



## 15 Years in the Neighbourhood Ivan Krastev in conversation with Philipp Dietachmair

The Europe ECF imagines extends well beyond the EU and embraces the countries that touch our borders to the east and to the south. Since our beginnings in the 1950s, ECF has been pursuing the idea of a Europe that goes beyond historical, cultural and political borders and proposes new ways of doing things.

These guiding principles run through the pages of our publication *Another Europe*,<sup>1</sup> which brings together a treasure trove of insights and experiences from partners and participants working with us in the European Neighbourhood over the past 15 years.

We take the book as our starting point in a conversation with Bulgarian political scientist **Ivan Krastev**, together with ECF Programme Manager **Philipp Dietachmair**, who has been running our neighbourhood programmes for more than 10 years. We invite you to dive into this fascinating and much needed conversation with one of Europe's most respected and knowledgeable political scientists. We have divided the interview into five parts to allow a deeper look and time for reflection on the history of the role of culture in the larger European project.

Part 1: Looking Back

Part 2: Identity Politics

Part 3: A Common Ground Across Geographies

Part 4: Finding a New Language

Part 5: Culture and Politics

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the book and order a copy visit [www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/another-europe](http://www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/another-europe)

## Part 1: Looking Back

Philipp Dietachmair: *When ECF started to collaborate with cultural initiatives in the EU Neighbourhood countries in 1999, the wars in Ex-Yugoslavia had just been ended, Eastern enlargement of the EU was only a few years ahead, so was the reopening of membership talks with Turkey and no other EU Delegation worldwide had more employees than the diplomatic representation in Moscow. Civil society in a number of countries along the EU borders seemed to have justified reasons to believe that – with a good deal of persistence – more openness, participation and justice would eventually become achievable in their societies.*

*After 15 years of building capacities with cultural managers who operate in ‘turbulent times’ (to quote the title of one of our seminal handbooks<sup>2</sup>) violent political developments, repressive (or crumbling) state structures and shifting social realities across practically all EU Neighbourhood regions have left many of the civic initiatives which have collaborated with ECF more fragile and exposed than ever before. Was their assumption – which was very much in line with ECF’s own vision – that there was a true perspective for an ever more open, democratic and inclusive wider Europe (reaching across the EU and its neighbouring regions) too naïve?*

Ivan Krastev: The way we saw the world 15 years ago and the way we see it now has changed a lot. We like to talk about 1989 as a revolution, but nowhere in history has there been a revolution without a counter revolutionary moment. We believed that there was only one story and one narrative: the one of an ever expanded European Union where the institutions, values and practices were going to spread. I believe that we should look back because many of the things that are surprising us now probably had been under the surface and we didn’t manage to see them. People –especially in Western Europe, try to think of the last 25 years as a particularly uneventful time. But say you come from the moon and try to look at what happened in Europe in the last 25 years, you’re going to be surprised! Almost two dozen new states have emerged, and on that level, Europe in the last 25 years can be compared only to Africa in the 1960s.

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<sup>2</sup> *Arts management in turbulent times: Adaptable Quality Management*, Boekmanstudies/ European Cultural Foundation (ECF), Amsterdam 2005.

Instead of looking at one big project, the enlargement of the EU, it would be better to look at four different projects – all four of them in crisis now: One was of course the transformation in the enlargement of the EU, the biggest project because it was a visionary one. It kept a normative aspect and although people didn't know when the Balkans, Turkey or Ukraine were going to be part of the European Union, they knew that one day they'll be there. You ask if we've been naïve. Yes, we have been. But naiveté can also be part of your strengths. It was exactly this naiveté that allowed people to achieve more than if they've had been realistic about what was going on.

However, there have been three other projects running in Europe at the same time: one comprises the problem of the imaginary of Post-Imperial Russia. Never in its history had Russia been a non-empire. It was therefore not easy for the Russian society and leadership to find their place in the world. Whereas for us, the end of communism was perceived as a win-win game. Not many Russians were nostalgic for communism especially in the younger generations, but it was very difficult for us to understand that what the Russians were nostalgic for was the Soviet Union. For them, the end of communism did not mean that the Soviet Union should disintegrate towards this huge crisis of identity. Our failure to look closely into the political or social, but also the very deep identity crisis the Russian society was going through, prevented us from seeing the seeds of this Russia we see today – which cannot be explained simply by the policies of President Putin.

Then new states have emerged in the Post-Yugoslavian and Post-Soviet space, many of which had only their names and borders on the day of their creation. How to build a state in Europe where some of the normal mechanisms of state building –based on suppressing the minorities and coming with a strong nationalistic propaganda, are not tolerated anymore? We didn't ask ourselves that question, it was so obvious that it was part of history that we didn't believe something can come after this. Then you have Turkey which also went through a very important transformation: we see the images of Post-Kemalist Turkey which was on one level much more open and democratic but on another level was becoming less Western because of the rise of political Islam.

So you have all these four projects which have been part of the European space. The problem was obvious: are these projects going to support each other or are they going to disturb each other? We have seen in the last several years how this process created clashes, to what extent for example, the failure of the Ukrainian nation state under Yanukovych created also this major crisis in the Russian–European relations? To what extent a new identity that Putin built for Russia basically ended up in the aggressive isolationism that confronted Russia not only with Europe but many other parts of the world? As for the European Union, all this crisis now on its borders created a situation in which certain fragmentation forces can be seen within Europe.

And here comes the problem of culture. In this visionary idea of an ever expanding European Union, culture was very much reduced to the idea of being part of Europe's soft power. But Europeans have been very much preoccupied with established institutions. All was very much about exporting institutional design, and the idea was that institutions were going to create their own culture, which I believe we have failed to achieve. Although there was a lot of support for certain cultural initiatives, and energy in a new generation that was being shaped, culture was not used as much as it could have been as a source of knowledge about society. Many parts of the problems that we face today can be read in the books, seen in the theatre performances and in the films of this past period. It was always there.

As part of the European project, we have been strongly pushing for creating a very important European, much more cosmopolitan cultural elite and supporting their practices. For example, when they worked on performances that can touch the nerves of audiences not only in Belgrade but also in Zagreb, in Amsterdam, in Berlin. At the same time, what emerged was a much stronger divorce between this more cosmopolitan, mobile, urban part of society, and the other parts of society which basically felt as losers, not only in socio-economic terms, but they also started to have a huge fear about their identity and their place in the world. We've ended up with a situation which is quite different to 15 years ago when it comes to even fundamental questions: if there was one thing that nobody was going to put under question back then, it was the open borders.

*Would you say that we focused too much on the young generations and urban cosmopolitan elites who were clearly interested in reaching out? Did we not do enough with groups outside urban areas?*

Yes, that's true. According to us, such groups were less creative, they were less interesting and they were less connected to Europe. We have been very much focusing on this European-minded culture that was produced in places where, in my view it was logical to go. Because these were also the people that were most interested in cooperation, and every cooperation has demands.

## Part 2: Identity Politics

*Talking about reach and people, let's look at Zagreb's independent cultural scene for example. From its beginnings around two decades ago it grew into a strong and well-connected group of organisations whose activities inspire cultural workers in Croatia and beyond. But nobody was supporting those contemporary forms of cultural work in the past. So, such initiatives were dependent on us collaborating with them from abroad.*

We believed their work was interesting, also because of the support they received from Europe and from cultural foundations. They were never made to enter public institutions, they even developed a certain type of distaste for these institutions for good reasons. Some crowds are less supportive when it comes to new and bright ideas. Certain choices made by these new cultural actors also became a source of their current weaknesses as certain types of groups and ideas which were totally old fashioned and not interesting for us managed to remain positioned within these institutions. As eventually more money started to arrive for culture again, from national institutions and others, they started to push in a different direction: they managed to portray these much younger and urban groups as some sort of rootless cosmopolitans who do not understand their own societies.

I would like to illustrate this with an example I always find fascinating: the most popular T.V. series across all of the Balkans in the last several years have been the Turkish soap operas. Everyone who knows the nationalistic culture of places like Bulgaria or Serbia will know to what extent their national identity was very much based on anti-Ottoman and anti-Turkish sentiments. I find this

new interest in Turkish soaps absolutely puzzling. Why are these Christian societies that have very much been shaped by anti-Turkish sentiments throughout the last hundred years, so receptive to this type of soap operas? They are very professionally done, sure, but there are good quality soap operas coming from other parts of the world too. I have been trying to answer these questions because we are talking about a really huge popularity: they are watched by all parts of society, neither education nor age really matters here.

Let's look at the reasons why people watch these soap operas. The first thing they mention is the simple moral story: there is still good and bad. Secondly, institutions are still respected: prosecutors are not necessarily corrupt like in the Bulgarian or Russian or Ukrainian storylines. Also, the elderly are respected and the family has a strong presence. Viewers see people together all the time: around the dinner table, talking... As paradoxical as it may appear, the Turkish soap operas have become the expression of a nostalgia for socialism. They arrived in a situation where in Bulgaria, the conservative parts of society felt they didn't anymore have their own language to express their fears, their hopes, what they believed in, what they have lost and what they have gained. Because these new contemporary forms of culture that started to be produced in our societies could never really get these more conservative people as an audience.

*In his essay for Another Europe called "Culture as a Way out of Crisis", Jerzy Hausner<sup>3</sup> states that 'the conviction has reigned to date that culture is essential and useful when we make it a part of the economy or a political component such as Critical Art. It is time to look at this from another angle and consider how the economy or polity can become part of culture'. From your point of view, what is of particular value and maybe distinctive significance when engaging with civil society initiatives in the field of culture (in comparison with supporting much larger and maybe even more obvious agendas such as freedom of press, human rights, civil liberties, etc.)? What you just described regarding the popularity of soap operas from Turkey seems to be yet another phenomenon in-between.*

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<sup>3</sup> You can read the essay on the Another Europe – Samizdat Lab: <http://ecflabs.org/app/lab/another-europe-samizdat/feature-2-culture-way-out-crisis-%25E2%2580%2593-jerzy-hausner>

The basic problem is that the issue of social cohesion has been very much challenged by this ongoing rapid transformation within our societies. I do believe that we, as societies, but also you as funders, were all so much fascinated by the creative power coming from the winners of this transition that none of us showed enough patience for the culture or demands of the 'losers'. They were pushing for stability in societies where stability was not on offer, pushing for traditional values, such as respect for the elderly. But there was a void and a lack of cultural conversation. Then, when certain political forces decided to build all their cultural appeal on this void, it worked. You can see it to an extent with the current conservative agenda in Putin's Russia, its attacks on gay marriage and on modernity. Everything that we regard as worthy to support there has been cut and reproduced nothing but a scapegoat that became the symbol for a certain 'decadent' culture.

This is interesting because certain parts of all our societies are currently very much in search of words and expressions for what they have experienced. How to enable these people to speak and to tell their story without turning what they have to say into a resource for disclosing a cultural space as we see it happening in many places? Many of these more conservative people are of course not wrong. There were many things that happened in Russia in the 1990s outside of the big cities that had nothing to do with creativity, there was just a total feudal repression in the absence of a state. But how to talk about this? How to talk about this in an opening and not closing way?

Another example; in the 1990s, the period we talked about earlier, Europe very much perceived respect for minorities as a crucial part of its identity – and for good reasons, especially after the Yugoslav wars. We tried to make the minority perspective the key for our understanding of European politics. What we however see in Europe today, not only in Eastern Europe but in France too, is something that I would call the rise of the threatened majorities. Majority groups develop feelings of being persecuted, of never being in power, despite being a majority, and they have started to radicalize. Marine Le Pen and the people behind her in France are a very classical expression of this.

We have arrived at a moment when we should not simply support this or that individual group, but should create a space in which these different intuitions about what's happening in the modern world can clash, but in a positive way.

We need the cultural encounters that never happened before because a more urban open liberal culture and a much more conservative culture have both been living in their own worlds. Now we need common cultural encounters. There is a natural trend which is true for everything, it is by the way also true for the market as it is true for the Internet: people prefer to talk to people who are like them. They tend to stay in their own circles.

*So how do we bring them together to talk with people from outside their own (liberal and cosmopolitan) circles? What are your ideas about who could create a place for such common cultural encounters?*

I do not believe they can be simply brought together by the fact that we all know now how divided our societies are, over cultural issues but also many other issues. Politics in Europe these days are dominated by identity politics. It's not so much about socio-economic issues anymore, today we have a very strong anti-establishment sentiment.

If we want these new encounters to happen, it is very important – and I do believe it's critically important especially for foundations like the European Cultural Foundation, to find authentic and powerful figures and productions from this more conservative culture that are worth talking about. Put them in touch with figures who represent this much more liberal and open-minded view on Europe. Find topics and productions of the more liberal and cosmopolitan cultural circles that are worth to be tried out in contact with a public that feels so much more scared and persecuted now and is often very reactionary. This is going to be more difficult for us than it was showing new art from Croatia in Serbia in the 1990s or inviting Croats to see Serbian art. Most of us working in this field are a part of this more liberal, cosmopolitan high European culture ourselves.

For me, such questions are also all connected to the legacy of communism. From the point of view of somebody like me who was born in a communist country and then lived in a communist country for the first twenty-five years of his life, the only art that societally made sense was art that was challenging, criticizing and eroding power. Since then, we developed a very high level of praise and sympathy for any type of unconformist art. What is interesting these days is that you don't really know what is conformist and what is non-



conformist anymore. Many productions that were non-conformist are now very conformist when we think about the established environments in which they take place and which are often created by donors that are very much in love with non-conformist groups. Beyond this elementary division of conformist versus non-conformist art we need to find cultural productions that express the divergent motions and experiences across different parts of our societies. This will help us understand that for the last twenty-five years, we have been living in the same countries, in the same Europe, but we have a very different idea of what is going on.

### Part 3 – A Common Ground across Geographies

*We have a very concrete challenge in this direction ahead with our annual award, the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture. This year's laureates are citizen laboratory for digital culture Medialab-Prado (Madrid, Spain) and theatre-makers and community developers Krétakör (Budapest, Hungary). They have been chosen for their exceptional bodies of artistic and cultural work in developing critical spaces of social participation and political experimentation through culture. In the case of Hungary especially, many within the cultural community and in the country are sceptical about cultural initiatives such as giving this award. How do you think cultural organisations can better formulate or present their activities to actually reach people who don't even want to hear about the European project, who don't believe in it anymore -or maybe never have? Also in the light of presenting the Award to the laureates in Amsterdam, in front of an audience that most likely thinks more or less like us already.*

You could start by organising a performance by the collective as well as a debate tackling these issues by inviting theatre critics and the general public, so that the Amsterdam audience can experience the profound division we see within the Hungarian society. The biggest political mistake we can all make now is trying to attribute all types of regressive policies simply to decisions allegedly taken by one person, be it Viktor Órban or Jarosław Kaczyński. These people represent certain general trends in their societies. The same goes for the arts: part of the new censorship does not come simply from the government but stems from the pressure that you hear from below. This was also very clear in the case of Russia. I have been talking to a lot of Russian

friends of mine, some of them with a strong dissident experience in the Soviet period, who were telling me that things became worse than in Soviet times after [Crimea](#). In Soviet Russia, the government could be after you, but not the ordinary people –if they were not on your side, they didn't care at least. Now, pressure comes not only from the government, but also from a highly nationalistic, agitated public. It is one thing to be attacked by the cultural department of the communist party, it becomes a totally different story when the porter you know from your own house starts to question your allegiance to your country because of something you said.

Another thing you could do with the Hungarian laureates is to organise the same type of debate and performance you do in Amsterdam in Hungary. That way, the Hungarian audience can understand how foreigners see what is happening in their country, and that this perspective goes beyond liking or not liking Hungarians or blaming their country. We are afraid because we don't want our own societies to be treated like this. I do believe that bringing the conversation over there is going to make it much more interesting because one of the things in Hungary which I personally find very dangerous, is that in this period of political polarization, everybody starts to live in a ghetto of their own. So we are not talking to the other side anymore. It is not going to be a pleasant talk nor an easy conversation, but this is why it should happen on the level of culture.

*Would we not always face the risk that our invitation to such a conversation would be ignored – simply because the ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture comes from Amsterdam and is a European award?*

If they ignore your invitation, it is their problem. But you invited them, and I do believe this would be an important step. In places such as Hungary and Poland, there is a very dangerous collective political trend, although Poland still has a big constituency that defends liberal principles that are important to them. In Hungary, the opposition too quickly jumped towards Brussels to solve their political problems, which resulted in losing parts of their constituency.

Again, we have to be slightly more interested in the cultural productions coming from the more conservative milieus. Not simply because some of them

could actually be good art, they really always could be. But it's very important for us to understand that sometimes we actually might not be talking about simple propaganda, but about genuine and earnest emotions that real art comes from. Remember this hysterical discussion in France about Michel Houellebecq's book *Submission*? It is an important discussion. It is not about liking or disliking something. What is essentially important however, is to understand how the critics of this liberal and open Europe throw themselves into these debates, why they feel this way.

In my view, opening up for a broader understanding could also be of great value for cultural practice itself, because when you're stuck in your own environment, you tend to make the walks of life much less complex than they actually are. For example, let's look at Ukraine where an interesting cultural change takes place on all levels. You obviously have a new nation in the making, and as a result of it, like in any nation building, you have a lot of highly nationalistic rhetoric. How should we look at this? We're not talking about fascism but can clearly see that parts of Ukrainian propaganda are not very different from the Russian one. Should we see this as something natural? How does it fit to the way most other parts of Europe feel? Can we really expect Ukrainians to talk the way Germans do by now, sixty or seventy years after what happened in Germany? On the other hand, if we are very tolerant towards nationalistic Ukrainian rhetoric, how critical could we possibly be towards others in Europe who use similar language? Including Russians. I really do believe we need to have these critical conversations: We quickly like to call something propaganda, but nobody ever believes that they are actually doing propaganda themselves. It's the first rule in propaganda: you always believe that you are doing counter-propaganda and the actual propaganda comes from the other side. This is why culture matters.

In her book *Inventing Human Rights*, French historian and academic Lynn Hunt analyses the birth of human rights by looking at cultural artefacts such as the opera and the novel in the eighteenth century. According to her, the birth of the idea of the universal man and of universal rights goes hand in hand with the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century: for the first time, a countess reading a novel could feel empathy and identify herself with the love and feelings of a maid. The same goes the other way around, for the maid who

reads about the romantic misfortunes of the queen. This is how they discover their common humanity.<sup>4</sup>

We all feel vulnerable in the world, it is therefore very important that culture allows people to talk through their insecurities and vulnerabilities, without letting each side become either a censor or a preacher. Some fears, such as the fears connected to radical Islam, are genuine and legitimate. The problem is that many of the demands voiced by people who have these fears would make our societies even more vulnerable. Nevertheless, in order to have a conversation, we need to acknowledge the genuineness of their fears. On the other hand, however, when people in places like Russia and elsewhere, start expressing their negative feelings about gay rights or hostility towards other issues, sure, let them articulate themselves, but then let's please also remind them: "It could be your own son you are talking about ... ."

I recently heard a very sophisticated explanation used by an NGO in Russia that works with autistic children. They are basically trying to convince the parents to take better care of their kids and to keep them with them at home by using the following elaborate argument: If today you as a parent are telling your kid who is in this difficult condition that you cannot keep him or her at your home, cannot take care of your own child because it is too problematic and that you are going to dump it in an institution, don't forget that the other kids in your family are watching you while doing this. So don't be surprised if tomorrow your children are not going to be interested in taking care of their old parents.

Empathy is critically important, and only culture can breed empathy.

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<sup>4</sup> Also look at Thomas Poell's review of Hunt's book where he confirms that "the growth of new forms of empathy established the basis for the articulation of a whole set of human rights demands." <http://www.krisis.eu/content/2008-3/2008-3-05-poell.pdf>

## Part 4 – Finding a New Language

*When we take a look at international and philanthropic programmes for the EU Neighbourhood countries we can see a number of working areas that seem to have a rather clear agenda – at least on the surface: Supporting freedom of expression, human rights, civil liberties, democratisation and so on.*

*ECF's work in the field of culture comes along with much more fluid concepts. Everybody has a more or less clear idea of what support for human rights activists entails but when it comes to culture, people here and there can be confused as our work is not about a specific art form like opera or even supporting the arts in general. It is, like we discussed earlier, about developing empathy for example. How would you make the case for this rather complex system of transnational cultural collaboration contacts, which maybe hasn't developed its own kind of generally understood agenda yet?*

This is extremely important because this is also the way cultural programmes and, in my view, cultural foundations should help the European Union. We used to have these boxes we would check: we had a very clear idea of what we were doing, we knew it was what it was, clearly measurable and so on. This has changed now. We also used to talk a lot about the transformative power of the EU, and now we have discovered a new transformative power of the Neighbourhood over the EU – coming along with the developments around the refugees. So from this point of view, obviously, we need a different language. Of various possible initiatives, cultural programmes are the most capable to create this new language that connects to the other side, because people involved in such programmes are inherently talented to work with ideas and notions. I do believe that cultural programmes also have the important advantage that very often their focus is on individuals and not only on organisations.

We are now at a time when cultural foundations should say, “let's talk first”. This approach should be more represented in how we want to present our side, what we want to achieve and, how we want to speak about things. For instance, is the best way to defend human rights really to send human rights monitors? We should be mindful, if we are not actually alienating a huge group of people by just blaming this or that government for not adopting this

legislation, or violating that legislation? This approach is probably not going to impress a lot of people. But one can clearly see how strong the response is to some of the cultural productions which deal with these problems, that describe persecuted groups, be it gays or others. Because there is this human factor that cannot be easily put in a box and this is what makes cultural productions attractive, this is what cultural figures go for.

However, there is also a risk to reduce support of cultural productions only to those made by NGOs and similar organisations because these structures make it easy for us to fund. Now, it should also be about new ideas, about new words and especially also about new figures. In my view, foundations now also have the task to talk about this to policy-makers, especially in Brussels. We should change certain words. In certain moments, if we want to keep our value agenda alive, we also need to change the language.

*ECF's work with the western Russian region of Kaliningrad 2004–2009*<sup>5</sup> involved a number of public institutions, such as the local museums, and took place in the framework of a mutually co-financed EU–Russia culture programme. It showed that in those times for a period of five, six years, interaction between EU–based and Russia-based public institutions was possible on an equal level. But when certain developments in Russia –which you described earlier, were set in motion many of these increasingly normal exchanges were almost immediately stopped, and from both sides. Our colleagues in Kaliningrad now face huge problems to keep up even basic cultural contacts to Poland, to Lithuania and others in the Baltic neighbourhood which are so vital for them.

I agree, what we had to discover in the last two or three years is the fragility of all these projects and networks we have created and that everything could basically disappear with one political decision – and boom, not any more ... . The good news however is that I am convinced that in the next two or three years we're only going to discover the actual resilience of some of these projects. People who were involved with them made the experience of genuinely talking to each other. One can cut money but one cannot cut real

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<sup>5</sup> Read further in the dedicated chapter in Another Europe, accessible on the Another Europe – Samizdat Lab: <http://ecflabs.org/app/lab/another-europe-samizdat/feature-4-cross-border-cooperation-challenge-and-inspiration-kaliningrad>

communication between real people, and people will just continue to like borrowing ideas. Following these first moments of disengagement we have seen the emergence of many people who are afraid or very much attracted by this new, powerful nationalistic discourse. But then again I am convinced, when we are talking about talented and reasonable people, they will start looking around soon again. Then we should start to reengage. This reengagement is probably not going to be immediately on the same level as before, but I do believe it is very important to keep up the contacts and also to try to have an understanding for some of their problems.

Let's keep looking at Russia as an example, and more concretely at some of the figures inside the public administration. I always have this conversation with colleagues who are not part of the cultural sphere and who ask me, why I still keep friendly contacts with some of the experts that are now quite close to the Kremlin and other institutions. Firstly, because I want to know how they see the world. But secondly, because I'm entirely ready to recognise the complexity of their position. We should be very careful and not try to moralize others, instead, we should try to understand their choices. One needs to maintain real red lines of course, because there are people who do things that are simply unacceptable.

*Where are the red lines for you?*

There is one very simple and important red line: don't harm other people! And this is a very important red line! I believe using your position of power, or even your position of a kind of public visibility, in order to destroy people who are in a difficult position, should in no way be tolerated, because this is an awful misuse of power. The fact that people have a different view than us on certain issues however is not reason enough for me to cut relationships. Even more, there is always a chance that on certain things they might be right.

One of the things that we should redevelop, and that unfortunately neither the European Union nor America did after the end of the Cold War –which is typical for all victorious powers, is the curiosity we have lost. We have the feeling that because of the end of the Cold War, we know better than anybody – I speak about a West which claims to know how things function. No, we should remain curious: for others, for their arguments, for their experiences. Curiosity can

make opposite sides really understand that even when they disagree, they didn't disagree right away and from the very beginning. If you are ready to first listen to something, you are also ready to talk about this most of the time. I was recently told about a debate organised in Kharkiv by one of the key figures in the Ukrainian Euromaidan: writer and poet Serhiy Zhadan who invited a very strongly pro-Russian nationalistic poet from the Donbas region. This created a major divide with half of the audience which was protesting and leaving the room because of her presence. She was not even on the panel, but only present in the room. I have a huge respect for people like Zhadan, who was beaten during Euromaidan<sup>6</sup>. He knows that because of his experience, it is up to him to invite this woman and to allow her to speak so he can tell her that he disagrees. But you always need to do this in a way that makes a next conversation possible. Shouting at each other is not helping. This is why cultural programmes are so very important because cultural figures from opposite sides are usually always among the most expressive and most committed advocates for their cause. And these programmes are exactly what should be done, these conversations need to happen. But strangely enough, such conversations somehow can happen more easily in Amsterdam than in Kharkiv. Ok, probably it would also be easier for some people to talk about issues with Islam in Dutch society in Kharkiv rather than in Amsterdam. The point is that I really do believe that we should use these types of different geographies of Europe to try and bring very different people's ideas and audiences together.

I have always believed that the major hero of any democratic society is a person who is ready to change his/her opinion on the base of an argument. If we are losing this type of person, then we are losing a lot. Because of the fact that cultural programmes, more than other working fields– are not simply based on a rational argument but also on emotions, they should really try to praise the people who are ready to change their opinion based on something they have learned and that they didn't know before. In my view, this should be at the heart of what we are doing. Because I do think this is also at the heart of what European culture stands for.

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<sup>6</sup> The Abuse of Ukraine's Best-Known Poet by Sally McGrane, The New Yorker (8 March 2014) <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-abuse-of-ukraines-best-known-poet>



*When we look at feedback from participants who have joined our Tandem Ukraine Cultural Exchange Programme<sup>7</sup> in 2014, we see an interesting phenomenon: on the one hand we have of course some Ukraine–EU collaborations who engage with the burning political questions of the past years. But at least half of the group tells us how much they appreciate our programme because it supports them in doing what is important for their work and in their city and doesn't force them to constantly discuss all the things that are so challenging for their country. There are so many international programmes which focus on conflict and politics now, they say Tandem offers a framework, a safe space where life continues 'normally' and participants can focus on their work within their local communities.*

Good cultural programmes are like cooking and gardening: they are very local. There is no universal model. What works in one place is not necessarily going to work in another. There are places where people simply will not discuss what divides them. And people should be respected for this. They are buying time, just like Europe had been buying time in the 1940s and 50s. In the same Germany that we praise so much today there was a lot of silence back then. This silence basically turned out to be very productive because it was the silence that produced the 1960s and the opening of German society.

We cannot demand this productive silence from people everywhere of course, and in certain contexts, they need to shout at each other occasionally. But, as long as they shout at each other from face to face, that's fine. What I'm afraid of is when people are shouting at each other from their own ghettos, and when they are starting to dehumanise the other side. New media is making this much easier. Because on Facebook, you are staying with people who share your views. We are much more ghetto prone than we realise, and yet, there are cultural problems to discuss. Yes, some people want to discuss –and in the end it could be even through opera, it could be anything. People should know that living together is not easy. This is kind of an important thing to understand and this is why cultural programmes should have a totally different space and position. They should not be perceived simply as support for better cultural policies or as cultural management education.

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<sup>7</sup> see [www.tandemexchange.eu](http://www.tandemexchange.eu) to learn more about the programme.

We need to go back to the heart of what culture is: allowing people to live together, while keeping their differences well articulated. Tensions in our post-conflict societies are very high and this is how we are going to make it work.

*After more than 15 years of our work with cultural initiatives in the EU Neighbourhood the past few years have confronted us with a serious reality-check for our work. Probably we altogether will need a perspective of at least another 15 years to turn the seeds of the many cultural initiatives which have managed to grow into small plants into something really bigger and influential.*

Absolutely! And here you have, in my view, always two kinds of extremes: On the one hand you have people who basically always want to be very optimistic and teleological and want to believe that in ten or fifteen years you can totally change societies. And then there are the others who believe that nothing can be changed at all. Neither is true. There are going to be changes here and there of course, but it is important not to simplify. For example, we always believe that the younger generations are going to be much more open and liberal than the older ones. Not necessarily. It depends on many things. By the way, the very same open borders we created also mean that some of the most energetic and liberal young people are going to leave their societies very early on. Is this going to affect the life of the others who are staying? For sure.

I believe we need much more curiosity, should not fear complexity and cherish the knowledge that regardless of what you are doing, even at the end of your life, you'll never know whether you have actually succeeded or not. I do believe that the difference between a business initiative, let's say a construction project, and a cultural project is that success for the latter always comes much later. But it's a success that is likely to stay because, unlike building just anything else like a new highway or something, a meaningful cultural undertaking really happens on the level of society as a whole.

## Part 5 – Culture and Politics

*Let us briefly look back to the beginning of this conversation, when we discussed about the starting point of our programmes end of the 90s and the very different political context back then. What can we expect for the next 15 years? You already spoke about the new transformative power of the situation in the EU Neighbourhood which, as it were, forces itself upon Europe. During an ECF event called the Dwarfing of Europe in 2013, political analyst Ranabir Samaddar of the Calcutta Research Group tried to describe the EU and its Neighbourhood with an image of two concentric circles: the inner circle (the EU), he said, would inevitably come into motion once the outer circle (the neighbouring countries) started moving. It seems that we have arrived at exactly such a situation. Do we have to anticipate that during the next 15 years our collaboration with cultural initiatives outside but also inside the EU will be determined by a more and more unpredictable and in some fields even dangerous context?*

Until now we have been looking at ourselves as transformers in a certain way. Cultural managers and the cultural policies of the European Union and its countries have been acting as if they were in a classical science-fiction story, in which they are going to an alien planet and transform the people there. We now understand that first, by transforming them you are changing yourself. But then, the people that you are transforming also have an idea how to make you different. The European Union in the way we knew it is not here anymore. It is going to become something else. But it doesn't mean that there is not going to be a European Union, only that everything is going to be different. So, it's not about having found right or wrong answers to the questions we had fifteen years ago, the questions as such are changing. From this point of view, the success of any cultural programme for me is determined by coming up with the right questions.

We shouldn't fall into the trap of believing that by insisting on doing what we have always been doing we show consistency and commitment. No, I do believe that the cultural sphere, like anything else, has to be flexible and needs to be ready for change. Programmes and support schemes that made a lot of sense five years ago can turn out not be working anymore, simply because the context has changed. We will need to re-evaluate and ask ourselves a new

question: this question is not about having done things in a good or bad way, but asking ourselves what do we need to do in order to have most impact in the situation we face today?

This is going to be much more difficult compared to fifteen years ago, because the assumptions of what needs to be done were widely shared back then. Today, we are in a situation where we are going to see societies, political establishments and institutions which will face the challenge of having very different assumptions about what's actually going on. How will the world look like in ten years from now? Today, one gets very different answers, depending on whom we ask.

*You have already touched upon the power cultural projects can develop for engaging people around certain issues, the mobilising role culture can have for civil society movements and the involvement of cultural initiatives we see today with protest movements inside and outside Europe. In Zagreb, some of the first cultural initiatives we have started to collaborate with in our capacity building programmes fifteen years ago, have since become – among doing many other things – the coordinators of a powerful activists' platform. They team up with environmentalist groups, civil rights groups, independent media and even unions to protest for example against the construction of a shopping mall and an underground garage in an inner-city pedestrian zone, but also other government-led privatisation projects, such as selling of the usage licenses for Croatia's highways, etc.*

*You published a book<sup>8</sup> which deals with the recent protest movements around the world. Many of them have expressed their demands in a very imaginative and creative way. From your point of view, what is the particular role culture and cultural initiatives played within these protests of the past few years?*

They are indeed very creative and that's very important. Cultural practices are crucial for generating identity in such moments. We saw this happening with the protests in Bulgaria and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, when people suddenly became highly imaginative. Artists play a very important role in this

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<sup>8</sup> *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. <http://www.iwm.at/publications/books/democracy-disrupted-politics-global-protest/>

from the beginning, as their work can contribute creative and symbolic propositions as to what the major challenge at hand actually is. Around this, these groups can then crystallise certain energies.

Once such constellations grow strong enough to create specific identities however, it is very important to see how they are actually going to institutionalise. Because what bothered me then, and still does now, is that some of my initial fears have turned out to be legitimate when we look at the actual legacy of the Gezi protests, or the Bulgarian protests, or the Russian protests in 2012. Most important in the long run is what one makes of this creative energy that people have while on the square. The protest-driven constellations that are going to survive – in the sense that they truly represent citizens who act together – are the ones that manage to motivate people to enter politics or to defend their ideas at least by really doing things, such as creating a new theatre or establishing a new organisation.

I believe that part of the political weakness of some of the milieus close to culture is their tendency to underestimate the power of institutions. We can speak of a total cult of creativity as an end in itself, which is coupled with the idea that it is already enough to disrupt, that the idea of culture is enough to disrupt. But it is not enough. Unfortunately, change in our societies does not happen in the same way as it tends to happen in technological companies. I think it is not a coincidence that artists and people in IT are often overrepresented in many of the protests that you see around the world today. IT people know that disruption normally works well in their technology companies. But in societies, it is very important to bring in others, to allow certain ideas to multiply, to allow certain cultural practices and even fashions to spread, because part of the power of cultural practices is that they also work as a fashion: Something that was strange yesterday is becoming trendy today and is going to become a new norm tomorrow. So, how to learn, how to institutionalise, how to go outside of your own circles? And then, what is even more important: how to learn to speak by not just telling your own story, but actually the story of the people you don't know of yet?

For me, it was a very strong signal in this direction that Svetlana Alexievich received the Nobel Prize for literature. Because to be the voice of other voices is crucially important in culture, as it allows society to hear itself – as all

classical literature did. I do believe that there is a very strong anti-political sentiment among some of the cultural circles we work with, the idea that politics is not a good place for decent people. But it is very difficult and contradictory to believe that politics in general is not a place for decent people while expecting on the other hand that only decent attitudes should prevail inside the political system. So from this point of view, I do believe that often there is actually no need for a regime change but for a change of mind.

*Some of the cultural initiatives from Zagreb I have introduced when we spoke about the recent protest movements, have for example established a new service organisation for the support of independent cultural productions in the city. One of the main goals of this organisation is the development of venues for contemporary cultural creations and events – e.g. in abandoned factory buildings owned by the city. Both the City of Zagreb and a coalition of local cultural NGOs which have set it up govern the organisation in the legal framework of what they call a ‘civil – public partnership’. This seems to be a good example for people who have moved on from protesting to ‘really doing something to defend their ideas’ as you argued for. But what’s the next step now? Should they enter politics and become a political party?*

They don't need to right away become a political party, but those of them who see that they have the talent to create change by mobilising people could choose that way. Many important cultural figures and dissidents across Central and Eastern Europe went into politics in the early 1990s. They didn't stay for a long time, but they made a lot of changes and one of the most important things they changed was language and how to talk about certain things differently. There is no need to push people to go into politics if they really don't want to go there. But to make a virtue out of being anti-political and outside of the political sphere even when you very much care about politics, is in my view one of the weaknesses of this cultural milieu. And this is very much limiting their power to really change their own societies.

*And what to do in situations where sometimes it can even be too dangerous to publicly appear as a politically engaged cultural figure, like in Egypt or in Belarus?*

This is awful. We know the existence of this danger very well from the communist period. Governments are trying to put pressure on people who just want to speak freely. But because of this risk, the public sometimes also listens differently to those who dare to speak freely and take these risks. It is very easy to be nonconformist in an environment that doesn't care about you. It is very easy to attack God in a post-catholic secular France, whereas it is very, very risky to do so in most Muslim societies today. But actually because of this, we are also not listening very carefully to those who do blame God in France.

However, when we encounter dissident voices under threat, get to know how profound it must be for the person who dares to speak, how significant it is for this person to take the risk, the poet, the artist gains rising importance exactly as a result of this willingness to be exposed. This is the paradoxical story of dictatorship: the harder they repress, the more important they are making the figure of the artist. But we cannot push people to take risks that they are not ready to take. I find it morally unacceptable when somebody from outside pushes people to take the risk when they are not sharing that same risk. However, we need to make sure people who are ready to take these risks are heard.

*Part of our work at ECF is to translate know-how from our programmes in the EU Neighbourhood and the practices of the cultural initiatives we collaborate with for consideration in broader EU policy agendas. The External Action Service of the EU will soon announce a new cultural component to be included in their EU Foreign Relations policy framework.*

*ECF's advocacy work in the framework of the More Europe<sup>9</sup> consortium has helped to introduce some of the key aspects we just discussed towards a new way of thinking about European cultural collaboration on EU foreign policy levels. In international diplomacy one of the challenges is of course that it still happens mostly based on government to government relations. From your point of view, what should be key aspects of future EU diplomacy programmes that are based on the soft power of culture?*

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<sup>9</sup> [www.moreeurope.org](http://www.moreeurope.org)

I believe that culture is something more than simply the soft power, something which is simply based on the power to attract. That's why also in the context of international diplomatic relations, when institutional cooperation has its limits, it is very important to also go on the level of individual encounters, through scholarships, trips and visits. Because at the end of the day, it is all about people. People to people. Instead of trying to always go into very long term institutional programmes where governments are going to agree on something that is meaningless, that nobody is going to hear about, people with ideas should be at the centre of everything.

The European Union could use its money to provide thousands of fellowships for young people to see how our cultural institutions work. Give money to European artists to go and learn on the spot, to see what it is like to live in some of the countries we talked about. These types of very simple projects can have much more impact than something that works very good on paper but at the end of the day, is going to get entangled in intra-governmental relations where some of the money, while hopefully not being stolen, might nevertheless be wasted on programmes whose only feature is that they are not offensive to anybody. If you don't have a partner that is really interested in transformation, and if you don't want to fake cooperation, go with small grants and give support to as many different people as possible.

*We'll pass it on! Thank you very much for this conversation.*

For more information about *Another Europe* and to order a copy of the book, visit <http://www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/another-europe>

We also invite our readers to join the dedicated 'Another Europe' Lab on ECF Labs (<http://ecflabs.org/app/lab/another-europe-samizdat>) where you can participate to the discussion on issues around these particular themes and download more texts on our work in the EU Neighbourhood as featured in *Another Europe*.