



## Culture, the driver for rEUnaissance

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Speaker

*Speech delivered at the 129th CoR plenary session [Check against delivery]*

Dear President Lambertz,

Dear Commissioner Navracsics,

Dear Ms Kammerevert,

Dear members of the Committee of Regions,

Dear colleagues,

Dear guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be invited to speak here today and thank President Lambertz for his kind invitation.

As you know, the subject of Culture is close to my heart- it is one of the four priorities of my presidency alongside peace, sustainable development and youth. These are the pillars of the new European Renaissance we must urgently strive for.

Culture is not only a driver of economic growth and social cohesion, it has been one of the drivers of European identity for many centuries. We are the children of Michelangelo, of Vetruvio, of Mozart, Picasso, Shakespeare, Racine and Kafka.

The knowledge of this joint cultural heritage creates a sense of belonging and influences our thoughts and actions.

However, our culture and heritage loses much of its impact if it is not supported and harnessed to rise to its full potential.

Thus, beyond these general words: let me give very concrete input to the debate today, to the role of cities and regions as key drivers for reinforcing European Identity through Culture.

How can we best benefit from the richness of our diverse cultures and heritage?

Cultural policy in cities and regions is crucial, as is also demonstrated in the Culture and Creative Cities Monitor developed by the Joint Research Centre, led by Commissioner Navracsics.

This central topic also led to my commissioning a research study on 'Cities, Culture and Identity in Europe' in 2016. Many of its findings are also valid for regions.

I do not have the time to speak about all the points of the study – let me concentrate on three areas which I find useful in this setting:

- 1) the development of multi-player dialogue
- 2) the importance of mobility and exchange and
- 3) the need for innovative funding strategies.

We should strive to enhance dialogue between institutions and civil society in cultural decision-making, ensuring a multi-level approach to increasingly complex local and regional challenges. This develops citizens' understanding of democratic processes, counters populist rhetoric through increased trust between civil society and different political levels and empowers citizens through a feeling of ownership. For example, the co-governance of cultural heritage sites has been shown to enhance feeling of community, strengthen ties between citizens of different generations and cultural backgrounds. It also positively impacts the development of local cultural policy in-line with citizens' needs.

Secondly, I would like to underline the importance of exchange between cultures for fostering social and

economic development. Mobility is a key element in driving the development of a European cultural identity and in increasing employability through skills and language development. Cities and regions have a key role to play in promoting exchanges and partnerships, both within and also outside of Europe.

Furthermore, cross-border regional cultural cooperation can support the development of cultural spaces, leading to a better understanding of other cultures, an increased sense of regional identity, improved cultural offer through cross-border cultural programmes as well as the development of border regions, benefitting from their cultural diversity and diverse cultural history.

This will help put the periphery back at the core of our society. This 'periphery' is not only to be understood in the geographic sense, but also concerning mechanisms of exclusion.

Lastly: Decision-makers on all levels, European and regional, are struggling to do 'more with less'. We can thus be more than happy that the funding on European level for the core culture programme, Creative Europe, is being increased.

However, we must ensure that culture is also driven transversally, through the Regional funds, European Social Funds, Interreg or Research programmes. In this respect, we should avoid funding only cultural infrastructure, as important as this is, and fund cultural processes. The investment in a building is but a start of the processes, not the end. Only then can culture and cultural heritage develop their full potential for reinforcing European identity.

Faced with funding gaps, we must be inventive. Loan schemes such as the Loan Guarantee Facility which is being developed in the framework of the current Creative Europe programme are one option, and will be a welcomed driver for the creative industries. However, we must also continue to support public investment in culture as a 'European acquis', reflecting the reality that most cultural initiatives will not achieve direct profit. But the benefits are there, and we should find ways to reinvest cultural spill-overs in cultural ecosystems, promoting public-private-civic partnerships. For example, the benefits of tourism should contribute to preservation strategies or community involvement in heritage.

Therefore, as you can imagine, I read with great interest and fully support the Opinions which are to be debated today. I especially welcome for example the emphasis on early language learning as a pillar of driving exchange and European identity and the call to involve youth in the design of education and cultural policy reforms.

In the upcoming year, we will be working on a number of initiatives and opinions in the field of culture, which I would like to briefly flag up.

We shall be issuing three opinions on 1) the New Agenda for Culture, 2) the Education strategy and 3) the Youth strategy. Furthermore, we are working on an own initiative opinion on Culture and rural environments. Cultural heritage, in celebration of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, was also at the core of this year's youth event 'Your Europe – Your Say', and will be the topic of our annual Civil Society Prize. The 60th anniversary of the EESC, which we will be celebrating next week, will culminate in an evening celebrating our diverse cultural heritage.

I invite you warmly to join us at this cultural event in Brussels on 24<sup>th</sup> of May.

As you see, we have many points in common and I look forward to enhancing cooperation between the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

The long term EU Action Plan for Cultural Heritage Ms Winter speaks of in her Opinion to be adopted today could be one such possibility.

Thank you.