



POLICY PAPER

EU's International Cultural Collaborations

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Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, global challenges and opportunities are more closely intertwined than ever before. As international dynamics evolve, shaped by technological change, shifting alliances, and growing demands for sustainable and inclusive development, the need for meaningful cooperation across borders becomes ever more pressing.

Within this context, the European Union has a unique opportunity to strengthen its global role by building on its core values and deepening its international partnerships. Its commitment to promoting peace, democracy, human rights, and sustainable development reflects an understanding that today's challenges cannot be addressed in isolation.

Culture plays a vital role in this effort. As a shared space for exchange, creativity, and critical reflection, it fosters dialogue, mutual understanding, and trust across diverse contexts. Beyond its intrinsic value, culture enables new ways of thinking, supports collaborative problem-solving, and connects local realities with global perspectives. At a time when spaces for dialogue are under pressure, strengthening international cultural relations is not simply desirable – it is an urgent priority for the European Union in engaging with the world.

Context

Today's world is facing some serious challenges. Wars, geopolitical tensions, shrinking spaces for freedom and democracy, and the climate crisis are all intensifying. At the same time, rapid technological development is no longer seen only as an opportunity, but also as a challenge to manage. These dynamics are unfolding alongside the reconfiguration of long-standing international institutions and the questioning – and sometimes disruption – of historic partnerships.

This period presents the European Union with both unprecedented challenges and crucial opportunities to consolidate and redefine its global positioning – harnessing its core values, putting forward its genuine needs, and capitalising on its strengths. The EU's strategic outlook under Commission President Ursula von der Leyen acknowledges and addresses this reality: strengthening the EU's role as a global leader and enhancing its international partnerships are key priorities of her agenda¹. Moreover, the European Council envisions the EU playing a bold

¹ Ursula von der Leyen 2024, Europe's Choice Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029, pp. 25-28

role in advancing global peace, justice, stability, democracy, human rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals across international forums².

To fully leverage the EU's global position and promote meaningful international dialogue, culture is essential. In a time of deepening divides, rising tensions, and growing militarisation, culture remains one of the few shared global commons still available to us. The arts possess a unique capacity to model and rehearse trans-border trust and collective care for the planet, fostering spaces for dialogue and mutual learning, re-centering humanism in international relations, and helping us grasp the world as it is, in both its diversity and its shared spaces.

The EU's new cultural strategy – the *Culture Compass*, adopted in November 2025 – positions championing international cultural relations and partnerships as one of its four key directions. The Compass affirms the EU's role as a '*global leader in culture and creativity, rooted in mutual understanding and anchored in EU values*'³. The new strategy also seeks to reinforce a value-driven approach to international cultural relations, presenting these core values as universal and cultural diversity as 'continuously reimagined' – an important rhetorical shift signalling greater openness towards the world. The Compass commits to updating the EU Strategy on International Cultural Relations (2016). These aspirations are welcome; however, their success and tangible impact will depend largely on implementation measures, the scale and stability of the allocated budget, and the conditions governing its disbursement.

International collaboration as a structural condition of the arts

The international dimension of culture is not only essential for global peace and sustainable development, but is also an integral and indispensable element of art itself.

IETM is one of the few cultural networks supported by Creative Europe with a large international membership base: our members are spread across 64 countries worldwide, 38 of which are outside the

² European Council 2024, Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, p. 3

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A Culture Compass for Europe, Brussels, 2025.

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EU⁴. In the past few years, we have expanded our international work, inter alia thanks to our flagship programme Global Connect⁵.

Our research, based on surveys and interviews with members, shows that the primary reason professionals in the performing arts engage internationally is the continuous need to broaden their perspectives – by enriching their practice through exposure to different approaches, encountering diverse visions and styles, engaging with new audiences, and challenging their own paradigms⁶. Art professionals are inherently curious about the unexplored. Like artistic practice itself – which is, by nature, a continuous quest to investigate the unknown and even what has yet to exist – international collaboration expands the boundaries of what is visible and imaginable. This quest cannot be confined within national borders.

Our day-to-day experience within the performing arts sector confirms that working across borders is highly beneficial for EU-based professionals. It expands their understanding of global challenges, fosters the exchange of innovative solutions, enables collective artistic inquiry into pressing global issues, and encourages the rethinking of international collaboration models in light of evolving geopolitical realities. Participation in EU-funded projects is equally valuable for professionals based outside the EU, not only in terms of financial sustainability, but also for learning, professional development, and advancing advocacy priorities at the local level – including green funding and practices, fair remuneration, gender equality, disability rights, and broader inclusion in the arts. Raising awareness and promoting these priorities often generates multiplier effects within local civil society, which is one of the ways to advance global peace, justice, stability, democracy, human rights, and sustainability - the ambitions of the European Council, as discussed above.

The bottom-up approach to international cultural relations – as opposed to top-down showcasing of national cultures – is increasingly essential in today’s world, where the need to develop relevant, context-specific, and global solutions for promoting planetary sustainability, peace, and societal well-being is more pressing than ever.

⁴ The countries represented within the membership of IETM are: Afghanistan, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Congo, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mali, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Rwanda, Senegal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States. *Data from July 2025.*

⁵ Please learn more about the programme here: <https://www.ietm.org/en/projects/ietm-global-connect>

⁶ E. Polivtseva, “The New International - Against All Odds”, IETM, Brussels, January 2025.

The diverse values of cross-border cultural collaboration – particularly its people-to-people dimension – were already firmly acknowledged and promoted by the European Commission ten years ago in its Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, ‘Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations’⁷. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), this document, together with the Council Conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations (8 April 2019) ‘marked a turning point’ in the EU’s coordinated action in this field⁸. ‘Mutual exchange’, ‘people-to-people engagement’, and ‘co-creation’ remain to be the key principles of the EU’s approach to international cultural relations, as opposed to ‘traditional cultural promotion or “showcasing” European cultural soft power’⁹.

Given the rapidly evolving and challenging global landscape, another ‘turning point’ – clearly not a step backwards – is urgently needed to effectively scale up, institutionally recognise, and strengthen bottom-up, reciprocal global collaborations in the arts. This is essential not only to the DNA of the European arts sector, but also to the EU’s current repositioning in the world.

Current and future support for international cultural collaborations

Transnational collaborations in the arts remain marked by profound inequalities and a lack of structured, continuous financial support. The patchwork nature of public funding for international cooperation undermines the sustainability and longevity of global partnerships¹⁰. A recent UNESCO report examining policies and measures adopted worldwide to implement the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2021–2024) once again reveals a distorted map of global cultural mobility flows: while 96% of developed countries support outward mobility, only 38% facilitate inward mobility from developing countries – a decline from 53% in the reporting period of 2017–2020¹¹. This imbalance persists against the backdrop of visa restrictions, discussed in the report as a significant barrier that continues to undermine global artistic collaboration¹².

⁷ European Commission (2016) Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations, JOIN(2016) 29 final, 8 June.

⁸ European External Action Service (EEAS) (n.d.) Culture – implementing EU international cultural relations. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/culture-%E2%80%93-implementing-eu-international-cultural-relations_en (Accessed: 22 April 2026).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nordic Culture Fund, Globus, Dimension 04, Enabling Change Through Transnational Art Practices, <https://globus.nordiskkulturfond.org/dimension/change-through-transnational-art-practices>

¹¹ UNESCO 2026, Reshaping policies for creativity: we share, we act, we build, p. 13

¹² Ibid, pp. 105-120

Although there is no comprehensive EU-wide study on the current state of public support for transnational arts cooperation, practitioners increasingly report shrinking space for bottom-up cross-border initiatives within political agendas. The European performing arts sector observes that cultural policy priorities often shift inward¹³. Where internationalisation is supported, it is frequently concentrated on cultural export and nation-branding¹⁴. While these objectives may serve legitimate foreign policy goals, they do not always align with principles of mutual partnership, equal dialogue, openness, curiosity, and genuine co-creation on equal footing.

At the same time, artistic freedom – and freedom of expression more broadly – continues to deteriorate worldwide. The number of people whose freedom of expression has degraded in the past decade now accounts for two-thirds of the global population¹⁵. Freemuse and other organisations continue to document alarming and rising levels of censorship and self-censorship in the arts globally. Factors undermining artistic freedom include government repression, growing social intolerance in polarised societies, armed conflicts, natural disasters, and the commercial practices of digital platforms, among other pressures. These conditions further complicate and constrain cross-border cultural collaboration.

AgoraEU

At a time when the world urgently needs to restore dialogue, uphold human rights, and enable a collective cross-border imagination of a better future for the planet, we must acknowledge that a bold and operational commitment from the EU to strengthen its international relations through culture remains insufficiently articulated. The Culture Compass has put this ambition forward; however, it does not yet clearly define what EU leadership in culture and creativity entails, nor how this new chapter of international cultural relations should concretely unfold. The continued reference to ‘soft power’ in the Compass – a term criticised by the European Parliament in its 2022 report on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations¹⁶ – further underlines this ambiguity.

¹³ Polivtseva, E. 2026, *Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience*, Performing Arts Coalition

¹⁴ Culture Action Europe 2024, *State of Culture*, p. 18

¹⁵ Global Expression Report (n.d.) *Global Expression Report*. Available at: <https://www.globalexpressionreport.org/> (Accessed: 23 February 2026).

¹⁶ The report stated: *‘It is crucial to overcome the conventional conversation exclusively framed around the use of culture as a “soft power” tool to influence through attractiveness. This framework in fact does not reflect the current theories and practices of ICR, which focus on the relational process and outcome of cultural relations and are based on building trust between people, recognising power relations and seeking equity and fairness in order to address collective challenges.’*

Moreover, AgoraEU, the newly proposed programme to support culture under the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), includes references to international cultural collaboration but does not articulate an ambitious vision for culture as a driver of the EU's global role. While the programme emphasises support for the distribution of European creative works both within and beyond the Union, its approach does not represent a substantial shift from Creative Europe in terms of positioning culture within geopolitical strategy. International relations are mentioned only briefly in the Commission's proposal for regulation for AgoraEU: culture is expected to help the EU 'project the image of a dynamic continent on the world stage' and to operate in synergy with the Global Europe instrument¹⁷. While this reference is important, it remains to be seen whether these synergies will be designed in ways that are practical in terms of co-financing bottom-up, diverse, and equitable trans-border cultural collaborations.

In the Presidency compromise text on AgoraEU circulated in January 2026, the Commission's general references to the international dimension of the programme are proposed to be further tightened. According to the text, organisations from countries outside the 41 participating states may be involved only '*by way of exception*' and solely where their participation is '*strictly necessary*' to achieve the objectives of an action. The compromise text also suggests that such entities should, in principle, bear the costs of their participation¹⁸.

While the current Creative Europe Regulation also frames third-country participation as exceptional and subject to necessity, its legal basis leaves room for complementary support through other EU instruments¹⁹. These instruments can be the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. For example, the dedicated Creative Europe call for Western Balkans–EU cultural cooperation (2019) was made possible through funding from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance.

The proposed tightening of the language of the future programme – combined with the absence of a clear provision enabling financial synergies between AgoraEU and EU external

¹⁷ Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818, p. 3

¹⁸ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028-2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818 - Presidency compromise text, p. 44

¹⁹ Article 17 (3): 'Legal entities active in the cultural and creative sectors established in a third country which is not associated to the Programme shall exceptionally be eligible to participate in the Programme where such participation is necessary for the achievement of the objectives of a given action'.

Article 17 (4): 'Legal entities active in the cultural and creative sectors established in a third country which is not associated to the Programme shall in principle bear the cost of their participation. Where it is in the Union's interest, additional contributions from the external financing instruments in accordance with Article 8(6) may cover the costs of the participation of such legal entities'.

action instruments – does not offer a positive outlook for achieving the ambitions set out in the Culture Compass. If the Culture strand of AgoraEU inherits the core features of Creative Europe, it will remain the only EU programme supporting relatively open, bottom-up cultural collaboration that is not strictly limited by geopolitical priorities (aside from specific thematic calls). This modality allows European cultural professionals and organisations to pursue genuine artistic and professional partnerships across borders.

Therefore, while cross-border cultural cooperation may continue to be financed under other instruments of the future MFF, it is important to recognise that the relational infrastructure and operational logic of Creative Europe – likely to be continued under AgoraEU – are particularly well suited to fostering diverse, bottom-up, and relatively open collaboration between EU-based artists and their peers worldwide. The possibility of strengthening and further developing this programme, including through complementary funding from other EU instruments, must therefore remain legally and structurally open.

Global Europe

Other crucial developments affecting the future of EU international cultural relations concern the Global Europe programme, proposed as part of the Commission’s new MFF package (2028–2034). With a budget of €200.3 billion, this new instrument signals a significant increase in ambition for the EU’s external action and consolidates several existing external financing instruments – including pre-accession and humanitarian aid funds – into a single framework.

There are notable differences between the proposed programme and the current Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe. The current NDICI structure includes thematic programmes, within which culture has a dedicated area of intervention under the thematic programme ‘Global Challenges’. This cultural area of intervention encompasses six priorities, including support for culture as a driver of sustainable development; the development of local crafts; the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage; safeguarding vulnerable heritage, especially that of minority, isolated, and Indigenous communities; and support for agreements on the return of cultural property to countries of origin, among others²⁰.

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2021/947 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009 (Text with EEA relevance)

Importantly, the current Regulation explicitly states that ‘Union funding under the Instrument should be used to finance actions under the international dimension of Creative Europe’²¹ – a provision that was, in turn, anchored in the Creative Europe Regulation.

By contrast, the proposed new Global Europe instrument consolidates priorities into geographic and global pillars. Policy areas such as democracy, human rights, peace, stability, and support for civil society are no longer covered by dedicated thematic programmes and are instead largely referenced in annexes rather than embedded in the core text. The same structural shift applies to culture. Each geographic pillar contains its own Annex II section, and the depth of cultural references varies across regions – being more detailed in the Europe pillar and more general in the Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Americas-Caribbean pillars, where references focus primarily on intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, and heritage safeguarding²².

While the proposed instrument retains references to culture across all geographic pillars and introduces certain forward-looking elements (including provisions related to artificial intelligence and support for Ukraine), it nonetheless represents a structural downgrade for culture compared to the current framework. The dedicated thematic area of intervention has been removed, and several specific provisions – including those relating to Indigenous heritage, cultural property restitution, and local crafts – are no longer mentioned. In addition, no indicative spending targets are proposed that would anchor cultural funding within the instrument.

Finally, the Commission’s proposal for the future Global Europe Regulation (2028–2034) does not explicitly refer to potential synergies with AgoraEU. Whether the ongoing legislative negotiations will restore some of these structural elements remains an open question in the months ahead.

Recommendations

The EU’s ambition to reinforce its global role through culture, as articulated in the Culture Compass, must be reflected in the provisions of the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. The negotiations on the proposed AgoraEU Regulation (Culture strand) and the

²¹ *ibid*

²² Annexes to the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Global Europe

Global Europe Regulation (2028–2034) provide a decisive opportunity to align political ambition with legal architecture.

1. Preserve and clarify the international dimension of AgoraEU

The Regulation should contain an explicit operative article affirming that international cultural cooperation constitutes a structural objective of the Programme.

- Include a dedicated paragraph under the objectives article stating that the Programme shall support equitable, reciprocal and sustainable cultural cooperation between entities established in participating states and partners in third countries.
- Avoid restrictive language limiting third-country participation to cases that are ‘strictly necessary’. Instead, retain wording aligned with proportionality and value added. Replace ‘by way of exception’ with ‘where such participation adds demonstrable value to the objectives of the action’.
- Introduce proportional co-financing flexibility for entities operating in structurally disadvantaged contexts.
- Insert a recital clarifying that international cultural cooperation shall be guided by principles of equality, solidarity, respect for human dignity and universality of human rights, in line with Article 21 TEU.
- Reintroduce structural funding to support the operational costs of European cultural networks with a proven long-term track record of addressing emerging needs, testing new models, and providing flexible support to cross-border artistic communities.

2. Maintain legal space for financial synergies

Reintroduce a cross-reference clause in both AgoraEU and Global Europe Regulations, anchoring funding for the international dimension of the cultural programme.

- In AgoraEU, Include an article providing that actions involving third-country entities may be financed from external action instruments, including Global Europe.
- In Global Europe, insert a provision stating that Union funding under this Instrument may support actions under the international dimension of AgoraEU.

3. Reinstate culture as a distinct area of intervention as part of Global Europe

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Reinsert culture as a clearly identifiable intervention priority within the Global Europe, including explicit references to:

- Cultural diversity
- Artistic freedom
- Cultural mobility
- Protection and restitution of cultural heritage
- Support to independent cultural actors
- Vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples

4. Protect artistic freedom within both AgoraEU and Global Europe

Given the deterioration of freedom of expression globally:

- Include explicit language in the democracy and human rights objectives referencing artistic freedom.
- Enable emergency support mechanisms for at-risk cultural professionals.
- Ensure that support to civil society includes cultural actors as eligible beneficiaries.

If the legal architecture of AgoraEU and Global Europe narrows eligibility, restricts financial synergies, and removes structured intervention areas for culture, the timely ambitions of the Culture Compass to strengthen EU's cultural relations will remain rhetorical. If we fail to safeguard the international dimension of the arts today, we risk overlooking their unique potential to model and workshop trans-border trust and care for the planet. Such losses will reverberate in the near term and for generations to come.

IETM – International network for contemporary performing arts is one of the oldest and largest international cultural networks, representing the voice of over 500 performing arts organisations and individual professionals working in the contemporary performing arts worldwide. Their mission is to advocate the value of the arts and culture and empower performing arts professionals through access to international connections, knowledge and a dynamic forum for exchange. They also work to stimulate the quality, development and context of the contemporary performing arts, in all their diversity.

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