



# THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ARTS TO DEMOCRATIC REVIVAL

## 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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