

THE EU'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: What Role for Cities?

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Cities are one of the “under-explored potentials” of EU external cultural relations. With the EU’s new chief diplomat, Josep Borrell, taking office on 1 November there is an opportunity to review the EU’s cultural diplomacy and give cities and their local governments real consideration as partners that could help implement the new spirit of intercultural dialogue on the ground and inform future EU policies and actions.

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Cultural diplomacy is an emerging field of the European Union’s foreign policy alongside the established instruments of security and defence. With the EU only having supporting competence in culture, the definition of the new policy area has been slow and cautious to ensure complementarity with Member States. However, a significant step was taken in June 2016, when three weeks prior to the launch of the EU Global Strategy, the Commission and External Action Service presented the Joint Communication *Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations*, which was approved by the Council in May 2017. The most innovative aspect of this strategy is the move from a conception of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool towards a more inclusive and reciprocal agenda built around “a new spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning, joint capacity-building and global solidarity”.

In concrete terms, these ideals should have translated into a bottom-up approach that stresses people-to-people cooperation with limited involvement of governments and stronger co-ownership with local stakeholders in third countries. However, regrettably this was not recognized in the EU’s implementation plan outlined in a **framework for action** adopted by the Council in April 2019. The plan relies almost entirely on partnerships with the cultural institutes of Member States (e.g. British Council, Goethe-Institut and Institut Français) and their umbrella organization, the EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) network, created in 2006 to promote collaboration between European cultural institutes in an outside the EU and to have a joint platform for cooperation with the EU. Other non-state actors, including local governments, independent cultural organizations and civil society that the Joint Communication listed as vital to the implementation of the strategy are barely mentioned. This failure to involve non-state actors risks diluting the innovative essence of the EU’s cultural diplomacy in the long-term.

A particular surprise has been the absence of plans for the systematic involvement of cities and their local governments. Since 2016, a number of stakeholders have formally called for European cities and regions to be involved in the future definition and implementation of the EU's cultural diplomacy, including the **Committee of the Regions**, the **European Economic and Social Committee** and the **Culture and Education and Foreign Affairs committees**. These calls echoed the recommendations of the **Preparatory Action** commissioned prior to the Joint Communication, which identified cities as one of the "under-explored potentials" of EU external cultural relations and important partners. While staff at the Commission appears to be receptive to these ideas, there have been no signs of them being carried forward. With the EU's new chief diplomat, Josep Borrell, taking office on 1 November there is an opportunity to review the EU's cultural diplomacy and give cities and their local governments real consideration as partners that could help implement the new spirit of intercultural dialogue on the ground and inform future EU policies and actions. Five contributions that cities could bring to the table stand out.

Firstly, the EU could learn from cities in its effort to move beyond traditional soft power frameworks. A **EUROCITIES study** from 2017 has shown that while these innovative modes of international cultural engagement are considered a "paradigm shift" at national and EU level, they are "already firmly embedded in the policies and working methods of European cities". Many large and medium-sized European cities are cultural and creative hubs that have been engaging directly with external partners for decades. Operating within the collaborative logic of city twinning programmes, city networks and decentralized cooperation, cities have advanced models of cultural cooperation that put reciprocity and people-to-people exchanges centre stage. Their proximity to citizens has made them test grounds for new participation models and strategies for responding to the specific needs of different cultural communities and institutions in their territories.

Second, bringing cities on board could help expand and decentralize the reach of the EU's cultural diplomacy. Too much reliance on the cultural institutes of Member States will inevitably lead to actions concentrating in the capital and major cities of established partner countries in which the latter have their representations. By contrast, European cities and their transnational networks could act as intermediaries for connecting with more diverse and remote geographies. This decentralization is urgently needed if the EU wants to respond to the global reality of today's cultural flows, rather than to just continue treading the beaten tracks of established EU and Member State cultural relations, which tend to run along older East-West and North-South geopolitical fault lines. Beyond this well-known terrain there are many cities with innovative cultural scenes and a cosmopolitan outlook that Europe could learn from.

A third issue that should be given consideration is how city-to-city collaboration can offer ways around international political tensions that are harder to bridge at national level. For example, in countries with repressive or authoritarian regimes that have distant relations with the EU, local governments with a more progressive outlook – such as Moscow under the city's Cultural Minister Sergei Kapkov (2011-2015) and now potentially Istanbul under the new mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu – may be interested in establishing parallel cultural relations with Europe. Such cultural exchanges at local and citizen level are of great importance since they may constitute first steps towards (re)opening or maintaining a pathway for dialogue.

Similarly, in EU countries that currently have nationalist foreign policy agendas – like Hungary, Poland and Italy – oppositional city authorities could potentially become partners in transmitting the universalist spirit of the new strategy for international cultural relations, both at home and abroad. It is important to note here, how in the context of the renationalisation of foreign policy in Europe and beyond, a new relevance is conferred to the EU's emergent cultural diplomacy as a stronghold of cultural resilience against the growing “populist nationalist zeitgeist” and the isolationist cultural identities it thrives on.

Finally, cooperation with cities is essential to one of the principal concerns of the EU's external cultural action agenda: to support culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development. Recognizing the important role of cities in the culture-development nexus, the Joint Communication already highlighted the need to support capacity building in this area among local authorities in partner countries. If this suggestion is to be taken seriously, cooperation with European cities and their transnational networks is fundamental. The latter cannot only share their experience and knowledge on culture-led economic development and emancipatory cultural policy models that aim to foster social equality and cohesion, but also provide established international networking and partnership structures and the relations of trust and sharing these are built on.

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What are the caveats? While the choice to postpone the systematic involvement of cities is certainly related to the EU's strong respect for the interests of Member States, it may in part also be the result of fears about municipalities not being sufficiently reliable partners. At city level, policy priorities often change from one administration to the next and the portfolios of culture and international relations are especially prone to modification and controversy. This problematic could be sidestepped by the EU partnering with European and global city networks that have made international cultural cooperation a priority. An obvious choice would be United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide association for local and regional governments and their networks, which has a Committee on Culture that leads international policies and programmes on culture and sustainable development. Other potential partners could be the EUROCITIES network and UNESCO's Creative Cities Network.

With Federica Mogherini's term ending in October, it remains to be seen whether initiatives taken under her leadership to make cultural diplomacy an integral part of EU foreign policy will persist as a priority. A stronger involvement of cities would be one way to consolidate and further advance the current approach build around dialogue and mutual learning.