Navigating Dissonant Entanglements - Exploring Future Pathways of EU International Cultural Relations

Claske Vos and Fien van der Steen

Executive Summary:

Since 2016 the EU launched its Strategy for Culture in International Relations. Typical for this strategy is its focus on cultural relations and its intention to facilitate transnational cooperation between non-governmental actors, civil society representatives, professionals from the creative and cultural sectors, and ordinary citizens. Yet, the EU has thus far struggled to successfully combine cultural diplomacy – investing in culture to advance EU interests – with cultural relations – investing in culture to develop spaces of engagement between several European and non-European actors to allow for intercultural dialogue and transnational interaction. While international cultural relations are deemed central to EU action in the field of culture and are included in the Cultural Compass and in the recent AgoraEU Programme,[1] it turns out to be challenging to make EU investments in international cultural projects more horizontal, inclusive and participatory. This report examines some of the most important reasons why the EU struggles in its attempts to successfully engage in international cultural relations. It does so by focusing on a series of so-called **'dissonant entanglements'** that complicate cultural relations such as persisting power asymmetries, unfair cultural practice, and misalignments between funding requirements and the needs of those applying for the funding. The report starts with an elaboration of what is meant by the term 'dissonant entanglements' and how this concept is used. Then it will examine the most important features of each dissonant entanglement, and how these affect international cultural relations. Consequently, the report focuses on the root causes of these dissonant entanglements providing necessary insights into how they have come into being. Such insights are needed for the final part of this report: **how to constructively work on future pathways of culture in international relations**. The report is the result of the Workshop **"Future Pathways of Culture in International Relations"** which was organised by the **University of Amsterdam** in February 2026 as part of the **ValEUs project** in close association with the **Amsterdam Centre for European Studies, EUNIC Global** and **DutchCulture**. Thirty globally active cultural practitioners ranging from representatives of national cultural institutes to cultural organisations, independent cultural actors and international networks[2] came together to discuss the most important dissonant entanglements within the field of international cultural relations. They exchanged ideas about how EU international cultural relations could be made future-proof and shared concrete methods to make practices fairer and more inclusive, addressing equality, inclusion, decoloniality, and the allocation of financial resources.

1. Dissonant entanglements in EU international cultural relations

Dissonant entanglements are at the center of this report. Dissonant entanglements refer to how several actors are entangled in a web of relationships and expectations interconnected to their participation in international programmes and how such entanglements cause dissonances that impact the ways in which these programmes take shape.[3] Dissonance can mean different things but generally refers to **those factors that interfere in what could have been a smooth relationship.** It has to do with instances of friction that emerge due to exchanges between

different actors. This friction does not always mean the end of collaboration, stagnation, or conflict. Friction means that something different or unexpected happens due to differences in ideas and ways of doing things. As Anna Tsing said in her book "friction": "Friction is the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference".[4] It is a kind of **agency**; a force that moves things into different directions. In Tsing's words: "A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, **friction reminds us that heterogenous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of power**".[5] Concerning EU international cultural relations a focus on dissonant entanglements helps to expose the instances of friction that occur when different actors from different positions (professionally, geographically, culturally) engage in the field. Such dissonant entanglements provide insights in the different forces affecting the investments made in EU international cultural relations and how these could be counteracted. Similar to Tsing, friction is in this report a force, a starting point to make things move into different directions.

2. Dissonant Entanglements: Power Asymmetries, Unfair Cultural Practice and Misalignment

What were the main dissonant entanglements observed during the workshop and how did these affect international cultural relations? What became clear is that dissonant entanglements had to do with **power asymmetries** which were felt by several cultural actors involved in international cultural relations. Moreover, dissonant entanglements were interconnected to **instances of unfair cultural practice** displaying inequalities and diverging conditions for participation. Finally, dissonant entanglements were the result of several **instances of misalignment** between the designers and the recipients of the policies and the available funding schemes confirming the impact of power asymmetries and the unfair cultural practice surrounding the several attempts to work on international cultural relations.

2.1 The political agendas of the most powerful determine the interpretations of EU international cultural relations.

One of the most prominent dissonant entanglements emerges from the ways in which international relations take shape. Ultimately the political agendas of the most **powerful determine the interpretations of international cultural relations**. The most powerful refers here to those in charge of developing the strategies behind international cultural relations, those who set the standards of the available funding, and those who are able to steer the implementation of cultural initiatives in the different settings in which international cultural relations are implemented. Such political agendas work through at different levels and have diverse effects. For example, the requirements of the funding schemes are determined by the EU and its political agenda related to the Directorate General (DG) under which the funding scheme is accommodated. As such the requirements of EU funding schemes reflect the broader agendas of the different DGs (i.e. culture, enlargement, development, trade). On the national level, the political agendas of the state in which the programmes are developed determine whether and to which extent initiatives are supported.[6] These agendas reflect national priorities and reveal different institutional structures of cultural policy (i.e. centralised, arms-length, decentralised) and thus a diversity of approaches to culture that do not always match the ones

represented in the funding schemes. On the regional and local level, the political agendas of municipalities, chiefdoms and communities, set the agendas of international cultural relations. Their constituencies differ from the European and national ones and are driven by different concerns. These concerns do not always match the European and national ones. Being a typical field of multilevel governance, several players operating on different levels negotiate the interpretation of the projects being developed as part of international cultural relations. This can be constraining as well as enabling. Constraining when it means that certain voices are more powerful than others. In these instances projects proposals are written to **meet the (political) interest of these powerholders** even if this implies that the objectives behind the programmes do not necessarily benefit the national, regional and local contexts in which these projects are being implemented. Enabling, when power asymmetries do not determine the course of negotiation, but allow for **horizontal forms of exchange and collaboration**. In those instances interests of the actors involved on different levels are taken into consideration and cooperation is based on reciprocity and equity. Unfortunately, such reciprocal projects are the exception rather than the rule.

2.2 The overrepresentation of certain voices within the field of EU international cultural relations and the lack of reciprocity

In line with this strong influence of powerholders on the interpretation of most of projects developed in the field of international cultural relations, another dissonant entanglement results from the **overrepresentation of certain voices** and the exclusion of many others. In particular in the establishment of policies, the setting of standards of funding schemes and development of programmes, **representatives from outside of the EU are rarely invited on the negotiation tables**. If they are invited it is often the same pool of people and organisations and this is because they are already strong cultural players with close affiliations with the EU and/or national and local governments and representatives, cultural institutions such as Institut français and the Goethe-Institut, within the countries in which the projects are implemented.[7] Cultural actors without such connections, skills and/or international experiences, are generally not included and particularly not those representing local communities or organisations. Additionally, there is **no consistency of engagement, nor a dedicated space for the voices of non-governmental actors or non-development agencies**. As such there is hardly room for feedback to funders on their fundraising and or grant application experiences. This leads to the situation in which **the EU still sets the frameworks for most of its investments in international cultural relations and remains the main gatekeeper of the programmes it supports**. Hence, there is a tendency to still primarily invest in cultural diplomacy as limited room is provided for deliberation between several participants which is typical for cultural relations.

2.3 The language and frameworks used in EU international cultural relations do not always resonate in the settings in which programmes are implemented

A dissonant entanglement that directly results from the dominance of political agendas of the most powerful and the overrepresentation of certain voices is that **the language and frameworks used in the field of international cultural relations are not always resonating within the settings in which the programmes are implemented.** Many participants in

international cultural relations feel that they are being forced to work with frameworks that they do not recognise as being their own. This might mean having to adjust to output oriented framings of funding schemes marked by results, risk analyses and quantitative output. It can also mean being forced to frame projects by using notions such as "equality, diversity and inclusion" – which have become central to Western notions of fairer and more inclusive practices – while in the local settings these concepts might not be used, have a different meaning, or are seen as Western impositions.[8] **Fair cultural practice is a deeply relational concept, shaped by who is involved, the context, and the project's purpose and nature**.[9] Imposition from above might create more awareness about this, yet it is not a guarantee that fair cultural practice will become a reality nor that the concepts introduced are automatically embraced by their recipients. Another example of being forced into frameworks is being categorised as an organisation from the "Global South", as a member of "civil society" or as "associate partner" for which no funding is being reserved. **The categorisations used indicate hierarchical differences between the participants active in the field of international cultural relations displaying persisting power asymmetries**.

2.4 Only a 'privileged few' are able to take part in EU international cultural relations

A direct consequence of these dominant framings of international cultural relations and the most prominent funding schemes is that **only 'a privileged few' are able to take part in international cultural relations.** Dissonant entanglements emerge because some face more obstacles than others concerning their participation in international cultural relations. Starting positions of people differ based on the availability of financial resources, their position within society, access to knowledge, the socio-political conditions in which they manoeuvre, the status of their country within the wider geopolitical context, the visa regulations that determine international mobility, the existing cultural infrastructures in the settings in which they work and their personal abilities. We already established that those in more powerful positions set the agendas and that Western voices based on certain interpretations of international cultural relations overrule other voices. The result is that within non-Western contexts only certain participants manage to engage in programmes developed as part of EU international relations. These individuals often come from rather privileged positions and had part of their education in these Western contexts. They understand the rules of the game, know how to move in international environments, speak the languages used in the programmes and funding schemes (primarily English) and are able to find their way – physically and verbally – in cultural contexts different than their own. Others who do not have similar opportunities remain excluded from international cultural relations or consciously decide to abstain from participating in these relations as they **resist the hierarchies and framings this entails**. Within the field of international cultural relations **several instances of unfair cultural practice can be discerned** leading to numerous dissonant entanglements.

2.5 Misalignment between the funding requirements and the needs in the settings in which the programmes are developed

In line with the earlier described lack of resonance of the language and frameworks used in EU international cultural relations and the inequalities this creates between who understands these frameworks and who cannot, quite a few misalignments are felt between **the funding requirements of the projects developed within the field of EU international cultural**

relations and the needs in the settings in which the programmes are developed. These funding requirements differ related to the Work Plan for Culture of the Commission that sets the priorities of the concerning funding period[10] and to the overall strategies and joint declarations that underpin EU international cultural relations.[11] The interpretation of funding schemes also differs per Directorate General of the European Commission. Where DG-EAC primarily focuses on the priorities of the education and culture policies, DG-ENEST (previously DG-NEAR) focuses on the priorities of the Eastern Enlargement and Neighbourhood policy and DG INTPA targets the priorities of international partnership and development policy. **For many applying for the funding schemes it remains unclear what the project they engage in is really about as the language used and the purposes behind the project – which helped them win the bid – is far removed from the ways in which they understand the purpose behind their projects.** As a result, a large part of the projects – in its application as well as implementation – is spent on proving that the projects align with the promises made to the funder – including taking pictures, organising sessions and making posters – while this 'performative action' is not the main concern of the participating organisation. It leads to **dissatisfaction and a feeling that finances could have been spent in a much more effective way.** In some cases, it even led to the situation that cultural actors decided to no longer engage in EU funded projects. This decision to no longer take part was particularly felt in response to the **bureaucracy resulting from the attempt to comply with EU requirements**. Many participants noticed that **the administrative burden of the projects started to outweigh the cultural value of the projects** due to the main emphasis on how the projects are executed (methodology, reporting, compliance), and not on what the projects actually represent (content, artistic message). In some cases – and particularly in circumstances of crises such as Covid-19, political change, conflict and unrest – audits of projects resulted in a situation in which participants were asked to return considerable amounts of money. Here engaging in international cultural relations becomes **risky business**: an investment that costs more than that it brings. Dissonant entanglements thus emerged because the frameworks used by the EU – with a clear focus on EU policy concerns, output and cost-benefit negotiations and bureaucratic procedures – overruled other interpretations based on throughput, quality of content and sensitivity to the contexts in which these projects were implemented leading to several instances of misalignment.

3. Causes behind the dissonant entanglements

Now we have mapped some of the most important forms of friction caused by the dissonant entanglements, we move to the causes of these dissonant entanglements. **How can we explain the existence and persistence of asymmetric power relations and unfair practices within the field of international cultural relations and the several instances of misalignment?** The root causes of the dissonant entanglements can be found in historical legacies that still work through in present day practices. Moreover, they can be found in the high **concentration of funding schemes** in Western Europe which impacts on the ways in which international cultural relations are being perceived. Additionally, they can be found in the **insistence on accountability and bureaucracy** which increased due to the **overall decline in resources**

available for the cultural sector leading to an exponential growth of competition for funding schemes.

3.1 The persistence of the historical legacy of colonialism

One of the most important and persistent causes behind the dissonant entanglements in the field of international cultural relations is the **colonial past**. The afterlife of colonialism is not only directly felt in the countries that have been subject to colonialism, but also in terms of persisting **hegemonic impositions** on the structure of institutions, interpretation of knowledge, use of (statistical) models, and systematic categorisations between groups of people leading to discrimination, racism, and systematic exclusion all over the world. Such hegemonic impositions, implying a hierarchical relation between the West and the 'rest,' have shaped the framing of international cultural relations, which still draws heavily on **capitalist thought** with a focus on **output** and **efficiency** over content and quality**.** This hierarchical relation between the West and the 'rest' can also be recognised when focusing on **who is invited on the negotiation tables**. Negotiations about policy structures and funding schemes are still dominated by representatives from the main (often Western) institutions and thus on who has the mandate of what happens within the field of international cultural relations. These legacies of colonialism can also be seen in the more general **dispersal of resources** worldwide which displays **severe inequalities** and is the main reason behind the diverse starting positions of cultural actors participating in international cultural relations. The colonial past is still felt in patterns of discrimination and systematic exclusion embedded within present day cultural frameworks.

3.2 Increasing focus on European unity – cultural diplomacy over cultural relations

Another cause behind dissonant entanglements can be found in a more recent development of prioritising cultural diplomacy over cultural relations which leads to a furthering of **Eurocentric approaches to international cultural relations**. Due to **increasing geopolitical tensions**, characterised by ongoing conflict, geopolitical power play and 'new' imperialism, the EU focuses more extensively on what brings Europeans together placing the emphasis on European values and on the need to stay united at times in which the national interests frequently enter in competition with EU interests. It leads to a situation in which the **EU increasingly focuses on public and cultural diplomacy instead of cultural relations** and wants to make sure that the EU label is clearly visible on the funded projects – decreasing the visibility of the other partners it works with.[12] The EU thus demands **ownership** which negatively impacts on the establishment of the international cultural relations meaning reaching out to outside world, focusing on global interconnections. Another side effect of this change in focus is that the role of culture in the EU's external relations risks to become smaller. The focus risks to **shift from 'soft power' to 'hard power'** meaning that the main budget will be spend on defence, security and border protection and considerably less on the advancement of broader universalist liberal democratic principles which can be accommodated within cultural programmes.[13] As such, resources might become even more scarce and focus more directly on fulfilling EU interests and thus on cultural diplomacy.

3.3 Concentration of policymaking processes and funding opportunities in Western Europe and the lack of reciprocity

Another cause behind the dissonant entanglements which feeds into the persistence of hegemonic Eurocentric interpretations of international cultural relations is the **high concentration of policy making processes and funding opportunities in Western Europe.** Most of the available funding schemes come from countries within the EU – including the funding provided by the European Commission.[14] The recent Yearbook of On the Move, revealed that 82.4%, of all open calls for cultural mobility are based in Europe.[15] Here the focus is particularly on mobility grants, yet similar numbers hold valid concerning other grants relevant to the field of international cultural relations. Hence, there is a considerable **disbalance concerning funding schemes and their global spread** leading to an overrepresentation of European standards and frameworks. Additionally, in the establishment of policies, the setting of standards of funding schemes and development of programmes, **representatives from outside of the EU are rarely invited on the negotiation tables**. Keeping decision making within their own networks allows the EU to maintain control over its mandate which is closely tied to **accountability** – the EU is responsible to account for the budget spent on international cultural relations which is money provided for by the EU member states. Yet, inclusion of voices from parts of the world in which international cultural relations are implemented and handing over some of the decision-making responsibilities to international partners does not necessarily mean risking a 'loss of valuable money'. It might actually facilitate processes that could enhance EU investments in international cultural relations. Firm accountability through bureaucracy is no guarantee that the budget is well spent. The lack of reciprocity, absence of feedback loops, and overall imbalance in available funding schemes creates instances of friction and negatively impacts on the establishment of cultural relations based on intercultural dialogue and transnational interaction.

3.4 Accountability feeds bureaucracy

As we have seen, quite a few of the dissonant entanglements are the result of misalignments between the funding requirements and the needs in the settings in which the programmes are developed and particularly with the bureaucracy that many of the funding schemes entail. The cause of these requirements and the bureaucracy lies with **accountability**. In essence, accountability involves **being answerable to stakeholders and being responsible for decisions and outcomes**. So, when the EU decides to allocate part of its budget to international cultural relations it can only spend this budget when it can assure that it is spent on initiatives that comply with the targets it has set for this budget. These targets are the results of agreements among the main EU institutions and have been recorded in its action plans, work plans communications, and resolutions. A lot of the rules and requirements around funding schemes have emerged because European taxpayers want them to be strictly observed. This is also the reason why audits take place on a regular basis. Due to these accountability measures most of the EU funding schemes ask for **predetermined agendas over organic cultural development, compliance over creativity,** and **accountability over trust**. As these accountability measures often imply the imposition of Western models and frameworks, this creates several challenges for participants not familiar with these models or working in contexts in which different models and frameworks apply.

3.5 Devaluation of funding schemes and exponential growth in competition

Several of the dissonant entanglements – and particularly those related to different starting positions, unfair cultural practices and growing bureaucracy – have become worsened due to an overall **devaluation of funding schemes** and the resulting **exponential growth of competition**. Due to a global overall cut in budgets, funding possibilities for international cultural projects have become increasingly scarce leading to an exponential growth of applications per available funding scheme. This exponential growth in applications led to the introduction of **point systems** in which applicants gain points for different aspects of the application process (such as innovation, cooperation, risk mitigation and impact). The idea behind these point systems has been to offer transparency as it would provide insights in why a project was granted. Yet due to the many applications, differences between the allocated points have become minimal and **winning a grant has become a matter of being excellent on all fronts.** It has become very difficult to obtain funding without considerable experience, knowledge about EU terminology and objectives, and without the help of a consultancy or AI. This has resulted in a situation in which only a few excellent project applications get through, while many very good project proposals fail to obtain funding. Even institutions that used to be highly successful in obtaining grants such as the Goethe-Institut, are currently not managing – let alone those that have a much more precarious position in the field. Paradoxically this growth of competition has also impacted bureaucracy. To facilitate application and evaluation procedures the European Commission has aimed to simplify the application process without impacting negatively on accessibility and transparency. However, the result of this has been a more **abstract language** characterised by a terminology such as 'operational capacity, risk management and lump sum' making it less clear what was asked for creating confusion and making it hard to write grant applications.

4. Future pathways for culture in international relations

We have now exposed the most important dissonant entanglements in the field of EU international cultural relations and looked at their root causes. We approached these dissonant entanglements as a form of agency; as a force that could make things move in new directions. Three things stand out considering how to move forward. First of all, the **dissonant entanglements have deep historical roots** displaying profound power asymmetries and hegemonic patterns that still impact present day interpretations of international cultural relations. Second, the entanglements are closely intertwined with persisting **hierarchical and competitive forms of collaboration** which lead to **instances of unfair cultural practice** displaying inequalities and diverging conditions for participation. Finally, the dissonant entanglements display a **politics of knowledge** shaped by political authority, social norms, and institutional practices rooted in Western Europe which cause **misalignments** within the contexts in which these are implemented. How can these insights in the dissonant entanglements become starting points to make things move into new directions?

4.1 Exposing the historical roots of the dissonant entanglements

One of the first things that needs to be addressed when trying to lessen the impact of dissonant entanglements is that **more awareness** needs to be created about the **historical roots of these dissonant entanglements** and how these work through in present day societies. Only by exposing these historical roots, acknowledging their exploitative nature and recognising their present day effects, steps can be taken to move international cultural relations into radically

different directions. This asks for an **exposure of hegemonic patterns** that many do not even recognise as these are so engrained in how their societies are being shaped. Joffe and Magkou argued in this respect that decolonisation of cultural relations should be seen as an activist concept and practice. They emphasize how the entire cultural ecosystem involved in cultural relations, including funders, core partners, beneficiaries and participants, play a role in this process. "**It requires each actor in the cultural cooperation partnership to acknowledge the historical, geographical and social situatedness of knowledge and the continuing global imbalances in how the latter is produced and consumed."**[16] The fundamental question to ask is **"where does coloniality touch you?"**[17] By raising more consciousness about power asymmetries and how they affect people in different forms and shapes, the first steps can be made to change these patterns. These steps include the recognition and inclusion of knowledge systems that have been systematically excluded, developing funding and cultural programmes which address power imbalances and prioritise representation and participation of excluded groups, and the introduction of possibilities for listening and exchanging during project implementation to move away from a focus purely on the results and output of projects. Only after raising awareness, knowledge-based inequalities can be dismantled and hegemonic frameworks challenged.

4.2 Move from cultural diplomacy to cultural relations

In line with this need to move towards less Eurocentric approaches, there is a need to counteract the current trend in which the EU and its member states invest more in cultural diplomacy than in cultural relations. While it is understandable that the current geopolitical context asks for a firmer position of the EU on the world stage, international cultural relations are more important than ever. As remarked in a recently published report of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IfA): "**The EU and its member states must resist the temptation to instrumentalize external cultural policy purely for economic gain or propaganda, instead positioning it as a long-term investment in credibility, connection, and trust**".[18] The EU should not only work on a convincing narrative that resonates across the continent, but should also invest in **narratives that resonate with audiences worldwide**. Reshaping international cultural relations in a changing world order is a shared task and thus requires the **strengthening of transnational alliances**. Here the several cultural networks bringing together cultural actors worldwide could form an important starting point for investing in transnational cultural relations.[19] Other initiatives could be the investment in **regional hubs** decentralising the focus on Europe. A good example is how the Cultural Emergency Response[20] has organised its action. Instead of imposing action from above, it takes a **decentralised approach** and invests in local infrastructures. The Regional Hubs are hosted by established civil society organisations active in their national and regional sectors. They play a central role in coordinating programmes, always working with the full consent of local governments, authorities, and communities and have deep-rooted connections to local stakeholders and communities, understanding regional needs, priorities, and contexts. At the same time, they engage with major international organisations, fostering coordination and diverse partnerships. As such, Regional Hubs can play a central role in **strengthening credibility, connection, and trust** between the EU and its partners outside the EU and thus in international cultural relations.

4.3 Invest in reciprocity in policy making processes and the establishment of funding schemes

Where dissonant entanglements are rather directly felt is where people are excluded from the decision making processes. As we already established, typical for quite a few of these processes is that **experts from non-EU countries are rarely invited** to actively engage and provide input. Without these voices on the table and an equal involvement of partners, power asymmetries are maintained. **It should become a standard rule that there is an equal representation of partners within the field of international relation on different levels**: **decision making, project execution and evaluation.** In the words of a participant at the workshop: "We need to emancipate ourselves instead of pleasing the Master and demand a place at the table". Vice versa, the EU needs to provide room for a form of international cultural relations characterised by dialogue and transnational interaction on more equal levels. This would entail **willingness amongst the most important powerholders to share authority, and adopt horizontal models of cultural governance.** A good example of this is what happened with the Organisation of African Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) where the last ACP-EU culture programme funded under the 11th European Development Fund introduced a new mechanism of implementation, with a decentralised management through regional hubs. It enabled the setting up of regional support funds managed primarily around consortia of international, regional and local organisations, with a majority of African component. By doing this, the objective was to respond to the needs of African operators in a targeted manner: by publishing calls for proposals at least once a year in the different cultural and creative sectors. The sub-granting mechanism contributed to the multiplication of financing opportunities for operators, to strengthening the capacities of regional organisations involved and allowed for a more equal distribution of financial aid between ACP regions.[21]

4.4 Moving towards less hierarchical forms of collaboration

Such **decentralised practices and a handing over of some ownership** can also take place on other scales and could indicate a more general move towards less hierarchical forms of collaboration. Key is that more opportunities emerge for policymakers and practitioners to work together instead of in parallel ways. So, to think less in us-them terms, but to work more towards **integrated cooperation between policy makers and cultural actors.** Integrated cooperation means providing possibilities of constructive exchange between the different actors working on different levels in the wider field of international cultural relations. The previously mentioned example of working with Regional Hubs and handing over responsibilities is a good way of establishing such relations. Moreover, each programme and funding scheme should have a mechanism in place in which grantees are invited to provide **feedback** that moves beyond questionnaires**.** Instances should be provided – including time and financial support – in which experiences are actively exchanged with the policymakers and the funders. Another step forward is that **cultural organisations, networks and individuals act more as collaborators instead of competitors**. Together they can join forces in their advocacy for policy change, exchange experiences and provide shared input for policy makers. Such focus on collaboration over competition also means that cultural actors can join forces in applying for joint funding and find ways to share the burden by effectively weighing the strengths and weaknesses of the different applicants. Those applicants with the availability of more resources (in terms of finances, knowledge, skills, personnel, space and mobility) take

the lead in the application processes while drawing in those with less resources. To facilitate this, **seed funding** should be made available which allows for the establishment of these clusters of collaboration and an exploration of how to best divide tasks and responsibilities. In these investments in collaboration processes it remains key to remain attentive to persisting inequalities and unfair practices – only the most privileged manage to apply and get granted – and to actively work on the provision of space for those that usually do not make it through. **Collaboration should therefore also mean developing platforms and networks where knowledge, resources, and tools can be exchanged and where ways are sought to involve those that have thus far remained on the sidelines**. A good example of how this could work is the Clubture network that introduced a collaborative platform which is based on mutual decision-making in terms of strategy, programming and financing in Croatia.[22] The network not only facilitates direct program cooperation between cultural organisations and strengthens organisations' capacities for programming and organisational management; it also invests in the strengthening of their capacities for participation in policy making and advocacy in the cultural field. Platform Kooperativa, a regional network of organisations working in the field of independent culture and contemporary art in Southeast Europe, is currently investing in a similar model for Southeast Europe.[23]

4.5 Avoid misunderstandings and misalignments by introducing mediators and work with regional experts

While these mechanisms for integrated cooperation and collaborative platforms are essential to bridge the gaps between policymakers and practitioners and are key to create spaces of exchange in which cultural actors join forces and strengthen their overall position, there is still a need to invest in structures that can help mitigate the several misunderstandings and misalignments of the grant schemes offered by the EU. Here a solution could be to invest in the establishment of **mediatory and advisory bodies in the settings in which the programmes and projects are developed and implemented.** These mediatory bodies can form a crucial link between the funders, the applicants and the grantees. One obvious solution could be to invest in Regional Hubs interconnected to the 145 EU delegations.[24] These delegations will most probably become more regionally oriented in the future[25] which could offer an opportunity to associate the EU Delegations with a **regional expert centre** that has an independent status but acts as advisory body for the delegation. Taking the example of the earlier discussed regional hubs of the Cultural Emergency Center, these regional centers can function as coordination points which do not only inform potential applicants about the funding opportunities and application procedures, but also function as a place where knowledge and tools can be shared and where people can receive training, mentorship and work on the strengthening of their networks. Vice versa, these regional centers can become important advisory boards for the EU and provide feedback on existing funding programmes. They can provide input on what is really needed within the regions in which the projects are implemented and work on their long term sustainability**. EUNIC** and the **Cultural Relations Platform** could become important partners in this process as they already act as mediating bodies and bring in their expertise, connections and partnerships.

4.6 Diversify application procedures

In line with these attempts to move towards less hierarchical forms of collaboration, and the investment in mediation and advice concerning the existing funding schemes, it is also important to critically look at the actual functioning of these schemes and how they can be improved in terms of fair cultural practice. One intervention which is crucial concerning the inequal access to grants is to invest in the **diversifying application procedures.** This entails different things. It means **carefully looking at the language used in the funding schemes** and considering formats that are more accessible to people facing difficulties reading the grant schemes and writing applications. This could involve avoiding jargon and/or providing explanatory notes for concepts that might be considered difficult to understand. It could also mean adjusting texts with an eye to people with dyslexia or other reading disabilities. Another important intervention would be to present funding schemes in other languages than English only and that applicants are able to write their application in a different language than English. Allowing people to apply for funding by **using different formats than written texts only** could also be an important means to make funding schemes more inclusive. For example, people with visual disabilities could be allowed to send a recording of their application. Or people who face difficulties writing their application could send a video to vocalise and visualise their plans. Another means to diversify application procedures is to **establish funding schemes that are more directly targeted at certain regions or at particular sectors**. The idea is that expertise about these regions and sectors could be integrated in the formats of these applications so that they will be better aligned with the conditions in which the projects are implemented. Such application schemes could allow for precarious budget conditions, socio-political conditions, constraints, and specific needs. Moreover, it can help with the further diversification of application procedures, since it provides insights in the reasons why often the same group of (privileged) people manages to obtain funding, and why large groups remain distant from international funding schemes. Better insights in regional specific factors such as the problems with mobility due to visa regulations or the general lack of people educated in the field of cultural management can be taken into account.

4.7 Introducing different funding mechanisms that allow for more equality

This diversification of application procedures is one of the measures that can be taken to advance inclusivity and improve fair cultural practice. Another important measure is to **introduce different forms of funding schemes** that allow for fair cultural practice. One already discussed measure is to **not only allow for funding once the project is granted, but also before and after the project.** This is particularly relevant for those applicants that work in rather precarious financial and political circumstances. Funding before the actual application would allow them to meet with potential partners and work on the grant application.[26] Similar grants are needed for those who face difficulties with mobility and are not able to travel. In this respect Yvette Mutumba urged for ‘equity fellowships’, grants for African and diasporic artists that fund travel, but also invest in time to prepare, reflect, and return. As she argues: “the way forward lies in making room for slower, more considered forms of connection, where mobility does not just mean movement, but mutual transformation”.[27] Another important measure is to make **agreements about how the budget is divided** amongst the partners an **integral part of grant application and project implementation**. In particularly in projects which include partners from all over the world, there are considerable differences in what each partner can spend, whether their governments will provide co-funding and the amount of resources they need. Good considerations about this need to be made in advance. An example of this is what

happened with the EU-funded project on contemporary dance, "Kedja" in which eight partners decided that the budget should be equally divided. This meant that each participating country had to calculate what it could afford by using a clear protocol and then negotiate with the countries that could afford more, whether they could add to the budget to make the project possible.[28] Finally, integrate the "**not-a-toolkit approach"**[29] which was commissioned by EUNIC in 2019, into each funding programme and consider whether the format used provides for fair practice. The toolkit provides several instruments to check whether the collaborative projects emerging from the current funding schemes are actually fair. Using the "not-a-toolkit" should take place before, during, and after the projects and help in the establishment of funding schemes that allow for more equality.

4.8 Introducing different funding mechanisms that allow for more ownership and flexibility

Funding schemes also have an important role to play in the establishment of more horizontal cultural relations. We already discussed the needs for a decentralisation of policymaking processes and introducing new forms of collaboration. In this respect funding schemes can also play a considerable role. One shift that was frequently mentioned was to move towards grant schemes that are **based on trust** and in which the grantee is provided with **relative freedom to implement their projects** once they have received their funding. One shift towards new grant schemes which is recently introduced by the EU which allows for more autonomy for the grantee is the **cascading funding mechanisms**. For example the EU used these grants for cultural initiatives in Ukraine.[30] When using cascading grants the European Commission allocates funds through intermediary organisations. These organisations then redistribute the funds to other relevant partners, allowing them to access financial support without applying directly to the EU. These grants thus **lessen the administrative burden** of programmes and provide **intermediaries with the responsibility to redistribute funding according to the needs of the context in which the project is implemented**. Another example is the award-method used by the Prince Claus Fund. The application procedures for these awards are relatively simple and once these awards are granted, the grantees are free to spend it according to their own preferences, based on a relation of trust, assuming that they will invest it in something worthwhile. Such **trust-based grant schemes** work best if they are not too big and do not involve too many partners. In these projects there is more room for integrated cooperation between the funders and the grantees and thus for better alignment between the grants and the needs of those using the grants.

5. Concluding words:

In this report we exposed the dissonant entanglements that determine the current functioning of EU investments in international cultural relations and the root causes of these entanglements. In line with Anna Tsing's imaginations of friction these dissonant entanglements are seen as important forces leading to "pathways that make motion easier and more efficient". [31] Creating these pathways is by no means an easy task. It means taking historical legacies seriously and acknowledging how these sustain hegemonic knowledge patterns and global imbalances. It also means moving from cultural diplomacy to cultural relations and investing in a form of international cultural relations that is globally connected but regionally owned. It implies better insights in what works in which contexts and how diverging starting positions – and the

accessibility to the field – influence engagement in international cultural relations. It asks for a move from competition to collaboration and daring to decentralize policymaking processes and rethink funding mechanisms wherever needed and possible. This means investing in the exchange – and not the imposition – of expertise, resources, connections and partnerships and establishing relationships built on trust, equity and reciprocity. Ultimately, it implies investing in pathways that understand **cultural relations as an infrastructure of trust**[32] allowing for long-term, reciprocal processes that create the conditions for sustained collaboration between the several actors involved.

---

[1] The Cultural Compass is most recent strategic framework of the EU, to guide cultural policy and address challenges in the cultural and creative industries: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0091 last accessed 15 May 2026. The AgoraEU programme is the new programme to support culture, media and democratic values: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/agoraeu_en, last accessed 24 June 2026.
[2] The full list of participants can be found in the appendix of this report.
[3] See Naeff et al. 'Dissonant entanglements and creative redistributions', 71-96.
[4] Tsing, *Friction.*, 4.
[5] Ibid. 5.
[6] At times – and particularly in authoritarian and anti-Western contexts – this means that implementation of international cultural relations is severely obstructed.
[7] Yet this is also not always a guarantee. For example in the negotiations concerning the future of international cultural relation of the Organisations of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), the EU did not invite the African Ministers of Culture nor any of the previously involved national and local experts.
[8] For example in China the concepts, equality, diversity and inclusivity are generally not used in cultural projects. So while Chinese applicants need to work with these notions in their grant applications and make sure that their projects commit to equality, diversity and inclusivity, in their daily realities they have to find their own creative ways to work with this within their local context.
[9] Politseva, "Fair Practice in an Unfair World".
[10] See most recent Work Plan: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2022_466_R_0001.
[11] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/international-cultural-relations.
[12] For example the Goethe-Institut was asked to remove their logo from the projects they co-developed with the European Union. By only displaying the EU logo, the EU demands ownership, while the Goethe-Institut is brought in the position of implementer. While it is understandable that the EU needs more visibility, this negatively affects the dynamic of international cultural relations as it creates hierarchies and inequality.
[13] Anheier et al. "The New Nationalisms and the Future of Cultural Relations".
[14] Important funders include UNESCO, the Goethe-Institut, the British Council, Institut français, the Swedish Institute, the Allianz Cultural Foundation, Pro Helvetia, the Roberto Cimetta Fund, the Prins Claus Fund, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the European Cultural Foundation.
[15] https://on-the-move.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/OTM_Yearbook_2026.pdf, accessed on 15 May 2026
[16] Joffe and Magkou "The Payer, the Piper and the Fairness Tune", 40.
[17] Mignolo *Epistemic Decolonisation.*
[18] Anheier et al. "The New Nationalisms and the Future of Cultural Relations".
[19] EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), the Cultural Relations Platform, Culture Action Europe (CAE), International network for contemporary performing arts (IETM), On the Move, ENCATC, Circostrada, Art Baltica, Trans Europe Halles, TransArtist, Kooperativa, Art Moves Africa and Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) are good examples of such networks.
[20] See: https://www.culturalemergency.org/programs/regional-hubs, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[21] Unfortunately this was not continued. In the most recent negotiations concerning the future of the OACPS the local operators were not even involved in the development of the new plans, nor the Ministers of Culture from the participating regional hubs leading to a tremendous loss of expertise.
[22] See: https://www.clubture.org/info/what-we-do and https://www.clubture.org/system/publication/pdf/27/za_web-A_bottom-up_approach_to_cultural_policy-making.pdf, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[23] https://platforma-kooperativa.org/, last accessed 24 June 2026.

[24] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/about-european-external-action-service_en#8419, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[25] https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-eu-embassy-staff-africa-latin-america-eu-external-action-service-eeas-diplomacy/, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[26] Such collaboration before applying actually increases the success rate of applications as the "Opstart Programme" revealed. This fund ran by all the Nordic countries offered funding opportunities to have a dialogue with potential partners, without the demand of clear deliverables. The Nordic cultural organisation did an evaluation about the outcome of this and it led to an increase of the quality of the applications in this period: https://nordiskkulturfond.org/en/funding-programmes/get-off-to-a-better-start-with-opstart, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[27] https://on-the-move.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/OTM_Deconfining_Movements_of_Translation_and_Return_%20Art_Mobility_and_the_Diaspora.pdf, page 33, accessed on 24 June 2026,
[28] Herewith the details of the project "Kedja" https://kedja.net/projects/, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[29] Not-A-Toolkit: *Not a toolkit! Fair collaboration in cultural relations: a reflAction* is the result of a commission from EUNIC to a team of six experts with diverse profiles and backgrounds to develop a set of user-centred tools for EUNIC members and colleagues working in the field of cultural relations. https://eunic.eu/fair-collaboration, accessed on 15 May 2026.
[30] See: Fostering Ukrainians' access to culture and cultural heritage - Search for Funding - EuroAccess - Fördermittelsuche der EuroVienna EU-consulting & -management GmbH, accessed on 24 June 2026.
[31] Tsing, *Friction*, 5.
[32] See also edgeandstory and Lanka.pro Collective "Art as Peace Building" and Vickery et al. *Understanding cultural diplomacy*.

Bibliography:

Anheier, Helmut K., and Edward L. Knudsen, with Sofia Todd-Tombini. "The New Nationalisms and the Future of Cultural Relations: External Cultural Policy in an Age of Political Extremes." In Helmut K. Anheier and ifa (Eds.). *The External Cultural Policy Monitor*. Stuttgart: ifa, 2024: 1-55.

edgeandstory and Lanka.pro Collective. *Art as Peace Building: An exploration of practices and impact scenarios of how arts and culture address fragility and conflict.* British Council, 2026.

Joffe, Avril, and Matina Magkou. "The Payer, the Piper and the Fairness Tune: On EU-Africa Cultural Cooperation." In Mafalda Damaso (Ed.). *The European Union as a Global Cultural Power*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025: 31-52.

Mignolo, Walter. 'Epistemic Decolonisation: Keynote Address to the ICRRA Conference, Cooperation in a Fragmented World.' 2021. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJkZ4gjge6s.

Naeff, Judith, van Ree, Arnout, Sipkes, Lenneke, Strava, Cristiana, Tromp, Kasper and Westmoreland, Mark. 'Dissonant Entanglements and Creative Redistributions.' In Kuoni, Carin, Baltà Portolés, Jordi, Khan, Nora and Moses, Serubiri (Eds.). *Forces of Art: Perspectives from a Changing World,* Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020: 71-96. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020.

Politseva, Elena, "Fair Practice in an Unfair World: Value, Checklist, or Privilege?", The Cultural Policy Room. 2026. Available at: https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/fair-practice-in-an-unfair-world-value-checklist-or-privilege.

Farinha, Cristina, Joffe, Avril, Magkou, Matina, Steinkamp, Anna, Verstraete, Katelijn and Thakurata, Sudebi *Not a Toolkit! Fair Collaboration in Cultural Relations: A reflAction*. (2025) Brussels, Available at: https://eunic.eu/fair-collaboration.

Tsing, Anna *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University

Press: New Jersey, 2005.
Vickery, Jonathan, MacDonald, Stuart., and Cull, Nicholas (Eds.).*Understanding cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025.

Appendix:

Participants workshop "Future Pathways of Culture in International Relations":

Ena Grabar	Platforma Kooperativa, Zagreb, HR
Nihad Kreševljaković	MESS, Sarajevo, BiH
Paola Díaz Gómez	Historias en Kilómetros, Bogotá, CO
Lynn Fu	Independent Curator and Producer Shanghai/New York, CN/USA
Marijana Cvetković	Station Service for Contemporary Dance, Belgrade, RS
Daryna Zhyvohliadova	Cultural professional and Academic, Kyiv/Leuven, BE
Ása Richardsdóttir	IETM, Brussels, BE
Julia Sattler	Goethe-Institut, Brussel, BE
Marie Le Sourd	Culture Action Europe/On the Move, Montpellier, FR
Anaïs Fontanel	Institut français, Paris, FR
Aya Kasasa	Independent Consultant, Brussels, BE
Heba ElCheik	Creative Producer/ Institut français, Cairo, EG
Lars Ebert	Culture Action Europe, Brussels, BE
Yemisi Mokuolu	Consultant and Independent Producer/Hatch Ideas, London, UK
Jelle Burggraaff	DutchCulture, Amsterdam, NL
Simon de Leeuw	DutchCulture/ EUNIC NL, Amsterdam, NL
Andrew Manning	EUNIC Global, Brussels, BE
Robert Kieft	EUNIC Global, Brussels, BE
Tessa Giller	Prince Claus Fund, Amsterdam, NL
Julie Neederkorn	Movies that Matter, Amsterdam, NL
Philipp Dietachmair	European Cultural Foundation, Amsterdam, NL
Ulla Havenga	United Cowboys/Fontys Academy of the Arts, Utrecht, NL
Elke Kaschl	Goethe-Institut, Amsterdam, NL
Judith van der Kooij	DutchCulture, Amsterdam, NL
Bojana Panevska	TransArtist/ Dutch Culture, Amsterdam, NL
Claske Vos	researcher UvA, Amsterdam, NL
Fien van der Steen	Student assistant, Amsterdam, NL
Edgardo del Togno	Student assistant, Amsterdam, NL
Mabel Woodley	Intern EUNIC-NL, Amsterdam, NL