

POLICY REPORT

Calibrating the Needle: Steps Forward with the Culture Compass

A joint report by
Culture Action Europe
and MEP Nela Riehl,
Chair of the Committee on Culture and Education, European Parliament

*Based on the Policy Lunch of 23 March 2026
at the European Parliament, Brussels*

On 23 March 2026, MEP Nela Riehl, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT), hosted a policy lunch at the European Parliament co-organised by [Culture Action Europe](#) (CAE). Culture Action Europe is the major network that brings together over 300 cultural networks, organisations, artists, activists from all across Europe.

During the policy lunch, 25 European cultural networks and civil society organisations gathered alongside MEP Riehl's team and Georg Häusler, Director for Culture, Creativity and Sport at the European Commission, for an open exchange on the [Culture Compass for Europe](#).

At the heart of the agenda was a moderated conversation structured around four pillars of the Culture Compass: 1) values and cultural rights; 2) artists and people; 3) competitiveness, resilience, cohesion; 4) international cultural relations. Civil society representatives had a chance to share their vision for the implementation of the flagship actions of the Compass.

This report is co-produced by Culture Action Europe and MEP Nela Riehl as a shared record and a shared commitment: to keep civil society at the centre of EU cultural policy as its co-creator.

Setting the Scene

In his opening remarks, the moderator, Lars Ebert, Secretary General of Culture Action Europe, traced the path that led to the policy lunch.

He outlined Culture Action Europe's activity alongside its members to put culture at the heart of European policymaking: from advocacy in 2024 towards strong pro-European leadership in the CULT Committee of the European Parliament and the new European Commissioner responsible for culture, to the publication of Culture Action Europe's [State of Culture](#) report, which called for recognition of the intrinsic value of culture in policymaking, and collaborative work among networks on the discussion paper '[Towards the Culture Compass: a Sector Blueprint.](#)'

Following the publication of the official Culture Compass, Culture Action Europe established four action groups on the most time-sensitive flagship themes: artistic freedom, AI, working conditions, and international cultural relations. Their goal is to develop input and recommendations for the Culture Compass deliverables in consultation with Culture Action Europe members. The policy lunch was a chance to test the waters on how civil society can contribute to the Compass's implementation.

Lars Ebert highlighted the democratic nature of the triangle of participants at the policy lunch—the Parliament, the Commission, and civil society—noting that CAE sees its role as a facilitator of these conversations.

Institutional Direction

Georg Häusler emphasised that the work of the Compass only began with its adoption. Of the twenty flagship actions, several have already been delivered (the Future of the European Bauhaus, the Data Space for Cultural Heritage, the EU4Culture Programme in the Eastern Neighbourhood). The State of Culture report and the Data Hub will begin in 2027 and will be built up over time. He acknowledged invitation challenges around the Structured Dialogue and stressed that the Commission is accountable to the sector. On the upcoming Joint Declaration 'Europe for Culture – Culture for Europe', all three institutions are headed in the same direction; the Council of the EU is expected to finalise its position in early April, and trilogue negotiations will aim to conclude before summer. The European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee will also provide their opinions on the Joint Declaration.

Georg Häusler's closing message was direct: continue to put pressure on us, including on the quality of the deliverables.

MEP Nela Riehl's office, represented by Charlotte Bechert, has also highlighted 2026 as a key year for building a stronger EU policy framework for the cultural and creative sectors. On AgoraEU, the deadline for CULT Committee amendments is June 2026, with adoption expected in October 2026 and a first reading agreement by March 2027. In parallel, the CULT Committee is working on several AI-related files, including the report on AI in the Cultural and Creative Sectors and the Digital Omnibus, and stressed the importance of ensuring coherence across these documents, as they may set an important precedent for the sector.

In this context, the Cultural Compass was presented as an opportunity to create a more stable and evidence-based policy architecture, including through proposals such as an EU Cultural Data Hub, a regular State of Culture Report, and a structured dialogue with cultural stakeholders. MEP Riehl's team has also underlined the need to better integrate culture with other policy areas, including youth, media, and the EU's international action. Particular attention was drawn to the links with the AgoraEU negotiations and to the importance of stronger stakeholder mobilisation in the implementation of the Compass, which was presented as one of the main reasons for organising the lunch.

What the Sector Said

On Values and Rights

Participants identified cultural rights and artistic freedom as the most urgent themes that require the sharpest action.

Threats to artistic freedom are escalating. The Arty Farty / Reset! network described a structured pattern unfolding in several countries: independent cultural players are first accused of falsehoods, then delegitimised, then defunded, and eventually replaced. This trajectory is visible in Georgia, Slovakia, and Hungary. Countering this negative trend requires data and a strategic response. The network proposed the creation of a European Observatory on Threats to Cultural and Media Independence, which could be integrated into the Cultural Data Hub. The Association des Centres culturels de rencontre (ACCR) echoed this, noting that heritage sites, especially in rural and less accessible areas, serve as hubs for resistance and artistic liberty.

Culture and democracy must be linked more explicitly. The European Cultural Foundation called for a stronger connection between the Culture Compass and the European Democracy Shield, warning that both external pressures and internal disinformation campaigns are affecting the cultural space. Culture, they argued, is a fundamental pillar of European democratic life. The European Civic Forum reinforced this: culture and civic space are interconnected, and the same tools used to delegitimise cultural professionals are used against civil society more broadly. Artistic freedom is part of civic freedom.

Cultural rights must be made concrete and cross-cutting. Opera Europa welcomed the prominence of cultural rights in the Compass but challenged the room to think beyond concepts. Cultural rights, like all human rights, are universal, inalienable, and interrelated. They should not sit in one pillar alone but be mainstreamed across all four directions of the Compass. What would it mean, concretely, to incorporate cultural rights into the way the Data Hub is designed, the State of Culture report is evaluated, or the Structured Dialogue is run? The European Cultural Foundation added that access to culture must go further: people should not only be able to access culture, but to create and express themselves freely. European cultural mobility is essential in this regard. Every citizen should have access to studying abroad (Erasmus+) and being part of cross-border cultural cooperation (AgoraEU).

Artistic freedom needs legal instruments. The European Theatre Convention reported receiving information weekly, if not daily, about attacks on premieres and performances across Europe.

The network's Resistance Now Together campaign is developing proposals for legislation to protect artistic freedom and bring them to Parliamentarians. They also stressed the need for more cross-border dialogue: national and European conversations too often happen in isolation.

Heritage and belonging are part of this story. European Early Music Network (REMA) made the case that intangible heritage is a living experience, not a narrow identity narrative. Young performers dedicating their lives to centuries-old music are expressing something about the world today. This creativity bonds audiences across cultures through shared feeling and emotion. Europa Nostra argued that heritage and arts are fundamental allies, not competitors, and that the European Heritage Label, designed to strengthen belonging, deserves much greater prominence in the Compass.

On Artists and Conditions for Creation

Participants turned to the people at the heart of the Compass: artists, cultural workers, educators, participants, and communities.

Don't forget the artist: Circostrada reminded the room that in a context of global trauma, the Culture Compass should remember that artists help us learn how to inhabit the world, to create imaginary spaces, and to embrace diversity, whether in conventional or unconventional spaces, in the city or the countryside, in every corner of Europe.

Cultural participation is wider than the professional sector. European Concert Hall Organisation highlighted the vast number of people engaged in participatory musical activities across Europe such as choral singing and amateur music-making at all stages of life. They must be included in the Structured Dialogue.

Working conditions and career transitions need attention. The European Association of Independent Performing Arts raised the issue of career transition, a reality for dancers whose careers typically end around age 35, but a topic largely absent from the Compass. Only two European countries (Sweden and the Netherlands) have structured support for this. EAIPA also warned that the sector relies heavily on unpaid labour: networks map data, artists provide evidence to policymakers, but they cannot do this sustainably if they are not paid. In Eastern Europe, organisations are being defunded and simultaneously asked to support decision-making with evidence.

The independent sector must be visible. The European Dance Development Network noted that contemporary dance is largely produced outside of big institutions, across borders, often in precarious conditions, which also makes it experimental and close to communities. This independent scene must be visible in the Data Hub and in how projects are designed. Measuring artistic work requires going beyond conventional indicators and being bold enough to try new approaches. EAIPA similarly argued that the proposed prize for performing arts should not be limited to institutional players but should connect to existing frameworks like Perform Europe and national showcases.

Arts education is disappearing. The Association Européenne des Conservatoires warned that music and arts education is evaporating from primary and secondary schools across Europe that

will deeply impact the sector and society. They called for reintroducing STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics) approaches at European level. They argued that primary and secondary education are the largest cultural institution we have. ELIA (European network for higher arts education) echoed this: access to arts education is not mandatory anywhere in Europe, and only those with means have it. Without that access, there is no diversity and no skills pipeline. ELIA is preparing a manifesto on arts education for all, linking the Culture Compass to the Union of Skills. They posed a direct question: how can civil society be involved not just in consultation but in implementation, given that education is a Member State competence?

On Competitiveness, Resilience, and Social Cohesion

Several organisations challenged the room to think about what competitiveness and resilience really mean for the cultural sector and whose data counts.

Digital must serve cultural rights, not replace them. Michael Culture Association welcomed the Compass's language on digital but argued for enlarging the discourse. When we talk about digital and AI, we should ask how technology can foster and protect cultural diversity, not pursue innovation for its own sake. AI is part of the broader digital realm; discussions should not separate them. The starting point must be the needs of cultural and creative professionals, and the goal should be to support them through grassroots models that allow cultural organisations to govern themselves. Together with Culture Action Europe, Michael Culture Association is working on a Blueprint for the AI Strategy for Cultural and Creative Sectors to bring sectoral perspectives to the Commission.

Culture as a basic need. Pearle*–Live Performance Europe emphasised that culture is an essential service: a point the sector had to fight for during COVID-19, when theatres struggled to stay open. Six years on, from the war in Ukraine to the energy crisis and beyond, culture keeps being forgotten in moments of crisis, despite being what helps societies hold together. Pearle committed to engaging with policymakers at all levels to connect the different directions of the Compass between European, national, regional, and local policy.

Socially engaged arts: impact without data. The Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts pointed out that socially engaged arts are already generating real outcomes (trust in communities, pathways for civic engagement, stronger social ties) but these effects are largely absent from current data systems. The Cultural Data Hub is an opportunity to change that: to build a space capable of capturing how arts improve democratic life, going beyond participation rates to community-level democratic impact. They called for mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, and offered to contribute directly to shaping both the Hub and the State of Culture report.

The Compass should reach beyond the inner circle. The European Music Council stressed that the Culture Compass recognises culture's intrinsic, social, civic, and economic values. The Data Hub must not default to economic data simply because it is easier to collect; social and civic value must be measured too. IETM pushed further: the Compass should not only be a compass for the sector and policymakers, but for other DGs and for Europe's citizens. If culture is not part of the public narrative about Europe's future, it will remain marginal.

On International Cultural Relations

The Goethe-Institut Brussels drew a sharp distinction between two approaches. One is to send a self-image outward: this is influence, persuasion, soft power, usually driven from headquarters. The other is international cultural relations: located with partners in partner countries, rooted in co-creation, local needs, trust-building, and expanding common spaces. EU-funded programmes like the Africa-Europe partnership for culture, EU for Culture, and Culture Moves Europe all follow this second approach. The worry, the Goethe-Institut said, is that the current moment is pushing Europe toward the first model. The Compass should firmly anchor the second: Europe's cultural power is best used in its ability to connect and create bridges, not to broadcast messages.

EUNIC shared that there is growing momentum and political leadership around international cultural relations, but the question is: what's the plan, and how can civil society help? This momentum must now be matched with action and expertise from the cultural and creative sectors, networks' connections across the globe. The upcoming revision of the International Cultural Relations strategy should properly involve existing partners.

The financing outlook for AgoraEU is leaning conservatively; horizontal cultural mainstreaming across other programmes and MFF files should be ensured.

We need to make sure that more voices from across the global cultural sector are actively feeding into strategic documents and programmes, so the overall vision is broader and more representative. At the same time, there is a real sense of urgency. Spending ten years to renew the ambition for an International Cultural Relations Strategy is hard to reconcile with the reality and atrocities the sectors are facing.

Cross-Cutting Themes and Policy Implications

Several themes recurred across many interventions.

The Cultural Data Hub must be inclusive and ambitious. Nearly every network spoke about the Data Hub. It should collect data on all the values of culture (not only economic), include the independent and amateur sectors, capture community-level and democratic impact, and draw on what already exists rather than starting from zero. Multiple organisations offered to contribute data and methodology.

The Structured Dialogue must be representative and accompany all twenty flagship actions as a condition of implementation. EAIPA noted that some members and national ministry representatives feel excluded from the Culture Compass process. ECHO argued that amateur practitioners and participatory sectors must feel addressed and included. It should accompany all twenty flagship actions as a condition of implementation.

Together with its members, Culture Action Europe plans to prepare recommendations on how structured dialogue and stakeholder consultations should be organised to ensure transparency and representation.

Many networks all converged on the same point: the Culture Compass is only as strong as the resources behind it. AgoraEU is the most immediate vehicle, but culture must also be mainstreamed into Horizon Europe, the European Competitiveness Fund, NRPPs, the European Social Fund, and Global Europe. The European Cultural Foundation called for early action on philanthropic partnerships, which the Compass envisions only in 2028.

Coherence across policy processes. MEP Nela Riehl's office and the Commission both acknowledged the risk of contradictions across the many AI-related and legislative processes currently running in parallel. Civil society shares this concern and called on the Compass to provide the strategic guidance that makes coherence possible.

Moreover, several participants stressed the **need for stronger links between European and national and regional cultural policies.** The interest of the Committee of the Regions in joining the Joint Declaration is a welcome signal; however, cultural policy needs better multi-level governance. Culture Action Europe has been developing its own model for working across levels through regional hubs and 'Satellite' conferences.

Culture Action Europe will also consult its members and work on the contribution for the next Work Plan for Culture 2027-2030 to share its vision on better coordination between EU and Member State levels.
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The sector should be concrete and imaginative at the same time. Culture Action Europe works with the concepts of imagination and 'beyond': letting imagination shine, coming up with visions of the future, and not only relying on evidence-based approaches. Evidence matters, but so does the capacity to imagine what is not yet there. Civil society should already be thinking beyond 2028, beyond the 2029 European elections, toward the future of European cultural policies.

Annex: Participating Organisations

- Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts
- ARTCENA / Circostrada
- Arty Farty / Reset! Network
- Association des Centres culturels de rencontre
- Association Européenne des Conservatoires
- ECHO - European Concert Hall Organisation
- EAIPA - European Association of Independent Performing Arts
- ELIA - European network for higher arts education
- EUNIC - European Union National Institutes for Culture
- Europa Nostra
- European Choral Association
- European Civic Forum
- European Cultural Foundation
- European Dance Development Network
- European Festivals Association
- European Music Council
- European Theatre Convention
- Goethe-Institut Brussels
- IETM
- Michael Culture Association
- Opera Europa
- Pearle*-Live Performance Europe
- REMA European Early Music Network