



The EU's New Culture Compass: Our Analysis and Perspective

On **12 November 2025**, the European Commission presented its new long-term strategic vision for culture – the [Culture Compass](#). The necessity for such a strategic framework has been stressed by various EU institutions in recent years, underlining the **need for greater coherence and vision** in how the EU unfolds its multiple actions and initiatives in the field of **cultural policy**. Moreover, the most recent cultural policy agenda – the [New European Agenda for Culture 2018](#) – has become increasingly outdated, having been adopted before many of today's challenges emerged, including wars, the consequences of the pandemic, and the rapid development of artificial intelligence.

The vision: Europe for Culture, Culture for Europe

The new Culture Compass is centred around the vision '**Europe for Culture, Culture for Europe**', presenting an approach based on a **reciprocal relationship** between the EU and its cultural field. '*Europe for Culture*' encompasses the ambition for the EU to create conditions in which the cultural and creative sectors can '**thrive, innovate, and compete globally**'. It reflects an intention to look inside the sector itself, recognise the unique challenges it faces, and lay the groundwork for strengthening these sectors. The '*Culture for Europe*' component positions **culture** as a resource for Europe to navigate the many challenges it faces, serving **as a tool for democratic resilience, social cohesion, wellbeing, economic development**, and more. This vision seeks to rebalance the intrinsic and instrumental values of culture. While it represents a necessary *policy* approach, a more *political* dimension of the Compass could be explored – harnessing the European Union's consolidated cultural agency and leadership, beyond merely celebrating the diversity of its many cultures, and articulating a bold vision of how culture can truly lead Europe in today's challenging times.

Importantly, **IETM** – a network representing more than 60 countries – finds it essential to stress that the concept of '**Europe**' **extends beyond the borders of the European Union**, and that many European countries which are also carriers and promoters of '*European culture*' are not part of the Union. This needs to be acknowledged mindfully, not only in the vocabulary used but also in the perspectives adopted and the actions put forward.

Artistic Freedom

The **freedom of artistic expression** is rightly placed high on the Compass' priority list. Artistic freedom is understood as being challenged by 'undue interference which affect the independence of cultural institutions, the use of so-called morality laws, censorship or intimidation of artists, and even self-censorship'. To address this, the Commission will systematically include a specific **focus on artists' experiences** in relation to artistic freedom in its future annual monitoring framework. Artistic freedom will also be safeguarded through current and future EU policies and programmes, notably in the proposed future AgoraEU, as part of the next EU long-term budget. Safeguarding artistic freedom is also in the *European Democracy Shield* – launched on the same day as the Culture Compass – featuring artistic freedom as a pillar of democracy. While this focus is essential and a sign of progress, it is regrettable that the idea of **the Artistic Freedom Act**, championed by many in the cultural sector and promoted by the Chair of the Culture and Education Committee, **is not included** in the Compass. We hope the Compass can, however, lay the ground for this important Act to be developed and adopted in the near future.

Artists' Working Conditions

The Culture Compass recognises the **challenges** and **fractures** within the cultural and creative professional ecosystem and promotes progress in the field of **artists' working conditions**. While ambitious ideas such as a Directive on fair working conditions are absent from the document, it presents the concept of an **EU Artists' Charter**, which will outline fundamental **principles, guidance, and commitments** for fair working conditions **across the sectors**. This Charter will be designed in consultation with the sector, gathered at the forthcoming EU high-level exchange with stakeholders and social partners. The Charter will most likely be non-binding; however, the Compass refers to mechanisms of accountability and compliance, 'particularly by recipients of EU funding for culture'. This is a welcome innovation, and its implementation will hopefully be supported by additional budgets. We also stress that the **EU's influence** on the Member States' policies, even if non-direct, should be **bold and focused**.

Cultural Participation and Access to Culture

Cultural participation is addressed primarily through the lens of **young people's access to cultural heritage**. The Commission plans to enhance young people's access across the Union by establishing a voluntary framework for the mutual recognition of national culture and cultural heritage passes, promoting the *DiscoverEU Culture Route* among young people, and increasing the cultural offer within the existing EU youth discount card under Erasmus+. Importantly, the Compass recognises a range of factors affecting participation, including socio-economic status, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, and geographic location. To address these, the EU and its Member States plan to assess how policies in areas such as science, health, environment, education, training, and social cohesion can foster engagement with culture. However, a more ambitious approach to addressing discrimination faced by **underrepresented groups** such as

displaced artists and **indigenous peoples** is missing, as is recognition of the increasing **redefinition of culture in nationalistic and exclusionary terms**, as well as the central role of art education and cultural infrastructure in ensuring access to culture.

International Cultural Relations

In times of global turmoil and Europe's repositioning in the world, a bold and innovative vision for the EU's international cultural relations is necessary, supported by a strong and visionary budget. While the planned update of the *International Cultural Relations Strategy* and the continuation of the *Cultural Relations Platform* are welcome, as are other initiatives including some region-specific actions, there remains a **lack of a visionary, time-proof approach** to reposition the **EU as a global leader**, thriving on its shared culture and values. In times of turmoil, shrinking space for dialogue, and a challenged position of the European continent globally, culture must lead by transforming policies and not be merely promoted as a 'soft power' instrument.

Climate Change and Sustainable Development

The Culture Compass recognises that '**cultural actors** should be **empowered to lead the green transition**', which is a welcome acknowledgement of the role of culture in climate action. Yet, among the measures proposed, a bolder approach could include **inviting advocates** and **network leaders to key policy tables** where new social and economic paradigms are discussed, and explicitly placing culture at the heart of the EU's green policies. Instead, planned actions are quite targeted: they include a workshop – 'The Commission will keep promoting the dialogue between cultural and environmental stakeholders, including by organising a workshop on the role of culture and the arts for sustainable living'; continuation of the New European Bauhaus initiative; measuring environmental impact in audiovisual sectors; and heritage preservation. At the international level, there is no reference to culture as a sustainability goal. However, the EU is planning to **promote culture and heritage in international climate adaptation agendas**.

Sectoral Approach

We welcome the proposal to establish a **Performing Arts Prize**, which would be a strong way to promote and reward the diverse, innovative and vibrant performing arts field in Europe. With an **emphasis on green and inclusive innovation** such a prize can be instrumental in raising awareness amongst European citizens about the **important role the performing arts** play in these important **policy areas of the EU** as well as become an excellent promotional vehicle to stimulate advanced transition of the sector itself, through example making. It is important that sectors of all countries belonging to the current artistic flagship programme, *Creative Europe*, will be eligible for nomination.

Other sectorial initiatives include *European Authors Day* and various measures to support the cultural heritage sector. While some sector-specific initiatives already exist through Creative

Europe and other funding instruments, there is a **growing need for a more strategic and inclusive approach to governing and supporting the various sectors**. The Culture Compass does not provide a detailed outline of EU policy regarding music, performing arts, literature, and visual arts, but it specifies that ‘while designed to be transversal, it recognises and values the specific characteristics of individual cultural sectors’. We hope this will be developed as part of the future AgoraEU programme.

Implementation Tools

The EU will require **stronger political commitment, substantial funding and new policy tools** to implement the Culture Compass effectively. To this end, the Commission plans to propose an interinstitutional [Joint Declaration, titled ‘Europe for Culture – Culture for Europe’](#), to be agreed between the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission, reaffirming political commitment to key principles for cultural policy. It will also **periodically** publish a Report on the *State of Culture* in the EU, providing insights into the European cultural landscape and assessing progress in developing the cultural and creative ecosystem, with particular emphasis on artistic freedom. To complement this, the Commission will establish a structured EU dialogue with cultural and creative stakeholders to discuss the State of Culture Report and monitor progress on delivering the key directions of the Culture Compass, serving as a platform for exchange, co-creation, and policy alignment. Finally, an *EU Cultural Data Hub* will be created to **collect and analyse cultural data**, monitor trends, and pool best practices, **in cooperation with Member States**, their statistical offices, and relevant international organisations.

It is important to emphasise that the **idea of publishing a regular resource** – the eponymous [State of Culture Report](#) by Culture Action Europe and cultural policy researcher Elena Polivtseva – was conceptualised and implemented earlier, serving as a **space for critical, bottom-up reflection**. We hope the sector will preserve this space for honest insight, while the EU conducts its more rigorous, data-driven monitoring, which is both necessary and welcome.

Discourse vs Action

We welcome the adoption of this **new, consolidated strategy for culture**, which represents a vital milestone in the EU’s approach to governing and supporting culture. The discourse of this strategy is, in many ways, **refreshing, bold, and valuable**. It is not solely driven by crises and anxiety – which is unique in today’s political climate – and **does not put competitiveness and security front and centre** - but rather invites to celebrate Europe’s assets, including its rich cultural diversity, and to explore the versatile potential of culture. Moreover, the Culture Compass emphasises the essential values of **culture**, framing it **as a ‘public good’**, and highlights culture’s intrinsic value. Europe as a continent is positioned as a ‘vibrant hub of cultural diversity’ and the EU a ‘global leader in culture and creativity’. It is also acknowledged that it is high time ‘to consistently include and **elevate culture’s role in policy making**’. The strong focus on artistic freedom and artists’ working conditions is essential as such for an EU strategic framework for culture.

While these breakthroughs can be regarded as a victory by culture advocates, including IETM, there is a **risk that these victories remain rhetorical** unless concrete, new, and bold measures are implemented, and a critical debate occurs on how culture can be genuinely elevated at the policy level. What does it truly mean for the EU to be a global leader in culture? How can Europe truly champion culture as a public good? How can 'cultural diversity' be ensured as an inclusive concept that is 'continuously reimagined', as referred to in the document, rather than merely celebrating national differences? There is a sense that some of the '*elephants in the room*' are not clearly addressed, and some actions proposed are either too soft or don't go beyond the status quo. Let us, as a sector, lead the debate on these '*elephants in the room*' and continue advocating real progress for the EU's cultural policy.

Moreover, the most pressing question concerns the **financial resources** that will support the implementation of the Culture Compass. The negotiations on the future Multiannual Financial Framework, within which the budget for culture has been doubled as part of the new *AgoraEU programme*, are ongoing. As these negotiations progress, the size and stability of the funding envelope, as well as **culture's autonomy** within the new programme – which integrates several sectors including culture, media, and civil society – remain **crucial** and **topical** issues.