

2025

BERLIN

CONFERENCE 2025

New Paths to Democracy: Cultural Participation as
an Instrument of Democratic Resilience



November 6-7
2025

Report & Conclusions



Pre-Conference Networking Session

Ahead of the official opening of the Berlin Conference 2025, an internal networking session took place at the European House Berlin. Representatives of European networks, cultural organizations, foundations, and civil society initiatives gathered to strengthen cooperation and align perspectives for the days ahead. After words of welcome by **Judit Hercegfalvi**, Head of the European Parliament Liaison Office in Germany, two short thematic inputs followed.

Christian Mangold, European Parliament

In his remarks, **Christian Mangold**, Director General for Communication of the European Parliament, stressed that culture is a key pillar of democratic values, especially amid polarization and disinformation. Cultural participation strengthens social cohesion and is closely linked to higher civic engagement: *“Where culture is free, democracy remains alive.”* He highlighted the crucial role of cultural infrastructures in times of crisis and the ability of art to make complex issues tangible. Festivals, artists, and cultural institutions serve as essential spaces for democratic dialogue. Mangold also underscored the relevance of cultural diplomacy, supported by EU programmes such as Creative Europe and the European Capitals of Culture, which enable cities to act as democratic laboratories.



Elena Polivtseva, Culture Policy Room

In her contribution, **Elena Polivtseva**, independent researcher and co-founder of Culture Policy Room, presented the study *Festivals in Context - The Role of the Arts in Local Cultural Policy*, published by the European Festivals Association within the EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions initiative. She introduced the central questions guiding the research: how festivals are perceived by local cultural policies today, what municipalities expect from them, and which roles festivals are being asked to assume in their communities. Polivtseva highlighted that the study examines how festivals respond to these expectations and whether they are prepared to contribute to shaping new paths for democratic engagement. Her input situated festivals within the broader context of arts and democracy, opening a discussion on their potential role in local cultural policy and their capacity to support participatory and community-oriented approaches.

Berlin Conference 2025

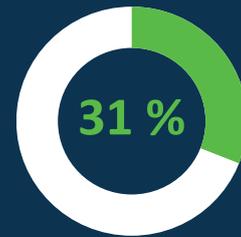
“Culture is more than just friendly exchange”

The Berlin Conference 2025 brought together cultural leaders, policymakers, and civil society representatives to explore how Europe can become more culturally resilient. Over two days, participants reflected on cultural participation as a source of collective strength in times of crisis and change.

Day 1 opened with a musical performance followed by a keynote on autonomy, resilience, and identity, setting the stage for dialogue on how culture can bridge divides and make democracy tangible.

Day 2 focused on exchange and collaboration through the formats of a Long Table Conversation and workshops, concluding with a shared call to see culture as a strategic force for Europe’s democratic future.

Over **600 participants** attended over the two days of the conference.



31% of participants were under the age of 35.



Participants came from **31 different countries**, representing more than **230 different organizations**, initiatives, and political representations.





Day 1

Words of Welcome

In her opening remarks, **Nele Hertling**, founding member of the A Soul for Europe Strategy Group, highlighted the enduring mission of the Berlin Conference: *“to convey to politics that the power of culture is indispensable in resisting attempts to destroy democracy.”* She noted that this conviction has guided this conference series from the very beginning in 2004, emphasizing that cooperation and persistence remain vital for building lasting bridges between culture and politics across Europe.



Opening with Music

The Berlin Conference opened with *“Klingende Flüsse aus aller Welt,”* performed by the youth ensemble **Mit-Mach-Musik Brandenburg**. Through musical pieces inspired by different cultures and regions, the performance highlighted how shared artistic expression can build connections across borders.

Mit-Mach-Musik was founded in 2015 in the wake of the influx of Syrian refugees and demonstrates, without a single word, what art is capable of in terms of connecting people and creating a sense of community. It offered an uplifting start to the conference and underscored the role of culture as a bridge within diverse communities.





Keynote Speech by Olesya Khromeychuk

In her keynote speech, **Olesya Khromeychuk**, Director of the Ukrainian Institute London, drew on Ukraine's experience to reflect on what it truly means to have to be "*ready for war*." Using the metaphor of an emergency bag filled with essential items, she described *identity*, *resilience*, *sustenance*, *autonomy*, and *security* as fundamentals not only for survival, but for sustaining democracy itself. Her reflections reached far beyond the Ukrainian context, offering a powerful reminder that collective strength, cultural awareness, and solidarity form the core of democratic resilience. Her brilliant speech lent an urgent and thoughtful tone to the entire conference, making it clear how much the war in Ukraine serves as both a warning signal and a portent for the rest of Europe.

The slightly shortened keynote speech can be found here. [→](#)



Panel Conversation



The opening panel of the Berlin Conference 2025, excellently moderated by **Susann Worschech**, European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), highlighted how closely democracy, culture, and social resilience are intertwined in Europe. Moldova's Ambassador **Aureliu Ciocoi** recalled how his country, despite political marginalization and enormous challenges, including hosting Ukrainian refugees equal to one-third of its population, continues to uphold democratic self-determination while grappling with the risks of social media. From a Polish perspective, Ambassador **Jan Tombiński** emphasized the identity-shaping power of culture, which provides hope in both Poland and Ukraine. **Paweł Potoroczyn**, Director of the European Capital of Culture Lublin 2029, stressed that culture reveals truth and can have political impact.



As Deputy Director of the German Museum of Technology Berlin, **Menekse Wenzler** pointed to growing anti-democratic attacks on the cultural sector and underlined the responsibility of cultural institutions to serve as trustworthy spaces and guardians of heritage. **Peter Kettner**, Head of the Division Strategy and Planning of Cultural, Urban and Sports Diplomacy at the German Federal Foreign Office, warned against the instrumentalization of culture by authoritarian regimes and called for cultural and sports diplomacy to strengthen democratic resilience. **Léonor Guy**, EU Representative at the Embassy of France in Berlin, drew attention to European initiatives against disinformation. The panel's shared message was clear: **Democracy depends on education, exchange, and active participation. It thrives not on observation, but on action - and culture is one of its strongest tools.**



Day 2



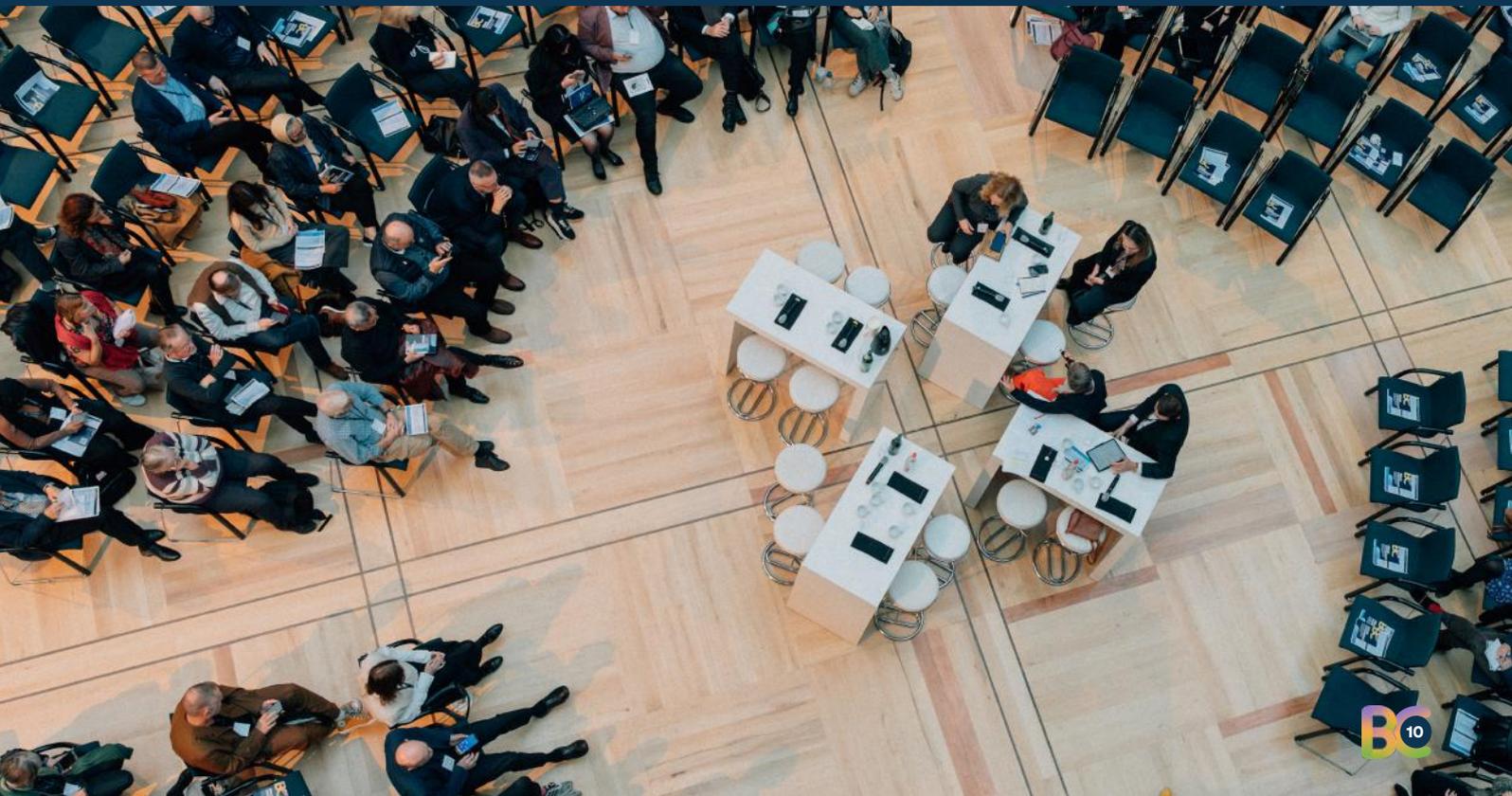
Day 2 of the Berlin Conference connected reflection with practice, guiding participants through a series of collaborative formats. It began with a Long Table Conversation, where diverse voices from across Europe exchanged perspectives on democracy, resilience, and cultural participation. This was followed by thematic workshops exploring how culture strengthens civil society, navigates conflict, and fosters inclusion. The day concluded with a plenary discussion linking the workshop outcomes to concrete civic and political strategies, reaffirming culture’s role as a driver of democratic renewal in Europe. The aim was to ask ourselves how we can learn from the upheavals caused by the war against Ukraine, how Western Europe can learn from the democratic dynamics of Eastern Europe, and how we can find a firm common ground in a time when words and values are losing strength. To this end, both the appropriate formats and the relevant content should be identified.

Long Table Conversation

The Long Table Conversation, held under the title *Art as a Bridge - How Culture Makes Democracy Tangible*, invited participants to become the panelists themselves. The participants present and the open format encouraged shared responsibility and a collective exploration of how cultural practice makes democratic values visible, lived, and resilient. The panel was moderated by **Marion Döring**, Member of the Board at Wim Wenders Foundation.

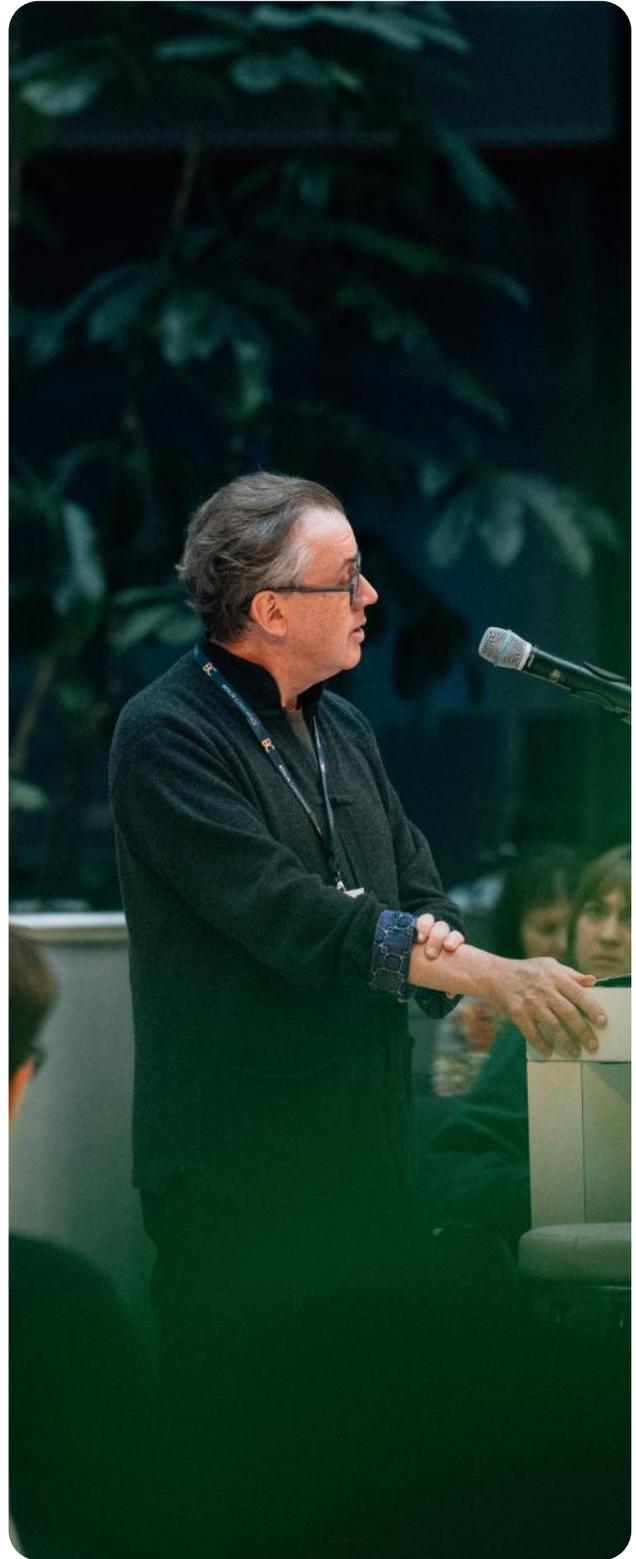
To break the ice and set the tone of the Long Table Conversation, composer and festival director **Sir Jonathan Mills** started emphasizing that Europe’s democratic resilience grows from lived cultural encounters rather than abstract declarations, reminding participants that “*culture is not a luxury. It is a civic necessity - a living rehearsal of democracy.*” Mills highlighted that formats like the Long Table Conversation mirror the spirit of Europe’s festivals, where people meet, listen, and “*bind difference into shared purpose.*”

The speech can be found here. [→](#)





Through its open format and diverse voices, the session showed how culture enables people to practice democracy directly - through dialogue, shared space, and collective responsibility. The open format also demonstrated that one must stand up and speak in order to be heard. Therefore, there were always free seats available for the audience on the central podium.



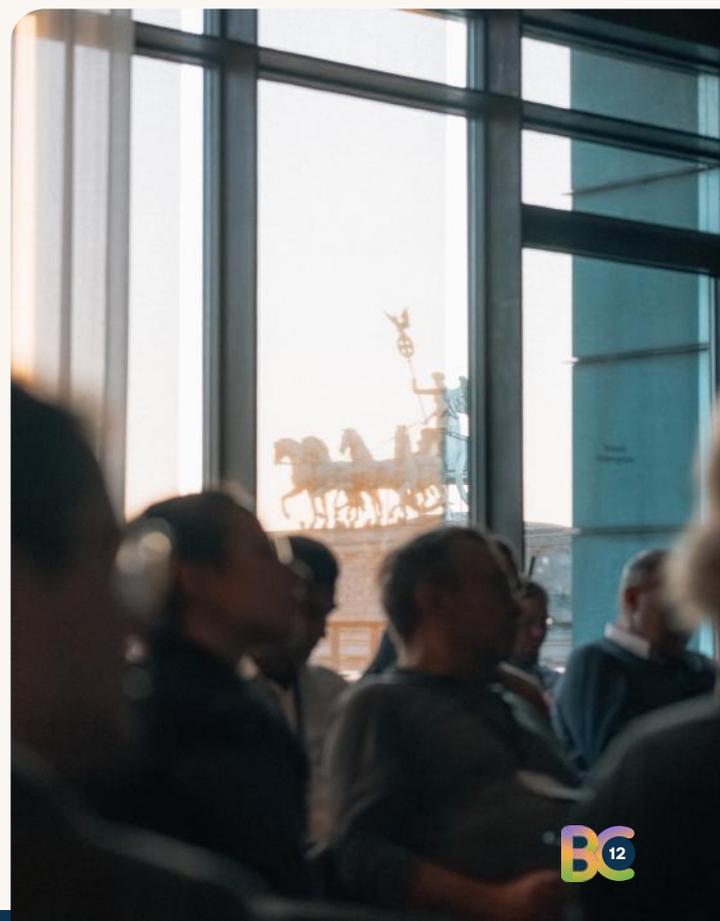


WORKSHOPS

Five parallel workshops invited participants to explore how arts and culture can foster democratic resilience across different contexts. From examining lessons of freedom and civic participation to navigating cultural divisions and responding to conflict, the sessions offered diverse perspectives from across Europe. A joint workshop by the European Forum Alpbach, the Charlemagne Prize Foundation, and Stiftung Zukunft Berlin (SZB) further connected cultural dialogue with political practice. Together, the workshops turned reflection into concrete ideas for strengthening Europe's democratic fabric.

Workshop 1

The workshop “The Task of Freedom – What East-Central European Voices Can Teach Us Today,” led by writer and novelist **Marko Martin**, drew on themes from his latest book *Freiheitsaufgaben*. It underscored that freedom loses its value where it is taken for granted, while in authoritarian contexts it must be fought for. Participants highlighted the need to strengthen democratic resilience through new narratives, intergenerational leadership, and solidarity across Europe. Integrating East-Central European and Ukrainian perspectives more deeply into education, politics, and media was seen as essential. The discussion concluded that Western Europe can learn from the East's lived experience of struggle, fragility, and perseverance in defending democracy.



Workshop 2

The workshop “Europe at the Heart of Civil Society – Democracy and Cultural Participation,” led by **Anke Fischer**, Head of Education at Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, and **Kian Jazdi**, Artistic Co-director of Liedstadt Festival, used the Elbphilharmonie’s education program as an example to show how cultural participation can be placed at the core of democratic practice and how this approach can serve as a model for making Europe visible beyond established cultural bubbles, relating to integral aspects of Berlin’s Europe Strategy in building Europe from within society.



Participants concluded that genuine inclusion, socially meaningful artistic experiences, and long-term community engagement are essential to inspiring more people to take part in European conversations. Such approaches not only broaden the audience for European ideas but also help strengthen democratic structures at the heart of civil society.

A key outcome was the recognition that cultural institutions strengthen democracy when they overcome interpretive hierarchies, lower access barriers, and reach people who otherwise have little contact with European discourse. The program’s holistic approach with its overlapping focuses, excellency in art, community outreach, amateur ensembles, inclusive formats, and a focus on “Music for all,” demonstrates how new multipliers and networks can emerge when cultural participation is understood as a shared, civic practice, hence as a core practice of democracy.





Workshop 3

The workshop “When Culture Divides and Unites,” led by **Giorgi Mjavanadze** and **Nodar Rukhadze** from Georgia’s Shame Movement, examined how cultural identity becomes a site of both mobilization and manipulation in democratic struggles. Drawing on Georgia’s long history of Russian occupation and influence, the speakers showed in painful ways how cultural symbols, flags, dances, and artistic heritage are often the first targets of propaganda, noting that *“Russia’s first attack is always against culture.”* Participants learned how the Shame Movement, founded in 2019, mobilized an unprecedented number of young people around democratic and pro-European values, despite repression, arrests, and systemic propaganda. The session concluded with a call for stronger European support, political, cultural, and security-related, to help Georgia safeguard its sovereignty and democratic identity. As painful as the examples and descriptions from Georgia were, they made it clear that the same thing could happen in Moldova, the Baltic states or Poland, and in some cases already has.



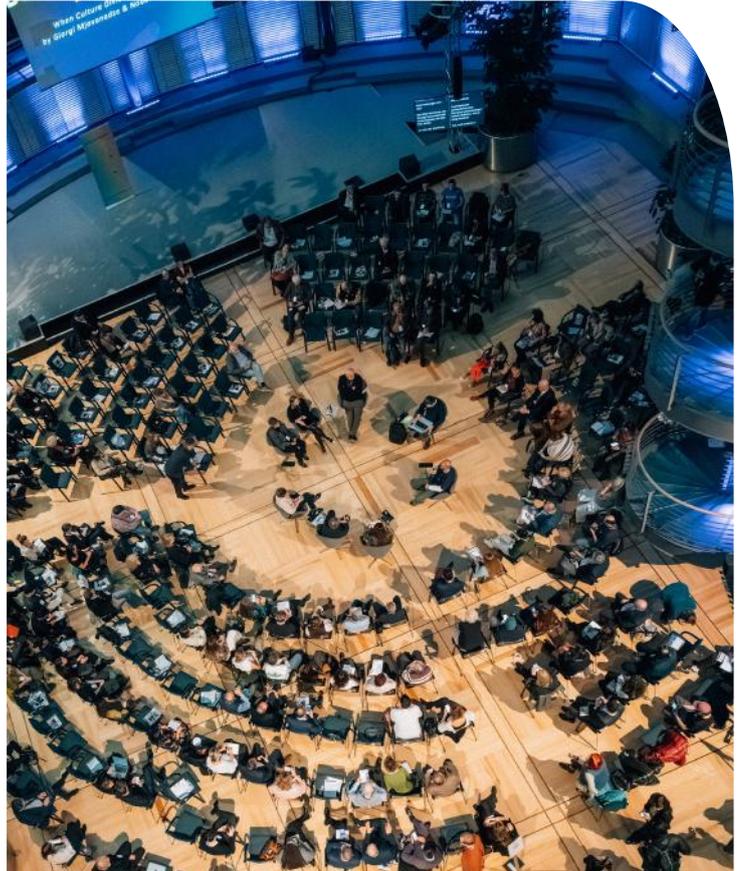


Workshop 4

The workshop: “Facing Conflicts - How Do the Arts and Culture as Part of Civil Society Respond,” led by **Dr Friederike Landau-Donnelly**, Visiting Professor of Social and Cultural Geography at Humboldt University of Berlin, explored how arts and culture can navigate and respond to the many-layered conflicts of our time - from geopolitical crises to social inequality, and ecological breakdown.



Grounded in political and agonistic democratic theory, participants reflected on how to distinguish between different forms of conflict and discussed the potentials and limitations of collaboration within the cultural field when divisions cannot be fully resolved. The session encouraged a nuanced understanding of conflict as an inherent, and potentially constructive, part of democratic life. Determining whether a conflict actually exists, who perceives it as such, and understanding how well the society in question can deal with conflicts is therefore always a basic prerequisite for resolving conflicts.



Presentation of the Workshops Results

Working in workshops means "small groups". Each workshop had around 40 to 60 participants. The challenge was to bring the workshops' results into the plenary session. Representatives from each group briefly presented their most important findings and questions. Their reflections illustrated how the topics of the day could be translated into practical questions in different contexts.

Reflection by Sir Jonathan Mills

Sir Jonathan Mills offered a short personal summary of these inputs, distilling them into three guiding questions to be addressed to both civil society networks and policymakers. These questions served as a final check of the conference's core intention: whether the discussions of the past two days can meaningfully inform daily democratic practice and future collaborative work.

1

Do these reflections resonate with your work?

2

Can they be translated into your daily practice?

3

How can these insights be carried forward into concrete action?

From Discussion to Action

Discussion of the Results with Representatives from Civil Society Initiatives

Nicolas Bertrand

representing *A Soul for Europe*, reflected on how quickly Europe's cultural landscape has shifted - from digitalization to geopolitical pressures - noting that culture and education are becoming increasingly intertwined. The re-emergence of the term "*cultural war*," he warned, shows how urgently culture must be defended today.

Haris Pašović

representing the *European Festivals Association*, reminded participants not to overlook Europe's own recent tragedies: "*Bosnia was the worst atrocity in Europe since the Second World War*." He proposed that future editions of the Berlin Conference be held in other European cities such as Sarajevo, Cluj or Naples in order to incorporate a broader spectrum of European experiences into the overall discussion of this conference series.

Leon Seydel

representing the *European Forum Alpbach*, highlighted the need to co-create culture with younger generations: "*Don't expect young people to only listen and learn - turn the table and develop culture with them*." He rightly pointed out that for many young participants today, "*culture also means Netflix or the Eurovision Song Contest*."

Christine Dietrich

representing the *Charlemagne Prize Foundation*, emphasized the political importance of cultural translation: "*We need to question our own bubbles. Complexity must be made understandable - otherwise we will never reach the people who feel left out*."





Benjamin Sibille

representing the *Service Civique Européen*, spoke on behalf of young volunteers working across Europe: “*The main takeaway for them is the need to remain connected - culture is a powerful vessel for this.*” He underlined that what happens on the ground resonates strongly with the discussions in Berlin.

Aisha

representing the *Berlin Parliament of Disabled People*, called for visibility and inclusion: “*We people with disabilities are simply too rarely present.*” She described cultural participation as a path to empowerment and community.



Plenary

From Discussion to Action

In the closing plenary, policy makers from local, national, and European level reflected on the conference findings and how to translate them into concrete political practice. The discussion underlined that culture is not a nice-to-have, but central to democracy, cohesion, and security in Europe.



Gergely Órsi, Mayor of Budapest District II, warned of the vulnerability of cultural funding when it depends solely on national politics: *“Politicians will always choose the streets, the kindergartens, the cows instead of culture.”* He argued that cultural budgets should be anchored more strongly at the municipal and civil society level, stressing that in Central and Eastern Europe culture has increasingly become a field of political struggle.

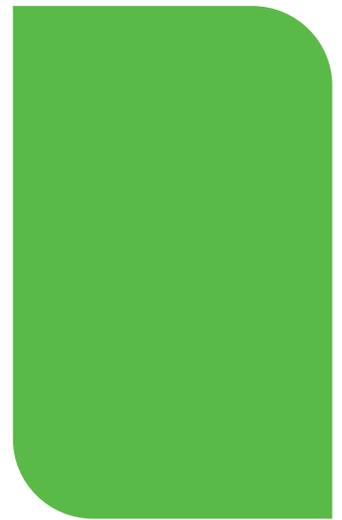
From Italy, **Daniele Tozzi**, Chancellor for Culture in the Municipality of Colle di Val d’Elsa, described how his city links cultural investment with social policy: *“We can not defend Europe only at its periphery, at its borders - we must defend Europe at our centres, in the heart of our cities. And we must defend it in practical terms.”* By reopening cultural spaces and combining them with social housing, he argued, municipalities can make democracy tangible in everyday life.

Barbara Gessler, Head of the European Commission Representation in Berlin, underlined that Europe’s cultural and linguistic diversity is one of its strongest assets at a moment of crisis and transformation. She stressed that culture must *“raise its voice”* and help shape a new European narrative grounded in participation, openness, and freedom of artistic expression, noting that *“respect for the rule of law, including freedom of speech and the arts, is becoming a measurable condition in EU funding.”*

Kriistina Avik, Head of Culture in the Tartu City Government, Estonia, emphasized the importance of access and education: Non-formal cultural education, mobility schemes and international cooperation, she noted, are crucial entry points for young people into cultural and democratic life.

Lithuanian Member of Parliament **Šarūnas Birutis** brought a historical and geopolitical perspective, recalling that under Soviet rule *“culture was never just entertainment - culture was survival.”* Today, he argued, culture must again be understood as part of Europe’s security architecture: *“We need to be united and speak loudly: culture is a shield.”*

Across the panel, one conclusion stood out: **Europe is built from the bottom up – in cities, municipalities, communities, and cultural spaces where participation, responsibility, and democratic values are lived every day.**





Closing Words

In his closing words, **Dr Dr h.c. Markus Dröge**, Speaker of the Board of Stiftung Zukunft Berlin, returned to the conference’s opening provocation - *“Are you prepared for war?”* - noting that democracy today demands its own *“emergency kit”* of autonomy, resilience, identity, and security. By revisiting this metaphor, he stressed that these themes extend far beyond Ukraine and speak to Europe’s current democratic challenges: *“Culture in Europe has become a battleground in two ways – it is used as a weapon in power politics, and we must fight to prevent this abuse.”*

Looking back on the discussions, Dröge highlighted that festivals and cultural events across Europe embody *“democracy in practice,”* offering spaces where participation and community strengthen resilience. Drawing on examples from Ukraine, he emphasized that when *“freedom, peace and identity are under attack, cultural events take on existential significance,”* bringing, as he put it, *“light into life.”*

He closed by reflecting that *“we are living in serious times, and it is most important that culture must preserve and uphold its own mission and its own forms of expression,”* capturing the core message that emerged across the two days.



Reception at the Polish Embassy

The Berlin Conference concluded on November 7, 2025 with a reception at the Polish Embassy, hosted by Ambassador **Jan Tombiński** and his wonderful team. We are deeply grateful for this generous invitation. The evening offered a warm and inspiring setting for exchange, conversation, and reflection, and provided a fitting conclusion to the Berlin Conference 2025.



Key Takeaways of the Berlin Conference 2025

1 Culture is a core competence of democratic resilience

In panel discussions, at the Long Table Conversation, in workshops and plenary sessions, participants emphasised that culture is not a by-product of democracy. Just the opposite, it is one of its foundations and a prerequisite for its success, enabling participation, shared experiences, collective identity and the daily implementation of democratic values.

2 Democracy grows from local engagement

Once again, as was the case at this Berlin Conference, there was urgent discussion of the fact that Europe is shaped more by the exchange of people from urban centres than by national governments. Similarly, the most tangible experience of democracy occurs at the local level. It is there, above all, that personal commitment translates into democratic self-efficacy.

3 Culture has become a political battleground

Especially speakers from Central and Eastern Europe emphasized that cultural narratives, symbols and institutions are among the first targets of authoritarian manipulation. Protecting cultural autonomy is increasingly part of safeguarding our national and European democratic security.

4 Inclusion and access determine who participates in democracy

There is much talk about culture, participation and democracy. Except during elections, democratic participation is difficult to measure. However, cultural participation can be an indicator of democratic political participation. The gap between rural and urban regions and barriers for people with disabilities, migrants and young people have been repeatedly highlighted. Without equal access to culture and equal representation in culture, democratic participation in politics remains incomplete.

5 Lived experiences of conflicts reshape Europe's understanding of freedom

Contributions from regions facing war or political repression showed that culture plays an existential role in maintaining identity, dignity and resilience. Wars target the five elements that Olesya Khromeychuk described in her emergency bag: identity, resilience, sustenance, autonomy, and security. And the first is identity. But interestingly identity is a cultural product, hence the direct war on culture. These experiences offer essential lessons for Europe about fragility, perseverance and the protection of democratic values.

6 Collaboration across sectors is essential for impact

The conference underscored the need for stronger cooperation between cultural practitioners, civil society and policymakers. Only through coordinated action can cultural insights translate into democratic practice and long-term resilience.

Final Conclusion

The outcome of most of the concluding discussions between the many participants at the Berlin Conference was: This is a clear mandate. We bear responsibility for this. And we accept this mandate and will work on it.

Executive organization

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Project and conference partners



Funding partners



We thank the following partners for their support



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We would like to thank everyone who helped make this conference possible.