

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Restart of cultural and creative sectors

(2021/C 106/08)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. points out that the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically brought to light the idea that we all support, namely that culture can be the trump card for Europe's social, economic and sustainable development. On the other hand, the reality of the cultural and creative sectors has also become clear. Bearing in mind that the term 'cultural and creative sectors' is vague, and the lines between publicly funded or subsidised art/culture and self-supporting cultural and creative workers are just as blurred as the boundaries of the industry itself, this opinion focuses in particular on those operators that in principle get little or no support from the public sector. In almost all countries, the sector is made up largely of small businesses, independent artists and other freelance creative professionals, is vulnerable and often precarious, and has been one of the hardest-hit by the pandemic crisis, as highlighted by the CoR in its resolution on the priorities for 2020-25;
2. points out that one of the premises on which the cultural and creative sectors (CCS) are based, across the board, is that they involve 'gatherings', i.e. collective enjoyment, and that this has made them subject to a lockdown which has not yet been lifted for certain sectors and for the activities linked to those sectors, and is leading to severe financial and job losses; an additional premise, however, is that they are intrinsically linked to progress, research and growth, as well as to tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Called attention to the fact that workers in the live arts sector are among the categories most damaged by the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These are people and families who risk no longer having an income and being unable to survive. Calls on the European institutions and national governments to support the workers in this sector, by ensuring that funds of the Creative Europe programme reach all forms of the culture and creative sector and all those who are involved in creating it, no matter their employment type, and by finding a way with the Member States of having this support take the form of a minimum subsistence income;
3. points out that Articles 6 and 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union state that the EU's competence in the field of culture is to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the CoR supports EU initiatives in this area of competence, as they bring to the fore the important transnational and European dimension of this sector. Local and regional authorities have important competences when it comes to promoting cultural and intercultural dialogue; in the middle of a pandemic, these authorities should also coordinate multi-dimensional local and regional cultural networks involving all the key stakeholders. This opinion is drafted in line with the EU's annual regional and local barometer;
4. highlights the importance of arts and culture being free and independent, and stresses the intrinsic value of cultural and artistic production; also believes that they need to be promoted as key enablers for strengthening European identity and enhancing its social function, and would make an appeal for art and culture to be given a more prominent role in the debate on the future of the EU; this would also ensure that the CCS are considered a priority at national level, by creating synergies with other policies and structural funding in the next programming period;
5. proposes a continuous dialogue with CCS organisations so that easily usable support systems can be developed, resulting in a mobilisation that fosters innovation and education, within a dynamic territorial ecosystem: by establishing ad hoc funds for setting up networks, regulating cultural operators' mobility, building up dedicated channels and IT platforms to host profiles of artists, associations and cultural operators, etc. to help them operate internationally (as is the case with Europass), and facilitating the publication of all calls, measures and specific and tailored actions enabling individual artists and professionals in the sector to more easily access and make use of them, bearing in mind that the CCS often hire self-employed and precarious workers and mainly involve small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), both commercial and non-profit;

6. points to the need to inform local and regional governments — even more effectively — of the measures and initiatives put in place for the CCS in the EU, establishing during this period greater monitoring of the CCS at local and regional level and recognising local and regional competences in the field of cultural policy, with a view to the fair distribution of the funding allocated to the sector, as grassroots institutions are more in tune with the basic structures. One starting point could be the existing platform <https://creativesunite.eu>, as well as fully exploiting the potential of national Creative Europe desks;

7. reiterates ‘the importance of capitalising on and boosting digital opportunities to promote culture in an interactive way and promoting access to culture for all groups of society, especially young people, as the future custodians and promoters of cultural heritage’⁽¹⁾. Also underlines the need for increased EU funding to co-finance these digitisation activities. This is all the more pertinent amidst the current pandemic, and in the field of culture in general, which has highlighted the digital divide that exists due to geographical, economic and generational factors;

8. reaffirms that ‘culture must lie at the heart of the EU’s international relations, and that alternative forms and approaches to international diplomacy have emerged, including cultural diplomacy’⁽²⁾. Further argues that European cultural diplomacy should focus on promoting Europe and its Member States, as well as its local and regional authorities, including through educational and cultural exchanges, reaching out to the public and to third countries, and thus helping to promote a positive image of Europe and its Member States and regions, as a way of strengthening identity and therefore bolstering social cohesion and dialogue. In order to retain the leading position of Europe’s diverse forms of cultural expression in the post-COVID era, a paradigm shift is needed in which awareness is increased even more not only of what we already have and what we must promote, including by alternative and virtual means, but above all of creative potential and the capacity for interaction with other sectors (cross-fertilisation) across all areas of culture and the arts. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us understand the importance of strengthening and developing the EU’s cultural diplomacy and of being able to compete by offering a greater range of cultural products and more innovation on the world stage, which has seen new powers emerge, including in the cultural sphere; the economic situation caused by COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of networking and of promoting tours in the performing arts, circuses and exhibitions as a way of sharing projects beyond local and regional borders; to this end, a network must be designed for each sub-sector of the arts in order to start planning tours and itineraries in 2022;

9. at the same time underlines the continuous importance of promoting traditional access to original heritage, in order to promote and preserve the common artistic, historical and Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe;

10. would like to see the promotion of EU calls for proposals that, among other things, provide more support for projects promoting the social role of culture, experimentation, and innovation in contemporary visual arts, aimed at the regeneration of peripheral, rural or vulnerable urban areas, schools, hospitals, shelters and prisons, by giving awards to artists and creative professionals for the realisation of a large-scale European cultural project, which, on the one hand, embraces contemporary art and innovation and, on the other, produces output that can connect, in an original, innovative and sensitive way, with its intended audience, with the community, thus helping to develop new models for quality of life;

11. calls for discussions with the individual Member States to ensure that tools are put in place that are able to capture the diversity of the many sub-sectors within the complex system of the CCS, not all of which can benefit from protective measures for workers. Calls for consideration to be given to the idea of a standard welfare system, that gives access to support and subsidies in the event of particular situations arising, by adapting the existing system and making it less rigid and obsolete, and by providing new regulatory frameworks adapted to the new mechanisms for creation, production and distribution within the sector, with an emphasis on creativity, in order to give recognition to operators’ professionalism. To this end, it is vital for the body of employees working in the public administration to include, where they are not represented, people with qualifications in the dramatic arts and other creative branches so that they can help develop cross-cutting programmes in acting, the audiovisual sector and theatre, i.e. embracing the perspective of the creative industry;

12. underlines the urgent need to ensure that there is a clear legislative framework explicitly covering the health and safety of all cultural workers and artists in their working environment and to take the precarious working conditions in the CCS into full account during this period of pandemic, and throughout the duration of the recovery and its consequences;

⁽¹⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Culture in a Union that strives for more: the role of regions and cities (OJ C 141, 29.4.2020, p. 39).

⁽²⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations (OJ C 207, 30.6.2017, p. 95).

Link with political priorities

13. is concerned about the fate of the CCS, despite the cross-cutting and sectoral measures that have been put in place since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic;

14. welcomes the agreement on the Creative Europe Programme reached in December 2020 between the Council and the European Parliament, in particular the EUR 2,2 billion support secured for artists. Such an agreement acknowledges the importance of CCS and provides a significant increase for a sector that will need strong assistance throughout the recovery phase;

15. points to the need to focus on sustainable cultural activities, encouraging investments without age limits in artists and other cultural workers who express values such as democracy, cosmopolitanism, social integration, inclusion and environmental awareness, and in the public enjoyment of art, promoting its launch and revitalisation through EU programmes and facilitating access to a range of sustainable financial support instruments, such as public subsidies, venture capital and access to credit on long-term favourable repayment terms;

16. welcomes the decision to facilitate participation of small-scale cultural projects in the Creative Europe Programme by achieving substantial simplification of bureaucratic procedures, mostly in the application stage; recommends furthermore integrating investment from the various EU funds in culture, simplifying the procedures involved and increasing, where provided for, the possibility of co-financing to up to 80 % for projects undertaken by small players, opening up the possibility of foundations, banks and institutions covering the remainder. Joins to this effect the European Parliament's call 'for sizeable and primary grant-based support for cultural and creative sectors and industries in order to ensure the livelihoods of local communities' and agrees on the need 'to earmark for the cultural and creative sectors and industries, according to their specific needs, at least 2 % of the Recovery and Resilience Facility dedicated to the recovery' ⁽³⁾. Calls for the inclusion of the CCS in REACT-EU, and stresses the need to integrate culture into national policies for the implementation of REACT-EU, and the EU's instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE), thus preventing the costs of culture weighing on the budgets of cities and regions, which have already suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic; advocates the use of cascade funding, a mechanism already provided for by the European Commission, referred to as 'financial support for third parties';

17. agrees with the need for an establishment of a single EU portal, combining information from all the EU programmes that are funding cultural heritage ⁽⁴⁾;

18. welcomes the growing interest and efforts of local and regional authorities across Europe in promoting shared visions and actions in the Member States. Hopes that similar initiatives to those implemented under the Charter of Agrigento ⁽⁵⁾, signed by hundreds of mayors and by presidents of Italian regions and supported by particularly representative associations and the European Committee of the Regions ⁽⁶⁾, can be reproduced in other countries;

19. hopes that the cultural heritage sector can always enable participation — despite the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic — sustainability, protection and innovation, the four cornerstones on which the European Year of Cultural Heritage initiatives were designed, and that, given the crisis triggered by COVID-19, the increases in funds for Creative Europe will be made structural and will be managed directly by the regional authorities;

20. professionals in the field of cultural heritage are ideally placed to make the community as a whole aware that the sector is of vital benefit to the economy, culture, the environment and society;

⁽³⁾ European Parliament resolution of 17 September 2020 on the cultural recovery of Europe (2020/2708(RSP)).

⁽⁴⁾ European Parliament's CULT Committee Draft Report, 2019/2194(INI).

⁽⁵⁾ The Charter of Agrigento, signed in Rome on 30 October 2019, aims to promote effective policies to make better use of the EU's cultural heritage (<http://www.anci.it/wp-content/uploads/Carta-di-Agrigento-per-una-nuova-Agenda-europea-della-Cultura.pdf>).

⁽⁶⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Culture in a Union that strives for more: the role of regions and cities, point 20 (OJ C 141, 29.4.2020, p. 39).

21. supports a greater role for creators, artists, technical staff and other cultural and heritage players, not just as a 'means' of growing the economy and increasing competitiveness. COVID-19 has further highlighted the need to incorporate culture into the education system as a cross-cutting part of the curriculum. To this end, it is essential to include the performing arts during school hours;

22. is particularly concerned about the growing shortage of skilled craftsmen, restoration professionals and heritage experts. Calls on the European institutions to include the preservation of valuable practices and knowledge in future cultural heritage preservation initiatives;

Specific local or regional dimension

23. calls, with due respect for complementarity and subsidiarity — the guiding principle of the EU in the field of cultural relations — for the Member States to step up their action here, carrying out supporting or coordinating measures in order to frame a strategic European approach to the restart of the CCS;

24. acknowledges that local and regional authorities have been playing a key role in promoting, stimulating and supporting cultural activities related to music, the visual arts, folklore, performing arts, audiovisual arts, publications, cultural heritage and so on, through grants that have been helping to improve beneficiaries' conditions over months of closure or reduced capacity in public spaces as a result of COVID-19 health measures, as well as through other support measures such as providing spaces for cultural activities free of charge or making it easier to use public areas;

25. points out that, when talking about culture and creativity, we are not always dealing with tangible objects; sometimes culture and creativity are channelled into the intangible, making the artists themselves a work of art, something that happens with singing and dancing, and with jugglers and trapeze artists, musicians and mime artists, actors and acrobats. Each of them is involved in passing on traditions and customs, creating emotions, giving rise to feelings, promoting their local area, attracting tourists, and overcoming all kinds of psychological barriers, but sometimes they fail to overcome the structural ones that have been exacerbated by the pandemic at this time. The expertise of cultural heritage professionals is a unique public asset, and is crucial in ensuring that work to protect and preserve heritage is imbued with quality and values and is sustainable. This requires strategic action by the authorities in order to protect the different cultural ecosystems;

26. points out and hopes that the EU will take action to spur on the necessary cooperation between the Member States, to support, promote and revitalise the wide range of sub-sectors within the CCS which the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to a halt. Each sub-sector has different characteristics and needs different spaces and different treatment, but they all contribute to creating opportunities in the regions for tourism and for the social, economic and cultural development of the regions. Examples here, among so many, include: cultural heritage, both tangible, comprising the extremely complex management of monuments and archaeological sites — including underwater ones — museums, archives and libraries; and intangible — regional and local holidays, gastronomy and crafts; forms of dissemination, ranging from conferences to events such as the European capitals of culture; the performing arts and shows, music and dance, from opera and circuses to street artists; the creative industry, including film, publishing, design, advertising, and radio and television, graphics, sculpture, painting and architecture; and cultural institutions and foundations;

27. urges local and regional authorities to use EU funding and the various programmes and measures to promote individual artists, especially those who are less well known but who are already working in the sector, by developing opportunities now for events and exchanges, including on a virtual basis, which can help unearth the wealth of creative potential hidden in the regions, and thus make those artists, as many have been in the past, ambassadors and promoters of their own cultures. Blending into each other, they manage to create a common European flavour, while at times maintaining features that are specific to each individual country and region. Calls for strong cooperation to be encouraged with the Creative Europe national desks to increase knowledge and information on the ground, and also for cooperation between the regions to be facilitated within the framework of this programme;

28. strongly supports the decision of the Council and the European Parliament to place cross-border cooperation as a priority for the cultural strand, to strengthen transnational cooperation and the cross-border dimension of creation, circulation and visibility of European works as well as the mobility of cultural and creative operators. Stands ready to contribute to the elaboration of a 'Status of European artist', in cooperation with the European Parliament, paying particular attention to the mobility of artists in the remotest European regions. Agrees with the European Parliament on the need to

'protect employment in the cultural heritage sector, to support restoration professionals and heritage experts, and to give them the tools they need to protect European heritage sites' ⁽⁷⁾; also notes that cultural heritage professionals, who work in interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral environments and combine traditional, creative and innovative approaches to safeguarding Europe's irreplaceable heritage for future generations, should not be forgotten; calls, therefore, for greater mobility to be fostered by enabling cultural heritage professionals to validate the full extent of their formal and non-formal knowledge and skills;

29. reiterates what has always been clear to those working in the cultural sphere: cities and regions that are able to harness their history, tell their stories, renew and re-imagine themselves, creating space for light, creative and sustainable economies, become attractive not only to tourists and the economic activities they generate, but also to businesses that locate there, the value of property in those areas, and the generational and intercultural balance, in societies that are now structurally multiracial and multi-religious;

30. calls for the regions to be supported in their efforts to re-launch the arts by being open to experimentation, and to take an interest in the proliferation of new projects and ideas we are seeing at this time when a paradigm shift is needed to revitalise the CCS. The regeneration of urban areas and regions should involve simple projects that make it easier for everyone to acquire knowledge, and this should include peripheral areas, the less developed regions and the outermost regions, by integrating and involving existing or planned cultural infrastructure in the region, and implementing protection and conservation plans for the historical heritage of these areas;

31. considers it necessary to design creative solutions for rehabilitating, regenerating, reinterpreting and managing the areas themselves, which can range from virtual and intangible measures in relation to the environment, to physical interventions in the places themselves, by turning, for example, to the visual and performing arts and relational art, to applied arts, communication, digital manufacturing and virtual reality, involving communities through activities that foster social cohesion and the development of interpersonal networks, characterised by applicability and sustainability. An example here is the *Fiumara d'Arte* artistic route: an open-air series of works by world-famous artists dotted across a number of provinces, works which, through particular events, become catalysts for new talents who thus have the opportunity to make themselves known. This is a way of developing local culture, by strengthening its identity and specific nature, creating a unique, place-based, non-transferable value, where cultural factors come to the fore, including at European level;

32. refers to the views it has previously expressed on the European Capitals of Culture initiative, which has helped to highlight the richness, diversity and common aspects of European cultures. This project and other such initiatives need to continue, and, as is the case with the *European Heritage Label*, their potential needs to be tapped further. In fact, it is important to develop cultural and creative knowledge especially in the younger generation, without underestimating the value of tourism and school tourism — sectors which are no less seriously affected than the CCS and which cannot operate virtually;

33. underlines the importance of voluntary work in protecting cultural heritage and therefore welcomes the targeted call for cultural heritage under the European Solidarity Corps;

General comments

34. considers it necessary to promote throughout Europe the dissemination of artistic and cultural creation, and the international promotion of artists, curators, critics and other cultural workers, as well as creators connected with other disciplines, by means of calls for proposals emphasising the social role of art and culture and involving local authorities, regions, cultural institutions in the strict sense, schools, hospitals, shelters and prisons, to act as the leaders of projects aimed at regenerating peripheral or vulnerable urban areas and buildings. The projects should involve collaboration between European bodies from different countries and a promotion phase in several EU countries, and produce works that can connect, in an original, innovative and sensitive way, with the community, thus helping to develop new models for quality of life and constituting a timely step change towards a genuine democratisation of culture and greater public involvement; likewise, new forms of cultural management innovation should be promoted by fostering incubators for cultural projects and initiatives;

⁽⁷⁾ European Parliament resolution of 17 September 2020 on the cultural recovery of Europe (2020/2708(RSP)).

35. supports the need to produce new works, but above all to use art and culture to support social objectives that are more integrated, structured and efficient, all the more so at a time of market crises that are both systemic and due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, drawing freely on the *Art Bonus* scheme established by the Italian government, which has led to good practices in the area of patronage, calls for proposals and competitions could be launched to promote the commissioning of works by contemporary European artists and cultural workers by private individuals and companies, works that the purchaser would undertake to make available to the public for a fixed period of time in museums and even as part of a tour;

36. stresses that, in relation to 'cultural clusters' or 'creative districts', the COVID-19 crisis has made it essential to position cities and regions at the hub of knowledge networks in order to fully benefit from the free movement of ideas, capital and people in the global network economy. Support from local and regional authorities is vital for the development of such clusters, but these also need to be linked into integrated and scalable European and global knowledge networks to enhance their effectiveness. Therefore the EU institutions should support financially Local and Regional Authorities, as well as local actors for the realisation of such projects;

37. calls for the CCS to be treated like producers of basic commodities, so that, in the event of further extraordinary events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not penalised by a lockdown. Foresight should therefore be employed and common guidelines drawn up to enable them to continue operating, albeit with restrictions in terms of accessibility;

38. welcomes with interest the new *European Bauhaus* initiative announced by the Commission president Ms von der Leyen as part of the Renovation Wave strategy, considering it necessary to nurture a new European aesthetic based on a societal need for beauty, on the interlinkages between existing realities, regeneration and the environment, and on the development and implementation of environmentally sustainable materials, taking as an example the work done by the *Superstudio Group* in Milan;

39. reiterates to this effect its earlier call 'for increased investment in culture and in plans to bring aspects of cultural heritage, including those which have been neglected or abandoned, into use,' as well as promoting their conservation and dissemination, 'under interactive and sustainable management within the new 2030 Urban Agenda, capitalising on innovative initiatives promoted by the municipalities and cooperation initiatives promoted by regional stakeholders' ⁽⁸⁾.

Brussels, 5 February 2021.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

⁽⁸⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Culture in a Union that strives for more: the role of regions and cities (OJ C 141, 29.4.2020, p. 39).