#CulturalDealEU

ANNUAL POLICY CONVERSATION 2026



KEY TAKEAWAYS AND MESSAGES

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On 3 February 2026 at BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts (Brussels, Belgium), the initiators of a **Cultural Deal for Europe**: the **European Cultural Foundation** (ECF), **Culture Action Europe** (CAE), and **Europa Nostra**, hosted the sixth Annual Policy Conversation: "When Culture Wins, Europe Wins!"

Over the years, the Cultural Deal for Europe Annual Policy Conversation has become a flagship cultural policy event in Brussels. It was no different this year, with more than 250 representatives from the EU institutions, national governments, local and regional authorities, academia, and the broader culture, cultural heritage, and cultural and creative sectors coming together to discuss:

- What must be done to secure a strong place of culture and cultural heritage in the next EU budget (2028-2034), and a well-resourced **AgoraEU** programme?
- How will the new strategy of the Commission, **the Culture Compass for Europe**, address key European challenges through culture?
- How can EU institutions and the wider civil society sector, including foundations, work together to strengthen Europe as a political and cultural project?

Here are the main takeaways from this year's Cultural Deal for Europe policy conversation, and what European policy-makers and civil society organisations intend to do to strengthen culture and cultural heritage in Europe's future.

Watch the full recording of the event **here**.

Find pictures from the event **here**.

CULTURE IS EUROPE'S DEFENCE LINE



"OUR GATHERING TAKES PLACE IN AN ART SPACE. OUR DISCUSSION SHOULD BE INSPIRED BY IMAGINATION AND BY ARTISTS THEMSELVES."

- CHRISTOPHE SLAGMUYLDER, CEO AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF BOZAR



In his welcoming remarks, Christophe Slagmuylder stressed that Europe must be bolder in defending the values that art and culture embody - values that can no longer be taken for granted. As BOZAR prepares its centenary programme for 2028, he reflected on how cultural institutions, like Europe itself, must make long-term decisions that meaningfully shape the next hundred years. Europe must tell an appealing story through the arts, and with artists.



“CULTURE IS NOT A LUXURY. IT IS EUROPE’S DEFENCE LINE AND FOUNDATION. EUROPE MUST CHOOSE: WILL CULTURE REMAIN ON THE MARGINS OR BECOME CENTRAL TO CORE EU POLITICAL DECISIONS?”

- ISABELLE SCHWARZ, PUBLIC POLICY DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN CULTURAL FOUNDATION

Isabelle Schwarz highlighted the central argument of the day: Europe cannot protect democracy if it does not protect culture. Artists and cultural actors are among the first to be targeted when democratic norms weaken, and this makes cultural investment a matter of political resilience. While she commended the Culture Compass for Europe as a constructive reference point, she emphasised that guidelines alone are insufficient. What Europe needs is political will, long-term commitment, and much stronger investment. This moment calls for a Cultural Deal for Europe - a moral and political imperative.

The demands of the Cultural Deal for Europe include:

- placing culture at the heart of the next multiannual budget of the EU (2028-2034),
- strengthening the role of culture across major EU programmes (from Horizon Europe to Erasmus+ and the EU’s external action),
- ensuring that culture appears in major political speeches, from the State of the Union to Davos and Munich,
- and achieving a long overdue increase of EU investment in culture to 2%.



SEEK DIALOGUE, AND NOT ONLY WITHIN OUR BUBBLE

"WE NEED A COALITION OF THE WILLING TO FIGHT FOR CULTURE, IN DIALOGUE WITH OTHER NON-CULTURE PARTNERS, AND WE NEED MEMBER STATES TO BE ON BOARD, INCLUDING THE BIG ONES."

-MEP NELA RIEHL, CHAIR OF THE EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE (CULT) OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



In her opening remarks, MEP Nela Riehl provided insights into CULT Committee priorities for 2026, including work on AgoraEU, the EU's multiannual budget negotiations, the revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, and the Committee's own-initiative report on the impact of AI on cultural and creative sectors.

She encouraged stronger cooperation between CULT and other European Parliament committees - especially BUDG - to ensure that culture is included across funding streams such as European Social Fund+ or Horizon Europe. The Culture Compass should serve not only as a bridge for EU institutions, but also as a tool for citizens and cultural actors. From her perspective, the Compass is a firm basis to shape the agenda of culture policy over the years to come, even if the CULT Committee argues that it is still necessary to strengthen the actions outlined.

One of the final points raised was the importance of adopting a trustworthy, ethical approach to AI. Reflecting on the rapid development and implications of AI for cultural sectors, MEP Nela Riehl acknowledged that we all need to catch up with rapid developments. Looking into the future, she remarked that the cultural and creative sectors must recognise that the development and deployment of AI is part of our reality, so we need to find ways to make the most of it and make sure that it is human-centred.

CULTURE SHOULD NOT HAVE TO FISH FOR FUNDING

The next session provided a space for dialogue between four MEPs of diverse portfolios on the current progress and challenges in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF, EU's long-term budget) negotiations. The speakers joining were MEP Hélder Sousa Silva from the Committee on Budgets (BUDG), MEP Marcos Ros Sempere from the Committee on Regional Development (REGI) as well as MEP Zoltán Tarr and MEP Hannes Heide, both from the CULT Committee.

The speakers much welcomed the growing community engaging with the Cultural Deal for Europe - as shown at this event - acknowledging it as a sign of broader mobilisation. In its draft opinion report on the next MFF, the CULT Committee intends to propose an increase of the AgoraEU budget to €12 billion, while some political groups, such as the Greens, call for €17.5 billion. The MEPs also discussed the important role played by civil society in influencing European policy, sometimes being much more influential than MEPs.

"AGORAEU OFFERS A VERY GOOD STARTING POINT FOR NEGOTIATING FUNDING FOR CULTURE IN THE NEXT EU BUDGET, EVEN IF THE NEGOTIATIONS ON IT BETWEEN THE THREE INSTITUTIONS STARTED ONLY AT THE END OF JANUARY"

-MEP ZOLTÁN TARR, SHADOW RAPPORTEUR ON THE AGORAEU PROPOSAL



Turning to the structure of the next MFF, MEP Marco Ros Sempere expressed concern that proposals for National and Regional Partnership Plans could undermine the role of regions in distributing funding, something the REGI Committee is actively examining. They also reiterated that a 2% investment target for culture should apply horizontally across all EU spending programmes.

While public funding remains crucial, the conversation also acknowledged the need to remain vigilant when democratic values are directly challenged by some Member States, as this directly affects the cultural field.

Lastly, the speakers underlined that closer synergies and relationships should be pursued between culture, philanthropic organisations, and the public and private sectors at all levels, including the local and regional level. Given the current context in which cultural independence and artistic freedom are under grave threat, greater collaboration and partnerships between the public and private sectors could represent a step in the right direction so long as they safeguard the independence of cultural initiatives.







CULTURE AND THE ARTS SHOULD NEVER RESPECT FORTRESSES





"WE NEED TO BRING MORE URGENCY IN CONNECTING CULTURE TO GLOBAL STRATEGIC ISSUES, AS CULTURE IS BECOMING A STRATEGIC LEVER IN THE FIGHT FOR POWER IN THE WORLD."

- LUUK VAN MIDELAAR, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE BRUSSELS INSTITUTE FOR GEOPOLITICS

An open exchange took place next for civil society actors, stakeholders and MEPs present to share their thoughts and reflections. The topics raised included artistic research, culture and the arts in education, cultural infrastructure as libraries for Europe, sectoral approaches to funding, artistic freedom, AI and digital innovation, as well as international cooperation through culture.

The open exchange touched upon many of the struggles that the cultural and creative sectors face, both within the context of negotiations on the EU budget, as well as on a global level in which European democracy, values and culture are under threat. At the same time, the contributions underscored the importance of a Cultural Deal for Europe to harness the transformative potential of culture to face current ruptures and challenges.






Key points raised by cultural stakeholders included:

- The importance of **arts education and artistic research** for democracy, civic resilience, and wellbeing.
- Recognition of **libraries as vital democratic infrastructure** requiring renewed support.
- Finding the right balance between reinventing and preserving Europe, with initiatives such as **Civitates: The European Democracy Fund**.
- The sectoral approach within Creative Europe, especially for the music sector (**Music Moves Europe**), highlighted as effective and worth preserving.
- **Perform Europe** was cited as a positive example of cross-sectoral mobility programming.
- The need to address how AI and large language models (LLMs) shape **cultural access and visibility**.
- European artists face growing pressures, and some see potential for a **European Artistic Freedom Act**, inspired by the recent European Media Freedom Act.

WE HAVE THE COMPASS, NOW WE NEED THE DEAL

Commissioner Micallef outlined several upcoming initiatives linked to the Compass, including an EU Artists' Charter establishing principles for fair working conditions, and an AI Strategy for the cultural and creative sectors to be developed together with Vice-President Virkkunen, structured around innovation, creators' rights, and digital skills.

He emphasised the renewed Structured Dialogue with civil society as a key mechanism for taking the Compass forward, with a new data hub set to support evidence-based cultural policymaking. With the flagship actions of the Compass still being shaped, the views of civil society organisations and wider cultural and creative sectors will prove pivotal in ensuring that the Culture Compass' actions fully reflect and address the challenges and needs of creatives across Europe.



"THE CULTURE COMPASS HAS BEEN WELCOMED BY THE COLLEGE OF COMMISSIONERS, BUT ADOPTING A JOINT DECLARATION AMONG THE EU INSTITUTIONS, AND THEN THE WAY FORWARD, WILL BE THE REAL TEST. WE DO HAVE THE COMPASS, BUT WE DO NOT, YET, HAVE THE DEAL".

-GLENN MICALLEF
EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER FOR INTERGENERATIONAL FAIRNESS, YOUTH, CULTURE AND SPORT



On the subject of working conditions, the Commissioner underlined the importance of everyone having the chance to create and to follow their artistic dreams. The pilot basic income scheme for artists in Ireland, the special status for artists in France and Belgium, and the artist social security fund in Germany were all highlighted as sources of inspiration for the upcoming EU Artists' Charter. Going one step beyond, the Commissioner expressed his goal for ensuring that one of the conditions to receive EU funding in the cultural sector is for the people working on the project to receive fair and proper remuneration.

Responding to his remarks, Lars Ebert, Secretary-General of Culture Action Europe, stated the very strong sense of ownership felt by the cultural and creative sectors with the Culture Compass, whose priorities align closely with the values of the Cultural Deal for Europe. He also reiterated that the representatives of European cultural civil society want to "help Compass become the Deal", and help build the case for culture with high-level EU decision-makers, including the European Commissioner for Budget Piotr Serafin or the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen.





CULTURE IS NOT AN ORNAMENT, IT IS A FUNDAMENT

"IN THIS ROOM, WE REPRESENT LARGE GROUPS OF CULTURAL OPERATORS, ARTISTS, VOLUNTEERS, CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS - DO COUNT ON US AS THE CULTURAL TROOPS OF EUROPE."

-SNEŠKA QUAEDVLIEG-MIHAILOVIC, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF EUROPA NOSTRA



Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailovic closed the event by calling for the political momentum needed to transform the Culture Compass into a true Cultural Deal for Europe. Drawing inspiration from the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, she suggested that Europe might need an entire decade dedicated to culture. She also pointed out that arts and heritage are two sides of the same coin, and Europe's culture and heritage are not its soft power, but its core and powerful force.

The Secretary-General of Europa Nostra emphasised the value of public–private partnerships, including greater involvement of philanthropic actors, and encouraged more frequent exchanges within European institutions, perhaps even in the European Parliament hemicycle itself.

For European culture to act both as a sector and a vector, we must not only achieve 2% of funding for culture in the next EU budget, but guarantee that culture remains at the heart of policy conversations and negotiations in the future. An intergroup for culture in the European Parliament across Committees could support this goal. Lastly, it is down to all of us to continue this conversation every day over the years to come.







PHOTOS BY CHRIS MARCHAL

CULTURAL DEAL FOR EUROPE
OUR CALLS TO ACTION 2026

The Cultural Deal for Europe partners - European Cultural Foundation, Culture Action Europe and Europa Nostra - together with the wider cultural civil society, are encouraged by the positive spirit leveraged at our Brussels Annual Policy event (3 February 2026). We campaigned for a new EU strategic framework for culture and we now have a Culture Compass for Europe. We advocated for 2% for culture in the next EU budget (2028-2034), and the European Commission has proposed a noticeable increase of the culture budget.

However, this is not yet a done deal, and we do not yet have a Cultural Deal for Europe. To strengthen the wins, there is only one way: **we must act together, and we must act now.** As Europe enters a decisive phase for its long-term budget and strategic direction, we must join forces to ensure that culture is placed where it belongs: at the heart of the European project.

Together, we will continue to:

- **Advocate within the European Commission towards non-culture directorates**, including Budget, Competitiveness, Research, Cohesion, Digital and External Action to ensure culture is embedded across key political priorities, strategies and programmes.
- **Demand a Culture Compass for Europe** with adequate programming and resources, making sure that the Compass becomes the Deal.
- **Convince the Members of the European Parliament, other than the CULT committee members, on the value of culture**. This includes approaching BUDG, REGI and other committees to defend culture in the negotiations on AgoraEU and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034.
- **Engage with Member States** - crucial to the outcome of the negotiations - to secure long-term investment in culture and recognition of artistic freedom, fair working conditions and cultural rights as Union priorities.

CULTURAL DEAL FOR EUROPE
OUR CALLS TO ACTION 2026

- **Coordinate our messaging as cultural civil society**, presenting shared evidence and proposals in the Structured Dialogue and in direct exchanges with EU institutions, ensuring our collective voice carries weight.
- **Expand and deepen alliances beyond the cultural field**, collaborating with actors working on democracy, education, social cohesion, regional and urban development, digital transformation, international relations and philanthropy to demonstrate culture's contribution to Europe's strategic goals.
- **Call on the EU to create a legal and fiscal environment allowing public-private partnerships and structured collaboration with philanthropy** to have more leverage, scale and impact. Foundations and philanthropic networks will remain key partners in amplifying cultural resilience and innovation.
- **Stand together for better working conditions for artists and cultural professionals**, contributing to the EU Artists' Charter and advocating for fair remuneration and social protection to become standard in EU-funded projects.
- **Promote and defend cultural spaces as democratic spaces**, from libraries to local cultural centres, ensuring they are recognised and supported as essential public infrastructure across Europe.
- **Raise culture's visibility at the highest political level**, ensuring it features in key political speeches, debates and strategic conversations as Europe prepares for a new budget cycle and institutional agenda.

Our collective strength lies in working together, across sectors, borders and institutions. Now is **the moment for cultural civil society to join forces**, making sure that culture is not only protected, but recognised as a force shaping Europe's future.

From Cultural Deal for Europe partners: thank you to all who helped us shape the Annual Policy Conversation 2026, and we are looking forward to working with you in the coming months!











ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

Culture Action Europe (CAE) is the major European network of cultural networks, organisations, artists, activists, academics and policymakers. CAE is the first port of call for informed opinion and debate about arts and cultural policy in Europe. As the only intersectoral network, it brings together all practices in culture, from the performing arts to literature, the visual arts, design and cross-arts initiatives, to community centres and activist groups.
www.cultureactioneurope.org

Europa Nostra is the European voice of civil society committed to safeguarding and promoting cultural and natural heritage. It is a pan-European federation of heritage NGOs, supported by a wide network of public bodies, private companies and individuals. It is recognised as the largest and the most representative heritage network in Europe. Europa Nostra actively contributes to the definition and implementation of European strategies and policies related to heritage, through a participatory dialogue with European Institutions and the coordination of the European Heritage Alliance 3.3
www.europanostra.org

European Cultural Foundation (ECF) promotes a European sentiment through developing and supporting cultural initiatives that let us share, experience and imagine Europe. The first foundation with a European mission and vision (founded 1954), ECF believes in the power of culture to achieve a united Europe of diversity, democracy and freedoms, where solidarity, mutual respect and collaboration contribute to a shared sense of belonging.
www.culturalfoundation.eu

Bozar offers a dynamic and diversified cultural programme of concerts and exhibitions: a multidisciplinary approach in which debates, theatre, cinema, literature and other disciplines meet to reflect on the connections between art and society.
www.bozar.be



STAY CONNECTED

Illustrated elements used in CDEU branding by **Menah Wellen**

You can find more pictures of the event on the CDEU website. Please credit Chris Marchal, **www.chrismarchal.com**.

We'd like to stay connected via our **BlueSky** and **LinkedIn** pages, and you are always welcome to join the conversation using #CulturalDealEU.

Learn more about the Cultural Deal for Europe at **culturaldeal.eu**



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