

Culture, Creativity and Coronavirus: Time for EU Action

Article by Elena Polivtseva

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The Covid-19 crisis has proved devastating for the cultural and creative sectors. Lockdowns and social distancing measures have made work as usual impossible for professionals in the sector, and many find themselves falling through the gaps of social protection. Precarity, however, is not new for many of those working in arts and culture. Elena Polivtseva connects the impacts of the pandemic to a longer-term failure to adequately address the working conditions of cultural professionals, calling for EU action to help protect the sector's future.

Culture has been high on the EU's agenda for the last few years, with its value recognised in key areas including economic development, social cohesion, and international relations. At the same time, it has been over a decade since efforts were made to establish a comprehensive outlook of the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals. The sector is today characterised by a high level of precarity among its workers: low and unstable incomes, increasingly complex professional statuses, and limited access to social security and benefits.

The harmful impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the cultural sector, especially the live arts, reveals structural problems which can no longer be disregarded. With the pandemic, we find ourselves in a historic moment for the EU to take collective action on protecting and improving the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals across Europe. Failure to take such action will make it difficult to safeguard a sector that Europe needs for its revival and recovery.

A sector under threat

According to a recent study produced by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, "[the] cultural and creative sectors are likely to have lost 80 per cent of their turnover in the second quarter of 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and the containment measures." The pandemic has disrupted work across the entire cultural ecosystem: concerts, exhibitions, festivals and performances cancelled, rehearsals and production suspended, residencies closed, touring put on hold, and international meetings made impossible. "We had 110 shows cancelled due to Covid-19," shares Line Rousseau, director of A Propic, a cultural organisation based in the Netherlands.

The first lockdown came in the busiest and most profitable time of year for the performing arts, which meant that millions of people have lost the biggest part of their annual income. "We had to cancel about 100 cultural events during the hard lockdown, and later on festivals and invitations of artists from abroad. Our financial future is more than unclear," commented Sigrid Niemer, a founding member of the Berlin-based International Cultural Centre ufaFabrik.

Since the start of social distancing in Europe, many theatres, dance venues, music organisations, and museums have been offering their content to audiences in a digital form, mostly free of charge. Although this has been both a temporary alternative to complete inaction and an opportunity for experimentation, the mass virtualisation of culture, especially the performing arts, has also brought concerns ranging from privacy and accessibility to remuneration and ecological footprint. According to Willie White, artistic director and chief executive of the

Dublin Theatre Festival, “so far a business model has not been created for streaming contemporary creations and there is a small demand relative to the cost of digitisation.”

Even when venues and museums are allowed to reopen, they cannot operate at full capacity, bringing more financial challenges. Many cultural professionals have been put on temporary unemployment, and others were made redundant, even in some of the large and renowned cultural institutions (it is worth noting that over 96 per cent of EU cultural and creative organisations are micro-organisations employing less than ten people).

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Freelance and self-employed artists and creative workers (which represent a high proportion of cultural sector workers^[1]) have been hit the hardest by the consequences of the confinement measures, as in most countries they were unable to benefit from regular unemployment schemes. Moreover, many of them used to rely on several sources of income yet many of those side-jobs – such as yoga classes, lecturing and hospitality – have also been frozen.

Coupled with unprecedented uncertainty, the current situation is likely to force many cultural professionals to look for jobs elsewhere. Hence, even if most venues and art institutions will ultimately survive the crisis (though this is far from guaranteed), there is a risk that many independent art professionals will not be able to remain working in the sector. “Buildings are one thing but clearly we need to look after our freelancers, many of whom we rely on to make our work. They need our creative and financial support,” says Dr. Paul Davies, artistic director at Volcano Theatre Company in Wales, UK.

Support schemes initiated by national governments and art councils vary widely from country to country. The European Commission has also announced a range of measures to boost the cultural sector in the context of the pandemic. The Commission’s support package did not aim to provide direct emergency relief to individual artists (this is the responsibility of member states), but focused instead on enhancing existing opportunities for cross-border projects and collaboration or creating new ones. The cultural sector could potentially have been included in the various EU support instruments distributed by the member states (for instance, the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative or the Recovery and Resilience Facility). France, Portugal and Spain have already allocated some support for culture in their recovery plans, although this is not substantial.

European cultural advocates have been vocal about the threat the current situation poses to the viability of the entire cultural ecosystem. The core demands of cultural advocates have been a double increase of the Creative Europe programme, the only EU programme which directly supports pan-European cultural collaboration, and a proper integration of culture in the recovery packages (see the statement by Culture Action Europe, an intersectoral network advocating for culture at the EU level).

What about resilience?

Amidst the Covid-19 storm, voices are increasingly emerging to counteract depictions of the crisis in the cultural sector as solely as a consequence of the pandemic. The current situation has brought many issues in the cultural sector to the surface, most of which are closely related to the atypical character of the work of artists and cultural professionals. One of the reasons behind the non-standard nature of this work is the high unpredictability of the final outcome of an artistic process and its reception by the audience. The value of an artwork is difficult to

measure, and the final perception varies from person to person. At the same time, the process of staging a performance is often labour and time-intensive. Therefore, artists usually invest a lot of time, energy, skills and even money into a “product”, the unique value of which is very hard to estimate. At the same time, it is largely recognised that culture and the arts have tremendous importance for societies, creating positive spill-over effects to multiple other fields, bringing people together, opening minds, paving the way for innovation, empowering people and contributing to well-being.

The atypicality of cultural and creative work is structurally overlooked by funders and policy-makers alike. According to a September 2020 OECD report, many government Covid-19 support measures are not well suited to the peculiarities of the cultural and creative sectors, with employment and income support measures not always being accessible or adapted to the new and non-standard forms of employment that tend to be especially precarious and common in these sectors.

In times of crisis, policymakers and funders start cherishing the so-called resilience of cultural and creative sectors, instead of designing specific support measures that take into account their non-standard mode of operation. The resilience discourse assumes that artistic communities should use all their creativity, flexibility and agility to adapt to harsh realities, inventing their own solutions to cope with the lack of public support. This discourse even goes so far as to suggest professionals in this sector should “emerge from the crisis” in a better shape.

Although resilience as such is definitely not alien to the nature of creative sectors, considering it as the only tool to safeguard the viability of the sector can seriously impact the freedom, autonomy and integrity of the artistic work itself.

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Cultural workers’ so-called resilience (not only in times of crisis) often means withstanding precarity with innovative survival strategies and juggling several jobs, scattered projects and hectic mobility. This has an impact on the ability of artists and creative workers to build and pursue long-term professional goals based on their artistic, social and political values – a result of which is often a limited capacity to deepen critical ideas and, ultimately, to seriously engage with socially and politically relevant issues due to the never-ending lack of time. It all comes down to how constant adaptability undermines artists’ ability to work, to create, to express themselves. In the long term, this is stifling the creativity and critical thinking that is so vital for healthy democracies and the sustainable transition of societies.

A pandemic was enough to turn this difficult reality into a near catastrophic situation. After a few weeks of social distancing, many freelance art professionals across the EU found themselves unable to pay their rent or even buy food (read dozens of testimonials here).

One may wonder why so many art professionals have not been financially prepared for even a short period of inaction. This is partly because they themselves have been investing in the art sector in the past few years. As a UNESCO study points out: “The largest subsidy for the arts comes not from governments, patrons or the private sector, but from artists themselves in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour”.

“More money” is no longer enough

At the same time, culture is hardly absent from the EU official discourse and had even been gaining momentum in the EU agenda prior to the pandemic. Over the past few years, culture was integrated into the EU external relations strategy. Moreover, there was a greater focus on culture's contribution to various fields of social life and economic development. The [New Agenda for Culture](#) (2018) puts forward a very ambitious approach to promoting and supporting culture at the EU level.

What is lacking, however, is a focus on those who “make” culture – the artists and cultural professionals. As Israel Aloni, the artistic director and co-founder of Swedish contemporary dance organisation ilDance, points out in a recent [essay](#), “If artists were appreciated and valued in society, and if art was recognised as an important contributor to the collective cultural and social evolution, there would be a system in place that would support artists for being artists.”

Indeed, in some member states there is a debate on how to preserve livelihoods and advance the professional development of those engaged in the art sector. Meanwhile, at the EU level, official acknowledgement that the vitality and sustainability of the cultural and creative sectors depend on the well-being, freedom and integrity of their workers is only just beginning to emerge. Before 2020, there was hardly any EU-wide debate on whether there should be a comprehensive EU action aimed at improving the working conditions of art professionals, with the last EU-level attempt to look into the issue being a 2006 [study](#) by the European Parliament. In November 2020, a [study](#) published by the European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual represented an important step in furthering this debate.

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Even if exploration of the theme is only beginning to take shape, the status of artists and cultural workers has not been a completely absent topic at the EU level. Different aspects, from mobility to copyrights, have been addressed in recent years, with varying degrees of progress. Importantly, an ecosystem that supports artists, cultural and creative professionals as well as European content is one of the priorities of the Council Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022.

As a real sign of progress, a new Resolution on Cultural Recovery of Europe puts forward a vision that it is no longer sufficient to only focus on the economic recovery of the cultural sector. It is non-binding, but it will certainly shape further discourse on the future of the European cultural sector and the recovery of EU economic and social life at large.

Increase of subsidies, namely of the Creative Europe programme is vital to preserving pan-European cooperation in the field of culture, and it is absolutely urgent to revive the cross-border cultural ties, which risk to be hit hard by the pandemic. But beyond, the Resolution brings the working conditions' issue into the spotlight and calls the European Commission “to create a European framework for working conditions in cultural and creative sectors, paying particular attention to transnational employment”. IETM, International network for contemporary arts, together with other networks, [have been planting this idea](#) in the past few months.

The Resolution was supported by all major groups by the Parliament and adopted by an overwhelming majority of MEPs.

Why an EU action?

Most issues related to working conditions fall within member states' sphere of responsibility. Why should there be an EU action in this field, and what would be its use and limits?

An EU action with the aim of improving the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals would be a significant boost for EU cultural cooperation, which is so important for European unity and the future of the European project. It is essential that citizens get acquainted not only with local and national artistic offers, but also with culture and arts from other countries. There has been a great patchwork of measures taken by national governments in support of the cultural sector since the pandemic began. Some countries have invested a lot in their artists, while others left the artistic community to be "resilient". There have already been huge discrepancies between levels and forms of support to the cultural sector across the EU, and Covid-19 will create even bigger cracks in the EU cultural landscape. In the future, this will have a negative impact on pan-European cultural collaboration (touring, co-productions, transborder projects, and so on).

Furthermore, there are many artists who work mostly or only internationally, across EU borders. They contribute to creating an EU common space of values and raising awareness of the richness of cultures within the continent and beyond. However, they often suffer from the lack of harmony among different national schemes supporting the status and working conditions of artists, and the current crisis has aggravated this situation.

An EU framework on the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals would provide a set of principles and recommendations. This would trigger legislative and non-legislative activity at the member state level on crucial issues related to the socio-economic conditions of artists, such as contracts, taxes, wages, social benefits, mobility issues, and more. Many of those issues are already in focus, and a joint framework would strengthen commitment to further progress among the Commission and member states. Such a framework would be based on the recognition of the atypical nature of artists' work and the acknowledgement that their situation requires improvement. It should necessarily stimulate an exchange of best practices among member states as well as progress monitoring. Such a framework would boost a debate on the issue, highlighting the problems which are being overlooked. Ultimately, it should aim to create favourable conditions for artists to work across EU borders.

While it is clear that such a framework would have a non-binding character, similar to the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), it would already be a tremendous step forward in the direction of recognising the value of artists and cultural professionals' work, as well as the atypical nature of their working conditions. Establishing such a framework would be an important political message and a crucial signal to policymakers of all levels – and the cultural sector itself – that European culture has a future, that artists are valued, and that there is a burning need for a change.

Footnotes

^[1] In the 27 EU member states, 32 per cent of cultural workers are self-employed, while 44 per cent of artists and writers are self-employed. "European Cultural and Creative Cities in COVID-19 times. Jobs at risk and the policy response", JCR Science for Policy Report, 2020.



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