

Europe on the Periphery: Belonging, Culture and the Search for a European Soul



Young artists & cultural workers develop public action together during 'Pop the Vote' Changemakers' Playground Camp organised by Culture Action Europe & co-funded by the European Parliament in February 2024. Photo by Stephanie Bonnici.

When I was 21 years old, I found myself at an event with participants from across Europe. The topic was Europe and culture, yet I felt like an outsider. As the only Maltese person there, I listened as the conversations swirled around realities that felt distant – more progressive and advanced than the world of my small island situated on the peripheries of Europe.

Sure, I was European. I belonged to this continent and even to the European Union (EU). However, being European, being a citizen of an EU member state, and truly feeling a sense of belonging to Europe are three very different things—each shaped by complex nuances. Add to that the notion of Europe as a geographical continent and the fact that Malta is an island, and the question becomes even more layered. As Maltese author and professor Adrian Grima writes: *“There probably aren’t many islanders anywhere who consider themselves full members of an adjacent continental mass, and the Maltese are no exception”*(1).

Malta joined the European Union in 2004, and I was only 8 years old at the time. In fact, I didn't fully recognise my Europeanness until I experienced the "privileges" of EU membership: the freedom to study, live, and work across member states with minimal restrictions.

These "privileges" stood in stark contrast to the bureaucratic and often unjust barriers that I've seen non-EU peers facing in order to live the life I get to live – a life of great freedoms, opportunities, and mobility. The disparity is even greater for those whose eventual legal recognition as Europeans has mostly highlighted their "outsider" status, leaving them excluded from a truly equitable life.

I speak of "privileges" because my young age at the time of Malta's EU accession meant that I had no part in the activism, campaigning, political contributions, time, efforts, energy and struggles that previous generations had endured to secure that membership.

Complacency and Why It's Dangerous

Too many of us today take these freedoms for granted.

Last year, at the airport in Sibiu, Romania, my passport was requested by the border control police. I found that strange. "Aren't I in an EU country?" I thought. I googled it: "Romania to become full Schengen member effective 1 January 2025."

Malta became part of Schengen in 2007. Eighteen years may seem like a long time, but as such privileges become routine, it's easy to forget that they were not always available.

Now consider a group of young people from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, or the Netherlands—founding EU member states from 1957. For them, the history of gaining EU membership—and its subsequent privileges—may feel distant, perhaps barely remembered. But these privileges can easily be taken for granted, revoked, or temporarily withheld, as we've seen recently in one of those founding countries (2).

This concept of collective memory has been on my mind for the past year, thanks to my conversations with the 90-year-old (but always young-at-heart) Berliner Nele Hertling. Nele, who, among many other feats, helped shape the artistic development of the post-war period in Berlin and Germany, reminds me of the importance of vigilance against complacency.

I remember the theme of complacency resonating strongly with me when reading Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" ten years ago, where the protagonist reflects on her past life as a citizen of the United States while living in the now theocratic Republic of Gilead where her freedoms are stripped away:

"But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it."

Atwood's words highlight the dangers of passively accepting gradual changes that erode freedoms and rights, a central theme in Atwood's dystopian novel and an increasingly adopted approach in contemporary European and global societies. The theme is echoed in Paul Lynch's "The Prophet Song", which I read last year:

“The world is always ending over and over again in one place but not another (...) the end of the world is always a local event, it comes to your country and visits your town and knocks on the door of your house and becomes to others but some distant warning, a brief report on the news, an echo of events that has passed into folklore.”

A Soul for Europe

So far, I’ve reflected on Europe. On belonging. On rights—those taken for granted by some, yet held just out of reach for others, like a carrot on a stick. I’ve reflected on activism and also on complacency.

None of this is by coincidence.

The notion of complacency resonates today as we reflect on the challenges facing Europe and the kind of Europe that is set to face those challenges. These challenges demand a Europe rooted in democratic values and solidarity. EU membership is about more than legal rights and obligations. This echoes Jacques Delors’ vision of *“a soul for Europe”*, a sentiment that Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, recently revived, noting *“that economic integration [is] not enough”* (3).

When I joined the European Cultural Foundation (ECF)’s public policy team, I carried this understanding of Europe with me—one shaped by my personal context. My academic background in theatre studies had unearthed within me a deep fascination with the fact that the very roots of democracy lie in collective experiences, which could be found in the theatre festivals of Ancient Greece, where theatre was a forum for moral and political exploration. Theatre served as a public forum, challenging audiences to reflect on democratic values and principles.

Through my previous collaborations with cultural networks and civil society organisations at the local, national, regional and European levels, in the fields of festivals, arts, gastronomy, museums, and culture – both as a sector and as a vector – I encountered Europe’s *“soul”*.

I encountered Europe through the values of collaboration, solidarity, listening, constructive dialogue, freedom of expression, accountability, and mutual respect for a diversity of perspectives that deserves to be celebrated for existing in all its complexity.

Yet, when people think of Europe today, they see red tape and bureaucracy. They think of institutions that still feel distant and inaccessible, even if there have been many valid (albeit institutional!) efforts to make them more accessible. That’s because belonging to Europe cannot be nurtured within the walls of institutions. Belonging requires human connection. It takes place when people are empowered to encounter one another as human beings first; when we are encouraged to see each other beyond political and national boundaries.

Young, Bold, and Losing Hope?

The founders of ECF understood this well. When envisioning a united Europe as a place in which citizens can live in diversity and harmony, they set up this foundation to promote a European sentiment through developing and supporting *cultural* initiatives.

Seventy years on, the question remains: where is this European sentiment today? The 2024 European Sentiment Compass, an annual initiative of ECF together with the European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR), paints a picture of disillusionment. The author, political scientist Paweł Zerka, describes the EU as a *“Barbieland”* that sees itself as more perfect than it truly is (4).

He notes that many are *“visibly disillusioned with the European project, some are simply uninterested, while others see themselves as outsiders to the EU community.”* In the “year of wars and elections”, he highlights the under-participation and alienation of three specific groups: non-white and Muslim Europeans; people in central and eastern Europe; and Europe’s youngest citizens.

Polarisation may play a significant part in this alienation. Take young people, for example. Zerka notes that *“despite being less likely to vote than the rest of the population, [they] are nonetheless drawn towards non-mainstream alternatives [...] this often means that many young people end up voting for the radical right. For example, in this year’s European Parliament election, the AfD came a close second among young German voters [...] In Poland, Konfederacja won the youth vote this year, obtaining 30 per cent [...] In France, a third of the young voted for Rassemblement National.”*

This trend raises critical questions about the broader disengagement of young people. Why are they hesitant to participate in democratic processes? And when they do, why are radical alternatives so appealing? On the one hand, we could interpret the lack of participation by young citizens as the result of disinterest or disconnection from the mainstream. Or we could choose to consider the general sense of hopelessness for the future felt by many young people.

ECF’s “What Can Culture Do?” revealed a pervasive sense of hopelessness among young people in Europe: *“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 [...] with many youth feeling that traditional democratic institutions [are not] equipped to address their needs or future”* (5).

A 2024 Eurobarometer on youth and democracy supports these findings: when asked why they were hesitant or uncertain about voting in the European Parliament elections, the second and third most selected responses were: *“I believe my vote will not change anything”* and *“I distrust the political system in general”* (6).

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild notes: *“Our polarisation, and the increasing reality that we simply don’t know each other, makes it too easy to settle for dislike and contempt”* (7). When we don’t know each other in our societies, we resort to division. Populist and extremist movements exploit this, using fear and resentment to attract young people who feel ignored by mainstream politics.

This division paradoxically underscores one of Europe’s greatest strengths: its diversity. The array of peoples, languages, beliefs, histories, and contemporary experiences in Europe is what makes life here interesting and inspiring. It is what can engage our curiosity to know more about one another, inspire our creativity to express ourselves in new ways and empower us to find ways of living together peacefully and in solidarity with one another.

Cultural anthropologist and author Margaret Mead is famously known to have said: *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”*

The same Eurobarometer cited earlier revealed another troubling statistic: out of the 64% of young people surveyed who have participated in civic life and societal change, only 15% have done so within a cultural organisation (6). This reflects a missed opportunity: cultural organisations are not seen as spaces for young people to express their voices and drive change.

The recent 'State of Culture' report published by Culture Action Europe warns against the instrumentalisation of culture – that is, using it solely as a tool for external goals (8). This undermines the intrinsic value of culture and risks alienating young people from cultural organisations. If youth are to re-engage with cultural organisations and discover the values they stand for, these spaces must retain their agency and autonomy and not be reduced to vehicles for political agendas.

Collectively Is the Only Way to Rediscover Europe's Soul

These reflections resonate deeply with my work on the [Cultural Deal for Europe](#), the annual policy conversation for which I am currently busy in my professional life together with a dedicated team from across the CDEU partners: European Cultural Foundation, Culture Action Europe, and Europa Nostra (9).

With all its complexities and ever-evolving nature, Europe is an incredible work-in-progress, built on legal frameworks, bureaucratic commitments, and collaboration. Yet these alone won't secure its thriving future, with all the intricate and incredible rollercoasters it will undoubtedly throw at us all – no matter who we are or where we come from. Europe needs a soul.

A soul that reminds us that Europe is made up of people– people who must be encouraged to see one another as human beings first.

Europe's soul is still here, though it often feels lost in the mist, and so it needs to be found again.

To rediscover it, we need collective action – politicians, artists, and civil society alike. Only then can we forge a future where everyone feels at home.



Europe: a work in progress. Photo of Brussels mural 'The Future is Europe' by artist Julien Crevaels, in front of a semi-demolished building and crane in the foreground, by Stephanie Bonnici.

Stephanie Bonnici (MT) is the Public Policy Coordinator at the European Cultural Foundation.

Register to join A Cultural Deal for Europe's Annual Policy Conversation 2025 – *Culture: The Compass for Europe's Future* on February 4, 2025, by clicking [here](#).

Sources:

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- (5) *What Can Culture Do Tour Report* (2024) *European Cultural Foundation*. Available at: <https://culturalfoundation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/What-Can-Culture-Do-Tour-Report-2024-December.pdf> (Accessed: 26 January 2025)
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 - (9) A Cultural Deal for Europe: Annual Policy Conversation 2025 – Culture: The Compass for Europe's Future (<https://culturalfoundation.eu/stories/culture-the-compass-for-europes-future-cultural-deal-for-europe-annual-policy-conversation/>)