

Shaping Cultural Policies in Europe for Free and Democratic Societies

Weimar Triangle Expert Consultation Report and Policy Brief

Quotes from project participants:

Take the local as your center. The center is everywhere—where responsibility for the whole is shared.

Democracy demands ongoing performativity and the willingness to give up privilege from time to time.

The truth isn't always between two sides. At times you've got to be bold, stand firm, see clearly, and say where truth truly lies.

Background

In times of multiple, overlapping crises, shifting East-West dynamics, and increasingly diverse perspectives, calls for greater participation are emerging both within and beyond European societies. Security needs for a united Europe are growing, even as efforts to undermine the “European idea” and democratic values intensify through polarising forces that deepen fragmentation across the continent. Polarisation and radicalisation are accelerating, with political extremes capturing a growing share of the electorate. No longer a fringe movement, far-right populist parties in particular are gaining influence, forging networks across Europe and globally. Meanwhile a persistent, group-centred, exclusionary notion of culture continues to emerge, prompting crucial questions:

Can the cultural sector help to strengthen European democracies? How can it rebuild a broad consensus around a common set of democratic values in Europe? What failures and oversights made by the cultural sector must be acknowledged? Moving forward, how can we reframe and strengthen the narrative(s) of an open Europe? What role can cultural and artistic practices play in these processes? And how can their spaces, as “third places”, facilitate meaningful dialogue and negotiation within society?

Findings: Current Challenges for Culture in Europe

Workshop participants identified several key challenges:

- Fundamental concepts of the European project, such as democracy and artistic freedom, are understood and practiced differently across Europe. Their meanings often vary depending on local, national, and European contexts. The growing individualisation of national discourses makes the idea of a shared European cultural space a “fragile” project. Moreover, these concepts have been hijacked and co-opted by anti-democratic forces, complicating efforts to debate culture as a public good.
- Participants noted that historical conflict zones have too often been neglected. They acknowledged a constructive tension between transnational orientations on one hand, and local environments of belonging on the other. Democracies must be defended domestically. Yet too often this tension is narrowly “resolved” through othering and polarisation. While a practiced and engaged sense of horizontal European citizenship is essential, the European idea needs to be rooted and valued within domestic contexts. National governments at the EU level often fail to reflect the full diversity of their regions.
- The cultural sphere often finds itself at the heart of political conflicts and is increasingly subject to political influence. Its independence is closely linked to the source and structure of funding. Many European regions lack sustainable cultural infrastructures capable of balancing overly nationalist tendencies with liberal and pluralist ideas.
- Participants emphasised the urgent need to prevent fractures in Europe, counter discursive dynamics of extremist and anti-democratic forces, and enhance the EU’s

capacity to mediate and regulate. Given the lack of rapid solutions, points of action must therefore address short-, medium-, and long-term strategies.

Cultural Policy Recommendations at Local, National, and European Levels

What institutions and local communities can do:

- Break down social silos, ease insecurity, and create experiences of collaboration. Build spaces for democratic exchange and confrontation. Focus on shared values rather than divisive ones and maintain dialogue across differences. Continue engaging constructively across divides, maintaining moderation and openness.
- Connect strategically with peers across Europe and other regions within your country. Share knowledge and practices that foster democratic resilience.
- Reflect with each other about shared experiences and causes of current transformations, and the different ways of addressing them in local contexts.
- Act independently of government agendas. Promote interconnectedness and mutual support, especially when individuals or organizations face politically motivated funding cuts.
- Explicitly use the frameworks of cultural rights and cultural polity to support plural debate without falling into partisan disputes.
- Explore actively promoting liberal and democratic ideas through social media channels.
- Cultivate reciprocal trust. Selective trust is not sustainable — institutions must trust citizens if they wish to be trusted in return.
- Shift from universal narratives toward locally grounded stories and practices. Instead of erasing differences, map and reflect on them.

What should be safeguarded at the national level:

- Strengthen efforts to counter disinformation and both internal and external interference. Invest in the arts and cultural education to nurture empathy, critical thinking, and the appreciation of diversity.
- Ensure structural participation of diverse groups nationwide. Integrate civil society and bottom-up processes into institutional frameworks and involve artists in cultural policy decision-making.
- Acknowledge national and regional differences rooted in distinct cultural histories.
- Support broad coalitions against illiberal alliances and jointly affirm the defence of artistic freedom.
- Protect cultural funding from political manipulation. Innovate sustainable and participatory forms of financing, involving both civil society and the cultural sector. Shift away from short-term project-based funding toward long-term commitments.
- Stop reducing budgets for the cultural sector. Cultural participation must be accessible to all. Culture is not a luxury but a social necessity. Culture, in its capacity to both

foster social cohesion and equip people with the necessary skills to navigate differences, must be recognized as a matter of national security.

- Include rural areas in the cultural development of the nation. Integrate them into long-term artistic and cultural planning, ensuring equitable representation within democratic cultural development.

Where EU engagement is essential:

- Diversify cultural partnerships and deepen European cooperation.
- Empower civil society and democratic citizenship, embedding arts and culture as a key component of European democracy and EU internal security strategies.
- Enhance the EU's political credibility by addressing challenges consistently across all European countries and regions alike.
- Establish a solidarity fund (majority vote) for cultural institutions facing illiberal governments, ensuring rapid and accessible support.
- Make transnational cooperation funding and European network programs more accessible at the municipal level to empower local actors. Align funding with regional development and social cohesion strategies.
- Uphold democratic frameworks rooted in cultural rights and cultural polity.
- Consider recognizing culture as the 18th Sustainable Development Goal to anchor its importance globally.
- Acknowledge the diversity of interpretations of European values, and ensure ongoing processes of dialogue, negotiation, and translation among them.
- Communicate the EU's successes clearly while addressing citizens' concerns and needs to prevent their frustrations being exploited by destructive forces.

Imprint

This policy brief is based on a Chatham House workshop, involving twenty practitioners and researchers from seven European nations, with a specific focus on the Weimar Triangle, held on 12 and 13 June 2025 in Genshagen Castle, Germany on the initiative and with the support of ifa, the Genshagen Foundation, and the University of Hildesheim.

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ifa or the other sponsoring and publishing institutions.

Publisher:

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John Barrett
ifa, Dialogue and Research “Culture and Foreign Policy”

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<https://doi.org/10.17901/1591>