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Cultural Policy in 2024: What's Changing and Why It Matters

CREATIVESUNITE

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The cultural policy landscape in 2024 has been marked by setbacks, with culture being deliberately excluded from high-level sustainable development agendas. However, priorities around artists' working conditions remain on top of the agenda and a new EU cultural policy strategy in the making.

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Analysis by Culture Policy Room*

This year, the world has neither regained 'normalcy' nor moved beyond the crisis mode we have faced in recent years. Political violence has risen by 15% compared to 2023. There are 56 recorded conflicts to date and they are increasingly more international. The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide has reached 120 million, marking yet another historic high. Meanwhile, elections in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world have highlighted a shift towards the political right, which is translating into a stronger emphasis on inward-looking policies and shrinking space for new-comers.

One of the dominant trends of 2023 and 2024 - the rapid rise of Generative AI - continues to reshape our economy and social dynamics. This technology is profoundly impacting the cultural and creative sectors. Despite facing increased scrutiny through regulatory actions, the overall reality remains that both policy

and public understanding are struggling to keep pace with the speed of the AI boom.

On a somewhat positive note, at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Azerbaijan, global leaders reached a breakthrough agreement to triple climate action financing for developing countries. However, this progress also serves as a stark reminder that global efforts to date have been insufficient to slow the worsening climate impacts that affect every corner of the world. The fact remains: confirming the tendency of recent years, 2024 is on track to become the warmest year on record.

What kind of year has 2024 been for culture? What can we expect from 2025? With a focus on Europe, and some global perspectives, we observe the following:

Culture in sustainable development: deliberately left out

Regarding the political recognition of culture in high-level agendas, 2024 has been a year of broken hopes, if not outright setbacks. Specifically, culture in its own right was once again excluded from the renewed global commitments to sustainable development.

In autumn 2024, world leaders gathered at the Summit of the Future to forge a new international consensus on securing a better future for the world. The key outcome of the Summit was the adoption of the Pact for the Future, which addresses major global challenges and outlines visions for global solutions. The initial draft of the Pact included a dedicated section on culture, positioning it as an independent goal of sustainable development. However, this section was removed in the final version.

While culture was still acknowledged, it was downgraded: it no longer has its own dedicated paragraph and was instead merged with sport. Although the Pact recognises the importance of integrating culture into economic, social, and environmental policies, it makes no direct reference to cultural policies in their own right. To cut a long story short: culture is somewhat included in such agendas, but only as a tool to support other policies. This falls short of the aspirations of the long-standing campaign advocating for culture to be recognised as a goal in its own right.

Moreover, a culture-specific goal was not proclaimed anymore by the G20 leaders who gathered in Rio De Janeiro in November. Anymore - because in 2023, G20 heads of state boldly called for a stand-alone culture goal in the sustainable development agenda - the first high-level call of its kind originating beyond ministries of culture. But this time around, the G20 Declaration has embraced a more general discourse, emphasising that culture holds significant power in 'fostering a more sustainable world, in all dimensions and from all perspectives'.

This happened despite the G7 'club' having called on promoting culture as a standalone goal just two months before at the G7 Ministerial Meeting on Culture. At the BRICS meeting in September, India pushed for this too, however, in the final Declaration it has been watered down to 'recognising the power of culture as a catalyst for sustainable development'.

Finally, COP29 was a major disappointment for culture advocates worldwide, especially in contrast to the historic progress made at COP28 in Dubai, UAE. Last year, after the launch of the Global Call to Put Culture at the Heart of Climate Action, the 'Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action' was established. However, COP29's conclusions did not embrace the proposal for the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies to hold workshops on culture and heritage issues in 2025. This proposal could have laid the groundwork for a stronger cultural agenda in the framework of the UN Climate Change Conference in the future.

Recognising culture as an independent and essential component of sustainable development goes beyond a symbolic victory. It is key to appreciating culture's unique contribution to a better future, rather than treating it as just one part of broader policies. This could strengthen cultural policies and, importantly, make the sustainability agenda itself more relevant and effective.

But why are we witnessing this 'one step forward, two steps back' scenario? While we may speculate about complex reasons, one thing is clear: culture was not simply overlooked - it was deliberately excluded from these broader agendas. Is it because culture is seen as too political or not political enough? Is there a lack of evidence? Or is it because different countries simply cannot reach an agreement?

Some food for thought on this was recently offered by UNESCO, which conducted a survey to assess the status of priorities and provisions outlined in the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration adopted in Mexico.

Through the survey, governments identified several key obstacles to embedding culture as a sustainable development goal. So, here are some 'why's':

-The diversity of national and regional priorities, needs, and approaches, which requires extensive coordination to drive policy changes
-The unsustainability of the cultural sector itself, marked by financial vulnerability (a seemingly vicious cycle)
-The ongoing reality of poly-crises, where investments are diverted to other economic and social priorities (another vicious cycle?)
-Gaps in national and subnational policy and regulatory frameworks
-Political dynamics that hinder efforts to promote culture independently of political agendas

These appear to be long-standing issues deeply ingrained in the global political landscape. For any breakthrough to occur in this field in 2025, a bold shift in collective political will is necessary. Are there any signs that this might happen?

Europe's political reset: more strategy, less culture

We now have an outline of the European Commission's new priorities, as presented in Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines before her re-election as Commission President in July. This new vision emphasises greater autonomy, sovereignty, and competitiveness for the Union, 'in an era of anxiety and uncertainty', where we must 'be clear-eyed about the world and threats around us as they really are'. Culture is not mentioned in the President's political guidelines, except for a brief reference to cultural heritage as a component of 'our European way of life'.

Competitiveness has emerged as a central theme for the EU in the years ahead, as outlined in the recently published Report on the Future of European Competitiveness, commissioned by the EU and authored by Mario Draghi, former Prime Minister of Italy and ex-President of the European Central Bank. Draghi calls for significant investments in innovation, defence, and transitioning the Union's economy to carbon neutrality. Although the report has faced some criticism, it is likely to shape the EU's vision for enhancing global economic competitiveness - a goal that remains unquestioned. This 400-page document does not mention creative industries, let alone culture or the 'cultural sector', even once. How culture can fit into this broader competitiveness agenda, if at all, remains

unclear.

The ambition to strengthen Europe's competitiveness is being advanced amidst ongoing geopolitical shifts that have compelled the EU to adopt a more strategic and coordinated approach. A key step in this effort is the reorganisation of the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Its previously broad portfolio has been divided between the Commissioner for the Mediterranean and the Commissioner for Enlargement. This change acknowledges the distinct characteristics of these regions and aims to enable a more focused policy approach for each.

Further specialisation in the EU's international relations is also evident in von der Leyen's mission letter to the Commissioner for International Partnerships, focusing on Africa, Asia, and Latin America. With the aim to upscale the Global Gateway based on trade and investments, culture is unlikely to play a prominent role in the agendas of these new EU departments. It is notably absent from the mission letters of all three Commissioners.

While a tailored approach to foreign relations may be logical, a regional specialisation of cultural action does not organically align with the bottom-up nature of transnational cultural relations, which flourish beyond the boundaries of governments' country- or region-specific priorities. So, this new development raises the question: will there be any consideration for a more inclusive and borderless cultural dimension?

As the EU's concepts of 'competitiveness,' 'autonomy,' and 'sovereignty' are predominantly framed in economic and military terms - reflecting global realities - it remains surprising that culture is not recognised as a key asset for strengthening the EU's global positioning. Will EU diplomats and cooperation officers succeed in convincing Brussels to allocate funding for more human-centered and inclusive partnerships on the ground? With transnational trust eroding rapidly, how does the EU plan to sustain its efforts to promote its principles and values without leveraging people-to-people, culture-centered collaborations?

Post-election Europe: divided and polarised field

While the EU's renewed political direction has yet to establish a clear approach to culture, the political divisiveness within the

newly shaped European landscape adds further uncertainty to the future of EU cultural policy.

The June elections resulted in the most right-wing European Parliament since its inception. More than half of its members belong to the centre-right European Peoples' Party, while right-wing groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists, and new factions like the Patriots for Europe (founded by Hungary's Viktor Orban) and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (led by the far-right Alternative for Germany), have also gained some influence. The 2024-2029 Parliament is not only more right-wing than its predecessor, but also more polarised, as seen in the divided vote for the new College of Commissioners in November: 370 in favor, 282 against, with 36 abstentions.

Naturally, approaches to culture in such a politically divided area also vary widely. The newly formed Culture & Education Committee of the European Parliament includes 30 full members from all eight European political groups, with a notably more right-wing composition than the CULT Committee of 2019-2024. The Committee Chair, Nela Riehl, is from the Greens/EFA group, which traditionally takes the most progressive stance on cultural policies. However, this stance has yet to be fully reflected in the discourse and initiatives of both the group and the Chair.

The CULT Committee faces challenges around balancing national cultural identities with European integration, as well as managing the divide between progressive and conservative values. A common theme among right- and centre-right parties, which form a majority within the Committee, is the emphasis on the uniqueness of their national cultures. These parties often base their political vision on pride in their civilization, using culture to promote national interests abroad or to reinforce national identities at home. While some of these parties don't see European integration as a threat, others express concerns about the interaction between national identities and the idea of a unified Europe and how far cultural integration should go.

The emphasis on national identities in right-wing party manifestos contrasts with the visions of other parties represented in the CULT Committee, which advocate for a more integrated cultural space in Europe. For example, French Socialists aim to transform Europe into a 'cultural power' and double the budget of Creative Europe, while Italian Democrats call for culture to become a key tool in the EU's common foreign policy, supported by adequate resources and strategies.

The next five years will be a period of exploring what kind of

European cultural policy and investment can emerge in a Union that is increasingly right-wing and politically divided. Which of the contrasting policy visions will prevail, and what kinds of compromises will be made? While it is too early to speculate, one initial development provides an interesting glimpse. The European Parliament has established 28 new intergroups - forums that unite different political groups to address pressing issues. Among them, only one intergroup is related to culture, bearing the self-explanatory title: 'European Cultural Heritage, Ways of Saint James, and European Cultural Roots'.

Artists' status reaffirmed as a priority amid shrinking resources and freedoms

The fragility of working conditions in the cultural and creative sectors was starkly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, numerous studies on the situation of artists have been conducted, and many legislative changes have occurred worldwide to improve working conditions in the sector.

Some shifts have also taken place at the EU level. One of the most notable initiatives in this area was a resolution adopted by the European Parliament in November last year. The resolution proposed an EU Framework to improve working conditions in the cultural sector, focusing on three key actions:

-An EU directive to establish decent working conditions for professionals and ensure determination of their employment status

-The creation of a European platform to enhance the exchange of best practices and foster mutual understanding among member states

-The adaptation of EU programmes that support artists, such as Creative Europe, to ensure compliance with EU, national, and collective labour and social obligations.

-Can we expect any concrete advancements in this field at the EU level, given the post-election changes? Many indications suggest that we can.

While the Parliament resolution was voted on in 2023, this year was crucial for another milestone: the European Commission's formal response to Parliament's initiative. In its response, the Commission promised to organise a High-Level Round Table with sector stakeholders in 2024 to explore the best way forward in addressing the sector's needs. It also committed to examining how future programmes (2028-2035) can comply

with social conditionality, acknowledging that current programmes are governed by existing legislation. Finally, the Commission assured that the issue would remain a priority at the EU level, to be integrated into the new strategic framework for culture currently in development. This last commitment was particularly significant, as it came just before the EU elections and the renewal of both the Commission and Parliament.

Furthermore, working conditions in the cultural sector is a key priority outlined in the mission letter from Ursula von der Leyen, addressed to Glenn Micallef, the then Commission-designate, and now the confirmed Commissioner for the Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport. Micallef himself featured the aspiration to make progress in this area during his confirmation hearing in the Parliament, yet his references to artists' working conditions were often coupled with the rather vague notion of 'competitiveness' of the cultural sector.

Importantly, the renewed Parliament does not seem to oppose or disregard the issue or artists' working conditions. This topic appears in several national party manifestos across the political spectrum, with most initiatives proposed by parties from the Socialists & Democrats group, but also other parties, including those from the right flank. However, only a tiny minority of parties explicitly endorse a consolidated EU approach on this issue, which would resonate with the idea of an EU Framework for artists' working conditions.

What about the Member States? In recent months, many have seen significant cuts to public funding for culture, with examples spanning France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Finland, and others. At the same time, there have been increasing attacks on artistic freedom in several European countries, including those traditionally regarded as strong performers in human rights and freedoms. This troubling trend raises concerns and highlights a paradox: growing awareness of the precarious status of artists is occurring alongside a deepening scarcity of resources to support them and erosion of artistic freedom.

Yet it is clear that the issue of artists' working conditions will not vanish from national political agendas. One of the most recent signs of it - non-binding yet historic - is the call of G20 heads of states (not ministries of culture!) to promote fair pay in the cultural sector featured in the Rio Declaration adopted in November. How can we make declarative commitments lead to real changes?

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The quest for a new narrative on culture: to be continued

Various old and new narratives regarding culture's value are coexisting on the global map of cultural policy. While the world is waking up to the limitations of the creative industries approach, which frames culture solely as an economic engine, the post-COVID interest in culture as a foundation for wellbeing has been gaining momentum.

However, a consistent direction is still lacking. In today's fragmented landscape, different international governance bodies are taking their own preferred approaches. For instance, the World Health Organisation is conducting studies on culture and health, and the EU Council is advocating for 'cultural prescriptions' by healthcare professionals. Meanwhile, UN leaders fail to mention culture in the Pact for the Future's reference to health, where sport - lumped together with culture within one paragraph - is praised. Similarly, the OECD excludes culture from its 'beyond GDP' wellbeing framework.

At the same time, new national strategies, such as those in Sweden, New Zealand, and others, still expect culture to thrive primarily as an industry; or contribute to national branding, such as the new Cool Japan Strategy and the implementation of the 'Made in Italy' law. One could argue that a diversity of approaches is not harmful, as the world is diverse anyway; however, a more consolidated global vision on culture would help advance steady progress of cultural policy we are all longing for.

Time running out for defining culture as a global public good

Next year, cultural ministries from across the world will gather in Spain at the MONDIACULT 2025 conference. It will be the moment to take stock of the progress made since UNESCO's MONDIACULT Declaration adopted in Mexico in 2022. One of the appeals made in this Declaration was to define 'culture as a global public good'. The concept of global public goods was first introduced by the UN Secretary-General in 2021, alongside the announcement of this year's Summit of the Future. The Summit seeks to revitalize the UN's role as a global governance body in the face of conflicts, climate change, democratic crises, and stalled progress on development. Just like the environment, technologies, financial system, and peace, culture can and should be defined as a global public good. Yet, as Justin

O'Connor claims in the reflection paper we published earlier this autumn, the UN's invitation to define culture as a global public good has not yet been fulfilled, which 'reflects a significant lack of cultural political imagination'.

New EU cultural policy strategy in the making

The EU's cultural policy is currently guided by the New Agenda for Culture 2018, which was adopted before key global shifts that have significantly impacted cultural policies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine, and the rise of AI. The adoption of a new strategic framework for culture is part of the EU's Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026. This plan states that the new framework 'will aim to strategically mainstream the cultural policy perspective and the assets of culture into all relevant EU policies, programmes, and initiatives'. Called the Culture Compass, this strategic framework is outlined in the Commission President's mission letter to Mr. Micallef. The new Commissioner emphasised that the primary aim of the strategy is to strengthen the cultural sector itself, with a secondary focus on promoting culture across other policy areas. This distinction is important, as these two priorities have often been blurred in EU cultural policy. Yet, there is no clarity yet on how the future strategy will look like.

The EU's future budget: what share for culture?

Discussions and negotiations regarding the future Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2035) will begin in the next couple of years. It remains uncertain whether a stand-alone programme for culture will be established after the current Creative Europe programme expires. The mission letter from Ursula von der Leyen makes no mention of this, though her political guidelines propose a revamping of the EU's budget: fewer instruments, more impact; a budget serving policies rather than programmes; and fewer administrative hurdles with faster decisions. This doesn't provide enough basis for speculation about the future of Creative Europe, other than suggesting that the current MFF structure may be reconsidered. During the hearing, Mr. Micallef, who, just like all of us, lacks full insight into the future, mentioned the need for a 'stronger' Creative Europe budget and indicated that more strategic funding decisions will be made.

Moving past the Resilience and Recovery Facility era

The next two years will also mark the final period of the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF), which has driven important changes for the cultural and creative sectors at the

national level, from reforms on working conditions to digital and green transitions. However, have these reforms sparked a true paradigm shift in national cultural policies that will be sustained beyond 2026? Clearly, continuous advocacy, capacity-building, and sustainable budgets are essential. If a post-RRF EU instrument is needed, it is crucial for the cultural and creative sectors to actively participate in shaping its design.

These are the issues that we, as a cultural sector, should not only observe over the next few years but also actively influence and guide in the right direction. Given the tendency of governments to sideline or overlook culture in major policy agendas, we must stay vigilant and proactive in addressing this pattern - one that benefits neither culture nor citizens, nor the broader agendas themselves.

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