

# **Building (New?) Bridges through Cultural Engagement: An Individual Level Analysis on European Cultural Project Funding**

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Since the beginning of the 1990s, the European Union has exerted soft power in the cultural policy area with funding cooperation projects conducted by private cultural actors. However, existing research lacks comprehensive assessment on the individual level for which reasons cultural operators decide to foster transnational cooperation under the framework of the European Union. The paper puts a perspective on the hardly assessed micro level and evaluates the underlying motivations to participate in the Union's project funding activities. In theoretical manners, these motivations can be based on the deepening and institutionalization of previously existing cooperations as well as rational and ideational considerations to develop new ones. These individual motivations interact with country-specific preconditions like the availability of national co-financing for instance causing additional variation on the micro level. This analysis intends to look beyond these country-specific structural factors by following a mixed-methods design combining a survey analysis of cultural operators at different stages of involvement with semi-structured in-depth interviews of key officials at the Creative Europe desks across Europe as well as participating third countries.

## **1 Introduction**

The European Union's cultural policy has been largely based on different funding mechanisms since its establishment with the Treaty of Maastricht in the beginning of the 1990s. It is based on the principle of subsidiarity - leaving the main policy competence in charge of the member states - and its measures mainly support cultural development and coordinate common activities at a European level (Creative Europe Desk Austria 2023). With a framework budget of 2.44 billion euros from 2021 to 2027, the Creative Europe funding program composes one of the major activity fields (European Commission 2023), which has experienced a continuous budget extension throughout all its predecessor programs (Mitter I forthcoming). With this budget, the European Union finances projects of the cultural and audio-visual sectors conducted by private people, institutions and businesses of the creative industries.

The relationship between the Union and these project operators is a reciprocal one: The Union offers funding and in turn expects the projects to meet certain requirements and pursue its policy targets. At the same time, the Union is in its choice of projects fully dependent from the submitted applications and has only limited control over their design and content. An indispensable prerequisite to all projects is the initiative of people working in the creative industries to apply for Creative Europe funds. Existing research currently lacks a

comprehensive assessment of their underlying motivations to participate in this system and set up a project application (Stajano 2009; Georgiadou und Siakas 2009; Büttner und Leopold 2016; Ettelt und Mays 2019). It is therefore the main research question of this paper *what motivates cultural operators to engage in the European Union's project funding framework*.

This question is of major importance for the European-wide cultural integration process in a wider sense as it is not clear to what extent this system actually brings a new dimension to European-wide activities. Is it capable of encouraging new actors to shift their work to an international sphere? Do cooperation projects actually bring up new collaborations or are they mainly based on previously existing ones? Projects can be held either in form of single projects in only one country or as cooperation projects between the actors of multiple countries. In both project forms, it is not clear to what extent these projects are conducted by new actors entering the European stage for the first time or whether most projects are held by “usual suspects” (i. e. people already operating internationally and with already existing transnational collaborations).

This also makes an essential difference to the effectiveness of the funding program as it is intended to encourage new actors and people from new member states to add a European-wide dimension to their work (Council & Commission of the European Communities 1992; European Commission 2023). The actors' considerations when applying for European funds therefore provide information with broad relevance: Researching the micro-level of cultural operators and institutions does not only fill a scientific gap with general importance to European funding even beyond the cultural case. It also incorporates high practical implications for policy making through such a project funding system full of interdependencies.

The following section develops arguments on the underlying causes for different motivations to apply for project funds at a European level. These include rational considerations and particularly financial reasons, normative thoughts and a support for European integration and finally facilitating factors that could serve as an additional catalyst for the decision to apply. Subsequently, the section on research design captures the requirements for an empirical analysis and describes the mixed methods research design consisting of a survey analysis among cultural operators and expert interviews with Creative Europe desks all over Europe. In the empirical section, first results of the expert interviews are summarized and discussed, which are followed by a brief interim conclusion.

## 2 Theory

### 2.1 Rational Considerations

Concepts rooting from rational choice theories are indispensable for conceptualizing the motivations of an individual to engage in such a process like European project funding. This engagement comes up in two stages: First, the *individual decision to apply for funds* at the European Union in principle, and second, the (optional) *choice of project partners* in case of cooperation projects. Both stages can be captured by the fundamental considerations of action theory. According to this theory, individuals choose their actions according to cost-benefit calculations. If the benefits exceed the costs, they decide to set the action (Scott 2000). In terms of collaborations with others, people choose their business partners according to their capabilities and their power to beneficially contribute to the common goal.

When assigning rational considerations to the cultural operators in their individual decision to apply, the most obvious driving factor to apply are *financial incentives*. The Union's funding program offers the chance to multiply already existing financial resources from other sources and enables the project leaders to extend their project with regard to its capacities or its runtime. At the same time, conducting a European project also opens up new audiences to the cultural operators and brings new attention to their activities. Indirectly, these *new audiences and greater international visibility* also have the potential to manifest themselves in financial rewards in the long run. Follow-up contracts and new job perspectives can result from entering the European stage. In this regard, it can be a strategic decision for future developments to hold an EU project. In contrast to these benefits, the *administrative efforts* to set up an application and administer a project are rather high. Particularly within the last framework programs, the formal requirements and continuous assessment of EU project have increased. They comprise significant cost factors as they are time-consuming and require staff resources or potentially even have to be outsourced (European Commission 2017).

With regard to collaborations with partners from other countries, similar thoughts can be prevailing. From a rational choice perspective, it is the best option to *collaborate with a stronger partner* than oneself who has the potential to improve the overall outcome and the own performance as their partner. This implies that it is rational for cultural operators to set up cooperation projects with partners with sufficient financial resources – for instance from countries with extensive co-financing mechanisms – and with good administrative skills. This is particularly given with partners who have already conducted European projects in the past or with partners originating from countries where a high level of administrative skills is required.

This particularly holds true for old member states from Western Europe like Germany or France for example, which are the countries with the biggest share of projects in the Creative Europe program (Mitter II forthcoming).

## **2.2 Ideational Convictions**

It is apparent that the rational approach on its own is not capable of fully explaining reality. With above mentioned considerations, project partners from new and disadvantaged member states would hardly get the chance to participate in a cooperation project for instance. For this reason, it can be expected that cultural operators also go beyond these rational considerations. Contrasting to them, ideological convictions of European Integration comprise a major motivation to engage on a European level and set up a project. From a theoretical perspective, the existing literature argues that established norms and the awareness of a social role in the community lead to increased engagement (Oshri et al. 2016; Andrighetto et al. 2020).

For cultural project funding, this norm can be deprived from the Treaty of Maastricht and the framework programs and could constitute *a general and common aspiration among the European creative industries to transmit European values through artistic collaboration and the generation of a strong network* (Council & Commission of the European Communities 1992; Vos 2019; Winston 2018; European Commission 2023). The own role in this social community can be fulfilled either individually through the representation of these aspects to a wider European public audience or through collaborative action. This particularly implies that collaboration is also possible and even desirable with financially and administratively weaker partners to foster the integration of new member states. Collaboration is expected to particularly take place among operators with congruent values (Akaliyski 2019).

## **2.3 Facilitating Factors: Building on Existing International Networks**

In addition to these fundamental motivational branches, path dependency theories and historical experiences serve as an essential catalyst to European projects. They cannot explain the motivation to apply for funds from scratch as they assume previous engagement on an international level – they have more power in explaining continuity (Roedenbeck 2011). For single projects, this particularly refers to *operators who have already conducted a European project in the past and repeatedly apply for new funds*. They already know the main hurdles and how to deal with them and are familiar with the processes related to the acquisition of co-financing and the administration. This reduces the threshold to apply. Additionally, continued reliance on EU funds offers them a welcomed feeling of security in the dynamic and financially insecure cultural environment.

With regard to cooperation projects, an already *existing international network* and particularly existing *business collaborations* serve as this important catalyst. People who had already good experiences with business relationships in the past continue them. The underlying causality is growing trust over time and improved knowledge on the working methods as well as the partner's strengths and weaknesses. This particularly applies to sectors of the creative industries that are naturally rooted in an international working sphere with existing broad international audiences (e. g. film festival organizers). At the same time, cultural operators from small countries, border regions and countries with general collaborative traditions have the potential to build on their existing relationships and institutionalize them further on the European level. Small countries and people from borders regions take advantage of the geographic closeness when cooperating with others. The Nordic countries have a long tradition of cross-border business cooperations and it therefore can be expected that spill-over effects from other business sectors to the creative branch can be observed (Blatter und Clement 2000; Vickery 2013; Medeiros 2017; Lundén 2018; Lantis und Wunderlich 2018).

### **3 Research Design**

Researching the individual level all across Europe imposes a number of challenges to be solved through the design of the analysis: First, it is essential to *reach the target group as comprehensively as possible*. The analysis has to reflect the far-reaching diversity of the creative industries including both the culture and the media branch, but also their various sub-sectors – particularly in the culture branch, which includes architecture, cultural heritage, design, literature and publishing, music and performing arts. At the same time, this variety has also to be reflected by individuals from a broad range of countries including more experienced Western European countries, Nordic countries, Mediterranean countries, the emerging Eastern European members of the Union and participating third countries like the Western Balkans or geographically more distant countries like Tunisia or Iceland. Apart from that, the analysis has to *capture different stages of (non-)involvement*, which includes people who have not (yet?) applied for European funds, people who are in the application process, people who have successfully obtained funds and people who are rather experienced in this European-wide funding competition. In order to detect the underlying motivations to apply for funds, it is also essential to get to know what keeps people from applying and why some are not interested at all although they would operate in a suitable business (i.e. a business with international work environment in a country participating in Creative Europe).

To fulfil these requirements, a survey analysis and semi-structured interviews with the Creative Europe desks compose a mixed-methods research design.<sup>1</sup> The *survey analysis* is based on a questionnaire of roughly ten minutes distributed among the cultural operators of the participating countries<sup>2</sup> through a row of online dissemination tools. This includes for instance networks, online platforms, national desks, national and European newsletters as well as the distribution via social media. Through the survey, it is the aim to cover as many direct responses from cultural operators as possible. However, it will be hardly possible to obtain a fully representative perspective on the field as some business sectors and countries can be reached more easily than others and the survey is based on voluntary participation. For this reason, the *interviews with the Creative Europe desks* aim at compensating for these drawbacks of the survey. The staff of these desks is confronted with their individual national realities on a daily basis including all the challenges cultural operators of their countries face. In this sense, they can offer a comprehensible view on their country. By doing semi-structured interviews with desks of as many countries as possible, the individual cultural operators might not be reached directly, but at least collectively.

## **4 First Empirical Results**

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The first empirical results presented at the EUSA conference are based on nine interviews with Creative Europe desks from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Slovakia. The results of the interview with the Italian desk are included only in the presentation as the interview was conducted closely to the submission deadline. Further interviews are held continuously. The survey on the cultural operators is about to start in May for having the chance to implement propositions for improvement from colleagues at the EUSA conference.

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### **4.1 Applicants and their Collaborations**

Before assessing the underlying motivations to apply, the group of potential applicants and its constitution has to be assessed. Overall, people applying for European funds at the Creative Europe program are rather diverse, but nevertheless, some general trends can be observed. First,

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<sup>1</sup> The survey questionnaire as well as the guidelines of the semi-structured interviews can be looked up in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> The participating countries include 27 EU member states, the United Kingdom as a former member and participating country and 14 third countries (Albania, Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Iceland, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine). In total, the survey covers 42 countries.

there is a *large difference between the culture and the audio-visual industries*. In the cultural field, the professions and the size of their associations are extremely heterogenous. They range from individuals to big associations like theatre groups or even universities (as it is the case in Finland for instance, Interview 8). In the audio-visual sector, there is a higher share of professional businesses applying for funds. This has essential consequences on their motivations and challenges, as it becomes clear in chapters 4.2 and 4.3.

A *general increase of interest* can be observed for several reasons: Some provisions have changed with the framework program in place since 2021 (e.g. the required co-financing amount for cooperation partners has been lowered). The whole Creative Europe program becomes more popular among the creative industries and more smaller organisations give a try to the European funding system. In some countries, a higher level of professionalization in the process of preparing the applications can be observed as specific workshops and networking events as well as more hands-on trainings are provided in some countries (Interviews 1, 4, 5, 8). At the same time, this professionalization has led to an *intensified competition*, which in turn challenges the applicants and resulting frustration sometimes even lowers the interest in European funds again (Interview 7, 8).

In terms of cooperation, two major findings become apparent: First, cooperation is mainly set up with partners from countries that already have an existing common ground. This relationship can be due to *geographical closeness or for language reasons*. An explicit example would be Belgium: Applicants from the Dutch-speaking regions tend to collaborate more with organisations from the Netherlands, whereas people from the French-speaking part are more oriented towards cooperations with France (Interview 6). A rather similar effect can be observed with Finland, where people are rather likely to set up cooperation projects with people from other Nordic countries or Estonia for instance (Interviews 5, 8). However, these collaborations do not necessarily approach the funding pot of the European Union: Across Europe, there is a wide range of international funding options covering the collaboration between country groups providing a complement to EU funds (e.g. Over-Bruggen, Visegrad Fund, Nordic Film Fund,...) (Interviews 1, 3, 5). These funds are also regularly used as a co-financing source.

Apart from this trend, cooperations are generally preferred to be set up with partners or under the management of a project leader originating from a *“high-performer-country”*. These are countries with many projects of several fields and of high quality (e.g. projects awarded with the EU’s distinction of being a *”success story”*), good co-financing structures and a high level of administrative skills among the general public. However, the desks of Western European

countries often explicitly push applicants to cooperate with partners from countries with generally lower capacities as these projects have a high chance to be accepted in the assessment process and get funded (Interviews 3, 6). At this point, it has already become clear that the desks and their engagement have the potential to make a huge difference to the overall performance of a country and its individual applicants.

## **4.2 Motivational Factors**

With regard to the motivational factors, two main aspects become apparent from the interviews. They support mainly the rational explanatory branch and the power of facilitating factors, whereas ideational aspects were hardly mentioned at all. However, even the *financial aspect* was controversial: On the one hand, European funds represent a good way to multiply funds from different sources like national programs. The funding sums are higher than in alternative funding programs. Additionally, European projects partly have runtimes of several years and provide financial stability for a rather long time with a rather high degree of creative freedom compared to other funding sources. Particularly for the creative industries, this was mentioned to be an outstandingly positive and important aspect of European funds (Interviews 1, 6). On the other hand, interviewees said that “nobody is doing that solely for money” (cf. Interview 8). The statement was justified with extraordinarily high administrative efforts, the complex application procedure and particularly the low acceptance rates. Larger organizations tend to be more strategic with their application efforts, particularly in the audio-visual sector.

The national desks cope with this trade-off between efforts and rewards in two different ways: High performing countries (like Belgium or the Netherlands for instance) explicitly advise their clients whether an application can be expected to be successful and actively discourage clients from applying if their project is not promising enough from their perspective (Interviews 3, 6). This partly contributes to higher success rates in their countries. Emerging countries (like Finland, or the Czech Republic for instance) advise their clients interested in European funding first to engage as a project partner in cooperation projects, use them for gaining experience and building a network and therefore improve their preconditions first before applying with a single project (Interviews 4, 8).

The reference to the improvement of pre-conditions already leads to the second core motivational factor: European projects enable their operators to *develop and strengthen their international networks*. They extend not only their audience, but also their contacts to potential future business partners. Through enlarged networks, follow-up projects and ideas for new collaborations arise and a sustainable momentum is generated, which directly benefits the



operators even after their initial project has end (Interviews 4, 8). However, a large share of applicants has extensive networks even without any EU projects: International connectivity is a substantial part of the daily business of some creative sectors - film festival organizers for instance.

### **4.3 Hurdles and Challenges**

The above-mentioned application efforts already point in the direction of one major hurdle, which was unanimously mentioned by all Creative Europe desks: The *administrative efforts* of first applying for and – if successful – managing a project funded by the Union. Unexpectedly, this challenge does not only apply to applicants from countries which recently became members of the Union, but also to countries with highly developed administration. The Finish interviewees explained that people from their country are familiar with all kinds of administrative processes, but the national administration is much easier to comprehend, more flexible and at the same time parsimonious. Their clients are simply overwhelmed by the “extensive and almost philosophical perspectives” they have to put on their EU projects to justify them (cf. Interview 8).

A rather similar surprise could be detected with regard to the *(co-)financing of projects*. This is a rather common challenge in all participating member states but has to be examined from a differentiated perspective: Not only countries with generally limited co-financing mechanisms face problems in this regard. Particularly countries with high living expenses are incapable of financing their projects nevertheless as rents and salaries are extremely high in these countries. Denmark is a prominent example of this situation as the national desk mentioned this as one of the major challenges applicants from this country have to cope with (Interview 2).

## **5 First Conclusions**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from these first empirical examinations. First, the creative industries often face rather similar problems, but for potentially even complementary reasons. This concerns both the financing of the projects and the administrative efforts as well as the trade-off between financial and administrative aspects. Desks from different country groups advise their clients to cope with this problem differently. In addition, the desks are conceptualized differently: In some countries, the clients are supported by a whole staff team of several full-time employees, whereas other countries provide only limited resources for their desks. Personal consultations for applicants are not axiomatic in all countries but have the potential to make a huge difference both for the individual applicants and for the overall performance of a country.

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## **7 Appendix**

### **7.1 Interview Guidelines**

*The questions are not necessarily discussed in this order and in the same formulation. Partly, they are posed as follow-up questions to aspects previously mentioned by the desks.*

*In addition, some questions are focused on country-level parameters, which are only partly related to this paper. The findings of the interviews are also used for another paper with a more country-oriented focus.*

*The interviews are planned to take roughly about 30 minutes.*

#### **(A) The Creative Europe desk and its activities**

- a. How does the team look like? How many full-/part-time employees are there? What are their professional backgrounds?
- b. What are the tasks of the desk? How does the desk decide on its activities? What is covered by the activities of the desk?

#### **(B) The country's creative industries and European funding mechanisms**

- a. Which sectors are more/less developed in the corresponding country?
- b. How strongly are these people connected to their colleagues from other countries? With which countries do most collaborations exist?
- c. How strong is the general interest in the EU's funding programs? Are there some particular sectors with more/less interest?
- d. What are their motivations to apply for European funding?
- e. Which challenges do the applicants face in this process? How do you support them in this regard?
- f. What would be the most important changes to the current system from your point of view?

#### **(C) National level funding structures**

- a. How strongly does the national government support the creative industries in general?
- b. How strongly does the national government support the European dimension?
- c. What are the most important national funding options for the creative industries?
- d. Which availabilities do applicants to European funding have in the corresponding country to obtain the required co-financing?

### **7.2 Online survey for cultural operators**

The survey can be accessed via the following link:

<https://umfrage.sbg.ac.at/index.php/724468?lang=en>

Full attachment in print format is not possible because the survey's questions differ depending on the answer to the third question (whether you have already applied for EU funding or not).

### **7.3 List of Interviews**

- Interview 1: Creative Europe Desk Slovakia
- Interview 2: Creative Europe Desk Denmark
- Interview 3: Creative Europe Desk Netherlands
- Interview 4: Creative Europe Desk Czech Republic (cultural branch)
- Interview 5: Creative Europe Desk Finland (media branch)
- Interview 6: Creative Europe Desk Belgium (media branch)
- Interview 7: Creative Europe Desk Czech Republic (media branch)
- Interview 8: Creative Europe Desk Finland (media branch)
- Interview 9: Creative Europe Desk Italy

Transcripts and further information on interviewees on request.