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Preserving Cultural Autonomy in a Shifting European Landscape

CREATIVESUNITE

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Luiza Moroz from Culture Action Europe discusses the critical need to protect cultural autonomy in Europe, addressing challenges from new political pressures, AI disruptions, and the quest for a strategic cultural vision.

In the aftermath of challenging elections, Europe's cultural sector seeks to preserve its autonomy, confronting pressures, disruptions, and the critical need for a strategic vision beyond national boundaries. Luiza Moroz, Policy Advisor of Culture Action Europe has been a vocal and insightful commentator of the recent political developments on the EU level. She speaks to Creatives Unite about the new political landscape in Europe and the need to preserve Culture as an autonomous field.

Q: After surviving the elections, the newly formed “Democratic Front,” so to speak, has taken a significant step against the so-called populist forces, that showed a particular interest in it for ideological reasons. However, there's a sense that the cultural field is now fragmented. Micallef's hearings were accepted as a good but generic start. There's a general feeling that Europe lacks a strategic vision for culture. So, where do we stand at this critical moment?

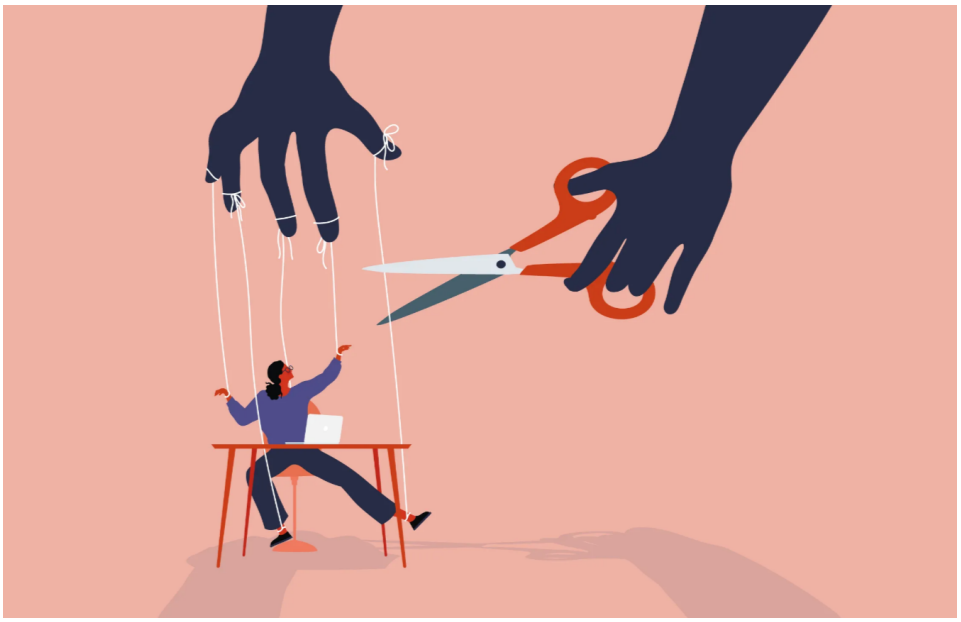
A: Indeed, these are challenging times globally, if you consider Trump's victory and the increasing restrictions on artistic freedom and cultural autonomy in some member states. As you mentioned, this summer we were concerned about far-right candidates potentially taking leadership in the CULT committee of the European Parliament. Fortunately, pro-European forces in the Parliament and the cultural sector managed to secure a pro-European chair, which is reassuring.

Micallef's diplomatic approach during his hearing was understandable. We hope that his promises regarding annual youth policy dialogues and stakeholder consultations will allow

Culture Action Europe, as one of the largest representative organizations, to contribute to the discourse on European cultural policy's future.

At Culture Action Europe, we recently completed a major research project called “State of Culture,” authored by Elena Polivtseva. The research identified several trends, notably the growing instrumentalisation of culture, where culture serves as a means to an end rather than valued as a unique sector with its needs. This “culture serves everyone” narrative often overlooks the specific challenges cultural sector practitioners face, including their working conditions or role in AI.

We've been missing a focus on culture's intrinsic and unique value in the current strategic framework discussion. We believe this cultural dimension should be more prominently reflected in the EU’s strategic planning. Furthermore, we have certain ideas about what the strategic framework might reflect and what it might focus on, and we feel that through a collaborative process, we can contribute to that planning to achieve a shift in the narrative discourse.



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Q: Culture is considered at large a national responsibility, and that reflects on the strong support of heritage initiatives tied to national and local traditions—a very important field. But it doesn't address the field's unity and autonomy. What can the ecosystem do to preserve its unity and autonomy?

A: Despite the different views on certain issues, the sector agrees on crucial issues like the need to improve the working conditions for cultural and creative professionals, cultural funding, and in particular the future of the Creative Europe program. Unfortunately, it was notably absent from Micallef's mission letter, written responses, and hearing.

With partners like the European Cultural Foundation and Europa Nostra, our Cultural Deal for Europe campaign secured 2% of the Recovery and Resilience Facility funding for culture during the pandemic. We are calling for the Cultural Deal and an increase in culture funding to 2% of the EU budget in the new policy cycle, too. Economically speaking, this measure alone would generate an additional €38 billion in GDP annually across the EU. Looking ahead to the 2024-2029 policy mandate, advocating for Creative Europe as a standalone program in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU's seven-year budget is crucial. The Commissioner-designate for Budget has hinted at the next MFF's structure, mentioning a major competitiveness fund organised like the current STEP platform. He emphasised the importance of EU-level strategic projects and focused programs.

We believe Creative Europe meets all these conditions: it has unique added value; it's the only EU program specifically focused on culture and creative sectors, and it demonstrates successful multi-member state collaboration.

So, our priority is securing and increasing the budget of Creative Europe as a standalone program in the next MFF and competitiveness fund, while ensuring cultural funding is present in the external action budget envelope and national investment plans. This is a unifying cause for the cultural community.

Q: Micallef wasn't very clear about whether the Creative Europe program could potentially be integrated into Erasmus, which I assume you wouldn't consider a positive development.

A: I believe it's crucial to understand that what constitutes "simplification" for the EU doesn't necessarily translate into simplification for the cultural sector too. Merging programs risks overlooking the sector's unique characteristics and needs. While there's certainly room for improvement, Creative Europe's concept and function as a policy tool have proven valuable. It should be maintained and strengthened as a separate, standalone program.

Q: Could you comment on Micallef's statements about AI and fair remuneration?

A: AI is currently a divisive and sensitive topic in the cultural sector. Many rights holders' organisations argue that the AI Act doesn't adequately address remuneration issues. They contest that data collection for AI training shouldn't fall under the Text and Data Mining exception, which is how the AI Act currently frames it referring to the Copyright Directive.

The implementation of the AI Act is ongoing, with the AI Office under the European Commission creating a plenary of about 1,000 stakeholders, including tech sector representatives, rights holders' organisations, and civil society organisations. They've drafted the first Code of Practice to clarify how the AI Act obligations for general-purpose AI model providers should be implemented. Culture Action Europe is part of this plenary group.

From the hearings of both the Executive Vice-President-designate for Tech Sovereignty and Commissioner-designate for Culture, we're seeing the Commission's narrative that essentially says, "You can opt-out, but we encourage you to conclude agreements with providers"—essentially selling your data. While this may sound reasonable, it raises concerns about power imbalances in negotiations between big tech and the cultural sector. It also fails to address how to handle past copyright infringements and how to proactively strengthen the cultural sector's role in AI development.

Q: The State of Culture report emphasises a democratic point that I find particularly interesting—culture being an integral part of the democratic process, whether through education or how institutions function. How does that play in today's world?

A: We often refer to the Porto Santo Charter, which explains the concept of cultural democracy. It's about actively engaging

people, focusing on cultural participation and cooperation in shared spaces for shared futures—not just providing access to culture.

Cultural democracy is especially relevant in times of permanent, multi-layered crises. Interestingly, culture's intrinsic value becomes most visible during crises. Culture offers a framework where we can think together, process our pains, and reflect on our past and future. If I needed to show examples, just see Ukraine, where despite limited resources, culture continues to find ways to communicate, share, and reflect on the situation.

Q: Culture is invaluable in preserving democracy, both in war and peace settings. IETM released a statement recently expressing concerns about incidents of artistic freedom suppression in the European bloc. Would you like to comment on that?

A: We believe that the forthcoming strategic framework for culture—the Culture Compass—should focus on artistic freedom and cultural democracy. It needs to provide a bold vision for the future, and that includes the autonomy of artistic and cultural institutions.

We should focus on supporting people and infrastructure that strengthens individuals and communities, rather than thinking in project-based cycles. One of the limitations of artistic freedom observed is embedded in how funding programs are structured—with numerous conditionalities that leave less space for creativity. We need to trust artists and artistic processes without requiring constant justification. This approach will highlight culture's role in our resilience—both in facing crises and as a self-sufficient sector.

For the next strategic framework to successfully address these issues, we need to consider three key questions:

- How do we work with cultural main streaming?
- How do we navigate national versus EU-level cultural policies?
- How do we involve citizens in meaningful co-creation of our future vision?

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