

What can culture do?

2024 tour





Over the span of 10 months, between January and October 2024, the European Cultural Foundation embarked on a wide-reaching consultation process across 13 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.

The following cities were part of the tour: Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Cambridge, Chemnitz, Helsinki, Malmö, Marseille, Milan, Rotterdam, Vienna, Warsaw, Zagreb.

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 the 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.

Conclusions – How Can We work?

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 marginalised voices and revitalise 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 marginalised 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. Revitalising 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 marginalised 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.



Introduction and Rationale

The European Cultural Foundation (ECF) builds its next strategic cycle 2025-2030, that will leverage the power of culture and philanthropy to create a more democratic, cohesive, thirteen resilient and inclusive Europe. For that, ECF embarked on a listening tour in thirteen cities across Europe, a journey of discovery and reflection. This journey is about hope, creativity and collective action. It is about a shared purpose and direction for the future of Europe.

Extensive consultations in Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Cambridge, Chemnitz, Helsinki, Malmö, Marseille, Milan, Rotterdam, Vienna, Warsaw, Zagreb have revealed key insights and priorities within the cultural sector, shaping the future of cultural policies and initiatives. Almost 200 individuals from partner organisations with various backgrounds, ages and perspectives took part in the consultations around the questions: *What are the challenges of Europe? What can culture do? What can philanthropy do?* and concluding: *How can we work together?* This is a structured report of the insights collected across Europe that will nurture ECF's future strategy.

What Are the Challenges of Europe?

Europe faces a crisis of identity as it grapples with globalisation, polarisation, socio-political fragmentation and extreme pressures like climate change and the war in Ukraine. The rise of populism and far-right movements considerably influences narratives on Europe and impact our European sentiment. Many feel disconnected from the European project, and particularly youth can feel disillusioned, alienated and overwhelmed.

What is 'Europe'?

As globalisation continues to accelerate, and global players are competing for power, Europe can only survive if it emancipates itself and deals with issues of self-representation, image, narrative, history and culture. What stories does Europe tell about itself? How is Europe perceived by the rest of the world? Where is the critical thinking on Europe and its geopolitical position?

While research shows that a European sentiment has been growing, non-westerners, youth and other marginalised groups feel further distant from Europe than ever. Europe seems stuck between the old and the new, in some sort of identity crisis stemming from the primacy of national discourses and actions.¹ The traditional narrative of freedom has become outdated in the eyes of many Europeans, who now seek stories for the future rather than a glorified past. Europe is losing its voice geopolitically and has to reinvent itself on the world map. While the EU continues to support Ukraine since Putin's full-scale invasion in 2022, some Member States express fatigue and reluctance. The once strong narrative of a united and free Europe is fragilised. What does Europe stand for, and is it ready to fight for its values? These are key questions to be answered.

Undermining democracy

Democracy in Europe is undermined substantially by extremist groups that try to take control of communities by using culture as a divisive tool. The polarisation that this has caused is a result of the uncertain way progressive Europe defines democracy. The term is often reduced to a mere political system, whereas it also refers to a way of life and a set of

values that communities live by, such as respect, equality, fairness and freedom. Another undermining problem is that democratically elected representatives can still decide not to listen to their constituencies, as we have seen throughout Poland's eight years of resilience under a right-wing government. Extremist parties can do whatever they want as it seems, democrats are limited by the principles of democracy.² Such realities have placed democracy in a vulnerable position, that feels out of touch with people's needs.

Right-wing extremist parties – that are increasingly gaining support in countries such as The Netherlands, Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Hungary and Slovakia – have provided their supporters with a sense of agency that fragmented liberal democratic parties have not. The European community risks further division if we allow these extremist groups to gain more support by letting them weaponise immigration, white supremacy, security issues and rising inequalities. The diminishing solidarity between European states and between communities only further perpetuates the hyper-individualism and -localism. These divisive tendencies must be fought to avoid losing the values and principles that make Europe a unique political, economic, social and cultural community.

Belong where? To whom?

In Europe, many are grappling with loneliness, a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, amplified by social polarisation. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health concerns, with many feeling alone, alienated and disconnected. Deteriorating mental health and growing social inequalities in various European environments have been working against a sense of togetherness and shared destiny. Marginalised communities are pushed even more to the fringes with growing polarisation as a result of populist discourses. This translates into a crisis of meaning: no shared European sense of reality nor direction, no shared understanding of belonging. The lack of a strong European identity and narrative of the future has caused a diminishing sense of belonging amongst Europeans. So far it still holds but it is extremely fragilised.

Economic downturns, environmental crises and geopolitical tensions have deepened these issues. Continued uncertainty has put Europeans in a 'fight or flight' mindset. Responses by national governments to external threats have mainly revolved around increasing budget spending on defence and security, including militarisation. This development does not align with the vision of retaining peace and a general sense of safety for Europeans in the near future. Simultaneously, budgets for culture are cut, as it is not considered essential. But if you would ask people if they prefer tanks or theatres, then they would say 'theatre'.³

The fifth wheel

In the political realm, both at the national and European levels, culture is often considered a fifth wheel or a non-essential area of political action. The question of why culture is not regarded as an important area for policy and action is one to take note of. Throughout history, culture has shaped the way societies grow and thrive. Today, different parties accuse culture of being a mere instrument or entertainment for the social elites, a self-centred egocentric project.⁴ At the same time, many around Europe seem seduced by 'big' phenomena such as security threats, Big Tech and media storms, as if culture has become too mundane to hold their attention. This directly ties to the issue of the widespread perception of Europe as an exclusively political project, but many have forgotten that it is also a cultural one. It leaves cultural institutions with no space and resources to do what they do best: utilising their creativity, bringing communities together, addressing critical questions and offering solutions. Culture is an under-estimated hidden treasure, while it is culture that makes us human. So, what can we do to make culture a priority again?

Culture hijacking

While liberal societies show divisions and uncertainties, far-right groups have determined who they are, what they stand for and are not afraid to show it! Culture to them is a weapon to mould perceptions on what is acceptable and what is not, as a prelude to their ambitions to

change rules and norms and affect common sense. This serves them in driving their divisive agendas where culture resides – in our homes, streets and minds. The rise of extremist right-wing populism across Europe signifies a blaring alarm that has rang before. Once again, civil society organisations are at risk of being controlled or even crushed by governments that do not aim to cater to their people’s needs. Fuelling the narrative that culture is entertainment reserved for elites further impacts the appreciation of culture. The cultural ecosystem, far from dividing or only addressing a minority, embraces plurality and diversity and does not aim to weaponise culture against communities. Culture can bring us together, it can tear us apart, It can bridge divides or create a chasm. It can provide opportunities for growth and development or just reinforce the status quo or even trigger regression. It represents simultaneously the best and the worst of individuals, organisations, societies and nations.⁵

Taken for granted

Europeans have become complacent, taking peace and the benefits of the European project for granted. In line with that, Europe has also shifted from enlightenment to entitlement, a concerning development resulting from the lack of learning from each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Europeans’ attitudes and relations to other regions of the world has given off the sentiment that they have gotten used to living in peace and to take it for granted. However, one cannot preserve peace if one is not ready to defend it. War, for nearly three years, has been a serious reality for many Europeans, with frontlines stretching across Eastern, Central and Baltic European states.

Disconnected youth

Young Europeans feel disconnected and overwhelmed by current challenges, including security concerns, housing crises and political disillusionment. Growing anxiety about the future is pertinent and a lack of agency in politics feeds into this. Many claim: “I can’t see a future for myself.”⁶ This is one of the explanations of their increased voting for

⁵ Participant, WCCD Cambridge, April 2024.
⁶ Participant, WCCD Berlin, April 2024.

right-wing politicians who promise them future security. While youth groups are being tokenised and burdened with the expectations to solve societal problems, the combination of external pressures and personal challenges leaves them feeling both overburdened and disconnected, struggling to find stability and support amidst these crises. As a result of this, many feel they cannot participate in democratic processes nor utilise their rights as Europeans to agency. There is a widespread sentiment among youth that their needs and expectations are not represented by politicians in office and those running in elections. This culminates in a feeling of isolation that replicates itself as new generations feel they cannot relate to the experiences or the behaviours of older ones.

Digital storm

The digital storm is here to stay and Europe struggles to handle it. One of its responses is to invest in digital literacy. To aid a global community which – on the daily – wades through fake news, extremist media sources and propaganda, it is essential to equip it with the necessary tools to discern truth from otherwise. Social media continues to undermine democracy due to algorithmic prioritisation of controversial content (clickbait) over quality, trustworthy information. On top of that, the battle between conflicting identities has reinforced silos that prevent the possibility of dialogue. Cultural organisations and foundations lack a strong presence in the digital space that would allow them to address, occupy and educate towards helping people understand the divide between what happens on these platforms and in real life. This is especially crucial to avoid a limited and potentially twisted understanding of European politics among the public. Just because some leading media outlets have lost the value of the truth, this does not mean we should stop promoting it. Securing a safe, democratic digital space is essential for maintaining informed and engaged citizens, to ensure Europeans have the right to resist.⁷

⁷ Participant, WCCD Amsterdam, May 2024.

Artificial Intelligence: friend or foe?

How will AI change or shape the way we live and work, travel and consume, analyse and create? With rapidly evolving developments in AI and technology, it can be hard for us to keep up and adjust our understanding of how to interact with it, if we – as the cultural ecosystem – keep out of the conversation. We should evaluate the threats of AI but also understand the way it can be used as a generative model to aid creativity while not replacing it. In order to find a balance, we also need to engage with the right partners who understand AI's impact and how cultural organisations can best use it. The cultural ecosystem must be included in conversations about AI policies to ensure it can adapt and thrive in this evolving landscape. Balancing the benefits and risks of AI is essential for leveraging its potential while safeguarding creativity and integrity.

Civic space for none

Civic space for dialogue and collaboration is shrinking, both physically and digitally. This is the result of a culmination of different polarising sources, political environments and shifts. There is an evident deteriorating engagement in meaningful dialogue. There is a widespread syndrome of 'schismogenesis'⁸, which is defined by the consistent creation of divisions. This specific ailment persists in a time where European states feel a need to hold on to their own identities and individualism, being afraid of being diluted by each other's. Europe's multicultural fabric is threatened by these identity and culture wars that alienate a subset of the population that strives for a sense of becoming and belonging across the continent. Hate and social cleavages causing polarisation on every level (social, political and economic) impact civic space substantially. As European communities struggle with conflicting narratives, there is a risk to lose the capacity of dialogue and listening, of building bridges within the shared space.

It's getting hot in here... or cold?

Climate change poses significant challenges across the world, including Europe: rising temperatures, extreme weather events and sea level rise

have serious consequences for the environment, economy, public health, society and people. Mobilising people on climate issues has become exceedingly difficult due to shifting public priorities and advocacy sector oversaturation. However, most participants who brought up climate change as a cause for concern or major challenge facing Europe in the coming years failed to elaborate on how culture and philanthropy can contribute positively to it. Many of our young participants claimed that climate change is a large source of anxiety. But due to the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and disconnectedness, they fail to see a tangible way they can address this challenge. To achieve ecological sustainability, the absence of culture on the deliberation table does not help put Europe's best foot forward, as culture works to preserve the human element of our efforts to combat climate change and its effects. So, how can culture be more involved in discussions and actions around just ecological transitions?

What Can Culture Do?

Amidst these challenges, culture emerges as a beacon of hope. It can inspire, foster dialogue and amplify marginalised voices, reimagining a revived, united and inclusive European narrative. Cultural initiatives such as mobility and exchange programmes can meaningfully engage the youth with Europe, reigniting their connection to European values and promoting a deeper understanding of the continent's social fabric.

Inspire hope and imagination

Culture can inspire hope, foster solidarity and reignite youth's imagination for the future. It can challenge societal norms, nurture empathy and encourage engaged communities. Culture can project new utopias that can be realised over generations, promoting interdependence and creative solutions to common problems. Societal divisions are often dictated by norms, but they can be changed, and culture is a powerful vessel for change: it opens doors and can alter people's attitudes through nurturing empathy and care. Culture, a living breathing thing, is also a space in which hope can be nurtured by communities and shared solidarity. It can provide an emotionally fulfilling response to people's struggles, soothe, help rethink our positions amidst these challenges and be together.

Encourage dialogue

Culture can engage and celebrate differences, confront taboos and promote mutual understanding. It creates space for debate and disagreement, embracing localities while bringing European values into people's lives. Culture can destigmatise ways of living seen as taboo by exploring diverse cultural meanings. How can we create not only a space for debate but also a space to actively explore how we can have greater social relevance? Culture itself is a result of a larger dialogue, and no one can make a dialogue alone. As culture occurs through intentional social interactions, it can also be a catalyst for change. Culture is conflicting, disruptive, provocative but also brings communities together because it can include voices that are not present in the room. Cultural institutions are testing grounds, providing new imaginaries.⁹

Even more, culture can facilitate conversation in hostile localities. Where identities can become exclusive, culture can allow them to connect. Culture can be a bridge by encouraging dialogue along the political spectrum.

Narrow the intergenerational gap

Culture can bridge the intergenerational gap by engaging youth in meaningful dialogue with older generations. Encouraging open and transparent communication ensures the transfer of knowledge and connection to the European project. In every generation there is a prominent culture that appears; for the current youth, the dominant culture is that of resistance and protest. The youth feel compelled to occupy the public space and utilise their voice especially in times of geopolitical conflict, such as the war in Palestine. Culture has always been used to communicate issues and as such it can also be a vessel to build trust and foster intergenerational dialogue and experience. It can be seen the form of songlines, a passing down of songs through generations to transfer along history memories that delineate the description of reality through messages and lessons learned.¹⁰ These traces are maps that can aid the youth in navigating life's wide terrain and help them find their way in this everchanging sociopolitical landscape. European communities must engage in cultural activities in the public space that nourishes intergenerational dialogue to promote better awareness of why other perspectives exist and how to effectively and peacefully cooperate. This would ensure that a European sense of belonging is transmitted throughout generations. The future is the ultimate public space.¹¹

Amplify marginalised voices

Who speaks and who is invited to speak? Culture can be a platform to amplify marginalised voices from groups of people or individuals who otherwise may struggle, suffer or live below acceptable living standards. Culture can be a well-informed resource for these groups to lean on and

to build a platform to advocate for their own cause. When it comes to speaking of culture and not speaking for it, the concept of championing becomes important. This notion refers to positioning people with powerful stories as champions that represent culture as whole. Such as Nelson Mandela – he represented not only a specific culture but an array of values that allowed multitudes to align with his vision. Where is culture's Nelson Mandela? Culture can centre the voices of oppressed communities. These communities are in the best positions to expose injustices and the unfair system they exist in. Culture is a safe space for those who have struggled. Culture can give people (especially minorities) a voice to share their stories away from oppression and victimisation as full human beings.

Advocate for arts and culture

To more effectively and innovatively convey the value of arts and culture to policymakers and the general public, we must rethink our engagement strategies. Art, as a powerful element of culture, can change minds by engaging both the heart and the mind, making people think and feel. It also has the power to involve individuals who believe their participation has no impact on community matters. Arts and culture cannot necessarily provide the answers, but they can help to ask the right questions. In accordance with this, “culture shows the value of creativity in every part of our lives,” while “arts and the creative communities are essential for cities to grow.”¹² To combat political disinterest in arts and culture, we should shift from impact and metric-oriented evaluations to using soft indicators of social change that do not align with restrictive KPI frameworks. Foundations need to balance respecting the freedom of the arts with advancing their cultural political agenda. Expanding our view of what is considered art, such as including rap music, which constitutes approximately 25% of all music production in Europe and has a diverse follower base, can bring together marginalised communities. By exploring these avenues, foundations can broaden their reach and engage groups that might otherwise remain excluded, promoting greater social change.

Tell powerful stories

Everyone's most profound memories are somehow all related to culture. Culture holds a safe space for multiple perspectives present at the same time. Culture is what makes us human. It has the power to bridge gaps and encourage solidarity and compassion. Culture IS solidarity – by stepping down to the people: the small centres of the world. To reignite a true European sentiment, culture can highlight stories that inspire hope, without romanticising the past, and hold Europe accountable for amplifying these lived experiences to represent a broader European narrative. To unearth connections and tell the stories of these encounters, past, present and future, makes the European sentiment and sense of belonging tangible.

Heal collective wounds and help us prepare for the future

Culture is essential in recovery and building resilience, particularly in response to global challenges like climate change and wars. It brings communities together, creating a shared sense of purpose and empowering individuals to form their identities through an understanding of cultural heritage. Beyond preserving the past, culture equips us for the future, challenging attempts—such as the rise of right-wing populism—to control our collective destiny. It helps us resist this ‘colonisation of the future’¹³ by encouraging creative thought, promoting freedom and driving progress. Culture acts as society's research and development, guiding us to redefine what it means to be safe in today's world. In doing so, it offers a counter-narrative of freedom and solidarity, healing wounds from past and present crises while preparing us to face the challenges ahead. ‘Us’, in this context, refers to society at large, encompassing all individuals and communities affected by global challenges such as climate change, political shifts and social crises. It includes those who are marginalised or impacted by oppressive forces, as well as anyone invested in creating a more equitable, inclusive and resilient future for Europe.

What Can Philanthropy Do?

Philanthropy plays a crucial role, acting as a trusted partner to the cultural sector by promoting solidarity, cooperation and inclusivity. By supporting grassroots organisations and creatively utilising traditional venues such as libraries and museums as hubs for collaboration and empowerment, philanthropy can encourage empathy and understanding across communities.

Not a saviour, but a trusted partner

Public perception of philanthropy has always been fragmented depending on the presence of foundations in people's national or local contexts. Some see it as "a result of an economic system that thrives on inequality," or a redistribution system from "rich to poor," that is often disconnected from the civil society and cultural sectors.¹⁴ Individual experiences of cultural actors in relations with foundations may result in distrust, or mismatching expectations – such as pressure to prove impact. Neither cultural actors nor foundations are 'messiahs' in this sense.¹⁵ To be relevant to the sectors' needs, and develop trust, philanthropic organisations are required to involve beneficiaries/ grantees in participatory processes that value their perspectives (as experts in their own field) – in strategic processes, in advisory bodies, in programme co-design, implementation and evaluation.¹⁶

Accountable and accessible?

Around Europe, philanthropy has been understood as many different things depending on one's experience and interaction with it. The philanthropic sector is far from homogenous, comprising various public, private and mixed players, created under different conditions to serve specific purposes. In recent years, philanthropy, alongside civil society and the cultural sector, has been under attack by public authorities and by media in some EU Member States. Foundations supporting human rights, LGBTQ or independent cultural sector and media, started losing ground as key stakeholders, complementing public institutions' work for positive societal change.

14 Participant, WCCD Malmö, May 2024.

15 Participant, WCCD Malmö, May 2024.

16 Arts and Culture at the Core of Philanthropy (issuelab.org).

At the same time, foundations are seen as supporters for those sectors in times of uncertainty and in politically hostile environments.

While operating under different legal and fiscal regulations in each country, foundations in Europe are determined to keep their place and role as providers of funding and non-financial support and to remain relevant to the urgencies on the ground.¹⁷ For foundations, "(w)hat we do at global level needs to be translated to locals in a very different language ... there is a gap in understanding each other."¹⁸ How can philanthropy bridge this gap? While foundations cannot fully reconcile the relationship between the grant-provider and the receiver as 'equal', they can focus on listening, engage in collaboration with their constituencies, and use accessible language and tools, to connect to wider public. Their periodical reality checks, assessments and feedback from their constituencies, help reinventing their strategic approaches to adapt to the changing environments and to address key societal challenges.

Provide support

With ongoing global conflicts, economic disparities and climate change driving migration flows, Europe is grappling with how to effectively manage and support civil society, including the arts and culture. Philanthropy can directly support community organisations working on the ground addressing the root causes of social inequalities by providing them with financial resources and technical advice. There is a high demand to make long-term/multiannual funding or structural support (such as spaces, overhead costs) available to civil society organisations, so that they could grow and thrive in the long run, instead of constantly looking for funding opportunities. However, not many foundations can provide multiannual direct financial support or structural grants.

Foundations can also provide a range of non-financial support to arts and culture, as illustrated by the second Philea mapping 'Arts and Culture at the Core of Philanthropy' (Philea 2023). Most of the foundations that took part in the mapping reported that they provide

17 Arts and Culture at the Core of Philanthropy (issuelab.org) – Mapping 2018.

18 Participant, WCCD Zagreb, May 2024.

organisational development support, access to networks, partnerships, collaboration, advocacy, communications and more. Functional support includes capital, infrastructure, programme development, research and evaluation and can prove vital for arts, independent sector and civil society. Foundations must create sustainable patterns of support to counteract the reduction of public budgets for culture, as well as their re-purposing away from civil society, which is observed in several European countries.

Create space

As understood throughout this tour, there is no equal access to philanthropy in Europe. The presence of foundations in arts and culture is geographically uneven across the continent. The first 'Arts and Culture at the Core of Philanthropy' mapping by Philea (2018) covered 40 foundations, most of which were only in western Europe. Their geographic focus is predominantly local, regional and national, and much less transnational, European or global.¹⁹ Whether this access is curbed by geography, socio-economic barriers, language or other factors, it is also a testament to the lack of spaces in which people can encounter philanthropy in its diversity. In times of shrinking spaces for civil society, foundations' support is often crucial for civil society organisations to perform their work and serve their communities.

This is philanthropy's moment to step up and invest in cultural infrastructure and initiatives which bring and hold communities together. For example, libraries can "be a lifeline to people and be that connection to the rest of the world offering a safe, dry, warm place and just that is a lot more than most other organisations can offer."²⁰ By promoting these democratic spaces for meaningful participation, philanthropy can sustain cultural practices that also align with their values as foundations. The ambition is also to drive inclusivity in philanthropy by ensuring that grassroots organisations that cater to marginalised communities and underrepresented problems have access to the support they need. As such, also providing the physical space

that they can perform their practices on the ground in. Philanthropic organisations, specifically engaged with arts and culture, must engage actively in climate coalitions, improve their sustainability policies, pool resources and innovate their grant-making for the just transition. Novel support for arts and culture to produce narratives and foster environment sustainability approaches across their networks, communities and practices is also needed, yet with moderate expectations and caution, and without instrumentalisation. This is to preserve spaces for civil society and ensure that they are in line with ecological responsibilities and duties to the earth.

Share Europe

Addressing cultural and educational poverty in both big cities and rural areas is crucial and a demand to philanthropy. We must give importance to the 'glocal': the local, in the global view.²¹ We need a more balanced approach balancing support for larger cities and rural areas. Building a true European sentiment and sense of belonging has been ECF's mission, and a 'cathedral mission', meaning carrying on knowing that working towards this can be hard, long and gruelling but even with its setbacks will be a monumental end product.²² Foundations need to reinvent their narratives in the light of Europe's challenges and need for more philanthropy with a European purpose. Philanthropy can reignite passion for the European project by creating experiences that highlight its benefits. By combining local and global contexts, philanthropy can better address societal challenges and promote a cohesive European model of solidarity. Sharing Europe is also about collectively investing in building that solidarity. ECF has been working on a public-private philanthropic platform that would allow alignment, pooling and co-investment for more impact. The vision of Share Europe is about collectively tackling local and European challenges and by sharing resources and presenting co-financing opportunities to funders who may not have access to a birds-eye-view of European civil society initiatives.

Facilitate cross-border collaboration

Through dialogue and collaborative practice, we overcome conflicts and create strong relations across borders. Turkey and its relationship with Europe have been the focal point of the WCCD session in Berlin with ECF's [VAHA](#) programme. This programme works on building common ground for spaces of public discussion and dialogue in Turkey and neighbouring Europe. Along the tour, relationships between European states and beyond were widely discussed. Insights on censorship and cultural suppression, political polarisation, erosion of civil liberties and cultural conflicts that lead to substantial identity crises in Turkey brought to light the overlap between challenges faced in Europe and in neighbouring countries. In this aspect, philanthropy, by learning from (geo)politically volatile countries such as Turkey and Ukraine, can apply these learnings to navigate the current threats posed by incoming extremist governments in Europe. War in Europe and around the world has become a very hard reality for many. There is a deep need and expressed request to facilitate a pipeline that allows for philanthropic practices that nourish civil society to extend beyond national borders and act according to a culture of solidarity.

Invest in a safe digital space

Navigating the digital age requires a steady and educated approach. As discussed in the section titled 'What are the challenges of Europe?', communities across Europe are facing disinformation, fake news and a growing right-wing populist propaganda. To address this, philanthropy must comprehensively combat the concentration of digital power in the hands of Big Tech businesses by investing in open-source media landscapes like [Display Europe](#). It is crucial to support initiatives that empower democratic digital citizenship and participation ethically. This includes supporting providers of digital and media literacy tools to help the public navigate fact-checking and avoid filter bubbles. Ensuring that echo chambers do not grow to circulate misinformation and propaganda is essential. To do so, philanthropy must invest in or become a key partner of public institutions and the EU in building better public digital spaces that are safe, informative and trustworthy. Projects like Display Europe aim to place users in an emancipated role, understanding that

a safe and democratic media space is a human right. This also greatly aligns with the EU's long-time goal for tech emancipation from US media models and continuous investment into European digital platforms. These initiatives are vital for developing a more informed and engaged digital public space.

Support local ownership and co-creation

Grassroots organisations have a crucial role in addressing local needs, yet they frequently face financial instability due to short-term funding cycles. The consultations underscored the need for philanthropic foundations to shift toward long-term-oriented, flexible funding models. What foundations can also offer is a wide array of non-financial support tools such as organisational development support, access to networks, partnerships, collaboration, advocacy and communications. Part of the foundations' toolbox are also functional support tools that can enhance grantees and partners efficacy as organisations tending to the needs of their communities. This would allow grassroots organisations to focus on creating lasting solutions rather than constantly seeking new funds. By collaborating with these organisations as equal partners, foundations can ensure that projects are shaped by local expertise and are more likely to have a positive impact. Empowering communities through co-creation fosters resilience, giving them the agency to lead initiatives that address their own needs effectively.

Reimagine civic spaces for cultural engagement

Public spaces, such as libraries and museums, are vital for enabling cultural engagement and fostering community interaction. Yet many of these spaces are underfunded or at risk. Participants emphasised the importance of transforming these spaces into vibrant centres for cultural expression, education and dialogue. Philanthropic organisations should invest in revitalising these venues, ensuring they remain accessible and serve as platforms for public discourse. This revitalisation is particularly important in areas where civic spaces have been diminished. By supporting the development of these inclusive cultural hubs, foundations can provide marginalised groups with a space to participate and express themselves.

Embrace risk

Addressing Europe's challenges requires foundations to give space for civil society to experiment and fail. The consultations highlighted that current short-term funding structures often restrict the potential of organisations to explore creative approaches to deep-rooted issues.

By embracing risk and supporting projects that may not have immediate, measurable outcomes, philanthropic organisations can help generate lasting change. Long-term funding gives organisations the freedom to plan beyond immediate needs and experiment with bold ideas that could lead to transformative social and societal impact.

Strengthen digital literacy and democratic engagement

The rise of misinformation and divisive online content calls for increased investment in digital literacy. Foundations must support initiatives that equip individuals with the skills to critically assess online information and engage responsibly. Participants stressed that without digital literacy, many people are vulnerable to manipulation and exclusion from civic life. Supporting the creation of open-source, non-commercial digital platforms would also provide safe spaces for public discourse. By doing so, foundations can ensure that citizens have access to reliable information and a platform for meaningful civic participation, ultimately protecting the integrity of public discourse.

Advocate for cultural and civic infrastructure

Cultural and civic infrastructure is under threat across Europe due to underfunding and political pressures. The consultations called on foundations to advocate for the preservation of these essential spaces, which are vital for public discourse, cultural engagement and education. Libraries, museums and community centres serve as gathering places where people can learn, discuss and participate in cultural life. Foundations should work with local governments to protect these spaces and ensure they remain accessible to all. By investing in the development and sustainability of cultural infrastructure, philanthropy can help safeguard the cultural and civic fabric of European societies.

Promote cross-sector collaboration for broader impact

Philanthropy should promote collaboration across sectors, bringing together cultural, educational and social actors to address complex issues. Participants highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary partnerships that leverage expertise from various fields to tackle challenges like inequality, climate change and digital exclusion.

Foundations can facilitate these partnerships by creating spaces where artists, educators, policymakers and community leaders collaborate to design innovative, holistic solutions. This approach ensures that cultural initiatives have a broader social impact, reaching diverse audiences and addressing a wider range of societal needs.

Empower youth and encourage intergenerational dialogue

Engaging youth in cultural and civic projects is critical to shaping Europe's future. The consultations emphasised the need for philanthropic organisations to support programmes that empower young people to lead initiatives and participate actively in addressing social and cultural challenges. Youth-driven projects, along with intergenerational dialogue, can help bridge the gap between younger and older generations, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. By investing in youth leadership and promoting conversations between generations, foundations can ensure that younger voices contribute to the ongoing development of a more inclusive and forward-thinking European society.

Secure access to safe public digital spaces

With the growing polarisation of digital spaces, foundations must invest in creating safe, public digital platforms that promote democratic values. Participants noted the urgent need for open-source, independent digital platforms where citizens can engage in informed and respectful dialogue without being subject to manipulation by commercial interests or divisive algorithms. By supporting these initiatives, philanthropy can create environments that encourage ethical, inclusive and transparent civic engagement. This not only protects digital discourse but also ensures that marginalised voices are represented in the public digital sphere.

Facilitate European solidarity through cultural exchange

To counter rising nationalism and fragmentation within Europe, foundations should prioritise cultural exchange programmes that encourage collaboration across borders. The consultations revealed a strong desire for cross-border cultural initiatives that bring together artists, activists and community leaders from different European countries. These exchanges foster mutual understanding and solidarity,

helping to build a shared European identity. By facilitating these cross-border dialogues, philanthropic organisations can help bridge divides, challenge nationalist rhetoric and promote a more united and cohesive Europe through empowering democratic participation for collective goals. Philanthropy and democracy share a common foundation: the belief in the power of individuals to create change.

The European Cultural Foundation would like to extend its sincerest gratitude to the nearly 200 participants who were able to join the sessions on What Can Culture Do? across Europe this year. Your contributions have been most insightful and useful in developing our upcoming strategy. We hope this is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue with the cultural ecosystem and beyond.

A special thank you to the *organisations* we were *honoured* to partner with:

**Council for European
Public Space**

Berlin

De Balie

Amsterdam

**Philea Arts and Culture
Funders Forum hosted
by Kultura Nova**

Zagreb

Fondazione Cariplo

Milano

Kultura Nova

Zagreb

Culture Action Europe

Brussels

**Brussels Institute for
Geopolitics (BIG)**

Brussels

Les Têtes de L'Art

Marseille

**Warsaw Observatory of Culture
(WOK)**

Warsaw

The Pochen Biennale

Chemnitz

**The Finnish Cultural and
Academic Institutes (SKTI)**

Helsinki

**Vote4OurRuleofLaw bootcamp
hosted by Humboldt University**

Berlin

Colofon

Credits to
Copy-editor
Image front page
Design

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Bas Lafleur
Jorg de Vries Humel
HOAX

