

# Europe & Culture: Back to the Future

## Proceedings

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

European Cultural Foundation

*(cover)*
First congress organised by the European Cultural Foundation on the theme, 'Cultural and Intellectual Unity of Europe', Amsterdam, 1967.
From left to right: Robert Schuman, Dr. Konrad Adenauer, HRH Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, and Paul-Henri Spaak.
Courtesy European Cultural Foundation

# Europe & Culture: Back to the Future

Proceedings

Published by the European Cultural Foundation on the occasion of the official opening of its archives at the Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence on 9–10 June 2026.

The European Cultural Foundation would like to express its sincere gratitude to the team of the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) for their collaboration in making the Foundation's archives accessible to the public. Special thanks go to Director Dieter Schlenker, whose commitment and support made the transfer of the archives possible; to archivist Elena Iorio for her dedication to cataloguing and preserving the collection; to Mattia Torelli for his work on the exhibition and catalogue; and to Lisa Benvegnu and Laura Burgassi for their invaluable logistical support.

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Finally, the Foundation is deeply grateful to all contributors, artists and participants in the launch of the Foundation's archives in Florence. Through their reflections and exchanges, they helped make this event not only an opportunity to revisit the Foundation's history, but also a space for engaging with the questions, challenges and possibilities that shape Europe's future and inform the Foundation's ongoing mission.

**Edited by**
Lore Gablier,
Programme Manager at the European Cultural Foundation

**Graphic design**
Fernando Lai Couto

**Copyediting**
Vicky Anning

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The **European Cultural Foundation (ECF)** was established in 1954 on the belief that Europe will not be built by treaties alone. It requires something deeper: a sense that our destinies are connected. For over seventy years, the Foundation has championed cultural initiatives that bring people together, inspire hope, foster democracy and imagine a shared future for Europe. This commitment has given rise to countless programmes, studies, campaigns, and international collaborations, including its contribution to shaping and implementing the Erasmus student mobility scheme.

For more details, please visit: www.culturalfoundation.eu

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# Europe & Culture: Back to the Future

Lore Gablier

On 10 June 2026, the seminar *Europe & Culture: Back to the Future* took place at Villa Salviati in Florence, home of the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU). Bringing together academics, public intellectuals, policymakers, and cultural practitioners, the seminar explored how culture has shaped European imaginaries and forms of belonging, while also offering critical perspectives on the notions of both 'culture' and 'Europe'. The seminar formed the intellectual centrepiece of the official opening of the archives of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) at the HAEU, following the successful transfer of ECF's historical records to Florence.

Established in 1954 to foster a European sense of belonging through culture and education, ECF seized the opportunity to connect its historical legacy with contemporary debates on the role of culture in Europe. In doing so, it continued its long-standing tradition of convening debates and reflection groups on questions shaping the future of the continent.

Alongside the seminar, visitors were invited to discover the newly opened ECF collection through *Building Belonging: Inside the Archives of the European Cultural Foundation*, an exhibition of original archival documents and narrative panels. The exhibition opening coincided with the publication of an eponymous catalogue[1] offering the first insights into the richness of the foundation's holdings and its contribution to the cultural history of European integration.

The launch of ECF's archives unfolded over two days. On the evening preceding the seminar, ECF convened a group of distinguished guests for a dinner hosted by the foundation's President, HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands. This created a space for informal exchange and reflection among representatives from the cultural, philanthropic, academic, and policy sectors.

The programme was further enriched by a series of artistic interventions, including musical performances by Lex Empress, who improvised songs inspired by the conversations and reflections emerging throughout the event. There was also a participatory weaving project in which words contributed by guests and audience members were transformed by artist Masja Ottenheim into a collective tapestry.

The seminar itself was structured in two parts. The first part offered historical perspectives on the relationship between culture and European integration. The speakers explored how cultural visions of Europe became embedded in post-war institutions, networks, and policies, while also reflecting on the possibilities, limitations, and contradictions of culture as a vehicle for European belonging.

1.
Mattia Torelli (ed.), *Building Belonging: Inside the Archives of the European Cultural Foundation*, Historical Archives of the European Union, Florence, 2026.

Seminar moderator Katy Lee (left) and singer Lex Empress (right).
Photo: Marco Borrelli




Audience participant contributing to the collective tapestry.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

The second part turned towards the future. Against a backdrop of geopolitical uncertainty, technological transformation, democratic fragility, and shifting social realities, contributors considered how Europe might respond proactively to contemporary challenges and reimagine itself altogether.

Together, the contributions reveal both the enduring relevance of culture within the European project. While speakers differed in their diagnoses and proposals, they shared a conviction that Europe cannot be reduced to an economic or political arrangement alone. At a time of increasing polarization and competing visions of Europe, the seminar questioned whether culture can still provide a space for democratic imagination, connection, and shared futures, and what public institutions, foundations, and civil society can do to strengthen Europe through culture.

What follows are the transcripts of the contributions delivered during the seminar, accompanied by photographs documenting the event as well as reflections offered by the dinner guests.


European
listen to the children they know the way to go for all
EUI EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE
European
Cultural
Foundation

Excerpt from the opening address
by HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands,
Honorary President of the ECF

Excerpt from the welcome speech by Dieter Schlenker,
Director of the HAEU

Video message by Glenn Micallef, European Commissioner
for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport

# Official opening

HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands (left) and moderator Katy Lee during the official opening of the seminar. Photo: Marco Borrelli




HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands during her opening address.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

We talk a lot about collaboration and solidarity, but what do they actually mean?

Some of you shared reflections ahead of today's seminar. They came from many different perspectives, but as I read through them, one phrase really stood out because it came back time and time again: "We are taking things for granted: peace, democracy, solidarity, culture, and Europe itself."

The more I read those words, the more I felt that taking things for granted is, in many ways, a euphemism for indifference. It happens when we stop paying attention to something precious, when we assume that what has been achieved will somehow sustain itself.

Yet history teaches us otherwise. When we look back at the people who made that history, we see that they understood progress is never a permanent state. You can still see the fire in their eyes as they worked to create the Europe we live in today. And it prompts a question: where is that fire in us?

Progress is a continuous act of care, participation, and renewal.

The archives we celebrate today tell the stories of those who came before us, and of countless Europeans whose efforts shaped our present. They also remind us of something equally important: the actions we take today are writing the history of tomorrow.

—HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands,
Honorary President of the European Cultural Foundation

*Excerpt from her opening address.*



Dieter Schlenker during his welcome address.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

For us at the Historical Archives of the European Union, this is a very special moment. Our institution was created in 1983 at the initiative of the European institutions. But from the very outset our institutional partners and stakeholders agreed that Europe is much more than the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, and the other EU institutions. It is a project that has involved thousands, if not millions, of people who have been active in different organisations, movements, associations, and cultural clubs with a European scope, all working towards a united Europe: a Europe that lives in peace, that develops, that is innovative, that is at the heart of our sense of belonging, and that fosters citizenship.

This was the idea from the outset, and it is why we were able to welcome the archives of the European Cultural Foundation into our collections. The records tell a unique story of cultural cooperation and, indeed, cultural integration.

Our invitation to all the speakers and participants is to spread the word that these archives are now available here, that they can be consulted, and that everyone can draw their own story from them.

—Dieter Schlenker,
Director of the Historical Archives of the European Union

*Excerpt from his welcome speech.*

Audience watches Glenn Micaleff's video message.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Video Message from Glenn Micaleff, European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

The European project is organized by treaties, but held together by people. This is the legacy of the European Cultural Foundation—a legacy now integrated in the Historical Archives of the European Union.

It tells the story of students crossing borders through the Erasmus programme for the first time; of artists, writers, and journalists creating shared spaces of understanding; and of people discovering that, despite their different histories and languages, they belong to the same European story.

Today, this legacy matters even more than ever—especially at a time when war has returned to our continent, when democratic values are under pressure. Integrating these archives into the EU archives is a statement of confidence: confidence in our shared history, in our common values, and in Europe's future.

These archives testify to the role of the European Cultural Foundation in creating spaces for dialogue that nurture a sense of belonging, and helping Europeans to see one another as neighbours. They remind us that culture is central to the European project.

That is also the ambition of the Culture Compass for Europe: to place culture at the heart of the European project.

Thank you for protecting this legacy so that future generations continue to experience what Europe truly is: a space of freedom, of diversity, and of mutual understanding.

Congratulations on this important occasion.


EUI

Culture: Europe's Superpower
Rethinking European Cultural Belonging
What Can the EU Institutions Do Through Culture?
Cultural Dimension of European Integration:
A View from The European Pavilion

# Part 1: Evolutions — On the Role of Culture in European Integration

On the screen: Photograph from the ECF archives featuring George Sluizer, ECF Secretary General from 1961-1972. Photo: Marco Borrelli




ECF Director André Wilkens delivering his speech.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Culture: Europe's Superpower

André Wilkens

As Director of the European Cultural Foundation, it is an honour to open this panel.

Let me first take you back to 1954, and start with a few lines from the founding document of the European Cultural Foundation. I quote:

'Totalitarianism today rules one third of humanity…'
'In the other two thirds its forces remain active… through the fascinating quality of its myths…'
'Today, tyranny is able to change a man's thoughts, his sentiments, even his sense of truth…'
'The mental enslavement of a large part of humanity is no longer a utopia.'
'The most disquieting fact… is that Europe feels powerless…'
'We still think nationally… and feel too small for this century.'
'The difficulties are more moral than material.'
'A lack of confidence… a fetishist attachment to national sovereignty… short-sighted egoism…'

These words were written more than seven decades ago. And yet they sound eerily contemporary. These words are urgent, political, courageous. They sound like a revolutionary manifesto rather than the founding document of a philanthropic foundation. Or of any foundation, I would say, at that time and probably also today.

The core founders of the European Cultural Foundation were a Swiss philosopher, a French-Luxemburgish politician and a Dutch prince. They had seen Europe in blood and flames, and they swore to do whatever it took to change Europe's trajectory. One of the founders, the French-Luxemburgish politician, who became the first President of the European Cultural Foundation, had just written the Schuman Declaration, which would become the founding document of the European Union.

The founders' conclusion was, and I quote:

'The whole problem hinges on the mental attitude of Europeans themselves.'
'Europe will not take shape of itself…'
'It will be born from the realisation that its destinies depend… on its own acts.'
'Some of us, at least, should accept this challenge of history. Without pride, yet without abject humility. A few, here, can attain a great deal for the good of many, provided they unite and act while there is yet time.'

In other words: Europe is not automatic. Europe is a choice. The real choice was not only economic or military. It was psychological. It was cultural. It was about how people think—and what they believe.

But the founders of the European Cultural Foundation did not want to just write another manifesto. They wanted to make things happen They created a foundation with a big mission:

'The stimulation of the European sentiment.'

'The development and preservation of a feeling of mutual comprehension and democratic solidarity between the peoples of Europe by encouraging cultural and educational activities of common interest.'

A sense of belonging across borders. A shared feeling of Europe. To build a European identity—not through war or fear—but through culture and education. A long-term project.

This was an ambitious mission for a new foundation that was uniquely trans-European and that started with no money or generous donors. And yet—they got started.

Over the next seventy years, the European Cultural Foundation supported countless initiatives, built institutions, campaigns and collaborations. It connected millions of people. It co-created the Erasmus programme: our proud unicorn, which must be one of the most transformative philanthropic initiatives in Europe, ever.

Today we are proudly opening our archive to the public. I hope this little preview has created an appetite to find out more about the incredible history of the European Cultural Foundation and its contribution to building modern Europe.

### Moving to the present

The founding rationale of 1954 sounds surprisingly contemporary, and not only in a good way. We live again in a time of polarization. Of nationalism. Of propaganda. Of war.

Europe's former best friend, and co-creator of a united Europe as some might say, has turned into a fierce opponent, declaring that Europe has 'lost its way' and pledging to support oppositional forces to change its trajectory. This is a declaration of culture war. It echoes the Western playbook for undermining the Soviet Union. Except now the EU is cast as the new Soviet Union.

On the other side, Vladimir Putin's neo-imperial strategy is not only to occupy land—but to occupy culture. To destroy heritage. To distort narratives. To weaken meaning. Because if you control the story, you control society.

I grew up on the Eastern side of the Berlin Wall, and I have seen this dynamic before. I know that the Cold War was not won by military and economic strength alone. It was also won by culture. By music from The Clash, films from Ingmar Bergmann, books by Hannah Arendt, magazines like *The Face*, freedom of speech and of movement. Europe was attractive—because it was meaningful.

Today, we risk forgetting this. Culture is not decoration. It is not a luxury. Culture is where we decide: who we are; what we value; how we live together. When culture is strong, society is resilient. When culture shrinks, societies are volatile. That is why attacks on culture are strategic. They target the very foundations of democratic societies.



ECF Director André Wilkens delivering his speech. Photo: Marco Borrelli

And yet—in Europe, culture is still treated as optional. We speak about culture as Europe's 'soul'. But we fund it with just 0.2% of the EU budget. The rhetoric is big, but the investment is minimal. At the same time, surveys of European citizens show: people want a Europe that they can feel. Not just regulations—but experience. A Europe that is present in everyday life.

### What next?

But belonging cannot be legislated. And more funding alone will not close the belonging gap.

It must be experienced. The Erasmus programme works because people can experience Europe directly. So, what is our next Erasmus? How do we make Europe tangible for many more people?

To mention just a few examples, we could connect the 67,000 libraries of Europe to a European Social Network, analogue and digital; we could create a massive Erasmus Fellowship for digital creators, to empower European narratives online; we could establish Europe Day—a real European public holiday.

Because the real battle today—just as in 1954—is for minds. For meaning. For imagination.

Let me conclude. When we look at Europe today, we often focus on what we lack. We are not a military superpower. We are not a digital superpower. But in one domain, Europe is a superpower. And that is culture. Europe has a unique richness of languages, traditions, and ideas. A long history of exchange. A deep experience in living together in diversity. Culture is what makes Europe more than a market. It makes Europe a community. Culture is not a soft add-on; it is Europe's key strategic asset. Culture is Europe's superpower. It is the power of purpose, resilience, hope—and future. But a superpower unused is a superpower wasted.

This is the contemporary interpretation of the original mission of the European Cultural Foundation.

Thank you.

**André Wilkens** is the Director of the European Cultural Foundation, Board Chair of Tactical Tech, co-founder of the Initiative Offene Gesellschaft and founding member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. He au-thored two books, on Europe (*Der diskrete Charme der Bürokratie*, S. Fischer, 2017) and on digitalization (*Analog ist das neue Bio*, Metrolit, 2015), and is a regular media contributor.




Géraldine Schwarz at the lectern.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Rethinking European Cultural Belonging

Géraldine Schwarz

When the philosopher René Descartes led the foundations of modern philosophy with his famous declaration, 'I think, therefore I am', he cast the human being as a creator of reason capable of a rational vision of existence—free from the distortions of emotion and tradition. Had Descartes been right, I think the European Union would be extraordinarily popular. From a rational standpoint, the European Union has made remarkable achievements. It protects its citizens, guarantees their rights, keeps the peace, and opens borders. And yet, as we all have observed, the EU struggles to inspire genuine enthusiasm among its citizens, partly because—contrary to what Descartes said and what modernity promised—human beings do not always choose what seems rationally best for them.

Descartes' maxim captures only part of the human condition, and it needs to be completed with: 'I feel, therefore I am'. Today, despite or perhaps because of the rationalising tools technology has given us—we live with a striking paradox. Emotions carry more weight than facts. So we cannot hope to build a genuine European adhesion if we do not honestly admit this reality. Emotions shape our societies and our decisions. And I want to focus on one of them that I believe is very relevant to our task: the fear of exclusion—and its counterpart, the need to belong.

For the past two centuries, this emotion, the need to belong, has been overwhelmingly shaped by the national narrative. It drew sharp lines between those who are part of the nation and those who are not—fixing rigid criteria of membership. The success of the national narrative is all the more remarkable given that it was, to a large extent, a fabrication.

Across Europe, immense pedagogical and propagandistic efforts were deployed through schools—popular art, folklore, songs, parades, national holidays—to fabricate shared bonds of national identity like founding myths, heroes, a common heritage, and, of course, a common language. This was often at the expense of regional dialects. In a relatively short time, the national project brought together populations that had previously had very little in common, while simultaneously erecting walls between people who actually had something in common. And it erased bonds that had linked regions and communities for centuries.

Europe, unlike the nation-state, needs no great narration, no invention: just remembrance. The facts speak for themselves. Since antiquity, European borders have never stopped shifting, forming fluid

entities where beliefs, practices, ideas mixed continuously. And people themselves never stopped moving, migrating, driven by persecution, poverty, or plague, and carrying with them their know-how and their cultures. A good example is the Netherlands, which benefitted greatly from the skills of Protestant refugees from Spanish-occupied Belgium, particularly from Antwerp, the centre of cartography, publishing and finance.

Europe existed as a cultural space long before it became a political and economic project. As we know, the Greeks and Romans, and later Christianity—we should not forget Christianity , created cultural frameworks and ways of life in a vast symbolic and cultural universe that crossed borders. Humanism and later the Enlightenment, created transnational networks and more. Most of the great ruptures—religious, artistic, political—were the fruit of a long evolution to which countless Europeans contributed. Their effects rippled across the entire continent, gradually shaping common ways of living and thinking. But afterwards, the nation states often claimed these achievements as their own, folding them into a national story that was—wherever possible—brilliant and heroic.

So, there is no need to fabricate a European narrative. We simply need to reawaken a shared heritage that continues to shape us. But how? Most of us would say through culture, of course.

The architects of European integration quickly understood the importance of incorporating culture into the European project in order to foster a sense of common belonging. The results have been, in many ways, remarkable. And yet, given the rise of nationalist far-right movements across the continent, we must be honest: EU cultural policy has not succeeded over the long-term in building a broad European consciousness. Maybe it created transnational networks and connected those who were already mobile, educated and urban? But did it reach the others? It may even have deepened a fracture that is clearly visible today in political behaviour across the continent.

### What do we mean by culture?

So, if our aim is to strengthen a shared European belonging through culture, I think it is worth pausing to reflect on what we actually mean by culture and belonging.

Let me share a few thoughts. On culture, first.

For me and for many of us, I think, culture is far broader than artistic and intellectual creation. It is the entire fabric of meanings, memories, values, practices, and narratives through which people—here, Europeans—perceive their relationship to the place they inhabit, and to one another.

This is why I believe in an expansive and connective approach to culture, one to which the many and not only the few can relate. An approach that bridges regions and countries, past and present—culture and history should go hand in hand. An approach that is interdisciplinary: religion, philosophy, arts, science, even economy—all is connected.

Beyond celebrating creation and artistic achievements, culture can or must help us Europeans better understand where we come from, our differences, and how deeply we have been intertwined through centuries.

But above all, it must help us reflect on the human condition, on what we are capable of: the worst and the best. Culture alone is not a bulwark against barbarism. Many Nazis were cultured and educated. Civilization is thinner than we like to think. So culture must do more than provide knowledge and enlightenment. It must sharpen our awareness of our own humanity, of our flaws and fragility, but also our courage, our capacity for change, and the impact each of us can have on the course of events.

And to reach the many, the EU must be willing to go where people actually are and actively support cultural and educational projects that use podcasts and social media, and not dismiss them as somehow unworthy of the name culture.

Second, on the meaning of belonging.

Fostering attachment to Europe must not mean erasing other forms of belonging or competing with them. The goal cannot be to replace regional or local identities with a homogeneous European identity. Europe has no need for a single, unified culture. Nor can we ignore the profound power of attachment to one's home—the deep emotional bonds we weave with the place where we were born. They provide a sense of security in a volatile and ever-accelerating world—a shelter against the fear of exclusion.

So, Europe must not appear to be imposing a European culture from above. Otherwise, it might fuel the very thing we are trying to counter: defensive identity politics rooted in the fear of cultural dissolution. But Europe can become something like a second home, not inherited but chosen.

People often need to be part of both: a place of roots where they were born and a larger horizon onto which to project something greater than themselves. That ideal could be Europe itself: the vision of a continent that turned its back on centuries of violence to become a space of freedom, culture, and peace. To embody that dream, however, Europe must go beyond defining itself solely as a post-war peace project, as a safeguard against the repetition of the twentieth century's horrors. The call of 'never again!' was a powerful one for a time, but it has lost part of its binding energy.

Belonging to a community requires more than warnings—it demands inspiration. And that is precisely what culture can provide by reconnecting the Europeans with a multi-millennial civilization, so they can learn from its shadows, of course, but also draw inspiration from its extraordinary light, its creativity, and its power of renewal. The past is not merely history. To know what we need to change, we must trace how we became what we are.

**Géraldine Schwarz** is a Franco-German author, journalist, and documentary filmmaker. She works with international media outlets and speaks at conferences on topics such as memory, democracy, populism, and Europe. Her bestselling essay *Les Amnésiques* (Flammarion, 2017) was translated into more than ten languages and received several awards. In 2024, she published *Where We Come From—What Unites Us, What Divides Us*, an exploration of Europe's millennia-long past in search of a common history shared by Europeans, which won the Jacques Delors European Prize.

Tamás Szűcs at the lectern.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# What Can the EU Institutions Do Through Culture?

Tamás Szűcs

Good morning, and thank you very much for the invitation. I must confess, it's not easy to live up to the challenge posed by the title suggested for my speech: 'What can the EU institutions do through culture?'—as, by definition, it's a fairly bureaucratic subject.

In a nutshell, through culture, our institutions have tried to address four main areas of action: strengthening a European identity; fostering social inclusion and cohesion; enhancing the EU's global influence; and, of course, boosting economic growth. We are going to talk about the first three this morning.

Historically, the European project primarily focussed on economic and commercial integration, and it took almost four decades for culture to gain legal recognition in the Maastricht Treaty. Yet the need was evident from the very beginning for a human and cultural dimension: for a narrative embodying the fundamental values we all share as European citizens. Now, of course, it's a long, piecemeal journey started with the Congress of Europe in the Hague and the European Conference on Culture in Lausanne just after the Second World War. While in principle they all recognized that European construction should involve culture to reconcile public opinions, in practice, its first two decades focussed on creating economic growth and stability.

It took the severe recession of the 1970s for Europe's political leaders to realize that the legitimacy of the European communities could no longer be based solely on prosperity. This led to initiatives at two levels: high politics and technical implementation, if I may use this expression.

At the first level, in the European Council, the desire to Europeanize national public discourses and to find a common European narrative has driven the Declaration on European Identity from 1973 by the nine foreign ministers, the Tindemans report, and the Adonnino report.[1] These were the three main documents at the time that marked a turning point. With the adoption of the European flag and the European anthem, they went beyond proposing political symbols. They reimagined Europe as a cultural community designed to foster a stronger sense of belonging. They also inspired two ministers of culture to launch the famous European Capital of Culture in 1985. This is the oldest and most popular and concrete EU cultural project, which has been awarded to more than 70 cities so far and which, hopefully, goes beyond the normal cultural sphere and tries to involve as many people as possible.

1.
In 1975, Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans published his 'Report on the European Union', a landmark proposal on the future of the European Communities and the concept of 'European Union'. Formally titled *A People's Europe*, the Adonnino Report refers to two reports submitted to the European Council in March and June of 1985 by the ad hoc Committee on a People's Europe, chaired by Italian politician Pietro Adonnino.

At the second more technical level, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the European Commission prepared, and the Council adopted, several resolutions dealing with cultural matters on films, translations, literary issues, and cultural heritage. Structural funds started to provide financial support even before culture became an official policy sector.

Bolstered by the Maastricht Treaty, the 1990s and 2000s saw the launch of new programmes to finance cross-European cultural collaboration such as Culture 2000, the first European Framework Programme, merging three previous programmes into one single instrument. Since 2014 its activities have been continued in the Creative Europe programme (2014–2027) (one of the few programmes with budget increase in each multiannual cycle) that will be integrated into the Agora EU Programme from 2028.

Within the EU, with all these efforts our institutions have sought to link the collective and individual dimensions of belonging to territorial dimensions by appealing to our common cultural roots and shared values.

### United in Diversity

The official slogan, 'United in Diversity', captures this ambition perfectly. The goal has been to construct a European identity that does not erase national differences, but instead celebrates them within a broader framework of unity.

At the same time, externally, the EU institutions have sought to harness the transformative power of culture to enhance the EU's global influence. This was set out first in the Commission's European Agenda for Culture in a globalising world in 2007. This led almost ten years later to the first EU strategy for international cultural relations, published in 2016 jointly by the Commission and the European External Action Service. This document suggested a new model of enhanced cooperation for cultural relations based on mutual outreach with third countries to realize the full potential of the EU's soft power. The European Council confirmed this approach in 2017, and the European Commission adopted a new European Agenda for Culture in 2018, which set out a new overall framework for cultural policy operation at the EU level with a strong external dimension.

At the end of last year, the Commission's Culture Compass for Europe reinforced both the internal and the external dimension of the EU cultural policy in a comprehensive manner. With twenty new flagship actions, it establishes a strategic vision clearly strengthening the role of culture in shaping Europe's shared identity.

The succession and nature of these policy documents, combined with the dedicated support programmes, demonstrate how the concepts of belonging and identity were consolidated in the EU's official vocabulary. They also show the complex interplay between the different EU institutions ultimately working for the same objective. They have

collectively worked to gradually expand the scope of a field where the EU originally had minimal formal competence. The European Council provided strategic guidance, symbols, and rhetoric from the top. The European Commission and the European Parliament drove policy from the bottom up through consultations, proposals, citizen engagement, and channelling the views of artists and cultural professionals. And of course, the Council has ensured that the Member States' voices were clearly heard.

Yet, as we have seen, this path has not been easy. Culture is a controversial tool for building identity and belonging, and a highly contested terrain. It can unite, but it can also divide. It can inspire, but it can also be weaponized. In a world of profound global transformation where Europe is facing an uncertain geostrategic environment, the role of culture has never been more important.

While seeking to overcome national and cultural divisions, the emphasis on a common European identity and narrative is under attack from two sides. First, from within, nationalist parties: the extreme right movements misuse the idea of European identity to advance their own agendas, often distorting the EU's narrative of unity in diversity. Second, from the outside: our geopolitical adversaries, as we politely say—Russia and China and their friends from authoritarian regimes—seek to undermine the EU's fundamental democratic values. When we are facing such attacks, it becomes even more important to stand united. And of course, this goes not just for the EU institutions, but also for the Member States.

Will this happen? We cannot be sure. Yet, incidentally, this seminar takes place at a time that may signal a new turning point in our quest for fostering a European belonging. Today, just as we are speaking, the European Parliament is expected to endorse a landmark document with this purpose: the first flagship action of the Culture Compass—the so-called Joint Declaration, 'Europe for Culture, Culture for Europe'.

The European Commission and the Council have already endorsed this document last week. If everything goes well, on the margins of the European Council, the three Presidents will hopefully sign the document, which will be the first such document in European cultural policy.

I'm not sure the European Cultural Foundation had this in mind when deciding the date of this seminar, but let's take it as a sign of hope and a much-needed ammunition in our quest to achieve what we have always wanted.

Thank you.

**Tamás Szűcs** is Principal Advisor for the international dimension of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) policies. Since July 2025, he has been Special Adviser for Intergenerational Fairness, after being the Director for Culture, Creativity and Sport in the same Directorate-General. He is the author and editor of several publications on European integration and an alumnus of the Salzburg Seminar, the Alpbach Forum, and the European University Institute, among others.




Monica Sassatelli delivering her speech.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Cultural Dimension of European Integration: A View from The European Pavilion

Monica Sassatelli

Good morning everyone.

The general task that we've been given today is to offer critical perspectives on the notions of culture and Europe, both in connection and separately. And both in connection or separately, these are very tricky terms. And I use tricky, which is not an academic scholarly notion, because I actually think that they're tricky in the sense of potentially deceptive. They can trap us, especially when we try, rightly so, to define them. For the sake of clarity, we need definitions before we can start talking. But as we do that, we are tricked into cutting out something very fundamental.

You will have to forgive me for chiselling away lots and lots of layers from my block of stone to free the form that is inside—to quote Michelangelo, who said that creating statues is about freeing them from the block. I need to do that: I need to chip away very, very fast if I want to make my general introduction, but also get to The European Pavilion.

So, culture. When we want to be precise about culture, the usual way, at least in academia, is to say: there is the artistic or aesthetic notion, which includes the arts and all that human imagination has created; and then there is the anthropological sense, which is a way of life and includes much more. But what's the trap here?

The trap, I think, is that this distinction exacerbates certain opposite aspects, whilst hiding a profound common root: one that I'd like to instead set free from my block of stone. Aesthetic culture may be, in fact, too narrow and elitist, and anthropological culture, too wide and relativist. And their combination becomes a real challenge. There seems to be almost no meeting ground between the two, and yet, we all talk of culture. Culture seems to be doing something unique and specific to us—specific and unique to culture in all its expressions.

This thing that culture does for us humans is to provide meaning. Culture—aesthetic and anthropological alike—is meaning, as a human software, so to speak: what we need to function, the web of meaning that gives our action direction, that shapes our interests. I know it's very general, but it also shifts the attention from a territorial dimension—one culture, one place—to a translocal idea.

Now, culture in Europe, or European culture, arrived when—in the words of a Dutch sociologist called Jan Nederveen Pieterse—we were undergoing a period of accelerated cultural mixing involving a tendency towards a deterritorialization of culture, an overall shift in

orientation from the territorial notion towards culture as a translocal learning process. And this affected both how emerging European institutions could try to leverage culture's expediency and how artists lent their imagination to the process.

Here, Europe's shapes starts to appear as layers are removed, because culture has been included in European integration, precisely as an expression of this turn to cultural melange and hybridization as a feature of the contemporary public sphere. We live in this time of undeniable hybridization, and cultural expressions increasingly claim agency rather than representation. Artists increasingly refuse to represent, particularly the nation.

I'm starting to speak here, for instance, of the Venice Biennale, which is a reference for The European Pavilion, but also a reference in the art world in general. At the Venice Biennale, it's true: national pavilions thrive. This year saw a record number of one hundred national pavilions. But they thrive not as showcases of national styles or schools or trends, but as means of cultural diplomacy. They try not so much to represent, but to act: they aim to have an impact, to raise awareness, to affect change.

### Pavilion with a European perspective

Social art, in fact, or activist art, is arguably one of the key trends in an art world that has become cosmopolitan in its narratives. Very few would use the national as a criterion for aesthetic distinctions. And here I've finally reached my crucial example, because if you have to find culture when Europe is imagined, expressed and performed, I think that a good vantage point really is The European Pavilion: this programme that the ECF launched in 2020 and that started as a provocation on why there is no European Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and what could it be if one ever existed.

From this premise, The European Pavilion then actually developed in a rather different direction, a series of events that also supported research activities, involving several institutions and individuals. So, it developed into something completely different from what a European Pavilion by default might have looked like. What it showed, I think, is that the challenges in reframing the pavilion from a European perspective—the strategies that have had to be put in place—become traces of what happens when culture and Europe are paired in the current cultural climate.

From the first idea to implementation, which has turned into almost two mini bienniales, one in 2022 in Rome and one in 2024 in Lisbon, I could see the shift from what was indeed a rather direct transfer to Europe of a device—the pavilion meant for national representation—

to the realization that, at the European level in the current climate, a simple transfer was not an option. What happened instead was a search for innovative cultural models that would propagate new types of non-linear and decentralized pavilions. I just very briefly want to quote something from the organizers of the 2024 European Pavilion, which took the form of boats navigating four Europeans rivers:

> The collapsing of the notion of pavilion into a boat can be understood as taking the contradictions of the very concept of European Pavilion head on. Boat is charged with acquired meaning through European history, beyond being merely a means of transport, it symbolises European research expeditions, merchant enterprises, and the colonial roots of the continent status and wealth. Boats of a smaller scale are also vessels that daily transport migrants to Europe in very dangerous conditions across the Mediterranean, the cradle of European civilization, but also a mass graveyard and battlefield of proclaimed European values of human dignity, the right to move, to work. The pavilion, a place of detachment, withdrawal, a place of pleasure, contemplation and representation, needs to deal with all these new meanings once it is built on a boat.

So, it's no longer just about celebration or about a simple story, but it's about keeping together complex things that then become meaningful to people's lived experience.

To conclude, I think the European Pavilion Programme has entered the cultural public sphere at a moment when identity-building projects have become increasingly suspect. Its solution for a pavilion that is not a pavilion and the debates about it are interesting precisely because they are a testing ground for imagining communities that are less based on enforced homogeneity, specious horizontality, and unattainable sovereignty.

The European Pavilion enacts the search for something that could work like a common narrative or canon, creating a shared basis that is relevant to people's everyday lives, but without the dark side, if you like, of canons: exclusion, silencing, avoiding dissent. The search for a European narrative that is at the origin of this programme has not really produced a common narrative but a shared narrative space. I think that it offers a glimpse of the options that are available in the cultural public sphere that is relevant to Europeans' living worlds—how they are taking shape, the types of citizenship and citizen empowerment that are emerging perhaps where one would not expect them.

Thank you.

**Monica Sassatelli** is a cultural sociologist and Associate Professor at the Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Department of the Arts, Italy. Her research and teaching focus on cultural events, policies, and institutions, with a particular emphasis on Europe. She has authored and edited numerous books and essays, including the recent 'European Identity and Culture. Imagining a European Pavilion' (in *Europe and the Everyday. Subjectivities, Identities and Contestations*, Springer, 2024).

**Discussion with the speakers**
Moderated by Katy Lee






Panel discussions involving speakers from the first part of the seminar.
All photos: Marco Borrelli


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Part 2: Prospects
European Challenges
Today and Tomorrow
European Cultural Foundation

Spirit of Europe
Nourishing the Future: Culture and Creativity as Catalysts
Tools, Not Agents: A European Vision for Human–AI Collaboration
Imagining Europe from the Stage: Belonging, Doubt, and Community

# Part 2: Prospects — European challenges today and tomorrow

Moderator Katy Lee introduces Part Two of the seminar.
Photo: Marco Borrelli




Tomáš Sedláček contributes to the Woven Voices tapestry.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Spirit of Europe

Tomáš Sedláček

Dear friends, it is a great privilege and honour to be standing here before you.

Fifteen years ago, I was dealing with the same questions as we are considering today with José Manuel Barroso, former President of the European Commission, who summoned a group of intellectuals and gave us a task: to come up with a non-economic 'Narrative of Europe'. The task was seemingly simple: what is the story of the European Union minus the economy? In other words, if we take away economic integration, what is left?

For me, as an economist, I thought that would be easy to answer. But wherever I started, it ended up with economic integration. In fact, if you ask anyone in the street, the European Union is a story of economic integration—and this perception is correct.

So we failed miserably. We came up with nothing beyond cultural exchange and a faint hope, which I knew was not a good answer. As somebody rightly observed earlier today, Nazis and Communists also emerged from very rich cultural traditions.[1] We cannot assume that what happened to Europe was because of a lack of culture. On the contrary, culture was used to evil ends.

1.
Tomáš Sedláček here refers to Géraldine Schwarz who said in her talk that 'Many Nazis were cultured and educated'.

So, I have an advantage over you: I have had a guilty conscience for fifteen years. And for an intellectual, this is terrible. Therefore, I came up with an answer: a 200-page manuscript, which will be published in the Autumn.

In order to answer the question and come up with something refreshing, I read almost all the books on history and philosophy I could find to separate three elements to ease the debate. I started looking at Europe as a body, a soul, and a spirit.

First, the body: the material things that are made of atoms—rivers, highways, land mass, petrol, etc. They are tangible.

Second, what I call the soul—and there's nothing esoteric about this. It is defined as something that objectively exists but is not tangible, such as law, democracy, the European Union, or language. Mathematics is also a good example of a soul entity. It is true: everybody agrees that one plus one is two. But to this day, we don't know what the number one or the 'plus' looks like; we only have a sign for them. This is the software of society, something firm we agree on. That's soul: the realm of knowledge, science, facts, and things that must be objectively true.

Third comes the spirit. I think I'm one of the few people who emphasize the differentiation between spirit and soul. Spirit is something that is true, but is no longer objectively true. For example, your expe-

rience of a concert: same violin, same performer, same notes—you may love it or you may hate it. And that's why you went to the concert: you expected a spiritual experience. It's something you can't divide or analyze. To the realm of spirit belong: meaning, faith, love and so on. The spirit is not analytical.

**What is the spirit of Europe?**

The realm of culture falls exactly under the realm of the spirit. You can't put it into a freezer and expect it to be the same twenty years later. You can freeze piano notes, but two concerts will never be the same, even with the same person playing the same notes. The spirit will be different every single time.

My hypothesis is that it was a very wise move by the founding fathers of Europe not to talk about the spirit. We did that during the Middle Ages and it didn't end up very well: not a single country was spared from Christians killing Christians—even though their religion told them not to kill each other.

Our fathers founded the European Union on a shared soul rather than a shared spirit: a community, common tariffs, a shared legal framework and a common currency so that we can communicate and trade with each other across vast areas. Pretty soon, another huge barrier will fall: the language barrier because of AI. We never imagined we would be able to overcome that, but within a year or two, I'm quite sure Greeks will be able to share jokes with Finnish fishermen.

So we were silent about the spirit of Europe. What I mean by spirit is the meaning, the purpose, the drive: the thing that wakes you up in the morning. Why do you do the things you do? That's your purpose in life, be it your family or a hobby, or the search for eternal truth. It's the spirit that possesses you and moves with you.

This was a taboo. If you go through the European Union's documents, their philosophy is very brief. It moves very quickly onto the 'soul' subject. Until now, it has been impossible to speak about the spirit of Europe. In fact, we are the first generation to do so—now that we stand exposed by the Russian attack on Ukraine, and ideologically exposed because of America's attack on Europe, albeit verbal.

What, then, is the true spirit of Europe? I would say it is something I find both surprising and controversial: our love of criticism. Twenty-two deputies of the European Parliament are critical of the European Union. To us, that's normal. But imagine twenty-two deputies in the American Congress being against the Union and preferring the Confederate states. Not funny enough? Imagine it in Russia, or in China.

Why was Greta Thunberg born in Sweden? Why wasn't she born in China? Why wasn't she born in Russia, where the air—unlike in Sweden—is actually dirty? Communist ideology supposedly favours the protection of the commons much more than our 'cut-throat' capitalist ego, yet she was born in Sweden. Why? Well, it's a sad, obvious answer. Someone like Greta probably was born in Moscow, in Arabic countries, or in China, but she was, in one way or another, most likely silenced.

What did we do? We bent our knees. The most powerful leaders of Europe bent their knees and listened to—and this is not an insult but a fact—an educated girl child. And we really listened. Whether she had something to say or not, I leave to your discretion. That's not as important as the fact that we didn't kill her.

### Critical spirit

The spirit of criticism can be traced all the way to the *Book of Job*, which is the first anti-ideological book. But for me—and this is again a bold claim—it also materializes in a sentence in *The New Testament*, which is the most useful and practical, the most political and economical. In fact, I studied philosophy and ethics and, during the course of a weekend, I tried to figure out what's the ultimate good. I couldn't find anything but Jesus' 'Love your enemies'. What is the meaning of 'loving your enemy'? I would claim that this is actually how the European Union dealt with the spirit of Christianity.

The European Union is fuelled by three engines founded on loving your enemies. First: science. The key principle of science is that the weakest, least educated child can challenge Albert Einstein. Engines without the 'love your enemy' principle would not work. We call them opponents and try to out-argue them, but we don't hate them. We don't want them to die. In this way, science is an engine of democracy.

Democracy is defined by many things, most stupidly by rigorous elections. My suggestion is that we should judge democracy by the way it treats its opponents—in other words, minorities. The protection of minorities, to me growing up, was a nice thing. Like, 'We're so strong that we can afford to have these little things running around our shoes, kicking at our heels', and 'we're not going to stamp on them because we're so good and it's aesthetically nice to not kill the small ones'.

But this is only one layer. The other is fundamental to economics and politics: every idea ever born started as a minority. Never has a big idea suddenly attracted the majority from the start. Democracy didn't do that. Market capitalism didn't do that. iPhones didn't do that. Everything big started small. If you rid a society of tolerance towards these—very often crazy—birthplaces of ideas, you suppress the future. As Václav Havel says, if you just ban one news magazine that nobody reads, nobody even notices.

Only a few people care. But by this, you cut the few molecules in our society that are made to sense justice, future, and the developed geist. Again, the word geist actually appears quite often in human sciences. But what's important here is that it is really the love towards your criticism, how much critique you can take without screaming at the person. That is how strong your ideology is. And that is something that we have in Europe that exists nowhere else.

That, to me, is the spirit of Europe: it is the love of your enemy. When the Czech Republic entered the EU, nobody asked us about our religion. Nobody noticed that a completely atheist country was entering the Christian realm. The EU doesn't require the same ideology. Nobody even noticed that a whole new ethnic race, the Slavic people, not the Hungarians, entered a dominantly zero Slavic nation before the 2004 enlargement.

Loving your enemies is really a life hack. It's not moral, just like the protection of minorities is not a moral courtesy. It's a fundamental necessity for any society that wants to grow. This is the role of Europe: we should be inspiring the spirit of the world.

### What is the meaning of Europe?

The meaning of Europe, and this is my third radical hypothesis, is to become a blueprint for institutional *Salvatore Mundi*. What other models do we have? We have the Russian model that I don't have to explain. We have the American Make America Great Again (MAGA) model that I also don't need to explain. We have the Chinese model. And I don't know if we can consider the Caliphate model as another one.

Of course, we can complain about the lack of WiFi speed or other concerns, but the European project works really well. Could it be better? Yes, but everything could be better. We are the most contented people; Europe is one of the most desired places to live. The European culture that today seems to be on the decline has never been stronger on the planet. The reason is that we don't have anyone to inspire us; we don't follow the United States, China, or Russia. We are literally breaking through to something new and it's as absurd as loving your enemies.

Havel's writings rest on the fact that the spirit is the power of the powerless, and the power of the spirit created this world. Truth and love would be something that could be interpreted as holding the universe together and making it develop from the big bank until today. And truth and love is in fact what we, in Europe, cherish. Truth meaning science and love meaning taking care of each other.

So if instead of 'United in Diversity', which is nice but also shallow, I propose 'European Union Truth and Love'. It's unique and strong, meaningful to a small child, and makes sense not only in a Christian interpretation but in the broader interpretation that I have attempted today.

My time is up. I would like to say that the European miracle that happened at the beginning of the nineteenth century is what made the world rich. Max Weber, describing two hundred explanations for this economic miracle, came up with a weird one: the spirit of capitalism. John Maynard Keynes, the greatest economist, said the fundamental thing about economics is animal spirits. Most of my colleagues focus on the 'animal' part—the unpredictable, the hairy, the nuisances in otherwise well-functioning matrices. But Keynes said it: it's a spirit. He warned: 'If this spirit should falter and die, all business will cease.'[2] Just imagine if your business depended on nothing else than the rational calculations your Excel sheets provide.

2.
John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Macmillan, New York, 1936.

Belief in the spirit in meaning is superpower. We believe very often that reason and faith are kind of complementing each other. That's not true. Faith is a superpower of reason. Steve Jobs saw the same numbers as everybody else, but he believed, he saw in it something that didn't exist: the iPhone. Half of you have it today and it's employing millions of people because he believed in it and he got a couple of friends to also get fanatical and then he convinced the banks, and so on.

You see, there is life in you. And that light in your eyes is the spirit, and that spirit can never be quenched. If there is one thinker that can inspire us today about the spirit and about the spirit of Europe, I propose Václav Havel as a symbol of what has been going on in Europe. And I leave you with these words: 'May the Spirit be with you'.

Thank you.

**Tomáš Sedláček** has served as an economic adviser to Václav Havel and later to the Czech Minister of Finance, and has been a longstanding member of the Czech National Economic Council. He served as Chief Macroeconomic Strategist at one of the largest Czech banks for sixteen years. His book, *Economics of Good and Evil* (Ox-ford University Press, 2013), has been translated into twenty-two languages. He is currently Director of the Václav Havel Library.




Constanze Itzel at the podium.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Nourishing the Future: Culture and Creativity as Catalysts

Constanze Itzel

Dear André and Dieter, dear colleagues, dear guests,

Over the next few minutes, I'd like to take you, in my reflections, from the future to the past and then back to the present. In doing so, I will strive to give answers to the guiding questions of this section: Where can culture be a uniting versus a divisive force? How can we respond to cultural battles driven by (geo)political ambitions? And what unites Europeans today? What divides Europe today, and where?

### Culture and creativity as catalysts for imagining and ultimately creating possible futures

In her book, *The Future: A User's Guide*, Florence Gaub, research director at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has recently pointed out how Western societies are in need of a different approach to the future, or rather, to the many possible futures, as she put it. She criticizes the omnipresent pessimism and a paralysis that can stem from fear and a feeling of powerlessness.

Our brains, Gaub explains, hold the representation of the future in the same spaces that are also holding our memories of the past. She goes on to show how past experiences, memories, history, and literature nourish the mind and constitute material for imagining the future. The more historical consciousness, the more future consciousness, she argues. The more empathy, the more possible futures we can imagine. And the more futures we can imagine, the more easily we can create them.

In this interpretation, therefore, history, literature, and art take on an extremely important meaning: that of nourishing our imagination in order to develop ideas for the future.

But more than that: we also need creativity, that is, the capacity to go beyond the known, beyond the read, beyond the experienced, in order to create something new. And therefore, it is not only the mere accumulation of knowledge in our brains, but also creative skills that are needed to create innovative futures.

### Frames of thinking: National paradigms

Back to the future or forward to the past: If it is true that our past experiences shape the way we imagine the future, then we might have an issue, and this is where I come to the issue of culture as a dividing factor. Our past is deeply imbued with the paradigm of the nation-state, and with other thinking frames that stand in the way of imagining a European future.

The idea of a homogeneous nation-state based on ethnicity, language, and religion was invented in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and exported into the whole world. National identities were built by the nation-state during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, among other things by the invention of tradition and myths, by imperial ambitions, and by negative stereotypes about the other. Language, ethnicity, and religion were used to exclude. Racism, antisemitism, and other forms of exclusion continue to persist. Culture, and now also nationality, is still often used today to exclude, discriminate, and persecute. And although this has long existed, today we see once again a growing and increasingly worrying trend to create in-groups and out-groups for political purposes and to hierarchize them.

Whether we want it or not—because of the ways we are raised and taught, our brains hold a perception bias: the national frame of reference has been hardwired into our brains. It shapes the way we think, and will, for many, be the main lens through which they imagine the future. And only to use a very simple and rather anecdotical example for this type of bias: we commonly tend to describe cultural products as typically Italian, Dutch and so on, overlooking the deeply intercultural and hybrid nature of any cultural heritage. What if we described how pizza, in its current form, is the result of centuries of trade, both with the Middle East and with the Americas?

And the profession to which I belong—historiography—has long contributed to reinforcing this national frame of reference. The historical sciences gained considerable traction in the same time period as nation building, and the history of a nation was, and still is, used to give legitimacy to the political entity. At school, history is mainly taught as national history; a majority of the historiographical literature applies this frame, and national museums were created in order to underpin nation building in the nineteenth century. In public discourse about the past, the national discourse is also prominent, seemingly more so than in other disciplines such as the history of music or of art.

So when you ask what unites and divides Europeans today, I think that the limitations created by such biases are dividing and stopping us from seeing what unites us. Europeans today are used to considering political, economic, and social problems from the point of view of their nation-state. And this mental habit has been reinforced in recent years with the spread of national-populist movements, as slogans such as 'Italians first', 'Britain first', 'Love Britain', 'America first', 'Make America Great Again', 'Oui, la France', 'Votez patriote' etc., show. They do not only apply the nation-centric logic, but also imply an assertion of arbitrary primacy and hierarchization that stand in the way of reconciling the needs of all.

### Changing paradigms? Cultural institutions as sources of consciousness?

This means that a legacy of the past, the nineteenth century idea of the nation-state, influences the way we see the present and imagine the future.

This 'atavism', as Umberto Morelli called it, should be overcome.[1] He suggests replacing it with the slogan 'Humanity first'. This is a logic that goes beyond the narrow national perspective that leads to exclusion and segregation of what is different. Instead, it encourages us to see things from others' points of view, with the empathy that can lead to inclusion and integration.

1.
Umberto Morelli, 'From National Cultural Paradigms to European/Global Cultural Paradigms: A Copernican Revolution', *Journal of Social Science Education*, Volume 18, Issue 3, Autumn 2019, p. 36.

It seems to me that we can do much more in order to change the paradigms of thinking by digging out the many things that unite us.

And by suggesting these changes I do not mean to suggest recreating the national paradigm at the European level, but to break the paradigms attached to one territory or entity (be it municipal, regional, national, or European) and to rather consider patterns of interaction, movement, encounter, and exchange. We need to replace bounded paradigms with paradigms of openness, hybridity, and change, recognising the interdependency of any human and natural existence on Earth. Everything exists in a state of constant interaction and mutual influence. As a result, even something that could be described as bounded in one given moment would evolve under the influence of the other the next day. The vibrant culture of Florence with its many influences is a testimony to this evolving and intercultural nature of culture.

If we follow Florence Gaub in her analysis of how the content of our brains influences our capacity for the future, we could work on a change of paradigms in different ways:

1) Go much further in narrating events of the past that were transnational or European in nature. When representing maps, move from patchwork to network, from the patches of national territories to the networks of interactions. Showcase, as the archives here in Florence are doing, past visions for the future of Europe, but also, for example, the long European history of multilateralism. Nourish our brains with political, literary, and artistic visions for Europe.

2) Raise awareness of the ways in which our thinking is biased by history and historiography, with strong national references blinding us to other models. In analogy to Daniel Kahneman's 'Thinking, Fast and Slow', which aims to explain our brain's numerous biases, we could undertake similar deconstructions in order to create an enhanced consciousness for the unconscious limitations of our thinking.[2]

3) Foster the creativity and the crowd intelligence needed to imagine collective futures, going above and beyond the usual frames of reference, nourished by past visions of Europe, but based on encounters, listening, and mutual enrichment that allows us to invent a European future.

Cultural institutions can play a key role in fulfilling all three actions:

1) They hold contents—the literature, the theatre pieces, the archival material and the cultural heritage—through which they can tell multilateral stories from the past.

2) They can foster the critical thinking needed to deconstruct standard frames of reference; they can resist the political instrumentalization that would aim precisely to re-mobilize limiting frames of reference.

3) They can provide safe spaces for joint participatory creation with open outcomes.

In conclusion, therefore, I am convinced that cultural institutions, if they remain free zones for multiperspective creation, can narrate many different histories and perspectives, create empathy and mutual understanding, nourish our brains with many different pasts, and, therefore, foster imaginations of the many possible futures.

2.
Daniel Kahneman's, Thinking, Fast and Slow, Macmillan, New York, 2013.

**Constanze Itzel** is Museum Director at the House of European History in Brussels, a position she has held since June 2017, after having served as adviser and curator since the inception of the museum in 2009. She holds a PhD for her thesis on the impact of the pre-Reformation image debate on fifteenth-century painting. She was awarded the Ruprecht Karls Prize from the University of Heidelberg in 2005.

Aleksandra Przegalińska unpacks the cultural impact of AI.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Tools, Not Agents: A European Vision for Human–AI Collaboration

Aleksandra Przegalińska

Thank you so much.

Now it's time to really try and tackle the elephant in the room: artificial intelligence.

If you allow me, I'm going to start with my own experience. I've been working in the field of AI for fourteen years, which makes me a dinosaur in AI but also someone who started before the hype—which is a good thing. For the past couple of years, I've lived in the US and closely observed how AI is developing on that continent: what are the ambitions, the goals, and so on.

The past three years have been quite special. The world has realized that this powerful technology can be disseminated in very effective ways because we've lifted the main barrier, which is in fact a formal language, a code, allowing people to use it. First, we were very excited: it seemed to hold huge promise—although already at that point possibly regarded as a threat, to some extent.

I have been observing what's been happening in the US, particularly during recent graduation ceremonies where commencement guest speakers such as Google CEO Eric Schmidt would talk about AI as the future, the next revolution, and something we all have to embrace. Young people were booing. It just took three years to make them unexcited about AI and make this technology extremely polarising. That's where we are.

It's a bit less so in Europe in many ways, thanks to our regulations and our approach, and maybe also thanks to a certain cautiousness. In Europe, we are a bit shielded from the negative effects of AI that are felt elsewhere. Some of these effects are very real. For young workers who are seeking a job, AI is not a particularly good companion. We've also experienced other negative side effects such as deep fakes and the distortion of reality.

As someone who is a heavy user of artificial intelligence and a scholar who researches this technology and its interaction with humans, I am surprised by where we are, particularly in the US. On a macro level, AI is perceived as an engine of growth and perhaps the sole source of enthusiasm in the American market. But on the other hand, society is not so positive about this technology that was supposed to be an enabler.

The US has a culture around artificial intelligence that is mostly techno-libertarian and techno-deterministic. It's the type of culture that tells you that you shouldn't stand in the way of this technology,

and who knows, maybe you'll benefit from it, as it's going to give us abundance. No regulations should stand in the way, they say.

Even though we don't want to compare ourselves constantly, this is a good reference point because maybe this is not a philosophy and culture around technology that we would want to follow in Europe.

When it comes to our cloud and infrastructure in Europe, it's not ours. We spend a lot on infrastructure that does not enable sovereignty. For a couple of months, if not a year, we have been talking a lot about technological sovereignty or ambitions. In fact, last week, the European Commission announced that we will try to build technological sovereignty on a solid foundation of our own infrastructure. That's one thing. The other thing is obviously AI itself.

I'm sure many of you have a pluralistic approach to it and use multiple different models, which is always a good thing. I think it's a European thing to be picky about your models and choose the one that works best, and not to get stuck with one. But I assume that many of you do not use the many European models that are out there: the French Mistral, the Swiss Apertus, the German Alef Alpha.

When I ask my European students from a business school where I teach in Poland which models they use: they don't use European models. They know about them, but it's not something they would even consider testing. This is something we have to treat seriously. We can drop it altogether and say, 'Okay, somebody has built it and we've overslept.' But in technology, it's not really always true. Based on the fact that you miss something, you can build something completely new.

Actually, in Poland, a good example of this is the banking system. Our banking system was not modernized, but it then rapidly joined the train of digitalization and suddenly we have great services just because they were built one or two years ago. We didn't have any legacy systems that we had to follow. So that's not a bad thing to start from scratch.

We've recently researched startup founders in the Netherlands and Germany. It turned out that, when it comes to implementation for a startup that is feasible, AI was extremely helpful and the group that could use it extensively was actually delivering very good tasks. But when it comes to idea selection, that same group was bad. The other group that did not use AI did much better, with ideas that were more meaningful, more original, out of the box. We need more evi dence on a healthy collaboration with AI, not just a stance where we automate whatever we can because we believe that the optimization of tasks and full-on automation is the right pathway.

Europe can actually allow itself to think about how we would like to plot this interaction with artificial intelligence and how the division of labour between humans and AI can look in the future. What would be a good choice for us?

This brings me to my last point. I wanted to refer to the concept of belonging and try to bridge it with the division of labour. I often attend events at the Stone Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which is directed by two Nobel Prize economists, Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson. They said: 'We know so much about how organizations implement AI and how that impacts their productivity already. But we really know nothing about how people work with AI. Do they delegate, over delegate? How much do they edit by themselves? What do they leave to themselves?'

These are interesting questions. But these are not questions asked by American corporations and grant funders. Maybe these are questions for us and we could take them further.




Aleksandra Przegalińska unpacks the cultural impact of AI. Photo: Marco Borrelli

Belonging is an interesting concept. It can be structural. And it can be very effective.

Belonging means that you are needed, that you are important, that your work is valued, that you can contribute somehow with what you do to a greater effort. I feel like AI in its current shape, packaged and streamlined from the US, is not about belonging. It's actually radically about not belonging. It's about telling you that you are not necessarily important in the sense that your work is not so relevant and can be replaced. This is maybe a wish for some people: if you agree not to belong and to leave your job, we may give you universal basic income or, as Elon Musk recently claimed, universal high income, right?

I've written a whole book about universal basic income and I consider it a very interesting policy, but the way it's currently bridged with technology is concerning to me. It's a message about us not being part of something, and us not standing in the way of technology's future trajectory. The whole discussion is only about jobs. The fear of artificial intelligence that is spreading in the US is mostly focused on jobs and losing a job. And I understand why. But I think there is a deeper layer to it. It's not just about work and having an income. It's also about us building things together, being involved, making decisions. We have intentions. We can be curious. And yet, the way it's being presented to us: you can remove all that part that is about belonging and just leave the work itself and the work will be done more efficiently by artificial intelligence.

I hear calls to ban artificial intelligence or get rid of it altogether, but that would not be my stance. I understand how young people feel. My students are completely against AI and my own thirteen-year-old daughter thinks AI is cringe. I understand where that comes from. It's a cultural moment of rebellion, which is very healthy. But in the long run, it will not do. We just have to carve out our own path when it comes to using this technology. I would obviously welcome that. That would be based on our own infrastructure. We just cannot get rid of our values so that we can belong, and then maybe, invite AI every now and then to our communities as well.

Thank you.

**Aleksandra Przegalińska** is a Fellow at the Center for Labor and a Just Economy at Harvard University. She is also the Vice-Rector for Innovation and AI and Associate Professor at Kozminski University in Warsaw, where she heads the Human and Machine Interaction Research Center and leads the AI in Management Program. A philosopher by training (PhD, University of Warsaw, 2014), her work focuses on artificial intelligence, human and AI collaboration, and the future of work.

Jade Herbulot imagining Europe from the stage.
Photo: Marco Borrelli

# Imagining Europe from the Stage: Belonging, Doubt, and Community

Jade Herbulot

I'd like to start with how my training as a future actress, playwright and stage director shaped my sense of European belonging—not by design, not by ideology, but simply by the nature of the repertoire I was confronted with: Henrik Ibsen, Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Marius von Mayenburg, Martin Crimp. From my very first year, I was encountering imaginaries and ways of thinking about the world that were not my own. I also had the privilege of seeing the work by incredible European artists such as Velikovsky, Christoph Marthaler, Romeo Castellucci, Emma Dante, Thomas Ostermeier, Frank Castorf, Angélica Liddell, Tiago Rodrigues, Anne-Cécile Vandalem. Artists who taught me that European theatre, and art in general, is not a unified style but a space of friction, dialogue, and sometimes, of productive misunderstanding.

Twelve years ago, when I was still a student at the Conservatoire National de Paris, I co-founded Le Birgit Ensemble, an independent theatre company. Our first play told the story of the Berlin Wall, from its construction to its fall. It brought together fifteen actors on stage.

Why this topic? Why the Berlin Wall? First, because we were all born between 1985 and 1991 and were asking ourselves: What do we have in common from a historical point of view? And what we had in common was the fall of the Berlin Wall: growing up in a world that could not be defined by two blocks anymore. We soon realised how the fall of the wall impacted our sense of European belonging. And that's what we wanted to talk about. Writing this play was a way of asking ourselves, as young French artists, what it actually meant to be European in a world that wasn't divided anymore.

After this first experience, we decided to carry on exploring issues of identity through two plays: one about the relationships between the EU and the siege of Sarajevo; and another one about the relationship between the EU and Greece during the economic crisis of 2008. We showed this in Avignon in 2017. We worked from written documentary sources, archive materials, testimonies, interviews, political speeches, and other traces of the past, not to advance a single thesis about Europe, but to confront different narratives and explore the tensions between memories that coexist, often without recognising one another. What we discovered is that a sense of European belonging is far from self-evident, even for us, as French artists who assumed we were already committed to the European idea. Since we were children, Europe was presented to us as something obvious, as a success story. Through all this work, it turned out to be more complex to inhabit, difficult to define, and sometimes painful to claim.

That is precisely what theatre can do as an art form: not celebrate a ready-made common imaginary, but create the conditions for an honest confrontation with it. Theatre has the capacity to make narratives circulate beyond the administrative and cultural borders that would otherwise contain them.

Today, the dominant political discourses across many European countries are leaning towards contraction: shrinking borders, shrinking identities, shrinking definitions of us, and foreign parties are thriving by offering very narrow narratives of selfhood, national, ethnic, and defensive. Faced with this, I believe theatre has a specific responsibility to produce alternative imaginaries: not utopian ones, not naive ones, but ones that are capable of expanding our sense of who we are.

With the Le Birgit Ensemble, in 2021, we created an iterative show. We chose a different form to explore European imaginaries. We created a musical cabaret, playing with Brechtian distancing and comedy. Through original songs, we offered a chronicle of political current affairs. So, we made Ursula von der Leyen, Viktor Orbán or Giorgia Meloni sing and dance. In our cabaret, they become characters. For us, this satirical form is a way of reclaiming a political reality that so often feels out of reach: of making it graspable, shareable, and laughable for the public. In laughing, we really believe that something circulates: ideas, critical approaches, mutual recognition. We always begin with this European chronicle, and then, we follow with the French political chronicle.

The format of the show is built from journalistic or factual information shared by the public, and is a part of a broader documentary theatre approach. In France, this approach has become increasingly rooted in local realities, built from interviews, conversations, field work, photographs, and so on. Something we might call a theatre of proximity, connected to everyday life or very specific issues shared by the audience.

The argument I want to put forward here is this: attention to the local does not exclude broader imaginaries. In fact, I think opposing local approaches with broader approaches is unproductive. For instance, the European Theatre Convention and the Theatre of Cologne have recently started a programme called TRUST—Truth On Stage, which gathers ten European theatres and more than twenty artists from across Europe. The purpose of this programme is to create a dialogue between journalism and theatre, and to allow stories from one place to reach audiences in another. The idea is that a story from Germany or Austria can resonate in France; a testimony from Athens

can land in Lisbon. Not despite the local specificity of these stories but because of it. What makes a narrative travel is not its generality, but its precision.

To conclude, the challenge, from my perspective as a theatre maker, as an artist, is this: to expand our sense of who we are in the face of political discourses that seek to reduce it. We should not be afraid of the layering of identities: personal, local, national, European, which are shifting and sometimes blurred—never fixed. To accept that belonging is not a territory with clear borders, but a practice: something we build together in time through shared experiences.

Theatre cannot do this alone, of course, but it can create the conditions for it. It can offer shared spaces for reflection, genuine time to think about ourselves as a part of a larger whole. Time to imagine, together, the European societies we want to live in. This is possible through art, creation, and practice. That, I think, is not a minor ambition, especially at this moment in time.

**Jade Herbulot** is a French actor and dramaturg. In 2012, she co-founded the Collectif 49 701 with Clara Hédouin, which produced a six-part adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* staged in non-theatrical spaces. In 2014, she co-founded, together with Julie Bertin, the Birgit Ensemble, a theatre company exploring the tension between local realities and European imaginaries. Since September 2024, she has been an associate artist at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe.

Lex Empress performing at the close of the seminar.
Photo: Marco Borrelli



Lex Empress (left) and HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands contributing to the collective tapestry. Photo: Marco Borrelli

### Woven Voices

The seminar was accompanied by *Woven Voices*, a participatory artistic intervention developed by singer and dialogue facilitator Lex Empress in collaboration with visual artist Masja Ottenheim. Combining music, dialogue, and textile art, the project invited participants to contribute actively to a collective reflection on Europe, memory, and the future.

Throughout the event, guests were invited to write words, thoughts, and reflections on strips of fabric, which were woven together into a collective tapestry. Created in real time during the seminar, the artwork became a visual record of the ideas, hopes, questions, and concerns expressed by participants.

To open and close the seminar, Lex Empress performed improvised songs accompanied by guitarist Sebastian Paier. Inspired by participants' reflections on questions such as 'How do we write history today?' and 'What came up today?', the performances echoed back the ideas, questions, and reflections emerging in the room, transforming them into a shared musical experience that created a sense of connection and collective engagement.





The making of the collective tapestry, woven by artist Masja Ottenheim.
All photos: Marco Borrelli






European
Cultural







# Dinner reflections

Ahead of the dinner hosted by HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands on the eve of the seminar, guests were invited to reflect on the following question:

*"As we look at Europe today, what do you think we have misunderstood, overlooked, or taken for granted in the past—and how has that shaped the fractures we now face in our shared sense of European belonging?"*

These reflections served as a point of departure for the conversations that unfolded over the course of the evening. Reproduced here with kind permission from the authors, they are published as part of these proceedings.

"We have misunderstood the pillars of the European construction: of course, the market matters, but we need to push forward the solidarity. We need to find common ground in fiscal affairs, in social security, in defence and in diplomacy. We need to build our sovereignty with each other, and without building enemies outside. Otherwise, we are not winning. Europe needs to stand for international solidarity. Every life matters—anywhere. Our allies must be those who share these views.

We have overlooked Palestine: Palestine is mostly about Palestinians being slaughtered, but it's also an ethical matter. Precisely, when we Europeans choose to look away, to avoid looking at what's going on, we lose our soul and our European values. It is a spiritual defeat, and this opens the door to fascism and its never-ending list of enemies. What European culture can we build otherwise?"

—Carlos Almela, Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"For decades, Europe assumed that economic integration would generate political trust, cultural proximity, and civic belonging. It did not. The single market, free movement and institutional cooperation created proximity, but not a shared emotional vocabulary.

What we overlooked was inequality of experience. For mobile, educated urban classes, Europe meant opportunity and protection. For citizens in peripheral regions, crisis-hit economies or less secure jobs, it often meant bureaucracy, austerity and loss of control. These realities coexisted, yet we spoke as if there was a single European story.

We also took peace for granted, not just as the absence of war, but as a moral infrastructure shaped by memory, compromise, and restraint. As that memory faded, fear returned: of decline, migration, conflict and irrelevance. Today's fractures stem from this gap. European belonging cannot rely solely on institutions or rules. It requires recognition, proximity and the sense of being seen.

—Beatriz Capão, podcaster, youth advocate, and communications consultant

"I think what we took for granted most is that democracy, once we had it, would simply continue—that the institutions would hold, the prosperity carry forward, and the next generation inherit our confidence the way they inherit a language. The data is sobering: forty-three per cent of young Europeans aren't convinced democracy is the best system; nearly half think it endangered; and in five Member States, dissatisfaction tops sixty per cent. They are telling us something we haven't quite been listening to.

Where this bites hardest is technology. The infrastructure our democratic conversation runs on—the platforms, the AI, the channels—was largely built and governed outside Europe's reach. We assumed information was a market; it turned out to be sovereignty. The machine can be a partial answer to the machine, but only if the machine is European. The fracture in our shared belonging began the day we forgot that democracy has hardware too."

—Madeleine de Cock Buning, member of the High Level Task Force, Democracy27

"People identify with a success, not with a failure. By keeping Europe on a short leash for decades, constantly debunking it and not allowing it to flourish, Member States have prevented citizens from developing a sense of shared belonging. It is only today that Europeans become a little prouder of who they are and what they stand for. Surrounded and undermined by aggressive, autocratic regimes, they cherish the European values they had long taken for granted. Suddenly, many see everything Europe does (or does not do, such as waging senseless wars) in a more favourable light compared to other large powers. And they want more of it. Today, citizens' number one expectation from Europe is to have security, a nest. They look for European heroes and call for a values-based foreign policy. Support for the euro and even a (non-existent!) European army is at an all-time high. The lesson? If we allow Europe to blossom, it will. As a result, we will feel more proudly European."

—Caroline de Gruyter, columnist at *NRC* and member of the European Council on Foreign Relations

"The question that currently occupies me most is the state of public space. Space that is genuinely shaped for and by the public, where dialogue takes place, curiosity is sparked and people can disagree without dehumanising one another.

I think we have overlooked how the public space has been reduced, become shallow, and has even been turned toxic by the capitalization of our time and attention. We are still misunderstanding how digitisation is accelerating this process.

The endless stream of content we face on a daily basis is actively shaping fractures across Europe. In order to build a stronger sense of European belonging, people need to be given the opportunity to navigate this content to access information, and for that information to become knowledge. Public spaces play a vital role in this and are in my opinion fundamental for ensuring better understanding across European communities and in order to strengthen our democracy."

—Klaas Gommers, advisor for association affairs of the Dutch Association of Public Libraries

"We have failed to promote culture in rural areas and structurally disadvantaged regions, and thus to counteract the social, economic, and cultural decline of these areas. We have overlooked the fact that this trend undermines people's sense of identity with the European Union and its values and achievements, thereby strengthening its enemies.

In my view, we have failed to promote cultural activities in these neglected areas, such as traditional community life, regional characteristics, and temporary cultural events with broad appeal and impact outside the major urban centres; but we have also failed to promote permanent community centres, particularly for young people, in the form of self-managed cultural spaces that are curated with foresight, where young people are socialised and cultural values flourish. It is precisely for this purpose that we need targeted support for young curators and organisers, who exist in every community.

This would enhance these regions in terms of improved quality of life, attractiveness and people's sense of connection to their home, thereby counteracting depopulation and resignation.

We have failed to promote the positive impact and significance of culture and subculture for the development of our countries and, in doing so, to permanently instil in local people a conviction in the pan-European idea and the achievements of the European Union. Let's change that!"

—Dimitri Hegemann, founder of Tresor Club and Chair of the Board of the Tresor Foundation, Berlin

"We have taken Europe as a given guarantor of peace and prosperity; of betterment and overcoming, of a way forward. Yet such things aren't a given; it is always a process of continuous making and remaking, especially through the everyday practices of… culture. Today, we must consider how culture can cultivate affective politics that is so much needed to envision a community with the ambition of a just, free, and active society for all. It must not forget the terrors of its past and present, but envision another future nonetheless."

—Maria Hlavajova, curator and founder of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst

"People take for granted how much 'Europe' exists only through the willingness of Europeans to accept the compromise and self-discipline to work together. That willingness to engage in collective action is what makes the single market competitive, innovative, and prosperous. It is what stabilises European financial institutions and strengthens the euro as a common currency. Most importantly, it underpins European security arising from tensions or disagreements among Europeans, and when confronting those who would hurt European interests. When Europeans complain about how much this 'Europe' costs, how much it regulates, the fact that it redistributes resources across countries or by borrowing against future repayment, they underestimate how much that activity fosters and focuses the collective action necessary to ensure European security and to provide all those benefits that the single market, the single currency, and the single finance space can create."

—Erik Jones, Director of the Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute

"I have just started researching a book on what I feel is a huge field of ignorance: Europe's founding story. Americans have always been taught at school about their founding fathers. Even most well-informed Europhile Europeans know almost nothing about the group of men who came out of World War Two and, by 1957, had created the EEC: Jean Monnet (hardly anyone knows more about him than his name); Robert Schuman; the Dutchman Jan-Willem Beijen; the Belgian Paul-Henri Spaak; and the Italians Alcide De Gasperi and Altiero—a man who wrote down many of the ideas that would drive Europe on scraps of paper while imprisoned by Mussolini in the camp of Ventotene. I want to tell their story, starting during the war, like an action movie. Europe has an inspiring origin story—it's just that almost nobody knows it."

—Simon Kuper,
author and journalist for the *Financial Times*

"We have underestimated the power of algorithms to divide Europeans into siloed social media communities that see the world in drastically different ways—and see their own perspective as the only true and reasonable one. From Brexit to the 2024 Romanian elections, we've suffered the real-world consequences. But I also think we have underestimated our own power to take some of the power back from the US tech platforms that are responsible for these algorithms.

I believe Europe's internet could look very different, and be much less divisive, if we chose to use that power. And despite the many problems, I also think we have underestimated the power of social media to actually forge a sense of belonging among Europeans—the shared memes, the same viral moments—especially among a generation used to watching subtitled TikToks. We overlook this positive aspect of social media as much as we have historically overlooked the threats."

—Katy Lee, journalist, co-founder
and host of The Europeans podcast

"In my view, Europe could benefit from increased awareness of how strongly today's world views are framed by the idea of the nation state, on the one hand, and by the racist exploitation systems of colonialism, on the other hand. The concept of a nation state based on ideas of homogeneity—whether in the areas of language, ethnicity, or religion—was invented in Europe and exported into the world. Colonial exploitation and slavery were justified by the invention of racial hierarchies. Both ways of thinking still have a strong impact on our societies today.

Although Europe can look back on a long history of exchanges, encounters, and interactions, and although cultural transfer has been described as constitutive for European cultures, the strong national framing of people's views hampers the perception of the intercultural nature of most culture, and of Europe's entangled past. One example of this framing is the way in which history is mostly being taught: as the history of nation states and their majorities, a frame that often disregards the many interdependences of historical events and neglects marginalised groups. Similarly, racial stereotypes and other forms of exclusion lead to perception biases favouring certain groups over others.

This type of framing imbues many areas of daily and cultural life. Stereotypes are easy to activate by political forces seeking to divide and fracture society. Essentialising particular cultural frames of reference and using them to define and hierarchise invented in- and outgroups, to discriminate and to exclude, is a harmful practice which undermines peaceful coexistence. It would seem to me that raising awareness of the invented and constructed nature of such frames of reference could help to deconstruct them, allowing us to encounter and discover one another without being blindfolded by perception biases, but instead stimulated by curiosity and a sense of discovery."

—Constanze Itzel,
Museum Director of the House of European History

"Europe's greatest misunderstanding has been to treat itself primarily as an institutional or economic project, rather than a community of people. Citizens in democracies are more than voters; they are co-creators of the European project. Yet we have often overlooked this civic dimension, assuming that integration would sustain itself without continuous engagement.

At the same time, we have taken stability for granted. Peace, cooperation, and shared norms came to feel permanent rather than contingent. This complacency has contributed to a gradual erosion of a shared sense of belonging.

As a result, Europe today faces fractures not only between states, but within societies. We have forgotten that Europe is a collective endeavour that requires ongoing participation and renewal.

Europe can—and should—mean different things to different people. But without a common sense of belonging and responsibility, the project risks becoming hollow at its core."

—Johanna Mair, Director of the Florence School
of Transnational Governance at the European
University Institute

"As Europeans, we've underestimated how the media environment has changed, and the decisive role that access interfaces now play in shaping a sense of belonging.

What strikes me is how visible this blind spot has become. Not so much in policy debates, but in the everyday experience of Europeans, especially younger ones, who now encounter their continent almost exclusively through non-European platforms, where the interfaces that shape access to information, culture, and entertainment are driven by economic logics that tend to fragment rather than connect. If we want to build a shared European space, this calls for a shift towards a federated European media network, where we exercise sovereignty over access, interfaces, and discovery.

Ultimately, this is about gaining control over the conditions through which Europe is seen, understood, and experienced by Europeans. Because technological sovereignty isn't just about control: it's about the freedom to shape our own experiences."

—Bruno Patino, CEO of Arte France

"Europe assumed that technological convergence would create shared futures. It hasn't.

What was overlooked was the profound unevenness of digital transformation across regions and labour markets. Automation anxiety did not land equally. Workers in deindustrialising regions faced displacement without the retraining infrastructure or policy imagination that Western capitals promised but rarely delivered.

What was taken for granted was sovereignty itself. While Europe debated values and standards, American platforms became the infrastructure of European public life, and Chinese hardware quietly entered critical systems. European data sovereignty rhetoric was reactive, arriving after dependency was already structural. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) named the problem; it did not reverse the architecture. Europe became a regulatory power precisely because it forfeited technological power first."

—Aleksandra Przegalińska, Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"We misread how shallow much of our European identity as 'we' actually was. We built institutions, markets, and borders but neglected the everyday infrastructure of 'belonging': care, corridors between worlds, and the people doing connective work in the shadows. We treated precarity, racism, extraction, and democratic erosion as separate issues instead of symptoms of the same system, pushing them into silos of 'migration', 'security' or 'economic reform'. That blindness made it easy for resentment to harden and for more reactionary stories of identity, purity, and control to fill the gap."

—Gerry Salole, Chair of the Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"Europeans' sense of belonging was long based on a shared memory of the atrocities of the 20th century, but we have now entered an era in which this consensus is fracturing. Yet this shift also offers an opportunity to redefine European identity in a way that not only serves as a moral warning, but also empowers and inspires. Europe is much more than a preventive measure against the recurrence of the worst: it is founded on centuries of shifting borders, migrations, exchanges, and conflicts that shaped our institutions, cultures, and values. Yet we still largely interpret history through national narratives—in education, media, culture, and politics—overlooking the interconnected nature of European societies. It is urgent to view the past in a more supranational context and become aware of our intertwined histories, but also of our differences in order to deepen our understanding of one another, strengthen our cohesion, and build a European collective memory."

—Géraldine Schwarz,
author, journalist and documentary filmmaker

"The roots of the current social crisis date back to the 1980s and 1990s, when an unruled process of globalisation broke the 'social deal' that had produced development and prosperity in Europe and in the Western countries, with a progressive impoverishment of the middle and lower working classes. These caused a growing loss of trust towards the governments and also towards the European institutions. In the face of complex and not fully understood problems, simplified solutions became attractive to citizens, as well as the identification of 'the enemy': this is the case of the rise of nationalism and anti-European and anti-migrant movements.

The national approach to the global competition is clearly short sighted and is showing its limits. But Europe can come back into the heart of the European citizens only if it proves to be able to create a future of development and peace for them."

—Andrea Silvestri, Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"We have neglected the digital public domain. It was once a public space, with 'De Digitale Stad' (DDS) as a symbolic milestone. We have allowed it to fall into the hands of private entities. Now, we're stuck with a few Big Tech corporations that dictate our democracy and social media. Addictive and deceptive algorithms are leading to mental health problems. We are seeing the undermining of our democracy because our newsfeeds are being manipulated. AI is being integrated into social media that is anti-democratic and carries ideological components.

We haven't sufficiently safeguarded the digital domain and its public values. Only now, driven by the need for strategic autonomy and sovereignty, have we made a start toward reclaiming it. We need the 'Public Stack' to guide us through this complex subject. Fortunately, there is a significant movement growing around social media, and there is a widespread understanding that this shift is essential.

Open Socials, based on public values, is possible and is being launched by Waag and Eurosky. This is the moment for civic and public institutions—from libraries to NGOs—to support it and to use it in their own communication and engagement with their audiences and communities."

—Marleen Stikker, founder and Executive Director of Waag Futurelab

"We treated Europe as an institution to administer rather than a culture to practice. Peace, prosperity, free movement became a backdrop, taken for granted by people who never had to imagine their absence. The lived layer was outsourced to Brussels, to bureaucracy, to a vocabulary nobody actually uses at dinner. Belonging became something you proved with a passport rather than something you carried.

What I see now isn't a fracturing of values. It's the absence of a shared register. There's no common 'we' because we never built one in cultural terms, only legal and economic ones.

We overlooked aspiration. Europe was sold as a peace project to people who hadn't seen war. The next generation inherited the answer without being given the question. The fracture isn't ideological. It's that Europe was never offered as something worth wanting."

—Sebastian Stricker, founder of 12F, an independent magazine on European identity; co-founder and former CEO of ShareTheMeal and Share

"Ever since Russia's brutal onslaught on Ukraine its ramifications keep occupying my personal thoughts. I'm shocked to observe that our shared sense of European belonging, together with the EU itself as a preeminent example of rules-based multilateralism, is under multiple attacks—not just from our known adversaries, but—since Trump 2.0—also from a key ally. We have taken for granted that Europe's peace dividend via NATO, with US leadership will remain a permanent feature of the liberal, rules-based international order. For the liberal democracies of the Global West, it resulted in (relative) harmony between ourselves, while keeping the two major potential disruptors, Russia and China, outside—with limited abilities.

However, we underestimated Russia's imperial ambitions pursued through hybrid warfare and miliary force, and the threat of illiberal democracies advocated by far-right populists within the EU while embraced and weaponised against us also by the US. At the same time, we wrongly assumed that China's economic expansion would lead to democratisation. This triple constraint is forcing a shift towards defensive, security-focused autonomy and strengthening our unity. We must renew multilateralism and regain the shared sense of European belonging as a strong independent pole on our own terms in a multipolar world."

—Tamás Szücs, Principal Advisor of the European Commission in the Directorate-General of Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

"In recent decades, we have sometimes taken Europe for granted. In doing so, we may have confused institutional integration with a genuine sense of European belonging—with what we might call 'a shared European citizenship'.

We may also have underestimated something essential: that Europe is, above all, a cultural and social experience, not only a legal or economic one. At the same time, we have also underestimated territorial and generational inequalities, allowing some places and groups to see Europe more as a constraint than as an opportunity.

A second, and perhaps more dangerous, misunderstanding has been to treat culture as a secondary issue, rather than as a core infrastructure of cohesion. I strongly believe that continuous investment in education, cultural production, and shared spaces is essential to strengthen our sense of belonging.

Many of the fractures we see today—between centre and periphery, between elites and ordinary citizens, between openness and fear—are rooted in these gaps.

If we want to rebuild a sense of European belonging, we need to make Europe something people can trust: closer to their lives, attentive to their needs and anxieties, and capable of making culture a true driver of inclusion, not just a shared symbol."

—Sergio Urbani, CEO at Fondazione Cariplo

"It took the US fifteen years to move from the Boston Tea Party to the Constitution and involved a homogeneous group with shared objectives, one language, (pretty much) one religion and a non-interfering enemy overseas. We basically do not have that luxury and need far more time to coalesce into a meaningful community. Let's stay the course and not become despondent.

We have a great deal of truly European shared values but we are only making slow osmotic progress towards a yet-to-be-defined common goal and therefore the story is less than compelling. Yet the story is essential. We have, I think, so far failed to bring European citizens on board with this process in a meaningful way. The challenges are manageable, but they take time."

—Igno van Waesberghe, Vice Chair of the Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"Reality changes in unpredictable ways. The democratic and economic crises that we face today—and that have a clear geopolitical dimension—are also fuelled by other 'new' crises around the digital revolution, AI, and climate change, which are not directly connected to Europe.

Because of the economically driven approach of the European project, we haven't taken enough care of the 'European Sentiment', of its political and civic dimension, which has to be based on values, and a sense of common destiny and identity that exists beyond the differences. The European project has been built in a territory known for its centuries-long disputes between cities, nations, and empires. Exchanges like Erasmus are paramount but they are not enough. I always think of my personal experience as a College of Europe 's student, in the school year 1985/86: it was all about technical learning in law, economics, administration. There was nothing—or very little—about European history and politics, as mandatory subjects in the curriculum. This should be the case from primary or secondary school."

—Catarina Vaz Pinto, Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"For a long time, we assumed that 'Europe' spoke for itself. That its values were self-evident, that belonging would come naturally from integration, and that the project's benefits were felt equally by everyone. We never really explained why these values matter, to whom, and at what cost. We took for granted that freedom of movement, rule of law, and democracy meant the same thing in Warsaw as in Amsterdam, Palermo and Paris. They don't, not experientially, not historically, not emotionally. When values go unexplained, they become empty words. And empty words are easy to dismiss. The divisions we face today are partly the result of a Europe that assumed shared belonging rather than actively building it. But that can change. We can still have the conversations we thought were unnecessary. And maybe now we finally have the urgency to actually have those conversations."

—Anna Walczak, co-founder of Our Rule of Law Foundation

"From an Eastern European perspective, one of Europe's enduring blind spots has been its tendency to overlook, dismiss, or erase what it did not immediately appreciate how to value. Too much in the East has been treated as peripheral or backward, while the cultural confidence of the West has too often become a form of dominance. If democratic Europe is to endure, it must renew the public institutions that cultivate critical thought, historical understanding, and the possibility of disagreement. Education should not be understood merely as the task of preparing the young, but as a lifelong, cross-generational practice sustained through public discourse and shared cultural institutions. At a time when debate is increasingly shaped by commercial platforms and political polarisation, institutions such as schools, universities, museums, libraries, archives, cinemas, theatres, and even archives must remain places where people of all ages develop historical literacy, critical judgement, and an openness to difference, including questions of gender, identity, migration, and belonging. Europe must also abandon the fiction that its identity is defined solely by its historical nation-states. Its future is shaped equally by migrants, diasporic communities, and generations whose lives and histories transcend national borders."

—Ines Weizman, Professor of History and Theory of Architecture at the School of Architecture, Royal College of Art

"A shared sense of European belonging is far more fragile than we may have assumed. I feel we've underestimated the role that insecurity plays in shaping how people relate to the world and to one another, often leading them to withdraw into narratives rooted in fear.

Insecurity is multi-dimensional, provoked by multiple, overlapping forces, including economic destabilisation, job insecurity, technological change, new forms of elitism and inequality, and environmental degradation. It's important to recognise that insecurity is not only about material realities, but also about how people experience and perceive their place in a rapidly changing world. These dynamics produce a profound sense of loss and disorientation. And without a clear pathway for navigating an increasingly volatile future, the sense of insecurity only deepens."

—Rana Zincir Celal, Supervisory Board member of the European Cultural Foundation

"While the current crisis moment is not an entirely new and unique situation, the multiple parallel crises form a particular stress test for the Europeans, and provoke a feeling of shock and deadlock. Until Brexit, we were probably too easily convinced that the functional progress of European Union under the 'ever closer Union' promise would be sufficiently strong to absorb any critique from within. It also seems that Western Europeans took progress in acquiring more rights and in attaining economic growth too much for granted and have, until today, not fully understood how much the events of 1989 created a new Europe. They might still consider Central and Eastern Europeans as an extension of their previous reality, while the latter, after a first period of engagement, realised the shortcomings of the new society and started to nurture a political culture of disappointment, joining those who criticised the system from within."

—Dieter Schlenker, Director of the Historical Archives of the European Union



Audience at the seminar *Europe & Culture: Back to the Future*,
Villa Salviati, Florence, 10 June 2026.
Photo: Marco Borrelli