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“Cultural spaces are crucial for democracy”

Sylvia Amann, Creative FLIP policy expert & Inforelais, presents the interim results of the Creative FLIP project's research on cultural spaces and democracy.

"We need accessible cultural infrastructure and public spaces in cities and rural areas," says Sylvia Amann, author of the report on cultural spaces and democracy for the [Creative FLIP](#) programme, in an interview with Creatives Unite.

Presenting the interim results of a larger survey due to be completed in 2026, the Creative FLIP policy expert notes that "the link between culture and democracy is currently not very visible in EU strategic documents" and adds that "engagement is needed to integrate cultural spaces of interaction into these EU strategic frameworks".

As Sylvia Amann points out, "one of the core elements of democracy is civilised interaction and exchange... And culture can play a crucial role in that because we can create a lot of different formats where we can meet, where we can debate, where we can see each other".

"This is an important moment to reflect on the role and potential of culture in democracy and to integrate culture in the best possible way in the new financial framework," concludes the author of the study.

You may find the report [here](#).

Creatives Unite: How do rapid socio-economic, technological, and geopolitical changes affect democracy in Europe and the world?

Sylvia Amann: It's a big question with many aspects, but perhaps we should go through the four main areas of change and highlight some elements. Related to social changes, what we've found out in the research is that it's not just about regulatory frameworks, it's also about social norms. So these

are two dimensions and another one is who has the power to decide or impose.

We can take public spaces, for example, and how access to them can be restricted or contested. The same applies to artistic expression. We see an increasing trend towards more repressive actions, not only in Europe, but worldwide.

In terms of economic changes, what we've found is that it's not only the actual economic status that matters, but also the perception of the economic and financial situation. In another research, they also found that feelings influence people quite a lot. So the feelings about the economy or the perceived backwardness creates a kind of mindset, a kind of situation in people. In that context, people tend to have more negative opinion about democracy.

If we're interested in looking at practices that promote democratic frameworks, it's really important to understand the context, not just the evidence. We have to look at how people feel.

In terms of technological change, a few years ago, we were quite enthusiastic, and that is still something that the digital world can do for democracy. It's about mobilising people, providing spaces for interaction. I think the Arab Spring was a typical case where all these technologies helped young people to organise themselves and demand democratic and civil rights. But on the other hand, we also have a lot of disinformation or these geopolitical influences. Before the digital revolution, our sources of information had a certain framework, like newspapers, TV. Now we are slowly going to a situation where people do not trust information. And this is going to get worse with deepfake.

The question is, where do you get reliable information? And that's a key element of democracy, because you need to have confidence in information.

In terms of geopolitical changes, the war in Ukraine was a disruptive element. But even now, with Trump, we see that global decision-making is undergoing significant change, especially when it should be inclusive and democratic.

So if we come back to some of the key elements involved in these changes. It's about participation, it's about trust, it's about evidence and feelings, it's about rules and social norms, and it's also about power relations. About who has the right to decide.

And all of this is undergoing significant change, and yes, these four areas - the social and societal sphere, the economic sphere, the technological sphere, and of course the international changes - they all affect democracy.

C.U.: In times of change, how can the European Union's policies be adapted to meet these new challenges?

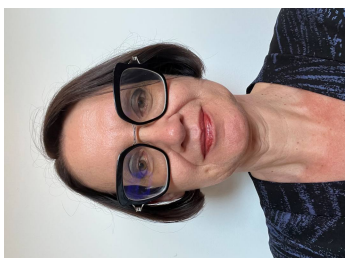
S.A.: The European Union does and can do a lot. But perhaps we should remember from the outset that the European Union is a supranational structure that brings together a very large number of democratic countries.

It's still the largest community of democratic states in the world. This kind of hybrid structure has also brought forward a lot of common policies and initiatives. In that sense, it has both power and responsibility.

And I think, especially now, it can be a space of hope for those strata of the world's population who aspire to democratic frameworks. Of course, internal criticism is good. We can say that we are far from perfect. But we must always benchmark and compare ourselves with what is happening in other parts of the world.

What can the EU do to strengthen cooperation between democratic countries in the world? Kofi Annan says that being a good citizen and also a democratic nation is a process and it needs a permanent commitment. I very much agree with his quote.

Maybe that is something we have forgotten in the past. We thought democracy was achieved, but it's never been achieved and we should be much more involved. If we want to be good citizens and a democratic nation, we need interaction. We need debate.



I think one of the core elements of democracy is civilised interaction and exchange. In that sense, we need physical, digital and hybrid spaces for interaction. And culture can play a crucial role in that because we can create a lot of different formats where we can meet, where we can debate, where we can see each other. That is very important. That is why some of the research highlights the need for social infrastructure.

In the European Union, since 2023, we have the European Commission's Defence of Democracy package and many other initiatives, some also in the Creative Europe programme, such as those on strengthening high-quality journalism.

But I think the moment of truth always comes when it's about the budget. And we just start now to negotiate the multi-annual financial framework (MFF) of the European Union.

This is an important moment to reflect on the role and potential of culture in democracy and to integrate culture into the new financial framework in the best possible way. Not only the role of cultural cooperation, which is at the heart of cultural activities, but also the transversal role that culture plays in society and in strengthening democracy including strengthening NGOs and networks on the ground.

The EU can do a lot and should not only look inwards but also outwards. It can invest in community building, in strengthening actors who share the democratic goals, and in promoting cultural cooperation between democratic countries.

C.U.: What role do cultural spaces play in democracy?

S.A.: A recent study on culture and democracy found that culture can increase the likelihood of voting, trust and conflict resolution.

Civic participation and cultural activities go together. In order to activate people, a first step is to encourage them to participate in some cultural activities. To go and sing together, or to get involved in a creative centre, or to be a cultural buddy accompanying other people to the theatre, for example. This can generate further engagement because it already creates a community and spaces for exchange, for interaction, for debate.

Art and culture also help us to imagine different social realities. Art is a field of experimentation. When someone goes to the theatre, their imagination can be open to new ideas. These ideas can be an inspiration. Someone may begin to think that things could be done differently.

So it's about opportunities for interaction in public space, and for that we need to invest in creating and strengthening cultural spaces and social infrastructures, buildings and public spaces where interaction takes place.

C.U.: Based on the desk research you have conducted on cultural spaces and democracy, what are the guiding elements for good policy-making in relation to cultural spaces and their role in democracy?

S.A.: We have based our research on Creative FLIP Collaborative Transformation Policy Approach, developed in 2023 and which identifies 8 elements of good (cultural) policy making in transformational times.

Science-based policy-making is crucial in order to use the broad range of research and information already available and to best link it with the related potential and challenges for culture development.

Eco-systemic approaches are needed to identify those areas of special attention which have positive / negative disruption power for a given topic, e. g. the digital sphere in the case of democracy.

The third element is „Value-driven policy-making“ to better understand the objectives which guide the decision-makers – in the case of democracy this concerns e. g. open governance approaches including transparency, civic freedoms and participative decision-making.

Collaborative policy-making process can imply different concepts: Do we build our decision making (alone) on the democratic institutions of the state or is a collaborative approach better – e. g. with a wider range of stakeholders. What does this mean for accountability or legitimacy? Which kind of civilisation do we build in this context e. g. a public space of culture.

Understanding which are the most urgent areas of policy attention is crucial, e. g. in 2024 over 118 countries worldwide placed serious restrictions on civil society. The next elections of the EP take place in 2029. If we want to support democracy action policy action has to be taken from now.

Behavioral patterns: Human beings are also guided by emotions, feelings, etc. If we want to bring forward policies we need to understand the related feelings of people towards a certain topic. Related to democracy e. g. the feelings of lagging behind or feeling insecure influence the perception of democracy.

Territorial and international dimensions: We tend often to generalise, but if we look closer e. g. an Eurobarometer survey highlights that the satisfaction with democracy is very different in EU countries (79% in Denmark, 26% in Bulgaria). Furthermore, those living in rural areas are less happy with democracy. These facts provide us guidance where to focus (culture) policy.

Middle- to long-term policy orientations are crucial: For the moment, the link between culture and democracy is not very visible in strategic EU documents (e. g. the strategic agenda of the EC, the MFF). Engagement is needed to integrate culture spaces of interaction into these strategic frameworks of the EU.

C.U.: Based on the findings of the Creative Flip Policy Orientations on Culture and Democracy, what could be the actions that policy makers and stakeholders in the European Union should focus on in order to promote democracy through cultural spaces?

S.A.: It's a broad area, but we can highlight some of the key areas.

We think that the furthering of cultural rights would be really beneficial. For example, furthering transparency and representativeness. We still do not really reflect the diversity of our populations in different European countries. I really liked an example from the Canada Council of the Arts, where Inuit and indigenous people were able to manage their own budget, decide on the outline of the funding programme and then make the funding decisions. Obviously the European context is different, but it is an interesting example in terms of representativeness.

Another key area is investment in place-based cultural development. Cultural spaces, interaction spaces are crucial. We need accessible cultural infrastructures and public spaces in cities. We are discussing new rules for the European Capitals of Culture. Public spaces could play an important role in this initiative. But not only in cities. Also in rural areas.

If we look at some of the figures we have, we see that in less densely populated areas people tend to be more sceptical about democracy.

For example, in a rural area, if the shop closes, the post office disappears, the school may move away next year. The area becomes more and more empty. If policymakers stop funding the local cultural initiative, or perhaps a small cinema, this in turn reinforces the perception that people are being left behind.

In fact, these investments in culture, especially in villages, do not require huge amounts of money.

Of course, in the EU we have the EU rural development programmes and the ERDF funds. These programmes should continue to foresee investments in culture – also to strengthen democracy.

Another key area is that of European citizenship. I think culture can also play a crucial role here. Culture has that power to translate the message of connectivity into something accessible more easily than a study or an article.

C.U.: If we take the above as guidelines for long-term policy decisions, could you also make some suggestions for short-term policy actions in relation to cultural spaces and democracy?

S.A.: I think what is really important now is to respond very quickly to what is happening on the ground. We had a stakeholder meeting at the beginning of 2025 and they were quite concerned about the developments in many European countries where contemporary art and cultural spaces are under pressure or facing very severe budget cuts.

Europe has already demonstrated its ability to react quickly in previous moments of crisis. For example, in the Creative Europe programme we could imagine something like an emergency fund for those spaces that are under threat. It would also be useful for policy makers at EU level to work together with European cultural networks to find out very quickly where the hotspots are and what types of artistic and cultural activities are most under pressure.

From our analysis, this would be very useful, because once these spaces and initiatives are closed, it's very difficult to get them up and running again. It would not make sense to let parts of this ecosystem die off and then rebuild it in two years' time. Better to act now.

What we also discussed quite extensively with stakeholders at the beginning of this year was the digital sphere. And there is also a lot of fear. Stakeholders highlighted that there are initiatives for good tech and for good digital platforms that respect the rules and are based on a democratic and inclusive framework. Perhaps it would be good to look at a pilot project for something that we have called the good tech and good digital label, so that those platforms and those technological solutions that respect the European legal framework would get the good quality label.

This could also be very helpful for educational purposes or for young people who still want to use these platforms and their parents who do not have to be so concerned about their use. And, of course, it will also be very helpful for democracy, because it could also provide a better framework for combating misinformation and radicalisation.

C.U.: Could you share with us some inspiring good practices from Europe and beyond that aim to promote democracy through the inclusion of cultural spaces?

S.A.: One initiative that is very interesting and related to learning and exchange is the In Situ MOOC on cultural rights. It's a result of a big Creative Europe project called Uncommon Spaces. This online learning platform covers issues like governance, legal and illegal appropriation, power relations, representativeness and many others.

In terms of networks, we can highlight ICORN, the Cities of Refugees Network, which is linked to cultural rights and civil rights. These cities provide a safe environment for artists and writers. So they are defending the right to freedom of expression, and promote a free, fair, open society and access to justice.

Since we have been discussing the importance of investing more and more in rural cultural development, there are two programmes from Germany and Ireland that are very interesting. The one from Ireland is called Creative Places and it tries to address the issue of under-invested areas by giving them additional cultural funding to take advantage of it. The Third Places project invests in rural areas in Germany with limited interaction opportunities.

Finally I would like to mention the Porto Santo Charter, which was initiated during the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, stressing the fact that cultural and educational organisations are crucial for democracy – a strong statement of the Member States of the EU which requires further implementation in the upcoming years.

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Main photo: Creative FLIP

