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What we need is a Cultural Deal for Europe

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To counter inequality, populism, climate change and technological advances, the role of culture and heritage must be elevated on the political agenda and in public opinion. This is a call to action rooted in hard facts, Lars Ebert, Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović and André Wilkens argue.

By Lars Ebert, Secretary-General, Culture Action Europe, Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović is Secretary-Genera, Europa Nostra, André Wilkens, Director, European Cultural Foundation*

Europe stands at a critical juncture, facing war, division, and polarization which are eroding the very fabric of our societies. As decades of peace and European cooperation are threatened, the fundamental purpose of the European Union seems increasingly undermined amidst growing societal inequality and the misuse of culture and identity to divide rather than connect communities.

It's a time when we must not only react to these challenges but actively reimagine and rebuild the future of Europe with culture and cultural heritage at its core.

As the European Parliament elections have shown, voters' distrust of democracy and its institutions is significant. As a consequence, too many citizens are tempted to turn towards political forces that support the adoption of populist or extremist agendas, and these choices will shape the world of tomorrow.

The European Union needs to gear up its capacity to act together — as a community of shared values but also as a union

based on shared political, military, economic, social and cultural interests. It risks fading away as a relevant actor and credible partner. Why does culture and heritage matter?

Culture is a powerful force of resilience

Europe is a product of millennia of culture of exchange. Its cultural diversity is a matter of life. It is not always easy to manage it but a meaningful life in Europe is not possible without it.

We believe in the power of human dignity and empathy as a response to the suffering of people who need our solidarity.

We believe in freedom, in the freedom to express oneself, in the freedom of conscience, the freedom of movement, the freedom of the media, the freedom to challenge those in power and the freedom to resist oppression, regression and destruction.

Culture is not just about preserving heritage or the arts; it challenges the status quo by providing a space for diverse voices to be heard, countering narratives that fuel division and extremism, which often lead to violence and hatred.

We believe in the power of hope, curiosity and optimism. This alone is not enough, but without it, a better world is not possible.

In times of crisis, such as the ongoing war at Europe's eastern borders and during the COVID-19 pandemic, culture has proven to be a powerful force of resilience.

From singing on balconies to engaging with books, films and digital forms of art and heritage, culture has helped maintain our sanity and foster a sense of community and belonging.

This resilience underpins the reasons to fight for freedom, respect, and plurality, providing not only solace but also a rallying cry for unity.

A better Europe is possible

Culture is not just about preserving heritage or the arts; it challenges the status quo by providing a space for diverse voices to be heard, countering narratives that fuel division and extremism, which often lead to violence and hatred.

Culture can demystify digital technology and serve as an antidote against the misuse of artificial intelligence. It is the source of creativity needed to address today's problems and to imagine tomorrow's solutions.

Culture and cultural heritage can provide the imagination and the stories we need to foster a true European sentiment, a sense of purpose and belonging.

With such a sentiment, a better Europe is possible; without it, Europe is vulnerable to disintegration.

Let's seize this moment to harness the power of culture and craft a new narrative for Europe, one that is rooted in human dignity, solidarity and a shared sense of purpose. Europe needs new utopias, and through culture, we can aspire to create them.

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Imagine Europe without its culture: it would be emptied of its creativity, vitality and future. And still, it is the fundaments of our culture that are being questioned and contested by an increasing number of internal and external political forces.

Europe does not only need to resist these disruptive forces but invest in counter-narratives and positive actions that unite rather than divide our societies. Cultural battles are fought not only at our universities, in media, and on social media but also in our daily lives.

The EU lags in its understanding of culture and its pivotal role in nourishing a sense of purpose and togetherness.

Although it contributes over 4% to the European Union's GDP, only 0,2% of the EU budget is invested in culture (as a comparison, agriculture contributes 1,4% and receives 19%).

Institutionally, culture is nested in the large portfolio of a European Commissioner responsible for innovation, research, education, youth and culture.

Culture needs its European champion

To counter inequality, populism, climate change and technological advances, the role of culture and heritage must be elevated on the political agenda and in public opinion. This is a call to action rooted in hard facts.

Culture needs to be on top of the agenda of the next European Commission and the next European Parliament.

Not just in Sunday speeches and PR videos but in key policy priorities supported by ambitious budgets. What we need is a Cultural Deal for Europe.

This Cultural Deal must not only support our artists, heritage professionals and creators by ensuring fair working conditions and protecting their rights in the digital age but also foster a wide cultural ecosystem that drives innovation, enhances well-being, and strengthens our democratic fabric.

It requires strong leadership, bold action, unwavering commitment, and a substantial increase in funding.

And this Culture Deal for Europe needs a champion, someone who feels responsible and committed.

This should be the President of the European Commission in the first place. Culture is 'Chefsache', supporting social cohesion, defence policies, the green transition, AI regulations, trade, migration, enlargement and external relations.

Of course, the Commission President should be supported in this task by the rest of her/his team, including a dedicated member of the European Commission whose portfolio visibly covers culture.

Our three major European civil society organisations linked to culture and cultural heritage, speaking on behalf of millions of artists, heritage professionals and cultural creatives active in Europe, we call on the future leaders of the European Union Institutions to put Culture and Heritage where they belong: at the very top of Europe's agenda.

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