



July 2025



cS Brief #14

Recentering the human and cultural dimension in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership: the Pact for the Mediterranean, a not-to-be-missed opportunity

Elise Cuny¹

On 2 April 2025, the Anna Lindh Foundation organised the first dialogue for the Pact for the Mediterranean in Granada, as part of a series of preparatory events feeding into the European Commission's consultative process to design the New Pact for the Mediterranean.² The Pact's consultations mark an important moment of reflection for the future of these regional relations: are partners thinking in the same way? Do they share the same priorities?

A highly uncertain context is observed in the region: a lasting war in Gaza, a brief but intense Israel-Iran war along rapid political and geopolitical changes in Syria, Turkey, US-Gulf relation along with bilateral frictions (France-Algeria, Algeria-Morocco) and securitisation trend on both shores of the Mediterranean. Amid this multiplication of crises, is there still room for cooperation? Culture, common roots and values, and shared history have long been the binding elements of the Euro-Mediterranean relationship (cf. *Barcelona Declaration*³). How should we rethink cultural cooperation to maintain it through those turbulent times?

The dialogue was organised as a side event of the *Forum for the Future of the Mediterranean*,⁴ gathering the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean, under the Spanish Presidency. The event welcomed discussions on international cultural relations (ICR), youth and civil society mobility in the region, and civil society cooperation across the Mediterranean, among others.

1. Special thanks to Lilian Richieri Hanania and Damien Helly for their review. The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of culture Solutions.

2. Stanicek, B., *Pact for the Mediterranean*. In European Parliament Members' Research Service, "A global Europe: Leveraging our power and partnerships", 20 April 2025.

3. *Barcelona Declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference*, 27-28 November 1995, Office for Official Publications of the European Union.

culture Solutions was represented by Elise Cuny in the panel *“Taking stock of and recalibrating the EU’s international cultural relations in the Euro-Med”*. culture Solutions has long been engaged in analysing the evolution of Euro-Mediterranean relations amid broader geopolitical changes.⁵

This policy brief outlines the main positions and concerns expressed during the panel and extends the analysis to the new parameters in the region and the need to rethink and adapt ICR within the Pact.

The panel was moderated by Alessandro Lamonica, Head of the Public Policies Unit at the Anna Lindh Foundation, and featured contributions from Caterina Carta, Programme Director at the Brussels School of Governance; Haifa Gebis, Head of the Tunisia Creative Europe Desk; Jusaima Moaid-Azm, Substitute Professor at the University of Granada and beneficiary of the MYA–Intercultural Stakeholders Dialogues; and Mercedes Giovinazzo, President of the Biennale des Jeunes Créateurs d’Europe et de la Méditerranée. The panel received comments from Jamal Youssfi, Artistic Director at Cie Nouveaux Disparus, and Souhaila Amri, beneficiary of the MYA–Transformative Youth in Action.

Status quo

Threats and challenges

The panel reflected on the **current state of ICR** in the region and highlighted the significant difficulties, challenges, and constraints faced by cultural professionals and civil societies.

Criticism of the EU’s approach to ICR focused on its failure to **broaden the range of actors** involved in projects, often engaging the same local partners repeatedly, and on the lack of adequate conditions to ensure broader and more **equitable access to these opportunities**.

Despite repeated alerts and concerns from the cultural and artistic community, **visa restrictions and blockages** remain a central issue. For the EU to credibly engage

in cultural relations with the region, a genuine effort must be made to address this cornerstone issue of **artists’ mobility**.

In some countries, civil society organisations face increasing threats for defending fundamental values, and attacks on **freedom of creation and expression** are intensifying.

Wars and conflicts affecting the region damage **cultural heritage**, and causes massive displacements of populations, which often results in the loss of **intangible heritage**. Organisations such as ICOMOS and NGOs like Heritage for Peace do remarkable work in documenting damage to cultural heritage in war-affected areas in the region (Palestine, Gaza, Lebanon).⁶ The EU should take a clearer stance for the defence of heritage and civilians threatened by wars and repression as it does in the case of Ukraine.

4. Union for the Mediterranean, [Forum on the Future of the Mediterranean: Spanish Presidency of the PA-UfM](#).

5. Helly, D., [Post-Ukraine Cultural Mediterranean: Still curious?](#), culture Solutions, 20 June 2022.

6. ICOMOS Palestine, [The Cultural Heritage Devastations in Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Occupied Territories](#) (Documentation and evidence gathered: October 7th - December 16th 2023), 19 December 2023; Heritage for Peace, [Report: Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Lebanon due to the ongoing war](#), April 2025.

Global trends affecting ICR

Cultural and creative sector and cultural relations are affected by global trends of budget cuts and shifting national and geopolitical contexts. Beyond the changes introduced above, the new Trump presidency also brings its share of unpredictability regarding its present and future partners. The US foreign policy is shaped by economic deals and priorities, leading to recent rapprochements with Gulf countries Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates.⁷ The new role of Turkey in Syria along with its internal political destabilisation⁸ also reshapes the region. So does Israel's interventionist stance. Internally, the EU is marked by the rise of the far right pursuing the trend of **migration control**⁹, securitisation and externalisation of borders' control and **devaluation of international cooperation**.

Several global trends were recognised as both challenges and potential opportunities for the evolution of ICR. **Digital transformation**, for instance, offers tools for innovation and wider outreach but also raises concerns about regulation and access. Similarly, cultural professionals can and should play a greater role in the fight against climate change. For instance, at the most recent conference of culture ministers of the Union for the Mediterranean¹⁰, held in Naples in June

2022, there was a strong call to embed culture within climate action strategies.

Previously described geopolitical shifts, notably closer alliances between the US and the Gulf countries, will be an opportunity for the EU and Member States to **clarify their ambition** in the region.

New priorities for the EU

Investment and private sector

The EU's **Global Gateway**¹¹ **investment agenda** has emerged as a key guiding framework for EU's international cooperation, based on a people-to-people approach that cannot be achieved without **intercultural dialogue**. The Global Gateway encourages inter alia private investment to complement or take over from public funding in partner countries. In doing so, it encourages cultural actors to interact with private interests.¹² Private investment presents a valuable opportunity for the cultural sector—and the wider CCIs—to become more **autonomous**, and therefore more **resilient against political interference**. It can contribute to protecting cultural ecosystems, and with them, civil societies.

Even in the presence of private investment, active policy efforts are still needed to strengthen the cultural ecosystems that

7. President Trump is dedicating his second state visit to a three-day mission (12–15 May 2025) to three key countries in the Gulf. According to reports, his administration has discussed the possibility of expediting investments from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar ahead of his trip to the region. Sources: Al Jazeera, "[Trump visits Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE: What to know](#)," 12 May 2025; Al Jazeera, "[US to fast-track investments from Middle East before Trump trip: Report](#)," 10 May 2025.

8. A month after the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, youth-led protests continued to gather momentum in Turkey. "It's the accumulation of anger among millions of young people who have only ever known the AKP and who feel ignored," said a young protester on 19 April 2025. By then, discontent had spread to dozens of secondary schools across the country, triggered by a controversial decision by the AKP's Islamist-conservative government to replace certain teachers—a move widely seen as an attempt to tighten its grip on the education system, sparking a wave of outrage. Source: AFP, "[Un mois après l'arrestation de son plus coriace opposant, Erdogan fait toujours face à la fronde](#)," L'Orient-Le Jour, 19 April 2025.

9. Le Figaro and AFP, "[L'aide publique au développement réduite de 60 milliards d'euros dans le monde en 2025](#)," selon l'AFD, 25 June 2025.

10. [Naples Conference of the Ministers of Culture of the Euro-Mediterranean Region / EU Southern Partnership](#), 17 June 2022.

11. European Commission, Joint Communication [The Global Gateway](#), JOIN/2021/30 final, 2021.

12. See previous work performed by culture Solutions' collaborator Lilian Richieri Hanania with Anne-Thida Norodom and Aude Dumont on Corporate Sustainability Strategies in support of Culture Mediation, monitoring, visibility, advocacy, and knowledge sharing to improve the contribution of the private sector in favor of artists and cultural and creative industries, Final Report, 25 May 2024, Université Paris Cité.

will be the recipients of these funds. This is vital to ensure that the investment reaches the appropriate actors — those who genuinely contribute to the **ecosystem's development**, rather than simply pursuing profit at the expense of social and cultural value. This argument underlines why a **coherent policy framework** remains necessary, and why public action cannot and should not be excluded. Private sector support and investment should **complement, not replace**, the role of the State. Cultural actors encourage neutral public structures capable of delivering public support to cultural actors who contribute to the common values.

Re-nationalisation of EU ICR

The EU is increasingly adopting a more **pragmatic approach** in global affairs, a shift that is accompanied by the rise of **nationalism** across Member States, resulting in a **multi-speed diplomacy**. This trend is evident in efforts to coordinate more closely in the defence of key allies — with the UK-France dynamic in supporting Ukraine¹³ — and in the development of new cultural partnerships. One example is France's support for the ALIPH Foundation, which works to safeguard cultural heritage, backed by Gulf countries — notably the United Arab Emirates, which played a key role in its establishment, and Saudi Arabia, the foundation's second-largest donor.¹⁴

Overall, we see a **re-nationalisation of EU ICR**. This is happening in a broader trend that scholars have described as de-Europeanisation of foreign policy,¹⁵ described as a progressive re-nationalisation of foreign policy in three dimensions:

1. “the structural disintegration of collective policy making institutions;
2. the reconstruction of professional roles in exclusively/predominantly national terms;
3. and a repudiation (implicit or explicit) of well defined and established foundational norms – either procedural or substantive”.¹⁶

Amid this pragmatic and nationalistic trend, little space is left for a full European diplomacy, and commentators have pointed out the notable absence of High Representative Kaja Kallas “from most of the conflict and crisis zones surrounding Europe”.¹⁷

New Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034)

In the negotiations of the Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034), the European Commission must navigate **conflicting priorities and perspectives**, all within a context marked by efforts to simplify programmes and reduce budgets.¹⁸

13. Bloom, D., Caulcutt, L., Lunday C. and Vinocur, N., More governments pledge to join UK and France in sending peacekeepers to Ukraine, Politico, 2 March 2025.

14. Gronlund, M., Inside Aliph, the organisation racing to save the world's heritage, The Art Newspaper, 29 November 2024 ; "Saudi Culture Minister Announces \$30M Funding Commitment for ALIPH Foundation", Art & Deal, 10 February, 2022.

15. Thomas, C. D., The Return of Intergovernmentalism? DeEuropeanisation and EU Foreign Policy Decision-making, Journal of European Integration, 2021, 43:5, 619-635, cites to Szalai (2019) with veteran French and EU diplomat Pierre Vimont saying in 2019 that the member states have ‘backtracked’ in their willingness to develop an EU foreign policy. In fact, a growing number of scholars suspect that the development of a true EU foreign policy has slowed or even been reversed by ‘de-Europeanisation,’ which Tonra (2018) defines as a progressive renationalisation of foreign policy in three dimensions: ‘the structural disintegration of collective policy making institutions’; ‘the reconstruction of professional roles in exclusively/predominantly national terms’; and ‘a repudiation (implicit or explicit) of well defined and established foundational norms – either procedural or substantive.’

16. Tonra, B., "Europeanisation and De-Europeanisation of EU Member State Foreign Policies: Mirror Image or Discrete Phenomenon?" Nortia, 2018.

17. Gros Verheyde, N., But where has Kaja Kallas gone? Analysis, Bruxelles 2, 10 March 2025.

In its 16 July 2025 presentation,¹⁹ the Commission announced over 200 billion EUR for Global Europe, allocated across five regions—including the **Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf**—and supported by a global pillar for cross-regional actions. Pursuing the trend started with the Global Gateway, the Commission puts forward a “new European economic foreign policy aligned with internal EU priorities” such as economic and energy security, migration, climate, connectivity, and access to critical raw materials. The Commission also mentions that “making EU support conditional on specific reforms and/or investments may not be appropriate for all our partners”.

Commentators have emphasised the **strategic cost of disengagement**²⁰—especially at a time when the EU must assert itself and build new strategic alliances. The pressure on the EU’s external action is acknowledged by members of the European Parliament, who stated in the May vote that the current spending ceiling—set at 1% of the EU-27’s gross national income—is insufficient to respond to the **growing number of global crises** and challenges, particularly as the United States retreats from its traditional international role.²¹

The Council moreover **recently reminded the distinction between investment from official development assistance (ODA)**.²² ODA should focus on **creating conditions** that enable private sector engagement and support pro-poor

sustainable development — particularly through initiatives that may not be commercially viable but **generate significant long-term political, social, or economic benefits**.

Creative Europe programming announces **renewed ambition to strengthen the international dimension of the cultural and creative sectors**. It aims to “advance the Union’s international cultural relations and contribute to the EU’s external action objectives through cultural cooperation.”²³

The document promotes **alignment with the EU’s Global Europe** policies by encouraging cultural exchange and supporting EU media and audiovisual content on a global scale. Through international collaborations, it seeks to open new markets, attract global talent, and enhance the EU’s influence and appeal on the world stage.

Future initiatives include participation of third countries in the programme and increased support for international collaborations — creating potential synergies with the EU’s broader external action policies.

Importantly, the document reinforces the **EU’s commitment to artistic freedom**, stating: “The implementation of the ‘Culture’ strand shall be carried out with full respect for artistic freedom and the diversity of cultural expressions.”²⁴ Additionally, the Competitiveness Fund will extend support to CCIs as part of the

18. European Commission, Communication The Road to the Next Multiannual Financial Framework, COM(2025) 46 final, Strasbourg, 11 February 2025.

19. European Commission, Press release: An ambitious budget for a stronger Europe: 2028-2034 and Questions and answers on the next long-term budget, 16 July 2025.

20. Jones, A., A strong external budget: A strategic necessity in the MFF negotiations, ECDPM, 2 July 2025.

21. European Parliament, Parliament’s priorities for the EU’s post-2027 long-term budget, Press release, 7 May 2025.

22. Council of the European Union, Council conclusions ahead of the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development, 26 May 2025 ; Van Damme, P. Effective aid programming in the next MFF (Part 2): Simplification and governance, Briefing Note: 96, ECDPM, July 2025.

23. Culture Action Europe, The next Creative Europe programme has been leaked, 10 July 2025. Leaked document: European Commission, Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council, July 2025.

24. Leaked document: European Commission, Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the European Competitiveness Fund (‘ECF’), July 2025.

Digital Leadership pillar.

These developments shed light on the EU's cultural actions in **Tunisia**, covered by Creative Europe, and may provide insights into potential forms of cooperation across the MENA region.

Further questions remain the specific priorities for the MENA and Gulf region, in line with the EU's more realistic and pragmatic vision for its international cooperation.

EU- Mediterranean ICR at a crossroad

Despite internal hesitation regarding the EU's geopolitical ambitions and external action capacity, this section seeks to demonstrate how the EU has been —and can continue to be— a valuable **partner for countries in the region**, and how ICR can help build meaningful and sustainable partnerships. This requires rethinking certain methods and the overall cooperation framework, while also highlighting successful examples of collaboration in the cultural and creative industries.

EU's long-standing role in the region

The EU can capitalise on its previous efforts to assert its role as a **long-term**

partner in the region, for instance to Syrian and Lebanese peoples. Following the Beirut explosion on 4 August 2020, the EU provided an immediate release of 100 million EUR, followed by an additional 100 million EUR assistance package, which comprised 34 million EUR from the 2020 bilateral funding for Lebanon under the **European Neighbourhood Instrument** and 64.5 million EUR channelled via the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis.²⁵

Furthermore, the EU has been a strong supporter of Syria through the **EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis**, known as “Madad,” which has mobilised 2.38 billion EUR since its establishment in 2014.²⁶ Projects under the Madad Fund are set to run until June 2025, with funding expected to continue **through the transition to the “Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument”** (NDICI, or Global Europe”).

One notable initiative funded by the Madad Trust Fund was the project “Support to Livelihoods through Cultural Heritage Development in Jordan” (2019–2023), which received 6.5 million EUR and was implemented by UNESCO. The project engaged both **local communities and Syrian refugees** in the preservation and development of cultural heritage sites in northern Jordan, with a focus on promoting **sustainable tourism**. It directly supported nearly 2,500 Syrian refugees and vulnerable Jordanians, providing employment and skills development across

25. European Commission, [The EU mobilises additional €100 million in response to the Beirut port explosion in Lebanon](#), News article, 23 December 2020.

26. European Commission, [EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis](#) (last accessed 16 May 2025).

six heritage sites.²⁷ This instrument could be leveraged to fund **additional cultural initiatives** (e.g. Palmyra's ancient city used to welcome over 150.000 visitors per year.²⁸) Although the situation in Syria and the region likely remains too uncertain for the EU to make definitive decisions on new programming at this stage, such projects can still inspire a new generation of initiatives across the region that support populations from a sustainable economic perspective.

Rethinking the format

A long-standing but evolving phenomenon of **crises multiplication and complexification** requires a shift away from a singular regional approach. The **diversity of scenarios** (e.g. Turkey²⁹, Syria³⁰, Israel-Gaza war and the Middle East Peace Process³¹) and the influence of external or internal crises on bilateral relations (e.g. EU-Tunisia on migration³²; France-Algeria on migration, memory, and freedom of speech³³) call for more **nuanced and precise analyses**, which could be better achieved through bilateral perspectives of the EU with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In this sense, it is interesting and important to note that the newly-established DG MENA in charge of drafting the New Pact for the Mediterranean also covers the Gulf countries.³⁴ **What will be their role in practice in the design,**

approval and support to the implementation of the Pact? This is not clear yet and should be attentively addressed.

Ultimately, the outcome should matter more than the framework. If the European Commission's objective is to maintain a **meaningful relationship** with the Mediterranean region, support civil societies, and foster intercultural dialogue through a people-to-people approach, then creating such space will require a deep and **case-by-case dialogue** with civil society actors.

The Pact for the Mediterranean should be a valuable opportunity to listen carefully to the concerns of civil society organisations—those that have worked with EU institutions in the past and that often raise straightforward yet **fundamental issues** that prevent them from contributing more effectively to that partnership. That need for **deep and sincere listening** has been emphasised by panellists.

Promising projects

Cultural heritage for populations, skills and employment

The EU has shown its ability to act in a **coordinated manner** in the past in favour of the defence and promotion of the cultural sector, even beyond cultural

27. Ibid, p.38.

28. Lota, L., Noriega, P., "Nous pouvons renouer avec nos souvenirs": les Syriens retrouvent ce site historique emblématique après des années de guerre, 16 March 2025, RTL Info.

29. Lamche, A., Protesters return to Istanbul's streets for huge rally, BBC News, 29 March 2025.

30. Devron, J., Syria's Uncertain New Order. Can Shara's Government Unite a Country Ready to Explode?, Foreign Affairs, 11 April 2025.

31. An unrestrained Israel is reshaping the Middle East, Briefing, The Economist, 26 March 2025.

32. European Commission, Commission announces almost €127 million in support of the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia and in line with the 10-point plan for Lampedusa, News article, 22 September 2023 ; Dahmani, F., En Tunisie, de nouveaux drames révèlent que les accords migratoires n'ont rien réglé, Jeune Afrique, 27 September 2024.

33. Kirby, P. Le conflit entre la France et l'Algérie s'envenime avec des expulsions en cascade, BBC News, 17 April 2025 ; Détention de Christophe Gleizes en Algérie : "Nous nous battons pour sa libération", France 24, 19 July 2025.

34. European Commission, One sea, three continents: a new Directorate General to strengthen Mediterranean and Gulf partnerships, News article, 3 February 2025.

heritage. The **Concept on Cultural Heritage in conflicts and crises**³⁵ and the dedicated Council Conclusions that were adopted in 2021 are a great example of how the EU can enhance and monitor its cultural relations in the MENA-Gulf region, with a fruitful dialogue established between the EEAS and EU Member States. The Concept has led to the publication of annual reports that reflect a comprehensive understanding of the richness of cultural relations, as well as the tools available to partners in the MENA region to take meaningful action. “**Tounes Wjhetouna**” in Tunisia was launched in 2019 and running until 2026. The project has a total budget of 51 million EUR, including 45 million EUR from EU funding. It is implemented by GIZ, Expertise France, and the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). The initiative focuses on **strengthening the craft and design value chains** in Tunisia, with the aim of enhancing the **competitiveness** of these sectors and supporting their move upmarket, thereby improving **access to both national and international markets**.

EU ICR projects in the region illustrate an³⁷ interesting dynamic between cultural heritage in contexts of conflict and crisis, and broader support to vulnerable populations. They also place a strong emphasis on **employment** and **skills development**, **value chain** support, and the promotion of national and international trade in cultural goods.

Research & monitoring

Partnerships with research institutions could be further developed to evaluate cultural projects through societal, cultural, and economic lenses. Such assessments would contribute to **monitoring the impact of cultural initiatives** on regional cooperation, intercultural dialogue, and quality education — demonstrating the sector’s relevance in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aligning with broader UN priorities. Projects for assessment could include the **Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue**, a joint initiative of the Union for the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation, now in its second year of implementation.

Culture, education and citizenship

In previous research conducted in the region, based on interviews with civil society organisations, culture Solutions has also observed a strong and growing **convergence between culture, education, and citizenship**. This includes initiatives involving underage youth to grasp the surrounding cultural environments in which they live and transmit values. This serves as further evidence of the strength of cultural ecosystems and their active interaction with civil society’s vitality.

It is also worth noting that in many of these projects observed in the MENA region, **local and national dimensions** are

35. European Union External Action Service, Concept on Cultural heritage in conflicts and crises. A component for peace and security in European Union’s external action, 19 April 2021.

36. Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on EU Approach to Cultural Heritage in conflicts and crises, 21 June 2021.

37. European External Action Service, 2024 Report on the progress in the implementation of the ‘Concept on Cultural Heritage in conflicts and crises. A component for peace and security in European Union’s external action’ and the dedicated Council Conclusions, 29 November 2024, p.42.

38. Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue (last visited 26 May 2025).

39. culture Solutions paper to be released (2025) as part of the Anna Lindh Foundation Knowledge for Action’s call.

40. Examples include Odyssée Programme implemented by Heritage & Civilisation present across the Mediterranean connecting school students around their discovery of their cultural heritage.

41. In the interviews conducted by culture Solutions, projects often initially focus on engaging young people with their local environment and national history, before expanding to a broader regional and cross-continental perspective.

prioritised by civil society organisations over broader regional frameworks, such as the Euro-Mediterranean perspective. This reinforces the belief that a **bilateral approach**, more closely tailored to the local context, may be better suited to fostering meaningful partnerships.

Research and stakeholder engagement have also revealed that cultural actors are adapting to **new economic realities and opportunities**. One such development is the emergence of the cultural entrepreneur model and the growing connection between culture and the **social and solidarity economy** — as seen in Morocco, for example, with initiatives like La Maison de la Philosophie.⁴² Youth also play a vital role in this dynamic, contributing energy and innovation, including youth from the **diaspora**, as demonstrated by associations such as Je M'Engage pour l'Afrique.⁴³

Overall, the cultural sector, particularly through the adoption of an ecosystemic model, has shown remarkable **resilience and adaptability**. It continues to demonstrate its relevance across a range of policy areas — from climate action and education to democracy and civic engagement. Yet a critical question remains: can this sector survive without external support, whether from public funding or philanthropic sources? And more importantly, **do we want a world in which this cultural space ceases to exist?**⁴⁴

EU's ICR can play a vital role in ensuring that such spaces continue to exist — spaces for intercultural dialogue, creative

freedom, and a vibrant civil society. To do so, it is essential to ensure the plurality of actors and interconnectedness within cultural ecosystems — including education institutions.

Suggestions to adapt to new trends

Renewing partnerships through research and innovation

In addition to heritage and capacity building projects, support to research and innovation was also identified as an opportunity for EU's engagement in ICR. The third edition of **GITEX Africa**,⁴⁵ that took place in Morocco between 14–16 April 2025, aimed to position Africa as a major player capable of designing and shaping the technologies of the future — a development with significant implications for the cultural and creative industries. The EU was represented there to support the implementation of the **AU-EU Innovation Agenda**.⁴⁶ The EU's and its Member States' increasing shift toward private investment in funding cultural programmes could support cultural actors in taking advantage of these emerging opportunities.

Specific funds for other geographic regions have been created to leverage private investment by promoting an enabling investment environment for CCIs, de-risking investment and allowing loans to financial institutions to fund CCIs: CreatiFI (ACP),⁴⁷ CREA Fund,⁴⁸ and REGMIFA⁴⁹ (Sub-

42. La Maison de la Philosophie is a private institution based in Casablanca, Morocco, which organises seminars, workshops, and conferences aimed at introducing students to philosophy.

43. Je M'Engage Pour l'Afrique was launched in January 2021 as an incubator for African public policies.

44. Cuny, E., Helly, D. Sustainable digital creative ecosystems in Africa-Europe relations: the role of universities, culture Solutions, 15 March 2025.

45. GITEX Africa, 14-16 April 2025.

46. African Union and European Union, *The AU-EU Innovation Agenda, A strategic partnership supported by Global Gateway*, 19 July 2023.

47. European Commission. *InfoPoint Conference: CreatiFI - The Cultural and Creative Industries Financing Initiative*. 21 February 2024.

48. Proparco, *Proparco soutient, avec l'appui de l'UE, le financement des industries culturelles et créatives en Afrique*. 15 February 2022.

49. *Regional MSME Investment Fund for Sub-Saharan Africa S.A., SICAV-SIF (REGMIFA)*.

Saharan Africa). New hubs could be envisaged in the region fostering a Euro-North African-Middle Eastern dynamic of cultural entrepreneurs, with the support of EU Delegations, EUNIC and Creative Desk (Tunisia). These hubs could benefit from existing from existing innovation and investment platforms like GITEK. The innovation economy should not overshadow cultural relations but rather reinforce and enrich them. “Entrepreneurs, bankers and skilled employees, artists and managers can all play their part if they are supported financially (for instance via new EU guarantee funds for loans) and encouraged by Mediterranean governments and institutions.”⁵⁰

Work with AI regional leaders

By integrating the **Gulf countries** into the new DG MENA structure, the EU may be seeking **new regional allies** and acknowledging the **growing financial and political influence** of these state actors. Such new regional allies could be engaged in the support to the development of adapted legal frameworks for the cultural and creative industries in the face of **AI-driven transformations**. Saudi Arabia, for example, has emerged as a regional leader in this field. In 2019, the Kingdom established the Saudi Data and AI Authority and implemented reforms to its digital copyright law. In 2024, Saudi Arabia ranked first in the Global AI Index.⁵¹

Thus, the EU could explore **new capacity-building programmes** in partnership with regional powers such as Saudi Arabia.

These initiatives could leverage the well-established **Erasmus+ framework** to promote joint university projects, fostering cross-regional collaboration among European, North African, and Middle Eastern universities. Such efforts would contribute to developing both the policy frameworks and the skills necessary to prepare and accompany the digital transformation of the CCIs. This would also align with DG MENA’s commitment to the idea of a “Mediterranean University” — a networked institution with campuses and academic alliances on both shores of the Mediterranean, bringing together students, scholars, and cultures from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Conceived as a university alliance, it aims to coordinate academic cooperation, research consortia, and cultural exchange across the region.⁵²

Conclusions on policy action

Realism does not imply inaction. As Joseph Nye puts it “Realism is not wrong as an approach to power in international relations; it is just insufficient (...) analysts should start with realism but generally not stop there. My complaint is not that realists start with traditional elements of power but they stop so soon after they start without realizing there is much more to be explained.”⁵³

EU promotion of CCIs has paved the way for **other key players** to gain interest (e.g., Saudi Arabia positioning itself as a new actor for cultural heritage)⁵⁴. China pursues investments in telecommunications⁵⁵ and

50. Helly, D., Post-Ukraine Cultural Mediterranean: Still curious?, culture Solutions, 20 June 2022.

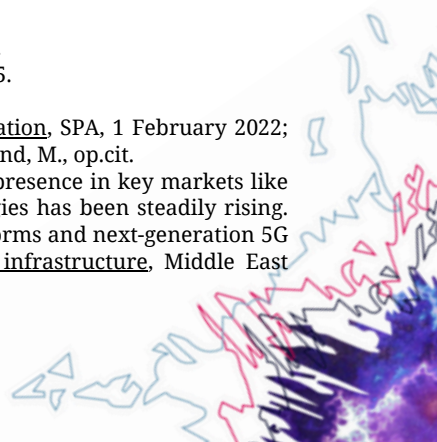
51. Saudi Arabia Surges to 14th Position in Global AI Index, 1st in Arab World, 19 September 2024.

52. European Commission DG MENA, A Mediterranean University for a shared future, 10 July 2025.

53. Nye, J.S., Soft power: the evolution of a concept, Journal of Political Power, 2021, p.4.

54. Saudi Culture Minister Announces Saudi Arabia Providing USD 30 Million for ALIPH Foundation, SPA, 1 February 2022; Saudi Arabia elected chair of UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Arab New, 25 Jan. 2023; Gronlund, M., op.cit.

55. “Major firms such as Huawei, Alibaba and Tencent have ramped up efforts to solidify their presence in key markets like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where investment in cutting-edge technologies has been steadily rising. This expansion is fuelled by the Middle East’s ambitious plans for smart cities, e-commerce platforms and next-generation 5G networks.” in China tech giants eye Middle East for growth amid rising demand for digital infrastructure, Middle East Monitor, 25 September 2024.



reaffirms its support to UNESCO.⁵⁶ State actors engage in culture for varying reasons: from securing market share and advancing cultural diplomacy, to enhancing their international influence and bilateral relations.

However, cultural cooperation should not be treated as a competition, nor reduced to a **zero-sum game**. The EU ought to approach international cultural relations with **greater confidence**, building upon its previous programmes, which have consistently been welcomed and appreciated by partner countries.

The EU should also ask itself a crucial question: **what are we funding that no other player is likely to fund?** The Union possesses a unique history of **peace and union building**, identity of **diverse cultures and languages**, and a set of values grounded in **democracy**. It is precisely through this *marque de fabrique* that meaningful dialogue between civil societies has been fostered. A funding strategy guided solely by economic interests or shaped by competition with other major global players risks overlooking this deep and long-standing heritage.

Even from a realist standpoint, the EU cannot disregard its *raison d'être* and foundational ideals. **Strategic autonomy** is essential if the EU is to preserve and promote its identity. However, this also requires the Union to be willing to clearly affirm these principles in its external partnerships.

The **Pact for the Mediterranean** serves as a strategic platform to reassess and clarify needs, challenges, and opportunities on a bilateral basis with partner countries. It enable a more tailored identification of

threats to civil society and culture, while also helping to define the areas of cooperation most valued by cultural actors on both sides of the Mediterranean. The EU should reaffirm its support to **cultural actors and artists** in the Pact for the Mediterranean and stand firm on the principles of **freedom of creation** and **independence of cultural actors**. The Union for the Mediterranean should serve as a platform for discussion on these aspects, and on the protection of artists and cultural professionals.

Non-governmental actors like the Anna Lindh Foundation could further enhance their role as facilitators of **independent spaces for intercultural dialogue and exchange** among artists, cultural professionals, and civil society organisations in the cultural sector. Furthermore, these networks could serve as a key channel for reporting and communicating obstacles to mobility and funding, acting as a crucial conduit between grassroots actors and policymakers.

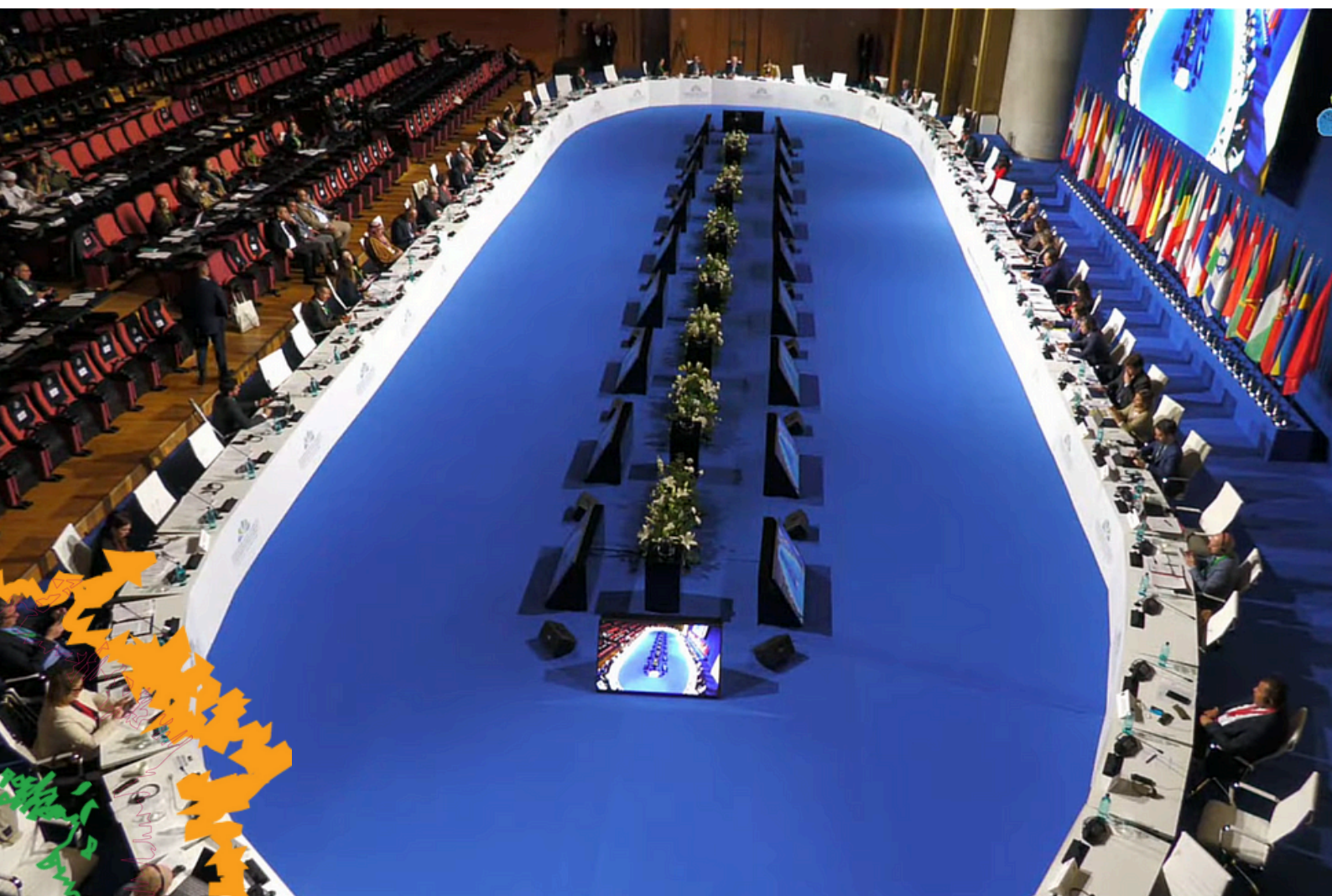
The EU (Council, EEAS, with the support of EU Delegations) could contribute to efforts within the realm of regional and international organisations (Union for the Mediterranean, UNESCO, and other partners that could be identified) to **anticipate and address emerging challenges** to the cultural heritage and the cultural sector in the region, for instance linked to artificial intelligence, climate change, and threats to freedom of creation as part of bilateral assessments in the region.

Efforts to **coordinate and facilitate visa policies for artists** participating in cultural exchange programmes or cultural leaders invited to conferences and

56. "On 11 March 2025, UNESCO and the Quanzhou Municipality, People's Republic of China, signed an agreement launching the China Funds-in-Trust (Quanzhou) for Capacity-Building on World Heritage in Africa" with a new Funds-in-Trust of one million dollars. In UNESCO, UNESCO and China Strengthen Partnership for African World Heritage with New China Funds-in-Trust (Quanzhou) Initiative, 12 March 2025.

meetings in the EU should remain a constant priority of the Commission, in dialogue with the Member States who remain sole deciders for the visa process. Such a need for **coordination** was already flagged in the 2010 OMC recommendations

on artist mobility: “The European and Member States should strive to enhance cooperation on visa issues with European non-Schengen countries as regards artists and other culture professionals”.⁵⁷



Front page image credits: Anna Lindt Foundation.

57. Expert Working Group on Improving the Conditions for the Mobility of Artists and Professionals in the Cultural Field - Open Method of Coordination (OMC), Final Report and Recommendations to the Cultural Affairs Committee on improving the conditions to support the Mobility of Artists and Culture Professionals, June 2010, p.5.



culture Solutions Europe (cS)
is an independent and non-for-profit social
innovation group serving all those involved in EU
international cultural relations.

We contribute independently to the excellence of
EU international cultural relations with the opening
of creative trust-building spaces, the production of
commons and the brokerage of know-how.

We follow a specific [Theory of Change](#).

Support us
culture Solutions Europe was created
as a French association on 23 october 2018.

Bank account:
IBAN FR76 1695 8000 0103 3008 4436 926
SWIFT QNTOFRP1XXX

www.culturesolutions.eu

Disclaimer: The content of this brief expressed by the authors does not reflect the official views of culture Solutions.