

Thank you, (Madam) Chair

Honourable members of the Committees, fellow speakers, members of the public,

I hope this hearing marks another important stage in the mainstreaming of culture and cultural relations work in the Union's foreign affairs and I am honoured to be addressing you today as a speaker from academia.

I am sure you can join me in testifying that the European Union has been making an impact in international cultural relations (ICR) long before it conceived of such a strategy, because this field of activity and the collective resources that back it, make the Union's support and interventions useful and for many invaluable.

In the public communication of this hearing,

the main question was set as:

How could culture better feature in the EU's external relations as a soft power tool?

Framing this conversation around the use of culture as a soft power tool does not reflect the evolution of theories and practice of international cultural relations based around building trust that also recognizes power relations, and seeks equity, and fairness to address collective challenges.

Therefore, although being fully aware of the historical popularity of the concept of soft power which seeks to influence through attractiveness, I believe that its continued use as a predominant paradigm in the sphere of culture in EU external relations may lead to a poor understanding of what is being proposed, since power may be simply understood as 'power over' rather than the relational process and outcomes of cultural relations.

Therefore, although it may be understandable that the concept of soft power may appeal to the Member States (MS), in 2021, reliance on this term gives the wrong message to countries with which the EU and its MS wish to engage in building and developing long term meaningful and mutually beneficial relations.

After this conceptual consideration, I want to proceed by sharing my reflection on the implementation of the 2017 strategy and to suggest developments

Despite the many worthwhile cultural projects supported by the EU, it is difficult to recommend improvements, as it is challenging to obtain a full understanding of activities and their effectiveness. Information on overall spending in international cultural relations, activities occurring across the different directorates/instruments/services, EU and MS coordination and delivery of strategy objectives, programme evaluation and lessons learned are not easily or publicly accessible outside of the organisation.

But perhaps that is because I am an outsider. Thus, my conclusion is that the EU needs to become better at performing as a communicating and learning organisation.

Thinking forward, it is important to highlight changes in the context in which the strategy was initially drawn in 2016 – the world has changed, massively...

- Brexit is consummated (which may matter to some).

- The Covid-19 pandemic further enhanced a nationalistic, inward turn in Europe and elsewhere, and was a massive blow to the lives and livelihoods of all of us, and in particular to the cultural and creative sectors, as well to the development of international cultural relations as an activity cherishing face-to-face engagement.
- Further, the urgency to deal with the climate crisis has become even more apparent and necessary.

Thus, although life appears to continue under the 'new' normal, paradigmatic changes are needed: we need to actively care for each other and the planet, and there is no more time.

The development and implementation of any international cultural relations strategy and activities needs to take this into account.

Therefore, I believe that the framework with which the EU has been working with, benefits from being re-visited and re-conceived, to enable adaptation to the new context and ensuing needs.

The original strategy, was designed as an envelopment strategy of existing mechanisms and activities: in a way, the intention and the political significance of the act were the novelty. Nevertheless, developments that followed – such as the Cultural Diplomacy Platform, cooperation with EUNIC, and UNESCO, and the appointment of cultural focal points for the EU Delegations– are important achievements in the pursuit of the objectives of the strategy, which have allowed for better and deeper European cultural ties with the rest of the world.

Let's take the case of the work developed by EUNIC, which has a difficult task, marrying the tendencies of the national cultural institutes for national self-promotion, with bringing them together to do joint work under the European banner. A good example of the latter is the project of the European Houses of Culture testing models of collaboration in cultural relations.

However, it is a shame that the European Houses of Culture could not be physically co-located, jointly operated, and strategically run, national cultural institutes. Adopting a shared physical location could better enable cross-learning, joint-programming, harness the creative potential of diverse staff, and allow for reducing impact on the environment of several buildings for different national cultural institutes.

Indeed, climate action, which connects with sustainable development, is an area I would like to highlight as one of the strands in a future development of the EU's strategy. The ecological crisis is also a crisis of culture, inequity and mistrust. Cultural relations work can thus be key in developing awareness of the climate crisis and prompting climate action as well as to practice ethical norms while pursuing co-created solutions beyond organisational 'greening'.

Another development, I would like to suggest, which also connects to the example I gave, pertains to the scaling and learning from 'demonstration projects'. Opportunities for cultural relations programme design, impact and scaling could be greatly accelerated through the use of a publicly available, open-access repository that connects the EU and national cultural institutes' internal communities of practice with fellow international and cultural actors to work cross-sectorally.

In summation, cultural work can be further developed to play a centre-stage role in EU external relations in three essential ways: **first**, by adopting a long-term relational approach that recognizes power dynamics and places value on co-creation of solutions, **secondly**, by providing incentives to support collaborative projects whose budgets, activities and evaluations are transparent and publicly available through an open-access repository to increase the ability to scale-up and learn from and thus fully leverage public resources, **and finally** by embedding ecologically responsive practices and norms throughout the entire life cycle of external relations initiatives.

I thank you very much for your attention.

Carla Figueira

Delivered address to the European Parliament, 14.10.2021

European Parliament public hearing by the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Culture and Education:

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/culture-in-the-eu-s-external-relations/product-details/20211006CHE09441>

The hearing looked at the implementation of the 2017 European Parliament resolution “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations” and suggested possible avenues for further development.

I was invited as a speaker from academia, along with three other speakers from the European External Action Service (EEAS), the German Institute for Foreign Relations (ifa), and UNESCO.

You can find the recording of the hearing

here: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/cult-afet_20211014-1345-COMMITTEE-CULT-AFET_vd

My main intervention is at 14:17:29.