



EUNIC Siena Cultural Relations Forum 2017: A Brief Note

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From June 11-15, EUNIC in partnership with the University of Siena, convened the first Cultural Relations Forum at the Certosa di Pontignano. An international group of policy makers, academics, researchers and practitioners was invited to provide input into how H.E Mogherini's June 2016 *Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations*, (accepted by the European Council on May 23rd) might be implemented.

The Forum commenced in plenary session with Professor Nick Cull from the University of Southern California providing some definitional context around the terms cultural exchange, relations and cultural diplomacy. This was followed by a session dedicated to setting the conceptual framework with Diego Marani and Silvio Gonzato from the European External Action Service articulating the *Joint Communication* in more detail. They shared important background and the current state of EU policy thinking on an EU approach to international cultural relations emphasising the commitment to a mutuality and dialogue based a *strategic approach* (as distinct from a strategy) to Cultural Relations.

While an extremely valuable session for the non-initiated into the nuanced and intricate (circumlocutory even) language of Brussels, it became clear that a shared understanding of the nature and role of an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations is yet to be agreed beyond the inner policymaking core of that community. The proof of this came in the brainstorming sessions in the afternoon, on different regional neighbourhood country strategies. Again, while these were extremely interesting they had a premature feel to them, given the incomplete information on member state priorities in the regions under discussion.

The second day introduced specific areas for discussion. Richard Higgott (EL CSID/VUB) presented his thoughts on potential governance issues for a 'strategic approach' with responses from Diego Marani and Walter Zampieri (DG Education and Culture). It was clear that members of the assembled community had different ideas on what a governance structure would look like as the strategy rolls out over the next few years. While this is a work in progress, it was also clear that the Friends of the Presidency Group will be the strongest agent in any structure at this stage. But what is not yet clear is how this group will relate to the wider community—be it as a nurturer and inspirer or something more directive. This is yet to be determined. At this time EUNIC, notwithstanding what Higgott identified as the ambiguity of its role, represents the best hope as an interlocutor between the very different worlds of policy and practice.

Discussion then turned to civil and professional networks operating across the broad spectrum of 'culture'. Many NGOs and cultural networks are already active across the EU, wider Europe and beyond and can demonstrate the crucial role they already play. Participants heard perspectives from Professor Annick Shramme (ENCATC, Antwerp) on cultural networks, Gottfried Wagner (formerly ECF) on NGOs and Mickael Shultz (Swedish Perm Rep to EU) on how to engage with these essential collaborators in any broad cultural project. The discussion confirmed that this is an important area of future dialogue and/or collaboration and also an opportunity to consider alternative funding models.

In response to the group's many questions, and picking up on earlier discussion, Walter Zampieri explained in more detail the role and function of the Friends of the President group that has been

convened to guide the development of the strategic approach with member states. Both he and Diego Marani were at pains to stress that they saw its role as one of oversight and support rather than one of direction.

On the third day, focus turned to principles of monitoring and evaluation that might be incorporated into the strategic approach. The British Council's Emily Morrison explained their new approach to this area, leading to a lively discussion about the challenges of monitoring and evaluation in this sector. It was here particularly that the absence of a vision for success for the *Joint Communication* was felt. The (purposeful) absence of a centralised EU strategy or top down goals, was emphasised many times throughout the forum, however it is likely to cause issues for generating consistent and useful, comparative, learnings about success, particularly with multiple stakeholders and a potentially wide audience for the product (both research and activity) of the community. (Discussion over coffee proved interesting. While no one was denying its importance, it was argued by some that in practice poorly managed, excessively intrusive or unfocused M/E could be the tail that ends up wagging the cultural relations dog).

The group also heard from Paul Walton from the Anna Lindh Foundation. He provided several specific examples of how that organisation has engaged in cultural relations and dialogue, the *Young Arab Voices* project being an example of how collaboration (with the British Council) can deliver a higher impact program.

On the final day, EUNIC Global's Director Andrew Murray presented a summary of outcomes and next steps. Recommendations for future sessions were taken, which included making better use of the experiences of such a diverse group, through managed breakout and round table discussion. The EUNIC organisers had tried to secure wider representation than those present at the event. And, as much of the discussion came back to the necessary role of member states in driving the specifics of the intercultural agenda, it became clear that a broader representation of stakeholder countries would have added to discussion.

In addition to the formal program, several attendees presented their specific project work in optional breakfast and evening sessions including Professor J.P. Singh (Edinburgh), opening a discussion on case study methodologies, Richard Higgott and Virginia Proud on populism and cultural resilience and Pierangelo Iserna (Siena) presented his research on how others see Europe.

The development of a strategic approach to Cultural Relations within and beyond Europe is clearly an increasingly salient area of Europe's international relations more generally. An endeavour to take a strategic approach is to be welcomed but is not without its dangers. The balance in the relationship between the community of policy makers, civil society organisations and practitioners, given the different motivations of their respective endeavours, will always be a delicate one. Interests might usually, but not always, coincide. Whilst on the same spectrum, informal cultural interaction and formal cultural diplomacy as the ends of that spectrum, can be far apart, with 'cultural relations' sitting somewhere between. What the Siena Forum showed was that the relationship is important, at both the level of principle and at the more practical level of Europe's interactions with the wider world. It also told us that some form of *governance light* for developing the relationship is appropriate. To us, as outside observers, Siena was an important step in the necessary dialogue between cultural stakeholders, for the growth and success of future international cultural dialogue.

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