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Artists Shaping Europe's Cultural Future: Advocacy, Collaboration, Innovation and Resilience

Report from four sessions at the IETM Oulu Plenary Meeting 2026

Shrinking Space for Cross-Border Collaboration: Strategies for Resilience
Cross-Sector Collaboration: Value, Partnership and Financial Sustainability
Cultural Work in the Age of Machines: Value, Financial Resilience and Digital Practice
Beyond the Grant: Alternative Financial Tools and the Politics of Value
Stories, reflections and lessons from practice

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IETM Report
Artists Shaping Europe's Cultural Future: Advocacy, Collaboration, Innovation and Resilience

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ADVOCACY FOR EUROPE'S CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

This chapter is based on the session *Shrinking Space for Cross-Border Collaboration: Strategies for Resilience* - The session examined the growing constraints on cross-border collaboration in the performing arts, looking at current EU cultural policy developments, funding cuts and increasing political pressure. Participants reflected on cultural rights, artistic freedom, instrumentalisation and competition for short-term funding, and worked together to identify strategies for resilience.

Facilitator: Ása Richardsdóttir, IETM, Belgium

Speaker: Elena Polivtseva, Independent Researcher, Belgium

While European public expenditure on cultural services remains modest, accounting for around 1% of GDP on average across EU Member States[1], political rhetoric continuously champions culture as the heart of 'European identity'. This gap reveals a stark reality: cultural policy has become highly ambitious rhetorically, while actual financial commitment remains stagnant.

Addressing this chronic underinvestment at the IETM Oulu Plenary Meeting, Elena Polivtseva, independent researcher and co-founder of Culture Policy Room, argued that traditional advocacy might have reached a dead end. Instead of merely fighting for increased funding within rigid frameworks, Elena asserted that the sector must pivot toward a more comprehensive strategy: advocating for the freedom, survival and health of the entire cultural ecosystem.



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The Political Context

"Europe is in a fight" – the phrase from the President of the European Commission's 2025 State of the Union address summarises the strategic narrative shaping European policymaking: a fight for peace, values, identity, autonomy and digital sovereignty in an increasingly unstable world. Europe's response is framed as one of unity, boldness and long-term strategic action.

At the same time, after the last elections in 2024, a highly polarised European Parliament shifted significantly rightward, diluting Green influence and empowering conservative and far-right factions. Political polarisation across the EU member-states inevitably affects cultural policy as well. Right-wing governments view culture as a tool for protecting national identity and traditional values. Some left-wing political movements have become more distant from the arts, partly because they associate cultural institutions with social elites. Technocratic populist governments often lack a coherent cultural policy altogether and tend to neglect the sector. Meanwhile, the majority of centrist and progressive governments continue promoting discourses centred on fair pay, inclusion, diversity, cultural rights and cultural democracy. Political discourse acknowledging the importance of culture for societies is a positive trend, yet it tends to intensify the instrumentalisation of culture while not substantially increasing public investment. In other words, cultural policy has become ambitious rhetorically, while financial commitment has remained limited.

1 | European Parliament Research Service, EU framework for the social and professional situation of artists and workers in the cultural and creative sectors (2023), citing Eurostat data on general government expenditure by function. The study reports that general government expenditure on culture in the EU totalled €71.2 billion, or 0.5% of GDP, in 2021 to 2023. In 2024, general government expenditure across the EU on cultural services amounted to €87.8 billion or 1.0% of all general government expenditure.-- based on gov_10a_exp – LINK

New Policies for Culture

The growing political attention to culture has recently resulted in the launch of the Culture Compass for Europe (2025), the European Union's new strategic framework for culture. Its guiding idea is expressed in the slogan:

"Europe for Culture. Culture for Europe."

The Culture Compass's central ambition is to raise culture higher on the European political agenda and to attempt to balance supporting and valuing culture on its own terms ('Europe for Culture'), on the one hand, and using culture for various policy agendas currently important for the EU ('Culture for Europe'). Among its central priorities are artistic freedom, artists' working conditions, cultural participation, arts education, sustainable investment, and the recognition of culture as a public good. The latter signals a major conceptual shift: public investment becomes a matter of democratic responsibility rather than economic efficiency alone.

The growing attention to culture's democratic value is also reflected in changing European funding priorities. The next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034), currently under negotiation, will help shape how these priorities are translated into European funding, while also offering an important opportunity for the cultural sector to influence that future architecture. Current proposals include the creation of a broader AgoraEU programme bringing together Creative Europe and the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

The rationale of this proposed funding instrument links culture to democracy, civic participation and societal resilience. While this political recognition potentially strengthens the position of culture within European policymaking, it also raises new questions:

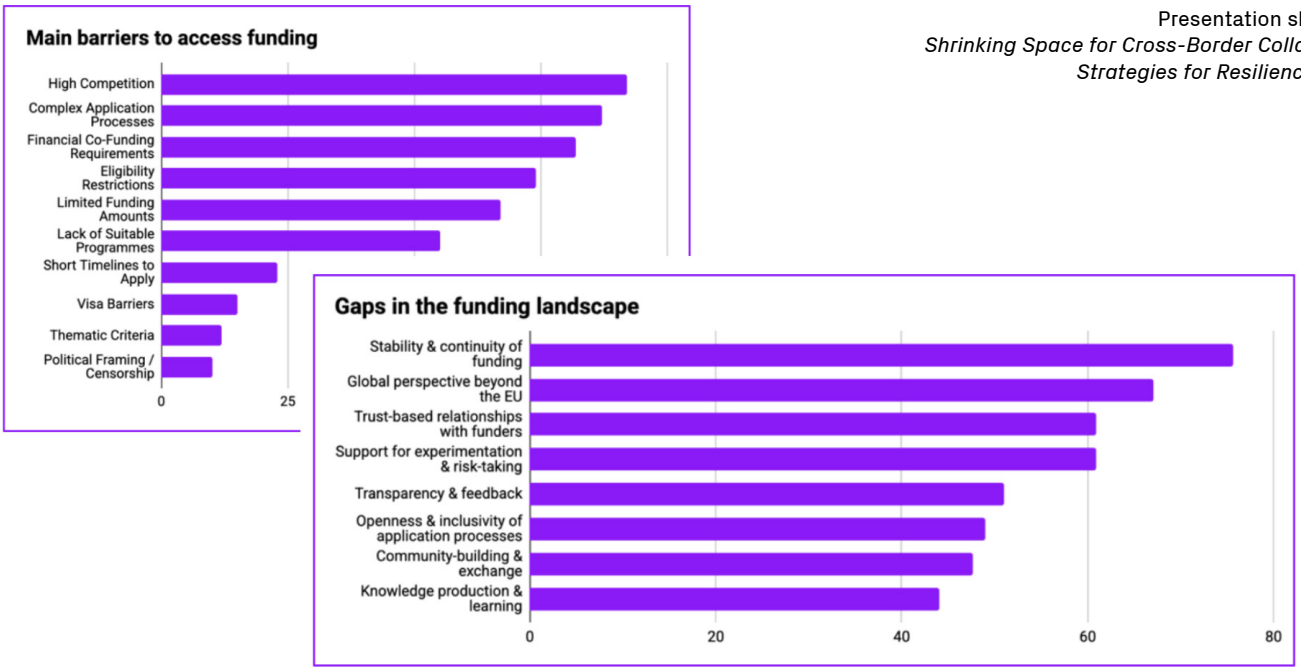
Will artistic projects increasingly be expected to demonstrate democratic impact, and if so, how will it affect funding criteria and priorities?

How can artistic freedom be maintained within these changing policy frameworks? Will culture remain an autonomous policy field?

The State of Freedom and Cross-Border Collaboration in the Performing Arts

Based on recent studies for the Performing Arts Coalition— 'Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience' and 'Cross-Border Collaboration In The Performing Arts', Elena identifies three interrelated concerns shared by the European performing arts sector.

First, **the space for cross-border collaboration is shrinking**, not because of declining interest among artists but due to changing policy environments, growing administrative burdens, intensified competition for funding and a stronger national focus in cultural policies, promoting a more inward-looking understanding of culture.



Presentation slides from
Shrinking Space for Cross-Border Collaboration: Strategies for Resilience session

Second, while **fair practice and artists' working conditions** have become a priority in many European countries and in the EU's cultural policy, culminating in initiatives such as the European Artists' Charter (to be issued in 2027), progress relies largely on non-binding recommendations and voluntary standards, with significant gaps remaining between political ambition and implementation, particularly across borders.

Third, **artistic freedom is under growing pressure**. Research presented by the Performing Arts Coalition indicates increasing censorship and self-censorship across Europe, suggesting that protecting artistic freedom has become not only a cultural concern but a fundamental democratic challenge. The political recognition of the importance of artistic freedom has also been reflected in the EU's new democracy agenda — the European Democracy Shield.

Even if money has been identified as both a major problem and a central solution in surveys of both reports, one of the strongest messages emerging from the research was not the demand for larger budgets, but for greater stability — long-term continuity, trust-based relationships with funders and support for experimentation.

Within this political and cultural sector status quo, Elena argues that advocacy for culture requires not only new ways of working, but also a reconsideration of advocacy itself.

Faced with shrinking budgets, the sector often advocates for itself by highlighting its contributions to health, education or economic development. While effective, this creates a significant risk: if culture is justified exclusively by its utility to other sectors, its intrinsic artistic value disappears from political discourse. Elena argued that **future advocacy should balance various narratives, defending both the inherent value of artistic creation and its wider societal contribution**.

Advocacy approaches

- influencing policymakers,
- building and strengthening communities,
- engaging with other sectors,
- exploring alternative financing models,
- building collective resilience through alternative models of resource redistribution,
- and strengthening "freedom infrastructures" through solidarity and practical mutual support to withstand growing pressures.

A second response to shrinking public funding has been increasing competition for short-term project grants. This model encourages organisations to devote substantial resources to fundraising while undermining long-term planning, organisational development and artistic experimentation. Rather than focusing solely on individual funding programmes, Elena proposed **shifting the discussion towards the infrastructures that make artistic work possible: stable funding mechanisms, mobility schemes, professional networks, knowledge exchange and spaces for international collaboration**.

Political pressure presents perhaps the most profound challenge. Censorship is accompanied by more subtle forms of self-censorship, as artists avoid sensitive topics, institutions adjust programmes and programming decisions become more cautious. Such responses may reduce immediate risk, but they gradually reshape the cultural landscape itself. Protecting artistic freedom cannot depend solely on the courage of individual artists. It requires supportive institutions, professional solidarity and long-term policy commitments. Elena introduced "freedom infrastructures": the legal, institutional and professional conditions that enable artistic freedom through collective action, emphasising that today's challenges require "alliances" and "ecosystem thinking" rather than individual organisations acting alone.



photo: Jaakko Jylhä - DEED Creative

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AS A STRATEGY FOR CARE AND RESILIENCE

This chapter is based on the session *Cross-Sector Collaboration: Value, Partnership and Financial Sustainability*.

This participatory workshop explored how performing arts practitioners can build cross-sector collaborations that create new ways of working and sustainable approaches to resourcing artistic practice. Through practical exercises and peer discussion, participants mapped potential connections with sectors such as healthcare, business, education and urban development, while considering what makes a partnership meaningful and reciprocal.

Facilitator: Immie Jonkman, Arcadia, the Netherlands

As public funding becomes fragmented and competitive, cultural organisations are under growing pressure to diversify their income and demonstrate wider societal relevance. **Immie Jonkman** proposed a fundamental shift in how the sector approaches resilience. Instead of focusing on fundraising alone, the workshop invited participants to think in terms of **ecosystems**: networks of organisations, institutions and communities connected by shared challenges and shared resources. The central question was no longer *Where can we find funding?* but rather, *Who already cares about the issue my project addresses?*

Elena Polivtseva's keynote argued that advocacy must move from focusing on short-term funding for individual organisations towards strengthening cultural ecosystems and collective resilience, while Immie Jonkman's workshop explored what such ecosystem thinking looks like in practice.


photo: Jaakko Jylhä - DEED Creative

The starting point is the shared purpose

Immie Jonkman encouraged participants to stop viewing municipalities, businesses, healthcare providers or educational institutions primarily as sponsors and refer to them as partners in creating public value. This does not mean reshaping artistic projects to serve external policy agendas.

Cultural organisations contribute imagination, creativity, participation and the ability to make complex societal issues tangible through artistic experience. Their partners from other sectors may bring different but equally valuable assets: professional expertise, institutional knowledge, infrastructure, networks and, where appropriate, financial resources. Sustainable cross-sector collaboration begins not with fundraising but with identifying shared objectives and building long-term relationships around them. As Immie repeatedly reminded participants: **"They are partners, not sponsors."**

Case Study 1: Bosk - A Walking Forest
A land art project that brought over a thousand trees into the Dutch city of Leeuwarden (Friesland), forever changing the lives of its citizens. "This project emerged from conversations with the municipality."

Case Study 2: Over de Drempel [2022]
Addresses loneliness by bringing together artists, municipalities and healthcare professionals in community-based artistic projects.

Case Study 3: Myn Grûn [2025]
Employs artistic practice to help residents navigate questions of identity following the merger of several municipalities.

The collaborative workshop illustrated how the ecosystem approach could be applied to participants' own projects. Immie encouraged participants to use the same associative and imaginative thinking they bring to artistic work when identifying possible partners. Venturing beyond funding advice, the group collectively mapped ecosystems of potential collaborators around each artistic idea.

As part of the collective discussion, a proposal from Palestine to develop artist residencies in the homes of elderly citizens gradually expanded beyond the cultural sector as participants suggested partnerships with healthcare providers, diaspora organisations, educational institutions and community leaders; the project's artistic exploration of memory and personal narrative could also connect questions of loneliness, intergenerational exchange and heritage preservation.

The second part of the discussion centred on an emerging literary project inspired by conversations in public swimming pools. What began as a personal artistic inquiry into stories of health, recovery and everyday encounters evolved into a broader conversation about partnerships with local authorities, public health organisations, swimming facilities, sound artists and designers, writers and publishers, public broadcasters interested in storytelling, organisations promoting healthy lifestyles. Once again, the emphasis was on identifying where artistic practice naturally intersects with the priorities of other sectors. The expanding map also revealed a practical tension: identifying possible connections does not mean pursuing all of them at once. The artist still has to determine the project's core and decide which relationships belong in its first phase.



photo: Jaakko Jylhä - DEED Creative

Towards the end of the workshop, Immie summarised several practical lessons that had emerged both from Arcadia's experience and from the afternoon's discussions:

"Successful partnerships begin with an issue that matters to both sides, rather than with a funding opportunity.

Whether addressing climate adaptation, loneliness, local identity, ageing or public health, the artistic project responds to an issue that already matters to another sector. The strongest collaborations are built not around money but around care: for public space, for ageing communities, for health, for memory, for belonging. When artistic projects begin with these shared concerns, financial support becomes one element within a broader and more resilient partnership. For performing arts organisations facing uncertain funding, such relationships can provide a broader and more sustainable base for their work.

Partnerships require time.

Trust develops through conversation, curiosity and a willingness to understand another organisation's objectives before proposing solutions. Long-term relationships prove more valuable than one-off collaborations. Successful partnerships evolve through repeated encounters, allowing organisations to develop mutual confidence and gradually expand the scope of their work together.

Keep your soul.

Throughout the workshop, participants referred to artists not as beneficiaries of funding but as professionals who contribute imagination, participation, emotional engagement and new ways of thinking - qualities that partner organisations may not be able to generate through their usual ways of working. At the same time, collaboration should never come at the expense of artistic integrity. Ecosystem thinking does not ask artists to adapt their work to the priorities of other sectors or become service providers - it encourages them to recognise the unique value they bring, identify where genuine interests overlap, and build partnerships of equals. In this way, resilience grows from networks of trust, shared knowledge and long-term collaboration and not from dependence on secured funding sources."

CULTURAL WORK IN THE AGE OF MACHINES: DEFINING HUMAN VALUE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

This chapter is based on the session *Cultural Work in the Age of Machines: Value, Financial Resilience and Digital Practice*.

This workshop explored what it means to make and sustain cultural work as digital technologies and AI become increasingly embedded in artistic practice. It focused on four connected themes: value beyond live performance, artists as micro-enterprises and new digital business models, AI in creative production, and the ecosystems and partnerships that support cultural work.

Facilitator: Dr. Kadja Manninen, Researcher in Digital Innovation, UK


photo: Jaakko Jylhä - DEED Creative

Artificial intelligence is already part of everyday cultural work, yet this session, facilitated by Dr. Kadja Manninen, demonstrated that the most important questions surrounding AI are not technological but cultural. Rather than asking what artificial intelligence can do, participants repeatedly returned to a more fundamental question: **what remains uniquely human in the performing arts?**

Value before technology

Too often, organisations approach technology by asking which tools they should adopt. Instead, Kadja Manninen proposed starting with a different question: **What value does this particular tool bring to the organisation?**

Drawing on the concept of digital business models, she argued that value in the performing arts extends far beyond financial sustainability. Cultural organisations create artistic, social, educational, community and economic value. Digital technologies should be judged by how they strengthen or weaken these forms of value, not by their novelty or effectiveness; they are a means of creating and sustaining value, not an end in themselves.

Throughout the workshop, Kadja returned to one principle: **start with the artistic question and only then consider whether technology helps answer it.**

Several international examples illustrated this approach. Projects such as Darkfield, Fheel Concepts or Lumo Company, VR-based performances, use technology to create artistic experiences that would not exist otherwise. Other initiatives like Nederlands Dans Theater demonstrate how digital tools can strengthen organisations internally by preserving choreographic knowledge, supporting archives, or enabling new forms of collaboration between artists, researchers and technology developers. Across these examples, technology functioned not as an end in itself but as a means of expanding artistic practice, organisational resilience and new partnership models.

What cannot be replaced?

The workshop took an unexpected turn when participants began questioning whether technological innovation should become a goal at all. One theatre director reflected on the rapid digitalisation of theatres during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that despite significant investment in streaming and online formats, these experiments rarely reproduced what audiences actually value most. People do not come to the theatre simply to consume content. They come to share time and physical space with performers and with one another.

This intervention shifted the discussion away from digital tools towards a reflection on the nature of live performance. Several participants argued that co-presence is not merely one characteristic of theatre

but its defining artistic quality. If performers and audiences no longer gather together in the same place and time, something meaningful may still be created, but perhaps it would be another artistic form, not theatre itself.

Kadja acknowledged the validity of this position. She emphasised that digital work should not be judged according to whether it successfully imitates live performance. What is worth exploring is whether it creates different forms of artistic value that deserve to be evaluated on their own terms. The discussion therefore did not become a debate between supporters and opponents of technology but rather a debate about what performing arts seek to preserve while continuing to experiment.

AI as a tool, not a substitute

Hardly any participants reported using AI directly in artistic creation. They reported employing it to translate texts, summarise documents, organise notes, search email correspondence, proofread applications or prepare first drafts of administrative documents. One practical example was the Synthetic Customer Persona, an AI-based tool that allows users to rehearse customer discovery conversations with a fictional but responsive persona. Participants were invited to try it: some experimented eagerly, others chose not to engage. Their mixed reactions reflected the sector's wider ambivalence towards AI and suggested that for now it may be gaining ground first in arts management rather than artistic creation. In that sense, AI may already be living in arts management, even if it has not yet made it onto the stage.

Many participants drew a clear distinction between assistance and substitution. Artificial intelligence was welcomed when it reduced repetitive administrative work and created more time for creative practice, yet unreliable for tasks that require artistic judgement, personal motivation or authentic communication. The concern was not that machines could write better than humans, but that they multiply generic forms of expression.

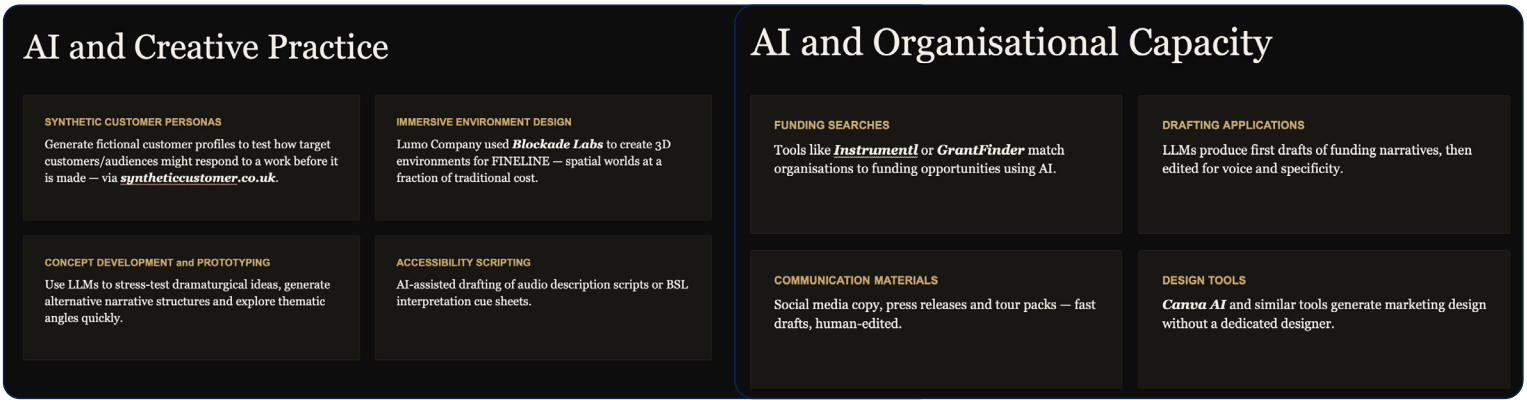
Human judgement as cultural infrastructure

Participants recognised the potential of AI-assisted translation, captioning and other accessibility tools, while also insisting that such technologies should be developed together with the communities expected to use them. "Do deaf people want AI generated sign language at live performances?", a performer asked. Decisions should not be driven solely by efficiency or cost, but by dialogue with users and by consideration of what kinds of human interaction remain essential.

If technology can automate many routine processes, where should human presence remain indispensable? Participants repeatedly returned to activities that rely on empathy, interpretation, trust and artistic intention: collaborating with artists, welcoming audiences, making curatorial choices, evaluating artistic quality and expressing creative motivation. AI may organise information and save time, but these forms of judgement continue to define the distinctive contribution of cultural professionals.

Technology reveals what matters

The workshop did not end with either enthusiasm for AI or resistance to it. Technology may transform how cultural work is produced, organised and shared, and AI is likely to become increasingly embedded in the sector. As the previous cross-sector workshop demonstrated, resilience depends on relationships and ecosystems; this discussion suggested that, in the digital age, it also depends on understanding the unique contribution of artists and cultural organisations. The challenge is not simply whether to adopt it, but how to do so without losing sight of the values that give cultural work its meaning. Technology cannot define its purpose. That remains the responsibility of artists themselves.



Presentation slides from the session *Cultural work in the age of machines: defining human value in the digital era*

FUNDING ARCHITECTURE: HOW FINANCIAL DESIGN SHAPES CULTURAL VALUE

This chapter is based on the session *Beyond the Grant: Alternative Financial Tools and the Politics of Value*.

The workshop introduced participants to a wider spectrum of financing models such as recoverable grants, revenue-based finance and equity-style instruments, and explored their potential application within the cultural sector. Through case-based examples and interactive exercises, it examined how different financial mechanisms, when adapted to culture, shape what kinds of artistic work become possible, how value and impact are defined, and where financial risk sits.

Facilitator: Çağıl Özdemir, 3dots, Türkiye/Germany

Most discussions about cultural funding focus on one question: how can the sector secure more resources? This workshop, facilitated by Çağıl Özdemir, approached the issue from a different angle. Public grants remain indispensable, but every funding mechanism also reflects assumptions about what kinds of cultural work deserve support, how success is measured and who carries the financial risk. The workshop invited participants to examine funding not only as a source of money but also as an architecture that shapes artistic practice.

The session began with a simulation that brought a lot of fun and excitement. Participants assumed different roles within a fictional funding programme: applicants, jurors, administrators and observers. Four fictional projects competed for a fixed pot of €100,000 that could not cover all their requests: a loss-making rural tour, a participatory project focused on social cohesion, an open-source digital platform for hybrid formats, and a long-term community archive with no commercial return. Each applicant had only a few minutes to present a proposal, while juries had to make difficult decisions under time pressure using a predefined set of contradictory assessment criteria. Such a common real-life situation.

The exercise revealed that funding decisions are rarely based on artistic quality alone. Prior to the projects being presented, some jurors had already formed assumptions about which types of proposals would require larger


photo: Jaakko Jylhä - DEED Creative

budgets or appear more innovative. Some presentations were more persuasive than others, despite similar project quality. Administrators occasionally influenced the discussion beyond their procedural role, while observers noted that the predefined criteria often guided decisions more strongly than the projects themselves. Participants acted thoughtfully and in good faith, yet the outcomes frequently felt arbitrary.

These observations became the foundation for the workshop's central argument. **When funding systems repeatedly produce similar results, the problem may not lie with applicants or evaluators but with the design of the funding programme itself.** Criteria are never neutral. They make certain forms of cultural work visible while pushing others to the margins. Projects built around continuity, community relationships or long-term cultural care may struggle within funding schemes that prioritise novelty, measurable innovation, substantial outreach or rapid growth. At the same time, experimental digital initiatives or commercially oriented projects may fit these criteria more easily, regardless of their deeper cultural significance.

To open up alternatives to conventional grant schemes, Çağıl walked participants through three cases, set in Türkiye, Kosovo and the Aegean, each distributing responsibility and risk differently.

A recoverable grant pilot, designed by 3dots and Alethina Impact for performing arts organisations in Türkiye, begins as a conventional grant. If a project generates a financial surplus and reaches agreed milestones, part of the funding is returned to the programme and becomes available for future beneficiaries. If no surplus is generated, the support remains a grant. The model shares financial risk between the funder and the organisation while allowing resources to circulate within the sector.

A second example, **a UNDP Kosovo programme on which Çağıl worked as an expert**, supported small cultural and creative enterprises through matching grants and business development. It focused on

strengthening organisations through market development, internationalisation and organisational capacity, recognising that cultural organisations also create employment and local economic activity. Yet the same logic has a blind spot: work that is non-commercial, experimental or informal slips out of view because the template simply cannot see it.

The third case, the **Bozcaada Viticulture Fund**, moved furthest from grant-making. Developed by 3dots in partnership with Alethina, the fund is inspired by challenges facing the island's historic wine-growing community and explores **Bozcaada's community ownership as a funding mechanism**. Much of its design, including its governance, is still being developed. Instead of financing individual projects through temporary philanthropic donations, the model operates on a standard, co-designed recoverable grant framework that protects shared cultural assets and reinvests returns into the long-term continuity of the local ecosystem. Value is understood not as growth or financial return but as stewardship across generations.

The funding spectrum

Most tools sit between a pure gift and full ownership, and none is neutral — each makes some kinds of work easier to fund and others harder.

Model	Main idea	Where risk sits
Grant	Gift	Funder
Recoverable grant	Repay only if surplus is generated	Split between funder and organisation
Enterprise template	Matching grants plus business support	Shifted toward the market
Revenue-based finance	Repayment linked to revenue	Applicant, through revenue share
Outcome contract	Investors finance measurable social outcomes	Investors, against agreed outcomes
Blended finance	Public/ philanthropic money reduces investor risk	Layered; public money absorbs losses first
Community ownership	Shared stewardship of common assets	Held in common

Although these models differ considerably, the workshop did not present them as replacements for grants. Each responds to a particular type of cultural activity and carries its own assumptions about value, ownership and risk. The workshop concluded with five reflections that apply equally to funders, policymakers and applicants.

First, **audit the design, not the people**. In the simulation, administrators, jurors and applicants all acted rationally and in good faith, yet the outcome was still distorted. When good people produce bad outcomes, the design is the suspect.

Second, **design determines output**. A fund selects the work that fits its shape, not necessarily the best work. And because the fund does not bend, applicants do: they adjust their work to the fund, rather than the fund to the work.

Third, **criteria are never neutra**l. Every criterion makes some work fundable and other work invisible. Projects built around continuity, community relationships or long-term cultural care may struggle within funding schemes that prioritise novelty, measurable innovation, substantial outreach or rapid growth.

Fourth, **risk placement is a choice**. A classic grant leaves all the risk with the funder; a recoverable grant shares it with the organisation; the enterprise template shifts it toward the market; community ownership holds it in common. The same money, organised by a different logic, produces different winners.

Finally, **funding structures are architectures of power**. Someone decides what counts as value, who carries the risk and which questions appear on the application form, and with them, which cultural futures become possible. The session left participants with a question to bring to their next call for applications, on either side of the table: What does this design make easy, and what does it quietly make impossible?

The session closed with a micro-charter: each table agreed on one sentence stating the single principle they would not compromise on if they designed the fund, completing the line "We would never fund work that…". Even a single sentence made the point concrete: if funding is designed, it can be redesigned. Taken together, these arguments extend the broader discussions that ran throughout the IETM Plenary Meeting. If advocacy requires stronger cultural ecosystems, and resilience depends on meaningful partnerships and clearly articulated artistic values, funding mechanisms must also evolve. The challenge is no longer simply to increase investment in culture, but to design financial tools that recognise the diversity of artistic practice instead of expecting every organisation to fit a single model.

THE SOLUTIONS NEED TO EMERGE WITHIN THE SECTOR

The session entitled *Shrinking Space for Cross-Border Collaboration*, mentioned at the beginning of this report, aimed at finding new models in a joint dialogue with participants, something which is at the core of IETM's advocacy ethos. Co-hosts Elena Polivtseva and Ása Richardsdóttir identified three trends as particularly urgent for the performing arts sector: the decreasing value attributed to the arts in political agendas, shrinking funding, and growing political pressure.

The aim of the joint exercise was to outline the most necessary, relevant, realistic and effective strategies for the performing arts sector to overcome these trends.

Trend	Current response	*Alternative strategies*
Decreased **value** attributed to the arts in political agendas	Instrumentalising the arts by emphasising their value in other policy fields	
Shrinking **funding**	Increased competition for short-term smaller grants	
Political pressure	Self-censorship	

Participants were asked to move beyond describing these conditions and explore what the sector could do collectively to respond to them with alternative strategies. The starting point was deliberately open: groups were encouraged to share strategies they considered necessary and effective, along with examples from their own practice, and to consider whether existing responses could be developed further or whether entirely new approaches were needed.

The second part of the exercise was intended to turn discussion into action. Each group was asked to outline at least one concrete strategy, defining its objectives, the actions required from the sector, and the resources and capacities needed to implement it. Participants were also invited to consider where their proposed approach would sit on a scale from responsive to transformative, and groups could develop several complementary approaches if a single strategy did not fit their discussion. The final presentations were then meant to allow the room to reflect on the balance between immediate responses and more transformative forms of action.

Decreased value attributed to the arts in political agendas

The groups discussing the declining value attributed to the arts questioned whether the sector should continue relying on arguments about the economic and social benefits of culture. One strand proposed working with the existing political language of instrumentalisation, while shifting attention towards the particular capacities of artistic practice: imagination, care, storytelling, creating spaces for dialogue and helping communities imagine alternatives in times of crisis. Examples from Türkiye and Ukraine illustrated how cultural activity can mobilise communities, create political pressure and communicate experiences that are difficult to express through other means. The discussion also pointed towards stronger alliances with education, environmental movements, human rights organisations and local communities, with the aim of creating constituencies beyond the cultural sector that recognise and advocate for the role of the arts.

Another direction was more direct political engagement. Participants mentioned entering political structures, working with civil servants as well as elected politicians, creating permanent spaces for dialogue and critical thinking, and using cultural organisations as platforms for international cultural relations. The examples ranged from taking legal action against cultural authorities and developing policy from within political parties to declaring an organisation a "European cultural embassy" and proposing cultural ambassadors. These approaches also pointed to the importance of building public support and making the sector's existing political and social agency more visible. In this context, IETM's own engagement with the European Union, through political dialogue and campaigns for policy change, provides a relevant example. A key question is how this knowledge and experience can be shared more directly with the IETM membership.

Shrinking funding and Increased competition for short-term smaller grants

The discussion on shrinking funding produced the widest range of ideas. Participants proposed reducing competition between organisations by experimenting with alternative allocation systems, simplifying application procedures and widening access to funding. Other suggestions included cultural taxation, tax incentives, cultural wallets, taxation of wealth or AI-driven technologies, basic income, support for collaboration with commercial sectors, subsidised mobility, and investment structures that would return part of the cultural value created in a city or community to the cultural sector. The discussion also touched on organisations owning their own spaces as a way of gaining greater independence from changing public policies.

The discussion also raised an ethical question around alternative sources of money: new funding can create new dependencies and dilemmas, particularly when its origins or conditions conflict with the values of the organisations receiving it. With public resources becoming more limited, the group nevertheless emphasised the importance of continuing international collaboration, building trust with partners who share common values, supporting colleagues in countries with fewer resources, and maintaining physical encounters even when only very small-scale collaboration is possible.

Political pressure and Self-censorship

The discussions on political pressure centred heavily on the relationship between self-censorship, collective action and resilience. Participants described the need to move from individual and reactive responses towards stronger communities across artistic disciplines and sectors. Collective voices, shared values and solidarity were seen as ways of reducing the vulnerability of individual organisations and practitioners. Other ideas included maintaining international networks, connecting with journalists and media outside the cultural field, and developing more decentralised forms of collective representation in which responsibility and visibility are not concentrated in a single leader.

The groups also explored more pragmatic ways of navigating difficult political environments. One suggestion was to acknowledge the changed political context and adapt organisations' activities accordingly, while leaving room for political action that may be less visible but remains clearly intentional. Participants stressed, however, that organisations need to recognise when such adaptation begins to compromise their values, principles and identity.

The most revealing outcome of the exercise may have been what did not happen. None of the groups reached the final stage of defining a fully developed strategy with clear objectives, concrete actions and the resources and capacities required for implementation. This was not simply a matter of insufficient time or lack of ideas, as an abundance of ideas were shared. The difficulty was in moving from this abundance of possibilities towards a shared choice. In several groups, participants themselves acknowledged that they had not selected one strategy, had not reached the question of implementation, or were presenting a mixture of approaches rather than a single solution.

This could be read as a limitation of the exercise, but it may also point to something important about advocacy in the current cultural environment. The three problems presented to the groups are deeply interconnected: declining political recognition of the arts makes funding harder to defend; shrinking resources increase competition and weaken collective capacity; political pressure can make organisations more cautious precisely when stronger collective advocacy is needed. The proposed responses are similarly interdependent, and some of them involve difficult choices about values, ethics, political engagement and institutional independence.

The IETM Advocacy School, starting in November 2026, will provide a space in which IETM members can stay with these questions for longer: identify advocacy actions and policy changes participants want to work on, develop them through peer-to-peer learning, identify shared policy needs across countries and contexts, and develop their own roadmaps for action of strategic advocacy.



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