

## A European Agenda for Culture in a globalizing world – more than rhetoric?

by Simone Dudt

*In November 2007 the European ministers of Culture (Culture Council) agreed on a “European Agenda for culture” based on the Communication on a “European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World” which was published by the European Commission in May 2007. The European Music Council (EMC) actively took part in the consultation process prior to the Communication. This process already underlined the important role of the civil society, which the Culture Council enforced by inviting different stakeholders to establish a structured dialogue between themselves. The EMC warmly welcomes the new “Agenda for Culture” and looks forward to participating in the structured dialogue.*

### **Background – the Communication**

With the Treaty of Amsterdam, culture was recognised as one of the areas of activity of the European Union. Article 151 states that "The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action [...] in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures."

The adoption of the “European Agenda for Culture” by the Culture Council and the intention to strengthen culture in all political fields of the EU and the EU member states in the sense of a “culture mainstreaming” is highly welcomed by the European Music Council.

The Culture Council endorsed the three major objectives proposed in the communication aiming to form a common cultural strategy for the European Institutions, the Member States, and the cultural and creative sector:

- the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue;
- the promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth, employment, innovation and competitiveness;
- the promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations.

### **Working Methods: Structured Dialogue and Open Method of Coordination**

The intention to establish new partnerships and new forms of communication is to be particularly welcomed. Among the partners, the so-called 'stakeholders', are the Commission, the Member States, the European Parliament and the civil society. The focus of these new partnerships will be to further develop the dialogue with the culture sector in a “structured dialogue” at all levels (local, regional, national and European). A first step to commence the “structured dialogue” is the installation of a biennial “Cultural Forum” by the EU where a first meeting already took place in Lisbon in September 2007.

The “Open Method of Coordination” (OMC) in the field of culture is suggested with regards to the cooperation between member states. Even though the OMC was created as a tool to guarantee the principle of subsidiarity, member states have considered it as the first step of the EU Commission to interfere with national politics and as over-bureaucratic. So it takes no wonder that the OMC has been a contentious point for the Culture Council in adopting the “European Agenda for Culture”. As a consequence, the OMC will be applied with the constraint of being “specifically adapted”, i.e. a flexible

and non-binding framework where the participation of the Member States in the actions and procedures concerned will be voluntary.

### ***Future priorities 2008-2010***

The Council decided that the European Agenda for Culture will be implemented through triennial work plans covering a limited number of priority areas. For the period of 2008 to 2010 those priority areas are:

- improve the conditions for the mobility of artists and other professionals in the cultural field;
- promote access to culture, especially by promoting cultural heritage, cultural tourism, multilingualism, digitisation, synergies with education (in particular arts education) and greater mobility of collections;
- develop data, statistics and methodologies in the cultural sector and improve their comparability;
- maximise the potential of cultural and creative industries, in particular that of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME);
- promote and implement the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Setting priorities for a given time-frame surely is a pragmatic approach, but isn't the mobility issue always important when it comes to the exchange of culture? It is highly welcomed that arts education is one of the first priorities which of course should not end after 2010. To use the momentum to accelerate the promotion and implementation of the UNESCO Convention is highly appreciated and the European Music Council is actively working on the implementation process with one of its Working Groups.

The adoption of the European Agenda on Culture by the Culture Council is a very positive sign for all cultural actors and enthusiasts. What is important now, is to seriously start the dialogue between all actors involved – a dialogue that will truly be at eye level and with reciprocal interest. Respecting cultural sovereignty of the member states and involving all levels in the debate is a prerequisite for a successful promotion of culture in Europe. The preparedness of the Culture Council to get involved with the field of culture shall be taken at its word; flexibility and voluntariness shall not prove to be excuses for hollow promises.

The first steps in implementing the "European Agenda for Culture" are very promising, the enthusiasm should not stop so that further concrete actions will follow – this way, the European Agenda for Culture will avoid the danger of being mere rhetoric.