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HOW TO SAVE EUROPE?

Report from the IETM Bucharest Plenary Meeting, 20 - 23 April 2017

by Elena Polivtseva



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How to save Europe?

As populist sentiments surge across the continent, multiple economic and social challenges have driven the EU into a grip of depression. Discouraging diagnoses - “existential crisis”, “new Dark Ages”, “a critical time” - are frequently declared by European policy-makers, yet no cure has been proposed. What is our power as artists to envisage and inspire a new - bold and plausible - European narrative? Are we too polite, and are we political enough? What actions should be taken to safeguard the relationship between artists and the EU?

Moderator:

John Newbiggin - [Creative England](#), United Kingdom

Speakers:

Aniko Racz - [Sin Arts and Culture Centre](#), Hungary

Marili Mastrantoni - [Entropia](#), Greece

Judith Knight - [Artsadmin](#), United Kingdom

Christoph Jankowski - [Creative Europe Desk](#), United Kingdom

Gianina Carbanariu - Independent theatre director and playwright, Romania

Europe today

The session addressed the gloomy reality Europe is living through: democratic deficit, institutional crisis, increasingly predominant populist and nationalist rhetoric, social disintegration. A group of around 50 participants coming from very diverse realities attempted to identify the ways in which culture and the arts can help overcoming the depression Europe has been driven to.

The moderator of the session, John Newbiggin, Co-founder and Chair of [Creative England](#), opened the discussion by stressing that Europe as a concept is not easy to define and comprehend. It is not an abstract notion; it is mix of concrete stories and heritage, very specific places and identities; thus, embracing European identity ultimately requires giving up on parts of one’s national self-determination.

Another struggling point that weakens Europe is that one of the core achievements of the European integration - free exchange of people and ideas - is perceived by some as its biggest threat. It results in blaming migrants (not only from outside Europe, but also from other EU member states) on everything that has gone wrong, including



How to save Europe? session at IETM Bucharest 2017 © Alina Usurelu

the mistakes made by national, regional and local authorities. The EU’s inability to persuade the large part of Europeans of the value of free exchange of people and ideas is one of its biggest political failures.

In an effort to identify which Europe “should be saved” and what should be

changed, Marili Mastrantoni ([Entropia](#), Greece) pinned down three phenomena, which, in her opinion, characterise today’s European Union as a political entity and nourish the populist discourse.

Lack of transparency

The so-called “Greek files” case illustrates how bureaucracy has turned the EU into a non-transparent body difficult to grasp. In June 2015, the newly-elected Greek government was locked in tense negotiations with its creditors, the “Troika”, (the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund) regarding the country’s public debt, fiscal policy and reform agenda, in order to re-examine a failed austerity programme. As a result, the Troika made a drastic move through the ECB: they took action to force Greece’s banks to close, ultimately driving the Greek government to accept the country’s third “bailout”. The ECB though feared these actions might be legally dubious and commissioned a private law firm for a legal advice. In July 2015, the German MEP Fabio De Masi requested to disclose the results of the study, but Mario Draghi, the head of the ECB, refused, referring to the “attorney-client privilege”. Therefore, the European Parliament, let alone European citizens (who in fact are “the clients” as tax-payers), have no access to this legal study. The campaign [#TheGreekFiles](#) ran by DiEM25 deploys a series of actions demanding to disclose the legal opinion which the ECB still keeps inaccessible.

Lack of accountability

Marili cited the example of the [Eurogroup](#) as the EU entity functioning beyond public scrutiny. The Eurogroup does take important decisions which impact lives of hundreds of millions of Europeans. Moreover, the media propound it in such a manner that in most people’s minds it seems as if it were an integral part of the other EU institutions, such as the European Commission or the European Parliament. However, it is not a statutory EU body and functions on an informal basis. It does not keep (let alone disclose) any transcripts or archives



Athens protesters call for Greece to defy troika and leave euro, June 2015 © Des Byrne

of their meetings. Thus, some very impactful decisions within Eurozone are taken by an entity eluding the public discourse and democratic accountability.

Democratic deficit

This problem exists both at the level of member states and the EU establishments. Marili is convinced many European citizens have a feeling that their political destiny is predetermined by the economic elites and there is no sense in taking part in elections, since they consider that their will and interests are ignored by their representatives. In her view, this feeling is not groundless: while the role of some national parliament shrinks, most of the policies are centrally pre-defined for years ahead, no matter which “political colour” dominates the decision-making process.

Marili has concluded that given all the three mentioned factors, there is no surprise populism and nationalism stir the European continent. More and more citizens feel

disconnected from the political scene and excluded from shaping the policies which directly affect their lives. Talking about the social division, which has aggravated all over Europe, Marili referred to the book by British journalist David Goodhart “[The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics](#)”. Goodhart identified two societal group: the “anywheres” and the “somewheres”. The former are the metropolitan, well-travelled, better-educated “elite”; the latter come from the provinces, they have never lost their sense of place or identity, and their concerns have been ignored.

Unfortunately, in these crucial times with the multiple and complex issues, it seems the progressive forces have failed so far to propose reliable alternatives and a coherent vision for Europe. Consequently, many voters have turned to the reactionary and simplistic views as expressed by the far-right populist and nationalist parties.

How can culture and the arts save Europe?

Disturb the status quo, imagine and shape a different future

Before opening the debate, the moderator shared three quotes, which in his view, reflect today's role of culture and the arts in helping Europe to overcome the dark times:

"The function of art is to disturb" (Georges Braque)

"Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it" (the origin of this quote is disputed, being attributed to Bertolt Brecht and Vladimir Mayakowsky).

"Too much sanity may be madness and the maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be." (Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote)

At the time, when the "fake news" are penetrating the global media discourse and when the reality seems rather pessimistic, it must be our purpose, of those working in the arts, to envisage how the future should be and not how it is.

Break down the black-and-white political palette

Reminding the audience that populism is nourished by a black-and-white discourse, John referred to the words of Clement Attlee (UK Labour leader after the Second World War): "I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to all our traditions as the referendum, which has only too often been the instrument of Nazism and fascism." Referendum with its "yes" and "no" camps divides people ("you are either on my side or you are my enemy") and does not leave much space for plurality and compromise.

Therefore, the crossover between culture and politics is crucial. A healthy democracy and the viability of democratic institutions depend on people's ability to accept each other's points of view and reach a compromise, a sort of a "grey area" in their relationships with other mentalities and



Banksy Brexit mural of man chipping away at EU flag in Dover, UK © Banksy

communities. Culture has the power to enable us to break out of the increasingly predominant black-and-white discourse and develop this "grey area" of acceptance and understanding.

Bring creativity to the public protest

Aniko Racz, (Sin Arts and Culture Centre, Hungary) shed the light on the current situation in her country. Populist and nationalist ideology has been strong in Hungary for a few years. The regime, which has got ever more centralised, sponsors culture guided by the principle: "We are not supposed to subsidise those who criticise us". Consequently, one part of the art sector – employed and subsidised by the state – is well off and largely represented in the media; another part – the independent scene – exists in precarious conditions and risks their careers by making critical art. Aniko spoke about the illegitimate foundation and operation of the Hungarian Academy of Arts, heavily funded by the state, requiring its members to advocate the propaganda of the government and having a significant influence on most of the arts institutions and curatorial bodies. In the meantime, the independent art scene is facing the problem of a decreasing number of audiences. Aniko stressed the role of independent art in social empowerment, inclusion and strengthening of

the civil society. In the meantime, the new wave of commercial theatre is somewhat weakening the visibility and development of progressive theatre.

In recent months, Hungary has been stirred by the public protests against the new higher education law, which threatens to shut down the Central European University. Aniko remarked that there is an increased number of artists taking to the streets – theatre-makers, designers, visual artists, etc. – who shape the tone of demonstrations, enriching it with alternative, artistic ways of communication. These new creative elements, reinforced by the sense of humour, make the protest actions much more effective and impactful. Aniko brought a couple of examples for arts used as a tool to point at the absurdity of the current regime, one of which is a street-art graffiti campaign of the Two-tailed Dog Party, a recently founded political party.

Engage with your co-citizens

Marili stressed that in today's reality, when our societies are increasingly fragmented, the role of cultural professionals must be to reach out to those who feel excluded from the policymaking and enable them to express their interests and demands. Art practitioners should engage in a deep and honest dialogue with their communities,

especially with the most marginalised and disadvantaged ones. Moreover, we must be brave enough to burst our own elitist bubble and to establish connections with those who have never been either part of our audiences or involved in our artistic practices.

Liz Pugh ([Walk the Plank](#), UK) noticed that if we wish a greater engagement with a broader slice of society, co-creation, aimed at engaging non-culture and non-arts practitioners, must be an integral element of our practices. No doubt, it requires more creativity and imagination.

John Newbiggin referred to the [National Theatre Wales](#), which deliberately does not have a permanent building and instead commissions a series of works, each initially located within a different site or community. Therefore, their projects are very different from what could be created within the walls of a big building.

Chris Torch (Artistic Director [Timisoara 2021 European Capital of Culture](#)) pointed out that one of the dangerous trends of today's politics, inspired by the spirit of neo-liberalism, is questioning public funding for culture. It is no longer taken for granted in the European countries that culture is one of the public services, like education, public health, etc. To challenge this status quo, art community should be more courageous to step beyond their usual audiences and reach to as many citizens as possible. Art professionals make themselves feeling better by making strong statements towards policy-makers, but their sharpened political position does not help them improve their position if they stay marginalised and disconnected from the large part of society. Audience engagement is the key to reinforcing the need and therefore the funding and function of culture in European societies.

Someone from the audience pointed out that instead of the constant focus on our capacity to bring the change, we should seek to address the needs of other communities and to enable those, who are excluded from the public debate, make their voices heard.

Build smarter advocacy strategies

New strategies of developing fair and sustainable relations between arts and politics must be adopted. Some of the progressive parties and movements, which the art field tends to support, initially build strategies which are favourable for the cultural sector; however, when in power, due to the lack of support from other political forces and under the pressure to prioritize other commitments, they do very little or nothing to help the art community thrive. Cultural sector badly needs to develop and apply smarter and more viable approaches to building alliances with policy-makers. Alongside with investing in the support of certain movements and parties, we should make sure they clearly reflect our aspirations in their programmes and take our demands into account while getting into practice.

One of the strategies of bridging the gap between the art sector and policy makers in a constructive way, mentioned by John Newbiggin, consisted in convincing some of the members of the UK Parliament to join the board of an arts company in the belief that over the time it would enable them to understand the real dynamics of the cultural policies more effectively.

Judith Knight ([Artsadmin](#), UK) cited the example of the initiative entitled "What Next?", in which her organisation is actively involved. [What Next](#) is a movement aiming to better connect the arts with 'civil society', to advocate for culture and arts education, to continually make the case for public investment, that the arts are not a luxury we cannot afford, but something we cannot afford not to have, to continually focus on values, to engage with MP's and with the people who vote for them. What Next has brought together artists and artistic organisations from right across the arts sectors, from the Royal Opera House to individual artists, all art forms, all scales, all over the country.

Establish interpersonal bonds and keep on collaborating

Chris Torch addressed the haziness of the concept of "Europe" itself: are we talking

about saving the institutions, values or culture? What do we have in mind when referring to Europe – the European Union, the European project or the European identity (if it exists)? Chris concluded we must remain critical of the manner in which the EU political structure functions, but continue developing interpersonal bonds across borders to nourish and sustain the European project as such. When the bonds are established, they are hard to break, even if the structure is falling apart; for example, Brexit does not seem to hinder the cross-border interpersonal connections within the art community, despite the toxic political discourse and the institutional changes to come. In Chris' view, Europe will survive through an emotional engagement with the European project, and not through the political engagement with the construction of the European Union.

Gianina Carburariu, independent theatre director and playwright from Romania, shared her perspective that working internationally helps overcome the precarious conditions, in which Romanian independent artists live and create. Gianina denoted her country as "the most suffocating place" on the international theatre landscape. There is no lack of subsidies for the cultural sector, but there is major concern of the unfair distribution of these resources. The independent sector faces financial challenges, while many state theatres and cultural institutions are heavily subsidised. When you struggle to survive locally, it is hard to envisage viable solutions for the European level; nevertheless, connections with international colleagues are vital, as they help to tackle the issues which are relevant across borders and to feel that you are not alone in your struggle.

Several participants highlighted the importance of undertaking cross-border projects and establishing international partnerships. It was agreed the cross-border exchange of knowledge and experiences on how to co-create and work with and for communities is ever more vital today.

In this regard, Christoph Jankowski (Head of Culture, England and Culture Advisor at Creative Europe Desk UK) pointed to the role of the [Creative Europe Programme](#), EU

support programme for the creative, cultural and audio-visual industries. Creative Europe, the main value of which is international collaboration, incites art professionals from 39 different countries to look for common challenges and to design experimental ways of tackling them. The application process requires considerable investments in terms of energy and time, but it pays off not only with financial means, but also with innovative, future-oriented ways of working, the time and space for taking risk, and quality international partnerships.

It was argued however that the differences of realities, in which art professionals live and work across Europe (social security, working models, funding policies, societal issues, political landscape, etc.), hinder their capacity to navigate the maze of the bureaucracy that comes together with setting up a cross-border project. It was wished that the Creative Europe programme should consider the extreme diversity of the contexts and situations the potential applicants are locked in and thus be more flexible and less administratively burdensome.

Overcome Brexit

Judith Knight shared her view on Brexit: "It is a disaster, based on a lie by self-serving politicians, turning the UK into a xenophobic intolerant, isolated, small minded country that I no longer recognise." In Judith's view, there is some "self-blame" within the cultural sector: some saying "it's our fault, the metropolitan cultural elite". She disagrees with that stating that cultural professionals she knows are far from elitist, they are dedicated, enormously hard working, seriously underpaid, passionate, caring people who are genuinely attempting to change society for the better. They are open-hearted, connected and free-thinking. Judith concluded that although we know that, we do have to be aware of how we are perceived, and we must change that.

Judith suggested we keep on adopting all possible solutions to reduce the damage of the gloomy reality brought by Brexit. We must keep touring, collaborating and travelling across frontiers and be prepared for dealing with rising bureaucratic barriers.



Calais fence will mark the border between the European Union and the UK after Brexit © VOA/Nicolas

We should see the work that is going on in the rest of Europe and invite as much of it as possible into the UK. We have to keep on collaborating – applying for EU funds for long lasting partnerships and creating long lasting partnerships even without EU funding. UK professionals should continue employing foreign citizens in the UK and seek to be employed in the EU. We should do all we can to help Creative Europe, the British Council, Culture Action Europe, and the Arts Council who are all engaged in strategies to alleviate the damage. We should convince more people to join the initiatives, organisations and networks, which help us fostering and maintaining trans-border connections – IETM, Culture Action Europe, among others. Our practices must become ever more politically-engaged, and we must definitely speak out more forcefully.

Christoph Jankowski encouraged UK art professionals to consider applying for Creative Europe grants, as no Brexit effect on the programme is expected to be in place at least until 2018. There is no bias against UK applicants; moreover, the UK Treasury will cover payments for UK-led or partnered projects, which are selected for support before the leave date. There are currently 11 non-EU countries that participate in Creative Europe, so logically there is a chance the upcoming negotiations will allow the UK to be one of them. Christoph also encouraged everyone in the room to support UK cultural professionals in their

advocacy efforts aimed at negotiating most favourable conditions for the cultural sector after Brexit.

Look outwards Europe

Mike van Graan from South Africa noted that analysing the roots of populist and nationalist sentiments in Europe, it is vital to look at Europe's economic, security and geopolitical strategies and actions undertaken outside its frontiers. In Mike's opinion, some of those strategies have resulted in political and economic instability in the Arab and African regions. In the meantime, Europe continues holding military and economic power and enjoys a considerable media dominance (we have heard a lot about the recent [Paris shooting](#), while the Western media would obviously not report on the victims of a drone strike in Afghanistan). Citizens of those regions feel excluded from the democratic project, as well as detached from the wealth and human rights enjoyed by Europeans. Forced to escape the precarious or even life-threatening conditions in their home countries, they flee to Europe, bringing different cultures, mentalities and perspectives to the European societies. It causes clashes, anxieties and suspicion among Europeans and results in surging racism, nationalism and populism. It is important to acknowledge the causes of populism and to seek to address these, rather than only their symptoms.