

EIBF Contribution: A Culture Compass for Europe

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, a majority of those being small and medium-sized independent and family-owned bookshops.

As such, EIBF welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the European Commission's first Culture Compass, a crucial overarching strategic framework that has the potential to embed culture as a primary strategic pillar for the future of the EU.

I. CORE PRINCIPLES

Defence of freedom of expression and protection of cultural professionals

It's no coincidence that throughout history, during times of political oppression and turmoil, books have been banned and restricted, while authors, publishers and bookshops have been targeted, censored, silenced, and even vandalised. With extreme ideologies on the rise across much of Europe and the world, we see a corresponding increase in [the censorship of books and violence against booksellers](#). EIBF and our community of booksellers believe in freedom of expression as a fundamental human right and the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. We know that reading books is not only enjoyable – it also promotes the exchange of knowledge, it leads to new ideas, and it encourages critical thinking. That's why freedom of expression is essential. Booksellers also play a crucial role in safeguarding that freedom, and they – just like publishers, authors and librarians – must not face retribution for standing up for what matters. Therefore, we call on the commission to:

- Be vigilant in the defense of freedom of expression throughout Europe.
- Promote initiatives aimed at bolstering freedom of expression and places in which it is safeguarded, such as bookshops.
- Protect cultural professionals from potential threatening situations.

Standing up for Literacy

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. A literate population plays a more active role in society.

However, globally – including in Europe – reading skills are declining, with literacy rates dropping. It's well known that low levels of literacy predict poorer educational outcomes for children. But low literacy also makes participation in society more vulnerable. It's therefore essential that we work together to turn this trend around.

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.

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Because supporting a literate population also entails supporting a well-educated, active and understanding community. We call for the new Culture Compass to:

- Support initiatives across the continent that promote reading, to those already existing, but also to countries who are still in the process of defining such initiatives.
- Support and maintain varied and diverse forms of access to books for every European citizens through book-friendly policies, project funding, communication campaigns, awareness raising, etc.
- Support and encourage initiatives specifically aimed at fostering access to a diverse and inclusive range of books

Safeguarding cultural businesses: a call for thoughtful legislation in a fragile industry

Bookshops are under pressure from all angles. While we welcome legislation that's helpful to the book sector, any additional laws that could further impose on booksellers in the years to come should be carefully thought out to avoid a detrimental effect on an already fragile sector. Regulations that impact bookshops' contractual freedom, investment choices, operations or financial capacities should not be rushed. If regulations are not thoroughly considered, they risk driving many bookshops out of business by imposing even more constraints on the industry. We echo Commissioner Micallef's stance that "*culture should be able to pay rent*", given that, fundamentally, businesses like bookshops must be able to thrive and pay their staff – which they do so currently, but at increasingly tighter margins. New legislation should not make it even harder, given the already precarious situation. Culture workers should thrive, not merely survive.

A lot of bookshops are small, local businesses that need to evolve and invest to meet demand in a rapidly changing market. Any additional red tape or administrative burden imposed on cultural SMEs will always end up making it easier for the big online retailers to monopolise the industry and drive away fair competition (which is in part already a reality through companies such as Amazon, for instance). It is thus fundamental that:

- Legislations impacting cultural SMEs be clear and provide thought out outlines– given that often, SMEs are left waiting in a limbo not knowing how to properly apply certain European regulations and directives.

Existing rules be enforced, while new regulations be fair and balanced, thus protecting the interests of small businesses and providing a level playing field to ensure fair competition

II. ENSURING THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

Establish a data collection system for the cultural sectors

When it comes to policy, it is widely known that you cannot change what you cannot measure. For this reason, it is imperative that the cultural and creative sector can rely on

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a tool, such as an observatory, to collect measurements and data at a European level, which will ensure:

- Informed policy-making for the cultural sectors through providing robust, evidence-based data to guide cultural policy development and reform.
- Appropriate monitoring of trends and developments across sectors such as employment, funding, and digital transformation.
- Identifying gaps and challenges through highlighting inequalities and sectors lacking support or representation.
- Encouragement of collaboration through linking cultural data across sectors to support integrated policy responses.
- Dialogue facilitation and transparency among governments, institutions, and relevant stakeholders.

In a world where data has become a currency, it is essential for the cultural sector – and any sector that wants to remain competitive – to own, understand and master their own data. Funding opportunities for innovative projects that contribute to data collection, analysis and ensuring concrete business actions should thus imperatively find a dedicated place within the Culture Compass. To do so, the EU can already follow its own examples through observatories such as the European Audiovisual Observatory.

Opportunities for education and vocational training for cultural professionals

Bookselling is a career that demands not just a deep literary knowledge and passion, but an ability to run a business and everything it entails. At the crossroads of culture and retail, bookselling is a profession which requires a specific toolbox – and this must be reflected also in the educational offering to adequately prepare the next generation of booksellers so that they can effectively promote literacy and culture, whilst contributing to the local economy. While certain countries in Europe already offer specific bookselling training, many do not. Ensuring educational and vocational training for cultural professionals, specifically booksellers, would:

- Support sector sustainability, ensuring that booksellers adapt to evolving market trends and consumer behaviours.
- Promote cultural literacy and diversity, as trained professionals are better equipped to curate, promote, and distribute diverse literary content and thus enhancing cultural access and inclusion.
- Encourage innovation and entrepreneurship through fostering skills in digital marketing, inventory management, and event programming.
- Boost employment and economic resilience and competitiveness, as professional development increases employability and job satisfaction in the cultural sector, contributing to the broader creative economy.

This proposal comes at a very tough time for booksellers, as many of them report that they're struggling to pay their staff a decent wage, and that talented employees are leaving to pursue more lucrative career opportunities. Providing a formal education would contribute to reversing this worrying trend and strengthen bookselling as a

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desirable, long-term career path for the next generation. This is fundamental in providing fertile ground on which better conditions can be sowed, and therefore ensure the viability of the bookselling profession.

Empowering the sector through sustainability, inclusion, and digital innovation

Digitalisation has permeated every aspect of daily life, while the focus on sustainability in general has come on in leaps and bounds over recent years, and it is widely recognised that our future depends on building more inclusive and diverse societies.

The cultural sector—including the book industry—plays a vital leadership role in all these areas. In fact, the book sector has already taken significant steps forward and should be further encouraged and supported in doing so. Many booksellers, for example, have begun transitioning toward greener business models, they have invested in modern e-commerce solutions, and they curate large selections of inclusive and diverse books. There is a strong consensus and acknowledgement across the bookselling sector that:

- A balance between online and offline is a winning business model.
- Embracing environmental sustainability is essential.
- Promoting diversity in all its forms is part of a bookshop's DNA.

However, challenges remain. Technology is evolving at an ever-faster pace, sustainability, as well as diversity and inclusion matters, can be complex to navigate, and many businesses lack the knowledge or resources to get started. If booksellers are to keep pace with these changes, they must be equipped with the right tools, knowledge, and support so that no one is left behind. A new Culture Compass that overlooks the crucial topics of sustainability, inclusion, and digital transformation would be fundamentally incomplete and out of step with the pressing needs of our globalised world.

Pooling resources and knowledge together

Pooling resources and sharing knowledge across the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) is essential for building a stronger, more collaborative and resilient sector. Opportunities for open exchange, like the stakeholders dialogue organised as part of the new Culture Compass, are invaluable. For many professionals in the culture field who were present last 20th March, this was the first such exchange in at least decade – a rare chance to connect with peers from other CCIs and engage directly with the European Commission. This kind of forum should be held more regularly to foster mutual understanding and joint action.

In addition to more regular exchanges, CCIs stakeholders who are also beneficiaries from funding programmes like Creative Europe and Erasmus+, would greatly benefit from a centralised, user-friendly platform that maps existing projects and their respective objectives. While project results are publicly available, and the funding and tender portal allows for tedious search, a thorough overview of the full range of existing projects in the cultural sector remains limited. Improved visibility and communication, through a dedicated tool, would help organisations to:

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- Collaborate more effectively.
- Unlock new synergies.
- Pool, as well as exchange, knowledge and resources.
- Create further added value and foster cross-fertilisation.
- Strengthen cooperation and resilience across industries.

III. CULTURE AS A VECTOR

Acknowledging culture as a strategic pillar for the EU's future through appropriate funding

As the European Commission prepares to submit its draft proposal for the 2028-2034 MFF, and considering the current geopolitical context, the new Culture Compass represents a unique opportunity to raise awareness on the paramount importance of culture, and its spillover effects, specifically for the European Union's democracy, competitiveness, and security.

Culture touches our societies and communities at every level, from education to employment opportunities to politics. Investing in culture through dedicated funding strands and actions means investing in thriving local economies, a resilient ecosystem with tangible and intangible added value, as well as a competitive sector with a high return on investment in the long term.

At the same time, the Creative Europe programme makes up only 0.198% of the overall current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). While being among the smallest financial envelopes of the EU's MFF, Creative Europe is the only EU programme specifically dedicated to transnational cultural cooperation, and an inestimable opportunity for cultural operators to act beyond borders and to make Europe's culture thrive. **It is therefore essential that Creative Europe remains as a standalone programme, absolutely avoiding any merging or diluting.** It is also crucial to ensure that no budget cuts affect the programme in the coming years. This has become even more pressing in recent years which have been tremendously challenging for the CCIs, with rampant inflation, skyrocketing energy costs, and the complexities of both digitalisation and greening, which all affect the operational capacities of CCIs – bookshops especially, given their low profit margins and relatively high operational costs.

Culture for broader societal and global goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all UN Member States, provide a powerful, globally recognised framework that already offers concrete pathways for tackling some of today's numerous interconnected challenges. The European CCIs, including the bookselling sector, have already started to address many of these goals, either by looking at how they can be directly applied to the cultural sectors, or by using culture as a vector to achieve these goals – sometimes even both. Europe now has a unique opportunity to lead by example and embed the SDGs deeply into its cultural

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policy. By doing so, it can set a global benchmark for how the cultural sector—not just as a mirror to society, but as an active agent of change—can contribute meaningfully to sustainable, inclusive, and resilient futures.

Using the new Culture compass to further build on the canvas already provided by the SDG framework would firmly anchor culture as a strategic asset and concretely connect cultural policy with broader societal goals. As such, the compass should not merely acknowledge the SDGs but actively expand upon them, providing the European cultural sector with the support and space to lead the way in transforming these global ambitions into tangible local impact.

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