Event report #5

2024: Towards a refreshed EU external cultural agenda

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On June 27th, 2023 at the European Parliament in Brussels, culture Solutions held a roundtable on "Policy Directions in EU International Cultural Relations, towards 2024"[1] in collaboration with MEP Mrs Salima Yenbou, rapporteur on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations for the CULT Committee.

The debates addressed three main questions:
1. Taking stock: which coherence efforts have been made since 2020 to ensure increased EU funding and human capacities for culture in external action? Are the results there?
2. What has been the impact of the war in Ukraine on the implementation of the EU International Cultural Relations agenda?
3. What should be the priorities of the next European Parliament, Council and Commission in the field of EU International Cultural Relations for 2024-2029?

This event report presents the content of the debates between the 50-selected participants from EU institutions, Member States, civil society networks and international organisations, who spoke under the Chatham House rule.

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1. culture Solutions, Policy Directions in EU International Cultural Relations, towards 2024,
https://www.culturesolutions.eu/events/policy-directions-in-eu-international-cultural-relations-towards-2024/

Taking stock

Policy frameworks

Despite many disagreements over the course of the discussion, one point was unchallenged: culture, seen by some around the table as the foundation and basis of the European integration project, cannot be left aside when engaging with external partners. How best to engage culturally however, has been, should and probably will remain the subject of many debates to come.

The 2022 "Report on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for[2]International Cultural Relations for CULT" was recognised as a constructive one, offering a balanced analysis and necessary thinking on progress made so far.

The "Yenbou report" noted that the 2016 Joint Communication document is however only a compass providing strategic orientation, not a strategy as such. Some participants called for the Council to adopt a full-fledged (and updated) strategy on EU international cultural relations.

The question of identification and cohesion was raised and remained unaddressed: what is the face of the EU outside? If Member States have their cultural institutes (e.g. Goethe Institut, Institut francais, Instituto Cervantes), what could be the EU's equivalent? Is EU strategic communications and visibility policy enough? One participant shared his experience that, in third countries, the perception of the EU, promoting its supposed "universal values" had significantly deteriorated since the COVID-19 pandemic (an analysis to be considered with the mixed conclusions of recent perceptions studies in key "strategic" partner countries).[3]

Some participants underlined the interlinkages between the internal and external dimensions of cultural flows and realities, and their implications: the challenges experienced by the European cultural sector are also realities shared by others outside of EU borders; for Europeans, it is often outside the EU that one starts to be aware of his/her own European identity, beyond national origin, deeply rooted in cultural elements.

EU vision for ICR: co-creation, from idea to practice

The main principles of the 2016 Joint Communication (co-creation, mutuality and dialogue) were not challenged as such during the round table. The European Spaces of Culture initiatives implemented by EUNIC[4] try to follow them, yet some critics dared to express some doubts about European cultural institutes' domination. Trying to avoid a Euro-centric view and to genuinely listen is a constant quest.

There was a broad consensus in the room that the 2016 Joint Communication[5] and the external part of the 2018 Agenda for

2. For the CULT report, that takes into account the opinions of associated AFET and DEVE committees, and the subsequent European Parliament decision, see https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0279_EN.html and https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0444_EN.html
For culture Solutions' contribution, see Making the difference: culture Solutions' recommendations reflected in the 14 December 2022 European Parliament's Resolution, https://www.culturesolutions.eu/articles/culture-solutions-recommendations-reflected-in-european-parliaments-resolution/

3. PPMi, PD-PCF, B&S Europe, Update of the 2015 Perception Study, https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/Update%20of%20the%202015%20Perception%20Study%2C%20Executive%20Summary%20and%20Main%20Report%20%28Volume%201%20and%202%29.pdf

4. EUNIC, European Spaces of Culture, https://europeanspacesofculture.eu

5. JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations, JOIN/2016/029 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN%3A2016%3A29%3AFIN

culture[6] have been implemented, within the available resources. Yet there was also a shared understanding of the need for more. More projects, more resources and more budget for this approach, going from pilot projects to a long-term mindset and modus operandi.

EU cultural external action has not really been prioritised at the political level over the last years, and this has had consequences. In the current "geopolitical Commission" (the title self-attributed to the von der Leyen College), as underlined by one participant, making the case for culture "has become really difficult" because of the new "hard" policy priorities and lack of political leadership.

Headquarters still have very limited capacity to push the external cultural agenda forward. Staff who are appointed cultural focal points in EU Delegations are still under-used and overwhelmed. Other EU staff are hardly familiar with the cultural dimensions of their work. During the roundtable, training was suggested as one line of answer to solve that issue (the authors of this report have also been informed that some new efforts are currently being made in that field by the Commission and the EEAS, in collaboration with EUNIC).

Critical assessments were made on the implementation conditions and mindset of the Joint Communication and existing policy frameworks. In thinking of the need for co-creation for better, more efficient, more impactful external cultural relations' projects, the questions of mobility, visas, justice in culture and equality came to the table.

One participant considered that Europeans, including Member States' cultural institutes, for instance in the design of the "spaces of culture" projects, were still too often the ones setting the tone, in contradiction with the co-creation principle. A perspective not shared by everyone, but that reflected the sensitivity and importance attached to the topic of dialogue and learning.

Concretely, EU ICR should enable non-European creators and civil society representatives to come to the EU in an effort to decolonise artistic practice. The project DECONFINING[7] was put forward as an example of intercontinental mobility and co-creation between the EU and Africa. Mobility implies greater coordination between culture and borders' management, concretely raising awareness among DG HOME and Member States' embassies for the need for visas for greater cultural cooperation, a field where presence in-person makes a difference.

Reciprocity in co-creation was put forward to make sure projects have an impact on tackling global problems, taking into account other cultures' perspectives. It must be borne in mind that there is great diversity of cultural expressions and

6. 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/?uri=COM%3A2018%3A267%3AFIN
7. DECONFINING Arts, Culture, & Policies in Europe & Africa, https://deconfining.eu/

contexts even within a partner country, as is the case of the different regions of Turkey,[8] which warrants an approach tailored to local realities. Non-European countries and partners should also be involved in the process of updating the EU strategic approach to ICR. One has to be aware of the European biases that exist when designing a project or preparing a policy document. Therefore, beyond an invitation to dialogue with the EU, the format of communication and meetings themselves should be co-designed too, as they include integrated norms and codes that can be different between cultures.

Such a collaborative and intercultural effort by Europeans is essential in all cultural relationships (and even more so in post-colonial relations) because it leads to renewed and mutual approaches and understanding of common (if not shared) history. Cultural relations have the potential to promote mutual understanding and trust-building, and citizens should be the first beneficiaries of these policies. Drawing a parallel with climate justice, local - and sometimes traditional - knowledge should be promoted as a guide in policy-design with non-European partners.

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Ukraine and geopolitics

Well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU's cultural aspirations have been caught up by the reality of geopolitics and hard power's strategies applied to culture[9] - with the inevitable example of

Russian misinformation in West and central Africa. Actors like China do not miss an opportunity to enter the cultural sectors by financing museums, like in the case of Senegal where it dedicated 30 millions euros to the construction of a museum for artefacts to be restituted by European countries.[10]

For certain participants, the risk for recipient countries or their populations is that such initiatives tie them up to Chinese culture and influence too, maintaining culture in a zone of influence rather than free expression for the individuals and preservation of people's memory. In their view, there is a risk that Russia and China actually make African countries dependent and damage the freedom of expression, in particular artistic expression. In that regard, the example of a controversial programme funded by China training African journalists and encouraging them to avoid criticising politicians, was quoted.[11] It was also reminded that media and culture are two intrinsically linked fields.

For some around the table, reality is too harsh for an idealistic vision of ICR. In their view, the cultural relations community (of which they didn't consider themselves part of) have achieved too little since 2016. This statement came as a bit of a shock for culture professionals in the room and reflected a growing polarisation of views on the role of culture in EU's external action.

"Realists" consider that the EU soft power's

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8. culture Solutions, Composing trust #2: EU-Turkey cultural relations – what next?, https://www.culturesolutions.eu/podcast/eu-turkey-cultural-relations-what-next/

9. culture Solutions, #FrenchPresidency – Balancing Paris Cultural Geopolitics and EU international cultural relations, https://www.culturesolutions.eu/articles/french-presidency/

10. The New York Times, Senegal's Museum of Black Civilizations Welcomes Some Treasures Home, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/arts/design/museum-of-black-civilizations-restitution-senegal-macron.html

11. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, China's Influence on African Media, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinas-influence-on-african-media/

model, which encompasses Cultural Diplomacy, is outdated, and not listened to any longer. For them, the liberal values defended through EU cultural projects are disputed and at threat, but they don't seem to be able to put forward a credible alternative cultural approach. For them, as one participant put it, the EU will not achieve its goal of value promotion through film festivals, citing the example of subtle and informal censorship of LGBTQI+ themes by authorities in some partner countries.

The position triggered bold reactions from other participants arguing, on the basis of recent research and personal experiences, that the integration of culture - including the media and audiovisual - among foreign policy tools is the only way forward for the EU to matter on the global stage. Similarly, (film) festivals are not just about artistic shows, they also provide safe, precious and free spaces for people to meet, learn, train themselves, network, and become more professional.

This debate shows that a renewed candid assessment of existing and potential EU soft power's tools (including those of Member States), proportionate to present and potential global threats and cooperation opportunities, is needed. To remain strategically relevant, the EU and the Member States, as a political community, will have to constantly seek the right balance between hard and soft power engagement. This implies, for some participants, stepping up intelligence strategy and for others connecting the dots between ICR and security and defence. ICR is currently absent from the EU security policy framework (with the exception of cultural heritage protection in conflict[12] and fight against illicit trafficking of cultural goods). Thus, relations between cultural context, action, peace and security should be more systematically included in future

EU's foreign strategies.

Furthermore, cultural aspects of conflict cannot be ignored with the repercussions ranging from looting, illicit trafficking of cultural goods serving terrorism, to damaging cultural heritage of people living in conflict zones (such as Palestine). In that sense, soft and hard power should not be opposed or compared but rather seen as a continuum of the EU's capacity, credibility and legitimacy on the global scene. Whether the EU is still seen as a promoter of peace and trustable cultural partner in times of war on the European continent will have to be regularly re-assessed.

The 2024 agenda and the value of cultural spaces worldwide

In increasingly tense international relations, marked by the manipulation of cultural expressions and the shrinking spaces of democratic expression, the safeguard of cultural spaces through International Cultural Relations and Cultural Diplomacy sticking to their guiding principles is essential. Preaching co-creation with non-European partners is good, applying and practising it for real is even more crucial.

To walk the talk, the EU will need to invest much more significantly in the professionnalisation and adaptation of the cultural and creative sectors in partner countries, while encouraging more explicitly the internationalisation of European cultural organisations and networks.

In figuring out the EU's common cultural face, even before considering a single brand (such as Team Europe or European

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12. culture Solutions, cS Brief #12: Cultural Heritage Protection in crises: strengthening the EU's role, https://www.culturesolutions.eu/publications/cs-brief-12-cultural-heritage-protection-in-crises/

spaces of culture), competition should be avoided between European cultural actors in the field (Member States' institutes, artistic organisations, cultural networks, NGOs, cultural experts). It should also be recognised that actors, from Member States to cultural institutes, have their specificities. In this environment, EU institutions should find and be given their own relevant and enabling space and encourage more inputs from NGO and partner countries. The boundaries of subsidiarity and complementarity will have to be redefined regularly and on a context-sensitive basis, and expressed in corresponding Council conclusions.

The EU has a role to play in empowering its partner countries (especially former colonies, if they wish so) to own their culture and not be dependent on the basis of external financing, which in the long-run makes them dependent culturally-wise. A combined ICR and Cultural Diplomacy approach is needed to avoid following the temptation of making culture a hard power tool as Russia and China are doing, especially on the African continent.

There is also space for cooperation with partner countries in training their cultural management sector, to accompany them where needed for the creation, promotion and safeguard of their cultural sector and heritage. For example, festivals designed by Delegations as an exercise of Cultural Diplomacy could be more than cultural events - they could also be seen as an occasion to train local cultural professionals.

The restitution of cultural heritage, addressed several times during the roundtable and also mentioned in the Yenbou report, will probably deserve many more collective exchanges among Member States before crystallising into an EU policy stance. As one participant stressed out, this debate is not mature enough among Member States and institutions to be translated into clear strategic directions and actions. To be continued after 2024.

In thinking of EU cultural action abroad, private actors should not be overlooked because they too have an influence and impact on the way European culture is diffused and looked at. Large broadcasters and streamers should also pay attention to freedom of expression, including artistic freedom, both within the EU and outside.

Conclusions and way forward

1. In the next 18 months, Member States and the European Commission will work regularly on the EU action plan for EU International Cultural Relations adopted in December 2022,[13] which covers many of the above-mentioned topics discussed at the 27 June roundtable. Member States' representatives from both foreign affairs and culture ministries will need to produce concrete proposals in the framework of a short-term open method coordination (OMC).[14] In parallel, the European Commission is communicating on its achievements, as part of the UNESCO 2005 Convention periodic reporting process.[15] In this regard, it is crucial to deepen the coordination and collaboration between all the different actors involved in International Cultural Relations: from the various EU and Member States' institutions, through the cultural sector in the EU and beyond, to partner countries and other global players, including UNESCO or the development network. Culture Solutions is happy to contribute to such efforts.

2. Scaling-up the good practices of the 2014-2019 Commission and bringing cultural awareness at the top of the European political agenda remains the only way forward for an impactful European cultural external action globally after 2024. The authors of this report, who participated in the roundtable, suggest to political parties represented in the European Parliament to form a cross-party group committed to keeping the EU ICR agenda high. They also recommend that the hearing of the candidates to the position of European Commission's president include a question on a future International Cultural Relations strategy. As recommended during the roundtable, future Commissioners' letters of mission will have to include International Cultural Relations or at least a cultural dimension for their external mandate. These conditions are a prerequisite for substantive financial investment, specialised human resources, and political engagement with Member States and partners.

3. It is desirable that government and institutions' representatives include and involve culture and creative professionals in the OMC policy-making process. EU policies and projects already care about local perspectives and support the co-creation logic. Efforts have to be put into action now, beyond words and strategies in order to pursue that trend on the ground. Proactive and well-represented cultural networks can serve as examples. There is a need to intensify the mobilisation and lobbying of institutions to ensure the perspective of the cultural practitioners are taken into account.

4. At the end of the day, because money "is the nerve of (cultural) war", more explicit EU external cultural funding lines are needed to obtain results. Member States and EU institutions, if they are clear about their renewed strategic cultural narrative, should be able to push for budgetary innovations. For instance, the case for a more explicit cultural component within the EU Global Gateway, and for alliance with private investors, could be made. Revisiting the place of cultural action in the spectrum of external action can be done by looking at what the other big players, often portrayed as hard powers, are trying to achieve through culture. It is not about

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13. Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 2022/C 466/01, ST/15381/2022/INIT, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022G1207%2801%29

14. European Commission, Cultural policy cooperation at the EU level, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/cultural-policy-cooperation-at-the-eu-level

15. UNESCO, Diversity of Cultural Expressions - Periodic Reports, https://en.unesco.org/creativity/governance/periodic-reports

copying what they do, but instead thinking differently and anticipating their intentions and the risks they entail. A bit bluntly, to paraphrase Marcus Aurelius, "the best revenge is not to be like your enemy."

5. Participants suggested focusing on the effectiveness of commitments and policy initiatives beyond conceptual distinctions between Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations. Cultural Diplomacy is needed in politically constrained times but should not be used to impose European vision and values onto the world and should ensure safe space for independent people-to-people cultural relations to flourish.

6. Partner countries need to be empowered

even more, so they too develop their cultural sector through cooperation on national cultural policies and inclusion of independent cultural stakeholders. The EU can provide advice, support and training, that should not be transformed into clumsy, naive or blunt cultural influence, but rather in the interest of the cultural sector's capacity building, ownership and independence.

7. From this discussion and these key takeaways, one hope, one objective: set the bar high enough so the EU institutional actors and Member States, particularly after the 2024 elections, continue to enjoy and serve the highly powerful cultural assets of their societies.

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