

Culture could be the answer to Europe's woes



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Culture is a vital ingredient to help bridge the gap between Europe's citizens and its institutions, Isabelle Schwarz argues.

Europe is under relentless pressure, with ever more complex challenges facing the Union every day. In the face of these challenges, Europeans are closing up their borders, turning inward rather than outward. But imagining that national approaches can respond effectively to global challenges is not only dangerous but irresponsible. And imagination is something that Europe is going to need plenty of in order to tackle the continent's current situation – imagination along with courage, a sense of responsibility and solidarity between communities and between individuals too.

Against this severe backdrop, culture has the potential to play a hugely important role – in terms of Europe's internal stability and the way the continent engages with other countries beyond our borders. Culture provides the space where we can negotiate ways of living together and build meaningful relationships, both inside and outside Europe. If we don't pay heed to the role culture plays, we risk deepening the fault lines in our communities, creating new divides, leading to internal conflicts at home and loss of reputation abroad – a no-win situation for everyone.

Europe is about people, and at the very heart, it is about cultures too. But as long as Europe is recognised first and foremost as an economic and financial project, it will fail to galvanise its citizens or to gain their hearts and minds. For Europe to become a union of people, it needs to be recognised as much as a political as a cultural project. Because culture is essential for creating the emotional bonds we need to make Europe work. Citizens need to believe that the European Union is a space of possibilities rather than impossibilities; a unique political laboratory and an inspiring cultural space they can contribute to, wherever they are in Europe.

Current policy processes seem unable to bridge the growing gaps that are opening up within our societies and between Europe's citizens and its institutions. It is high time to tap into the power of culture and to involve people at the grass-roots level in the making of Europe. This means supporting cultural change-making processes in their broadest sense. Because culture opens up spaces for creative exchange and dialogue. It allows us to negotiate differences by listening to and engaging with 'others' while remaining open and welcoming.

If we close our borders, geographically but also mentally and emotionally, we are acting against our own interests – for borders do not only stem the flow of people but also the exchange of ideas.

Europe needs new responses and, above all, joint responses. We all need to work together and stand up for the project we signed up to, rather than walking away. And we need to put culture at the very heart of the European project, because only then do we have the space to re-imagine, re-invent and project ourselves into the future.

The European Cultural Foundation is an organisation founded in 1954 to support, connect and advocate for culture as a cornerstone for Europe.

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