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**STEERING COMMITTEE
FOR CULTURE, HERITAGE AND LANDSCAPE
(CDCPP)**

**Concept note for the Thematic Session
of the 14th CDCPP Plenary**

***The role of culture and cultural heritage
for democracy and democratic participation***

**Contribution of the CDCPP to the
New Democratic Pact for Europe**

Secretariat Memorandum
prepared by the
Culture and Heritage for Democracy Division,
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This initiative is a contribution towards the **New Democratic Pact for Europe**

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Why a New Democratic Pact for Europe?

Democratic backsliding is a phenomenon that has been observed in recent years in Europe in different forms and dimension. As pointed out by the **Secretary General of the Council of Europe Alain Berset** in his **2025 report Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe**: *“Today, Europe faces a perfect storm – war, shifting geopolitics, democratic backsliding, rising impunity, climate, crisis, disinformation, rapid technological change and a retreat from co-operation into nationalism and protectionism. It threatens to undo the peace, stability and hard-won progress the Council of Europe has helped deliver across an entire continent over the past 75 years...Democracy is our first line of defence”.*

Europe today needs a reset, and a **New Democratic Pact for Europe** is designed to bring the vision of the [10 Reykjavik Principles of Democracy](#) to life and turn them into action. This new pact launched by the Secretary General calls for confronting democratic backsliding in all its forms and standing firm against polarisation and disinformation. It means addressing urgent challenges where it happens, where it hurts and where it hinges on Europe’s ability to restore trust in democracy by making it tangible in people’s daily lives through participation, accountability and equal access to rights. By doing this, Europe reinforces its security and its shared values. The New Democratic Pact (NDP) aims at empowering people, reinforcing democratic institutions and driving democratic resilience. A collective response is needed.

There is no quick fix and no single solution. With the New Democratic Pact, the Council of Europe unites with its partners to boost solutions that work and create new responses. To identify them, consultations are needed. The Pact will serve as a collective and inclusive process – not to reinvent democracy, but to reinforce its foundations, amplify its benefits, and innovate its form to make it tangible for everyone, especially younger generations. The directions set during the consultation phase running through 2026 will shape the work that follows.

The Pact is established on three core pillars. In *Learning and Practising Democracy*, formal and non-formal education initiatives should equip citizens with the skillset to be an engaged citizen. *Protecting Democracy* focuses on building robust responses to internal and external threats, such as corruption, and disinformation. Strategies for a **participatory and deliberate democracy** in the many fields are placed in the third pillar *Innovating for Democracy*.

A bottom-up approach is suggested for the development of the NDP, and this work in progress will last until the end of 2026, with milestones such as the recent [Democracy Hackathon](#), the [2025 World Forum for Democracy](#), a series of thematic conferences, and a wide range of contributions from across the different sectors of the Council of Europe.

Culture and Cultural Heritage

Culture and Heritage are placed in the third pillar of the NDP. This underlines an essential role of culture *in* and *for* democracy and can be seen as an opportunity to unfold new ideas and highlight the importance of culture for democratic and resilient societies.

The **Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape** (CDCPP) has set the efforts to increase democratic participation and the role of culture through their activities on the protection of freedom of artistic expression, participation in the preservation of heritage (Faro Convention, European Heritage Days), participation of youth in culture and heritage activities, digitisation and artificial intelligence, as well as equality and anti-discrimination in the cultural fields. All these issues align with the broader topic of **the role of culture for democracy and participation**.

In 2024, Europe marked the **70th anniversary of the European Cultural Convention** (ETS No. 18), reaffirming its continued relevance. The **No Culture ↔ No Democracy conference** in December 2024 emphasised the role of culture in strengthening democracy, shared values and resilience, particularly in the context of the war of aggression against Ukraine. The **United Nations Pact for the Future**, adopted in September 2024, also recognised culture as essential to addressing global challenges such as inequality, climate change and conflict.

The **2025 Secretary General's report** highlights that there is growing recognition that **cultural diversity is essential to democratic societies**.

Tools and networks, such as the Council of Europe Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy (IFCD) and the Compendium on Cultural Policies and Trends, which the Council of Europe developed with other institutions, provide insights into national developments and broader trends showing that **member states that prioritise cultural diversity**, freedom of expression and inclusive policies not only strengthen their creative sectors, but also **reinforce democracy**.

Countries are emphasising **democratic access to culture**, removing economic, social and physical barriers. Many have developed digital platforms to increase participation, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. However, **digital and non-digital divides remain**, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. One of the key trends is the continued **decentralisation of cultural decision making**, which provides local and regional authorities and communities with greater control over cultural governance and heritage planning. However, **disparities in funding** between urban and rural areas remain a challenge.

Governments are increasingly investing in **cultural education** that promotes democratic citizenship, critical thinking and media literacy. Many countries are also testing social protection models for cultural professionals, such as minimum fees or basic income for artists.

Funding models for culture are evolving. Many member states are adopting mixed-funding models, which combine public support, private investment, corporate sponsorship and new funding mechanisms. However, economic pressures, political factors and competing priorities continue to **challenge the sector**. Ensuring **transparent and diverse funding** remains essential for sustaining a thriving cultural sector and artistic freedom.

Key challenges for the culture and cultural heritage sectors remain:

- ensuring equitable access to culture.
- protecting artistic freedom.
- preserving culture in times of crises, conflicts and the war of aggression against Ukraine.
- managing the impact of the digital transformation on cultural practices.
- maintaining sustainable funding in difficult economic contexts.

The work of the CDCPP offers a valuable contribution on how to address the challenges. Therefore, it is suggested to focus the **2025 CDCPP's thematic debate on the role of culture and heritage for democracy as a contribution to the New Democratic Pact**.

Thematic Debate

The Thematic debate will be organised and held within the CDCPP plenary on 18 November. Experts will present various angles, policies, strategies, best practice examples on cultural policies designed to increase participation. Members of the CDCPP will be invited to contribute, to comment or to intervene during the debate.

The debate will also feature an opportunity to present to the CDCPP a **report** (*Appendix 1*) from a network of academics and cultural workers conducted by **Simon MUNDY**, Honorary Research Fellow for Cultural Advocacy, Queen Mary University, UK.

The following scenario is suggested for the organisation of the debate:

Moderator

Irena GUIDIKOVA, Head of Department, Democratic Institutions and Freedoms

Presentation of the report from the academic network by

Simon MUNDY, Honorary Research Fellow for Cultural Advocacy, Queen Mary University, UK

Speakers and contributors to the debate

Liam MONTGOMERY, Vice-Chair of the European Heritage Days Assembly of National Coordinators and Marketing & Projects Manager at Heritage Open Days (UK-England)

Prosper WANNER, Lead Expert, Faro Convention Network and Rapporteur of the Thematic Session

Lars EBERT, Secretary General, Culture Action Europe

Ulrike BLUMENREICH and **Olivier GÖBEL**, Compendium on Cultural Policies and Trends

Interventions and exchange on best practice experience, initiatives and policies on the topics by the national delegations

During the Thematic debate, the focus could be placed on issues relating to participation in cultural affairs and activities, as well as in designing, implementing and living cultural policies and strategies as part of living democracy and participating in public life.

The following questions can be addressed:

- *The role of culture and heritage, and the development of cultural policies and strategies for participation.*
- *The contribution of public policies and of non-state actors in reinforcing access to and participation in culture while ensuring the freedom and diversity of culture.*
- *The importance of civil society and various tiers of government in developing or implementing participation in cultural policy making.*
- *The impact of current political context, multifaceted crises and the war in Europe on cultural policies.*



THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ARTS TO DEMOCRATIC REVIVAL

Draft Report

Council of Europe

The Contribution of the Arts to Democratic Revival

I. The Context

The frustration among populations in Europe is evident. Many people are feeling underpaid, undervalued and disillusioned by the policy solutions offered by pragmatic governments. They see their own needs as simple and find it hard to understand that meeting those needs is not. In response, the Council of Europe suggests drawing up a pact for member states to adopt in support of inclusive and unmanipulated democracy.

This raises the question of what elements should go into it. Culture, in its widest sense, clearly plays an important part because of its role in shaping and expressing identity, whether collective or individual. Cultural politics are played out in media (mainstream and social), through language, gastronomy, religion, the narrative around heritage, and the many forms of tribalism. Culture itself is neutral. How it is used is not, and culture is often an excuse for conflict and divisive rhetoric. While it has been said that there is no security without culture, equally aspects of culture can, and are at present, too often used belligerently to undermine community security.

This report does not deal with these broader cultural issues, however, but looks at the positive contribution that expressive and collaborative culture, in particular, the arts (performing, literary and visual), can make in reinforcing the openness and plurality of democratic debate.

To discuss this, a small group was assembled from among those who look at cultural policy in depth at some of Europe's universities. They were not chosen as representatives but as contributors who could offer a range of views and perspectives across a variety of ages and locations. Those who took part in three online discussion sessions are listed at the end. This paper is not a summary of the discussions but a digest of ideas and imperatives that emerged.

i. The impact of the arts

Government tries to find general solutions for general problems that will help society overall.

But voters are individuals with particular problems and expectations. Their viewpoint is diametrically opposite. If they don't see their own problems, big or small, dealt with, they rebel. Meanwhile, the arts work at the individual, not the general, level. They give pleasure, instil confidence, help people to think outside their own predicament and generate empathy. The arts can be used to strengthen trust and underpin our basic humanity.

Democracy itself is a concept that has shifted and always been contested. Democracy is not a fixed point, but a negotiated and discursive space. The arts are a reflective part of that space where democracy is being negotiated, in which what we mean to express is created.

In practical terms the arts can provide spaces for exchange and dialogue where citizens can speak up, debate, and raise their understanding of societal challenges and complexities. The arts can help build a sense of community and trust when views diverge by unlocking empathy. For this to happen effectively, these cultural events have to be designed from the start as participatory and civic experiences. Cultural policies should encourage such development.

The arts cannot fix all the economic and social problems facing the population, but they can help people understand the complexity, the plurality of views and the likelihood that no simple solutions exist. The arts are about exchange and revelation.

Performers' outreach projects work best when they go to audiences who are not used to them. The impact of smaller organisations working in rural areas with local audiences is important. They know some of their audience take an extreme political position when voting, but the cultural space still provides a bridge. Sometimes this is through reaching an audience within a performance, but to really make a political difference participation is as important as attendance.

Free participatory processes are vital; free events, unusual venues, and always with the chance to join in. Artistic activity and events can help generate a sense of collectivity and foster enjoyment in a time of fear, but only if we are always aware of the necessity of inclusion. That does not mean that every event has to be for everyone. But the provision of events must be broad enough so that no one feels excluded by costs or social barriers. The arts can enable the reactivation of democratic life by offering spaces where people can reflect upon and recompose what it means to participate in democracy.

While all the above is true, there are caveats. It is important to watch out for blind spots in the way the arts talk to the public. Arts organisations need to identify collaborative partners more effectively, make unexpected alliances and engage with ideologically diverse constituencies. Storytelling is at the heart of all culture and it is hoped that the narratives will counter authoritarianism. It does not help to glorify stories of 'strong leaders', national superiority or one-dimensional solutions. While artists must be free to develop their work as they believe to be right, that freedom is unlikely to survive authoritarian government.

The arts are important in their own right, as well as being tools to educate the public - but there is often tension between a creator's artistic freedom and the use of the arts for other objectives. This is natural, and indeed necessary for artistic development, but government must be careful not to use only 'safe' arts in education and community development.

There is a great problem with follow-up when institutions use the arts or when they seek to develop cultural policy. Too often, activity is time-limited project-based and there is no provision made for continuity. In reality, in order to have any lasting effect, the work has to be allowed to grow and deepen over a long period. It needs to be sustainable and not just symbolic.

ii. Protection of the arts

The arts ask readers, viewers and audiences to consider questions. They rarely offer uncomplicated answers. It is up to the individual recipient to decode them and decide what insights can be accrued. There are often multiple answers and none: ambiguity is at the heart of every artistic message. This does not suit ideologues or those who regard one set of views as the only truth. Governments with tunnel vision do not enjoy that vision being questioned and often regard the arts as antagonistic because they refuse to subscribe to the prevailing ideology. The response, too often, is to remove funding, limit freedom of expression and use petty regulations to hinder the ability of the arts to sustain professionals or reach the public. In order to contribute to a healthy and inclusive democracy, the arts have to have a stable and well-resourced infrastructure of venues, education, professionals and media.

II. Cultural Points for Inclusion in the Pact and Actions for Governments

- Legislate for artistic freedom
- Do not use state or local funding of the arts as a tool of authoritarian ideology
- Legislate for media plurality
- Comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the Council of Europe conventions and their subsequent declarations
- Remind ministers and officials that many conventions and treaties to which governments are signatories require them to provide access and participation in the arts
- Base cultural rights in policy that does not exacerbate divisions
- Ensure access for all to arts in education – from pre-school to postgraduate level
- Support amateur cultural activity, directed by professionals
- Provide free instrumental and vocal training in schools and through local and national music organisations. Drama, dance and creative writing opportunities are necessary too

- Make public spaces available for artistic activity, in tandem with democratic debate
- Do not use licensing systems to hinder meetings around cultural events in cafés, clubs etc.
- Encourage local authorities to enable more participatory activity
- Promote narratives of heritage that are true to history and not just about victory - political or military
- Decouple the links between territory, language and cultural affiliation
- Avoid censorship, either open or disguised through other legislation
- Maintain support for the arts as a public good in their own right, not just as tools for other policy goals
- Maintain support for diversity and inclusion programmes but do not exclude, or give the impression of excluding, 'majority communities' in the process
- Accept that cultural legitimacy and identity does not have to be based on nationalism and territory
- Allow artistic NGOs and networks to raise funds outside national programmes and borders without hindrance.

III. Actions for Arts Organisations in support of the Pact

- Improve awareness within arts organisations and networks of the positive role arts engagement can play in supporting democracy and communicate that better in advocacy
- Look on arts meetings and festivals as venues and occasions for democratic exchange
- Provide details of engagement and outreach projects to European cultural networks so that these can be collated and shown to the Council of Europe and other IGOs.

IV. Actions for the Council of Europe in support of the Pact

- Engage more with Observer networks so that examples of good practice can be shared more widely
- Through initiatives with local authorities, youth organisations and community groups, help spread expertise already in the cultural sector so that communities with less experience can progress.
- Liaise with the UN on culture as a Sustainability Goal so that work can be co-ordinated.
- Bring together all directorates and institutions within the Council of Europe framework to support the Pact
- Establish an Institute for Sustainable Culture and Democracy to forge links between networks, governments and intergovernmental organisations so that work and initiatives can be co-ordinated better and communicated more effectively
- Use the Institute as a convening mechanism to bring together the Council of Europe, EU, OSCE and other intergovernmental bodies to co-ordinate activity and programmes

V. Concluding statement from the consultations

We challenge politicians to use their own belief in democracy to invest again in cohesion, artistic participation and education. We ask them to invigorate citizens by helping them connect with the world, reduce their fear of outsiders and to lead them to enjoy cultural variety without being worried about losing their own sense of belonging.

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