

Opening speech Cultural Deal for Europe Annual Policy Conversation
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Culture is Europe's Superpower

Isabelle Schwarz, Head Public Policy, European Cultural Foundation

It's a pleasure and a responsibility to stand before you today: I feel privileged to address such an engaged community. And I convey the best wishes of Andre Wilkens, director of the European Cultural Foundation who unfortunately fell ill with a flu and cannot be with us to share some opening thoughts.

Friends, colleagues, Europeans

Today, we gather not to reiterate what we know —

but to articulate **what must be said, understood and acted upon.**

And to demand **what Europe finally must do.**

Across our continent, **democratic norms are under strain**, trust is eroding, civic space is narrowing — sometimes quietly, sometimes violently. And yet, even now, even in this moment of urgency and seismic cultural shifts, **culture is still treated as an accessory.** A nice afterthought. A soft, harmless extra.

This is not only wrong - it is dangerous!

Culture is NOT a luxury — it is Europe's defence line / Europe's foundation.

Let me say it plainly:

Europe cannot defend democracy

— if it refuses to defend culture.

Internationally, the picture is sobering. Artists face censorship, intimidation, legal pressure, exile. Cultural institutions are closed, reshaped, or instrumentalised. Artists are often among the first to be targeted when democratic rules erode, precisely because their work resists simplification and authoritarian certainty.

But we should not think this is only a problem elsewhere.

In Europe too, artists and institutions experience growing pressure. The line between critique and intimidation is becoming thinner. Social media amplify conflict while eroding context. And many cultural professionals describe a growing need to defend not just their work, but their very right to present it.

The Culture Compass for Europe

The recent introduction of the Culture Compass is commendable; it signals that the EU recognizes culture as worthy of a strategic approach:

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It acknowledges that arts, culture, and cultural heritage are pillars of democratic resilience. It highlights the need for monitoring and defending artistic freedom and emphasizes the importance of working conditions within the cultural sector. It also calls for a shared cultural data infrastructure.

However, it's essential to understand that **a compass only points the way; it does not move**. A strategy without political traction, funding, and courage is merely a brochure.

Europe must choose

Will culture remain on the margins, or become central to core EU political decisions? The far right understands the power of culture and use it for their divisive purposes!

A Eurobarometer survey of last year (May), and ECF's annual research on the European Sentiment (European Sentiment Compass) shows that culture, values and history foster a strong sense of community. Citizens desire a more substantial EU role in cultural matters, seeking a Europe that resonates in daily life - in libraries, in schools, in public spaces, in local rituals, in shared stories.

We must make Europe tangible, emotional, and everyday. Europe cannot survive as a technical and an economic project; it must be a community, an identity, a home.

All this does not come for free!

Culture is treated as an accessory in the EU budget.

We speak of culture as the "soul of Europe" and "heart of democracy," but we fund it like a hobby. This is Europe's paradox — a blind spot and a weakness.

Culture is everywhere in political rhetoric — but almost nowhere in political decisions.

We cannot build resilience on symbolic gestures.
We cannot fight disinformation with poetry alone.
We cannot strengthen belonging with good intentions.

We need **investment**.
We need **commitment**.
We need **political will**.

This moment calls for a Cultural Deal for Europe - a moral and political imperative.

Here are our demands:

1. Position culture centrally in the next MFF (2028–2034)

Not at the margins — at the centre.
Not as an afterthought — as a priority.
Not as an expense — as a European asset.

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2. Reinforce culture transversally, across the whole EU architecture

- Across National and Regional Partnerships;
- Across the European Competitiveness Fund, including significantly boosted and earmarked cultural funding for Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ and Agora EU;
- Across the EU's External Action.

3. Treat culture as a strategic asset in all major EU political speeches

- Annual State of the Union by the President of the European Commission
- Plaidoyers of European Parliament President and MEPs for an independent, sovereign and democratic Europe
- Speeches from Heads of State and Government at major international political fora like Davos and Munich, giving equal weight alongside economic and security issues.

4. Increase investment in culture tenfold - to 2% of the EU budget. This is not just ambitious: it is overdue.

Culture is Europe's super power: it fosters community, trust and a sense of belonging. If the EU does not embrace culture, others will do it at its detriment.

Culture creates what regulations cannot: togetherness, home, identity. It's not merely soft power. It is the **power of purpose, resilience, hope and future.**

Conclusion

Let us not leave this room with beautiful words. Let us leave with a mandate:

A mandate to shift mindsets.

A mandate to lift budget lines.

A mandate to shift Europe itself.

We know what needs to be done and why it matters. **If we do not act now, others will define Europe for us.**

So let us begin —
with determination, courage, and speed.

Because when Culture wins, Europe wins.

Thank you.