

## Cultural policy in EU and external relations

The implementation of two European Commission documents on cultural policies is under scrutiny at a moment when the European Union is awaiting new guiding principles for its cultural policy. One document focuses on the role of culture in external relations and the way to establish an EU strategy in this domain. The other proposes objectives and specific actions regarding the role of culture in the EU's society and economy.

### Background

Cultural policy is a Member State competence, but the EU has a Treaty obligation to help protect and promote cultural heritage and diversity in all Member States, while delivering on its obligations to support internal cohesion and the single market. Its international relations focus on culture's social, economic and peace-building potential, and on intercultural dialogue.

After the COVID-19 lockdowns, not all cultural venues re-opened, and many artists and creatives dropped out of work. The cultural and creative sectors (CCS) were forced to hastily adopt digital solutions and provide a digital offer. The [pandemic](#) revealed major weaknesses in these sectors, which [employ highly qualified](#) workers on unstable conditions and low salaries. Russia's war against Ukraine has taken its toll of human lives and has damaged or destroyed 221 [Ukrainian cultural sites](#) so far. Rocketing energy prices and the resulting accelerated adaptation to energy efficiency requirements have put cultural venues and workers under further pressure. Last but not least, climate change remains a global challenge, and also affects the CCS.

EU cultural policy is based on the premise that culture is a public good, so the 'cultural exception' protects cultural goods and services from free trade rules. The Council and the Commission have recently worked on adapting EU cultural policy to changed circumstances and unaddressed challenges. On 29 November, the ministers of culture adopted a Council resolution on the EU [Work Plan for Culture](#) 2023-2026.

### European Commission initiatives

The Commission and High Representative's 2016 joint communication '[Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations](#)' set cultural diversity and cultural heritage as drivers of sustainable socio-economic development and peace in third countries, and used international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy as equivalent terms. The ambitions expressed in the communication translated into action across sectors and generations. Cooperation between the EU and third countries, and between third countries, aims to help both parties compete better with global players, with support for SMEs, skills and entrepreneurship playing an important role. Concerns about the impact of climate change on culture were addressed through sustainable cultural tourism and energy efficiency.

In its 2018 [New European Agenda for Culture](#), the Commission defined social, economic and external objectives for EU cultural policy. The social aspect pertains to culture and diversity as drivers of social cohesion; actions in this area focus on access and opportunities to participate in cultural activities, and on cultural heritage as a shared resource and source of common history, values and identity. The economic objectives aim to harness the potential of creativity and culture for innovation, growth and jobs, by placing arts, creativity and culture high on the educational agenda and promoting relevant skills, as well as digital and entrepreneurial competences. Working conditions in the CCS, access to financial services, fair remuneration for authors and creators, and creating favourable conditions for innovation, are important economic aspects highlighted in the agenda.

The external dimension of the agenda refers to the strengthening of international relations through specific actions such as supporting culture as a driving force for sustainable social and economic development, and as a peace-building factor, as well as reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage. It highlighted the importance of equality, reciprocity, trust and fairness in this area of international relations.



## European Parliament position

Consultations with stakeholders, an [implementation report](#) on both documents prepared by EPRS and published in September 2022, and the Commission [implementation report](#) from June 2022 on the [Council Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022](#) fed into Salima Yenbou's [report](#) on 'The implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations'. The Culture and Education Committee (CULT) adopted its report on 14 November. It considered that both communication and agenda were being well implemented, despite the pandemic, and made some recommendations.

The Yenbou report lists expectations concerning the 2023-2026 work plan, post-pandemic recovery and resilience. It mentions culture as a driver of sustainability, well-being and social justice, protection and promotion of cultural heritage, and the strengthening and development of international cultural relations.

Regarding the agenda, the report recommends that the Commission move from addressing the short-term crisis to human-centred solutions, as 'back to normal' would prolong the precarious employment situation, and leave unaddressed the lack of common EU standards in CCS. Despite the Commission's efforts to provide information on funding opportunities for cultural and creative projects on its multilingual [CulturEU](#) website, the application process, with application forms in English, is complicated for small entities. Such burdens hinder participation and cultural and linguistic diversity. The report praised cascade funding, facilitated via dedicated platforms, for offering support for previously excluded individual beneficiaries.

While the impact of the [Voices of Culture Structured Dialogue](#) on trans-sectoral cooperation is highlighted as an example of engagement between the Commission and cultural civil society organisations, the [open method of coordination](#) needs to go beyond reports and enable proposal of shared solutions.

Despite a substantial increase in funding for the Creative Europe 2021-2027 programme, additional financial opportunities are called for during the revision of the multiannual financial framework. Synergies with programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe are needed, as well as mainstreaming culture in the digital and green transitions. The latter is related to the [New European Bauhaus](#) (NEB) initiative, which connects science, technology and art in an effort to create a sustainable and aesthetic environment in which to live; energy efficiency and traditional skills and materials play a crucial role in restoring cultural heritage. The report calls for NEB to be a standalone programme and suggests that Member States devote 2 % of their budgets to culture and use the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) to improve working conditions and workers' skills, as CCS face challenges in terms of increased sustainability and digitalisation requirements.

Member States are invited to recognise and apply cultural and artistic rights as human rights. The report emphasises freedom of artistic expression and invites the Commission to include it as an indicator of respect for the rule of law in Member States in its annual reports, and to reflect on how to protect it in external relations where artists are at risk. The role of culture in gender equality is also highlighted.

The report notes that failing to involve the Commission's DEVCO and NEAR Directorates-General in drafting the strategy for international cultural relations (ICR) was detrimental to its implementation; the strategy's focus on culture as a tool for foreign diplomacy pushed sustainable development into the background. The difference between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy was emphasised as crucial for engaging in trustful and fair relations, to allow common challenges to be addressed together. Cultural diplomacy may be perceived as Eurocentric and neo-colonial, and such relations need to be built together with local civil society organisations, on a bottom-up, people-to-people basis. ICR is also proposed as a tool to present a cultural image of the EU on the global stage that is greater than the sum of its parts and thus complements the work of individual cultural institutes abroad. The EU needs its own toolbox for this purpose.

The report states that the ICR strategy is a work in progress and lacks human and financial resources in the Commission, the EEAS and EU Delegations to engage locally. Local communities feel legitimised and empowered if they choose the topics to work on, and such procedures also promote human rights and democracy, which are undermined by authoritarian regimes which redefine international rules and violate artistic freedom. Freedom of cultural expression in illiberal countries also needs to be addressed.

The recommendations pertaining to both policy documents in the implementation report contribute to Members' reflection and decision-making on the 2023-2026 Work Plan for Culture.

Own-initiative report: [2022/2047\(INI\)](#); Committee responsible: CULT; Rapporteur: Salima Yenbou (Renew, France).