

## Europe's enabling power: an EU strategy for international cultural relations

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### Executive Summary

- > The EU's current existential crisis underlines the cultural weaknesses of the European integration project and its disconnect with European societies and identities.
- > In a rapidly changing world shaped by intertwined transnational cultural and technological flows, managing the variety of Europeans cultures and their interactions with the globe has become a strategic priority.
- > There is an appetite among countries and civil societies outside of the EU for more cultural relations with Europeans.
- > The 2016 Joint Commission and High Representative Communication on an 'EU strategy for international cultural relations' is the first of its kind. Its main purpose is to put culture on the EU external action agenda, to signal that Europeans have cultural 'soft power' abroad, and to encourage them to use the EU as an enabler of their cultural relations.

This Policy Brief underlines the strategic significance of the joint communication 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations', published in 2016 by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. It analyses the various steps over the last decade that led to its adoption, sketches out its potential as well as the challenges it will face in its implementation, linking it to the necessity of a deeper democratic and cultural revival.

### Challenges: Europeans in world cultural flows and the EU's existential crisis

In 2016, the EU adopted a strategy for international cultural relations. In this document, culture includes the arts and 'a wide range of policies and activities, from inter-cultural dialogue to tourism, from education and research to the creative industries, from protecting heritage to promoting creative industries and new technologies, and from artisanship to development cooperation'. The strategy represents a response to several global trends.

Globalisation has led to an increase in cultural relations and exchanges across societies and continents through migratory flows, trade, the widespread use of new cyber-based technologies, the media and cities as cultural hubs. These flows include European people, goods, services and ideas as well as identities. New technologies, as a cultural, economic and societal phenomenon, are a powerful factor of change in international cultural relations, creating novel opportunities but also novel asymmetries between people and societies. In this global context, there is widespread interest among public and private actors for more cultural relations with Europe, Europeans and the EU.

Acknowledging Europe's cultural attractiveness while the EU integration project faces its most serious existential crisis may look like a paradox. Nationalist and Europhobic movements in Europe reject the whole project of EU integration. Brexiteers as well as the new US President, by fuelling cultural clashes with prejudices, discard the very purpose of the EU. Polls show that European citizens are less satisfied with EU institutions than in the past and that entire societies are considering the option of leaving the EU. The challenge is therefore not anymore about simply reforming the Union's institutional set-up. Democratic and identification deficits are much more deeply rooted in European societies.

Culture in EU policies usually creates much confusion among the public because almost everybody speaks of the

EU and Europe as identical twins. The EU and Europe are not twins (with the same genotype, identical and from the same ovum), not even fraternal twins (developed from two fertilised ova). They are fake twins, wrongly perceived as identical while being genetically different. The key question is not really whether there is a European culture to be promoted by the EU: European societies and people and sometimes states are the ones that can claim to be in possession of their cultures and heritage. As for an 'EU culture', it is extremely limited and narrow: it is mostly a political, legal and administrative culture, interplaying with European cultures. The challenge that European policy-makers face regarding culture is thus not really about the definition of a supposedly stable common European culture (using the singular). Rather, it is about finding the most optimal ways to manage, in contemporary exchange flows, the variety of constantly moving European cultures and cultural systems (in the plural) interacting amongst themselves and with the rest of the world with which they often share a common history and heritage (Arabic culture, Ottoman, Russian, African, American, Asian to name but a few general cultural affiliations)..

External cultural relations unfold beyond, outside or besides governments, sometimes with their support or engagement. In Europe as elsewhere, people have multiple identities. Europeans play with multiple layers of cultural relations and belonging, far beyond and beneath national boundaries. This raises questions about the limitations to states' roles in interconnected cultural relations. It also makes it necessary to reflect on the added value of the EU (being a political and institutional entity) as a potential enabler of these transnational cultural flows. According to the new strategy for international cultural relations, the EU is the facilitator of synergies between European creative assets and the world.

### **How creative lobbyists worked out an EU external cultural strategy**

For the last decade, European creative lobbyists have pushed culture onto the EU external action agenda. Cultural policy experts, cultural managers, NGO activists, academics and staff from national cultural institutes agreed that cultural cooperation within EU boundaries was bearing fruit in terms of peaceful relations and well-being. The EU's 2004 enlargement widened the scope of cultural cooperation in Europe. The role played by the European Commission in the adoption of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2005 demonstrated

that the EU was indeed an influential actor in international cultural policies.

However, as culture is a supplementary EU competence, EU institutions were very cautious when it came to call for EU external cultural action. Innovation, vision and new ideas therefore also had to come from the outside. The European Cultural Foundation and a few independent cultural experts saw the need for an EU external cultural strategy early on. In 2006, member states' cultural institutes created their own European network, EUNIC. The lobbying work from the cultural sector went through several waves and included various Council conclusions, European Parliament's resolutions and reports, as well as Commission and member states experiments on a cultural strategy towards China. In parallel, some development professionals in the European Commission and member states were already well aware of the role of culture in international development cooperation. They created a momentum around 2008 and 2009 with several rotating Council presidencies, such as the Spanish.

All these efforts led to the launch of the EU Preparatory Action on culture in external relations in 2012. For two years, the Preparatory Action consortium gathered as much evidence as possible on Europe's cultural relations with EU strategic partners (Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, the United States) and sixteen countries of the so-called Neighbourhood. The Preparatory Action also mapped each EU member state's external cultural action policy system and performances, although these reports remained unpublished. Other countries covered by development cooperation policies were not included in the Preparatory Action. The conclusions of the Preparatory Action were quite clear: there was an appetite among countries and civil societies outside of the EU for more cultural relations with Europeans, yet there was also fatigue (especially in the Mediterranean) with EU bureaucracy. At the same time, and while discourses on a global cultural citizenship were possibly overly ambitious, the consultations also underlined the need to address more candidly and consciously cultural differences and ignorance.

### **The 2016 strategy on paper: enabling power and creative prosperity**

Two years after the conclusions of the Preparatory Action, the Commission and the High Representative adopted the joint communication 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations' in June 2016. The document is shaped around three pillars: (i) guiding principles, (ii) themes for EU international cultural action (the contribution of culture to sustainable development, the promotion of intercultural dialogue for peace,

cooperation on cultural heritage) and (iii) a strategic EU approach to cultural diplomacy.

In a context of multifaceted crises in Europe, the strategy had to respond clearly to current challenges: instability in the Eastern and the Southern neighbourhood of the EU, low growth rates and unemployment, migration shocks, decreasing market shares in international trade. At the same time, as culture is a supplementary competence at EU level, EU institutions also had to respect member states' sovereignty with regard to national external cultural action, thus focusing on EU added value. Consequently, the EU is perceived as an 'enabling power' in the cultural field. The document amounts thus more to a stock-taking strategy than a ground-breaking novel approach, yet it has unique historical significance since it is the first of its kind. Its main purpose is to put culture on the EU external action agenda, to signal that Europeans potentially have joint cultural 'soft power' abroad, and to encourage them to use the EU as an enabler for their cultural relations. It was also an 'internal coherence' exercise to encourage synergies between the Commission's DG for Education and Culture (EAC) and other DGs dealing with external relations (DEVCO, NEAR) as well as the European External Action Service.

The text recognises the value of existing EU policy frameworks (development and other forms of cooperation with external partners, European Neighbourhood Policy, etc.) as the main funding channels to foster cultural relations. It does not announce the creation of a new European External Cultural Fund. It also reflects the concerns of policy-makers in 2016. In the context mentioned above, mobilising funding for culture is not going to be an easy task. With the UK leaving the Union, negotiations on the new multiannual financial framework (2021-2027) will be tense. The risk to see EU leaders forget the long-term value of investing in cultural relations is real. However, keeping cultural relations high on the EU's global agenda is a win-win option for all Europeans: the contribution of creative industries to employment and peace depends on a skilled, sustainable and responsible culture and arts sector.

### **Implementation: reforming EU cultural engagement worldwide**

The 2016 EU Global Strategy mentions cultural diplomacy as a new field of implementation. In November 2016, the Council of EU ministers of culture discussed the main principles of the joint communication on international cultural relations with a view to identifying implementation priorities. In 2017, an EU regulation on the import and illicit trafficking of cultural goods will be passed. 2018 will be the 'European Year of Cultural

Heritage'. The other points made by the ministers of culture on artists' mobility, tourism, cooperation with UNESCO and the Council of Europe were reiterations of previous meetings. The ministers also re-emphasized the need for discussing international cultural relations in the Foreign Affairs Council in 2017, thus confirming their wish for a truly joined-up cultural and diplomatic approach.

EU institutions and some member states have already started to work on implementation. The EEAS website has a new page on culture, with some examples of EU cultural relations with various countries. Joint guidelines on cultural diplomacy and cultural relations signed by three EU Commissioners (Development Cooperation, Culture, External Relations) have been sent to EU Delegations abroad. They encourage all EU Delegations to engage with member states locally to design relevant local European cultural initiatives. To do so, EU Delegations assigned cultural diplomacy to one staff member (often the Deputy Heads of Delegations), designated as the Delegation's focal point for culture. Furthermore, a Cultural Diplomacy Platform is up and running and at the service of EU institutions. Its purpose is to support the EU institutions in cultural diplomacy, with a particular focus on its strategic partners. It has already organised a young cultural leaders meeting in 2016 and provided policy advice to the EEAS on cultural relations with countries such as Iran, Russia, Tunisia and Turkey. Skills enhancement on international cultural relations has also been included in the training curricula in the EEAS and DEVCO. Various pilot trainings on cultural diplomacy and intercultural communication skills started to take place in late 2016.

All around the world, cultural focal points in EU Delegations are now brainstorming with member states representatives about local European cultural strategies. Priorities for future programmes will emerge from this consultation phase, informed by existing knowledge or studies on the state of cultural relations between Europe and a given country. The 36 country reports produced by the Preparatory Action already provide a starting point for such programmes. In all other countries, however, such knowledge is missing. A systematic assessment at country level seems necessary as a first step for culturally sensitive and tailored European strategies towards individual partner countries. These would help member states and EU Delegations figure out whether the local context in which they operate is conducive to launch pilot projects identified in the preparatory action, such as European cultural houses or closer cooperation amongst the EU institutions and member states' cultural institutes (potentially via local EUNIC clusters). Opportunities for implementation will not run out: over twenty EU funding

mechanisms already allow the financing of external cultural activities. The main challenge will be to find adequate human resources to launch and manage revived and innovative cultural initiatives.

### **Identities and cultures: a European democratic renaissance beyond EU reforms**

The future of Europe in the world is not the future of the EU only. The existential crisis of the EU as an institutional and administrative project demonstrates a double need. On the one hand, modernising EU institutions and policies is essential in order to respond to general citizens' frustrations. The new communication on international cultural relations encourages several policy changes in EU external action. Such reforms will push EU institutions to manage more credible and effective international cultural relations. There is a strong, but largely untapped potential in the EU for a reinforced use of new tech-driven soft power via cultural relations, cultural diplomacy and other forms of credible, trust-building culture-based exchanges and co-creation.

On the other hand, European societies and people need a cultural and democratic European 'renaissance' that goes far beyond a reformist discourse propagating the mere 'modernisation' of existing EU institutions, policies and

external action. Such a movement, to be effective and more compelling than the simplistic nationalist propaganda that is mushrooming all across Europe these days, will have to emerge bottom-up in a culturally sensitive dialogue (or at times through peaceful contestation) between citizens and organized civil society on one side and the EU institutions and states on the other. The way citizens are consulted and debate on the future of Europe and of the EU has to change. Locally organised citizens debates, informed by experts and encouraged by EU, national and local authorities are the only way to open new spaces for democratic and creative deliberation on what 'being European' actually means to people. Developing a network of European cultural ambassadors could also help give a more attractive and engaging face to Europe and the EU.

Altogether, while institutional reform is important, it cannot be the prime solution. Both avenues ought to be pursued: modernising EU policies and a European renaissance of democracy, as mutually reinforcing contributions to the reinvention of peoples' identities.

## Further Reading

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