cultural policy is therefore twofold: to remain open to new forms of cultural creation while ensuring that evolving concepts of creativity and authorship do not obscure who authorship, labour and responsibility is implied in creative work.

In this sense, the question whether AI belongs in culture might have become outdated, and the real questions we should be busy with are: *why* would AI belong to culture, and on *whose terms*? But the answer must consider what the use of AI requires and what consequences it produces. Even AI embedded in a human-led creative process is not harmless: using it to review multiple versions, generate alternatives or experiment with form still carries environmental costs that should not disappear from view.

The question of '*why*' must therefore remain central. If artists were ever given the possibility to opt out, or better still, to proactively opt in to allowing their content to train AI systems, what would be the purpose? What values, beyond financial gain, would make such a choice meaningful? Contributing to future AI-generated art?

[150]Culture Action Europe and Michael Culture Association (2026), *Recommendations for the AI Strategy for the Cultural and Creative Sectors.* Digital and AI Action Group, May 2026.

Revolutionising what we understand art to be? Contributing to culture as a global public good? Many questions remain unresolved, but it is crucial to keep asking them.

Chapter 3: Artistic Freedom: from Legal Principle to Lived Capacity

Artistic freedom has rarely been so loudly recognised in European cultural policy, and rarely felt so fragile in practice. Many pressures now operate before direct censorship needs to take place: through funding criteria, market concentration, reputational risk, online hostility, unequal access, geopolitical shifts, and self-censorship. The decisive question that emerges is: do artists have the economic, institutional, social and digital conditions needed to exercise freedom in practice?

During interviews, representatives from various fields, from literature to film and from museums to the performing arts, spoke about deteriorating conditions for artistic autonomy and freedom of expression. The clear signals in our survey are that 26% of respondents report recent censorship and 47% report self-censorship[151]; as well as the sense of safety that is declining fast: only 60% now agree that they can express their artistic views freely and safely in their country[152]. Moreover, only 15% agree with the statement '*Existing funding schemes give me enough creative freedom*'.

Similar findings appear in other studies. A 2025 survey by the Performing Arts Coalition (PAC), responded by 221 performing arts professionals mostly based in Europe, shows that nearly half of respondents consider artistic freedom to be endangered, while one third report having experienced government censorship in the recent past[153]. A recent membership survey by Reset!, the European network of independent cultural and media organisations, reportedly found artistic freedom to be the top priority for its members, ranked first by over a third of respondents. National surveys also show that cultural organisations experience pressure in different parts of Europe, including in countries that traditionally score highly on freedom of expression. In Sweden, for example, a survey by DIK, the trade union for culture, communication and the creative industries, found that 68% of museum-sector

[151] The questions were formulated as follows: 'Have you been censored in the recent past (over the past year)'? and 'Have you had to self-censor in the recent past?'

[152] The question was formulated as follows: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?' The statement was 'I can express my artistic views freely and safely in my country'.

[153] Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.

respondents had experienced social unrest in the workplace in the previous two years, while 54% had experienced vandalism[154].

Across wider Europe, beyond the EU, artistic freedom, safety and livelihoods have come under growing pressure in several countries. In Ukraine, Russia's full-scale invasion has claimed lives of hundreds of cultural workers, drawn many others into military service, and destroyed or damaged thousands of cultural sites and facilities, severely constraining the conditions in which artistic and cultural work can continue. In Türkiye, Freemuse has documented persistent restrictions on artistic expression, including censorship, surveillance, event bans and legal action justified through broad notions of public order, morality, security and counter-terrorism[155]. In Georgia, the 'foreign agent' legislation and wider restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly have accompanied a broader deterioration in civic freedoms and repeated crackdowns on protesters, including artists[156]. In Serbia, artists and cultural organisations that supported the student-led anti-corruption protests have reported blacklisting, cancelled projects, lost roles and restrictions on performances[157].

Globally, as UNESCO's *Reshaping Policies for Creativity* report (2026), violations of artistic freedom continue to rise, although the number of countries providing legal guarantees to protect it has increased. These include the use of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) 'to intimidate and silence artists by exhausting them financially and psychologically'. At the same time, independent monitoring bodies are declining in some regions[158].

This chapter examines how the state of artistic freedom in Europe[159] may have shifted over the past two years, and how it is increasingly understood as a collective and multilayered issue. It is about the interrelation of the conditions that keep artistic freedom alive: the freedom infrastructure governments are responsible for providing,

---

[154] DIK (2025) *Ny rapport: Kultur på svältkur – hur länge klarar museerna pressen?* https://dik.se/yrken/museum-konst-och-kulturmiljo/ny-rapport-om-museerna-kultur-pa-svaltkur/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[155] Freemuse 2026, The State of Artistic Freedom 2026, p. 54.

[156] Ibid, p. 51.

[157] EXIT (2025) 'Dušan Kovačević at the European Parliament: Europe Must Save Civil Society and the Cultural Sector in Serbia', 11 November, https://www.exitfest.org/en/dusan-kovacevic-at-the-european-parliament-europe-must-save-civil-society-and-the-cultural-sector-in-serbia, last seen 21 September 2026.

[158] UNESCO 2026, Reshaping Policies for Creativity, p. 13.

[159] The main focus was placed on EU member states.

the solidarity and sovereignty of artists themselves, and the receptiveness and solidarity of wider societies.

Artistic freedom: from isolated cases to a systemic issue

An article on American culture by Niña Weijers, published in De Groene Amsterdammer in June 2026, opened with the following diagnosis: 'Great literature thrives on freedom and experiment, but with cancel culture on the left and Trumpian hostility on the right, fear is what chiefly dominates among contemporary American writers. What use are they to us now?'[160]

This diagnosis resonates with how some of our interviewees describe the state of artistic freedom in Europe: as increasingly caught in a tightening vice of multiple pressures. An interviewee from the literature sector observed that freedom of artistic expression in Europe is now under more pressure than two or five years ago, and that this pressure has 'many faces': state scrutiny, funding decisions, budget cuts, market concentration, social backlash and internalised caution within publishing houses.

The most recent Freemuse report similarly diagnoses the state of artistic freedom globally as an increasingly systemic issue: attacks on artistic freedom are no longer mainly limited to sporadic incidents against individuals or organisations; they are becoming part of 'broader political developments that affect the foundations of democratic societies', having a structural impact on the 'entire cultural ecosystem'[161]. Artistic freedom is also becoming increasingly global in its vulnerabilities: the collapse of freedom in some parts of the world creates restrictions and chilling effects elsewhere[162]. As our survey and interviews point out, people accustomed to working internationally now find themselves compromising their freedoms when engaging with countries they had previously considered free, or deciding not to engage with those places at all, which in itself is also a restriction of their creative freedom.

The pressures discussed below operate through different channels, but they produce a similar effect: they narrow the space in which artists feel able to take risks. What links them is that many do not look like censorship; instead, they work earlier and more

[160] Weijers, N. (2026) 'Tuttenliteratuur', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 24 June, https://www.groene.nl/artikel/tuttenliteratuur, last seen 5 September, 2026. AI translation from Dutch into English, verified by a human.

[161] Freemuse 2026, The State of Artistic Freedom 2026, p. 4.

[162] Polivtseva, E. (2026). Funding Culture for a Changing World: Learning from Globus. Nordic Culture Fund, p. 35.

structurally, by shaping what is visible, considered as safe and worth the reputational risk.

Funding scarcity as political pressure

For the cultural sector, as our survey shows, economic hardship is by far the most significant barrier to artistic freedom: 58% of respondents selected it as one of the three major threats to artistic freedom, placing it at the top of a list of ten proposed threats[163]. One respondent from Germany specifically highlighted that this is not a recent problem: '*Interestingly we have become so accustomed to the financial limitations and constraints (of a highly intransparent funding system) that we do not acknowledge their limiting and censoring influence. Instead it becomes fashionable to complain about political censorship […]*'.

Defunding is not a new trend, but a marked feature of the past couple of years is that the reasoning behind it is no longer framed only as general austerity. Increasingly, it appears as a politically or ideologically motivated decision, singling out specific actors in the arts and culture fields and justifying cuts on the grounds that they are 'woke', elitist, or a burden on the taxpayer. In Pays de la Loire, the president of the region, Christelle Morançais, justified a significant funding cut by labelling independent cultural actors as 'radical-left public funds junkies'[164]. In Slovakia, the Ministry of Culture withdrew funding from LGBTI+ festivals and plays[165]. In some European countries, artists and organisations speaking out for Palestine have also seen their freedom, including government financial support, come under threat[166]. Art projects and festivals addressing the climate crisis have faced pressure in some countries too[167]. Therefore, the 'starving of the liberal agenda', identified by Freemuse in today's USA[168], also has echoes in various parts of Europe.

---

[163]The question was formulated as follows: 'What are the most significant threats to artistic freedom in your context? Please choose up to three'.

[164]Duhoo, S. (2025) 'Regional funding for culture is in danger: The alarming precedents set by Berlin and Nantes', *Reset! Network*, 9 December, https://reset-network.eu/regional-funding-for-culture-is-in-danger-the-alarming-precedents-set-by-berlin-and-nantes/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[165]Freemuse 2026, The State of Artistic Freedom 2026, p 9.

[166]Ibid, p 7.

[167]Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.

[168]Freemuse 2026, The State of Artistic Freedom 2026, p 38.

Who owns artistic expression?

Economic hardship reduces the resources available to artists and cultural organisations, and makes cultural ecosystems more vulnerable to capture. When public funding becomes scarce and independent infrastructures weaken, commercial and ideological actors gain more room to acquire and shape the spaces through which culture reaches the public.

The *Cartography of the European Music Value Chain*, launched by Reset! and Live DMA in early 2026, revealed that more than 150 of the largest festivals in the European Union, and over 200 when including the UK, are linked to just four private equity groups: Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), Live Nation, CTS Eventim and Superstruct[169].

Private equity operates through a straightforward model: acquiring festivals and venues, restructuring them, extracting value and selling them on, typically within a five- to seven-year horizon. To meet the ambitious return targets underpinning this model, gross profits must increase significantly. In practice, this often translates into higher ticket prices, cost-cutting in production, intensified advertising and the monetisation of user data[170].

A policy paper accompanying the *Cartography* sheds light on the tension between market concentration and freedom of artistic expression and creation: '*When a handful of players dominate programming, they tend to prioritise safe bets. Independent and experimental voices can lose space, minority languages and marginalised voices get sidelined. Access and participation in culture is also affected, as rising ticket prices and the disappearance of local and rural venues limit access for audiences, particularly for young and disadvantaged groups*'[171].

These dynamics also reveal a profound clash of values. Many of the festivals involved, such as Field Day and Boiler Room, had positioned themselves as progressive spaces: inclusive, local and critical of mainstream commercial culture. This sits uneasily

[169]Live DMA (2026) 'Live DMA & Reset! Network publish new maps of ownership in European live music', 4 February, https://live-dma.eu/live-dma-reset-network-publish-new-maps-of-ownership-in-european-live-music/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[170]Smits, H.W., Koens, R. & Broekstra, A. (2023) Loud music, silent takeovers: How private equity is reshaping Europe's festival scene. Follow the Money, https://www.ftm.eu/articles/private-equity-buys-festivals, last seen 5 September 2026.

[171]Kimenai, F. and Hildisch, H. (2026) *Ownership concentration and cultural pluralism in Europe's live music sector*. KEA European Affairs, pp. 4—5.

alongside the interests of firms such as KKR, whose investments span global tech, real estate, defence industries and companies with close ties to conservative political circles. When artists began to understand who stood behind the acquisitions, in 2025, at the London festival Field Day alone, 15 artists withdrew in protest[172].

The case of Vincent Bolloré, the French billionaire businessman, points to a related but more explicitly ideological form of ownership concentration. Bolloré Group became the largest shareholder in both Canal+ and Louis Hachette Group (including the Hachette Livre publishing business, *Le Journal du Dimanche* and Europe 1). The group exercises influence across television, news, publishing, magazines and film financing, with implications for public narratives and distribution of visibility. For example, after Fayard, controlled by Hachette, came under Bolloré's influence, the publishing house entered into agreements with several prominent right-wing and far-right figures[173]. More than 100 writers have quit the publishing house Grasset in protest against its owner[174]. Furthermore, in May 2026, ahead of the Cannes Festival, more than 600 figures signed an open letter voicing concern over Bolloré's growing influence. They argued that '*leaving French cinema in the hands of a far-right owner*' risked '*not only the standardisation of films, but a fascist takeover of the collective imagination*'[175].

Art and societies: a complex relationship

Even where ownership is not concentrated in the hands of a single ideological actor, the pluralism of public narratives and artistic expression can be limited by growing market pressure. An interviewee from the literature sector spoke of publishers' increasing caution around stories that might be perceived as controversial: '*Sales expectations, trigger-warning anxieties and fear of offending readers narrow what publishers are willing to support*'. As our survey and other interviews indicate, similar

[172]Smits, H.W., Koens, R. & Broekstra, A. (2023) Loud music, silent takeovers: How private equity is reshaping Europe's festival scene. Follow the Money, https://www.ftm.eu/articles/private-equity-buys-festivals, last seen 5 September 2026.

[173]Geslin, L. (2025) 'The billionaire rewriting France's cultural canon', *Euractiv*, 25 November, https://www.euractiv.com/news/the-billionaire-rewriting-frances-cultural-cannon/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[174] Chrisafis, A. (2026) 'More than 100 writers quit French publisher in protest against rightwing owner Vincent Bolloré', *The Guardian*, 16 April, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/16/writers-quit-french-publisher-protest-against-billionaire-owner-vincent-bollore, last seen 16 September 2026.

[175]Khomami, N. (2026) 'France's top film producer says it will blacklist figures who petitioned against rightwing billionaire', *The Guardian*, 17 May. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2026/may/17/frances-top-film-producer-says-it-will-blacklist-figures-who-petitioned-against-rightwing-billionaire, last seen 5 September 2026.

caution around social backlash has become a constraint on artistic freedom across other fields, including theatres, festivals, museums, cultural organisations and artists working across disciplines.

In the Netherlands, the Council for Culture, the statutory advisory body to the government and parliament in the fields of culture, heritage, the creative industries and media, established a Committee on Artistic Freedom in early 2025 to investigate the increasingly tense interaction between the arts and the public[176].

The findings of the Committee's report, published in early 2026, can resonate with the realities in many European countries. The report highlights how pressure on artistic expression increasingly arises from what it calls the '*horizontal axis*' between art and society, possibly more than on the '*vertical axis*' between art and government. On this horizontal axis, artists' freedom to create intersects with citizens' freedom to criticise, oppose or mobilise against artistic works. The report points to the reality that a growing number of topics addressed by artists and institutions have triggered unrest and resistance in society[177].

Such tensions have always existed, but the Council identifies a significant shift in recent years. Social pressure is now often amplified by social and political polarisation, which has become a defining feature of public life and debate. This is felt strongly in the cultural sector: in our survey, *social polarisation* was identified as the most crucial of seven proposed challenges facing the cultural and creative sectors over the next five years[178].

Studies indicate that polarisation in Europe is neither uniform nor unidirectional: public attitudes have become more divided on some issues and more convergent on others, with substantial variation across countries and political dimensions. What has intensified in some European countries is *affective polarisation* — the tendency to regard one's own political group positively while responding to opposing parties or their supporters with dislike, distrust or hostility[179]. Dogmatism, antagonism and an

[176]Raad voor Cultuur (2025) 'Raad voor Cultuur stelt adviescommissie in over artistieke vrijheid', 18 February., https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/actueel/nieuws/2025/02/18/start-adviescommissie-artistieke-vrijheid, last seen 5 September 2026.

[177]Raad voor Cultuur (2026) *Maken (z)onder druk: Artistieke vrijheid als democratisch fundament*. The Hague: Raad voor Cultuur, pp. 17—18.

[178]The question was formulated as follows: 'What challenges will be most crucial for cultural and creative sectors in the next five years? Please choose two issues that you think will be most pressing'

[179]Bettarelli, L., Reiljan, A. and van Haute, E. (2023) 'A regional perspective to the study of affective polarization', *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(2), pp. 645–659. doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12548; Boxell, L., Gentzkow,

unwillingness to accept others' beliefs are further amplified by media environments, whose algorithms consolidate information 'bubbles', while flooding public space with simplified messages.

As the Performing Arts Coalition study points out, cultural workers experience that tolerance for 'controversy' is also declining within these bubbles themselves — whether in social discourse, political debate or the arts. Fear of backlash and of being misunderstood in the fast-paced and often simplified circulation of information are pushing controversy out of debate even within 'like-minded' communities, while communication between opposing camps becomes increasingly aggressive and intolerant[180].

Artists are not immune to polarisation. They are part of the societies in which they live and cannot stand outside the divisions that shape public life. As one survey respondent reflected, whether the issue is gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, the number of 'taboos' in public debate has grown sharply, with '*only one right answer*' often considered possible or acceptable — not only in public narratives, but also within the peer art community. '*The freedom of expression concerning "taboo themes" has become an illusion*', they conclude.

Participation paradox

At the same time, as the report by the Dutch Council for Culture points out, compared with a few decades ago, even if the arts are still criticised for being elitist and homogeneous, they may have become more socially engaged, participatory and politically aware.

As discussed in the previous chapter, in many European countries, public policies have also encouraged this participatory shift by emphasising access, inclusivity, engagement and the social relevance of culture. As a result, art has moved closer to society, seeking to involve communities more directly in cultural production and dialogue. Yet this increased proximity also makes artistic expression more visible and contested: communities do not always welcome the practices and content they encounter. As the Council for Culture notes, artistic freedom today is shaped by a structural paradox: art seeks to reduce the distance between itself and society, yet this very proximity increases the likelihood of social pressure, controversy and backlash: '*Art is therefore moving more towards society, while at the same time there*

M. and Shapiro, J.M. (2024) 'Cross-country trends in affective polarization', *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 106(2), pp. 557–565. doi: 10.1162/rest_a_01160.

[180]Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience, p. 40.

is a growing lack of willingness to tolerate different perspectives and ideas side by side in the public space'[181].

Why has this not worked the other way around? The problem might be not that art has become too close to society; it is that this proximity has not been matched by long-term practices of mediation, trust-building and shared cultural learning.

First, the participatory policies of many governments have not always been strategic or consequential, nor have they always enabled long-term, bottom-up engagement[182]. The morally appealing concept of 'cultural participation for all' has emerged across cultural policy agendas as a priority in many European countries. Yet there is no uniform understanding of what this means in practice: who 'all' are, what participation or access means, and access to what kind of culture. This lack of clarity and coherence exists not only across countries and regions, but more so across political ideologies within the same country[183].

A deeper issue is that cultural participation is often not treated as a goal in itself, but as a policy tool for achieving other objectives. This development has been analysed by Hanne Dewinter and other scholars, who trace how the language of cultural participation evolved in Flemish cultural policy between 1990 and 2024. Their conclusions show how cultural participation can be absorbed into neoliberal and managerial rationalities focused on measurable impact, audience growth, employability, urban regeneration, national branding and economic value. Across this period, participatory arts practices, once associated with social transformation and critical engagement, became increasingly instrumentalised. Artists and cultural organisations were expected to deliver measurable 'returns': participation rates, visibility, social cohesion, tourism, entrepreneurship or city attractiveness[184]. As the policy lens shifts from social engagement to economic growth, from consolidating national identities to building a city brand, and from grassroot work to targeted

[181]Raad voor Cultuur (2026) *Maken (z)onder druk: Artistieke vrijheid als democratisch fundament*. The Hague: Raad voor Cultuur, p. 6.

[182]Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.

[183]Polivtseva, E., 2024. Culture after the EU elections: what to expect. Culture Policy Room, 1 October, https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/culture-after-the-eu-elections-what-toexpect, last seen 5 September 2026.

[184]Hanne Dewinter, Lieve Bradt, Kris Rutten & Geert Vandermeersche (10 Nov 2025): Limits to the participation paradigm? Unpacking the rhetoric of participation in Flemish cultural policy (1990–2024), International Journal of Cultural Policy, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2025.2583906

initiatives generating measurable visibility, it fails to build the cultural infrastructure needed for genuinely bottom-up and sustained democratic engagement with the cultural life of communities.

Another problematic trend across Europe is the shrinking or irregular funding of participatory priorities, which may also shift rapidly and inconsistently. France offers one example: the recently enhanced focus on culture in rural areas includes a new *Culture Pass for all*, built on the example of the long-standing *Culture Pass* for young people. The new *Culture Pass for all* was previously tested in the Grand Est region and announced for the entire territory in 2026. However, its roll-out has not included additional funding[185], while the already exiting *Culture Pass* for 18-year-olds was reduced by 50%[186]. Sadly, the tendency to support participation and inclusion rhetorically against a backdrop of shrinking funding can be seen in other European countries, affected by recent funding cuts[187].

Addressing participation and citizen engagement through short-term, increasingly underfunded and narrow interventions does not build the reciprocal relationship and deeper mutual understanding between art and society that are probably most needed to prevent backlash and reduce artists' fear of their own audiences. As ENCC, the European Network of Cultural Centres, reports, inclusion itself creates new forms of exposure: when socio-cultural centres give marginalised groups greater visibility, participants may also face backlash, stigma, community rejection or even violence[188]. This points to a wider trend in which participation policies must address not only access, but also safety, structural discrimination and emerging confrontation, especially in contexts shaped by far-right and autocratic pressures.

---

[185]Ministère de la Culture (2026) Plan Culture et Ruralité: la ministre de la Culture, Rachida Dati, annonce la généralisation de l'expérimentation du pass Culture pour tous. Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 15 January, https://www.culture.gouv.fr/presse/communiques-de-presse/plan-culture-et-ruralite-la-ministre-de-la-culture-rachida-dati-annonce-la-generalisation-de-l-experimentation-du-pass-culture-pour-tous, last seen 5 September 2026.

[186]Creatives Unite Newsroom (2025) 'French Government Cuts Youth Culture Pass Funding by 50%', *Creatives Unite*, 4 March. Available at: https://creativesunite.eu/article/french-government-cuts-youth-culture-pass-funding-by, last seen 5 September 2026.

[187]Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.

[188]Kasten, J. (2025) 'Aiming for meaningful participation sustainably', *European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC)*, 30 December, https://encc.eu/articles/aiming-for-meaningful-participation-sustainably, last seen 5 September 2026.

The current reality, therefore, is that artists and cultural institutions have been encouraged for years to engage wider and more diverse publics and, in many cases, have succeeded in doing so. Yet this expanded social role has not always been accompanied by the tools needed to hold such complexity, and while art no longer speaks only to a narrow circle, it increasingly finds itself in the middle of society, exposed to its conflicts, sensitivities and polarised expectations. Artists and institutions are often expected to bring different perspectives into the same space, but without sufficient time, mediation, trust, protection or shared methods for working through disagreement. Digital technologies intensify this problem: what might once have been tested, discussed or risked within a smaller context can now be extracted, circulated and judged publicly, often without the original context, intention or nuance.

All this is unfolding in the context of expanding regulation related to safety, environmental sustainability, privacy, access and rights. In most cases, these regulations signal policy progress, but it needs to be recognised that they can also appear as additional constraints on the arts' capacity to experiment, test ideas and exercise creative autonomy. As the study by the European Festivals Association points out, in many cities a growing body of regulations — including zoning laws that require every event to be embedded within an approved urban plan, as well as sustainability rules — compels festival organisers to rethink concepts of spontaneity and improvisation: '*Rules are necessary to protect residents' wellbeing and uphold environmental standards. However, they can also constrain the qualities that make festivals dynamic and meaningful*'[189].

These pressures intensify the trend of growing self-censorship within the arts field, which, as the Freemuse report pointed out in 2025, may soon make censorship itself less necessary[190]. According to our survey, the most commonly reported form of self-censorship was *adapting projects to fit funding criteria*, selected by 60% of respondents. Other frequently selected forms included avoiding public criticism of institutions, funders or authorities (37.5%), refraining from addressing certain topics or themes (35%), and avoiding the expression of personal views (30%)[191]. Not every decision not to say something is understood as self-censorship. Cultural workers make choices based on respect for audiences and care for vulnerable groups and revise

[189]European Festivals Association 2025, Festivals in Context: The Role of the Arts in the Local Cultural Policy, pp. 6.

[190]Freemuse 2025, The State of Artistic Freedom 2025, p. 10.

[191]The question was formulated as follows: What are the most common forms of self-censorship in your context, if any? Please choose all that apply'

work all the time. But self-censorship begins where such judgement is primarily shaped by fear: fear of losing funding, being attacked, misunderstood or 'cancelled', damaging an institution, or losing the means to continue working.

Collective resilience

At the same time, the picture across Europe is more complex than a story of growing self-censorship alone. Recent pressures on artistic freedom have also generated visible mobilisation, collective resilience and acts of resistance. Cultural workers have responded to funding cuts, politicised appointments, and attacks on institutional independence. In Slovakia, personal attacks by the Ministry of Culture on individuals in the arts and culture sector, combined with major organisational changes, extensive interference in the functioning of cultural institutions, and the politicisation of the Slovak Arts Council, prompted the launch of the Slovak Culture Strike,[192] and later convening an international conference by Open Culture! leading to the Bratislava Declaration for Artistic Freedom, which called for a European Artistic Freedom Act[193]. In Lithuania, the appointment of a controversial culture minister sparked civic movement the Culture Assembly (Kultūros asamblėja) and mass protests under the slogan 'We Are Culture'[194], while in Prague thousands mobilised against a right-wing initiative seen as threatening public broadcasting independence[195]. Resistance of the cultural sector is shown all across Europe, in various forms.

Artistic freedom is understood in practice as a collective concern, not only a matter of individual vulnerability. As pressures become more systemic, the response also needs to become more organised: through solidarity, networks, shared strategies and public mobilisation. However, as one survey respondent observed, solidarity often emerges *despite* existing policy and funding structures rather than *because of* them, pointing to the negative '*trickle-down effect*' of funding practices across the entire working ecosystem. Another respondent similarly suggested that precarity and the dominance

[192]Eckenhaussen, S. (2025) 'The Slovak Culture Strike: An interview with the Open Culture! team', *Creative Reset*, Institute of Network Cultures, 15 January, https://networkcultures.org/ourcreativereset/2025/01/15/the-slovak-culture-strike/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[193]Open Culture! Platform (2025) *The Bratislava Declaration*. Available at: https://platformaok.sk/bratislava-declaration

[194]Kultūros asamblėja (2026) 'What is happening in Lithuania?', last updated 21 May, https://kulturosasambleja.lt/info-in-english, last seen 5 September 2026.

[195]Deutsche Welle (2026) 'Czechia: Thousands march in support of public media funding', 22 June. https://www.dw.com/en/czechia-thousands-march-in-support-of-public-media-funding/a-77650608, last seen 5 September 2026.

of financial considerations distort both fairness and solidarity within the cultural sector. They reflected that a lack of transparency around selection criteria, artistic priorities and decision-making creates unequal relationships between workers, employers and institutions, leaving scope for manipulation and the exploitation of weaker parties. Under such conditions, actors may be encouraged to prioritise protecting their own economic position at the expense of artistic quality, mutual respect and collective purpose.

The persistent problem of unfair practices — both between workers and institutions and among cultural workers themselves — also emerged clearly from the survey. Almost 63% of respondents disagreed that current working practices among arts professionals are fair, while 59% disagreed that practices between workers and employers in the cultural sector are fair[196].

When asked which measures would most improve working conditions, respondents primarily identified interventions situated beyond individual professional relationships and within the wider support system. Sixty-six per cent selected more public funding for the cultural sector, 45% better social protection, 31% more sustainable and equitable organisational and business models, and 27% stronger collective bargaining and worker representation. Only 15% selected the adoption of fair-practice codes and ethical standards as one of the measures that would do most to improve working conditions[197]. This suggests that the sector understands precarity in the sector not as a problem of individual conduct or insufficient ethical guidance, but as a structural consequence of scarcity, insecurity and unequal bargaining power.

Collective resilience in the face of threats to artistic freedom can only be built on a resilient cultural sector. Symbolic recognition of artistic freedom loses much of its force when it is not matched by structural change. The question, then, is what is actually happening at the policy level.

Policy landscape: shifts, advancements, deadlocks

The statement that 'art is free' is not new to the official discourse of cultural policy. Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitutions of all EU Member States, and most also protect artistic freedom through constitutional provisions or dedicated

[196]The questions were formulated as follows: 'Do you agree that current working practices among arts professionals are fair?' and 'Do you agree that current working practices between workers and employers in the cultural sector are fair?'

[197]The question was formulated as follows: 'What would do most to improve working conditions in the cultural sector? Please choose up to three'.

legislation. What is more significant today is that several cultural policy agendas are asking in more concrete terms what protection means in practice.

Artistic freedom is framed as a democratic condition, a basis for public funding, and a responsibility of the state. Austria's *Federal Cultural Policy Guidelines* (2024), for example, define '*the freedom of art*' as '*a cornerstone of democracy*' and '*the starting point for its public funding*'[198]. In Belgium (French-speaking Community), culture is recognised as '*essential to democratic life*', with artistic freedom affirmed as one of the '*fundamental principles at the core of democratic culture*'[199].

A common narrative is emerging around a difficult balance: the state must support the arts while refraining from content interference. Austria's guidelines state that '*arts and cultural policy should not interfere with programs, but rather guarantee the free development of art and culture*'[200]. The Flemish *Strategic Vision Paper: Arts and Cultural Heritage in Flanders 2026–2030* makes the same responsibility explicit: '*A democratic community presupposes an autonomous cultural sector. At the same time, this autonomy requires active support from public structures. Cultural policy has the duty to guarantee and protect the autonomy and artistic freedom of the Arts and cultural heritage sector*'[201].

Yet the state also defines the limits of the freedom it funds. Germany's Coalition Agreement, *Responsibility for Germany*, states: '*Art and culture are free. Supporting them is a public responsibility that the federal government, the Länder, and municipalities must fulfil together, even in economically difficult times*'. It also clarifies that '*freedom of art requires that the state must not impose content-related requirements on art*', while setting boundaries for public support: '*We will not fund projects and initiatives that pursue antisemitic, racist, or other inhumane objectives. We will ensure this through legally secure funding conditions, awareness-raising, and personal responsibility*'[202].

---

[198]Federal Ministry of Arts and Culture 2024, Austria, *Federal Cultural Policy Guidelines*, p. 13.

[199]Parlement de la Communauté française (2024) *Déclaration de politique communautaire 2024–2029: Avoir le courage de changer pour que l'avenir s'éclaire*. 16 July, p. 61.

[200]Federal Ministry of Arts and Culture 2024, Austria, *Federal Cultural Policy Guidelines*, p. 13.

[201]De Vlaamse overheid 2026, Strategische Visienota Kunsten en Cultureel Erfgoed (2026-2030), p. 10.

[202]CDU, CSU und SPD (2025) *Verantwortung für Deutschland: Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD*. Berlin: CDU, CSU und SPD, p. 85.

Another notable feature is the recognition that cultural policy alone cannot protect artistic freedom if criminal law, administrative decisions or arbitrary cancellations restrict artistic creation. Spain's *Cultural Rights Plan* (2025), for instance, proposes reform of Criminal Code provisions affecting freedom of expression and artistic creation. Its measure on the 'Defence of artistic freedom' also commits the Ministry to addressing cases of direct censorship and arbitrary cancellations[203].

Several policy documents also acknowledge that the threat no longer comes only from direct censorship. It is recognised that artistic freedom is increasingly shaped by '*activist, ideological and even political pressures*'[204], by social media dynamics in which cultural moments are '*ripped from context and judged in real time*'[205], and by the erosion of a *'climate of trust'*[206]. Therefore, freedom is no longer understood simply as the absence of interference; it requires conditions in which artists and institutions can exercise judgement, hold complexity and resist the loudest voices. The Flemish *Strategic Vision Paper* puts this clearly: '*Uncomfortable narratives are [...] avoided or neutralised by stripping them of context. Or there is overcompensation through moralizing framing that replaces research. The core challenge is therefore not only to protect freedom in principle, but concretely to strengthen all actors. The arts and cultural heritage must be able to act in freedom and deal correctly with context, conflict, and polyphony, without having to bow to the loudest voices*'[207].

At EU level, the current picture is more constrained. Since the EU does not have exclusive competence in cultural policy, its approach is strongest in symbolic recognition, agenda-setting and awareness-raising, while concrete, binding instruments remain more limited. The *Culture Compass*, adopted in November 2025, places artistic freedom high among EU cultural policy priorities and recognises the complexity of the challenges undermining it. This is striking when compared with previous EU cultural frameworks — the *New European Agenda for Culture* (2018) and the *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World* (2007) — neither of which

[203]Ministry of Culture of Spain (2025) *Cultural Rights Plan 2025–2027*. Madrid: Ministry of Culture, https://culturepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Spain-Cultural-Rights-Plan-2025-2027.pdf, p. 23

[204]Parlement de la Communauté française (2024) *Déclaration de politique communautaire 2024–2029: Avoir le courage de changer pour que l'avenir s'éclaire*. 16 July, p. 61.

[205]De Vlaamse overheid 2026, Strategische Visienota Kunsten en Cultureel Erfgoed (2026-2030), p. 13.

[206]Parlement de la Communauté française (2024) *Déclaration de politique communautaire 2024–2029: Avoir le courage de changer pour que l'avenir s'éclaire*. 16 July, p. 61.

[207]De Vlaamse overheid 2026, Strategische Visienota Kunsten en Cultureel Erfgoed (2026-2030), p. 14.

mentioned artistic freedom. Yet the practical measures proposed by the Culture Compass remain both too broad and too specific: documenting and monitoring the state of artistic freedom, offering 'safe havens' for artists at risk and displaced artists, and help *'safeguard artistic freedom through current and future EU policies and programmes, notably in the proposed future AgoraEU'*[208].

AgoraEU, indeed, may offer a tangible opening: in the Commission's proposal for regulation, artistic freedom is recognised, even if not always explicitly named, as part of the democratic and civic rights architecture of the programme. Safeguarding artistic freedom now appears among the specific objectives of the programme, as proposed by the Commission, which has not been the case under Creative Europe. The Commission proposal also states that implementation of the culture-specific objective must take place with '*full respect for artistic freedom and the diversity of cultural expressions*'[209]. The unresolved question is how a funding programme can significantly enhance artistic freedom in practice: as a financial instrument enabling creative freedom through trust-based support or specific focus on experimentation; a conditionality tool requiring beneficiaries and governments to respect it (who would then lose access to the EU money if artistic freedom is infringed and how?); or merely another programme in which freedom is affirmed on paper without being structurally secured.

The Joint Declaration *Europe for Culture — Culture for Europe*, signed by the EU institutions in June 2026, is another important symbolic marker. It treats artistic freedom as a top priority ('freedom' is listed first out of its 12 principles) and commits to protecting the independence of cultural institutions and safeguarding artists from 'censorship, intimidation and undue interference'[210]. Yet the formulation in the Joint Declaration still largely reflects a defensive understanding of freedom: protection once interference occurs, saying less about the enabling conditions, infrastructures and capacities needed for freedom to be exercised before it is constrained — before censorship, intimidation or undue interference actually take place.

---

[208]European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[209]European Commission (2025) *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818*. COM(2025) 550 final, p. 27.

[210]Council of the European Union 2026, Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture - Culture for Europe" - Approval.

A more ambitious and targeted action could elevate artistic freedom on policy agendas of the EU and member states. Earlier, in March 2025, Nela Riehl, Chair of the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee, called for legislation similar to the European Media Freedom Act, but dedicated to artistic freedom[211]. The cultural sector, mobilised in the international movement *Resistance Now Together*, has also been promoting this idea, presenting such an Act as a way to secure '*an environment in which artists and cultural workers can operate without fear of censorship or retaliation and contribute to a democratic, diverse, and resilient Europe*'[212].

Amid this unprecedented recognition of both the value of artistic freedom and its deteriorating condition, the challenge now is to move from the protection of artistic freedom as a principle to the activation of artistic freedom as a daily practice. How can we ensure that artistic freedom remains enshrined in law while also creating the conditions in which it can be exercised, tested and renewed? How can we avoid box-ticking achievements that overlook the conditions needed to make creative freedom possible?

For instance, if a European Artistic Freedom Act ever becomes a reality, will cultural policies stop hyper-instrumentalising culture, provide foundational support versus fragmented grants, and build relationships with the arts based on trust? Will culture truly be placed at the heart of policymaking and treated as an autonomous and equal player, shielded from power dominance and given control and agency in policies that affect it, such as AI and digitalisation? Will institutions recognise their role in providing the space and governance needed for artistic risk?

One may say: but these issues do not fall within the remit of a possible dedicated Artistic Freedom Act. Perhaps not, but without these tensions being resolved, there can hardly be any real artistic freedom.

Freedom for what?

The debate on artistic freedom often starts too late. It begins with censorship or intimidation, occurring when the deeper conditions of freedom may already have eroded. Before looking at those conditions, it is essential to ask a more fundamental

[211]European Parliament, 2025. Plenary debate on 31 March 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/debate-details.html?date=20250331&detailBy=date, last seen 5 September 2026.

[212]Resistance Now Together (2025) *Why Europe needs a European Artistic Freedom Act*, https://cultureactioneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Why-Europe-Needs-a-European-Artistic-Freedom-Act.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

question: how do we imagine a world in which artistic freedom actually thrives? What role do we trust artists to play when freedom is not merely defended against attack, but actively enabled?

In current political discourse, at both EU and national levels, there is a growing recognition of culture as foundational: part of life, a public good, and an integral element of human civilisation. In principle, this should imply that culture is recognised for its own worth and that those who create it enjoy autonomy and freedom. Yet this new paradigm is emerging in a time of overlapping crises and threats — to peace, stability, democracy and Europe's global positioning. As a result, the idea of culture as foundational often intersects with the expectation that culture should preserve and sustain what is already there: values, democracy, identities, unity and mental wellbeing, all seen as necessary for resilient societies able to withstand crises and navigate threats. The AgoraEU discourse, for instance, explicitly links culture and civil society organisations to the protection, defence, preservation and sustaining of European values.

This is where something essential risks being overlooked — artists' capacity to question, imagine, rethink and rebuild these very foundations. As Timothy Snyder writes in *On Freedom*: '*A human intelligence that asks "why" before it asks "how", that is directed towards freedom rather than utility, is not rational so much as reasonable. It does not waste its energy rationalising the existing state of affairs or its own weakness. It reasons, instead, with the help of values and others, towards better futures*'[213]. Artistic freedom cannot be reduced to helping society preserve what it already knows. Its deeper democratic value lies in enabling artists to ask 'why', rather than remaining busy with rationalising the status quo.

The question, then, is whether policymakers, when talking about artistic freedom, trust artists to move beyond the preservation of the existing order, to reject the '*politics of inevitability*'[214], and ignite their radical imagination.

For example, as survey responses highlight and as we will further explore in the next chapter, the cultural sector feels engaged with the idea of Europe, but critically engaged. It does not understand its role as helping Europe preserve the status quo, but as imagining new futures that are plural, diverse, courageous and self-critical. For this kind of radical imagination, artists need genuine freedom, space for risk and an embrace of uncertainty. One respondent challenged the idea of confining culture to

[213]Snyder, T. (2024) On Freedom. London: The Bodley Head, p. 99

[214]Ibid, p.152.

nurturing belonging to a '*shared European space*' as a predefined concept, and instead pointed to the power of '*culture to disrupt and disturb our ideas of what we think as "normal"*'. Another stressed that people can only truly belong to something when they have agency in creating it: '*A soul that is not creating, providing, or evolving cannot truly embody these values, simply because they are not participating in their realisation. Ultimately, the European project is about co-creation — it is a living process we build together*'.

The cultural sector, therefore, does not see its role as merely preserving what already exists. It understands itself as an active co-creator and, at times, as a leader in imagining and writing the future. Imagination, unpredictability, and the courage to question, and to answer, are among the primary freedoms of artists.

If policymakers understand artistic freedom in this way, can its understanding be reduced to a condition in which formal barriers are removed? Is artistic freedom the same as political trust in artists' imaginative capacity: their ability to unsettle inherited assumptions, test new possibilities and help society think beyond what currently appears inevitable?

Freedom infrastructures

Artistic freedom in Europe is shifting from a question of legal principle to a question of infrastructures — foundations making freedom possible, not simply protected. Some of these foundations are already in place. Artistic freedom is anchored in EU law: the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000) is the most explicit EU-level text recognising artistic freedom. Article 13 states: '*The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected*'. This provision offers a legal reference point for protecting artists from undue interference when EU law is at play[215].

A renewed legal declaration of artistic freedom, for instance, in the form of a European Artistic Freedom Act, could strengthen the issue politically and move it beyond long-standing symbolic recognition — a recognition that has clearly not shielded artistic freedom from the pressures it faces today.

One of the values of such an Act would lie in clarifying the contemporary meaning, scope and purpose of artistic freedom: what is being defended, for whom, and against which forms of pressure. Artistic freedom should be understood as more than the absence of censorship or '*undue interference*'. It is also a capacity of artists and

[215]Cited in: Pearle* - Live Performance Europe, European Festivals Association 2025, Brussels, *The Ultimate Cookbook for Cultural Managers — The Artistic Freedom Regulatory Framework in the EU*, p. 20.

cultural workers to navigate changing realities, take risks, experiment, resist pressure and continue working when new, old or still-unidentified forms of interference arise. This requires infrastructures that sustain freedom in practice, including strategic and long-term support for the cultural sector, decent working conditions, time for experimentation, and resilience against political, economic, social and digital pressure.

This does not mean that artistic freedom should become shorthand for good cultural policy in general, or that a dedicated Artistic Freedom Act could solve every structural problem facing the cultural sector. But neither can these issues be neatly separated. Funding, working conditions, governance, education or participation are not necessarily artistic freedom issues in themselves; but they become relevant to artistic freedom when the way they are designed or deteriorate systematically reduces artists' capacity to create, take risks, experiment, speak up and take autonomous artistic decisions. A dedicated Act is therefore needed to make the protection of artistic freedom sharper: to define responsibilities, establish safeguards and provide mechanisms for intervention when freedom is directly threatened. But such an instrument must reside within a wider cultural policy committed to creating the *conditions* in which freedom can actually be exercised. Otherwise, we risk entering a vicious circle: recognising that artistic freedom is deteriorating, strengthening its recognition in principle while leaving the conditions behind its deterioration untouched, and then returning a few years later to document its further decline.

A future-proof approach to artistic freedom must therefore widen the field of attention. Direct government censorship remains a serious threat, but artistic freedom is also shaped by cultural rights, unequal access, social dynamics and the behaviour of digital platforms. Alongside monitoring censorship by governments, institutions or audiences, methodologies should also map access to artistic expression: who has access to education, funding, visibility and platforms, and who is excluded before their work becomes visible enough to be contested or censored.

Investigating self-censorship is urgent too. As it becomes clear from many studies, self-censorship might be one of the most powerful barriers to artistic freedom and clearest manifestations of its erosion in today's Europe, yet it remains difficult to define and measure. A European Artistic Freedom Act should therefore help establish a clearer shared understanding of self-censorship: how it differs from artistic judgement, care or responsibility; what forms it takes; and which conditions make it more likely to occur.

This understanding will need to evolve as new contexts and pressures emerge. As Sverre Pedersen, Director of Freemuse, explained: '*Self-censorship is hidden, and nobody is proud of censoring themselves. You don't go to social media or the press*

and say, "I have to self-censor". We are therefore totally dependent on creating safe spaces where people can share their experiences. When you create these safe rooms, you can gather a great deal of information on a personal level, which makes it possible to develop strategies to confront these threats'[216].

Bring the 'wild punk' back

An essential pathway for strengthening artistic freedom lies beyond law and monitoring: it is the creation of infrastructures for artistic risk. One interviewee captured this through a distinction between subsidised culture, market culture and a third space they called '*wild punk*'. Market culture, they argued, tends to bend towards target groups, visibility, marketing logic and 'happy ends'. Subsidised culture depends on the state, its criteria and lines of recognition. What is often missing is a space in which artists can step outside both market demand and funding frameworks: a space where work does not have to be immediately legible, useful, audience-oriented, measurable or institutionally acceptable.

As the interviewee put it: '*Where's the wild punk, and how could we manage to have infrastructures so that the wild punk can flourish?*' For 'wild punk' to emerge, artists and art communities need to be brave, strong and resilient. There is also a need to recognise that artistic risk is socially unequal: without material support, only those who already possess economic, social or symbolic security can afford to be truly defiant: '*In the end, only white guys can afford to make punk*', as the interview concluded.

Strengthening artistic freedom therefore requires more than legal guarantees and protections when it is attacked. It also requires infrastructures that allow the arts to be risky, excessive, unresolved, unpopular, slow, or simply unprofitable. This could include social security for artists, artist-run spaces, independent production infrastructures, residencies without output pressure, basic-income schemes, low-threshold grants, protection for non-institutional practice, and public spaces where experimentation does not have to justify itself through audience growth or immediate social impact. The 'wild punk' question points to a blind spot in many current artistic freedom agendas: the conditions in which freedom can take form before we need to defend it.

[216]Polivtseva, E. (2026) 'Artistic freedom in Europe: New law alone won't make arts free', *Culture Policy Room*, 12 February, https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/artistic-freedom-in-europe-new-law-alone-wont-make-arts-free, last seen 5 September 2026.

Freedom as a collective good and a collective responsibility

Another essential dimension of strengthening artistic freedom is the relationship between art and society. Social polarisation is not only surrounding the cultural sector; it is also seeping into it, installing taboos, demonising friction and controversy, and weakening the arts as a space where antagonism, plurality and disagreement can be held. If we care about the resilience of societies, we need to relearn how to live with difference. The arts can play a crucial role here, but only if cultural participation is understood in democratic terms: not as the assimilation of people into a predefined cultural offer, but as a long-term practice of co-creation, mediation and shared cultural learning.

This means taking participation much more seriously than symbolic commitments to 'culture for all'. Both artists and audiences need tools, time and spaces to encounter disagreement without turning it immediately into catastrophe. They also need the right to dislike, criticise and refuse — but in ways that do not destroy the conditions for artistic risk. As much as the cultural sector needs 'safe spaces', a concept that emerged strongly in the 2025 Turin State of Culture workshop, it also needs 'brave spaces': spaces where plurality, discomfort and conflict can be worked through rather than avoided[217]. As Snyder writes, '*Freedom is not us against the world; but us with the world, knowing it and changing it*[218]'.

Artistic freedom is therefore not only the destination of cultural participation; it is also one of its conditions. As Sverre Pedersen, Freemuse Director, reflected: '*The audience needs to know that the artist is honest. When the audience realise that the artist is self-censoring because bread and butter is more important than actually the creation, the audience will lose their trust and confidence with the arts and the artist*'[219]. This points to a fragile triangle: artists need the freedom to be honest, audiences need the capacity to receive that honesty, and institutions need to host the encounter between the two.

At present, this solidarity triangle often appears fragile. Artists feel growing pressure to self-censor; institutions may struggle to accommodate artists' free expression; and

---

[217]Kasten, J. (2025) 'Aiming for meaningful participation sustainably', *European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC)*, 30 December, https://encc.eu/articles/aiming-for-meaningful-participation-sustainably, last seen 5 September 2026.

[218]Snyder, T. (2024) On Freedom. London: The Bodley Head, p. 169

[219]Polivtseva, E. (2026) 'Artistic freedom in Europe: New law alone won't make arts free', *Culture Policy Room*, 12 February, https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/artistic-freedom-in-europe-new-law-alone-wont-make-arts-free, last seen 5 September 2026.

audiences may not fully recognise that artistic freedom is actually under strain. This gap is visible in the statistics: according to the European Commission' 2025 Eurobarometer, 77% of Europeans believe that artists can freely express their ideas and opinions, with even higher figures in Sweden (91%), the Netherlands (87%) and Germany (82%)[220]. Yet, as discussed above, the arts field — in these and other European countries — reports a much more fragile reality, marked by self-censorship, backlash, and funding pressure. If the public assumes that artistic freedom is already secure, they may not understand why artists need solidarity when they take risks.

But, as Snyder argues, freedom is collective; its real life in the world depends on being treated as both a collective good and a collective responsibility. In challenging times, institutional survival often outweighs individual expression, yet individual expression, taken collectively, is one of the foundations of freedom itself. Both institutions and artists therefore need to recognise their specific role in the 'freedom exercise' and remember that, as the Freemuse report highlights through numerous examples, '*courage is contagious*'[221].

Even when individual artists feel supported enough to take risks or pursue their artistic virtues without calculating the consequences, pressure may intensify. Resistance does not necessarily reduce pressure; it can also increase it. This is why collective resilience will be needed, even — and especially — if an Artistic Freedom Act ever sees the light. Networks, solidarity mechanisms, safety nets, spaces for dialogue and resource sharing, collective strategies for legal protection, tools for media and social media response, and community support are all essential, especially for individual artists and small organisations.

Can we commit to freedom?

Freedom also requires a collective commitment and a collective exercise of it. As Snyder reflects, 'Like freedom in general, freedom of speech requires declarations made by individuals and accommodations made by some people to others.[...] Without solidarity, without protection of free speakers and without the support of institutions that enable listening, freedom of speech (like freedom itself) becomes an empty slogan. Without solidarity, freedom of speech becomes a parody of itself [...]'[222].

---

[220]European Commission (2025) *Special Eurobarometer 562: Europeans' attitudes towards culture*. Brussels: European Commission, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3364, last seen 5 September 2026.

[221]Freemuse 2026, The State of Artistic Freedom 2026, p 12.

[222]Snyder, T. (2024) On Freedom. London: The Bodley Head, p. 196

So, what can the cultural sector do to make sure freedom, once guaranteed by law and provided through support mechanisms, does not become an empty slogan? As Pearle*'s report on artistic freedom suggests, 'Cultural organisations should adopt a clear artistic freedom policy affirming their commitment to presenting diverse views and fostering public debate. When controversy arises, a clear crisis-response plan is essential'[223]. Such policies indeed matter because they make freedom less dependent on improvisation in moments of fear and help institutions know in advance what they stand for, how they will deal with controversy if it arises.

But the question goes deeper than crisis management, and even deeper than solidarity. If artistic freedom is collective, it also becomes a professional and ethical question for the arts field itself. If artistic freedom anyway does not exist without being enacted, can it be understood as part of artistic responsibility — not merely as something artists need, but as something they actively practise? Are honesty and courage constitutive virtues for artists, in the same way that truthfulness is for journalists, impartiality for judges, or care for doctors?

Once legal and material protections are in place, will artists use them? Will institutions host the controversy that freedom produces? Will cultural organisations resist market pressure, social antagonism and peer surveillance when these pressures make freedom uncomfortable? Artistic freedom needs law, but it also needs spaces, practices and institutions willing to hold honesty, plurality and disagreement.

[223]Pearle* - Live Performance Europe, European Festivals Association 2025, Brussels, *The Ultimate Cookbook for Cultural Managers — The Artistic Freedom Regulatory Framework in the EU*, p. 30.

Chapter 4: Europe: A Continent of Culture?

The global order is diagnosed with a state of collapse[224]. International law is applied selectively; economic interdependence is increasingly weaponised; and democracy is weakening as a shared normative model. Multilateral institutions are becoming increasingly paralysed, while peace itself has grown more precarious, with the number of armed conflicts reaching its highest level since the founding of the United Nations[225]. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israel's war in Gaza, and the United States' retreat from multilateralism have been among the manifestations and drivers of the continuing breakdown of an international order that, although fragile and deeply unequal, appeared relatively stable until only a few years ago.

In this context, the EU is seeking to rethink and strengthen its global position. In her 2025 State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen opened with the declaration that '*Europe is in a fight*': a fight for peace, liberty, democracy, independence and a better future. The emerging order was presented as deeply challenging and unpredictable: '*So, yes, Europe must fight. For its place in a world in which many major powers are either ambivalent or openly hostile to Europe*'[226]. The EU is consequently developing strategies centred on economic competitiveness, strategic autonomy, digital sovereignty and military self-sufficiency. In this search for greater freedom and consolidated agency in global affairs, the Commission entitled its 2026 Work Programme *Europe's Independence Moment*[227].

Amid this existential search for a new global role, the EU has also begun to reposition culture, at least rhetorically, as a strategic asset for navigating global challenges. The new *Culture Compass for Europe* proclaims Europe a '*leader in culture and creativity*',

---

[224]Mafalda Dâmaso (2026) Updating the European Union's Strategy for International Cultural Relations in a time of geopolitical turmoil: international EU film policy and the future of EU–Global South relations, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 32:5, 724-742, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2026.2661633

[225] Guterres, A. (2026) 'Secretary-General's remarks to the United Nations Security Council on upholding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and strengthening the UN-centred international system', 26 May. New York: United Nations, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-05-26/secretary-generals-remarks-the-united-nations-security-council-upholding-the-purposes-and-principles-of-the-un-charter-and-strengthening-the-un-centred-international, last seen 5 September 2026.

[226]von der Leyen, U. (2025) '2025 State of the Union Address', speech to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 10 September. European Commission, SPEECH/25/2053, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_25_2053, last seen 5 September 2026.

[227] European Commission (2025) *Commission work programme 2026: Europe's Independence Moment.* COM(2025) 870 final, 21 October. Strasbourg: European Commission.

while reintroducing the language of '*soft power*' into the EU cultural policy discourse. The Compass acknowledges that '*culture's strategic importance for Europe is underestimated and yet to be fully valorised*'[228]. One response to this gap is intended to be a new strategy for international cultural relations, scheduled for adoption in 2027.

Europe is not the only actor seeking to mobilise culture in order to shape its agency, legitimacy and voice within the emerging world order. Researchers have observed that soft power is now being used particularly strategically by illiberal actors seeking to gain the trust of foreign audiences[229]. For example, China and Russia are intensifying their efforts to engage publics worldwide through culture, adopting new strategies and increasing investment in the promotion of their image and narratives[230].

Meanwhile, the United States, long regarded as a global leader in soft power, dismantled USAID as an independent development agency and, under Donald Trump's second administration, announced its renewed withdrawal from UNESCO[231]. Yet this retreat from institutional cultural and development cooperation did not amount to an abandonment of cultural influence. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio went so far as to foreground culture in his speech at the Munich Security Conference in early 2026. Before turning to questions of defence, he emphasised that first, it is essential to define what is there to be defended, '*because armies do not fight for abstractions*'. One of those existential pillars appeared to be the shared culture of 'Western civilisation', invoking Shakespeare, Mozart, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones[232].

---

[228] European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

[229] Mafalda Dâmaso (2026) Updating the European Union's Strategy for International Cultural Relations in a time of geopolitical turmoil: international EU film policy and the future of EU–Global South relations, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 32:5, 724-742, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2026.2661633.

[230] Culture Action Europe (2025) *Towards the Culture Compass: A Sector Blueprint*. Discussion paper, p. 30. https://cultureactioneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Towards-the-Culture-Compass-A-Sector-Blueprint.pdf, last seen 5 September 2025.

[231] Mafalda Dâmaso (2026) Updating the European Union's Strategy for International Cultural Relations in a time of geopolitical turmoil: international EU film policy and the future of EU–Global South relations, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 32:5, 724-742, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2026.2661633.

[232] U.S. Department of State (2026) 'Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference', remarks, Munich, 14 February, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference, last seen 5 September 2026.

International cultural events have likewise continued to serve as instruments in geopolitical competition. By a presidential decree in February 2025, Russia revived the *Intervision*, a song contest first staged in Czechoslovakia in 1965, subsequently held in Poland, and largely dormant after 1980. The 2025 edition was widely framed, and functioned, as a 'cultural counterweight' to Eurovision and its association with liberal values and LGBTQ+-inclusive culture[233]. Meanwhile, Eurovision is seeking to extend its reach into Asia by hosting the first Eurovision Song Contest Asia in Bangkok in November 2026.

Such events do more than project a country's culture or identity. They also compete for the authority to shape the platforms through which global culture is presented and global audiences are addressed. Culture is being rediscovered as an instrument of global power, but how does it play out in practice?

The Shrinking Space of Global Cultural Collaboration

These and many other attempts to use culture as an instrument, a weapon or a space for translational exchange are not unfolding smoothly. The conditions under which 'cultural diplomats' and international cultural actors have traditionally operated are changing rapidly. It has become increasingly evident that state-led cultural diplomacy, at least in its conventional form, is no longer functioning as it once did.

Earlier this year, the limitations of nation-branding through art, often disguised by claims that art is neutral and apolitical, became particularly visible. At the Venice Biennale, protests and institutional tensions intensified around the participation of Russia and Israel. The five-member jury announced that it would not award prizes to artists representing countries whose leaders were facing charges before the International Criminal Court, before resigning collectively[234]. Workers went on strike on the eve of the opening for the first time in the event's history, and several national pavilions closed in solidarity. The European Commission subsequently withdrew its €2

[233] Morton, E. (2025) 'Intervision Song Contest: why Russia is reviving its "cultural counterweight" to Eurovision', *The Guardian*, 5 September, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/sep/05/intervision-song-contest-why-russia-is-reviving-its-cultural-counterweight-to-eurovision, last seen 5 September 2026.

[234] Butt, Z., Dyangani Ose, E., Farkas, S., Kuzma, M. and Zapperi, G. (2026) 'Statement of intention by the International Jury of the 61st International Art Exhibition "In Minor Keys" of La Biennale di Venezia', *e-flux Notes*, 23 April, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/6783485/statement-of-intention-by-the-international-jury-of-the-61st-international-art-exhibition-in-minor-keys-of-la-biennale-di-venezia, last seen 5 September 2026.

million grant to the Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia due to Russia's return to the Biennale[235].

At the 2026 Eurovision Song Contest, Israel's participation similarly triggered protests, boycott campaigns, withdrawals, criticism from broadcasters, artists and former contestants, and demonstrations in the host city[236]. The controversy was not new: the 2024 and 2025 editions had already been heavily shaped by debates around Israel's participation. In 2026, geopolitical tensions extended from public protest and artists' debates to decisions by participating broadcasters about whether to take part at all: five countries withdrew from the contest altogether.

These examples show that there is a little room for 'culture as dialogue' within nation-branding events that claim political neutrality while continuing to reproduce the logic of 'business as usual' amid war and breaches of international law. The model of state-led cultural diplomacy organised around national representation is under growing pressure in an increasingly fragmented world. The deeper problem, then, may lie not with cultural diplomacy itself, but with the model that has come to dominate it: one centred on national representation, carefully staged encounters and the projection of influence. The limits of this model should not be mistaken for the limits of culture's role in international relations. Rather, they invite us to reconsider what that role could become beyond nation-branding and soft power[237].

Bottom-up transnational cultural collaborations that are not led by governments are nevertheless also facing growing pressure. One of the fundamental changes is the erosion of any broadly shared global normative space, whether grounded in democracy, human rights or international law. It has consequently become more difficult for artists and cultural organisations to engage with contexts that seemed to be safe, legitimate or politically navigable only a few years ago.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index 2024* points to a persistent process of democratic backsliding that began around 2007 and shows little sign of reversal. The four years following the COVID-19 pandemic marked a particularly

---

[235] De Michele, S. (2026) 'Russia at Venice Biennale, Brussels cuts €2 million in EU funds: appeal planned', *Euronews*, 21 July, https://www.euronews.com/culture/2026/07/21/russia-at-venice-biennale-brussels-cuts-2-million-in-eu-funds-appeal-planned, last seen 5 September 2026.

[236] Momtaz, R. (ed.) (2026) 'Taking the Pulse: Was it Right to Boycott Eurovision?', *Strategic Europe*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 May, https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2026/05/taking-the-pulse-was-it-right-to-boycott-eurovision, last seen 5 September 2026.

[237] Polivtseva, E. (2026) 'After cultural diplomacy', *Culture Policy Room*, 30 June, https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/after-cultural-diplomacy, last seen 5 September 2026.

severe rollback of freedoms. According to the Index, more than one-third of the world's population now lives under authoritarian rule, and this proportion continues to grow[238]. Freedom of expression is also deteriorating globally. The Global Expression Score has fallen by five points over the past decade, while the number of people experiencing deepening repression substantially exceeds the number benefiting from improvements in their freedoms. Scores have sunk in 77 countries, and only 35 countries are now ranked as 'open'[239].

This, combined with the growing number of conflicts, creates an environment, in which the free circulation of ideas, values, people and artworks can no longer be taken for granted. Several interviewees report that internationalisation has become ethically and politically more difficult to navigate. Cultural organisations, arts institutions and educational bodies face increasingly complex questions about whether and how to cooperate with partners in countries where artistic freedom, academic freedom or institutional autonomy are compromised.

International work now requires far more than building cross-border partnerships, developing audiences and securing funding for mobility and co-productions. It increasingly demands geopolitical judgement, ethical positioning, risk assessment and concrete forms of protection for the people involved. Such protection may be legal, physical or psychological, particularly when trauma, political friction or security concerns emerge through cross-border encounters.

Cultural workers and organisations are therefore being compelled to assume new responsibilities on top of their existing work. As interviewees and survey respondents (through an open-question field) share, some choose to remain engaged in politically difficult contexts, but find themselves pressured to avoid certain subjects or refrain from expressing particular views. Others withdraw from partnerships altogether, especially when cooperation involves state-led or state-funded institutions. These challenges are compounded by the long-standing 'visa wall' continues to restrict the movement of artists from the Global South, as UNESCO's 2026 Report *Reshaping Policies for Creativity* also demonstrates[240].

---

[238]Economist Intelligence Unit (2025) Democracy Index 2024: What's wrong with representative democracy? London: Economist Intelligence Unit.

[239]Global Expression Report, 2025. The Global Expression Report 2025, https://www.globalexpressionreport.org/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[240] UNESCO 2026, Reshaping Policies for Creativity, p. .

At the same time, the cultural field across Europe reports a shrinking space of financial support for international collaboration. A Nordic Culture Fund report, drawing on interviews with sectoral stakeholders and a survey of the Fund's beneficiaries, identifies increasingly insufficient, irregular and fragmented support for global cultural cooperation. European cultural actors report that securing sustainable funding for cross-border projects has become extremely difficult, particularly when projects involve partners outside Europe. Funding for long-term and open-ended collaboration, without an immediate obligation to produce visible and measurable outputs, is described as especially rare[241].

A survey conducted by the Performing Arts Coalition on cross-border work in the performing arts reveals a similar picture. Some 78.4% of respondents (153 performing arts professionals) describe access to funding for cross-border collaboration as 'difficult' or 'very difficult', while only 5.3% regard it as 'easy'. Respondents describe a sharp contraction in opportunities for cross-border cooperation, even as the cultural sector's need and appetite for international engagement grow. Rising production and mobility costs, shrinking cultural budgets and intensifying competition mean that available grants often fall short of actual project costs. Access is further restricted by eligibility criteria linked to residence, legal or organisational status, age, career stage and institutional affiliation. Respondents working across Africa, Asia, South America, the Middle East, and other non-European contexts also highlight the scarcity of programmes supporting genuinely reciprocal global collaboration beyond conventional models of cultural diplomacy[242].

Cultural relations are also no longer shaped only by governments, artists or civil-society networks. As cultural consumption has moved online, digital platforms have become powerful gatekeepers of cross-border circulation. They increasingly determine which works global audiences encounter, in what order, under what conditions and through which categories.

A 2026 European Commission study on the discoverability of cultural content shows that cultural discovery combines deliberate search with algorithmically driven exposure. Even apparently autonomous decisions are influenced by what platforms choose to make visible first. Popularity bias tends to reinforce already dominant

[241] Polivtseva, E. (2026). Funding Culture for a Changing World: Learning from Globus. Nordic Culture Fund, p. 19.

[242] Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Cross-Border Collaborations in the Performing Arts, pp. 6—7.

content, while the scale and market power of global platforms can leave European authors and artists, and less widely circulated works underrepresented[243].

Platformisation does not, however, produce straightforward cultural homogenisation. As *The Economist* has observed, the enormous abundance of content made available through streaming platforms also allows audiences to express increasingly localised preferences. Netflix has invested heavily in highly local stories designed for domestic audiences, and produced more content in languages other than English for the first time in 2025. Music-streaming algorithms, too, do not always direct listeners towards a single global mainstream; they also lead them into niche, local and highly specialised cultural ecosystems[244].

Therefore, global popular culture continues to circulate widely, while digital abundance enables audiences to assert increasingly local and specific tastes. What remains underdeveloped, however, is the space between these two poles: the cross-border circulation and mutual discovery of niche, emerging and diverse forms that are neither products of the global mainstream nor primarily confined to their domestic markets. Platform economies appear far less effective at enabling transnational pollination among local, smaller and niche expressions.

In his 2024 book *Trust: Building the Cultural Commons*, Pascal Gielen suggests that culture may be 'one of the largest common-pool resources still available to us'[245]. Is this last shared space now also eroding? Is global culture becoming more fragmented under the combined pressure of opaque digital algorithms, increasingly rigid political and ideological alliances, tariff regimes, securitised borders and military coalitions?

Cultural relations are, in fact, still taking place and may even be intensifying. IETM's 2025 report *The New International: Against All Odds*, based on surveys, interviews and workshops with more than 200 people from the arts field, shows that art professionals continue to face both long-standing and emerging barriers to working

---

[243]European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Panteia, KEA European Affairs, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, DELab – University of Warsaw, Erasmus University Rotterdam, IDEA Consult, Clarke, M., Vroonhof, P., Byrne, C., Petrov, L., Le Gall, A., Antonucci, F., Albertelli, A., Rolando, E., Ranaivoson, H., Salganik, R., Wiratama, V., Afilipoaie, A., Hardy, W., Paliński, M., Rożynek, S., Berkers, P., Calkins, T., Wijngaarden, Y., Vuijlsteke, C., Valintelyte, E., Janssens, J., *Study on the discoverability of diverse European cultural content in the digital environment – Final report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/8868773

[244] The Economist (2026) 'Forget the World Cup. Culture is becoming more fragmented', *The Economist*, 11 June., https://www.economist.com/briefing/2026/06/11/forget-the-world-cup-culture-is-becoming-more-fragmented, last seen 5 September 2026.

[245] Gielen, P 2024, Trust. Building of the Cultural Commons, Valiz, Amsterdam.

internationally. Yet they do not respond by retreating into national markets and realities. On the contrary, they seek new ways to build solidarity, pursue globally relevant artistic inquiries, address shared challenges, strengthen relationships and trust, and preserve culture as a space for communication across differences[246].

In the context of global democratic decline, the central question is therefore how art can continue to transcend borders and function as a genuine global public good while resisting various pressures, from political, digital, and economic restrictions to environmental and security-related threats.

From Projection to Reciprocity — and Back?

How can the EU respond to a new geopolitical reality in which it is seeking greater global influence, autonomy and strategic independence? What might the new strategy for international cultural relations, promised for 2027, seek to achieve? And what paradigm could remain credible amid rapidly changing geopolitical pressures while reflecting the values and needs of Europe's cultural field?

Any new EU paradigm will need to navigate the continued coexistence of several established approaches: public diplomacy, soft power, global responsibility, reciprocal cultural relations, and, more recently, strategic autonomy and collective security. That is why before imagining a new paradigm, it is useful to trace how the EU's understanding of its international cultural role has evolved. This evolution, partially, can be observed across key policy documents of the last two decades: the *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World* (2007), the Joint Communication *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (2016), the *New European Agenda for Culture* (2018), and the *Culture Compass for Europe* (2025).

In 2007, the EU's international cultural positioning was framed largely through a binary distinction between Europe and the rest of the world. Europe was presented as internally diverse, yet possessing an identity distinct from external cultural influences — and one placed under pressure by globalisation:

'*Globalisation has increased the exposure to more diverse cultures from across the world. This has heightened our curiosity and capacity to exchange with and benefit from other cultures, and contributed to the diversity of our societies. However, this*

[246] IETM 2025, The New International: Against all Odds.

has also raised questions about Europe's identity and its ability to ensure intercultural, cohesive societies'[247].

This Europe–world dichotomy was also evident in the conviction that the EU had something particular to offer globally: not only its '*cultural richness and diversity*', but values such as freedom of expression, dignity, solidarity and tolerance, which could '*be of inspiration for the world of tomorrow*'.

International cultural engagement was approached primarily through the logic of public diplomacy. Its purpose was to communicate Europe to the world: '*to convey important messages in third countries about Europe, its identity and its experience of building bridges between different cultures*' and to promote '*knowledge of and understanding for Europe's cultures throughout the world*'. Intercultural dialogue was understood partly as a set of competences required to navigate increasingly multicultural societies, and partly as an institutional dialogue between states in which culture could serve peace and conflict prevention.

The 2016 Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations*, introduced several important shifts. Its central ambition was to recognise culture as a strategic asset in international relations and to deploy that asset more coherently. This ambition was embedded in an explicit sense of global responsibility:

'*The EU is strongly committed to promoting a global order based on peace, the rule of law, freedom of expression, mutual understanding and respect for fundamental rights. Accordingly, promoting diversity through international cultural relations is an important part of the EU's role as a global actor*'[248].

This responsibility required the EU to move beyond simply projecting the diversity of European cultures and towards '*a new spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning, joint capacity-building and global solidarity*'. Culture was presented with greater confidence as a means of contributing to peacebuilding, sustainable development, employment, competitiveness and the promotion of fundamental values. The EU also

[247] European Commission (2007) *Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalising world.* COM(2007) 242 final, 10 May. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities.

[248] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2016) *Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations.* JOIN(2016) 29 final, 8 June. Brussels: European Commission.

positioned itself as a partner capable of helping other countries realise culture's social and economic potential.

Nevertheless, the document continued to serve recognisably diplomatic objectives. It sought to make the EU '*a stronger global actor*' and to reinforce its image as a continent of cultural heritage and vibrant creative forces. The important shift was in the proposed approach: these objectives were to be pursued through reciprocity, mutual learning and co-creation, alongside an acknowledgement that the EU itself '*stands to benefit greatly from increased exchanges with the rest of the world*'.

The principles of the Joint Communication were subsequently incorporated into the *New European Agenda for Culture* in 2018. Both documents were assessed by the European Parliament in 2022 in a report prepared by MEP Salima Yenbou. The report recognised the 2016 Communication as an important milestone, but concluded that the EU still lacked a genuinely coherent strategy and that implementation had been weakened by inconsistent political commitment, insufficient staffing and inadequate financial resources[249].

More fundamentally, the Parliament report drew a conceptual distinction between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. Cultural relations were defined as '*reciprocal, non-coercive transnational interactions*' that operate in both directions and seek to generate mutual understanding, connectivity and lasting relationships. Cultural diplomacy, by contrast, is more closely tied to the interests of the state. It uses culture to engage foreign governments or publics, but remains shaped by foreign-policy priorities, accountable to state institutions and often oriented towards one-way advocacy rather than mutual dialogue[250].

The decisive distinction, therefore, lies not simply in whether governments are involved or not. States may support genuine cultural relations when they enable reciprocal and open-ended encounters. At the same time, activities delivered by non-state organisations may still function as cultural diplomacy, especially when their objectives, narratives and accountability are determined in advance by state interests.

Yenbou also cautioned against treating culture exclusively as a tool of 'soft power'. Such a framework, according to the report, were not adequately capturing the relational character of contemporary international cultural practice, which increasingly

[249] European Parliament (2022) *Report on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations.* A9-0279/2022, rapporteur: Salima Yenbou, 21 November. Brussels: European Parliament, p. 9

[250] Ibid, p. 7.

focuses on '*building trust between people, recognising power relations and seeking equity and fairness to in order to address collective challenges*'[251]. Cultural relations, in this understanding, are not simply a more subtle means of exercising influence. Their value lies in the relationship itself and in the possibility that all participants, including the EU, may be transformed by it.

In 2025, amid intensifying geopolitical fragmentation, the European Commission committed to renewing the EU's approach to international cultural relations as one of the initiatives of the *Culture Compass*, the EU's strategic framework for culture launched in 2025. Its language marked a return to the vocabulary of soft power: '*Europe's vibrant cultural landscape is a source of soft power and a reputational asset*'[252].

At the same time, the strategic ambition had expanded considerably. The Compass acknowledged that culture had not been sufficiently mobilised in responding to the multiple crises facing Europe. It also articulated an emerging conception of EU cultural action in its own right as distinct from the national diplomacy of its Member States: '*The EU's added value lies in being more than the sum of its parts, as is also demonstrated by its presence in major cultural and public diplomacy events in partner countries*'.

The sense of responsibility for global peace, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue that emerged strongly in 2016 had, by 2025, evolved into a more explicit understanding of culture as an asset for a Europe seeking autonomy, resilience and 'collective security'. The ambition to deliver '*tangible benefits for societies worldwide*' remained, but it was now situated within a more openly conflictual account of the international order, in which Europe is compelled to seek its own place of influence. The Compass recognised that other global actors '*are actively using culture to shape perceptions and identities to legitimise political objectives*'. In such an environment, the EU must remain '*resilient and credible*' by pursuing a '*value-driven approach*' and leveraging its cultural diversity as a strategic asset within its external action.

Another essential shift is also visible. Culture is no longer presented solely as a means of advancing external objectives such as peace, sustainable development, democracy or tolerance. It increasingly forms part of the very identity the EU seeks to establish

[251] Idem.

[252] European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

internationally. Europe is imagined as a '*global leader in culture and creativity*'[253] and as '*global cultural powerhouse and vibrant hub of creativity, where everyone can freely create, access and engage with culture; a role which upholds cultural rights, empowers citizens and creative professionals*'[254]. The interinstitutional Joint Declaration on culture, following the Compass, opens its preamble with calling Europe '*continent of immesurable art, culture, creativity and rich cultural heritage and history*'[255].

This can suggest that Europe's global cultural position will depend less on the messages it communicates abroad, and more on the conditions for its culture it sustains at home. A 'continent of culture' in which artistic freedom is protected, artists can work under decent conditions, cultural diversity is genuinely supported and citizens can exercise their cultural rights can become Europe's global message as such.

Cultural Diversity: Inventory or Process?

Yet several competing narratives continue to shape the EU's vision for international cultural relations, including Europe as a cultural powerhouse, culture as soft power or a reputational asset, Europe as a continent of culture, and cultural relations as reciprocal exchange, and more. As a result, what European cultural leadership in the world would actually entail remains open to interpretation. Developing a robust vision is becoming increasingly urgent, particularly at a moment when various competing and distinct accounts of Europe's identity and future are emerging both outside and within the continent.

The renewed United States *National Security Strategy* of 2025, for example, diagnoses Europe as facing '*civilisational erasure*'. It attributes this crisis to the role of the European Union and other transnational institutions in undermining '*political liberty and sovereignty*', to migration policies allegedly transforming the continent, to the '*censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition*', and to the '*loss of national identities and self-confidence*'. Yet the section devoted to Europe is entitled '*Promoting European Greatness*'. According to the strategy, Europe must recover its '*greatness*' through renewed '*civilisational self-confidence*' and restored '*Western identity*', as well as through '*unapologetic celebrations of European nations*'

[253]Ibid, p. 3.

[254]Council of the European Union 2026, Joint Declaration "Europe for Culture - Culture for Europe" - Approval, p. 5.

[255]Ibid, p. 3.

individual character and history'[256]. Europe is imagined here as a continent composed of sovereign nations, each possessing a distinct culture, history and identity, yet united by a shared Western identity, challenged by migration and excessive integration.

This understanding resonates, in different forms, with the positions of several political parties within Europe itself. Across Europe, governments are increasingly repositioning culture as something predominantly rooted in the nation and expressive of national identity, pride and history, rather than as a dynamic, cosmopolitan field open to global influences. This inward turn is closely associated with the rightward shift in European politics.

In Italy, Fratelli d'Italia advocates a '*Europe of peoples, freedom and identities*' and presents the defence of Europe's Judeo-Christian cultural roots as a political responsibility. Its concern for cultural diversity is framed primarily as the protection of the distinct national cultures of the Member States: '*The cultural and identity-based differences of individual Member States must not be erased in favour of a centralised and dirigiste "European superstate"*'. The party also calls for a stronger Europe, but locates the source of that strength in the sovereignty and identity of its nations: '*Instead of a European 'superstate', reminiscent of the Soviet model cherished by the left, we prefer a Europe of peoples and nations*'[257]. When it comes to cultural policy, Giorgia Meloni's government has promoted a more culturally exclusionary account of cultural identity, foregrounding nationalist concepts such as *italianità*—Italianness[258], which resulted, for instance, in replacing foreign directors of major museums with national appointments[259].

For some political forces, the very existence of an EU-level cultural policy is understood as weakening nation states and, by extension, Europe itself. In March 2025, during a European Parliament CULT Committee debate on the then forthcoming Culture Compass, an MEP from the Europe of Sovereign Nations group argued: '*The Cultural Compass you are proposing serves to reinforce globalisation*

---

[256]The White House 2025, National Security Strategy of the United States of America November 2025, Washington, pp. 25—27.

[257] Fratelli d'Italia (2024) *Con Giorgia, l'Italia cambia l'Europa: Programma per le elezioni europee 2024*. Rome: Fratelli d'Italia, pp. 2—3.

[258] Pu, Annie Xixin. "The Return of Neo-Fascism: Reimagining Italy through the Cultural Turn under Giorgia Meloni ." The Grimshaw Review of International Affairs Vol 2, No. 2 (2026).

[259] Imam, J. (2024) 'Is Italy's government meddling in who runs top museums?', *The Art Newspaper*, 6 February, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/02/06/is-italys-government-meddling-in-who-runs-top-museums, last seen 5 September 2026.

centralisation, and this is in direct opposition to the historic tradition of the so-called small circles of freedom that made Europe great. You are trying to impose liberal doctrines, eroding traditional values and reducing the power of nation states, but this only weakens Europe [...] *For you, diversity means the advance of foreign cultures at the expense of autochthonous cultures. A common European cultural identity is impossible to define, as it simply does not exist. It would artificially create a weakened and uprooted mass that is incapable of recognising its own interests*'[260].

In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland, which has been rapidly gaining influence nationwide, advocates replacing the EU with a Federation of European Nations: a '*newly founded European economic and interest community*'. In such a structure, the sovereignty of the Member States would be preserved and cooperation would occur only where '*genuine common interests*' exist. Interestingly, alongside the common market, border protection, migration and security policy, the party identifies '*the preservation of European cultures and identities*' as one of these shared interests[261]. At the national level, it argues that German culture should function as the country's '*leading culture*' (*Leitkultur*), defined through the German language, Christianity, heritage, the Enlightenment, as well as scientific and artistic achievements[262].

National culture also occupies a central place in the political programmes of the Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party. Cultural policies of both parties challenge liberal and cosmopolitan approaches to culture by seeking to align cultural policy more closely with national identity and by imagining nations as relatively homogeneous social and cultural communities[263]. In Sweden, a national cultural canon was introduced to capture Swedish societal values and to serve as a '*tool to give all citizens the opportunity to learn about Swedish society and Swedish culture*', intended

[260] European Parliament (2025) 'European Cultural Compass as a driving force for economic competitiveness and resilience' [video], *Plenary debate*, 31 March. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=unit&vodLanguage=EN&internalEPId=2017020224080&providerMeetingId=20250331-0900-PLENARY, last seen 5 September 2026.

[261] Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (2025) *Zeit für Deutschland: Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 21. Deutschen Bundestag*, p. 140

[262] Ibid, p. 170.

[263] 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, 31(1), 16–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2024.2313520

to establish a common frame of reference[264]. The canon, launched in 2025, includes Pippi Longstocking, IKEA, parental leave, Sámi joik and the Nobel Prize, but excludes ABBA and everything created after 1975, a period during which Sweden became increasingly international and multicultural[265].

Whether these forces refer to a shared European or Western civilisation or to national cultures, they often perceive culture as stable, bounded and largely insulated from historical transformation, but fragile in the face of contemporary trends and challenges. As the historian of European politics John Foster observes, '*For the right, culture is somehow both unchanging and brittle*'[266]. The defence of culture is grounded in the belief that it once existed in a pure form and can be restored to that condition, while any external influence is understood as diluting its substance. Yet, as Foster notes, '*culture will stagnate unless it makes room for new influences*'.

The idea that culture possesses a stable essence that can be frozen in time, captured and codified bears little resemblance to the historical reality of cultural development. Cultural expressions have repeatedly evolved through movement, borrowing, reinterpretation, conflict and exchange. They merge with other forms, acquire new meanings and generate practices that could not have been anticipated from their supposed origins. Foster therefore argues that culture cannot be shielded from transformation: '*Culture is always porous at the edges, always mutating as humans find new ways to live with their surroundings and each other. Once in contact, cultures can never be fully disambiguated*'[267].

The tendency to understand culture as both static and exclusionary — two characteristics that reinforce one another — can also shape how cultural diversity, the central concept of European cultural policy, is conceived and governed. For instance, researcher Dario Verderame identifies a '*tendency to celebrate cultural diversity among European people as if they were fixed entities*'[268]. He describes this as a

---

[264] Sveriges riksdag, 'Kulturkanon'. Motion 2021/22:2496. Stockholm, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/motion/kulturkanon_h9022496/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[265]Bryant, M. (2025) 'Outcry as Swedish "cultural canon" snubs Abba and anything since 1975', *The Guardian*, 2 September, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/02/outcry-as-swedish-cultural-canon-snubs-abba-and-anything-since-1975, last seen 5 September 2026.

[266]Foster, J. (2025) 'Culture Clash: The Poverty of Purity', *The Battleground*, 3 May, https://thebattleground.eu/2025/05/03/culture-clash/, last seen 5 September 2026.

[267]Idem.

[268] Verderame, D. (2018) 'Understanding otherness through the prism of EU cultural policy: a case study', *De Europa*, 1(2), pp. 34–44. doi: 10.13135/2611-853X/2912, p. 36.

rhetoric that presents diversity as an unproblematic condition while ignoring the fact that cultural identities are changing, internally contested and sometimes conflicting. Through this approach, diversity becomes a commodified and aestheticised 'richness' of cultural goods available for consumption, rather than a lived, evolving and politically contested reality. Cultural difference is sampled through food, tourism, festivals and cultural products, but the conflicts, inequalities and historical processes through which identities are formed remain largely invisible. Crucially, Verderame argues that '*the problem does not lie in admitting the existence of a 'European culture', but in conceiving it as a 'coherent whole*" that remains '*uncontaminated*'[269].

He distinguishes three approaches to cultural difference within EU cultural policy. *Essentialism* constructs European culture as a bounded and coherent heritage, thereby risking the treatment of otherness as external, inferior or subordinate. *Transnationalism* refers to cultural experiences and networks that cross national borders, but such contact does not necessarily generate deeper engagement. Diversity may be encountered, consumed or celebrated without challenging existing assumptions or power relations. *Cosmopolitanism*, by contrast, requires a reflexive encounter in which the '*perspective of others*' becomes incorporated into one's own identity and understanding of the world. Its defining characteristic is therefore not mobility or exposure alone, but a willingness to confront difference and potentially to be changed through that encounter[270].

Certain cultural traditions, crafts and practices can, of course, be identified, described, codified and even placed on recognised heritage lists, as in the case of the practice of opera singing in Italy on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Some practices require active support for their transmission, visibility and preservation. Yet culture in a broader sense can never be fully fixed or contained. It also encompasses expressions, practices, objects and symbols whose meanings continue to evolve through reinterpretation, improvisation, migration, technological change, political contestation and contact with other cultural forms. Even highly codified traditions are not culturally static: their formal characteristics may be preserved while their social meaning, participants, functions and political significance change.

[269] Idem, p. 35.

[270] Idem, pp. 35—36.

According to the Eurobarometer, 87% of Europeans regard culture as the number one factor in creating a sense of community among them[271]. This raises a fundamental question: through what conception of culture is such a community formed? If culture is not a finished and bounded possession, can cultural diversity then still be understood simply as the coexistence of distinct, complete and internally coherent cultures?

The Culture Compass offers an important opening by describing cultural diversity as '*continuously reimagined*'[272]. Even if the concept is not discussed in the document, from this perspective, cultural diversity can refer not only to the richness of recognisable traditions and established cultural expressions, but also to the multiple ways in which they intersect, influence and transform one another, and give rise to new forms. The emphasis can shift from the preservation of a fixed cultural inventory to the conditions under which cultural plurality can continue to emerge.

This could also mean creating space for new, emerging and hybrid expressions, while enabling practices that have historically been marginalised, suppressed or left unrecognised to acquire visibility, agency and the capacity to enter into free and equitable dialogue with more established forms. Cultural diversity is also a question of power: whose expressions are recognised, whose histories are legitimised, who has access to resources and platforms, and under what conditions different cultural actors are able to meet.

Supporting cultural diversity as open, dynamic and inclusive consequently requires more than the promotion of a varied selection of cultural products. It demands the conditions and infrastructures through which diversity becomes possible: appropriate digital regulation; the preservation and critical reinterpretation of heritage; sustained support for a wide range of cultural expressions; robust protections for artists' rights and livelihoods; the defence of artistic freedom; and long-term, trust-based funding that enables meaningful engagement with communities, experimentation and risk-taking.

---

[271] Respondents were then asked to explain the factors that most create a feeling of community among EU citizens; the question was formulated as such: 'In your opinion, among the following issues, which are those that most create a feeling of community among EU citizens?'. See: European Commission 2025, Special Barometer 562 Europeans' attitudes towards culture, p. 18.

[272] European Commission (2025) *A Culture Compass for Europe*, p. 1, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/Communication%20-%20Culture%20Compass%20with%20cover_0.pdf, last seen 5 September 2026.

Understanding cultural diversity as open to the future also changes the focus of international cultural relations. The central question is *how* cultural collaborations are supported and conducted. Do they allow for profound engagement on equitable terms? Do they build trust and reciprocity? Do they permit all participants to influence the direction and outcomes of the relationship? Can they loosen rigid understandings of borders and identity, and enable cultural expressions to encounter one another on their own terms?

International cultural relations could, from this perspective, become a method and a space for a different kind of global cultural cooperation, rather than a set of predetermined messages or strategic directions to be communicated abroad. Europe's contribution would lie not in defining the cultural content of the encounter in advance, but in creating the conditions for open-ended, equitable and transformative collaboration.

These conditions are not, however, value-neutral. Reciprocity, artistic freedom, openness and a willingness to share power are themselves normative commitments. It would not be a transition from value-based to value-free cultural relations, but a shift from exporting predetermined values to embedding them in the way relationships are built and practised.

Even if one continues to think in terms of global influence, this method of cooperation may itself constitute Europe's most credible message: strong support for artists, artistic freedom, reciprocity, openness to transformation and the willingness to share power can become Europe's pillars of defining its place in the world.

Europe as a Cultural Practice

These ideas about how culture might be embedded in Europe's self-understanding and global positioning resonate substantially with the survey responses, as well as with recent conversations involving European artists, scholars and cultural leaders. One such conversation space is *About Europe*, an initiative launched by the European Festivals Association in early 2026 as a space for artists, cultural institutions and policymakers '*to contribute, exchange perspectives, or engage in public reflection on Europe: as a continent, as a political entity, as a voice in the world and as a cultural society*'[273]. The 22 contributions published on the *About Europe* website so far bring together a diverse group of thinkers, artists, festival directors and policymakers. Taken alongside our survey findings, they offer a rich body of ideas about what Europe is

[273] European Festivals Association (n.d.) *About Europe: A conversation on Europe through the lens of arts and culture*, https://www.about-europe.eu/, last seen 5 September 2026.

today, what it might become, and what role culture plays in shaping the European project.

Across these deliberations, the message is clear: today, amidst global challenges, artists must be free not only to represent Europe, but also to question it, move beyond it as a fixed concept, and imagine different futures with partners across the world. In these conversations, culture is widely portrayed as fundamental to Europe's future, yet there is strong resistance to reducing its role to self-promotion or soft power. Culture cannot be merely an instrument for consolidating a predetermined European identity: instead, respondents and contributors understand culture as a space in which Europe can continually interrogate its histories, values, institutions and possible futures.

The resulting vision is one of *critical engagement* with the idea of Europe. Across survey responses, there is visible support for European cooperation, solidarity and democratic values, but also a conviction that these can remain legitimate only if Europe embraces plurality, confronts its challenging historical legacies, and allows culture to reimagine the European project as much as to sustain and strengthen it. The central tension is therefore between culture as an instrument of European unity and integration and culture as a critical public sphere through which Europe remains open, democratic and capable of transformation. This tension does by no means arise from a rejection by the sector of a sense of European belonging, shared values or European identity. It lies in how these concepts are produced, by whom they are defined, whether they remain open to revision, and what role cultural actors are expected to play in shaping them.

The survey data illuminate this distinction. When respondents were asked about culture's role in Europe's future[274], '*building a shared sense of belonging among European citizens*' emerged as the second most frequently selected option, chosen by 46.7% of respondents and only marginally behind '*promoting human rights and sustainable development*', selected by 46.9%. Yet when respondents were asked about the EU's own role in cultural policymaking[275], '*developing the sense of a shared European cultural identity*' ranked last among ten proposed functions, selected by only 6.6%.

[274] The question was formulated as such: 'The following roles reflect current EU narratives on culture and the future of Europe. Which do you consider most important? Please choose up to two'.

[275] The question was formulated as such: 'What should the role of the EU be in cultural policy-making? Please choose up to three areas which you find particularly important'.

How can we read this data? A 'shared sense of belonging' and a 'shared European cultural identity' are not identical concepts. Nevertheless, the contrast suggests that the cultural sector is willing to contribute to a stronger sense of community among Europeans while remaining deeply sceptical of any top-down attempt by EU institutions to define the cultural substance of that community. Many respondents see shared belonging as particularly important in a context marked by geopolitical uncertainty, war and resurgent nationalism. Yet they consistently frame it as inclusive and active rather than homogenising: a civic and relational sense of belonging grounded in solidarity and participation, rather than a fixed uniform identity.

This closely resonates with several *About Europe* contributions. Doris Pack, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (2009-2014), rejects the idea that EU cultural policy should manufacture a single European culture. Its task, in her account, is to enable artistic circulation, mobility and intercultural dialogue. She ultimately raises the more fundamental question of whether Europe needs a unified cultural identity at all[276].

Jonathan Mills, a composer and festival director, citing Umberto Eco, reminds that '*Europe's language is one of translation*'. European identity, in this view, does not arise from eliminating disagreement or overcoming difference, but from the repeated work of translating between languages, histories, experiences and perspectives. Cultural participation allows differences to encounter one another and produce new meanings, rather than simply coexist as fixed and separate entities. He argues: '*Europe's strength has always been polyphonic – a harmony composed of distinct and sometimes dissonant voices. It is not a top-down structure but a grass-roots discourse. Its authority should emerge from listening, not instruction; from participation, not prescription.*'[277]

Europe therefore appears less as a cultural identity that people possess or belong to than as a cultural relationship they practise. This relationship is enacted through artistic circulation, translation, public encounter, self-examination and openness to difference. Europe, from this perspective, exists through cultural practice: through the relationships, negotiations and acts of interpretation that connect people across borders without requiring them to become culturally identical.

---

[276] Pack, D. (2015) 'Hijacked by federalists? On the nature and necessity of European cultural policy', address delivered at the farewell event for the Rector of Saarland University. Republished by *About Europe*, 15 June 2026, https://www.about-europe.eu/contributions/doris-pack, last seen 5 September 2026.

[277] Mills, J. (2026) 'Cultural participation as an instrument of democratic resilience', *About Europe*, 11 March. Based on a keynote delivered at the Berlin Conference, 7 November 2025, https://www.about-europe.eu/contributions/jonathan-mills, last seen 5 September 2026..

Several contributions reverse the conventional history of European integration in precisely this way. Rather than assuming that political Europe created a corresponding cultural space, they suggest that cultural collaboration preceded and helped produce the European project itself. Dorian Koçi, Albanian historian and diplomat, argues that European unity originated not in treaties but in Renaissance and Humanist networks, through the movement of ideas, artists and cultural forms across cities and regions. The so-called peripheries were '*not passive recipients of a culture*' created elsewhere, but active contributors to the European intellectual space. '*Europe was a cultural project long before it became a political one*', he argues[278]. So, Europe did not simply produce its culture; cultural circulation helped produce Europe.

This processual understanding of Europe is also strongly present in the survey responses. Many respondents describe the European project as a work in progress, an unfinished project, whose value systems must remain open to critical review and continuous development, including the correction of injustices and the inclusion of perspectives previously marginalised or excluded. Culture's role is then precisely to keep Europe open to multiple histories, identities and futures.

This is also why respondents place such emphasis on artistic autonomy. Culture best serves Europe, many argue, when it remains capable of questioning institutions, exposing contradictions and generating uncomfortable debates. Their role, therefore, cannot be confined to illustrating an already agreed account of Europe.

When it comes to Europe's external cultural relations, survey respondents generally believe that Europe has principles, experiences and forms of solidarity that it can contribute to global conversations, and values that must be protected and strengthened. Yet many challenge an approach based on clear-cut promotional messages directed at the rest of the world. Instead, they call for genuine cooperation capable of addressing shared global challenges. As one respondent puts it, '*International cultural relations should always be approached on an even eye-to-eye level and not to be misused or misunderstood as purely promoting European culture abroad but rather a real sense of cooperation*'.

Another respondent argues that Europe needs to build a new '*defence mechanism*' in the current global environment, but insists that this must be developed '*not as a new colonialism, but on the contrary—as narratives and practices of togetherness,*

[278] Koçi, D. (2026) 'Europe beyond politics: Why culture remains the foundation of the European project', *About Europe*, 20 July. Based on a keynote address delivered at the International Literary Festival for Young Writers 'Tirana-Gate 2021', https://www.about-europe.eu/contributions/dorian-koci, last seen 5 September 2026.

solidarity and common sense of purpose; emphasising our common values and rights—as an achievement of the post-WW2 integration'.

Cultural relations cannot be reduced to the dissemination of a consolidated European message, but they must allow Europe to enter relationships whose outcomes are not fully predetermined, and through which Europe itself may learn, change and be challenged. Cooperation, in this understanding, implies reciprocity, shared curiosity and concern for global challenges, and a willingness to recognise the agency, knowledge and priorities of partners elsewhere.

The emphasis on reciprocity also changes the meaning of artists' participation in Europe's global positioning. Artists seek to form relationships according to artistic curiosity, ethical commitments, shared concerns and affinities that do not necessarily correspond to the EU's geographic and political priorities. They may also work across borders in ways that complicate distinctions between Europe and the rest of the world, including through addressing matters of justice and decolonisation.

At the same time, the *About Europe* contributions reveal a recurrent concern that institutional Europe has been struggling to generate emotional attachment. Iván Fischer, Hungarian conductor and composer, expresses this when he says that 'love is missing' from Europe. According to him, the European integration so far may have produced a functioning union, a community to which people feel deeply and passionately connected may not be fully there yet. Artists, he suggests, can express European values through their music, theatre, visual art: '*artists can penetrate the heart*'[279].

Wim Wenders, German filmmaker, offers another version of this, in fact, much older, diagnosis. Europe has become an '*abstract, alien entity*' for many Europeans because its development was driven primarily by politicians and businesspeople, without being accompanied by compelling images, narratives and collective dreams. Yet the proposition that artists should now provide Europe with its missing story immediately creates another dilemma: asking artists to generate emotional attachment can easily become a form of instrumental cultural diplomacy. Wenders himself acknowledges this risk when he observes that there is a resistance of turning culture into a political or industrial tool[280].

---

[279] Fischer, I. (2026) 'Iván Fischer', *About Europe*, 11 June, https://www.about-europe.eu/contributions/ivan-fischer, last seen 5 September 2026.

[280] Wenders, W. (2007) 'The image of Europe: Identification and representation', speech delivered in Brussels, 11 June. Republished by *About Europe*, 27 April 2026, https://www.about-europe.eu/contributions/wim-wenders, last seen 5 September 2026.

This is why several respondents shift the focus from what culture should do for Europe to what Europe should do for culture. One particularly important narrative centres on the EU's responsibility to protect and sustain the cultural sector itself, making this commitment part of Europe's international positioning. As one respondent argues, '*Europe could be in the forefront of securing fair working conditions for artists. This would mean artists and creatives will thrive in Europe. Not to promote 'European values', but just to be able to do the best art*'.

This proposition connects directly to the idea of Europe's cultural environment itself becoming part of its global identity. Europe's cultural position in the world would not depend primarily on its capacity to communicate a persuasive narrative about itself, but on the conditions it creates for culture to flourish. A Europe in which artists can work under fair conditions, cultural rights are protected, artistic freedom is defended and diverse forms of expression can emerge would possess a credibility that no communication strategy could manufacture.

This would not make Europe's cultural relations value-neutral: fair working conditions, cultural rights, artistic freedom and diversity are themselves normative commitments. The difference is that these values would be demonstrated through Europe's own cultural practices and relationships, rather than prescribed as a message for others.

Rewriting Europe's global positioning through culture cannot mean assigning the sector yet another set of strategic functions and growing the snowball of narratives. How can we begin by giving substantive meaning to 'Europe for Culture' before further expanding the demands associated with 'Culture for Europe'?

The Doubts of the Missing Architecture

The combined survey responses and *About Europe* contributions do not only offer bottom-up visions of Europe's internal narrative and global cultural role, but they also expose unresolved tensions that cut across both political discourse and the cultural field's own thinking. These tensions should not be treated as inconsistencies that can simply be resolved through better wording; they have to be addressed as genuine dilemmas in the EU's international cultural relations.

One tension lies between Europe as a lived experience, unfolding through conversations, encounters, relationships, spaces, debates and shared inspirations, and Europe as an institutional and legal power whose action is nevertheless necessary for culture to thrive. Bottom-up cultural life cannot substitute for public institutions, legal protections or sustained investment. Yet institutional action can also overdetermine the meanings that cultural practice is expected to produce.

A second tension lies between understanding culture as a foundation of belonging, on the one hand, and resisting the idea of a singular or fixed European identity, on the other. Europe needs forms of attachment and solidarity, but the cultural sector recognises that its meaning is located in translation, hybridity, plurality and continuous transformation. Relatedly, moving away from the projection of predetermined messages about Europe to the world cannot mean pretending that cultural relations can be value-neutral. Reciprocity, artistic freedom, openness and willingness to share power are themselves normative choices. It is high time to focus on how these values are practiced and provided for.

A third tension concerns Europe's need for self-protection and agency. There is an unavoidable recognition that Europe must defend its identity and values. Yet reducing culture to safeguarding, resilience or strategic defence risks neglecting its capacity to also be courageous, unexpected, experimental and disruptive. Culture might be the only space left to collectively reimagine the world — how can it preserve its courage and freedom in times of the world turning fragmented and hostile?

A further area requiring conceptual clarity is what policymakers — and the cultural sector itself — mean by 'culture' in this debate. The EU's strategic discourse remains imprecise, while the sector's own advocacy can become fragile when it moves too easily between culture as identity, culture as a professional and institutional sector, and culture as a relationship or social practice. These meanings are connected, but they are not interchangeable. The Culture Compass offers an opportunity to secure a central place for the cultural sector within the EU's strategic agenda without reducing culture to the reproduction and projection of fixed collective identities.

But the most explicit, and possibly the oldest, tension remains the gap between positioning culture as indispensable for Europe, on the one hand, and securing the freedom and strength of the cultural sector on the other. If Europe continues to recognise culture as fundamental to its future, how can this recognition avoid producing an ever-expanding list of instrumental expectations? How can Europe mobilise culture without exhausting it, and draw strength from cultural life without constraining its autonomy?

Behind these questions lies an even more fundamental issue: whether culture can move beyond the cultural policy silo and genuinely shape the EU's wider strategic agenda. So far, neither the idea of Europe as a cultural continent nor a clearly articulated cultural dimension has been embedded in the Union's overarching vision, beyond the Culture Compass. The challenge is to make culture constitutive of Europe's strategic self-understanding without reducing it to an instrument of geopolitical projection, a source of institutional legitimacy or a fixed account of European identity.

Despite the ambition of its discourse, however, the Culture Compass does not propose particularly bold measures or financial guarantees capable of turning a new cultural-relations paradigm into practice. Nor does it set out a clear plan for building a long-term architecture for international cultural cooperation. These elements may be deferred until the adoption of the dedicated international cultural relations strategy planned for 2027. The immediate prospects nevertheless appear limited, as the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, currently under negotiation, does not yet contain any genuinely transformative provisions for international cultural relations.

The Commission's current proposal for AgoraEU, includes references to international cultural cooperation but does not articulate an ambitious vision of culture as a constitutive element of the EU's global role. International relations appear only briefly: culture is expected to help the EU '*project the image of a dynamic continent on the world stage*' and to operate in synergy with the Global Europe instrument. The proposal also emphasises the circulation and distribution of European creative works both within and beyond the Union[281]. Yet neither the Commission proposal nor the Council compromise text represents a substantial departure from Creative Europe in the way culture is positioned within the EU's wider geopolitical strategy[282].

The proposed Global Europe programme for 2028–2034, with a Commission-proposed budget of €200.3 billion, signals a considerable increase in ambition for the EU's external action and consolidates several existing external financing instruments. As the Commission proposal for regulation stands now, culture, however, is far less prominent in the discourse. The current Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe instrument contains a dedicated area of intervention for culture, covering six priorities. These include supporting culture as a driver of sustainable development; preserving and enhancing cultural heritage; safeguarding vulnerable heritage, particularly that of minority, isolated and Indigenous communities; and supporting agreements on the return of cultural property to countries of origin[283].

---

[281] Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818, p. 3

[282] IETM 2026, Policy Paper — EU's International Cultural Collaborations, p. 9.

[283] Regulation (EU) 2021/947 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009 (Text with EEA relevance)

The absence of such a dedicated cultural theme in the future Global Europe programme results from its reorganisation around geographical rather than thematic priorities. It is encouraging that culture appears across all geographical pillars, but the references remain broad and not yet sufficiently developed[284]. Removing a culture-specific area of intervention may therefore amount to a downgrading of culture's role, particularly if cultural objectives are dispersed across geographic programmes without clear priorities, expertise or protected resources.

Moreover, the relationship between Global Europe and AgoraEU has not been articulated in a sufficiently coherent or promising way. There is no clear account of how internal cultural support, external action, artistic mobility, international cooperation and cultural rights will connect across the two instruments. Without such an architecture, international cultural relations risk remaining suspended between programmes — recognised rhetorically, but weakly anchored institutionally and financially.

Towards A Continent of Culture

The EU's narrative on international cultural relations has passed through several distinct stages: from projecting European diversity and identity, to mobilising culture in pursuit of global objectives, to cultivating reciprocal relations, and, most recently, to treating Europe's own cultural vitality as a source of geopolitical standing. Yet these paradigms have not clearly replaced one another. They continue to coexist within the emerging framework: the language of reciprocity, openness and mutual transformation now sits alongside renewed ambitions for influence, visibility and strategic power.

Positioning Europe as a place where a strong, free and well-supported cultural sector can flourish — and making this part of its global identity — would undoubtedly be a positive shift. Yet an essential element remains missing: how does this 'continent of culture' relate to the rest of the world, to culture as global? What spaces will Europe create, support or join to enable dialogue on shared global challenges, and on whose terms will such dialogue be convened? How can European artists and their peers across the world collectively and independently imagine different futures? And how can culture become a space in which questions of justice are raised and infrastructures of solidarity are built?

Europe is moving towards greater competitiveness, autonomy and geopolitical agency. These ambitions may be both timely and necessary, and they advance the

[284] IETM 2026, Policy Paper — EU's International Cultural Collaborations, p. 9.

momentum for clarity on what kind of cultural relations Europe is willing to pursue in the world as it stands today. Should culture now be attached to a more consolidated and bounded conception of European identity? How can Europe strengthen its capacity to act and consolidate its values without turning that identity into something static, defensive and territorially contained?

The important test of the future 2027 strategy will be whether it can translate the idea of Europe as a cultural continent into durable structures for reciprocal, artist-led and globally connected cultural relations, rather than merely applying a more strategic vocabulary to existing policies. This is not a moment to choose between stronger European agency and cultural openness, because the latter can become a defining source of the former.

Conclusion — the State of Culture Today

In 2024, the state of culture was the state of asking for recognition. That recognition may still not have been fully achieved. Yet the central demand emerging today is no longer recognition alone, but *agency*. The cultural sector wants to lead and to participate actively in shaping Europe's future within a reality that remains deeply troubled.

And the reality is troubling indeed. Heatwaves are awakening even ecological sceptics, while the European Green Deal is gradually being dismantled. Conflict, persecution and hardship are driving forced displacement to record levels, while Europe's doors are becoming ever narrower. Digitalisation, once proclaimed primarily as an opportunity, is now firmly situated among the dangers invoked whenever the notorious polycrisis is described. The global order is no longer what it was, and, to echo the language of the EU's own high-level speeches, 'time is running out' for Europe to define and claim its place in the order now emerging.

What, then, of culture?

The cultural sector remains fragile, weakened by persistent underfunding and further cuts — some accompanied by the political downgrading of artists' role, legitimacy and public image. Working conditions remain unsustainable, marked by inadequate social protection, insecure employment and structural inequality. Cultural workers and organisations are vulnerable to the power of Big Tech, political polarisation and shifting social scrutiny. The COVID-19 crisis appeared to promise that there would be no return to the status quo, yet we know how that promise unfolded.

Culture is still imagined as a realm of inspiration, unpredictability and courage. In practice, however, it is increasingly governed as though it were a product of industrial production: subordinated to efficiency, foreseeable and measurable impact, and predictable trajectories. Inspiration and uncertainty have not disappeared, but they survive largely at the fringes of the systems through which cultural work is funded, managed and evaluated.

At the same time, culture is being asked to repair democracy and serve as a compass for Europe. Beyond affirming the eloquent language of new strategies, much remains to be done before culture can genuinely act as a force for democratic renewal or as a strategic asset for the European project.

Democracy depends, among other things, on collective participation in civic life, social engagement and critical thought. What is acknowledged far less often is that genuine agency also belongs to those with the freedom to imagine a different system — not merely to participate within the existing one. Put differently, if citizens' sense

of belonging and unity is considered vital to the future of democratic Europe, citizens must be able to shape Europe, engage with it, challenge it, take ownership of it and change it. One can hardly belong to what one has no role in creating.

This is what the cultural sector is asking for today. However fragile and exhausted it may be, the sector is seeking a form of critical engagement with Europe and with Europe's place in the world. It believes in Europe, in its values and in its responsibility to defend human rights and justice. But it also wants to interrogate Europe, question it and make it better. It wants to ask '*why*', rather than being confined to questions of '*how*'. It demands a central role in restoring human agency and social justice in the face of the interests of AI companies and other concentrated forms of technological power.

The sector is also asking for political trust: the trust to engage with the world on its own terms; to work with artists and communities from across the globe on terms they shape together; to discuss justice and confront injustice; to address globally urgent questions collectively; and to imagine a world in which there may, one day, be less need to speak constantly of competitiveness, strategic autonomy, sovereignty, security, preparedness and resilience.

Could such a world ever exist? Artists may be among the few who still dare to answer: why not? Even if they do not indulge in the naïve belief that such a world can ever be fully achieved, they can lead the vital process of imagining, debating and rehearsing it. Could political trust in culture and the arts to lead that dialogue become a defining feature of Europe's global role?

The state of culture today is therefore the state of confronting several decisive questions at once. It is a state of crossroads, as we are walking several tightropes simultaneously.

The first concerns the balance between enabling cultural agency — the freedom to produce meaning — and treating culture as an instrument for predefined objectives. Culture is increasingly recognised as a public good and a foundation of life. The question is whether it will be granted the power to act on that recognition, or whether it will simply be absorbed into larger political agendas whose priorities have already been determined elsewhere.

The second tightrope is not merely a question of balancing '*Europe for Culture*' with '*Culture for Europe*'. It is about whether the political momentum achieved at EU level, despite the considerable scepticism that many in the sector understandably share, can lead to a genuine policy transformation. Can the Culture Compass secure culture a permanent and strong place within major political discussions? Or will it become another promise without delivery — one accompanied by a growing list of

expectations and another layer in the accumulating snowball of cultural-policy narratives?

Narratives remain narratives. What is needed now is robust policy. If culture is a public good, this must be reflected in sustained public investment, fair working conditions, institutional autonomy and equal access to a diverse cultural life. If culture is a strategic asset, cultural actors must be treated as strategic partners rather than as delivery mechanisms. If artistic freedom is a pillar of democracy, as the European Democracy Shield proclaims, it must be understood urgently as a lived capacity: the capacity to exercise freedom, practise it and give it form every day. It cannot remain merely a legal principle concerned with direct threats, censorship and interference, even if those are also real and need to be tackled. Freedom requires time, resources, social protection, institutional trust and the ability to take risks without losing one's livelihood.

The final question is directed towards the cultural sector itself. Should greater agency be granted, should political trust emerge and should the conditions for freedom improve, would the sector be prepared to consolidate its leadership? And even if these conditions are not granted, can it begin to do so nevertheless? Can the sector commit to the freedom to articulate its own values, build shared visions, take responsibility, exercise courage and lead? Can the cultural sector emancipate from agendas, narratives and 'orders of worth' it does not own?

Culture is being called upon because Europe urgently needs imagination, plurality, meaning and the courage to question what appears inevitable. The decisive issue is whether culture will continue to be valued mainly for carrying agendas defined elsewhere, or whether it will be trusted, and prepared, to become an autonomous co-author of Europe's future.

Annex I - Interview participants

Giorgio Bacchiega, AMATEO

Gerbrand Bas, Creative FED—European Federation for Creative Economy

Julie Belgrado, Federation of European Screen Directors

Vittorio Bianco, ENCC—European Network of Cultural Centres

Laurent Bigarella, Reset!

Susanna Brozzu, EVA—European Visual Artists

Iarlaith Cartúir, Opera Europa

Anita Debaere, Pearle*

Kathrin Deventer, EFA—European Festival Association

Cécile Despringre, SAA—Society of Audiovisual Authors

Elisa Evangelisti, EVA—European Visual Artists

Irene Garofalo, ELIA—European League of Institutes of the Arts

Nina George, EWC—European Writers Council

Audrey Jungers, Opera Europa

Ulrike Kuner, EAIPA—European Association of Independent Performing Arts

Valérie Le Plouhinec, CEATL—European Council of Literary Translators' Associations

Menno Liauw, FUTURES

Claire McGuire, IFLA—International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

Manon Moulin, Reset!

Francesca Novajra, CEATL—European Council of Literary Translators' Associations

Julia Pagel, NEMO—Network of European Museum Organisations

Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic, Europa Nostra

Barbara Revelli, ELIA—European League of Institutes of the Arts

Alejandra Rosales, EVA—European Visual Artists

Annica Ryng, SAA—Society of Audiovisual Authors

Karen Stone, Opera Europa

Katharina Weinert, EMC—European Music Council

Annex II - Survey respondents to the State of Culture Barometer survey

In total, 483 individuals responded to the survey.

Number of respondents by country

Albania 1; Austria 6; Belgium 23; Bulgaria 43; Croatia 17; Cyprus 3; Czechia 13; Denmark 6; Estonia 1; Finland 4; France 16; Georgia 1; Germany 29; Greece 29; Hungary 1; Ireland 8; Italy 26; Latvia 5; Lithuania 4; Malta 17; Netherlands 32; North Macedonia 8; Norway 2; Poland 13; Portugal 17; Romania 10; Serbia 29; Slovakia 2; Slovenia 15; Spain 28; Sweden 14; Switzerland 3; Türkiye 7; Ukraine 6; United Kingdom 16; Other 28.

1. Number of responses by sector

Sector	Number	Percentage
Architecture	33	6.8%
Archives	38	7.9%
Artistic craft	50	10.4%
Audiovisual	93	19.3%
Design	49	10.1%
Fashion	8	1.7%
Heritage	101	20.9%
Libraries	33	6.8%

Literature, books and publishing	73	15.1%
Museums	72	14.9%
Music	132	27.3%
Other	100	20.7%
Performing arts	232	48.0%
Visual arts	152	31.5%

2. Number of respondents by gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	322	66.7%
Male	146	30.2%
Other	9	1.9%
Prefer not to say	6	1.2%

3. Number of respondents by age

Age	Number	Percentage
18-24	24	5%
25-34	89	18.4%
35-44	151	31.3%
45-54	129	26.7%
55-64	87	18%
65+	24	5%

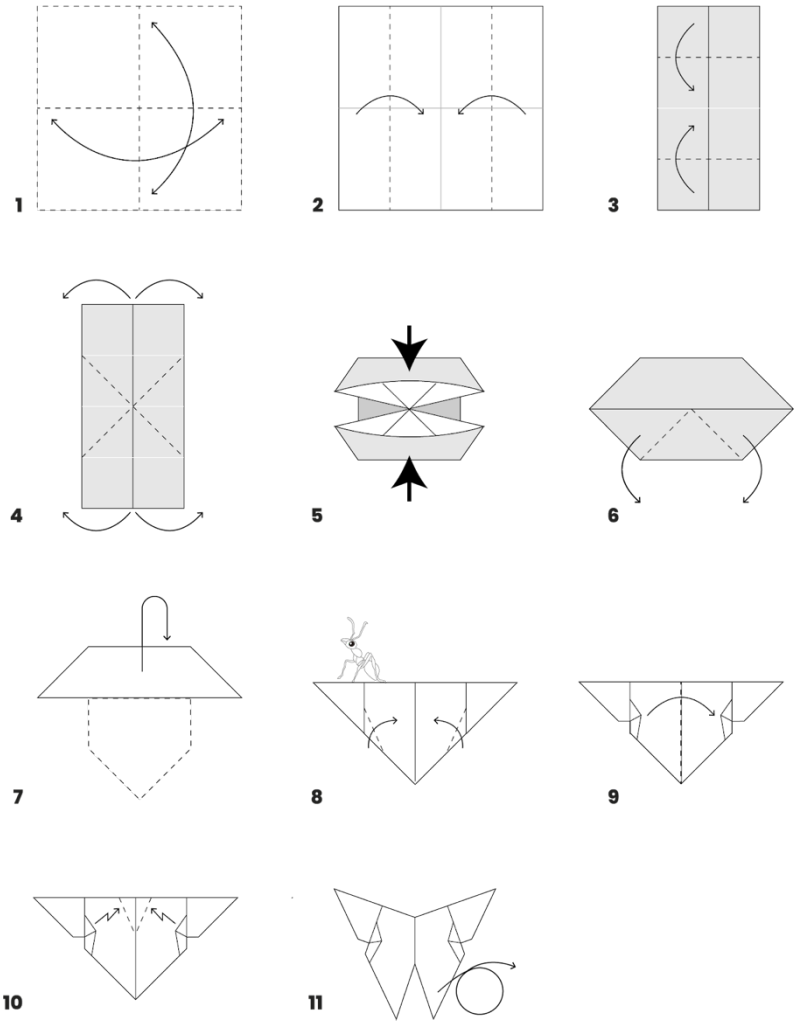
4. Number of responses by structure

Type of structure	Number	Percentage
For-profit	28	5.8%
Freelance / self-employed	171	35.4%
Non-profit company	180	37.3%
Public cultural institution	78	16.1%
University / research institution company	26	5.4%

5. Number of responses by area of activity

Main area of activity	Number	Percentage
Advocacy / network professional	90	18.6%
Artist / creator / performer	164	34.0%
Community / participation worker	50	10.4%
Critic / journalist	17	3.5%
Curator / programmer / producer	145	30.0%
Heritage / collections / conservation professional	33	6.8%
Manager / administrator / director	214	44.3%
Public official / funder	23	4.8%
Publisher / distributor / agent	16	3.3%
Researcher / educator	115	23.8%
Technician / production support	14	2.9%

We take care of the cultural ecosystem



Design: Lulú Soto, 2024

Find out more and subscribe to our newsletter at cultureactioneurope.org

IG [culture_action_europe]

LI [Culture Action Europe]

Co-funded by the European Union
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders. The European Union cannot be held responsible for them.