



# OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

## **Cultural diplomacy as a vector of EU external relations – new partnerships and role of CSOs**

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Cultural diplomacy as a vector of EU external relations –  
new partnerships and role of CSOs  
(own-initiative opinion)

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## 1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 Culture is inclusive. Culture is a form of capital that enables us to illuminate both our path in Europe and the image we project across the world. At a time when war has returned to the European continent, with devastating destruction, tearing apart human lives and places, we need cultural relations to be more than ever a tool for dialogue, peace and the future. Making it a key and strategic vehicle of the European Union's foreign policy, as repeatedly called for in many documents and important initiatives over the last 17 years, must now become a real priority.
- 1.2 On the basis of the European Commission's 2016 communication, the many decisions and guidelines of the Council and the recommendations of the European Parliament, it is now time to adopt **a fully-fledged multiannual strategic action plan** which, under the coordination of the EU External Action Service, will create real synergy with the different policies and structures of the European Commission and the Member States, and provide a platform for effective interconnection with wider entities in terms of both the territorial authorities involved and the many private and institutional players, which are already productively engaged. A plan backed up by the necessary funding.
- 1.3 In the meantime, **action needs to be stepped up immediately** to protect, restore and rebuild heritage in areas hit by natural disasters, crises and conflicts, increasing the training of local players and the capacity-building of local institutions and civil society organisations. More ambitious measures should be undertaken in the field of the **creative industries**. Significant **pilot projects** should be launched in areas such as the Western Balkans, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine.
- 1.4 A mapping exercise is also needed, covering the wide range of actions and initiatives already in place led by the European institutions and organisations, individual States, and the many civil society organisations in the Member States, as well as those established by the various international partnerships, with a view to creating an **EU platform for international cultural relations**.
- 1.5 A **significant dedicated structure within the EEAS** is needed, centred around an "**EU Special Envoy for Cultural Relations**", which would develop an overall political direction, be equipped with the necessary budget and be capable of networking with the Member States and different organisations, as well as providing instruments and small-scale financial allocations to the EU delegations, for developing initiatives in their respective countries.

## 2. **General context**

- 2.1 Culture as an instrument of the European Union's foreign policy, with the aim of increasing the interplay between cultural diversity, human rights and social and economic cohesion, and based on the cultural and creative industries as a driving force for growth, has long been on the agenda of the European institutions. The specific brand of cultural diplomacy favoured by the EU as a tool to be used in its foreign policy is based on not placing conditions on cultural cooperation and on an approach that goes beyond the mere promotion of Member States' cultural output and favours sharing a cultural co-production space with partner countries at civil society level.

- 2.2 Back in 2007, the European Commission adopted a Communication on a *European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World*<sup>1</sup>, which also aimed to give culture a more significant role in the EU's external relations. This approach was strongly backed by the European Parliament in resolutions issued in 2008 and 2011, with a specific budget of EUR 500 000 made available the following year for implementing preparatory measures for harnessing culture in international relations, which produced an important framework study<sup>2</sup> in 2014.
- 2.3 The European Council has repeatedly asserted the diplomatic potential of cultural relations, in particular in its conclusions of 2007, 2008, 2014 and 2015, and this approach has also featured in the Commission's action plans since 2014.
- 2.4 The preparatory work of that decade fed into the June 2016 Joint Communication<sup>3</sup> ***Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations***, issued by the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The Communication set out three areas of work for the development of this strategy:
- driving socio-economic development through cultural policies; the role of local authorities in cultural initiatives and of the cultural and creative industries in partner countries;
  - intercultural dialogue for peace and stability;
  - protecting cultural heritage from the threats posed by natural disasters, armed conflicts and the trafficking of artefacts, which can be a source of funding for terrorist activities.
- 2.5 The Communication also pointed to the need to move towards coordination of Member States' action, so as to overcome the considerable fragmentation that currently exists, give EU delegations in third countries an enhanced role as hubs, strengthen cooperation with the EUNIC network (European Union National Institutes for Culture) as the guarantor of the Member States' prerogative in the field of culture, and make use of existing instruments and funding lines in the various fields. It also set up a Cultural Diplomacy Platform<sup>4</sup>, to facilitate the establishment of suitable programmes and proper resources, as well as the coordination of different stakeholders.
- 2.6 In May 2017, the EESC gave its views on this Communication<sup>5</sup>, expressing its strong support, but also pointing to the need to take a step forward from a document entitled *Towards an EU strategy* to the adoption and subsequent implementation of a fully-fledged strategy and action plan. The opinion advocated that the action plan should fulfil four structural requirements: providing clarity of governance at EU level; seeking to coordinate and offer subsidiary support at Member State level; clarifying financial aspects; and promoting networks of interrelated

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1 [EUR-Lex - 52007DC0242 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#).

2 [Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship \(europa.eu\)](#).

3 [EUR-Lex - 52016JC0029 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#).

4 [Cultural Relations Platform \(cultureinexternalrelations.eu\)](#).

5 [Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations \(communication\) | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](#).

cultural players, representing a thriving cultural civil society. The EESC also called for culture to become the fourth pillar of the sustainable development strategy and for suitable networks to be developed to involve organised civil society and other organisations at various levels already active in this field.

- 2.7 The European Parliament, in its own-initiative opinion<sup>6</sup> adopted in July 2017, stressed that the Communication was not sufficiently structured to enable the development of a genuine EU cultural diplomacy strategy equipped with suitable funding. The CoR also put forward a strong opinion<sup>7</sup> in June 2017, pointing to the key role that cities and local levels of government can play in developing cultural cooperation networks at neighbourhood level. This topic was largely taken up in a comprehensive EP study in 2020<sup>8</sup>, which set out a multilevel strategy for international cultural relations.
- 2.8 The Council, in its conclusions of May 2017, took up and revived the Commission's proposals, and also recommended setting up a "Friends of the Presidency" group as a cross-cutting platform to facilitate the implementation of the strategy. The Council then returned once again to the topic of cultural diplomacy in its significant conclusions of June 2019 on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action<sup>9</sup>, its conclusions of September 2019 on the cultural dimension of sustainable development<sup>10</sup>, its conclusions of May 2020 on risk management in the area of cultural heritage<sup>11</sup> and finally its conclusions of June 2021<sup>12</sup> on an EU approach to cultural heritage in conflicts and crises.
- 2.9 Finally, in the European Framework for Action<sup>13</sup>, published following the European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018), the Commission specified "Cultural heritage for stronger global partnerships: reinforcing international cooperation" as one of five pillars of EU action in this area.

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6 [European Parliament resolution of 5 July 2017 – Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations \(2016/2240\(INI\)\) \(europa.eu\).](#)

7 [Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations \(europa.eu\).](#)

8 [Towards a multi-level strategy for EU external cultural relations](#) – Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu).

9 [Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action \(06/2019\).](#)

10 [Council resolution on the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development \(09/2019\).](#)

11 [Council conclusions on risk management in the area of cultural heritage \(5/2020\).](#)

12 [Council Conclusions on the EU Approach to Cultural Heritage in conflicts and crises \(6/2021\).](#)

13 Commission Staff Working Document, *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage*, SWD(2018) 491 final, 5.12.2018, p. 29.

### 3. **Comments and proposals**

- 3.1 The picture set out above thus illustrates the scale of policy development and the wide range of guidelines, proposals and decisions that have built up over the years, as well as the consensus that is now well established, which recognises culture as a vehicle of identity- and cohesion-building, a driver of socio-economic development and a substantial factor in peace-building, including people-to-people cooperation (involving civil society organisations, as well as universities, cultural centres, museums, cities and other intermediary organisations).

On top of this, there is a growing consensus that this emphasis on the cultural dimension is significant in terms of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

- 3.2 Moreover, culture is now part of the EU's main cooperation instruments, and of its bilateral agreements with third countries, and a wide variety of cultural projects have been implemented for many years as part of the EU's financial and technical assistance.

These actions have the following objectives: the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage sites, the production and circulation of works of art, the creation or restoration of museums, local capacity-building of cultural operators and artists, the promotion of their free movement between countries, the organisation of major cultural events, raising public awareness as regards protecting cultural heritage, and the development of a new model of sustainable tourism. The Commission also supports the emergence and strengthening of cultural industries, in particular the cinema and audiovisual sector, in partner countries, as well as the promotion of local access to culture.

- 3.3 ***However, this action is very fragmented, has no overall visibility, and lacks a tangible strategic vision.*** Therefore, it is in no real position to realise its true potential as an increasingly substantial "vector" of EU foreign policy and a driver of partnership in many parts of the world. A veritable hidden treasure, the huge capital that comprises both the ongoing and possible initiatives at Member State level, as well as a very large list of local players and institutions, and civil society organisations, constitutes a critical mass that should be unlocked.

- 3.4 It should also be borne in mind that, in order for it to be meaningful, the EU's cultural diplomacy should be conceived and developed as an instrument of the EU's foreign policy, and thus equipped with the necessary sphere of influence, which, in the case of the EU, materialises in promoting across the world its model of peaceful coexistence and integration of peoples, with respect for fundamental rights and freedom of artistic expression in accordance with the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

- 3.5 Moreover, culture is a product of work, which represents the pillar on which Europe is built. Work has allowed the development of industry, has put Europe at the core of trade, has shaped the history of European cities, allowing for the emancipation of its populations and at the same time has guaranteed the affirmation of social rights and the European social model. The culture of work must continue to be at the heart of European action.

- 3.6 Cultural heritage, in its tangible and intangible dimensions, is inherently politically sensitive, highly complex and considerably imbued with symbolic and emotional meanings. It therefore involves a high risk of political manipulation, concerning its history, whether it belongs to one or other component of society and its use, especially when it comes to minorities and in the case of conflict. Cultural heritage can therefore become a vehicle of conflict but also a driver of peace, reconciliation and shared development. This clearly points to it being a powerful and complementary diplomatic component of the EU's approach to peace, security and sustainable development.
- 3.7 The EU Council conclusions of 21 June 2021, which focus primarily on the protection of heritage in conflicts and crises, reiterate the ambition to make "cultural diplomacy" an important vehicle for peace and development within the framework of European Common Foreign and Security Policy. They instruct the EEAS, the Commission and all relevant EU agencies and bodies to prepare specific measures to this end, including through the establishment of a dedicated task force led by the EEAS, and request an annual report to the Council on the progress achieved. Point 8 of the conclusions stresses the importance of strengthening all of the necessary partnerships with relevant international and regional organisations, as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations (CSOs).
- 3.8 We therefore need to make a strong case once again for what we called for in our 2017 opinion, as also advocated in the EP's 2017 resolution, namely the adoption of **a fully-fledged action plan**, as has been done recently in a number of other areas of EU action, and the establishment of a flexible governance structure and the necessary funding, including dedicated funds and funds in other existing programmes that can be tapped.

This plan should focus in particular: on the reinforcement of the coherence of EU external policies and instruments; on the complementarity between the tangible and intangible heritage; on the link with climate change as a source of crisis; on the inclusion and empowerment of local actors, women and youth; on training and knowledge exchange; on the creation of networks and linking up with existing networks such as Erasmus Plus; on the various possibilities for developing concrete cooperation and partnership between EU cultural institutions and CSO actors in that field and their counterparts in third countries; and on stepping up cooperation with existing regional and international bodies, making culture an important strand of those synergies.

Above all, it should develop the interconnections between the following areas:

- cultural relations and sustainable development;
- cultural relations and the circular economy;
- cultural relations and the digital transition;
- cultural relations, peace and stability;
- cultural relations and the promotion of fundamental rights and freedom of expression;
- cultural relations and minorities; the protection and promotion of minority cultures and languages; and
- cultural relations and the promotion of gender equality.

- 3.9 In parallel with the drafting of this plan, with the widest possible involvement as is now customary, and with the same emphasis and significance given to various recent plans, there is also a set of specific measures that need to be launched immediately, in order to finally give substance to the Council's mandate and to the numerous recommendations and proposals from the other institutions referred to above, and enable this process to come to the fore. Examples of such measures are set out below.
- 3.9.1 **Protection, restoration and reconstruction of heritage in areas hit by natural disaster and in crisis and conflict areas**, building on existing CSDP missions – Afghanistan, Ukraine, Georgia, Kosovo, Libya, Palestinian Territories (Ramallah and Rafah), Niger, Mali and the Horn of Africa (Somalia & Somaliland) – and adapting their mandate where necessary. To this end: invest in intra-community and inter-ethnic dialogue (and where relevant inter-faith dialogue); turn the reconstruction and preservation of cultural heritage into a tool for rebuilding shared memory and reconciliation, but also into an opportunity for job creation, sustainable economic activities and tourism; develop local capacity-building and the necessary training activities; increase the use of satellite mapping and digital images for the development of preventive actions.
- 3.9.2 **Stepping up the fight against illicit trafficking in cultural goods** – which is also used to finance international terrorism and is very significant in conflict areas – in coordination with Europol and Interpol, and increasing the training of border police.
- 3.9.3 **Developing a specific initiative on the creative industries**, especially with regard to contemporary art and new technologies, with a special focus on the younger generations. This area, in which some significant initiatives have already been developed in cooperation with the WTO, is certainly one of the most promising avenues for creating sustainable development; it has already been deemed important in the framework of the new partnership agreement with ACP countries. The expected creation of an ACP Cultural Foundation and the proposal for a first meeting of ACP-EU culture ministers open up the prospect of a very interesting political framework, which must take on the priority it deserves. In the same vein, we draw attention to the 2021 Creative Forum<sup>14</sup> in Ljubljana, which **brings together creative businesses from the entire Mediterranean** area, contributing to the green transition, social innovation and economic growth.
- 3.9.4 **Systematic mapping** of the variety and breadth of initiatives already in place, at all levels, including by creating an interactive site open to the exchange of best practices and the development of new synergies between players at different levels and across borders. The objective here is to establish an **EU platform for international cultural relations**, along the lines of other successful initiatives launched in other fields (see the Circular Economy Platform; Festival of the New European Bauhaus, etc.). In this field, the EESC, in cooperation with the major European cultural organisations concerned, can certainly be a valuable and stable institutional forum.

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<sup>14</sup> [Future Unlocked! - Cultural and Creative Sectors as Agents of Change \(creativeforum.si\)](https://www.creativeforum.si/).

3.9.5 Launch of **pilot projects in certain specific areas**, linked to the political priorities already identified in each area. Some examples, where coordinated EU action can make a difference.

3.9.5.1 **The Western Balkans**, not least because of their prospects for integration into the European Union, are an area where the cultural dimension merits being strongly developed, for example by providing support to a **regional network of civil society organisations across the Western Balkan countries** dedicated to the preservation of cultural and natural heritage as a shared heritage. Thus, in the framework of the **Belgrade-Pristina dialogue** for the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, the topic of cultural and religious heritage should be raised to a much higher level of priority, given its major relevance for the identity of the various communities. Support should also be given to **regional collaborative projects involving historians and art historians** in the wider region of South East Europe to help overcome the growing trends of revising or rewriting history, with the related distortion of the (multifaceted) identity of historical monuments and heritage sites. This should also include: building the capacity of civil society organisations and local institutions, for example through twinning programmes with museums, foundations, etc. in EU Member States; the launch of an **EU-Western Balkans Heritage Champions** programme, inspired by the set-up of the existing "ILUCIDARE Champions" programme, which enables European and Western Balkan heritage professionals to exchange experiences and best practices; using the **European Solidarity Corps** programme to encourage young people to participate in heritage restoration "work sites"; moreover, a specific Cultural Heritage Volunteering scheme at regional level (open to both EU and non-EU citizens) could greatly contribute to building a renewed spirit of solidarity in the area.

3.9.5.2 **The Mediterranean and the Middle East**. This is certainly an area of priority, where there are many situations of ongoing conflict, and where there is no shortage of sites and priceless cultural heritage riches, which can play an important role in promoting reconciliation, peace, reconstruction and even sustainable development, as well as in preventing new crises, bringing the valuable energies of local communities and traditions back into circulation. There is certainly a strong case for resuming and bolstering the project previously promoted by DG DEVCO *in the Mosul area* to salvage gravely damaged identities and heritage at risk of dispersion, by training local cultural operators and professionals and developing related economic activities. A similar project should also take place *in Syria to rebuild Palmyra*. In the context of the complex process in *Libya*, the immense value of that country's cultural heritage cannot be underestimated. **The sites of Sabratha, Leptis Magna, Cyrene, Apollonia and Ghadames** have long been identified as most at risk since the beginning of the conflict, with assets of immense value that are at grave risk of being dispersed in illegal trafficking networks.

Since 2015, the Union for the Mediterranean has promoted an *independent network of Mediterranean experts on climate change*<sup>15</sup>, which has drawn up important conclusions, and also of significance is the *Strategic Urban Development Action Plan 2040*<sup>16</sup>. A **specific project with the UfM** on a shared strategy for securing the various sites of tangible heritage

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15 [MedECC and New MedECC infographic – MedECC](#).

16 [Towards a new UfM Strategic Urban Development Action Plan 2040 - Union for the Mediterranean - UfM \(ufmsecretariat.org\)](#).

would be of great political value, thus also preserving all related tourism and economic activities.

The main reference is now the **Final Declaration** from the **Conference of the Ministers of Culture of the Mediterranean**, held in **Naples** on 16 and 17 June 2022, with the aim of developing joint strategies and actions to protect and enhance culture as a common good of the region and to launch a "Naples Process" for cultural collaboration in the Mediterranean<sup>17</sup>.

3.9.5.3 The importance of culture **on the African continent** is certainly well known, but has often been very marginal, both in political relations and in terms of specific projects and investments. However, there are many examples of good practice; it is a growing priority within the ACP community; and there is considerable potential here in terms of relations with the African Union. One focal point is the **Museum of Black Civilisations in Dakar**, a project that was the vision of Senegal's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, inaugurated at the end of 2018, and the main hub for cultural exchange on the whole continent, tying in with the prospect of the **African Renaissance**. **Tigray** should also be included here, an area now of conflict and extreme humanitarian emergency, and the home of a huge cultural heritage, being the cradle of the Coptic religion, with its important monasteries and churches.

Africa is also the continent with the largest number of **refugees and displaced persons** in the world: there needs to be investment in the cultural dimension of these population masses, inter alia to foster the ability to preserve traditions and make them a basis for re-starting and rebuilding. Similarly, another issue is the cultural dimension of relations with the **respective diasporas**, which are numerous and can be drivers of development.

Lastly, **the fashion industry**, especially at craft and SME level, is really exploding on the continent, and it is not only a driver of economic well-being and work, but also a creator of identity and pride in the continent's creativity. Specific projects, both in terms of training and partnerships between economic operators from the two continents, need to be significantly strengthened.

3.9.5.4 A special initiative shall be developed for **Ukraine**, in consideration of the huge destruction of cultural heritage in many regions of the country that has already been reported. European museums could organise fundraising in **support of Ukrainian cultural heritage** and Member States could encourage public-private partnerships in order **to fund restoration projects**. The EP pilot project *European places of culture* could be focused on Ukraine with the establishment in Kyiv of a European House of Culture in the form of a library or other cultural space organised by EUNIC in cooperation with the EEAS.

3.9.5.5 Specific actions shall also be launched in order to bring a Western positive message of peace and respect to the **Russian and Belarussian populations** and to Russian culture with the aim of disrupting Putin's propaganda.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://cultura.gov.it/medculture>.

- 3.9.6 Coordination with the Council of Europe, which already operates European cultural policies, such as the "cultural heritage routes" programme, with UNESCO, ICCROM and the ICOM, strengthening the multilateral cooperation in view of the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022, planned to take place in Mexico from 28 to 30 September 2022.
- 3.9.7 Development of guidelines for a **looted artwork restitution policy** and for the development of support capacity for countries and museums hosting those works, with a view to rebuilding plundered and defrauded cultures. The necessity for repatriation is heightened in the case of antiquities of special importance for humanity that have been removed from the territory of a State in a manner that adversely impacts the monument or the broader archaeological environment, on the grounds of both the fundamental principles of cultural heritage law and the need to restore the integrity of the monument in its historical, cultural and natural context. This principle is expressed also by the 1970 UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property which facilitates international repatriation by combating archaeological looting, illicit trade in antiquities and smuggling of art treasures. The Native American Graves, the Benin Bronzes, the Master Zhang Gong statue and the Parthenon Sculptures are some examples.
- 3.9.8 Strengthening the **capacity-building of civil society active** in the cultural sector and international cultural relations in each country, supporting the development of independent and especially grassroots organisations.
- 3.10 Such an undertaking cannot take off without the creation of a **significant dedicated structure within the EEAS**, forming a network with the other relevant Commission DGs. A structure centred around an "**EU Special Envoy for Cultural Relations**", which would develop a comprehensive, recognised and powerful political direction, build networks and have overall responsibility for steering the above-mentioned action plan.

The budget to be allocated to this structure must, above all, guarantee this function.

This must be accompanied by a network of "cultural" focal points in the different EU delegations, based on the different political priorities, but always with a recognisable key pillar for a peacemaking Europe. The EU delegations should then be allocated specific funds for cultural actions on the ground.

- 3.11 Finally, in order to link the cultural dimension of the EU's international relations to the digital and sustainable transition, **clear principles of quality in cultural investment** need to be incorporated into any action developed in partner countries. For example, in the case of investments in tangible heritage, these must include the principles of the New European Bauhaus (sustainability, aesthetics, inclusion) and the Davos Baukultur Quality System.

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