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Informing and Implementing European Cultural Policy:
Citizenship, Society and Subsidiarity in Malta

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Abstract

This paper considers Malta's membership experience and its relations with European initiatives and programmes through the lens of cultural policy. This area is a matter of subsidiarity in the EU. However, since the 1970s and increasingly since 2004, several actions, in the shape of policies and funded projects, have encouraged growing levels of cooperation between European institutions and stakeholders in member states including Malta. This chapter assesses ensuing policy and strategy changes in Maltese cultural practice in relation to the prioritisation shown by the EU to the sustainability of economic models. It argues that cultural policy at EU level has progressively emphasised the instrumental use of cultural projects for economic ends, influencing Maltese policy that has taken this prioritisation to heart. However, democratic deficits observed at governance levels at both European and national levels, coupled with structural failures, have compromised cultural expression, thus limiting the achievement of both social and economic goals.

Keywords:

Cultural policy,
European Union,
instrumentalisation,
Malta, subsidiarity

List of Acronyms

ACM: Arts Council Malta
CCI: Creative Cultural Industry
CSO: Civil Society Organisation
ECoC: European Capital of Culture
EU: European Union
IT: Information Technology
MCCA: Malta Council for Culture and the Arts
PCO: Public Cultural Organisation
UN: United Nations

1. Introduction: complexity and connectivity in the current Maltese cultural context

A key characteristic that has shaped Maltese society and its economy is its high and increasing population density (Worldometer 2023). National cultural identities are increasingly influenced by

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diversity and complexity. The territory seems to capture a 'cross-roads' mind-set that features insular as well as continental European value systems that have been formed by various factors. These include Malta's geo-strategic context, its political development and economic orientations as well as a significant shift from a hegemonic Catholic culture towards more liberal social agendas (Vella 2008, p.24). Furthermore, Malta's history, notably its colonial past, has shaped policy changes in many fields of governance, including the management of heritage, the arts and language use, legal and financial provisions in their regard and education (Mifsud Bonnici 2008, p.37). These policy areas related to, or addressed, by culture have featured significantly in the development of state administration (Mifsud Bonnici 2008, p. 259).

Since Malta acceded to the European Union (EU) in 2004, it has experienced a fast, steady rate of influx of people from different ethnic and cultural communities from all over the world. The increase in the use of the internet in recent years, particularly amongst younger members of the population, has contributed to the improvement of digital skills and expanded social networks and access to information (NSO 2023). This phenomenon developed further when restrictions were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased connectedness introduced novel forms of global community expression, including those related to gender identity and the cultural expression of marginalized groups in society. Applying policy, including that addressing culture, to this developing scenario has been challenging (Saliba 2022, p.80). This is true both at national and European levels (Serodes 2022, p.15).

2. An overview of EU cultural policy: aims, tensions, limitations

The practice of cultural policy in the EU largely applies neo-liberal economic frameworks to social agendas. This approach influences trans-national, national and intra-national contexts and abets the construction of a regional framework across the European space. It has been noted that, even in the cultural context, the European Union applies measures in support of freedom of movement of people, goods and services while addressing social aspects that may be problematic, such as accessibility, inequality, integration and disaggregation (Lebaron 2023). An underlying tension between economic and social concerns may be said to ensue. This will be explored further in this paper in the context of cultural policy. This paper will show that the emphasis on the instrumental use of cultural policy to achieve social and economic goals has not overcome structural failures at European and national levels, with limiting results.

2.1 The external dimension of European cultural policy

The tension identified above influences policies inside the European space as well as outside it in terms of internal and external areas of action (Cafruny 2016, pp. 9-27). Over the past few years, the EU has tried balancing a tough external stance, for instance through economic means, with a more collaborative approach, which has often blended economic aims with cultural means (Marsili and Varoufakis 2017, pp. 14-17). For example, the securitisation of its borders to the east and south to manage migration and warfare through financial incentives and restrictions, intelligence and military means, has been pursued concurrently with support for cooperative initiatives that include cultural perspectives (Marsili and Varoufakis 2017, p.19).

It is worth noting that the dual nature of the EU's identification with its cultural dimension is present in yet another form. On the one hand, it acknowledges, safeguards and draws economic benefit from the nurturing and projection of a set of inherent cultural values associated with the European dimension:

these include the open and diverse cultural expression of both traditional as well as innovative forms of characteristics belonging to particular communities and society at large. On the other hand, these efforts need to be balanced with a more compact, recognisable and hence, arguably more unitary, projection of what European values stand for on a global dimension. The development of a clear, standard and widespread practice that may emanate from the 'unity in diversity' vision remains elusive (Burri 2024, p.164).

Furthermore, the EU has engaged in a strategy for international engagement on a cultural basis in order to address the economic targets as had been set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy for growth and jobs (European Commission 2010). This use of 'soft power' aims to nurture trust and goodwill to further economic objectives (Nye 2004). For example, the spearheading and ensuing ratification of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2005 supported a vision whereby cultural diversity became an important tool towards achieving progress in international trade protocols on cultural grounds advantageous to the EU (Burri 2010). In such cases, the cultural and commercial prerogatives of individual member states have been defended more robustly and amply than would have been the case had exclusively individual action been pursued (Bernier 2012, p.101). For instance, France has pursued its interests through a pan-European effort that has reached out to Canada and African states in particular, with significant results (Bernier 2012, p.102; Littoz-Monnet 2007, p.21).

2.2 EU cultural policy: The internal dimension

The administration of a common cultural policy inside the European space is characterised by a number of challenges. To a large extent, these are related to the tensions that arise from the bloc's commitment to achieving social aims through economic means. The EU does not have a cultural policy that it develops and wields with any particular autonomy from its member states. Policy and ancillary legislation remain within national competence and jurisdiction. However, it is worth noting that this is not the case with the Digital Single Market and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive that is updated regularly in line with technological developments that combine important channels of cultural production, expression and consumption. The development and safeguarding of the European space in these areas allows a diverse yet shared cultural sphere to thrive on economic and legal provisions that allow for technical innovation, interoperability and the generation of economies of scale on a global dimension (Littoz-Monnet 2007, pp. 14, 27).

Therefore, while actively nurturing a common sense of identity through heritage, the arts and cultural expression, the EU respects the principle of subsidiarity in culture (Littoz-Monnet 2007, p.13). This is so because 'national cultures [...] have, of course, been the primary frame of reference in which cultural policy agendas have been elaborated in modern Europe' (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006, p. 3). The practice of subsidiarity ensures that member states retain national competence while allowing for internal, regional autonomous action where applicable, as in the cases of Austria, Belgium, Germany and Spain (Littoz-Monnet 2007, p.29). The EU Treaties require policy instruments to be as close as possible to citizens in accordance with the proximity principle addressed in Article 10(3) of the Treaties of the EU.

It may be noted that, on the one hand, the subsidiarity principle binding the various EU institutions, including the Council of the EU, allows sensitivities and competencies on the level of national identity and expression to support citizenship access and participation through actions that respect said competencies. However, on the other hand, the subsidiarity principle is prone to being abused. This

happens when national authorities mobilise resources both nationally as well as at European level to further nationalistic aims. Such instrumentalisation of culture may consist in the introduction of programmes and projects for political and propagandistic reasons, the discrimination of different groups by preferring some to others, and the assignation of the organisation of events for financial interest (Littoz-Monnet 2007, p.27). Therefore, results may often be mixed, on the one hand in part matching expectations set at the outset, while on the other hand contradicting the European values and misusing funds for nationalistic purposes.

The next section considers a number of programmes that act as tools in the implementation of European cultural policy. Since they are 'classified within those domains where the EU has only complementary competence', these initiatives are 'still rather limited' (Sassatelli 2006, pp. 27-28). Furthermore, the 'iron rule of unanimity at the same time testifies to the reticence of member states to delegate even small portions of sovereignty and has the effect of slowing down every initiative' (Sassatelli 2006, p.27). Together with the relatively small amount of funds dedicated to cultural programmes and the ensuing mitigated impact on a continental level, states seem to benefit in exercising national control when compared to Europe-wide actions that nevertheless are still sought after and supported for funding, collaboration and communication purposes (Littoz-Monnet 2007, p.27).

2.2.1 Programme initiatives and funding schemes

Politically, the EU has been supporting cultural expression with an aim towards both enlargement as well as deeper trans-frontier integration since the late 1970s. A number of initiatives supported through funding schemes focused on the experience and international profiles of artists, artist collectives, cities and their festivals and infrastructures, as well as the growing market for tourism that thrived on contemporary expression together with Europe's rich tangible and intangible heritage. A supranational competence in culture was included in the Treaties under Article 128, signed in Maastricht in 1992 and amended in Amsterdam in 1997 (Farrell et. al. 2002, p.160). This led to the launch of the *Kaleidoscope Programme* on cultural cooperation, *Raphael* on cultural heritage and *Ariane* on publishing and reading, while Culture 2000 restructured these programmes within a more streamlined structure (Sassatelli 2006, p.28).

The development of programmes may be described as a 'discursive journey' that contributed towards constituting in a formal way the cultural policy of the EU. One may note changes in the discourse applied in the different generations of cultural programmes. Nevertheless, they all fall in line with the preference for implicit policy and practice established before the entry into force of Article 128. The discourse has acted as a Trojan horse, enabling 'camouflaged' cultural conception and intervention, instrumentally promoting economic and political frameworks respecting market priorities. Significantly, the latest generation of programming, namely *Creative Europe*, has not pursued any shade of discourse, detectable previously, that may be interpreted as hinting towards the political construction of a 'people's Europe'; instead, it has deployed text that encourages the pursuit of the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (Valtysson 2018, p.12).

Currently, *Creative Europe* supports both culture and the audiovisual sectors. This programme followed on from the *Culture Programme* and the *MEDIA Programme* with a budget of €1.46 billion, or 9% higher than its predecessors (European Commission 2021). Furthermore, significant funds and means enable European collaboration embracing cultural practices to exist outside the cultural programmes, as

in the case of funds available to structural development, research and innovation as well as education.²

There are several factors that affect the success rate of the national authorities of the various member states. Some of these explanations have to do with the topography, size, proximity to adjoining territories and centrality versus peripherality in regard to funding and activity hubs. These factors are closely linked to varying degrees to infrastructure, communication services, transport and health services.. Furthermore, such factors are often related to demographic elements, including the size, diversity, aptitudes and education levels of the population. Differences that may be attributed to the number of years of membership do not suggest a consistent pattern. For instance, since 2004, central and eastern European countries, including the Balkan member states, have performed very well. This also holds true for non-EU participating states such as candidate or potential candidate countries including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Turkey as well as European Neighbourhood Policy countries. Of particular note is Croatia's success since joining the EU in 2013 (European Commission 2018). Overall, these countries have been significantly more successful than Cyprus and Malta. In spite of the former's traditional close relations with Greece, both islands seem to display signs of peripherality and relative isolation, while other states have generally been on a par with the older member states, with whom they have built networks and co-productions. The performance of islands that are not states varies, ranging from Sicily's poor uptake of funds to strong participation levels in Sardinia and some of the Spanish and Greek islands (European Education and Culture Executive Agency 2020).

One area in which Malta has excelled, particularly in relation to its size and financial capacity for absorption and co-funding, has been the use of European funds for the restoration of structures of historical importance, particularly the bastions and other buildings that date to the period of the rule of the Knights of the Order of St John in Malta from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries (Grech 2012).³

2.2.2 Flagship programmes

A number of funding programmes have had a particular impact on the interpretation, expression and development of cultural identities of Europe. Arguably, the main such programme since 1985, has been the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). A growing number of cities have been attracted to the programme for its economic and urban regeneration effects, but social inclusion through civic participation has also been targeted, thus addressing two of the main pillars of *EU Strategy 2020*. National authorities coordinating bids and the bidding cities show growing interest in the process. However, addressing these two priorities may be contradictory, and not easily reconcilable, for candidates to the ECoC title.⁴

Other programmes that foster a degree of shared European belonging are the *European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Prize* and the *European Union Prize for Literature*. At the launch

2 In relative terms, the Creative Europe programme for 2014-2020 still only represented 0.15 % of the overall EU budget, of which 31 % was earmarked for culture (Serodes 2022, p. 9).

3 Additional data was provided to the author in private communication from Heritage Malta and Restoration Directorate 2023.

4 Further research on this matter includes Immler, N. L. & Sackers, H. (2014). "(Re)Programming Europe: European Capitals of Culture: rethinking the role of culture", *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 44, No 1, pp. 3-29; Lähdesmäki, T. (2013) "Cultural activism as a counter-discourse to the European Capital of Culture programme: The case of Turku 2011", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16 No 5, pp. 598-619; O'Callaghan, C.(2012) "Urban anxieties and creative tensions in the European Capital of Culture 2005: 'It couldn't just be about Cork, like'", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 18 No 2, pp. 185-204.

of the European Cultural Forum in Milan in 2017, marking the official launch of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, it was noted that tangible and intangible heritage are 'the beating heart of Europe'. In the light of this, these initiatives support greater attention being paid to cultural identity and expression and how these may help foster European citizenship on a wider scale (Culture Relations Platform 2017). The relative success of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 in terms of member state participation and use of funds led the EU to develop its first set of policies addressing cultural heritage through a European Framework for states to follow up and implement (Saliba 2022, p.10).

3. The impact of the EU on cultural policy in Malta

Arguably, the most significant developments during the last two decades in Malta's cultural policy are traceable to EU membership. The key driver of this process was mainly related to reorganisation for the sake of efficiency, transparency, accountability and improved economic performance. Prior to membership, Malta had already engaged with the Council of Europe (2002) to implement legal and institutional changes to models of governance, including the establishment and the direct funding of state entities such as Public Cultural Organisations (PCOs). The PCOs became answerable to the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA) and subsequently to the Arts Council Malta (ACM). Currently, they are empowered to engage with commercial, non-governmental and civil society organisations (CSOs) for the purpose of programming, funding and capacity building.

Ten years later, the Creative Economy Working Group (2012), a temporary unit was set up jointly by the ministries responsible for finance and culture. The working group, designed a toolbox to improve governance, finance, as well as professionalisation and internationalisation in the sector. The ensuing set of initiatives aimed at nurturing the necessary economic, financial and employment contexts to enable the establishment of a Creative Cultural Industry (CCI) in line with government policy (Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism, Culture and the Environment 2011) and later the Arts Council Malta strategy (2015). Furthermore, the economic potential of heritage management and film production was enhanced in relation to a Foreign Direct Investment scheme for international cinematic services. Alongside this, many manifestations of performing, visual and community arts were supported on the twin basis of social and economic sustainability. These activities were also conducive toward boosting tourism to Malta.

3.1 Inter-relations between EU policy and the national level

This section considers some of the main links between EU and national policy in the areas of legislation and funding attached to national initiatives. The ensuing assessment addresses recent economic and social contextual changes in Malta.

3.2 The context before enlargement

Prior to enlargement, the capital city Valletta featured in a special edition of the celebration of European cities. At the end of the Cold War, in 1990, the ministers of culture of the European Community launched the European Cultural Month. This was 'intended to respond to the widespread interest in the European Cities of Culture initiative, especially in cities outside the Community, considering the political changes in eastern and central Europe (Resolution 90/C 162/01)' (Palmer-Rae Associates 2004, p.158). Valletta's efforts 'to develop a broad programme

with wide appeal' highlighting infrastructural change, while experiencing administrative problems, provided a preview of some of the difficulties experienced during the ECoC year in 2018 (Palmer-Rae Associates 2004, p. 158).

Subsequently, Malta experienced a flow of changes in policy, legal frameworks and competences as well as funding mechanisms linked to preparations for EU membership. Generally, policy matters are a competence of the state; however, in Malta's case, a small cohort of experienced and inspired academics, researchers and practitioners supporting state officials, nurtured the basis of a framework that would encourage cultural management practices of an international standard to be established in Malta. Compliance with European standards led to better opportunities for investment through funding and cooperation.⁵

3.3 Supporting national policy

As noted, European policy expertise helped inform important changes in national policy. The guidance of the Cultural Committee of the Council of Europe led to the writing of two key pieces of legislation in 2002 (Council of Europe 2002). The first was the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts Act, establishing a cultural agency that is nominally at arm's length from government to inform policy and manage funds to stimulate the economic and social dimensions of cultural participation. The second was the Cultural Heritage Act, establishing the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage to operate autonomously from government while monitoring and safeguarding national heritage. The national agency for the management of heritage, Heritage Malta, was also set up, together with the Malta Centre for Restoration in collaboration with the University of Malta (Mifsud Bonnici 2008).⁶

3.4 Policy implementation in the light of EU membership

In 2006, the Creative Economy Working Group, consisting of two cultural professionals and two economists, was set up by the ministry for finance to help establish an infrastructure to support the private sector's stake in cultural development through economic activity (Creative Economy Working Group 2012). Up to then, and to a large degree, cultural activity in the fields of performance, heritage and tourism depended on the state and the Church authorities for organisation, patronage and funding.

In the last decade, in spite of the various efforts described in this paper, cultural activity in Malta seems to have, in the main, reverted to this model. Greater dependence on the state, though less so on the Church, has allowed for significant political influence in the organisation of otherwise commercially attractive events like concerts, festivals and both local and national festivities. This

5 Policy and research documents that provide background to and represent these developments include Cremona, V.A. (1995) "A Cultural Policy for Malta. A Working Document", Ministry of Education Malta; Ministry of Education Malta (1999) "Malta and the Arts. Perspectives for the New Millenium. Proceedings of a National Conference" (eds) Camilleri, P. & Gatt, P.; Azzopardi, M. (2001) "Cultural Policy in Malta. A Discussion Document", Ministry of Education Malta; Kelly, P. (2004) "Cultural Policy in Malta. A critical analysis of the state of culture in Malta, its new cultural policy and the appraisal of this policy by the Council of Europe". Unpublished dissertation MA in European Cultural Planning, De Montfort University, Leicester.

6 The Malta entry to the *Compendium: Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe* provides a review of cultural policy development in Malta: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/?id=25> (accessed 15 April 2023).

may lead to serious limitations and the failure of the effective progress achieved in the early years of EU membership. In the film sector, the diversion of financial support from the independent sector to productions managed by the state, has led to the discontinuation of financial support to the well-established Valletta Film Festival, while state agencies such as the Valletta Cultural Agency and the Malta Film Commission enjoyed increased funding to support the production and screening of largely American cinema. In the performing and community arts, PCOs successfully compete against CSOs for national funding as well as awards (Xuereb 2020). In heritage, recent legislation has allowed Heritage Malta to be considered as a beneficiary of guardianship deeds. This otherwise valuable measure has allowed the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage to grant more of the management and fundraising related to sites on behalf of the state to Heritage Malta. Thus, the national agency is effectively competing with CSOs for more funds in what has become an exhaustive, long-drawn out bureaucratic process overseen by the Lands Authority (Superintendence of Cultural Heritage 2022).

In the years following EU membership, Malta started addressing matters of policy, legislation and funding in terms of its nascent CCIs. In 2011, a cultural policy was published following seminal work by practitioners and researchers, most notably by Vicki Ann Cremona (1995) and Mario Azzopardi (2001), Unfortunately, in both instances, they were not owned, championed or implemented by the ministry for education that had commissioned them. The cultural policy launched by the ministry for culture referred directly to EU efforts towards the development of a single market for cultural industries. While prioritising the economic value of culture and creativity, the small, competent drafting team also highlighted the value of the social dimension of cultural participation that was accompanied by an emphasis on the need to professionalise the sector (Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism, the Environment and Culture 2011).

As noted earlier, in 2015 the MCCA was restructured into ACM. This followed the election of the *Partit Laburista* (Labour Party) to government thanks to, in part, the promotion of wider access to culture and a strong social equality agenda (Bartolo 2015). As happened with respect to society in general, the social agenda was sustained by significant financial interests and a strong economic drive. ACM introduced further funding streams to support local and international artists and promote accessibility, professionalisation, international collaboration and export. This development reflected the greater attention that EU policy gave to the economic potential of culture.

On a European level, culture gained further recognition as a vector for economic regeneration following the economic and financial crisis of 2008. Culture addressed the key areas of economic development and the generation of employment through investment in digitalisation, innovation and information technology (IT), as well as the social agenda and cultural diplomacy. National policy reflected European objectives particularly with respect to policy and legislation, strategic funding as well as programmes and initiatives.

3. 4. 1 Policy and legislation

In the first part of the twenty-first century, more attention is being paid to the need to engage with wider, more diverse audiences for various reasons. The priority of policy-makers has been to increase audiences, diversify cultural content, increase accessibility and encourage citizens' participation in order to justify financial investment in the cultural sector. Culture has had to

assert and maintain its relevance as a policy area through initiatives that have sought to be popular, meaningful and innovative by also making use of IT (Council of the European Union 2014).

3. 4. 2 The social agenda: curtailed achievements

National and EU policy have coincided in their more subtle and instrumental use supporting the social agenda. Diversity, inclusion and the integration of migrants have featured prominently. The case for cultural funding has addressed less intrinsic and artistic purposes and more the social purpose (Hewison 2014). At an EU and national level, tensions surfaced between assessing the social impact of culture on the one hand, and on the other hand measuring the impacts of economic targets met through culture.

This development is related to the socially progressive agenda promoted by government in Malta over the past decade, in the cultural context particularly in relation to the repeal of censorship laws (Bondin 2015). Nominally, the abolishment of censorship has strengthened artistic expression, limiting the risk of incurring criminal charges for the vilification of religion and morality. This openness chimes in with the general disposition of the EU. However, the ubiquitous role of government in the supply of cultural and audiovisual products and services has led to the numbing, connivance or silence of creatives who have adapted to and gained from this context who would otherwise be forced to struggle to survive should they be more vociferous about the nepotistic use of public funds and operational tools (Cachia 2023, p. 292). The nurturing of a sense of calm and tranquillity in the public sphere is pervasive and more influential (Leone Ganado 2017). Furthermore, cultural policy that supports members of society within the creative community may also be used to justify or at least ignore lack of action in other social areas where impacts are felt outside the realm of the arts. In Malta, as elsewhere in Europe, state censorship, for instance applied to the media or education, remains problematic (Otto 2022).

3. 5 Cultural strategy for economic growth: mitigated success

Through the ACM's *Create 2025 Strategy* (Arts Council Malta 2022), that succeeded the *Create 2020 Strategy*, Malta is implementing national and EU cultural policy aiming at economic growth through the attainment of social goals. The strategy aims to stimulate economic development by strengthening further the conditions for the sustainability and growth of micro creative industries that encourage innovation and professionalisation. In a progressively more overt way, the aim of EU policy to maximise the contribution of the CCIs to the European economy is evident. In parallel, ACM's strategy is to sustain its investment in business development accompanied by tailor-made mentoring, as well as supporting creatives to wean themselves off public funding by accessing alternative sources of funding, including EU funds. Individuals and artist collectives are encouraged to seek closer collaboration with the private sector. Many challenges can hamper the strategy. These include the lack of necessary expertise required to provide advice, the reticence of the private sector to invest in culture, the lack of political will to support the independent cultural sector and the realignment of priorities and the subsequent diminishing and redirected resources by both state and private funders (Times of Malta, 2023).

Furthermore, in the light of the pressures transposed by banks and potential private patrons to creative set-ups due to greater compliance requested by international financial authorities to respect transparency and accountability, the bureaucratic burden and administrative

responsibility of CCIs has exponentially increased, with little professional support and sometimes coherence supplied by authorities (Lasys 2022). The latest round of *Creative Europe* and other EU funds has reduced the administrative burden imposed on applicants. This was done, for instance, by reducing the extent of financial documents required and by abolishing timesheets. This shift has not yet been reflected in financial requirements imposed by national funders on local cultural project partners, not even by institutions that regularly access EU funds such as the University of Malta. One wonders whether the EU trend will eventually be reflected in Malta as well (European Commission 2023).

The economic principle is closely knit to the social dimension by means of objectives aiming to include wider and more diverse segments of society in culture and the arts, thereby supporting social integration and wellbeing with the accrual of economic gains. Herein lies a key challenge to the implementation of cultural policy: demographic data changes constantly and the population it represents is not simply waiting for a product or service to consume or engage with. People tend to occupy themselves with a number of activities that cultural ones may need to complement rather than compete with. The most recent manifestation of this phenomenon was the change in behavioural patterns related to entertainment observed since the relenting of restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some areas, like cinema, have not reverted to what they were before lockdown. Indeed, this sector has been particularly negatively impacted and is only experiencing a slow recovery after many months (European Audiovisual Observatory 2023).

4. A critical reflection of the economic prioritisation of culture

Ironically, the emphasis that the EU makes on the principle of subsidiarity, together with its emphasis on the economic value of culture, as reflected in national policy, have somewhat compromised European cultural diversity by hollowing out those aspects of cultural life that have not been conducive to bureaucratisation and commercialisation. As argued elsewhere (Xuereb 2020), the alignment of national policy to European priorities has favoured a kind of postcolonial practice through the exploitation of subsidiarity that has enabled further control by government elites of cultural expression through policy and economic means. Part of the price paid is the erosion of the critical approach that can support the role of cultural and social actors in society and their impact on other areas of society.

4.1 The prioritisation of economics

Developments observed in the cultural sector initiated by the state raise a number of concerns. National developments have followed European ones in promoting the economic and financial re-orientation of the sector with a bias towards commercialisation and commodification. The further diversification and accessibility of population sectors interacting with the cultural field has led to a sharpened focus on the economic viability of CCIs and ancillary activity.

Policy and strategy trends have supported this shift. Stakeholders consulted on their drafting over the past few years tended to stress the dominance of economic factors including the financial stability and usefulness of culture and the arts in Malta. For instance, a growing awareness of the prioritisation of the measurement and accountability of the cultural sector, at the expense of the

educational or governance aspects, has been experienced and expressed.⁷

Therefore, cultural entities have supported the European perspective of prioritising the economic aspects of cultural activity, including employment. In so doing, the instrumental approach to creativity and the arts including the quantitative measurement of impacts has been reinforced. Rather than being challenged, this trend has been strengthened by the increase in the number of funding streams that nominally aim to nudge independent cultural organisations towards less dependence on state funds and the nurturing of an entrepreneurial spirit that seeks innovation in the arts (Pulè 2018). However, the overall result has led to acquiescence towards state support which discourages financial independence and encourages self-censorship, evoking the Foucauldian concept of how self-governance grows and stifles actions that go against convention. Cultural expression that challenges the political structures is significantly limited and often prevalent in the printed word, because it is less expensive to produce than other art forms, and relatively rendered innocuous in the light of the low levels of reading at the national level.⁸

Cultural actors have recognised the importance of generating self-sufficiency through sound management and the sourcing from a diversity of funding streams. However, accessing EU funds remains challenging for many collectives and small organisations as well as national organisations as shown by the relatively low participation and success rates over the past twenty years (Eurostat 2021).

4. 2 Conclusion and recommendations

As noted, the principle of subsidiarity that applies to the cultural sector in Europe, meant to respect national competences, comes up short of fulfilling its positive aims towards supporting the flourishing of cultural diversity when compared with the space which it allows for economic priorities to prevail within national and transnational contexts. In spite of gradual changes, Europe still operates a system of ‘direct grants to various cultural actors, operating mainly at the local level, [that] is thus at the heart of the EU cultural policy’ (Sassatelli 2006, p. 28). A centralised system whereby the European institutions exert greater direct control on the management of cultural expression in member states is not called for. It is not envisaged either. However, one may consider whether cultural policy may be ‘re-framed in a context in which national objectives were no longer self-evidently the ‘natural’ priority?’ (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006, p. 3).

Nevertheless, greater coordination at the European level does not guarantee a shift from an instrumental to a more cooperative and diverse model of cultural activity. What may be needed is a shift towards a wider, more inclusive collaborative process that is centred on citizens and their communities, including new Europeans who settle on the continent, its peripheries and islands, particularly in the Mediterranean, through migration. Such a model may build on current positive practice and further support intercultural understanding, mutual inclusivity and integration that may contribute to a stronger sense of European identity (Xuereb 2011).

Deeper cultural affinity may in turn bring about greater social engagement rooted in humanistic and value-laden approaches towards social regeneration through economics. Enabling innovative practice through research and digitalisation may further address the changing demographic and

7 Personal impressions gleaned by author while participating and contributing to consultation processes 2019-2022.

8 These and other issues at the heart of the perceived neutering of the cultural sector were discussed at an insightful debate between writers and literary critics at the 2018 edition of the National Book Festival. The debate is accessible here, in Maltese: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BUHf6prNb4&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1xSg8yUM-Kqd0RtoUB3wQ5ocM2_oeQ7VbdA7tBEpl6mDCxftmsSom-Zrw (accessed 15 April 2023).

social priorities of European citizens and newcomers in order to maintain and bolster diversity as an asset to Europe, rather than as a threat that necessitates control. Common efforts towards this aim may be 'informed by a commitment to the protection of the 'common cultural heritage', together with the promotion of better knowledge and awareness of the cultures of the European peoples [...] whose variety [...] is the richness of Europe' (Sassatelli 2006, p. 28). In spite of the challenges outlined briefly, the Treaties' article addressing culture allows for further commonalities of heritage to be brought 'to the fore'. Recent trends manifest efforts at going beyond conceiving of European heritage as a rich yet finite shrine of past identities instilling a sense of European identity today. Current trends enable a European discussion that explores the constantly changing framework for present and potential common identities (Valtysson 2018, p. 29).

In Malta's case, particularly during the past few years, various actions discussed in this paper have boosted cultural activity at the heart of many communities in Malta and Gozo. However, a growing level of this practice has reverted to a reliance on the intervention of the state, both financially as well as politically. This tendency has encouraged political influence to fester in the management of what could be independent or commercially viable practices. This may be described as one of the major and most pervasive and influential limitation to the development of the creative field in twenty years of European membership.

The period of EU enlargement has coincided with important developments having taken place in European cultural policy and practice. The impact on member states' legislative and financial structures has been significant. The framework of national policy is traceable to the European dimension, in spite of the various challenges and shortfalls that persist. Some of the main limitations identified stem from a dearth of political will to implement measures and tap into, and mobilise, resources in order to achieve more widespread and impactful results.

A significant failure in the recent and current implementation of cultural policy is visible in its limited impact in interacting with, and influencing, other policy areas in a way that reflects a wide-angled approach to the field that allows it to acknowledge the social and economic diversities of contemporary Europe. A more inclusive approach towards culture may support the EU to address levels of disaffection with mainstream politics and inefficiencies in social dynamics that affect various areas of society. Related challenges that may be addressed include the disaggregation of different populations within the EU, somewhat loose identity bonds across the European space and disaffection towards mainstream political projects. Frictions between different positions may be addressed through a deep reflective process that addresses diversity, champions dialogue and processes of continuous, mutual change and exchange in order to help foster a sustained exercise towards social development that is culturally sound and congruent to contemporary Europe (Marsili and Varoufakis 2017, p. 75).

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