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The State of Culture Report: A Sector Demanding Agency

The State of Culture report 2026 by Culture Action Europe arrives as member states weigh a proposed 30 per cent cut to the European Commission's culture, media and democracy plan, about four months after the EU's three institutions pledged to put culture at the heart of the Union.

On 18 June, for the first time, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission signed a shared political declaration on culture. "[Europe for Culture – Culture for Europe](#)" sets out 12 principles, from artistic freedom and fair conditions for artists to heritage, access and the ethical use of AI.

On 10 October, the Irish presidency of the Council published a [revised negotiating box for the EU's 2028–2034 budget](#). It proposes to cut AgoraEU, the programme that will house the Culture strand of Creative Europe alongside media and civil society, from the Commission's original €8.6 billion to €6 billion. That is a reduction of about 30 per cent. According to the [European Policy Centre](#), the cut to AgoraEU is almost four times the overall percentage reduction proposed for the budget as a whole, while the saving it delivers is marginal: about 0.14 per cent of the total. Horizon Europe, by comparison, would lose approx. 10 per cent, the Competitiveness Fund 13 per cent and Global Europe 16 per cent.

EU leaders discussed the box at their summit on 15–16 October but reached no deal. They asked European Council President António Costa to take the talks forward "with a view to a timely agreement". The next meetings are an informal summit in Dublin on 13 November, a special summit on 26–27 November and the regular December Council. Parliament, for its part, has [backed €10.72 billion](#) for AgoraEU.

This is the backdrop to the second [State of Culture report](#), published by Culture Action Europe (CAE). It is a useful lens on the gap between what Europe thinks about culture and what it is actually negotiating and willing to pay for. Or maybe the negotiated gap between a sector that is recognised by the vast majority of European citizens across the continent for its contribution to their lives and the goals of governments and European institutions.

"Two years ago, when we launched the first edition, we focused on the growing instrumentalisation of culture and its lack of recognition in wider policy agendas," writes policy expert and author of the report Elena Polivtseva in a LinkedIn post.

"Since then, across Europe, ambitious cultural policy strategies have been adopted, full of promises: artistic freedom, culture as a public good, and a pillar of democracy. But how do these promises fit into the bigger picture if the sector remains so fragile, both financially and in terms of its freedoms?"

A report with a clear point

The evidence base is substantial: 27 interviews with representatives of 19 European and international networks, a review of national cultural policy documents from 14 member states, an analysis of EU texts, and a barometer survey of roughly 480 sector professionals. Its central claim is that the sector's demand has changed. In 2024, it was asking for recognition. In 2026, the report argues, it is asking for agency: the freedom to ask why, and not only how.

The report's sharpest finding is that policy values and policy instruments are pulling in different directions. Governments praise freedom, risk-taking and culture as a public good, yet fund through short-term projects, predefined outcomes and competition. As one interviewee put it, appreciation is "the cheapest currency at the political level".

In 2024, respondents ranked economic decline last among seven challenges, with 23 per cent. This year it is second, at 34 per cent, behind only social polarisation at 39 per cent. More than 60 per cent describe working conditions in the sector as problematic, bad, or critical, and only 5 per cent describe them as good. Just 28 per cent are optimistic about their country's cultural future.

The structural picture is no kinder. The report notes that public

spending on culture in the EU averages about 0.5 per cent of GDP, unchanged since 2001, and that Creative Europe amounts to about [0.2 per cent of the EU budget](#). Cuts since 2024 have hit Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK, among others. Berlin's 2025 budget removed about €130 million, or 12 to 13 per cent of its culture spending, affecting around 450 institutions. In France, the Pays de la Loire region cut cultural subsidies by about 62 per cent. Interviewees said such cuts tend to hit small non-profit organisations first. Field interviews conducted throughout the report's research phase reiterate that these austere fiscal models heavily victimise small, non-profit organisations first and local artistic ecosystems.

The June declaration itself shows the pattern. The Commission's draft pledged "continuous, dedicated funding" for the cultural and creative sectors. According to the report, the signed text commits only to supporting their "sustainability", including by encouraging different forms of funding. The report calls the final wording noticeably weaker. It adds that a week before the declaration was signed, [the Council proposed](#) €7.295 million in constant prices for AgoraEU, down from the Commission's €8.6 billion and a third below Parliament's position, roughly €500 million less a year.

Culture Action Europe (CAE) strongly [condemns the proposed cuts](#), warning that weakening AgoraEU severely undermines Europe's democratic and cultural resilience, especially at a time when Russia's culture and media budget is over five times larger than the proposed annual allocation for the EU programme.

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The report's second theme is artistic freedom, which it describes as more visible in policy than ever and more fragile in practice. In the survey, 26 per cent report recent censorship and 47 per cent report self-censorship. Only 15 per cent say funding schemes give them enough creative freedom. The report supports calls for a [European Artistic Freedom Act](#) but argues that a law alone will not give artists the means to use their freedom. Only 60 per cent now agree that they can express their artistic views freely and safely in their country.

"Artistic freedom is a collective good: if everyone chooses to play it safe, one by one, it can erode even when laws protect it," writes Polivtseva. "Instrumental funding criteria are something we can question, negotiate and critically engage with, rather than internalise and overperform to meet. Fair practice requires mutual respect and the ability to say no to unfair conditions — collectively".

The Venice Biennale offers a live test of how states handle culture when geopolitics intrudes. Protests this year centred on the participation of Russia and Israel. The five-member jury, which had said it would not award prizes to artists from countries whose leaders face charges before the International Criminal Court, resigned collectively, and workers went on strike on the eve of the opening for the first time in the event's history. The European Commission then [withdrew a €2 million grant](#) over Russia's return; press reports said an appeal was planned. For the report, the episode shows that state-led cultural diplomacy, at least in its conventional form, no longer works as it once did.

Artificial intelligence and artistic agency

According to the report, the question is no longer whether audiences can spot synthetic work, because mostly they cannot. In a [Eurobarometer survey of 2025](#), only 48 per cent of respondents believed they could tell AI-made art from human-made art, and in a Deezer and Ipsos [study across eight countries](#), 97 per cent of listeners could not tell AI music from human tracks. Yet, according to the same Eurobarometer, more than eight in ten Europeans say they prefer content created by humans.

The supply side is moving fast. Deezer reports that 44 per cent of all new music on its platform in April was AI-generated, about 75,000 tracks a day, up from 10,000 in 2025. The impact on work is already visible. Non-fiction translation is being

absorbed into AI workflows faster than literary fiction, which undermines the mixed income base of many literary translators, and junior positions are at risk in several sectors, including audiovisual production.

"Culture needs to be taken into account when the bigger picture is decided — be it on AI, sustainability, or security — not merely 'recognised' in a dedicated paragraph," writes Polivtseva. "The sector wants to make meaning and shape futures, not just design toolkits to operationalise ready-made policies."

The report's last chapter asks whether Europe can credibly call itself a continent of culture. It finds two ideas pulling against each other, one centred on preserving distinct cultures, the other on interaction and transformation across borders. It concludes that greater agency and greater openness need not conflict: openness can itself be one of the strongest sources of European cultural agency.

One of the report's main conclusions is that culture is being rediscovered as the infrastructure of collective life, something EU and national policy should protect and support in its own right rather than as a sector that must justify itself by serving other priorities. Policy should therefore protect the people and conditions of creation, not only police the line between human and machine. It also notes how little culture features in AI lawmaking: [UNESCO counted just one bill](#) with culture as its main subject among 148 AI bills passed in 128 countries between 2016 and 2023.

The report's own answer to the budget fight is that culture should be treated as infrastructure for collective life, to be protected in its own right and not as a sector that must justify itself by serving other priorities. After all of the above, a 30 per cent cut is not a rounding error but a political choice. Whether the language of June survives the arithmetic of November is now the real test. If the Joint Declaration is a statement of intent, AgoraEU's budget is where it becomes a commitment.

Download [the State of Culture Report here](#) (PDF)

Watch the full presentation of Culture Action Europe's [State of Culture 2026 Report](#) by Elena Polivtseva [here](#)

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