

European interview

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“This exceptional crisis should now help us think fundamentally about how we want to shape culture”

Interview with Gitte Zschoch, Director of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC)[1]

What impact is the Covid-19 pandemic having on the cultural sector?

Since the crisis, wherever there have been lockdowns, i.e., practically everywhere in the world, cultural programmes have been discontinued, language courses have ceased. As it is no longer possible to organise events physically with an audience and mobility is largely restricted, so new ways of organising cultural work had to be found. And these ways are indeed being found: a lot of activities have been carried into the online space.

What is the EU doing for the European cultural sector during this very difficult time?

The European Union has a coordinating and complementing role in the area of culture, but no mandate for culture as such. Culture remains with the Member States. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union specifies that the Union can coordinate and support the Member States in those fields of activity where it does this better than the individual countries. For example, there are some programmes that promote cultural exchange between European Member States - Creative Europe is the most evident example of this. Under this umbrella there are initiatives such as the European Capitals of Culture, which has been very successful. At the same time, an [EU strategy for international cultural relations](#) was launched in 2016, and this has had positive effects: the EU has started to become active in external cultural relations in recent years. However, compared to the sums available for other programmes, the share of cultural expenditure in the overall EU budget is very small.

In the current crisis, governments have taken measures

to support cultural stakeholders in their countries. But the EU has also acted, for example by launching the [Creatives Unite Platform](#). This platform includes both collections of links to surveys and documents as well as to events streamed online and collections of resources where cultural operators can apply for funding. We have all seen that discussions regarding how culture can be included in the EU recovery fund, have proved to be very difficult. We should note however that progress has been made by a [European Parliament Resolution](#).

In relation to the Multiannual Financial Framework and the recovery plan, what do you think of the agreement reached? Is it sufficient to meet the challenges faced by cultural stakeholders?

If you consider that the EU is a cultural project that wants to bring people together, then culture has been given very little consideration in this budget. The Parliament - supported by the cultural sector itself - was right to ask for the budget for Creative Europe to be doubled. If it is true that all ministers of culture agree that the culture budget should be increased, it certainly does not seem to be a priority for all European leaders. I would also like to add that Creative Europe is not the only relevant programme. It is important to think about culture in the different programmes and areas - including science, innovation and digitisation, as well as external action, cooperation and development, where culture can play a role. Of course, Creative Europe is very much THE programme for culture, and if its budget is reduced, then there will be even less funding for this innovative and dynamic sector

[1] EUNIC is the network of the national cultural institutes of the Member States and associated countries. Created in 2006, EUNIC comprises 36 members representing 28 countries and is active in more than 150 countries with more than 2000 institutions and thousands of local partners.

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of culture which is thriving thanks to the involvement of civil society. At the same time the cultural sector is also very fragile, as has been exposed during the Covid-19 crisis. In the cultural sector, organisations and initiatives are usually very small. Raising awareness of the importance of culture is not an easy task and that was the case for the recovery fund. Of course, Member States can use resources from this fund to support cultural sectors, but it is not compulsory. This means that the latter in Member States must be very active on the national and local level in order to get a share of the funding.

What do you mean when you say «the EU is a cultural project»?

The EU can be narrated as a history of economic unification and development of a common steel and coal industry. But this would not do justice to the European project which is first and foremost a peace project. And for me peace means getting to know each other, understanding each other, exchanging ideas and learning from each other. All this can be achieved through culture. We have long focused on eliminating borders - which is very positive. Today there is a single currency in 19 Member States and EU citizens can work anywhere in the Union. We have gained all these privileges and yet I fear that we have forgotten that the European project is about bringing people together. This might be one reason why the budget for culture is so small. But I believe that engaging with each other and increasing artistic exchange between countries is one way to achieve that.

Getting to know each other is all the more difficult at the moment because of the health restrictions. Could you elaborate on the impact of the restriction of free movement on the cultural sector?

The cultural sector has been globally interconnected for a long time. Right now, exchanges have come to a standstill due to the pandemic and the travel restrictions set in place. Events have either been cancelled or are taking place online. The rules are stricter for concerts, theatres, which bring a lot of people together. But I

think it would not help the cultural sector if we could simply travel and move around again. As a society we need to connect with people, to learn and exchange with one another. Culture has a particularly strong feature: you get involved in a story, a narrative, a performance.

It is totally possible to organise interesting cultural events in a different way. At the moment, there are also immense advantages to pursuing culture online: you can interact with people from different backgrounds, from different countries who live differently. I note that there are greater opportunities now to get involved in events that are taking place in Tokyo or Burkina Faso, for example. There is also a great opportunity in all of this: it is now possible to participate in digital events to which one might otherwise not have had access.

How do you assess the risk of household spending on culture declining in Europe, firstly because people cannot go out, and secondly because they do not have the available budget?

That's an interesting question, but the consumption of culture has also increased in certain ways. Many more films and TV series have been streamed and downloaded during the lockdowns. Funds that had might previously been invested in cinema tickets went into cultural products that could be consumed at home. The same applies to the book market. Who is suffering? Of course, theatres, concert halls, cinemas - in other words, everything that has a live aspect. If there is no external support, many cultural initiatives will disappear and many artists will have to turn to other sources of income. It will certainly take a while for new ways of approaching culture to become established. I'm actually waiting for us to find, approaches to make the cultural industry fairer, with less exploitation and less under-pricing. The crisis can be used to this end. But the normalcy of live events and full concert halls will certainly return.

Another major turning point in European integration is the departure of United Kingdom. In what way is Brexit influencing European culture?

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The cultural sector will be very much affected by the fact that cultural exchange with the United Kingdom will no longer exist in the future or will be diminished. It does not help either that the British government has announced its withdrawal from Creative Europe and has not expressed any interest in continuing to engage in close cooperation with the EU in the fields of culture and education. There are initiatives by cultural organisations - both here on the continent and in the United Kingdom - to intensify these cultural relations. The European Cultural Foundation, for example, has been particularly active in this area. The same applies to cultural institutes. EUNIC members in the UK are particularly aware of their responsibility to ensure that there is no decline in cooperation on the part of cultural stakeholders and civil society. In this respect, cultural institutes can form a bridge for the people of the UK, but also for cultural workers, to continue to participate in this exchange in the European cultural scene. 250 cultural organisations and creators signed a letter to the UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture and Media in early September calling on him to work towards keeping the United Kingdom in Creative Europe. Culture can potentially build understanding, contact and trust. In this respect, culture is likely to have a major role to play in future relations between Europe and the United Kingdom.

Is a European cultural policy possible with the current institutional form of the EU?

What is needed above all is an awareness of the importance of culture. Culture is absent too often from debates among Heads of State and Government. Gladly we have recently seen the European [Bauhaus](#) initiative. If we are to bring culture into a more diverse range of EU policies, it would probably first be necessary to create awareness of how important culture is. Often the national and European levels are in conflict. The reflex is to make sure that your own culture, your own language is protected and promoted, but simultaneity is possible on many levels. I can be in my city and see myself as - in my case - an inhabitant of Brussels, be German and at the same time consider myself European. For me, this is not a contradiction at all, but a productive exchange. And I believe that this can be true at all levels.

However, I understand the logic that the mandate for culture lies with the Member States. Who is best placed to decide which library is to be supported and which theatre or art gallery? That has to be decided at the levels closest to the population. It would make no sense to steer the Salzburg Festival or the Paris Opera from Brussels. But I am convinced that cultural exchange projects, for example the mobility and exchange of artists, initiatives like *the European Capitals of Culture* or [European Spaces of Culture](#) are necessary. When you look at the budget that these initiatives receive you realise that there is still a lot of room for improvement. For example, the European Capitals of Culture do not have a follow-up and networking programme, which definitely could be encouraged. The EU and the Member States could strike up a productive relationship in the areas of copyright and culture related artificial intelligence. Or look together into cultural education, cultural heritage, etc.

When it comes to culture, is there a European approach that would reflect the diversity of the Member States?

Culture is diverse in itself. National culture in that sense does not exist either. The aim should be to promote this diversity. What is unique about Europe are our values, such as freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, scientific freedom, etc. Something that is also included in EUNIC's statutes is the commitment to a cultural sector that has an independent voice and the best possible financial resources and structural framework. These elements can underpin a European cultural approach. It is a unique space that we have created in Europe even though there are now trends in Europe that seek to restrict these freedoms. Overall, Europe represents a great liberal order worldwide. This aspect constitutes the common approach to a European cultural policy.

This could also be correlated to the concept of European identity, of which the French President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly spoken. To what extent are these two concepts linked: European identity and European culture?

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My understanding of European identity is that it consists of different overlapping identities. For me, this freedom is intrinsic to our European area likewise a kind of solidarity, precisely because there is a certain canon of values that can be agreed upon, such as peace. That is one of the reasons why the EU exists.

You frequently point out that increasingly a bottom-up approach is being established on the European cultural scene. Could you explain what it is and what it means for the Union?

When we speak of the bottom-up approach, we are referring to cultural cooperation across borders. This can be correlated to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and, more generally, to discourses that exist on development and the relationship «global North - global South». It has become clear that cooperation with our partners works best between equals in a dialogue-based relationship. This way we try to build peaceful relationships based on trust. In this bottom-up approach, it is important that where activities are taking place, it is there that it should be decided how best to carry them out. Decisions on cultural activities should therefore be taken together with local partners. This is firmly anchored in the EU strategy for international cultural relations. I believe in the principle that the allocation of funds is not decided in some far-off capital city. A great deal of decision-making power can and should be transferred to ever smaller levels. In cultural policy, it always makes sense to set up the programmes in such a way that the people that are directly involved with specific issues and who are directly active in the field are the ones who decide.

You have often mentioned the importance of culture in international relations. What role do you think European culture plays in European foreign policy and soft power?

That is a huge topic. In this respect we are talking about cultural relations, less about cultural diplomacy or soft power. The EU strategy of 2016 to me is a very progressive strategy in that it is based on values rather than on specific fields of action. It is also involving global solidarity, which is central to our cultural activities worldwide. The image

of Europe in the world can benefit if we embrace these values, learn from each other and listen to each other. This approach is probably contrasting with other policy areas. It was Federica Mogherini, former Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who introduced this cultural approach to EU foreign policy. We are trying to ensure that the positive effects of such an approach impact conflict prevention and socio-economic developments in partner countries. We are trying to draw attention to this angle so that the EU engages more in this direction, since it can bring people together. There are countries that are already doing this more actively. France and Germany have very distinct approaches to cultural relations. In this regard the EU still has a long way to go. It does not really use these cultural instruments to their full potential and may not be sufficiently aware of their real power.

Irrespective of all the difficulties that this crisis is creating in the cultural sector, what positive things can come out of it for European cooperation? Are there any positive or new effects?

This moment can now be seized to try out new formats, to understand the specificities of the digital space, and to see in what way it is useful in the cultural field. The topic of copyright is essential. At the same time, the possibility to reach a global audience is interesting. All cultural stakeholders must now ask themselves questions, like what it means to be in «competition» with all the theatres, operas or operators of the world. Do we want this or not? Should we focus more strongly on the social aspect? What does that mean?

Furthermore, this exceptional situation should now help us think fundamentally about how we want to shape culture. Cultural work takes a critical look at the world - which is absolutely desirable - and sometimes at its own structures. Another important aspect is fair cooperation: many museums do not pay any fees to the artists they exhibit, arguing that the added value comes from increased visibility. This is problematic, because nobody can live on visibility alone. The current crisis could be an opportunity to think about such issues.

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It is also an opportunity to connect to other issues, such as sustainability and our impact on the environment. How can mobility and culture be organised without travelling so much? A lot of resources are wasted in the process. How can art be made, exhibited and brought to a public with a smaller ecological footprint? These are questions we can ask ourselves now.

This interview was conducted by Stefanie Buzmaniuk on 11 September 2020. It has been updated to take into account the agreement reached on 10 December on the Multiannual Financial Framework.

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