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## **Cultural Policies as European Union's Tool of Soft Power**

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### **Introduction**

Culture is a complex term which encompasses various areas of human activities in a society. There are many different definitions depending on the perspective of their creators, but all of them agree that culture covers a wide range of fields of human expression which are common to a group of people considered as a collective. The subject discussed in this paper will be the role of culture and cultural heritage within the European Union (EU). The cultural heritage

of Europe is a mosaic of different traditions and expressions including natural, built, and archaeological sites, museums, monuments, artworks, historic cities, literary, musical, and audio-visual works, as well as knowledge, practices, and traditions of European citizens. The cultural richness and diversity of Europe are strongly associated with its impact in the world and with its position within the international community.

The importance of culture is noticeable in both internal and external affairs of the EU. One of the internal aspects refers to the link between culture and wellbeing of people. Enhancing cultural activities in a community generates enhanced quality of life of European citizens. It supports the intercultural dialogue and fosters the diversity in languages and cultures within Europe. Furthermore, cultural and creative sectors have an important role in growth and employment, but they also stimulate creativity, by having crucial function in social and technological innovation. The external dimension of strengthening cultural relations of the EU consists of advancing cooperation with cultures outside of Europe, creating dialogue to guarantee peace, stability, solidarity, and prosperity. Besides increasing the number of projects and collaborations, the visibility and outreach are crucial for generating maximal benefit of these activities. The motto “unity in diversity” reflects the aim of the EU to assist and complement the actions of the Member States in regard of preservation and promotion of European cultural heritage. The ground for this action lies in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU Articles 3, 6 and 167, confirming the importance of the culture for the EU, describing culture as a responsibility of each Member State.

## **The main actors and the strategic framework of the cultural policies of the EU**

Cultural policy of the EU is generated through collaboration between the European Commission and the Member States at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council and the Cultural affairs Committee of the Council of the EU, while the Commission’s activity in the field of culture is conducted through the Committee on Culture and Education. Besides these bodies, the cooperation requires interchange of ideas and experiences from cities, regions, and international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

*The EU strengthens its influence in the world in collaboration with UNESCO.*

The main actors in the field of cultural heritage of the EU are the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the European Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the EU External Action.

The EU strengthens its influence in the world in collaboration with UNESCO, being the first largest funding partner to the Organization, as the two are close and natural partners sharing the same values and objectives. The EU policy for cultural heritage includes tangible, intangible and digital heritage, perceived as a driving force of the cultural and creative sectors, being a valuable asset for economic growth, employment and social cohesion. The EU policies in fields such as education, research, social policy, regional development, and external relations include cultural components confirming many different approaches towards culture which can be observed.

The strategic framework for the EU's cultural policy consists of the New European Agenda on Culture adopted in 2018 (following the European Agenda on Culture from 2007), comprising three strategic areas – social, economic and external dimension. Moreover, the priorities for cultural policy of the Member States are defined in the Work Plans, being the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 the most recent document which tackles all the current challenges in the field of culture, such as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the acceleration of climate change, and the process of digitalisation. In context of the EU's internal policies and programmes, it is possible

to identify many successful projects initiated by the EU to promote culture and the cultural heritage of Europe, such as the programme Creative Europe (divided into two strands, Culture and Media, for cultural and creative sectors) or the European Year of Cultural Heritage in 2018 which was an unprecedented celebration which engaged 12.8 million citizens through more than 13,000 events.

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The European Capitals of Culture is a specific initiative designed to celebrate the different cultural features of Europe choosing three cities each year to increase sense of belonging of the European citizens to a common cultural area and to foster contribution of culture to the development of the cities. The major cultural achievements in EU are celebrated and encouraged by special prizes of the EU, annual and biennial initiatives which highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, in field of literature, contemporary architecture, cultural heritage, and popular and contemporary music. 21st century, and especially the last few years, have brought many new challenges to the approach to the culture, such as digitalisation,

social crises caused by migrations, climate change and necessity of green transition, the health crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian war against Ukraine, which have highly impacted the lives of people all over Europe.

### **Culture and COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused radical changes in the world. The lock down had shown the fragility of the cultural and creative sectors which suffered great financial losses. These new circumstances demanded structural changes in the approach to the culture directing it to the new possibilities of virtual approach. During the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU an unprecedented event occurred when the Ministers of Culture and Media of the EU Member States gathered for the first time in form of a video conference. On 8 April 2020 they composed a first set of national and European measures as a basis for further action to support the recovery of the cultural and media sectors. Consequently, in June 2021 the European Commission published EU guidelines to aid the recommencement of the cultural activities within the Member States at national, regional, and local level, which consisted of two key dimensions: the safe reopening of the cultural sectors and their sustainable recovery.

*The core of recovery plan lies in the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).*

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic the EU adopted a recovery plan named NextGenerationEU (NGEU) which purpose is to make Europe greener, more digital and more resilient. The core of this recovery plan lies in the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) which, in period between 2021-2026, will provide financial support to the Member States in form of grants and loans. In November 2021 Culture Action Europe with the support of European Commission and under the Creative Europe Programme started a project with the aim to assure at least 2% of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans for culture. More than 100 organisations from the cultural and creative sectors supported this initiative as a part of the Cultural Deal for Europe campaign. However, many Member States did not manage to meet the criteria which is why it is important to further encourage the investment in the culture.

*Europeana is a great example of empowering the digitisation of the cultural heritage sector.*

The pandemic outbreak highlighted the necessity of culture to maintain the mental and physical wellbeing of people who, despite the isolation, needed a way to express themselves, to connect with the community and to interact with other people. It only accelerated the dynamic of changes towards the digitisation of culture. Europeana is a great example of empowering the digitisation of the cultural heritage sector. The platform is at the heart of the European Commission's common European data space for cultural heritage, funded under the Digital Europe programme as part of Europe's Digital Decade. It provides access to over 58 million digitalised cultural heritage records from over 3600 cultural heritage institutions and organisations. It was launched by the European Commission on 20 November 2008, and to the present day it has developed as main Europe's digital cultural collection for responsible, accessible, sustainable, and innovative tourism.

### **Safeguarding heritage**

Another subject of the EU work plan for culture is referred to safeguarding heritage against natural and human-made disasters which consist of strengthening risk-assessment skills, improved disaster preparedness and

regulated actions. The European projects such as HEREIN (Heritage Network) and the Collaborative Cloud for Europe's Cultural Heritage are great examples of dialogue via digital infrastructure among Member State's practices for management of European cultural heritage. The preservation and restoration of cultural sites requires collaboration between institutions and professionals within the EU to expand common knowledge to protect the sites from natural disasters like climate change and global warming, or from a human-made disasters like the destruction of cultural sites in the light of the war in Ukraine.

*Europa Nostra is the citizens' movement for safeguarding Europe's cultural and natural heritage.*

The digitisation of cultural heritage contributes to the sustainability transformation to attain the goal of the European Green Deal and the 2030 Agenda. The main actor for strengthening the innovation in the cultural and creative sectors is the Knowledge and Innovation Community of the European Institute for Innovation and Technology, as stated in the Council Resolution of the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 (2022/C 466/01). Another significant actor in



the area of cultural heritage of the EU is Europa Nostra, a rapidly growing citizens' movement for safeguarding of Europe's cultural and natural heritage, which generates campaigns, organises events and produces publications to raise awareness on the value of cultural heritage for Europe. Europa Nostra was recently selected to implement a two year EU-funded pilot project European Heritage Hub (in collaboration with other partners) to mobilise and strengthen the cultural heritage-driven movement in Europe.

## War in Ukraine

The Russian war against Ukraine has shown the world how a misuse of culture and cultural heritage can generate military aggression. Besides all the other aspects of war, Russia is also waging war on the cultural ground. The cultural cleansing begun in Crimea and Donbas region in 2014, which included illegal export of artifacts, unauthorized archaeological expeditions, demolition of Muslim burial sites and damage of cultural heritage sites of Crimean Tatars. The same pattern of demolition of culture was applied on the rest of Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion in February 2022 where, as of 10 May 2023, UNESCO has verified damage to 255 sites – 110 religious sites, 22 museums, 91 buildings of historical and/or

artistic interest, 19 monuments, 12 libraries and 1 Archive.

*The purpose of Russia's aggressive campaign is to annihilate Ukraine's cultural heritage.*

The deliberate destruction of the cultural heritage is a war crime under the 1954 Hague Convention (Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict). The purpose of Russia's aggressive campaign is to annihilate Ukraine's cultural heritage. By doing so, Russia aims to destroy the cultural identity of the people and their moral. Once people lose the cultural connection with the society they belong to, it is much easier to impose the new domination. However, this power of culture to maintain the social integrity of one nation can be used the other way around, to foster the feeling of unity of the Ukrainians and to support them morally. In this sense, the European Commission made efforts to support the Ukrainian artists and cultural organisations by publishing a special call under the Creative Europe programme worth 5 million euros for recovery of the Ukrainian cultural and creative sectors. Furthermore, in January 2021 was created the initiative "Save the Ukraine Monuments" (SUM), launched by the European

Competence Centre for Cultural Heritage (4CH) led by Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare (IT).

### *European External Action Service launched a campaign named #ARTvsWAR.*

In collaboration with 18 partners, this EU funded project aims to digitise and preserve the cultural heritage of Ukraine, with special attention to 3D. The European External Action Service launched a campaign named #ARTvsWAR to raise awareness of destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage during the Russian war in Ukraine and to show support of the EU, which considers Ukrainian culture as an important part of European cultural heritage. By sharing individual stories about devastated cultural heritage and cultural life in Ukraine, the campaign strives to show the world the tragedy of the war from cultural perspective.

### **The power of culture**

Culture mirrors the humanity and its impact on people's wellbeing cannot be neglected. It is a reflection of the past, a witness of the present and a ground to build a future. In the light of the changes happening in the last years, such as the pandemic, the acceleration of climate change,

the digitalisation and energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, all fields of human activities need to adapt, and so does the culture. It is not possible to expect a successful green transition, digital transformation, or smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth if cultural and creative sectors are not included in the plan of implementation for these goals. Furthermore, the importance of culture lies in its potential to promote democracy, equality and tolerance in the form of cultural dialogue that is essential for the promotion and protection of human rights.

### *The cultural identity of Europe is defined by a set of shared values, a unity in diversity*

The cultural identity of Europe is defined by a set of shared values, a unity in diversity which has been nurtured through the past, guaranteeing peace, stability, solidarity, prosperity and security. The intrinsic value of culture within the EU encompasses its internal and external policies which is why it is necessary to mainstream cultural dimension in all relevant policy areas, programmes and initiatives. Culture is considered to a certain extent as a soft power, but its impact on people is immeasurable, as Gao Xingjian, Nobel Prize For Literature winner said: *"Culture is not a luxury, but a necessity."*

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**DISCLAIMER:** The views presented in this paper are solely of the author and do not represent an official position of the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) or of the Hanns Seidel Foundation.



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