

RESEARCH FOR CULT COMMITTEE – EU STRATEGY FOR INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL RELATIONS

Context

In the joint communication “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations” from 8 June 2016, the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy have drawn up a strategy for the EU’s international cultural relations, departing from “showcasing” and working towards a cooperative peer-to-peer learning approach. The Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) have decided to draw up an own-initiative report on the strategy.

CULT strongly advocated the development of this strategy throughout the last few years, as evidenced by a relevant EP resolution and a preparatory action. This briefing gives an overview of the policy developments that led to the new strategy, summarises the strategy itself and points out crucial elements and challenges that could be addressed in the own-initiative report.

Policy developments in the EU’s external cultural relations

In the “European agenda for culture in a globalizing world” (COM(2007)0242), the Commission stressed culture as a key element to be mainstreamed into external relations and development cooperation and envisioned capacity building of local cultural players and CCIs in third countries, cooperation on heritage sites, mobility of works of art and artists and support for specific actions and projects as central activities. The EP and the Council endorsed the emphasis placed on cultural relations with third countries (EP resolution of 10 April 2008 and Resolution of the Council of 16 November 2007 on a European Agenda for Culture).

In its conclusions of 16 December 2008 on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in the external relations of the Union and its Member States, the Council called on the Member States and the Commission to strengthen the role of culture in all external relations and cooperation with third countries and to draw up a European strategy “for incorporating culture consistently and systematically in the external relations of the Union”. It also asked to establish specific strategies with regions and countries outside the Union in the area of cultural relations.

The Commission’s report on the implementation of the European Agenda for Culture (July 2010) stressed that culture was increasingly perceived as a strategic factor in external policy and outlined various programmes and instruments that had been newly set up (e.g. under the ENP, Eastern Partnership and in development policies). Moreover, the Commission had invested in a study on a potential Euromed strategy on culture.

The European Parliament resolution of 12 May 2011 on the [cultural dimensions of the EU's external actions \(2010/2161\(INI\)\)](#) reaffirmed the importance of culture in external policies and expressed concerns at the fragmentation of external EU cultural policy and projects. It therefore asked for “the development of a visible common EU strategy on the cultural aspects of the EU’s external relations”. It called for a central internet portal that should carry information on relevant funding programmes and cultural events and asked for structures dedicated to culture in the European External Action Service (EEAS) and dedicated staff in the EU delegations.

In the preparation for the budget for 2013, the European Parliament voted for a preparatory action for Culture in External relations. Under this preparatory action, a study was drawn up that was based on an extensive mapping and consultation process which involved a wide variety of stakeholders from inside and outside the EU. It was presented and discussed in a conference in April 2014 and fed into the development of the strategy at hand.

In the Council Conclusions of 23 December 2014 on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018), the Council scheduled further steps working towards a strategic approach to culture in EU external relations, such as a study on existing programmes available for culture for European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries and joint informal meetings of senior Member State officials working in Ministries of Culture and/or Foreign Affairs and follow-up activities on the preparatory action.

In the Council Conclusions of 24 November 2015 on culture in the EU's external relations with a focus on culture in development cooperation, the Council endorsed one of the conclusions from the preparatory action, namely the need to move towards a “spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning”. Simultaneously, it demanded a better coordination of efforts under a strategic European approach, in particular with a view to development cooperation.

The Commission has presented its EU strategy for international cultural relations in June 2016 on the basis of the policy developments sketched above.

The strategy in a nutshell

Underlying principles

The strategy builds on five core principles. Three of them are value-based:

- (1) respect and promotion of cultural diversity and human rights,
- (2) using approaches tailor-made for the relevant cultural contexts and interests, with a strong focus on dialogue and mutual learning, and
- (3) respect for complementarity and subsidiarity, i.e. the role of the Member States, with the EU acting as an “enabler”.

Two principles are more pragmatically oriented:

- (4) “mainstreaming” of culture into other areas of external policy and
- (5) using existing frameworks for cooperation. Examples include thematic programmes such as the Partnership Instrument or certain components of the Development Cooperation Instruments and geographic frameworks for cooperation, such as enlargement policy, the European Neighbourhood Policy and Development Cooperation.

The strategy's three pillars

Pillar (1) aims at “supporting culture as an engine for social and economic development”. The development of cultural policies and the role of local authorities in partner countries will be supported by sharing best practices, e.g. on the European Capitals of Culture, through instruments such as town twinning. Furthermore, this pillar aims to build capacity of cultural and creative industries (CCIs) through relevant programmes (ex. Med Culture and MedFilm). Further actions to strengthen CCIs include building regional creative hubs and clusters, developing entrepreneurship and skills, supporting SMEs and mainstreaming culture into regional cooperation frameworks.

Pillar (2) “Promoting culture and inter-cultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations” aims to support and strengthen cooperation amongst cultural operators through existing programmes and structures, including those geared towards facilitating intercultural dialogue in conflictual situations.

Pillar (3) deals with cooperation on cultural heritage and concentrates on research on preservation and management of cultural heritage, combatting the trafficking of heritage and protecting it, e.g. through regionally dedicated funds and technical assistance.

Approach

The strategy places great emphasis on “smart complementarity” to exploit synergies between local governments at all levels, cultural organisations and NGOs on the ground, EU delegations, Member States, their cultural institutes and the relevant umbrella organisations. EU delegations play the role of local coordinators, and major EU delegations can act as cultural focal points to disseminate best practices and provide training. Joint EU cultural events, such as an EU film festival, are planned. The website “Cultural Diplomacy Platform” is intended to facilitate networking and dissemination of best practices. The mobility of researchers, students and staff to and from third countries and alumni networks of previous participants of Erasmus+ complete the strategy.

Challenges

There are several aspects that are crucial to the success of the strategy: its further substantiation, a localised and dialogue-based approach, its governance and funding instruments.

Substance

While the strategy ties together important elements of the EU’s international cultural relations, many of these were already present in the corresponding strand of the “EU agenda for culture in a globalising world”. It also falls short of what the Council demanded in its conclusions of 15 December 2015: a strategic European approach that would include “thematic and geographic priorities, realistic objectives and outcomes, target groups, common interests and initiatives, financing provisions, citizens participation and implementation modalities”. A **stocktaking** of what has been achieved under the “EU agenda for culture” up until the present strategic communication could be a useful starting point to further concretize the strategy at hand and establish clear and measurable goals, priorities and realistic outcomes. That would also entail finding a **clear division of tasks between the EU, its Member States and international organisations**, as called for by the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council meeting 21 and 22 November 2016).

Missing elements

In order to widen the reach of any activities under the strategy, **digital tools** could play a crucial role, in particular for reaching “young people, who increasingly communicate with each other and create communities of interest and engagement trans-nationally through digital tools and the social media” (Preparatory Action ‘Culture in External Relations’). Actions could include the creation of social media profiles targeting certain countries, increasing the visibility and accessibility of the activities of EU delegations and Member States’ cultural institutes and their umbrella organisations.

The **mobility of artists** is not mentioned in the strategy, although it could prove a cornerstone to facilitate people-to-people contacts and building bridges, with mobile artists functioning as multipliers and cultural ambassadors. Their mobility could be promoted e.g. by visa facilitation and by creating specific information systems. Alumni networks, as they are envisioned for former participants of Erasmus+, could also be established for previously mobile artists and those who participated in cultural projects under the strategy.

The strategy mentions the **UN, UNESCO and the Council of Europe as important partners** for safeguarding cultural heritage. The role of these partnerships should be stressed and go also beyond the area of cultural heritage.

A localised and dialogue-based approach

The strategy has made an important transition: from “showcasing” to a dialogue-based approach to cultural diplomacy. While an EU strategy for international cultural relations has been a long-term desideratum, it should not be neglected that “one size does not fit all”: interests and realities in partner countries differ. Therefore - as requested by the EP in its 2011 resolution - , the strategy has to be **adapted to the local context**, taking account of the situation in different regions and partner countries.

Bottom-up processes should be prioritised in order to contextualise the strategy appropriately, taking on board the views of local governments, cultural and civil society organisations as well as those of Member States’ cultural institutes and their umbrella organisations. At the same time, **strategic common elements** that are relevant to international cultural relations across regions and countries should be reinforced, inter alia by facilitating the exchange of best practices between EU delegations and Member States’ cultural institutes and periodic reflections on the implementation of the strategy at EU level.

Governance

EU delegations are well-placed to coordinate the activities of various players in the cultural field. They are, however, not cultural operators themselves, as opposed to the Member States’ cultural institutes and local actors. Therefore, they may lack know-how in area of cultural relations. For the EU delegations to be able to fulfil a coordinating role in a satisfactory manner, it is essential that they have **adequate human resources**. Hence, it is desirable to appoint a specific person dealing with cultural matters where possible (see Vandewalle 2015, Preparatory Action ‘Culture in External Relations’). Given that this will not be the case for all EU delegations, the creation of **cultural “focal points” in major delegations** as envisioned in the strategy may be a good option. It should be ensured that these focal points can specialise on certain regions, fields of expertise within the cultural domain, or both, to quickly generate expertise.

Currently, EEAS does not have any dedicated structure or unit working exclusively on culture. However, the **EEAS headquarters** in Brussels could play an important role in **organising and coordinating practical issues** that are relevant to all cultural activities in the EU delegations with the local partners, and they could also coordinate the implementation of the (contextualised) strategy. A relevant unit could be created inside EEAS and/or synergies with DG EAC and other DGs dealing with external relations exploited, among other things by providing relevant training courses for staff.

Given that cultural institutes and their umbrella organisations may play a very important role in filling the strategy with life, the **role of the institutes from smaller Member States** may have to be reinforced and their participation encouraged. Overall, a dominance of the biggest cultural institutes should be avoided and synergies and “**variable geometries**” fostered.

Funding instruments

Available EU funding for activities under the strategy is spread across a multitude of different financial instruments with different eligibility criteria (status of a region/country, type of project, etc.). Within each of these instruments, funding is relatively limited, and the strategy does not make it clear how much funding is available for cultural relations overall. The sheer number of funding instruments can be daunting for local organisations, cultural institutes and perhaps even for EU delegations, who have difficulties discerning which of these instruments is best addressed when looking for funding for a specific project.

This concern could be addressed in several ways. First, the **creation of a financial instrument** dedicated to supporting cultural relations under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) could be envisioned, bringing together the funding that is currently spread across many programmes, preferably with funding levels over and above of what is available now.

Second, the **Creative Europe programme**, which is already open for the participation of candidate and neighbourhood countries under certain conditions, could be opened up to include further partner countries, or a specific strand for cultural relations with third countries could be developed.

Third, a **one-stop-shop website**, e.g. under the Cultural Diplomacy Platform, could “virtually” pool available resources and serve as a point of entry into the landscape of funding opportunities, providing comprehensive information about all funding instruments available for relevant activities in certain regions. This website could also serve as a basis for developing innovative forms of funding and finding partners for them - e.g. for crowdfunding and public-private partnerships

Conclusion

During the last decade, the importance of EU cultural relations with third countries has increasingly been recognised by the EU institutions and partners such as the cultural institutes of the Member States. The strategy presented by the Commission is a useful starting point for the further development of these relations and requires further substantiation and contextualisation. Governance structures and funding instruments will pose challenges that have to be solved with the strategic aims in mind.

Sources

Commission Communication of 10 May 2007 on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world (COM(2007)0242)

Council Resolution of 16 December 2007 on a European Agenda for Culture¹

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Commission report on the implementation of the European Agenda for Culture (COM(2010)0390)

European Parliament resolution of 12 May 2011 on the cultural dimensions of the EU's external actions (2010/2161(INI))³

Council Conclusions of 23 December 2014 on a Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018)⁴

Council Conclusions of 24 November 2015 on culture in the EU's external relations with a focus on culture in development cooperation⁵

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¹ OJ C 287, 29.11.2007, p. 1–4

² OJ C 320, 16.12.2008, p. 10–12

³ OJ C 377E, 7.12.2012, p. 135–141

⁴ OJ C 463, 23.12.2014, p. 4–14

⁵ OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 41–43