

**The Creative
Europe
programme,
a conversation
with Mr. Karel
Bartak**

Mr. Karel Bartak has been at the head of the Creative Europe Culture Unit at the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) since 2016. Before, he was in charge of the Creative Europe Coordination Unit within the Directorate-General for Education and Culture at the European Commission. We met him in his office in Brussels, in March 2018, while he was evaluating the 2018 Creative Europe call for cooperation projects.

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G.C.: What impact did you expect when the Audience Development (AD) priority was activated? Was that the result of a need coming from a close observation of the cultural sector, or was it a way to tackle the constant decrease of cultural participation? How comes the notion of AD and participation in culture?

K.B.: I think that the starting point were the statistics on cultural participation in Europe we were getting, showing that public participation in culture was dropping. The general growth of living standards in Europe was not reflecting on the way culture was being perceived and consumed by the public. That was one point of departure.

Another one was the observation of the projects co-financed by the Creative Europe programme. We were aware that some of them were rather abstract, artificial, concentrating preferably on theoretical discussion, brainstorming, exchange of experiences, and had a limited impact on the public. Our intention was to support projects aimed to give artists the opportunity to find new audiences, to go beyond what they usually did at the national level. We were following the idea that thanks to EU contribution the artists could enhance their careers by attracting new audiences. That is why AD became a kind of overarching priority of the Creative Europe programme, in reaction to the past when we were more concentrating on the exchanges among cultural professionals, without necessarily considering their impact on the public.

The importance of the programme, which amounts to just 1.5 billion euros for 7 years for 28 countries, in the context of the overall cultural landscape in Europe can be compared to a drop in the ocean. It is just about 0.15% of the whole EU budget. We should not believe that we are changing the world with the Creative Europe programme, it is and will be complementary to national funding, which will always be much more valuable. Rather, the specificity of the projects funded by Creative Europe is their European added value, which you will not normally find in nationally financed schemes.

G.C.: Do you think that promoting the idea of AD is also a way to push organisations to think about themselves in a more sustainable way? In Europe we are presently living an incredible huge crisis, especially in the cultural sector. The local funding is lower than 5-7 years ago. In your opinion, might that also be a way of giving a silent indication to organisations to re-think themselves under an economical perspective?

K.B.: Due to the financial crisis in Europe, we have seen cultural budgets dropping across the board. There are a couple of exceptions, but most countries reduced their budgets. In that context it was a success to see the Creative Europe programme growing by 9% compared to the previous period, before 2014. If you take into consideration the needs of the new financial guarantee instrument launched in 2016, we have basically the same amount of money as in the period from 2007 to 2013. Our low budget is the main reason why most of the actions in the Culture part of the programme had a very modest success. We select for funding only about 15% of the applications we get. For every call, we know that at least 20/30 projects would really be worth funding, but... there is no budget. That is creating some frustration.

Coming back to the question about participation, yes, the idea is that through the projects we fund, with AD as a priority, we are

basically asking all the project coordinators to come up with ideas that respond to that. So, already at the preparatory stage, we are pushing them to reflect on how their project can be sustainable and can address audiences, having an impact on the hearts and minds of people. I think that through this programme, the notions of sustainability and AD have become more important than they were before.

G.C.: Can we say that beside the AD priority there is also a special attention to new business models? Is the European Commission through those priorities pushing organisations to place themselves in the market, or to find a way to be financed beside the institutional support? What is your opinion?

K.B.: Yes, you need to look at the context in which the programme was born, and that is reflected in the legal basis of the programme itself. We were in the middle of the financial crisis in Europe at the time when the new multiannual financial framework was conceived. The mantra was “*growth and jobs*”, and rightly so, as it was crucial to react to the economic slump.

That priority also found its way into the new Creative Europe programme. The preceding Culture programme (not the Media programme) had been focused on public organisations and on more traditional branches of cultural activities. Now, we started paying more attention to the fact that culture is also produced by creative industries. A lot is happening in the private sector; many micro companies, as well as small and medium enterprises are involved. That was taken on board by this programme, and was also reflected in the priority called *capacity building*. We do not necessarily ask ‘La Scala’ to do *capacity building*. But we want to see the start-ups and the small companies thinking about development, how they can become more important in the market, or how they can support the artists. That was the idea behind the notion of capacity building, and that is why it is not an overarching priority, like AD, but just one of the priorities. If

you follow it, you follow it, if you don't, you don't. You are not penalised for not choosing capacity building as a priority in your project.

Now Europe is in better economic conditions, but we are facing new challenges, like migration or the strengthening of populist and demagogu tendencies. The intercultural dialogue has become critical again, which is being reflected in our yearly work programmes, without changing the legal base of the programme.

G.C.: The word *trans-locality* is emerging in debates across Europe. Most of the cultural operators are working with local communities trying to link them through social media, artistic productions, art residencies, or through mobility programs, as we also do in the framework of Be SpectActive!. Basically, we are connecting cities, not nation-states, as they represent a new arena of discussion for most of us. As EU Commission, are you supporting the idea of *trans-locality*? Or do you look at the nation-state as a first interlocutor?

K.B.: We are basically working with cultural operators. In some countries we might be having interlocutors at a national level, in others at a regional level, or at a more local level in still others. Europe is a culturally fragmented space, also language-wise. We do not know what is happening a couple of kilometres away, across the nearest border. We are all flooded by a certain mainstream culture, which comes through the social media or from the new IT tools, but, at the end of the day, we are very much unaware of what is really happening on the ground in other countries. This little programme aims to overcome that barrier, go beyond what you normally get to in your everyday life, provide knowledge and experience of what is going on elsewhere and put creators in contact to do things together.

Most of the projects we are running are based on a simple financial impetus, enabling creators to be mobile, to share residencies, to work together (that's why they are called cooperation projects). In other cases, we are paying to reduce the risk of showcasing works – performances, exhibitions – which would normally be considered as economically unviable. In this way, we help the artists and, above of all, the emerging artists to start their international carriers earlier, to attract new audiences outside their own countries. That is the added value we are bringing. We are not competing with projects run by the Member States, what we do is complementary to their work, and I am sure that most of our projects would not be able to secure national funding.

G.C.: From your observatory, did you ever see cases where participatory actions were used for generating forms of political consensus in specific arenas? Or, on the contrary, was participation more an opportunity for the cultural policy to generating awareness among citizens and at cultural level?

K.B.: We are evaluating, selecting, managing projects at a European level; these projects are co-financed with European money, meaning money of the European taxpayers. The rules of the game exclude any kind of propaganda or political agenda. On the other hand, it is quite possible that a European project can be considered a way to convince people about the merits of the European integration. That's fair. In the same vein, a project that is contrary to the values we are defending, would not be selected for funding. We are always selecting on the merit of relevance, of quality and never any political consideration is being permitted in this selection.

G.C.: ...did you ever had cases in which you felt that participatory tools were being used for different aims than the EU priorities of the programme?

K.B.: Participation is one of the ways of bringing Europeans together. To overcome current populist tendencies it is necessary that people travel and see how other people live in other countries, broadening their horizons and perspectives. That is one of the reasons why programs like this – Erasmus, Creative Europe, Europe for Citizens – exist and will be continued and even broadened and made more important. You can observe, in Europe, that the perception of European integration varies according to the different age groups, but also to those who have been given more opportunities and experiences in other countries.

G.C.: Do you have already, after having been managing the Creative Europe programme for four years, emerging new tools for cultural policy or other tools you would use for new upcoming programs? Are you already evaluating your failures and successes?

K.B.: We are drawing lessons from the projects we have funded, which will be used in the next programme. I cannot tell you now what the new programme will look like, the Commission is only preparing its first draft for the Member States and the European Parliament. It seems obvious that the participatory dimension, the emphasis on mobility and cooperation are going to stay. We think that the culture sector needs more of those and we want to continue with projects, which have the strongest leverage effect. The money we are investing should be very well spent.

At the same time, we aim at simplifying procedures and applications in order to enable all cultural operators to participate. We are aware that with rather low EU contributions we are asking a lot from the beneficiaries. The new financial regulation should make participation easier, even for small entities. We would like to have an open dialogue with the creators

and the artists and not with too many intermediaries. We would like them feel that this program is doing something for them and that this added value is bringing new possibilities, new opportunities for their creation, for their creative life.

G.C.: In your opinion, which are the main weak points of the programme?

K.B.: Well, as I've already said, the main weakness is the very limited budget and the huge difference between offer and demand. Not only are the rejected applicants disappointed, but also from the point of view of this Agency, it is not really rewarding to evaluate hundreds of projects, which will never be funded.

We train and control the independent experts in charge of the first evaluations, watch over their consensus and recommendations. Then the evaluation committee composed of colleagues from the Commission and the Agency takes the final decision after long deliberation. Re-submitted and controversial projects get a special attention.

A project takes days and days to be evaluated. At the end you have a huge list of projects, then you draw the red line and check all those under the line, which take weeks to be evaluated, but they are lost. It's frustrating for us and, of course, it's frustrating for those who are rejected, because they have put a lot of effort into it. It's frustrating even for those who are selected, because they have to wait so long before the decision is taken, while they would like to start and get the pre-financing, obviously.

In order to measure the performance of the programme, we have introduced e-reports, which will enable us to have better statistics and also compare better the aim of the project at the beginning and its outcome. That is important, as we are

improving our knowledge and communicating with all cultural sectors, monitoring how the programme is really performing, measuring the impact we are having and what needs to be fine-tuned in the future legal base.

G.C.: A lively debate is taking place around the *legacy* that the programme can generate at local level, especially if you work on actions of social cohesion or creating processes of participation that need a long-term perspective. For having an impact, you need time. Some projects start having results after 4 years and then they apply again because a trans-national cooperation needs to be supported by specific funding. Unfortunately, in the case of Creative Europe, they are in the same pot of many other applications that may be applying for the first time. That is a problem for both: the new projects and the second applications. Very often, there is a discrepancy between the two because of the practices presented, the experiences or simply the needs of the two categories.

Coming back to the evaluation process and the programme efficacy, is that a procedure that is also linked to the availability of economic resources, as you have already mentioned? Or is it also a kind of neo-liberal tendency, in which the observation is more on the numbers and then quantities that each project has to bring, and less on the values and the long terms processes that are requested according to the priorities?

K.B.: There is no special treatment for some projects, no specific criteria. Everyone competes against everyone, from all sectors and disciplines and from all participating countries. Why is that? Because the programme is so small, we are only able to select a couple of dozens of projects per year. Once you start ring-fencing a certain amount here and there, then you end up with nothing. If the programme would be more important – from the financial point of view – I can very well imagine that we

might reserve a part of it for specific activities. But this is not the case at the moment.

G.C.: ...and about the neo-liberalism and the need of quantity, how do you see that aspect?

K.B.: We are evaluating the projects on the basis of their merits exclusively. The political orientation is given by the Member States who have mandated the Commission to implement the programme. The yearly work programme is endorsed by the Council, and we report to the Member States about its implementation. In cooperation projects, for instance, the prevailing attitude is in favour of smaller organisations to get involved. There is a concern also in the European Parliament that the small organisations get limited opportunities for funding. We are therefore dealing with the request to select more small cooperation projects at the detriment of the large cooperation category. The legacy of the small ones is less obvious than in the case of the large ones, which have 10-15 or even more partners somehow, having a structuring effect on the sector. That being said, you may have very competitive and very innovative small cooperation projects, yet, they are limited in scope and output, by their very nature.

G.C.: Do you think that may be the result of a neo-liberal approach, or is that the tendency that some of the Member States are displaying?

K.B.: It is more that some NGOs have access to their Ministers and keep complaining that they are discriminated; some countries are sensitive to that. I have already mentioned the slightly economic nature of the legal basis of the programme from 2013. But, as I have said, nowadays, everything that concerns values, rights and dialogue is being taken on board, because the programme is sufficiently flexible.

G.C.: Going to the final question, do you have the feeling of the programme impact at the regional level? Looking at the statistics on your website there are some countries that are participating a lot, while others are not very active. Why? Is it a consequence of their national funding policy or what?

K.B.: The main reason, I think, is the lack of experience in certain countries, above all the newcomers. It's both the lack of skills to present such a project, and also the lack of their co-financing capacity. We are asking for 40-50% co-financing for cooperation projects, which for cultural operators in some countries is a red line they cannot cross. That's why we are trying to encourage cultural operators, in particular those from South-Eastern Europe, to get engaged as often as possible as partners in projects, in order to learn how to coordinate and reap as much profit from the programme as possible, despite their handicap.

The second aspect is the traditional cultural life of the country and the appetite to go international. There are more traditionally closed countries, which feel good in their comfort zone. There are other countries that have had this openness all along. They have always been very receptive to inputs from the outside world. You have also countries having important minorities to deal with, so that, I think, there is more openness and there is more appetite to cooperate internationally.

The third aspect is more organisational. Because, as you know, in all countries we have our offices (the Creative Europe Desks), in charge of helping operators to prepare their applications. The number and quality of projects depend to a certain extent on the activity and the approach of the desks. A very good office in a certain country can make a difference at European level – Slovenia is a good example.

G.C.: Mr. Bartak, thank you very much for your time.