

Notes from the 2nd Meeting of the European Commission Expert Group on Cultural Heritage

(taken by Mariachiara Esposito, Brussels, Expert on behalf of ERRIN and Tuscany Region)

On 9th and 10th of June the representatives of the Commission Expert Group on Cultural Heritage (CH), set up to give independent advice on cultural policies and to ensure a follow-up of the European Year on CH 2018-related initiatives, gathered online to discuss current challenges for the sector. The Group is unique in its composition, made of experts issued from national, international and stakeholders' organisations, including ERRIN, that give voice to the wide community of professionals, operators, ministries, regional authorities etc. active in the sector of cultural policies and cultural heritage promotion and enhancement.

The Group is led and facilitated by EU Officials in charge of cultural heritage policies at different levels and from all perspectives: DG EAC (Chair), DG RTD, DG GROW, DG CNECT, DG ENER, and the JRC. The European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions also took part in the discussion and gave the important perspective of the inter-institutional engagement for culture, particularly in response to the current crisis, and contributed to activate platforms in support of cultural stakeholders during the pandemic.

The meeting opened with a speech by Commissioner Gabriel who put a strong emphasis on the need to act collectively to push for the relaunch of cultural economy and cultural related activities after the Covid-19 crisis at all levels. In her speech, the Commissioner emphasised the following overarching aspects that are at the core of the Commission's concerns and engagement in the current phase:

- exploiting synergies with cohesion funds looking beyond the Covid-19 emergency;
- mainstreaming CH in the other EU programmes to make the best out of the contribution of CH to the Green Deal and to the recovery plan for the tourism sector;
- using future innovative assets deriving from programmes such as Digital Europe and Invest EU as a leverage for achieving digital opportunities within the sector and improving the use of financial facilities;
- promoting European cultural destinations and proximity of European CH through cooperative platforms and campaigns, together with regional and local authorities to help the recovery and local communities;
- increasing attention and all possible investments and instruments to support the cultural sector in the next MFF and in the upcoming programming period.

Commissioner Gabriel stressed the crucial importance of a common action plan for cooperation with regions, across policies for preservation and promotion of CH, in order to build and implement effectively the legacy of the EYCH with new tools and innovative opportunities on the ground. Only through such cooperation, Europe will be able to reinforce the message of "Culture as a Value" and "Culture as a World Diversity", where the diversity of cultural content and production can be expressed to the benefit of Europe as a whole, stressed the Commissioner.

MEP Melbarde highlighted the main points of the EP own initiative report on “Achieving an effective policy legacy for the European Year of Cultural Heritage”, for which she is the rapporteur, referring in particular to cultural heritage and sustainability and the importance of preserving the born digital as well as the digitisation of cultural heritage. MEP Sojdrova supported the intervention of Commissioner Gabriel and she reminded the group of the successes of the EYCH 2018 and how we should build on it. She referred to the budgetary allocation for Creative Europe in the proposal for the new MFF, considered insufficient. Commissioner Gabriel replied calling for a joint mobilisation to secure appropriate funding for culture and she expressed her appreciation of MEP Melbarde’s report.

The different representatives from the Commission illustrated the many important ongoing initiatives launched both in the recent years, as a result of the EYCH, and mostly in the latest months, to adapt to and mitigate the effects of the health emergency on the economy and services related to culture and tourism in particular. There is a need to re-invent opportunities and measures to help cultural operators face the crisis and the devastating impact of the pandemic.

Head of Unit of Cultural Policies in DG EAC, Catherine Magnant, gave an overview of the most strategic initiatives, including an analysis on EU investments in cultural sites contained in the Court of Auditors Report, planning for the workshop on alternative funding for heritage, the Cultural Heritage in Action project, European Heritage Label and the social media campaign on sustainable cultural tourism “Europe’s culture - close to you”. (See PPT)

Members of other DGs contributed to the wider picture and focused on the opportunities for the sector looking at the future work-programme of Horizon 2020 and at synergies with environmental and tourist policies, among other things.

While the first day addressed all issues from a holistic perspective and looking at the most urgent challenges derived from the pandemic, in combination with future policies and programmes, the second day was focused on very specific aspects and addressed the pillars of the phenomena of Digitalisation and Climate Change in terms of challenges for CH.

The first issue was framed by a main question: *Digital learnings from COVID-19 and how to build again physical audiences?* These are the problems at stake:

- What have we learned about access to cultural heritage via digital means?
- Given the rapid pace to move exhibitions, education programmes and artefacts online, are audiences experiencing online cultural fatigue? What can we do to address this?
- How can we strategically target new audiences, encourage repeat visits and retain existing audiences?

From DG CONNECT, Anne Bajart, Deputy Head of Unit, Interactive Technologies, Digital for Culture and Education reported that early in the crisis a web page was created on digital cultural heritage. Europeana was, and is, extremely active with a number of initiatives. Ms Bajart referred to the review of the Commission Recommendation on the digitisation and online accessibility of cultural material and digital preservation (2011/711/EU).

From the JRC, Valentina Alberti (ISPRA), Policy Analyst on Indicator Frameworks, told about the EU Cultural Gems initiative, using an open source application which builds on alliances and supports a network of cities – it promotes EU culture from home. From mid-April until the end of May 2020, 350 online initiatives were collected from 30 European countries

For more information: <https://culturalgems.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

Julia Pagel, Secretary General of the Network of European Museums Organisation (NEMO), focused on the challenges faced by museums that are still in the middle of the pandemic. As museums re-open there are less visitors and additional safety features and regulations. Ms Pagel recalled the results of the NEMO survey carried out in the context of COVID-19; 961 museums from 48 countries took part in the survey. Income loss is a big issue. So far, staff members have not been laid-off. Many museums have re-assigned their staff resources to duties relating to increasing an online presence of collections and exhibitions. However, all voluntary programmes have ceased.

For more information:

https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf

In the last presentation, Harry Verwayen, Executive Director of Europeana, focused on the digital transformation during the pandemic. The overall response to the crisis goes through three stages: the immediate, the transition and the new normal. Europeana organised five workshops over a three-week period, focusing on capacity building. An initiative highlighting content on the theme of tourism will run from June until October using the hashtag #Discoveringeurope.

See presentation:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Z3TnR0HgRivv0lbifVc_uqtBVnfczAM6Bxn9eGjsfdQ/edit#slide=id.g889108630a_0_385

In Session 2, where the contribution of Cultural heritage to the Green Deal was discussed, the issue was framed by the following questions:

- *How can we advocate more effectively the place of cultural heritage within the European Green Deal?*
- *How can we ensure that rural and remote cultural heritage sites and practices are included in the planning processes for a sustainable economy?*
- *What are the examples of good practice of addressing cultural heritage in national and regional climate adaptation & mitigation plans?*

Among the presentations, such as from the *Historic Environment Scotland*, the topics raised were aimed to showcase the importance of demonstrating the value of cultural heritage in climate adaptation and mitigation. The need to change the current narrative in order to present CH not as a victim but as a catalyst for climate action, actively contributing to this important international agenda, was highlighted.

The presentation of the *European Partnership under Horizon Europe - Built4People | People-centric sustainable built environment* – by Margot Pinault from DG ENER, focused on the European Green Deal in more detail, mentioning the energy and resource-efficient building renovation action (“renovation wave”) and the future co-programmed R&I partnership on people-centric sustainable built environment. The focus of this Partnership is on decarbonisation, sustainability and better living, while respecting heritage and cultural diversity.

For more information: https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/sustainable-built-environment-research-and-innovation-partnership-under-horizon-europe-2019-dec-12_en

Some key interventions were made during the debate.

Erminia Sciacchitano, from the Italian Ministry for Culture and Tourism, stated the importance for cultural heritage to be present in environmental discussions both at the national and at the EU level. There are several guidelines at the national level, and the cultural heritage network should have an overview of adaptation plans. She proposed to collect national examples and reiterated the need to consider CH as an opportunity and not an obstacle in the sustainability process.

Jyoti Hosagrahar, from UNESCO, intervened about both the digital dimension and the Green Deal. She stated the importance of looking at the digital environment for sharing content but recalled the value of monitoring the conservation through digital means. Concerning the Green Deal, she highlighted how the crisis showed the interconnectedness of the world and said that the connection between natural and cultural sustainable development is crucial. UNESCO has been working on integrating cultural heritage in sustainable development discourses. She also pointed out that in 2007 UNESCO developed its policy on cultural heritage and climate change, and this is now being revised. It will be finalised at the next meeting of the Committee, which has been postponed and new dates will be announced soon.

At the end of the two days meeting a few main points were reiterated to summarise the expectations for the next steps and the most important elements for reflection, ranging from issues such as:

- how to better cooperate and mobilise the different instruments for an effective recovery of the sector
- ways to foster appropriate processes, skills and methodologies to exploit the value and potential of CH to the interconnected sectors
- a specific focus on heritage at risk, risk management and the importance of a more and more people-centred approach, where both tangible and intangible heritage are essential to preserve the community knowledge after a disaster and to link this discourse with the fight against climate change.

The next meeting is planned for autumn 2020. Experts are also invited to join the online preparatory meeting of the workshop on Alternative Funding for Cultural Heritage, scheduled for 22 September 2020. The Workshop itself will be held at the end of January 2021 and invitations will be circulated in due time.