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State of Culture Report: Reclaiming the Transformative Power of Culture

As the cultural sphere grapples with the impacts of the “polycrisis”, the State of Culture Report, issued by Culture Action Europe, makes a compelling case for a recalibration of how culture is valued and supported.

Recognising culture’s essential role in shaping a more just, sustainable, and democratic future and empowering the sector as an equal partner in driving critical agendas forward are the main pillars of such effort, according to the report.

In a comprehensive report commissioned by Culture Action Europe, cultural policy expert Elena Polivtseva paints a challenging picture facing the cultural sector across Europe. From the climate crisis and geopolitical tensions to the disruptive effects of technological change, the cultural sector is facing its crisis within the “polycrisis” of our times.

Culture Action Europe held the online launch of its report “[State of Culture](#)” on October 16th at 13:00 CEST. The “State of Culture” report was the outcome of a non-academic policy research initiative that explored how the role and value of culture are

framed in national and European cultural policies.

Situated within broader discussions such as the climate crisis and its effects and a challenging geopolitical landscape for Europe and the world, shaping political pressures and structural changes coming from the technological sector such as AI, the role of culture in Europe needs to be examined and re-evaluated accordingly. The State of Culture (SoC) report provides new perspectives on the major challenges and opportunities the sector faces in the present world.

For the State of Culture Report, Elena Polivtseva, on behalf of CAE, conducted wide and thorough research, including the results of the first edition of the State of Culture Barometer. She also interviewed 17 sector representatives from various creative fields, from museums & libraries to cultural heritage, visual arts, and more. A significant amount of research was also devoted to analysing key stakeholder policy papers and reviewing recent academic papers, books, and key documents such as the Creative Europe legal framework.

The hyper-Instrumentalisation of Culture

One of the key issues identified in the report is the “hyper-instrumentalization” of cultural policy. The value of culture is increasingly justified in terms of its utility for external goals such as diplomacy, economics or urban development, rather than its intrinsic value. In the SoC report, Polivtseva notes a “mismatch” between how policymakers view the role of culture and the aspirations of the sector itself.

“There is a lot of attention from the governments to culture as a tool for economics, international development, cultural cohesion of societies, and also more recently, consolidating national identities,” Polivtseva underlined. “This is about identities inside the country but also towards the outside world, while the cultural sector itself sees itself, rather as a contributor to critical debate as a force of transformation of societies.”

According to the report, while the cultural community sees itself as a catalyst for social progress, climate action, and strengthening democracy, policymakers are often emphasising short-term, measurable results. This is even though the sector’s impact is deeper, more nuanced, and harder to quantify.

Culture is being promoted as a contributor or a tool for other areas, and it is being supported and evaluated in the logic of

these other external areas, Polivtseva said in the presentation. “Very often this doesn't help culture to unleash its real power.”

Worryingly, in times of crisis and declining political trust, the cultural sector increasingly conforms to the imposed instrumental view, adapting to pragmatic demands rather than boldly asserting its transformative potential. This adaptation, the report warns, has come at the expense of innovation and the sector's ability to fulfil its true purpose.

Culture's Autonomy

“The alternative to the instrumentalisation of culture for us is not arts for the arts, even if this concept has also the right to exist for us,” she said. “It is about recognising the cultural field has a right to be an equal partner to other sectors and other government portfolios to drive important agendas forward,” Polivtseva explained.

A key strategic direction proposed in the report is for the cultural sector to restore its trust in itself and rebuild a sense of self-worth. This would involve a “profound conversation and profound redefinition” of the sector's core values and unique contributions, moving beyond siloed approaches.

“We often say the value of culture in its terms, but rarely will someone say, What are those terms? And if we don't know what these terms are, other government portfolios will not know that either,” Polivtseva said in the presentation.

“The sector needs to restore its trust in itself, rebuild its sense of world self-worth, and strengthen its core values. The cultural sector needs to articulate its values and to do it in its accord.”

Culture as a Battleground

Culture has become a “battlefield for competing identities and ideologies” in the face of growing political polarisation, notes the SOC Report. As cultural consumption increasingly shifts towards individualised, on-demand experiences driven by algorithms, the cultural sector fears this trend is contributing to the fragmentation of shared cultural experiences and democratic discourse.

“The digital revolution was seen as an opportunity and a source

of innovation is now more and more seen as a source of disruptions, especially with the development of AI. Social polarisation is not just a catchy title from the media. There is data. We suggest that this is a problem in all European countries.” Polivtseva argued at the presentation of the report.

The report found that while cross-sectoral collaboration is frequently discussed, there is still no comprehensive strategy for effectively embedding culture within broader political efforts, such as the ones mentioned above. The existing collaborations tend to be fragmented and imbalanced. On top of these strategic concerns, the rise of AI compels us to confront questions about the value of human creativity itself.

“As the cultural and creative industries face challenges around AI’s impact on employment and intellectual property, the debate crystallises the need to articulate why we cherish the unpredictable, emotive power of human expression,” Polivtseva noted.

The risks associated with it, for the culture and creative sectors, so far look bigger than the opportunities and benefits associated with it. “So there are such problems as erosion of human labour, reduced opportunities, job opportunities, challenges related to transparency into actual property and remuneration governance, the notion of truth and truthfulness, and many other concerns,” she underlined.

Europe’s Role

The SoC report points to the fact that culture is not a central part of the Green Deal or the democracy plan of the EU at the moment. Even though it is referenced here and there, it is not promoted as an important driver or tool for these policies. There is tangible data to support the claim: According to UNESCO’s 2022 report, evidence suggests that the global investment in culture has only dropped in the last 10 years.

At the EU level, the general average rate of investment in culture is 0.5 of the GDP of member states. This level has remained stable since 2014. In 12 countries it has not changed at all, whereas in some cases it has decreased.

The report argues the European Union has a significant role to play in driving innovation and advocacy around these issues, despite the primary responsibility lying with national governments. EU initiatives like the Copyright Directive and the

AI Act have demonstrated the bloc's potential to shape policy debates. "The ability to be ahead of the curve can have greater effects in the long term even than legal power," said Elena Polivtseva at the presentation.

"There is stagnation of freedom of expression worldwide and also degradation of democratic systems, not only in other parts of the world but also in at least 20 countries of the European Union," she added.

While policymakers view culture as a tool to "bridge ideological and emotional divides and to rescue democracy", the SoC report warns that culture can only fulfil this essential role if it is democratic itself. It calls for the development of pluralistic, inclusive narratives about Europe's future, drawing on heritage, values, and the dynamism of contemporary culture.

Crucially, the report argues that culture must be recognised not only for celebrating the past but as a catalyst for imagining and shaping our shared future. How do we want that future to look like? Who is going to imagine it and open the way towards it?

---You can read the full paper [here](#) and a summary [here](#)

8 Key Takeaways

1. The value of culture lies in its autonomy. Valuing culture solely through external needs and goals can only be a survival tactic, not a sustainable strategy.
2. It is high time to assert and protect the value of human creativity against content produced by AI. Recognising human creativity means acknowledging that diverse, pluralistic, and free human expression is essential for shaping our collective future and advancing as a society.
3. Culture is not only about products; it is equally about processes. While owning a piece of art or consuming a cultural product holds value, it does not surpass the worth of the process and the value of being involved in it.
4. Valuing culture means reaffirming our commitment to collective futures rather than succumbing to alienation

and individualism. Culture is about embodying what it means to be a society—a collective with a voice and power—rather than just a group of individual voters or consumers.

5. The value of culture today lies in its diversity. The plurality of culture lends it legitimacy as a genuine social good, and without this plurality it risks becoming the source of further polarisation of society or a political tool.
6. Culture begins with the people who create it. Specific protections for creative workers are needed, not only to ensure their rights are on a par with other workers but also to highlight the unique value their work brings to society.
7. Valuing culture means daring to believe in a better short- and long-term future. Not only does culture strengthen our imaginative capacities but its impact also unfolds over long periods. Long-term thinking fosters solidarity and helps us move beyond self-centred, short-term impulses.
8. Democracy can be seen as too complex for a world under the stress of numerous crises, with its true value only evident in the long term. Similarly, culture, with its unpredictable nature and long-term impacts, struggles to be valued during crises. The valuing of democracy and culture shares common principles, and each can mutually reinforce the other.

Images: Courtesy of Culture Action Europe