

EIBF Contribution: Funding for EU External Action in the 2028-34 MFF

The **European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF)** is the voice of booksellers in the European Union and globally. EIBF's members are national Booksellers Associations, who represent all kinds of book retailers across Europe, North and Central America, Oceania and Asia, a majority of those being small and medium-sized independent and family-owned bookshops. Since 2009, EIBF proudly co-organises the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL), one of the 4 Creative Europe (CE) co-funded Prizes. In 2022, thanks to CE's invaluable support, we were able to launch RISE Bookselling, a co-funded network project designed to boost the sector's overall competitiveness, innovation and resilience through increased cross-border knowledge exchange, further access to cutting-edge information and know-how, and reinforcement of adequate tools and skillsets.

As the only standalone funding programme entirely dedicated to culture, the Creative Europe programme has increasingly recognized over the years the crucial role that culture plays in reinforcing international relations and propelling the diversity and heritage of the European continent forward. This realization was clearly spelled out in the 2021-2027 programme priorities and objectives: *“enhancing the economic, social and external dimension of European level cooperation to develop and promote and strengthening the competitiveness of the European cultural and creative sectors and reinforcing international cultural relations”*.¹

As the European Commission prepares to submit its draft proposal for the 2028-2034 MFF, and considering the current changeable and precarious geopolitical climate, EIBF welcomes this opportunity to raise awareness on the paramount importance of funding for culture, not only through Creative Europe, but also through the other funding programmes such as the EU external actions, taking into account the spillover effects of cultural investments, specifically for the European Union's **security, external reach**, and the promotion of EU values of **democracy, diversity and freedom of expression**.

Culture as a pillar of democracy and freedom of expression

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs), including the book sector, create irrefutable intangible value for communities across the world. Books touch our societies and communities at every level, from education to employment opportunities to politics. It's no coincidence that throughout history, and to this day, during times of political oppression and turmoil, books have been, and continue to be, banned and restricted, while authors, publishers and bookshops have been and are still targeted, censored, silenced, and even vandalised. In a time when the free exchange of ideas is more under threat than ever, bookshops all over the world play a vital role in upholding democracy. They are spaces where diverse voices are heard, difficult conversations are encouraged, and the principles of free speech are promoted – sometimes, despite unfavourable political circumstances.

Reading brings a multitude of benefits – not only to individual readers but to society as a whole. Books provide knowledge and education, of course, but they also instil empathy and understanding for other people. Bookshops and libraries both strive for the same goals of literacy, reading promotion and access to books. They have a long history of working together to get people reading. This is particularly valuable because supporting a literate population also entails supporting all citizens' well-informed democratic participation.

¹ [REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 20 May 2021 establishing the Creative Europe programme \(2021 to 2027\) and repealing Regulation \(EU\) No 1295/2013](#), EUR-Lex.

The importance of culture as a bridge over division and polarisation has been widely recognised across the political spectrum and is now more salient than ever. Therefore, if the whole CCI sector is to keep playing its part in underpinning democratic societies worldwide, it is essential that international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy become a strong and key asset of funding for EU external relations in the next MFF.

Culture as a pillar of security

With the announcement of the €800 billion *ReArm Europe* plan, defence and security were cemented as EU priorities for the coming years. Given the wide array of emergencies the EU is currently facing, a multi-faceted approach to security and defence must be taken. As an essential pillar of resilience, culture should be embedded as an integral part of Europe's preparedness agenda and corresponding funding programmes.

- **Promoting European culture is of strategic essence to fight against authoritarian regimes and protect European values.** Investing in culture means, fostering literacy skills, critical thinking, and psychological autonomy and resilience. If we fail to invest sufficiently in culture and literate populations (both print and media, in Europe and internationally), citizens are left vulnerable to external manipulation and hybrid threats from authoritarian regimes that recognise culture as a powerful tool and exploit it to advance their own interests. For instance, Russia allocated more than €1 billion to propaganda through culture and media in 2024, whereas the Creative Europe budget amounted to just €335 million the same year². In the context of ever-decreasing literacy rates globally, bookshops are a focal point in the fight against manipulation and autocracy through their direct contact with young readers, for instance.
- **Culture strengthens social cohesion, stability, and integration.** According to the European Commission's study³, people who engage in cultural activities are more likely to democratically participate in societies and become involved in their communities through volunteering, for example. Bookshops often act as vanguards for deeper integration within communities through providing spaces that are [safe havens where all are welcome](#).
- **Culture is a key tool to preserve the psychological resilience of societies, better preparing them for emergencies and security crises.** Certain EU member states, such as Finland⁴, have already recognised the importance of maintaining and protecting cultural services and heritage sites as part of its psychological resilience and comprehensive security model. It is scientifically proven that books and literacy also boost an individual's health and resilience⁵.

As eloquently put by [Commissioner Micallef himself](#), *"If you want to destroy a nation, if you want to completely erase a country, you attack its culture."* It is crucial that, in the context of security concerns, funding for culture, including in EU external actions, does not become a casualty.

Culture as a pillar for continued cross-border dialogue, empathy building and peace

In the current changeable and precarious geopolitical climate, dedicating some of the EU external action funding for cultural cooperation is more important than ever. The partnerships, cooperation projects, and research endeavours, that already exists between European actors and their third country counterparts

² [EU Funding for Culture in the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034](#). Culture Action Europe.

³ [How citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion : lessons from international research](#). European Commission.

⁴ [Security strategy for Society](#). Security Committee of the Finnish Government.

⁵ [Using Literacy to Boost Your Child's Health and Resilience](#). Yale School of Medicine.

are dearly valued. These formal arrangements for collaboration through EU-funded projects offer unique and stable opportunities to exchange, learn from each other, and form intercultural connections that foster empathy, while upholding common (European) values of democracy, peace and diversity.

The European bookselling sector is no different than others when looking at these partnerships. Our international colleagues see the EU as an essential ally in their ongoing work to promote literature and literacy, and they highly value the opportunities that cultural exchanges bring, allowing them to learn from European thought leadership.

Thanks to the EU co-funded project RISE, EIBF has managed to create and develop a strong bookselling community, that goes beyond our EU borders, and whose members cooperate, exchange and learn from each other, ultimately contributing to the overall resilience and competitiveness of the sector at global level. RISE has also spearheaded research on environmentally sustainable practices in bookselling, providing actionable and replicable tools to green the sector, which, due to its interconnected, global structure, needs such cross-border collaboration to fully realise the green transition. Simultaneously, in an international climate that is becoming increasingly hostile to the right to freedom of expression and, by extension, the freedom to read, RISE acts as a knowledge hub, providing invaluable support and a refuge for booksellers across the world who, in their position as promoters of reading, critical thinking and intercultural dialogue, provide crucial resistance to populist and anti-democratic forces worldwide.

Finally, decades of experience in the book sector have shown us that booksellers grow more resilient to crises, and thus competitive in the long run, when they can share their experience and best practices within and beyond national borders. Therefore, culture and international cultural partnerships play an intrinsic role in propelling the economy of the sector forward – nurturing innovation, creating jobs, and bolstering its overall competitiveness. With many creative and cultural industries being interconnected due to the global nature of their value chains, fostering international cooperation in culture also amounts to further strengthening the competitiveness of the European cultural and creative sectors.

Our asks

- Despite the significantly increased Creative Europe budget for the period 2021-2027, which we greatly welcomed, the programme is still oversubscribed considering the demand for such funds⁶. Therefore, we strongly advocate for **increasing the EU funding for the cultural and creative sectors and industries to 2% across all EU programmes**. If the EU were to increase its expenditure on culture to 2% (approximately €24 billion) of the MFF budget, the measure would be expected to generate **€266 billion of additional GDP or €38 billion annually**⁷.
- There is a **need to integrate culture into a broader range of funding programmes** to reflect its cross-cutting and transversal nature across a range of disciplines. In the next MFF, it is thus recommended to strengthen synergies across EU funding opportunities for culture.
- In the current changeable and precarious geopolitical climate, it is essential that the cultural and creative industries be able to keep playing their crucial role in upholding values of democracy, peace, diversity, and freedom of speech. Funding opportunities for innovative projects that contribute to international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy should find a dedicated place within the external actions funding strands.

⁶ [European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2024 on the implementation of the Creative Europe Programme 2021-2027](#). European Parliament.

⁷ [EU Funding for Culture in the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034](#). Culture Action Europe.



- Similarly, external cultural projects that contribute to further develop the EU partnerships with non EU-countries and accelerate the achievement of the SDGs – some of which having direct ties to culture – should be regarded as strong and key assets within the overall funding for EU external relations in the next MFF.
- It is crucial to **ensure that the current and pressing need to align the MFF with the Union’s priorities** of Democracy, Security and Competitiveness, **do not result in further diminishing the Creative Europe budget and its standalone position**. This has become even more pressing given that the recent years have been tremendously challenging to the CCIs, with rampant inflation, skyrocketing energy costs, and the complexities of both digitisation and greening, which all affect the operational capacities of CCIs – bookshops especially, given their low profit margins and relatively high operational costs.