



Ad Libitum, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille – Le Gymnase CDCN © David Le Borgne

# Policy Paper Cross-Border Collaborations in the Performing Arts

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## About the Performing Arts Coalition (PAC)

The Performing Arts Coalition (PAC) is a platform for European and international performing arts networks to collaborate on advocacy for the performing arts, conducting joint actions and research, exchanging knowledge, and pooling resources. Our mission is to strengthen the role of the performing arts in society by advocating for policies that recognise their unique value. PAC was founded in 2025 by ASSITEJ - International Association of Theatre and Performing Arts for Children and Young People, Circostrada - European Network for contemporary circus and outdoor arts, EDN - European Dance Development Network, EFA - European Festivals Association, and IETM - International network for contemporary performing arts. **The joint membership of the networks is based in over 90 countries of the world counting over a thousand of organisations and professionals.**



## About this Paper

This policy paper aims to inform policymakers and funders about key trends and needs in the performing arts field in relation to cross-border collaboration. It highlights the most pressing gaps in current funding systems, as well as the types of support most urgently required. The paper offers recommendations on how international collaboration can be reimagined, strengthened, and sustained in the context of the world as it stands in 2026.

With a focus on Europe — and in particular on the EU's future programme for the cultural and creative sectors, AgoraEU (the Creative Europe-Culture strand), proposed by the European Commission as part of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034 — this document puts forward both visionary and practical ideas on how EU cultural funding can play a transformative role in advancing global cultural engagement, solidarity, and exchange.

This document draws on insights from 153 members of five international performing arts networks: ASSITEJ – International Association of Theatre and Performing Arts for Children and Young People; Circostrada – European Network for Contemporary Circus and Outdoor Arts; EDN – European Dance Development Network; EFA – European Festivals Association; and IETM – International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts. Together, these networks form the Performing Arts Coalition (PAC), an initiative established in 2025 to conduct research and advocacy aimed at strengthening the position of the performing arts at the EU level.

# Performing Arts as a Cross-Border Democratic Infrastructure

The performing arts stand as one of society's most powerful forces to inspire artistic imagination and foster democratic values, personal development, wellbeing, critical thinking, and inspiring visions of a better world. Theatre, dance, circus, and performance serve as vital catalysts for social progress, individual growth, and collective transformation that ripple through communities and generations. They foster the assembly of citizens and provide tools for communities to engage in dialogue, bringing forward concerns and feelings that might otherwise be excluded from social discourse and political debate. Civic engagement stimulated by performing arts creates the essential conditions for democratic societies<sup>01</sup>. Moreover, the performing arts sector is one of the largest employers among the creative sectors, providing more than 1.2 million jobs in the European Union (EU)<sup>02</sup>.

The cross-border dimension is intrinsic to the performing arts<sup>03</sup>. At their core, arts in general are driven by a curiosity to explore new perspectives and expand artistic horizons, which naturally leads them beyond local and national boundaries. Collaboration across borders enables artists to exchange methods, aesthetics, and perspectives, which fuels innovation. Exposure to different cultural contexts challenges assumptions and enriches creative processes, leading to more diverse and experimental artistic outcomes.

For the performing arts field, this openness is not only an aesthetic and conceptual characteristic of artistic practice, but also a practical necessity. The performing arts sector relies on co-productions, international

collaborations, and the circulation of works and artists across countries. Producing performing arts — be it theatre, dance, circus, outdoor art, or interdisciplinary work — is resource-intensive. Co-productions allow organisations to share costs, risks, and infrastructure, making ambitious projects feasible that would be difficult to realise within a single national context.

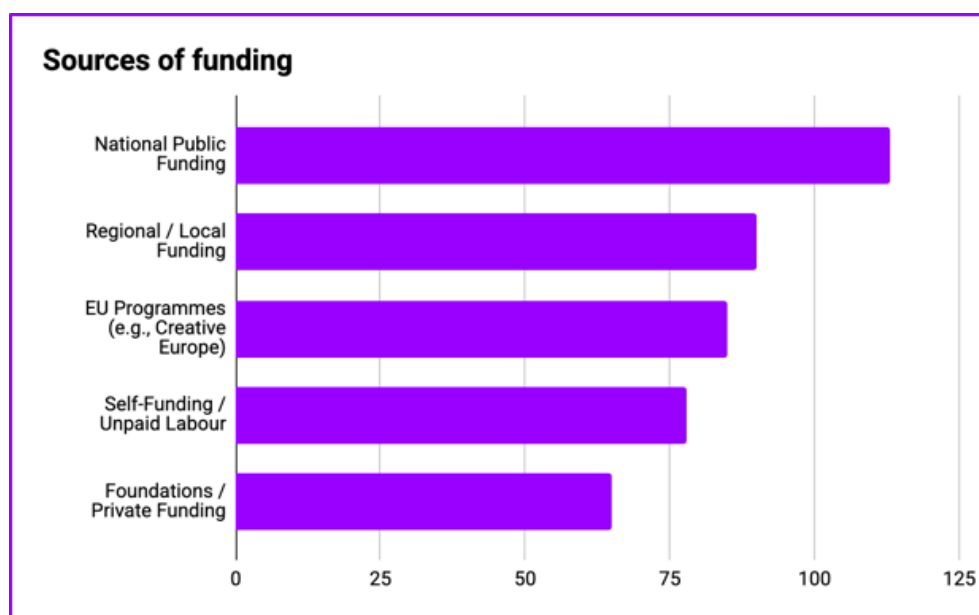
The sector also depends on opportunities for cross-border engagement and visibility. Unlike many other cultural forms, the performing arts are often ephemeral and live, meaning their impact relies on the moment of presentation and the immediacy of audience encounter. Touring and cross-border circulation are therefore essential to reach audiences, extend the lifespan of productions, and support financial sustainability.

Therefore, the performing arts sector is fundamentally built on cross-border exchange. What enables this is the universality of performing arts languages — movement, sound, presence, and visual expression — which can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers while remaining deeply rooted in specific contexts. This makes the performing arts both locally grounded and globally resonant, constantly evolving through interaction, adaptation, and reinterpretation across different cultural settings.

# Funding for Cross-Border Collaborations: the State of Play

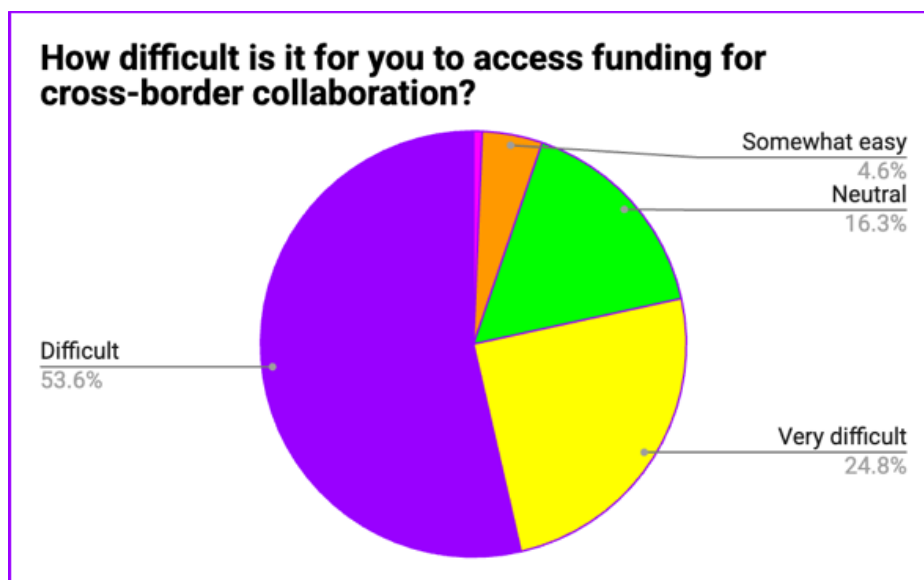
In early spring 2026, PAC circulated a survey on the needs and challenges in the field of cross-border cultural collaboration. The survey collected 153 responses — with 83% of respondents being based in the 41 countries taking part in Creative Europe (77% — in the EU). Around 68% of respondents represent organisations (companies, collectives, companies, dancehouse, theatres, festivals, umbrella organisations, and multidisciplinary venues), and 32% are freelancers.

The majority of survey respondents (113, which is 73%) benefit from the national funding, but a significant portion also rely on regional and local funding (90 respondents — 58%) and EU programmes (85 respondents — 56%). Around 43% (68 respondents) have also indicated ‘foundations / private funding’ as their finance source. Strikingly, more than half (78 respondents — 51%) of respondents rely on self-funding (see graph ‘Sources of funding’<sup>04</sup>).



There is currently no comprehensive data on the scale or forms of support dedicated to international cultural relations in Europe. Nor is there sufficient data to compare the current situation with that of five or ten years ago. However, testimonies from the field — both in this research and in previous studies<sup>05</sup> — are deeply concerning: cultural professionals report shrinking opportunities, growing competition, and increasing difficulty in sustaining international partnerships, particularly with partners outside Europe.

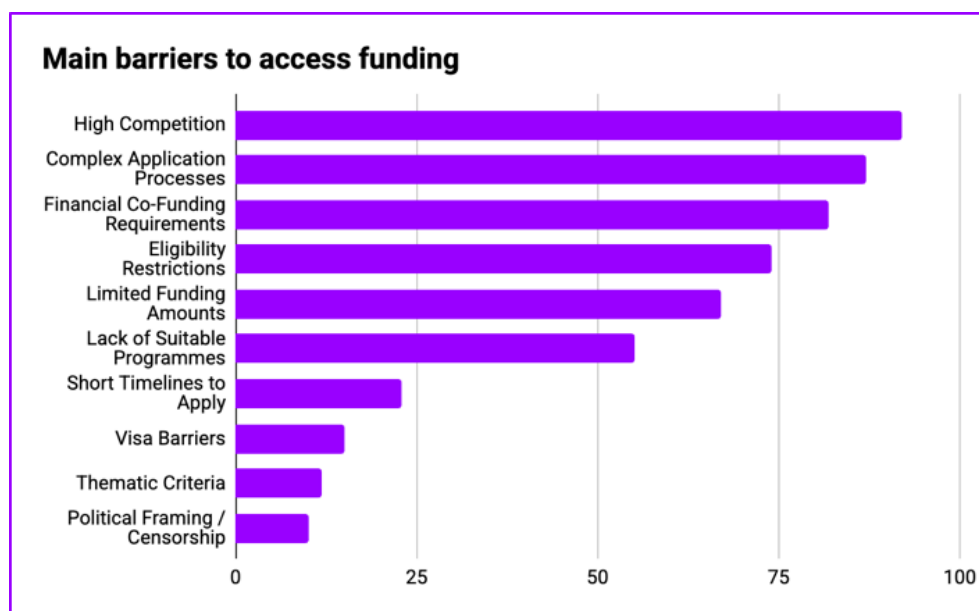
Specifically in the context of this survey, access to funding for cross-border collaborations is perceived as overwhelmingly challenging by respondents: 78.4% find access to funding ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’. Only 5.3% find it ‘easy’, and a relatively small group is neutral (16%) (see graph ‘How difficult is it for you to access funding for cross-border collaboration?’).



Several barriers to funding access were highlighted by respondents (see also graph ‘Main barriers to access funding’<sup>06</sup>).

1. The most dominant barrier is the **combination of limited funding and high competition**. There is overwhelming feedback that opportunities for cross-border collaboration have become extremely limited, while the needs in the sector have only increased — as there is overall more interest and need in cross-border engagement. As inflation rises and national cultural budgets shrink, applications increase and competition intensifies. Funding levels no longer reflect real costs, and grants often fail to cover actual budgets. As a result, teams shrink, and remaining staff take on heavier workloads while expanding activities, often leading to burnouts and a decline in quality. Respondents describe a structural imbalance between the number of applicants and the resources available. Creative Europe is mentioned frequently as an example: applications may receive very high scores and still fail, making the process feel risky and disproportionate to the potential outcome. This is intensified by declining national and local cultural budgets, which push more organisations towards the same limited funding streams.
2. Closely linked to this is the **complexity of application processes**. Many respondents describe funding applications as bureaucratic, technical, time-consuming, and difficult to manage without dedicated staff or professional grant writers. Even when funding is secured, the effort required to obtain it is often disproportionate to the scale of the support provided. This is particularly problematic for small organisations, freelancers, artist-led companies, and organisations where artists themselves also carry administrative responsibilities. Some respondents describe EU funding as especially complex and distant from artistic realities in this sense.
3. Many organisations **lack the capacity** — the staff, expertise, language skills, financial systems, or administrative infrastructure needed not only to apply but **to manage international funding**. Some respondents stress that cross-border funding requires not only artistic ideas, but also complex partnership-building, risk management, financial management, and legal-administrative knowledge — expertise that is rarely funded in themselves.

4. **Co-funding requirements** are another major barrier. Many organisations struggle to secure the required match funding, particularly where national or local support is weak, delayed, declining, or non-existent. Several respondents also stress that the problem is not only co-funding itself, but cash flow: payments arriving late, reimbursement models, and the need to pre-finance activities place significant financial risk on already fragile organisations.
5. **Eligibility restrictions** emerge as a highly significant barrier. Respondents mention exclusions based on country, administrative status, organisational type, legal form, age, career stage, and institutional affiliation. Brexit appears repeatedly as a major turning point for UK-based respondents, who describe having lost an important — and in some cases the only — source of support for cross-border collaborations. Some respondents underline that national funders are increasingly less willing to support artists from other countries or to fund collaboration with them, leaving essential parts of cross-border projects to be self-funded. Such eligibility frameworks do not reflect the realities of transnational artistic lives, hybrid careers, diasporic practices, and collaborations between Europe and the wider world. For example, several respondents based in or working with partners in Africa, South America, the Middle East, India, and other non-European contexts highlight the lack of programmes that support genuinely reciprocal global collaboration rather than ‘cultural diplomacy’ projects shaped mainly by European funding and political priorities.

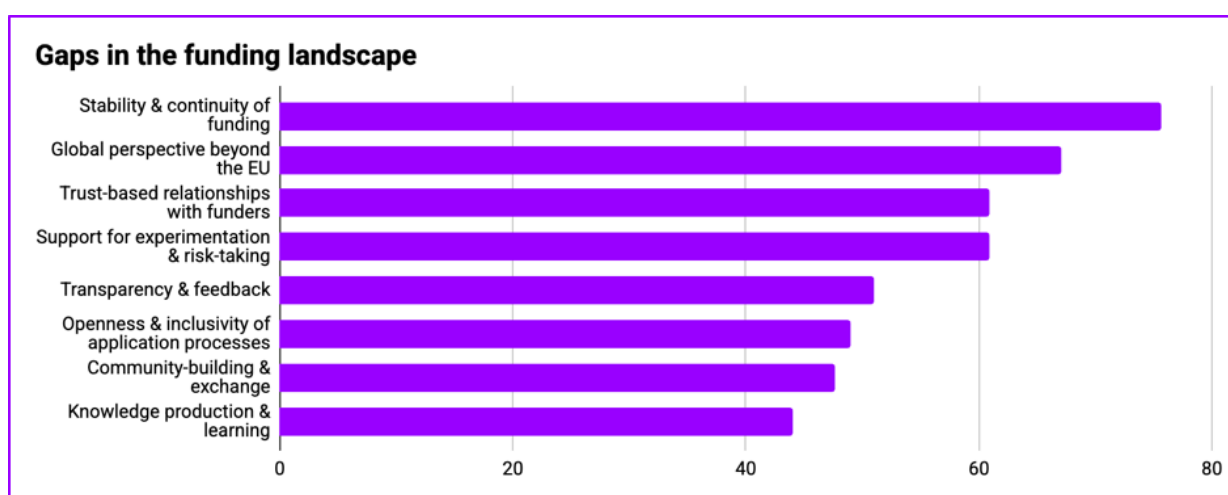


6. This is closely related to another dominant issue — the **lack of suitable programmes**. Many respondents argue that available schemes do not match the actual needs of performing arts collaboration. Some programmes are too prescriptive in terms of topics and processes, too risk-averse, focused on outputs at the cost of meaningful engagements with communities and contexts, too large-scale, or too dependent on multi-country structures. Only a minimal fraction of programmes fund smaller exchanges, early-stage relationship-building, touring, research, experimentation, or direct support to freelancers. One key challenge is the ‘project disease’ in the funding landscape, which compels artists and organisations to move from one project to the next without the ability to build long-term continuity or meaningful links between their activities.
7. The responses also reveal strong concerns about **asymmetries of power in international collaboration**. Funding is often concentrated in Europe or the Global North, requiring a European lead partner, fiscal host, or institutional intermediary. This can mean that European actors set the agenda, define the language, shape the timeline, and control the budget, while partners from the Global South are positioned as ‘voices’, ‘beneficiaries’, or implementers rather than equal co-creators.

8. **Visa and mobility barriers** are another important, though less frequently mentioned, obstacle. Respondents describe visa processes as expensive, unpredictable, and administratively burdensome. Visa costs are often excluded from eligible expenses, creating a financial risk for partners who require visas to cross national borders as part of the project. Some respondents also note that European venues and festivals may avoid programming artists who require visas, indirectly excluding artists from Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and other regions. This trend may intensify as migration policies become more restrictive.
9. **Political framing, censorship, and content restrictions** appear as less frequent but highly serious concerns. Some respondents describe funding priorities as politically shaped, ideologically narrow, and disconnected from artistic realities. The space to appreciate performing arts for what it is, without a thematic framing, has become extremely thin. Some art forms, such as dance, are particularly excluded from funding programmes that are strongly focused on political or social topics. Other respondents refer to censorship, self-censorship, or the impossibility of addressing certain topics due to political pressures.

Overall, several responses point out that the current funding system often undermines the very collaboration it aims to support. Short timelines and intensified focus on final outputs do not allow relationships to develop. Competitive calls encourage organisations to compete rather than collaborate and take time for creating a truly resilient and strong community. Project-based funding prevents continuity. Thematic criteria push artists to adapt their work to funder language. Limited grants do not cover the real costs of mobility, labour, access, administration, or care. As a result, cross-border collaboration becomes possible mainly for those who already have resources, networks, institutional stability, and administrative capacity.

When it comes to gaps in current support systems, respondents highlight structural issues such as the lack of stability and continuity in funding, insufficient global perspectives beyond the EU, limited trust-based relationships with funders, and inadequate support for experimentation and risk-taking, among others (see graph '*Gaps in the funding landscape*'<sup>07</sup>). Stability and continuity emerge as the most critical gaps, followed by the need for a stronger global outlook in funding priorities and modalities, as well as more open-ended, trust-based processes and dedicated spaces for experimentation and risk-taking.

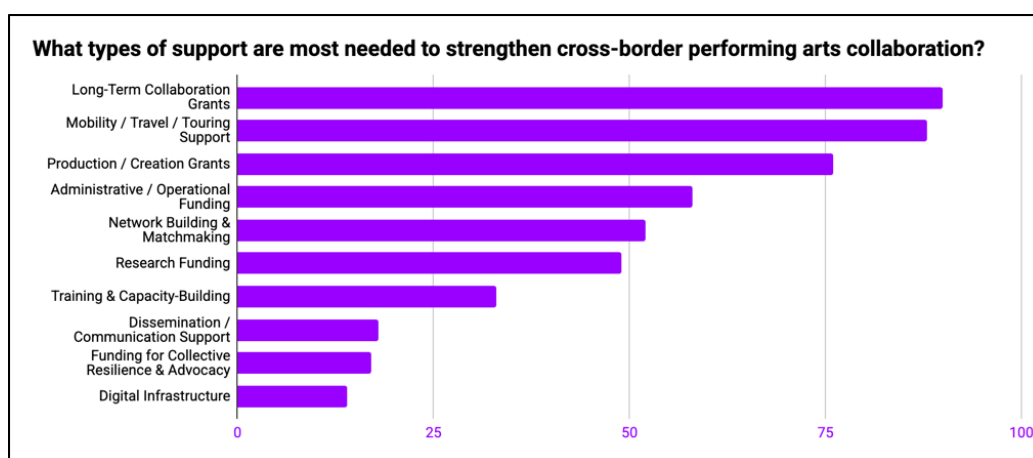


# Funding Models for Cross-Border Practice

According to respondents, current funding often separates research, creation, mobility, administration, touring, and dissemination into different schemes, forcing organisations to patch together multiple applications and reporting obligations. Respondents call instead for more holistic funding models that support the full cycle of collaboration. The strongest needs are therefore financial, structural — time, continuity, mobility, operational capacity, and trust, and systemic — in a possibility to access balanced and continuous funding landscapes in which various needs are addressed. It is also essential that entry conditions are proportionate to the benefits offered within each support model — ranging from small-scale, easily accessible grants to more complex schemes that justifiably provide longer-term and larger-scale support. The following funding models were identified as the most suited for cross-border collaborations in the performing arts (see also the graph *'What types of support are most needed to strengthen cross-border performing arts collaboration?'*<sup>08</sup>):

1. The strongest demand is for **long-term, multi-year collaboration** funding, supporting relationship-building and development of programmes or permanent collaboration structures. Respondents repeatedly stress that meaningful cross-border work cannot be built through short project cycles, as its key ingredients — trust, shared methods, artistic risk, and mutual understanding — take time and require open-ended and process-centred approaches. Current funding often supports one-off projects, festival appearances, or short exchanges, but not the slow and future-oriented development of partnerships. For many, this creates a loss of professional relationships and accumulated knowledge. What is being asked for is not simply longer funding cycles, but a shift toward **funding that supports processes and ecosystems rather than individual projects and isolated outputs**.
2. **Mobility, travel, and touring support** is the second major need. Physical presence remains essential in the performing arts: for rehearsals, co-creation, touring, networking, and audience development. There is a clear emphasis on the need to support **sustainable mobility** — enabling professionals to build deeper connections with places and partners when touring and co-producing work, while placing sustainability at the heart of artistic collaboration and favouring greener modes of travel. Respondents underline that mobility costs have risen sharply, while visa costs, accommodation, transport, and subsistence are often insufficiently covered. Mobility is also framed as an equity issue: without dedicated support, only those with resources, strong passports, or institutional backing can participate internationally, which undermines the very notion of reciprocity and reinforces current inequalities.
3. **Production and creation grants** remain central. Several respondents stress that, even if not guaranteed and not always the case, cross-border collaboration often ultimately aims to result in artistic work, and that artists need time and resources to research, rehearse, produce, and present work properly — having sufficient space for experiment and risk-taking. There is frustration that cross-border funding often supports surrounding activities, but not the core creative process.
4. **Administrative and operational funding** is also seen as crucial. Cross-border collaboration requires substantial invisible labour: budgeting, contracts, visas, coordination, reporting, communication, partner management, and financial administration. This work is often carried out by already overstretched teams. Respondents stress that without operational capacity, even strong artistic ideas cannot be developed or delivered sustainably; at the same time, operational activities, without dedicated support, distract artists and organisations from their core artistic processes.

5. **Network-building and matchmaking** are described as the entry point to collaboration. Many respondents stress that global partnerships require repeated, physical encounters, joint activities, space for collective exploration of collaboration opportunities and preparation of projects. Support for networking and relationship-building is especially important for smaller organisations, freelancers, artists from less-connected regions, and those outside established European circuits. At the same time, networking is valuable only if supported by resources for research, mobility, and long-term collaboration.
6. Several respondents emphasise that research is the foundation of artistic practice, especially in cross-border work. However, **research funding** is repeatedly described as one of the weakest parts of the system. Artistic research, experimentation, residencies, and early-stage inquiry are essential to meaningful creation, but difficult to fund because they do not always produce immediate outputs.



7. **Training and capacity-building** are valued in connection to most pressing needs: fundraising, international project management, digital skills, disability access, intercultural collaboration, mediation, and economic resilience. Respondents do not present training as a substitute for funding, but as a support layer that helps actors navigate complex systems.
8. There is a clear need to strengthen **disability support** within international collaborations in the performing arts. Cross-border projects involve additional logistical, financial, and administrative barriers that disproportionately affect cultural workers with disabilities — from inaccessible travel and venues to the lack of funding for access needs such as interpreters, personal assistants, or adapted working conditions. To ensure truly inclusive collaboration, funding programmes must systematically include dedicated access budgets, recognising access costs as essential and support disabled artistic leadership.
9. Funding for platforms for **collective resilience, solidarity, advocacy, and mutual support** is mentioned less often, but carries strong political significance. Respondents connect it to the need for stronger advocacy for culture, support for associations and networks, and collective responses to shrinking resources, censorship, precarious labour, and democratic pressure.
10. **Digital infrastructure** is the least selected mainstream support type, but respondents still identify specific needs: digital collaboration tools, access for disabled artists, hybrid residencies, and alternatives to travel. Importantly, digital tools are not seen as replacing physical encounters, but as widening access and complementing mobility.

When it comes to the key characteristics of funding models that meet the needs of the performing arts sector working across borders, there is a clear demand for **balanced, adaptable, and holistic approaches**.

- A dominant critique is that current funding frameworks are too fragmented, overly competitive, and focused on short-term outputs rather than on the conditions that make artistic work possible. What is needed instead is a balanced model that supports the **infrastructures of collaboration** — including relationships, research phases, and capacity-building — alongside their tangible outputs. Funding should therefore also cover the often ‘invisible’ dimensions of collaboration, such as coordination, administration, travel constraints, and contextual differences.
- Cross-border collaboration, in particular, involves complex realities, including mobility barriers, visa restrictions, and uneven infrastructures. In a context marked by global tensions, instability, and multiple overlapping crises — environmental, geopolitical, economic, and democratic — such collaborations carry a high degree of unpredictability and risk. Funding models must therefore become more flexible and responsive. This should be reflected in application processes that allow for long-term visions without requiring overly fixed outputs or impacts, as well as in a **trust-based relationship between funders** and beneficiaries, enabling justified adaptations as projects evolve in response to changing circumstances and emerging needs.

According to survey respondents, a **balanced combination of four funding streams** would provide a strong foundation for sustainable and flexible cross-border partnerships:

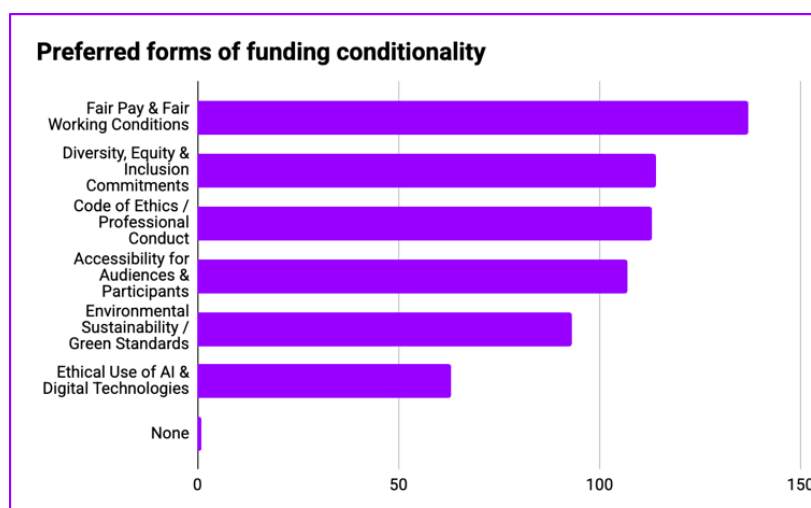
1. At the core of this vision is the need for **multi-year and structural funding**. One-off, time-limited grants may initiate projects, but they rarely allow initiatives and partnerships to mature. Thus, there is a strong need for funding that covers ongoing organisational costs, research phases, and long-term partnerships, enabling artists and organisations to build continuity and deepen their artistic ideas and relationships.
2. Alongside this, there is a strong emphasis on **seed funding and early-stage support**. Many contributors point out that the most innovative ideas emerge during exploratory phases that are currently underfunded or entirely unpaid. Supporting the development of ideas, experimentation, and relationship-building is therefore seen as essential, as it creates the foundation from which more structured and impactful projects can grow.
3. Another key need is the availability of **small-scale, purpose-specific flexible grants**. These are valued for their accessibility and responsiveness, particularly for grassroots organisations, rural contexts, and emerging artists. Such funding allows for testing collaborations, initiating exchanges, and responding to changing circumstances without the heavy administrative burden associated with large-scale programmes. At the same time, respondents stress that these smaller grants should not replace, but rather complement, more ambitious and long-term funding schemes, creating a balanced ecosystem.
4. A recurring concern is the need to fund careers and livelihoods, not only activities. Many responses highlight the precarious conditions faced by independent artists and small organisations, who often lack the resources to sustain their work between projects. There is therefore a strong call for funding models that directly support **artistic labour, creative time, and professional development**, rather than relying on trickle-down mechanisms through larger institutions or networks. These can include professional grants and fellowships awarded directly to artists, including those from other countries — their presence and professional engagement are often crucial for the development of local artistic communities and their international standing. Other forms of support needed in the sector include basic income schemes, downtime and unemployment allowances, and subsidies covering social security contributions.

# Funding Conditionality

Respondents are strongly convinced of the need to link public funding to compliance with conditions related to working practices, environmental standards, digital ethics, and other key areas. Fair pay and working conditions emerge overwhelmingly as the most important expected condition for public funding. Diversity, equity, and inclusion, ethics, accessibility, and sustainability also receive strong support, while AI and digital ethics, although relevant, are seen as less central. Notably, only one respondent believes that no such conditions should be imposed on beneficiaries.

Respondents suggest that these conditions should be implemented through a mix of **clear standards, adequate resources, proportionality, training, and accountability**, and embedded across the full funding cycle: in application guidelines, budgets, contracts, evaluation criteria, reporting, and final assessment. Key considerations for such conditionality integration include (see also the graph *'Preferred forms of funding conditionality'*<sup>09</sup>):

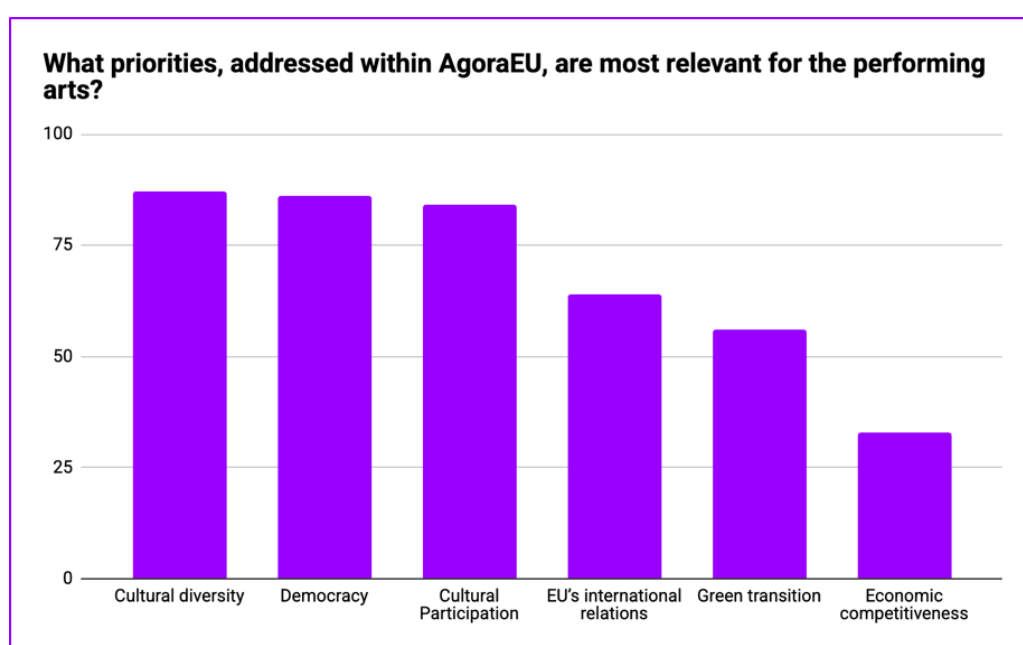
- **Fair pay should be integrated as a real budget condition.** There is a need for mandatory budget lines for artists' fees, minimum pay rates, written agreements on hours and remuneration, and protection of these lines from later cuts.
- Any type of conditionality, especially the one related to fair practice, requires **dedicated resources**. These should not be absorbed into already shrinking artistic budgets, but supported through ringfenced budgets, top-ups, or additional eligible costs.
- There is a need for **guidelines, templates, examples, and training** over heavy compliance procedures. Funders could provide model policies, simple checklists, access audits, environmental guidance, fair practice templates, and peer-learning opportunities. Support should be focused on development and improvement: helping organisations learn and improve instead of simply penalising them.
- A recurring caution is that implementation should avoid becoming another layer of bureaucracy. Respondents are wary of formalistic reporting that produces 'box-checking' answers without changing practice. The preferred approach includes clear expectations, practical support, transparent monitoring, and space for learning and improvement.
- Funders themselves must **model the standards they require**. This includes transparency, ethical conduct, responsiveness to complaints, fair treatment of applicants, and adequate support for the real costs of implementing these values.
- Many stress that conditionalities must be implemented in a **proportionate** way. Small artist-led groups and grassroots organisations should not be expected to meet the same requirements as large public institutions. Several respondents call for scalable expectations depending on the size of the grant and the capacity of the organisation.



# EU Funding for Culture – AgoraEU

## Guiding priorities: how the performing arts sector understands its role

The future AgoraEU programme is set to be one of the key instruments of implementing the EU’s new culture strategy – the *Culture Compass for Europe*, proposed by the European Commission in late 2025. The Compass positions culture as an essential driver of Europe’s future, in several dimensions, such as democracy and values, international relations, competitiveness, innovation, wellbeing, and green transition. We asked performing arts professionals how these various priorities are relevant for their work, and how AgoraEU can strengthen their role in these different fields (see the graph ‘What priorities, addressed within AgoraEU, are most relevant for the performing arts?’<sup>10</sup>).



At the top, there is a strong and almost unanimous cluster of social and cultural values. Cultural Diversity and Democracy lead, closely followed by Cultural Participation. The very high concentration of top scores and the near absence of low ratings show that the sector sees itself as fundamentally tied to democratic life, representation, inclusion, and public engagement. Respondents clearly highlight the multifaceted value of the performing arts, with many arguing that, in the current context, programmes like AgoraEU must both promote and make these values visible, while supporting the creative sectors in fulfilling them.

1. The dominant idea is that performing arts should be recognised as **democratic and civic infrastructure**. Many respondents frame live performance as a space where people meet, listen, disagree, recognise difference, and rehearse democratic life. In this sense, the performing arts help create the conditions for democratic societies to function. This is especially important in a context of polarisation, disinformation, authoritarian tendencies, war, and shrinking civic space. Several responses insist that cultural participation, freedom of expression, and access to artistic experience are foundational democratic rights.
2. A second strong theme is the need to understand performing arts as **social and educational infrastructure**, especially for children and young people. Respondents stress that cultural participation should begin early and that young audiences must not be treated as a niche. Performing arts are seen as a way to develop empathy, critical thinking, confidence, civic imagination, and intercultural understanding. This links culture with education, wellbeing, mental health, and community resilience — but again, respondents insist that this value emerges from artistic practice itself, not from externally imposed policy messaging.
3. International relations are also seen as a highly relevant field, but respondents tend to reject narrow models of cultural diplomacy or ‘soft power’. What they call for instead is **deep, trust-based, reciprocal transnational collaboration**. Performing arts can strengthen Europe’s global relations by enabling long-term exchange, co-creation, just mobility, and mutual learning across borders, including beyond Europe. Several responses point to the need to include artists, and networks from other continents, and to support collaborations grounded in equality rather than representation, export, or symbolic inclusion.
4. The green transition is recognised as important, but respondents are cautious about turning it into another compliance burden. The performing arts can contribute through sustainable production models, shared resources, reuse of sets and costumes, alternative touring models, residencies, digital or hybrid exchange, and ecological storytelling. However, several responses stress that sustainability must be supported structurally and fairly. **Green requirements should not become a new barrier**, especially for artists and organisations working in regions with weaker infrastructure or fewer resources.
5. Economic competitiveness is the most contested and least convincing policy frame. Some respondents acknowledge that the performing arts contribute to employment, innovation, professional development, and the cultural economy. But many reject competitiveness as a primary lens, arguing that it is alien to the deeper public value of culture. The stronger alternative framing is **economic sustainability for artists and organisations**, not competitiveness in a market sense. In other words, the sector does not ask to be made more competitive so much as to be made more viable, resilient, and fairly resourced.

Even if the responses show strong support for linking culture with broader policy areas, they underline this should happen only under one essential condition: **performing arts must not be reduced to an instrument for delivering external policy objectives**. Respondents repeatedly argue that the arts already contribute to democracy, participation, diversity, international relations, sustainability, and social cohesion — but precisely **when they operate as spaces of imagination, freedom, encounter, and critique**. The strategic task for AgoraEU is therefore not to instrumentalise the performing arts, but to create the conditions in which their civic, social, and artistic power can unfold.

Many respondents are wary of funding systems that tell artists what to address, how to be relevant, which values to perform, and how to understand the impact of their work. Some explicitly argue that linking culture too tightly to policy areas risks steering art, narrowing artistic freedom, and privileging projects that speak the language of funders rather than those with genuine artistic urgency. The recurring message is that AgoraEU should **support the capacity of the arts to engage with society, but not prescribe the outcomes of that engagement**.

Several practical implications follow. AgoraEU should strengthen performing arts through long-term funding, process-based support, fair pay, no-strings-attached mobility grants, residencies, co-creation, international partnerships, and support for independent actors. Cross-sectoral projects and synergies should be encouraged and developed, but not made a requirement for the arts sector to access funding. Respondents repeatedly argue that if the programme wants cultural impact across policy fields, it must fund the conditions that make this impact possible: time, trust, artistic freedom, research, rehearsal, touring, translation, accessibility, and community engagement.

# Towards a Future-Proof and Relevant AgoraEU<sup>11</sup>

## 1. Fair and guaranteed funding.

By merging with the CERV programme and the news media sector, and with the future MFF's increased flexibility, the Creative Europe—Culture strand risks being forced to constantly defend its budget as new priorities emerge. We call on EU co-legislators to **clearly define the percentage allocated to each strand** within the amended AgoraEU regulation. Moreover, within the proposed AgoraEU budget, the Creative Europe—Culture strand is allocated 21% of the total amount, down from 33% in the current programme. In the spirit of equality among the programme strands, **we urge that this share be restored to one-third (33%)**.

## 2. Tiered and flexible funding pathways.

There is a clear need for a diversified and coherent funding portfolio that reflects the different stages of artistic and collaborative development. This should include multi-year grants, operational funding, seed funding, mobility support and fellowships for artists, ensuring that support is available not only for production, but also for research, experimentation, and long-term sustainability. Such an approach recognises that building cross-border artistic careers and collaborations is a gradual process, with evolving needs over time. As part of this diversification, there is a need for redistributing power within the cultural field: alongside funding for large organisations, specific funding strands, potentially not requiring co-funding, can be created for small and independent organisations, as well as individual artists.

- a. One effective model could be a **multi-stage collaboration fund**, including micro-grants for initial encounters and idea testing, medium-scale grants for co-creation and mobility, and multi-year support for established partnerships. A multi-stage funding system would balance innovation and risk-taking on the one hand with stability and long-term thinking on the other. It would also create accessible entry points for smaller organisations and individual artists, enabling them to gradually integrate into larger, more structured funding frameworks.
- b. In the core support streams, such as cooperation projects, there needs to be a shift away from rigid thematic priorities towards more open support. Funding should focus on what kind of collaboration models it supports, trusting them to identify most urgent topics, rather than compelling them to fit within predefined thematic priorities. In parallel, specific thematic calls can be initiated to respond to specific political priorities and needs within the field.
- c. There is a strong call for **basic income support for artists**<sup>12</sup>. While such schemes are best tested and implemented at national or local levels, there is also a need for a similar initiative at the EU level. Artists whose careers are primarily transnational could be supported through a dedicated fellowship or income scheme within AgoraEU. This 'European Artist' scheme should target artists who have built a European career — working across multiple EU countries and contributing both to several national cultural ecosystems and to the European arts landscape as a whole. Such support could take the form of multi-year grants, fellowships, or awards, provided without the requirement to deliver a specific project or programme, thereby allowing artists to sustain their practice with greater stability and independence.

### 3. Long-term structural support.

The performing arts ecosystem cannot be sustained through a rapid cycle of short-term competitive project grants, especially when it comes to cross-border collaborations requiring time and space for building relationships and mutual understanding, and taking risks.

- a. The sector needs funding that covers the **invisible backbone of cultural collaborations** — relationship-building, administration, production management, spaces, care responsibilities, capacity-building, risk-taking, and research — without forcing every grant to generate a new output and fit a specific thematic priority. AgoraEU could pilot *'infrastructure grants'* to support informal or emerging partnerships in maturing and building the foundations for more permanent structures, including their administrative, management, and capacity-building needs.
- b. Projects remain to be important forms of collaboration, but **project-based support needs to be balanced with funding for other essential foundations of artistic work** (explained in the point above). Different contexts and goals require different models of support, and a thoughtful and balanced approach to providing the appropriate type of funding is essential.
- c. For example, cross-border cultural networks — established to serve their members' evolving needs and to convene ongoing, dynamic platforms for exchange, collaboration, advocacy, and mutual learning — are best supported through operational funding. While networks can participate in or even lead project-based initiatives, such activities cannot form the core of their sustainability; **structured operational support for networks should therefore be ensured.**

### 4. Simplification and access.

Many respondents express the view that current EU cultural funding often favours those who can demonstrate bureaucratic competence, rather than those undertaking the most urgent or meaningful work. In the age of AI—now widely used to prepare applications—this tendency to reward grant-writing skills over artistic relevance becomes even more counterproductive. When AI tools can easily generate polished narratives aligned with EU priorities, the purpose of detailed application forms risks losing its meaning. This points to an urgent need to rethink both application and selection processes, taking the opportunity to respond to the repeatedly expressed demand for simplification. Importantly, the simplification the sector has been calling for over many years does not mean simplification for funders or assessors; rather, it implies **rebalancing the burden away from applicants.**

- a. At the **application** stage, greater emphasis should be placed on ideas, vision, and long-term ambition, rather than on predefined KPIs or speculative impacts tailored to funders' expectations. This could be achieved through shorter first-stage applications and a broader range of formats, including video submissions and interviews, alongside written proposals.
- b. At the evaluation stage, the focus should shift towards assessing how well a project understands and responds to the specific, contextual needs it seeks to address. This requires involving evaluators with deep sectoral expertise (people working directly in the performing arts and other respective sectors) as well as strong contextual knowledge, including local experts who can provide insight into the relevance and feasibility of proposed actions. More decentralised forms of assessment, supported by a strengthened arm's-length approach, should also be explored; these can include, for example, cascading grants, development of strong local evaluator networks, panels led by underrepresented voices, and other models.

- c. At the **implementation and reporting** stage, impact assessment should shift towards context-specific, tailor-made approaches to capturing outcomes. This should involve external evaluation experts — not to police beneficiaries, but to gather learning from their experiences — and foster a relationship between funder and beneficiary in which the funder gains a deeper understanding of the project, its dynamics, successes, and challenges through observation, dialogue, and participation, rather than through heavy and detailed reporting processes.
- d. In order to implement the above recommendations, there is a need for a substantial specifically dedicated budget for increasing the quality and efficiency of selection processes, which would on the one hand give the decision-making power to experts close to the thematic and geographic areas, and on the other hand attract people that are able to filter projects with a long-term vision, contextual need, relevance and urgency — among the increased number of AI-generated applications.

## 5. Global cultural collaboration.

AgoraEU, as the key programme supporting cultural collaborations, must be one of the central platforms for advancing the EU's ambition to strengthen its global cultural role, in line with the Culture Compass. In a context of shifting global power dynamics, ongoing conflicts, and the rethinking of global governance structures and principles, the EU has an important role to play in upholding the values of human rights, equity, and dialogue. This calls for moving beyond notions of soft power and cultural diplomacy towards more shared, reciprocal, and decolonial cultural infrastructures. To enable this, the EU should actively explore ways to open its cultural funding to global collaborations, free from rigid geographic priorities, and better aligned with the realities and needs of European cultural actors seeking to engage with peers worldwide.

- a. It is necessary to preserve and clarify the international dimension of AgoraEU. The regulation should clearly affirm a vision of open, equitable, and reciprocal cultural cooperation beyond European borders. Rather than treating collaboration with third countries as an exception, it should be embraced as an integral dimension of the Programme, possibly co-funded with the support of other EU instruments, such as Global Europe.
- b. Pilot '*Global AgoraEU*' instruments can be tested to allow European beneficiaries to engage in projects and collaborations with partners based in countries beyond the 41 countries of Creative Europe, without predefined thematic or geographical priorities. These can be grants for partnership-building, a South-North cultural mobility fund, co-production support, and more. A clear decolonial perspective is necessary, reflected in support for restorative justice, establishing equity in inward and outward mobility, releasing pressures for non-EU professionals to present in the EU, and recognising diverse systems of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge.
- c. Establish an EU solidarity fund dedicated to defending artistic freedom and supporting censored or persecuted artists. Such funds could provide emergency financial support, legal aid, and advocacy, as well as fund residencies or safe mobility opportunities. They could also offer capacity-building, mentorship, and platforms for safely showcasing censored work, ensuring that artists can continue their practice and reach audiences despite threats or restrictions. Such funds should be open to artists from all over the world.
- d. There is a need to address local challenges through a global lens, linking cross-border collaboration with social inclusion at the local level. For example, dedicated funding streams and long-term partnerships should enable artists from marginalised backgrounds — including young people — and art organisations in fragile contexts to connect, exchange knowledge, and co-create across borders. Moreover, through translocal collaboration, the performing arts sector should also be equipped to bring global perspectives into local contexts — helping navigate social polarisation while connecting audiences and communities with diverse voices and experiences from around the world.

## 6. Fair and sustainable touring models.

Mobility remains essential to the performing arts, but current dominant models place a significant burden on both the environment and professionals' well-being. There is a need to continuously reimagine models of mobility, including touring, in order to enhance their environmental, social, and financial sustainability. To this end, programmes such as Perform Europe<sup>13</sup> should be sustained and expanded, building on its extensive experience and ensuring that the models tested by beneficiaries evolve from experimentation into established practices. More broadly, existing gaps in the performing arts mobility landscape must be carefully mapped and addressed through targeted calls or dedicated mobility funding streams. AgoraEU could also support the mobility of artistic concepts, methods, and formats. This would enable artists to reinterpret works locally with partners, share practices, and co-create in context. Such an approach would reduce environmental impact, strengthen local relevance, and foster deeper, more sustainable international collaboration and knowledge exchange, offering a strong alternative to traditional touring, especially for work with children and young audiences.

## 7. Structured data collection and learning from the performing arts field.

A more comprehensive and precise understanding of the current state of the performing arts sector is needed, particularly in relation to employment, income, participation, and other key indicators. While this should be addressed through the future Data Hub initiative — including a dedicated section on the performing arts — an additional stream of knowledge creation could be developed within AgoraEU itself. This could take the form of a structured 'learning laboratory' that systematically captures insights from funded projects, with a particular focus on the many solutions, innovations, pilots, and bold initiatives emerging from the performing arts. These practices often connect deeply with communities, contribute to environmental sustainability, reimagine urban and rural spaces, and strengthen democratic resilience. There is a significant body of knowledge within the field that holds value not only for the cultural sector but for society and the wider economy. Failing to capture and learn from this knowledge through dedicated, structured mechanisms would represent a missed opportunity. We therefore advocate for the creation of a structured learning platform that enables the extraction of key insights from performing arts practices, while supporting beneficiaries in articulating and reflecting on their work — without adding an additional reporting burden.

## 8. Strong support for the performing arts.

Sectoral initiatives have long been a cornerstone of EU cultural policy, with programmes such as Perform Europe demonstrating their value by increasing visibility, supporting smaller actors through cascading funding, and fostering artistic innovation. With the prospect of increased funding and the emergence of a new cultural framework through the Culture Compass and AgoraEU, there is now a clear opportunity to develop a more coherent, balanced, and strategic sectoral approach that recognises diversity while strengthening the overall ecosystem. As part of this approach, we believe the performing arts sector must be recognised as a key sector, and that an appropriate sectoral strategy should be developed through close dialogue and an open forum with the entire field — something the Performing Arts Coalition is well-placed to convene.

## Endnotes

- 01 Beausoleil, E. J. (2012). *Performing democracy : artistic engagements of identity/difference* (T). University of British Columbia. Retrieved from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0058208>; Cunningham, M. and Hammond, M. (2025) 'Arts-based approaches to democracy: Reinvigorating the public sphere', *Politics*, 46(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957251324529> (Accessed: 5 May 2026).
- 02 European Parliamentary Research Service 2019, *Employment in the cultural and creative sectors – Briefing*
- 03 Janssens, J & Fraioli, M 2022, *Research Results of Perform Europe*; E. Polivtseva, "The New International - Against All Odds", IETM, Brussels, January 2025.
- 04 Respondents were invited to select all applicable options. The graph shows the number of times each option was selected.
- 05 E. Polivtseva, "The New International - Against All Odds", IETM, Brussels, January 2025; <https://www.ietm.org/en/resources/new-international-episode-publication-series/the-new-international-against-all-odds> Nordic Culture Fund, Globus, Dimension 04, *Enabling Change Through Transnational Art Practices*, <https://globus.nordiskkulturfond.org/dimension/change-through-transnational-art-practices>
- 06 Respondents were able to select up to three barriers.
- 07 The question was formulated as follows: 'Which aspects are most lacking in the current funding landscape, aside from the overall level of funding?' Respondents were invited to rate each item on a scale from 1 (least lacking) to 5 (most lacking). The graph shows the number of respondents who selected 4 or 5 for each option. The question was answered by 152 respondents.
- 08 The question was formulated as follows: "What types of support are most needed to strengthen cross-border performing arts collaboration?" Respondents were able to select up to three options. The graph presents the number of times each option was selected.
- 09 The question was formulated as follows: 'What conditions should organisations meet when receiving public funding?' Respondents were able to select all applicable options. The graph presents the number of times each option was selected.
- 10 Respondents were invited to rate each item on a scale from 1 (least relevant) to 5 (most relevant). The graph shows the number of times each option was rated with 4 or 5. Each option was rated by 144 respondents.
- 11 This section is mainly based on the analysis of responses to the following open-ended questions: "What should be the top priority of the future AgoraEU – Culture programme?"; "What would make the EU's key programme for culture accessible and effective for the performing arts?"; "If you could suggest one bold idea that can be tested / implemented in the framework of the EU's future funding programme for culture, what would that be?"
- 12 The definition of 'artist' can potentially include other types of cultural workers.
- 13 Perform Europe is a forward-looking funding scheme for the European performing arts sector. Through an Open Call Perform Europe supports 42 inclusive, diverse and green touring projects across all 40 Creative Europe countries. Learn more: <https://performeurope.eu/>



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