

What can culture do?



Over the span of 10 months, between January and October of 2024, the European Cultural Foundation embarked on a wide-reaching consultation process across 15 European cities to shape its strategic direction for 2025-2030. The listening tour, which included input from almost 200 participants with diverse backgrounds and nationalities, focused on four key questions designed to explore the potential of culture in responding to key European challenges.

- **What are the challenges of Europe?**
- **What can culture do?**
- **What can philanthropy do?**
- **What can we do together?**

The discussions provided a broad range of insights regarding the importance of culture and philanthropy in addressing concerns such as polarization, rising populism, the climate and digital transition, youth disengagement, and democratic erosion.

Alongside these in-person consultations, a broader survey was conducted to gauge the public's perceptions of culture's future role. The data gathered informs this summary, which highlights the key findings and sets the direction of future ECF action.

A. Challenges Facing Europe

Crisis of Identity

Europe's struggle with identity is one of the most pressing issues identified during the consultations. Participants noted that the continent has drifted from its historical narrative of freedom and unity, with the rise of populism and right-wing extremism exacerbating divisions across the region. This disconnect is worsened by national identity politics of European states, which have weakened the shared sense of purpose that once defined the European project. The war in Ukraine brought Europe's geopolitical and energy vulnerabilities into sharp relief, but despite solid solidarity efforts from public and private stakeholders, the broader European identity continues to fragment.

Disconnect with Youth

Across multiple consultations, participants expressed concern over the growing disillusionment of young Europeans. Many feel powerless and disconnected from political processes, particularly in light of pressing issues like housing shortages, the war in Ukraine, and the economic difficulties they face. This generation's sense of alienation contributes to political disengagement, with many youth feeling that traditional democratic institutions are not equipped to address their needs or future.

Shrinking Civic and Digital Spaces

The consultations also revealed the detrimental effects of shrinking civic spaces and the pervasive spread of mis- and disinformation in digital environments. Social media, driven by algorithms that prioritize sensationalism, has played a central role in distorting political discourse and undermining democratic engagement. Additionally, as public spaces for dialogue dwindle, opportunities for meaningful exchange and debate are becoming increasingly scarce, further eroding the public's trust in democratic institutions.

Climate Change

While the existential threat of climate change was acknowledged across the board, many young participants expressed feelings of helplessness. The enormity of the crisis, compounded by perceived political inertia, has left many uncertain of how to meaningfully contribute to addressing climate issues. Participants emphasized the need for culture to become more deeply integrated into the conversation on sustainability, seeing it as a bridge to engage communities and envision alternative futures.

B. The Role of Culture**Inspiring Hope and Imagination**

Culture has the potential to inspire hope and reinvigorate the collective imagination, particularly among younger generations. Participants argued that culture can encourage new ways of thinking and help envision a more positive and inclusive future for Europe. By challenging established norms and encouraging empathy across communities, culture can pave the way for stronger social connections and cooperation. According to ECF's 2024 survey, over 63% of respondents viewed culture as essential for imagining Europe's future.

Amplifying Marginalized Voices

One of the most significant roles of culture identified by participants is its ability to give voice to marginalized communities. Immigrants, minorities, and those in vulnerable positions can find platforms through cultural initiatives, where they can share their stories, challenge dominant narratives, and advocate for their rights. This process allows for a more inclusive Europe, where diversity is seen as a strength and different perspectives are actively encouraged.

Bridging Generational Gaps

Culture also plays an important role in connecting different generations, especially as younger Europeans increasingly feel estranged from traditional political systems. Cultural initiatives that focus on dialogue and collaboration between generations can help restore the younger generation's sense of belonging and political engagement. These connections are critical in rebuilding trust and creating a more cohesive European society and identity.

Resisting Populism and Reclaiming the Future

As right-wing populism continues to rise, culture offers a means to challenge efforts to control Europe's future. By creating spaces where alternative narratives can be explored and developed, culture serves as a tool for resisting populist agendas that seek to divide and manipulate public opinion. In doing so, cultural initiatives help to protect the democratic values upon which Europe is built, safeguarding the future from regressive forces.

C. The Role of Philanthropy**Partnering, Not Rescuing**

Philanthropy should move away from positioning itself as a saviour and instead collaborate closely with communities to achieve shared goals. By embracing participatory grant-making processes, philanthropic organizations can ensure that the people they support have a meaningful role in shaping the projects designed to benefit them. This shift from top-down approaches allows for more responsive and sustainable outcomes.

Supporting Grassroots Movements

Foundations and philanthropic institutions should prioritize long-term support for grassroots organisations, particularly those working on the front lines of social change. By offering sustained financial and logistical support, philanthropy can empower these organizations to pursue their goals without the constant pressure of short-term funding cycles.

Transforming Public Spaces

Philanthropy has the capacity to turn traditional public spaces—such as libraries and museums—into dynamic centres for community engagement and cultural dialogue. By reimagining these spaces, philanthropy can create accessible venues for public participation, ensuring that culture and civic engagement remain central to Europe's future.

Investing in Safe Digital Spaces

To counter the challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital submersion, philanthropy must invest in developing open-source media platforms and promoting digital literacy initiatives. These efforts will help create safer, more democratic online environments where citizens can engage in informed discussions without falling victim to algorithmic manipulation.

What can we do together?

The findings from the consultations reveal that Europe is grappling with a profound identity crisis. Cultural policies and initiatives will be essential in addressing these divisions by providing platforms for inclusive dialogue and bridging the generational and societal gaps. The consultations also underscored the critical role of culture in helping Europe navigate geopolitical challenges, countering the rise of populism, and engaging with climate change. To this end, philanthropy must support grassroots movements and work with communities to amplify marginalized voices and revitalize public spaces for cultural engagement.

Culture has the potential to unite a fractured Europe, but only if it is integrated meaningfully into public life and policies. Ensuring that cultural initiatives are accessible to all, especially marginalized groups and the disillusioned youth, will be key to creating a more cohesive and resilient European community. **So, what does this look like?**

Supporting Local Ownership and Co-Creation

Philanthropic foundations should provide long-term, flexible funding and non-financial support to grassroots organisations and initiatives, empowering communities to lead initiatives that meet local needs.

Reimagining Civic Spaces for Cultural Engagement

Investments in public spaces like libraries and museums are essential for cultural engagement. Revitalizing these venues enhances accessibility and promotes public discourse.

Embracing Risk

Allowing civil society to experiment and embrace risks through long-term funding supports innovative solutions to complex societal challenges.

Strengthening Digital Literacy and Democratic Engagement

Investing in digital literacy initiatives is crucial to combat misinformation. Programmes that enhance critical assessment of online content and create safe digital platforms for public discourse are vital.

Advocating for Cultural and Civic Infrastructure

Advocating for support, development, protection and preservation of cultural and civic spaces is essential to ensure societal health and cohesion, upheld by sound public policies. This encourages public engagement and education for Europeans in all localities within their communities.

Promoting Cross-Sector Collaboration for Broader Impact

Facilitating interdisciplinary partnerships helps address complex issues, ensuring that cultural initiatives have a broader social impact.

Empowering Youth and Encouraging Intergenerational Dialogue

Supporting youth-led initiatives and encouraging intergenerational dialogue are essential for building a more inclusive society and shaping the future.

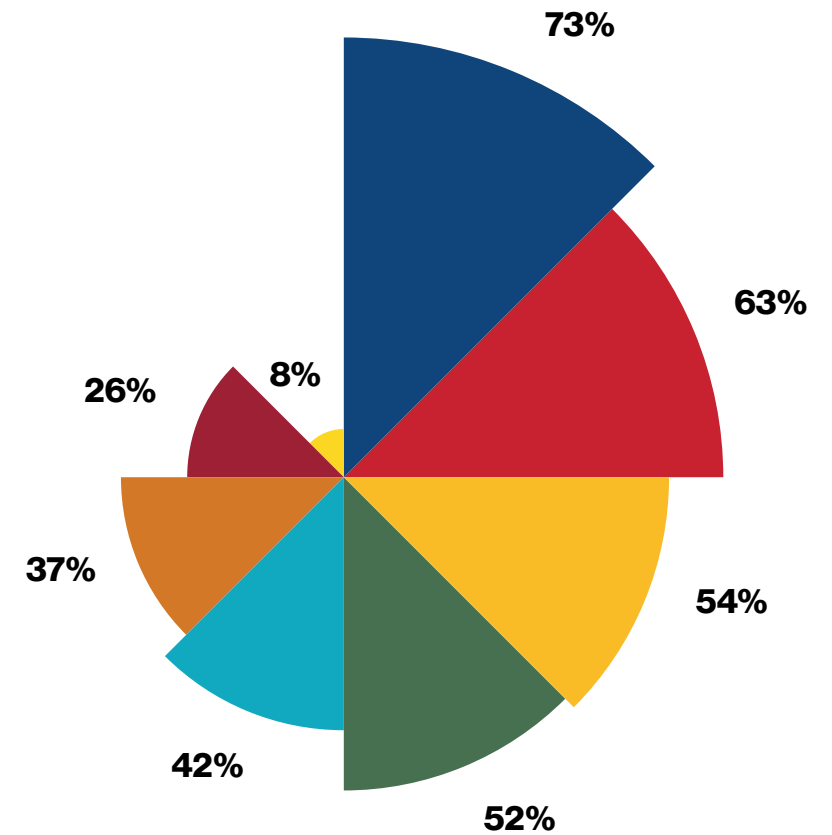
Securing Access to Safe Public Digital Spaces

Investments in creating open-source digital platforms promote democratic values and protect marginalized voices in public discourse.

Facilitating European Solidarity Through Cultural Exchange

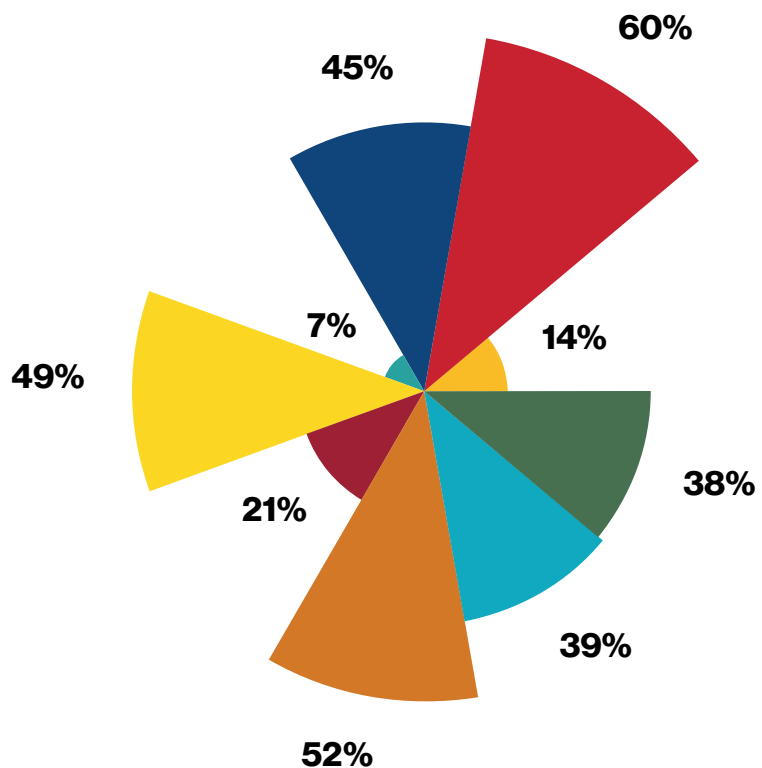
Cultural exchange programmes can combat nationalism by encouraging mutual understanding and solidarity, promoting a cohesive European community through collaborative initiatives.

Which of the following challenges are you most concerned with on the European level?



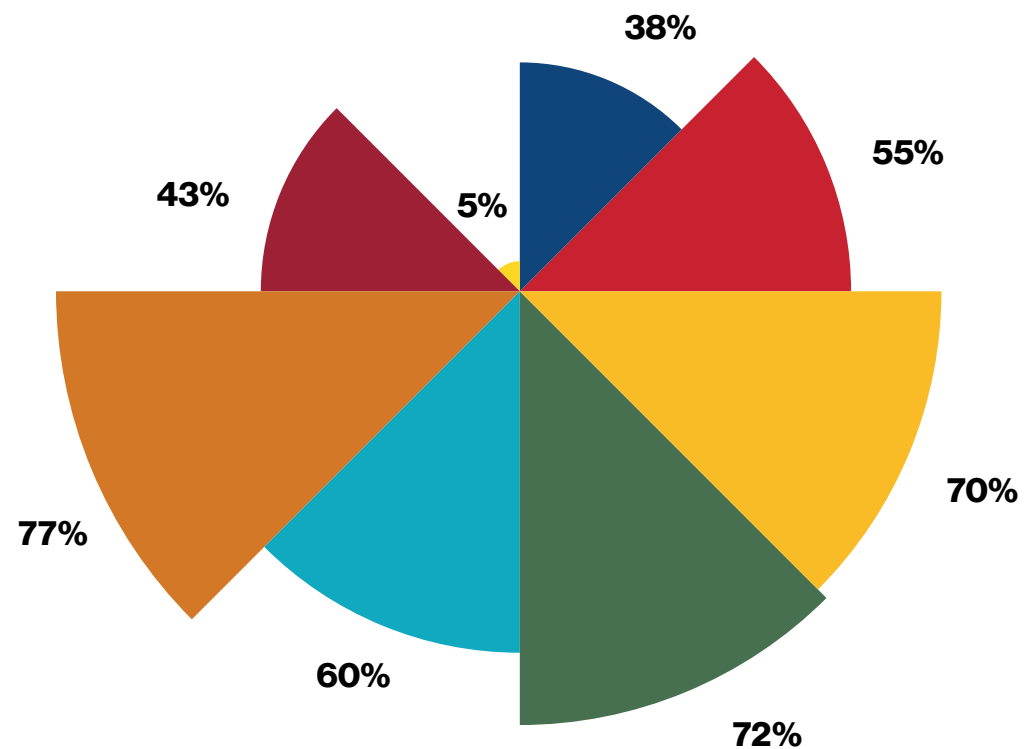
- 73% Rise of nationalism and populism
- 63% Global conflicts and war
- 54% Poverty and social inequality
- 52% Climate crisis
- 42% Disinformation and censorship
- 37% Decreasing support for cultural initiatives
- 26% Economic crises
- 8% Other (please specify)

Which of the following challenges do you believe are affecting your local context?



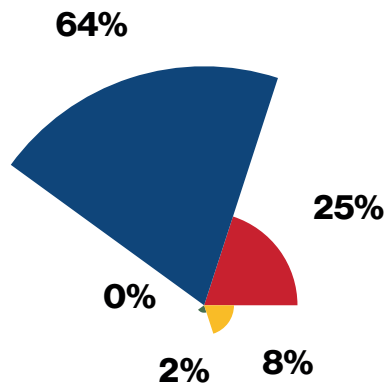
- 46% Permanent crisis and uncertainty
- 60% Rise of nationalism and populism
- 14% Global challenges
- 38% Disinformation and censorship
- 39% Climate crisis
- 52% Poverty and social inequality
- 21% Conflicts and war
- 49% Decreasing support for cultural initiatives
- 7% Other (please specify)

Which of the following do you think culture can effectively contribute to in Europe?



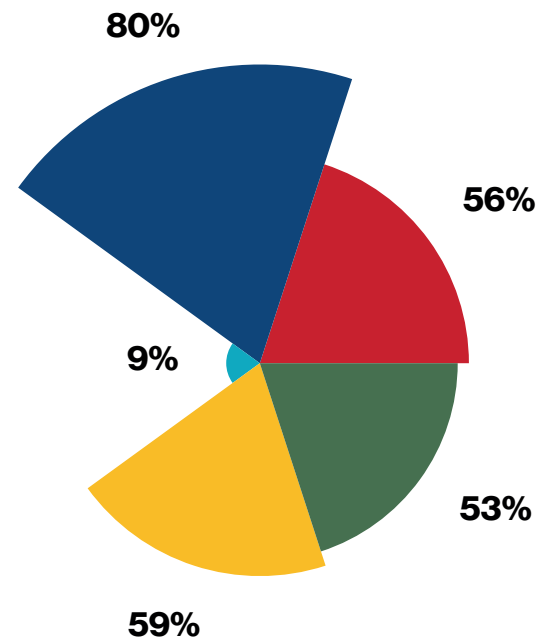
- 38% Facilitating sustainable development
- 55% Contribute to European sense of belonging
- 70% Build democratic spaces for dialogue and free expression
- 72% Create new ideas and narratives
- 60% Strengthen civil society and positive change
- 77% Bringing people together and creating mutual understanding
- 43% Contribute to peace and prosperity
- 5% Other (please specify)

How do you view the role of culture in imagining a better future for Europe?



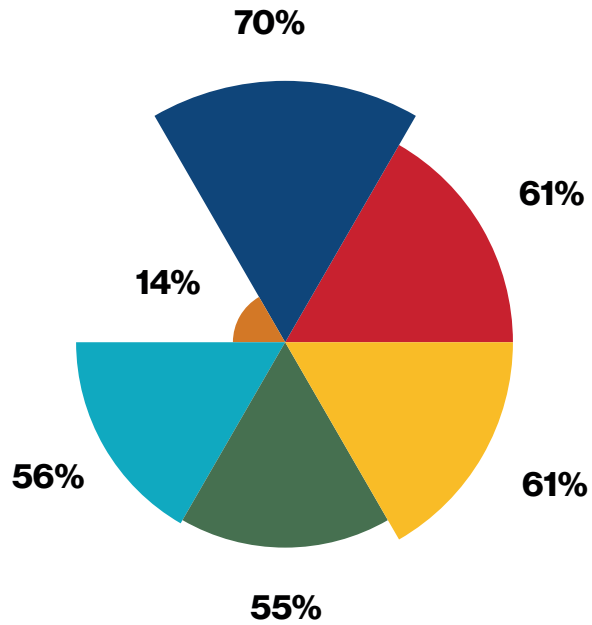
- 64% Extremely useful
- 25% Very useful
- 8% Somewhat useful
- 2% Not so useful
- 0% Not at all useful

Which of the following roles do you believe philanthropy can play in Europe? (please tick at least 2 options)



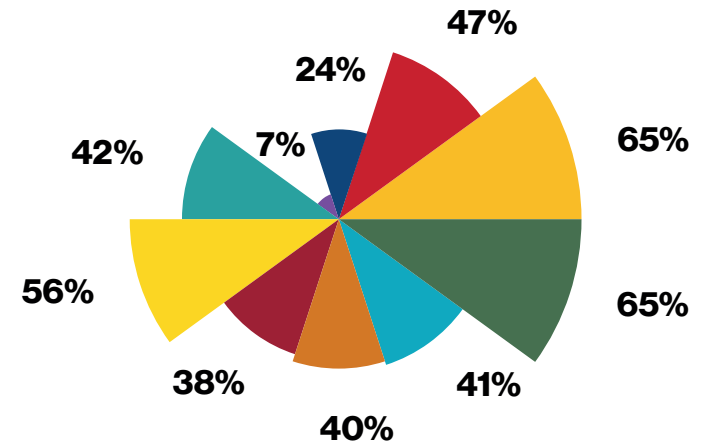
- 80% Supporting non-institutional actors (e.g. civil society, private businesses, SMEs, NGOs, etc.)
- 56% Encouraging innovation and risk-taking
- 53% Enabling new imaginaries
- 57% Develop collaboration to maximise impact
- 9% Other (please specify)

What do you think foundations can do together to address the common challenges?



- 70% Grants, awards and prizes
- 61% Access to networks and/or contacts
- 61% Facilitating venues and workspaces
- 55% Communications and advocacy support
- 56% Capacity development
- 14% Other (please specify)

Which of the following common goals do you believe can drive collaboration across different philanthropic sectors in Europe?



- 24% Supporting public service media
- 47% Building trust and openness
- 65% Building an infrastructure for cultural engagement
- 65% Arts & culture
- 41% Cultural heritage
- 40% Climate resilience
- 38% Cultural relief in conflict/war
- 56% Support for democracy
- 42% Pooling funds for shared resources
- 7% Other (please specify)

The European Cultural Foundation would like to extend immense gratitude to almost 200 participants who were able to join the sessions on What can culture do? in the aforementioned cities around Europe this year. Your contributions have shed light on the most pressing issues in Europe today and the near future. This listening tour has been instrumental in developing our upcoming strategy. We hope this is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue with the wider cultural ecosystem and beyond.

A special *Thank You* to the organisations we were honoured to have partnered with:

**Council for European
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De Balie

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**Warsaw Observatory of Culture
(WOK)**

Culture Action Europe

Les Têtes de L'Art

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The Pochen Biennale

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