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Culture Action Europe to The Commission: Turn Recognition into Funding

Open letter to Ursula von der Leyen argues that June's landmark culture declaration must now be followed by money, seats at the table and a binding law protecting artistic freedom

When President Ursula von der Leyen rises to deliver her [State of the Union](#) address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg this Wednesday, it will be the first such speech since the EU's three main institutions signed a [joint declaration](#) on culture. [Culture Action Europe \(CAE\)](#), one of the sector's largest representative networks, wants to make sure that commitment survives contact with Brussels' budget negotiations.

In a letter sent to Mrs von der Leyen on 27 August and published in full below, CAE strikes a markedly different tone from a year ago, when it complained that culture was missing from the Commission's agenda altogether. This time, the network says culture is "finally present" — but warns that presence alone will not be enough.

The shift follows the signing, on 18 June, on the sidelines of a European Council summit in Brussels, of a joint declaration titled "Europe for Culture, Culture for Europe" by Mrs von der Leyen, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola and the rotating Council presidency, then held by Cyprus — the first time the three institutions have united behind a single political statement on culture. Signing it, Mrs von der Leyen said: "Our culture is at the core of our identity." The declaration, which builds on the Commission's 2025 [Culture Compass](#) strategy, sets out twelve principles on artistic freedom, cultural diversity and fair working conditions for artists.

CAE now argues that recognition and action are still too far apart, and it sets out three tests for closing the gap under the banner [Ask, Pay, Trust the Artist](#).

On the first, CAE notes that cultural representatives hold no seats on the AI Act's [Scientific Panel](#) or [Advisory Forum](#), the

[European Innovation Council Board](#), the [Manuel Heitor group advising on Horizon Europe](#) and its successor [FP10](#), or the Digital Services Act's working groups — bodies now shaping rules that lean heavily on creative content and data. With the [European Innovation Act](#), the [European Research Area Act](#), the [Digital Fairness Act](#) and a revised Copyright Directive all still to come, CAE wants cultural actors involved while the rules are being drafted, not consulted once the texts are finished.

The second test runs straight into the fight over the EU's next seven-year budget. The Commission's original proposal allocated €8.6 billion to AgoraEU, the programme that would replace Creative Europe; the European Parliament voted in April to raise that to €10.72 billion, a figure CAE's letter treats as a floor rather than a ceiling. More than [150 cultural organisations](#) are campaigning for at least a quarter of whatever AgoraEU eventually receives to be ring-fenced for its cultural strand — still short of the €12 billion the Parliament's own culture committee had sought. The stakes were underlined only weeks after the June declaration, when the Council of the EU proposed cutting AgoraEU's budget by roughly a third against the Parliament's position, a move CAE has separately called "[bad news](#)" for the sector. The letter also asks for a dedicated line for culture in Horizon Europe and the new [European Competitiveness Fund](#), for member states to steer 2% of their National and Regional Partnership Plans towards culture — echoing the roughly 2% of pandemic-era recovery funds that reached the sector — and for a new [EU Artists' Charter](#) covering pay, contracts and social protection, including for the use of creative work in AI systems.

The third test concerns artistic freedom itself. CAE argues that the principle the Joint Declaration already commits to needs legal teeth: a binding EU Artistic Freedom Act, modelled on the existing European Media Freedom Act, to guard against the censorship and political interference with cultural institutions and funding that CAE says is spreading across the continent.

Beneath the three-point checklist sits a larger question CAE puts to Mrs von der Leyen directly: whether a policy architecture built for an era when culture was treated mainly as a national matter, with Brussels in a supporting role, still fits the strategic weight EU leaders now say they want culture to carry. The letter proposes that Wednesday's address is the moment to begin that reflection — without predicting what the Commission president will actually say.

The full text of Culture Action Europe's letter follows below.

Dear President von der Leyen,

Last year, [we wrote to you](#) ahead of the State of the Union because culture was missing. This year, we are writing for a different reason: culture is finally present.

On 18 June, you joined the Presidents of the European Parliament and the Council in signing the Joint Declaration ‘Europe for Culture—Culture for Europe.’ For the first time in the history of the EU, three institutions came together around a shared political commitment to culture.

For a sector that has spent years making the case for why culture matters, this was a milestone. We felt recognised. We felt that the contribution culture makes to democracy, resilience, competitiveness and Europe’s place in the world was finally being understood at the highest political level.

That’s why we do not want to spend this letter asking you to recognise culture once again—because we believe you will. Instead, we want to talk about what recognition requires.

The EU’s new culture strategy, the Culture Compass, has started to provide an answer. But as one of the largest representative organisations for culture, we keep hearing one message from the sector: the distance between political recognition and political action needs to close.

For us, turning these commitments into action comes down to three things: Ask, Pay, Trust the Artist.

Asking the Artist means ensuring that cultural actors can exercise their agency

Do you know how many seats are reserved for representatives of the cultural sector in the AI Act Scientific Panel and Advisory Forum? In the European Innovation Council Board? In the Manuel Heitor group advising on Horizon Europe and FP10? In the Digital Services Act working groups? None.

AI and innovation are one clear example of a wider problem. Technologies are being developed that depend on human creativity, cultural content and data, while the people producing that value have little say over how these systems are designed and governed. The same question of agency arises when Europe shapes its policies on democratic resilience, competitiveness, preparedness, and sustainability.

Cultural actors should not be invited to adapt once the rules have already been written. They should help write them. With major legislative files ahead—including the European Innovation Act, European Research Area Act, Digital Fairness

Act and the revision of the Copyright Directive—as well as new governance structures such as the Stakeholder Platform of the European Centre for Democratic Resilience and the Public-Private Preparedness Task Force, culture should be invited to the ‘room where it happens’ from the beginning.

Paying the Artist means resourcing Europe’s cultural ambition properly

The next Multiannual Financial Framework is the clearest test of the commitments made through the Joint Declaration.

[More than 150 cultural organisations](#) from across Europe are asking for a significantly more ambitious AgoraEU budget, with at least 25% dedicated to its cultural component. The European Parliament’s proposed €10.72 billion envelope is a strong benchmark for that ambition.

Culture needs to be clearly [named, placed and funded](#) in Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund, where there is currently no dedicated structural component or budget for the cultural and creative sectors. As Europe rethinks its place in the world, Global Europe should give international cultural relations a dedicated place in Europe’s external action.

We are also asking Member States to dedicate 2% of their National and Regional Partnership Plans to cultural chapters. During the pandemic, around 2% of the Recovery and Resilience Facility was allocated to culture and the creative sectors, providing an important example of EU common action that helped sustain the sector through the crisis. We should build on this precedent.

But paying for culture is also about the people who make it possible. An EU Artists’ Charter must help turn political recognition into better working conditions: fair remuneration, stronger social protection, fair contracts and greater security for artists and workers in the cultural and creative sectors, including when their work is used in AI and digital.

Trust the Artist means protecting the conditions in which culture can remain free and diverse

Artists and cultural organisations need the freedom to experiment and create work whose outcome cannot always be predicted in advance. They need independent institutions and an environment in which different voices and forms of cultural expression can emerge. These conditions matter for the sector itself, but also for Europe’s democratic resilience and for the credibility of the values it promotes. Yet across Europe, artistic

freedom is threatened by censorship, political pressure and interference with cultural institutions and their funding.

The Joint Declaration recognises artistic freedom as a fundamental principle. The next step should be stronger, more binding protection through an EU Artistic Freedom Act, building on the approach already taken with the European Media Freedom Act.

The EU is doing great work in celebrating culture. But now this is not enough. Europe must also protect it when it is critical, uncomfortable or challenges those in power.

Ask, Pay, Trust the Artist:

Strengthen cultural actors' agency in making decisions that shape Europe's future.

Provide the resources that make cultural creation possible.

Protect the freedom and autonomy without which culture cannot fulfil its role.

Together, these are the conditions needed to turn Europe's political commitment to culture into practice.

Our letter addresses the changes needed now. But our ambition for culture should also extend beyond the next funding programme or policy cycle. Europe's new recognition of culture allows us to think again about the place culture has in the European project and whether the frameworks inherited from a time when culture was largely treated as a national responsibility, with the EU playing a supporting and often sectoral role, are sufficient for the strategic role we now expect culture to play.

That means looking again at the scope of the EU's mandate and action in culture, building on the unique cross-border cultural space the EU has already helped create and asking how culture can shape rather than simply contribute to Europe's wider political priorities.

When signing the Joint Declaration, you described culture as Europe's 'greatest strength.' The Culture Compass has given that ambition a policy direction. This recognition invites us to ask if the foundations of Europe's approach to culture are still adequate for the ambition now attached to it. The 2026 State of the Union is the right place to begin that reflection.

