

## EDITORIAL

### Editorial

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While doomscrolling on social media, an article popped up called “[After Growth: Culture as Foundational for Democracy](#),” written by Justin O’Connor for *The Green European Journal*. In it, the author argues that culture shouldn’t be judged only on its ability to fuel growth. Instead, policymakers should recognize culture as part of democratic life, meaning, and public value. In line with this position, the article does not cite one single number on the budget of the European cultural sector, its profits or losses, salaries or employment structure. One can but sympathize with Mr. O’Connor. The calculations that are used to legitimize European cultural policy are creative at best.

For instance, a [press release](#) about the 25th anniversary of the MEDIA program makes the following estimate, “For every €1 invested in the Europa Cinemas network, an estimated €13 is generated through additional audience for the audiovisual sector.” Put this way, the program appears as a high-yield investment and should give any policymaker a reassuring impression that cultural subsidies more than pay for themselves. The reality is, of course, more sobering. The unit responsible for MEDIA financing explained, upon being asked how these numbers came about, that they were based on the following calculation: Europa Cinemas, a network of EU-funded cinemas, was awarded 9,166,097€. As these cinemas – 962 in total – commit to showing European films in exchange for financing, the unit calculated that the box office figures in this network amounted to 123,877,504€, which explain the 1/13.5 ratio. In other words, the ticket sales are treated as if the subsidies created them. But (for now) nothing in the real world keeps the tickets from being sold anyway. Viewers may simply have moved from unsubsidised films or venues to subsidised ones. Once this effect and the public money that funds the films is subtracted from the ticket sales, the net effect of one euro of support spent on the sector could drop below zero.

Then again, Mr. O’Connor’s article is not about creative accounting. It makes a larger claim about a one-sided focus on profits, whereas culture doesn’t have a price. Fair enough. However, Mr. O’Connor makes his point about priceless European culture in a journal funded by the European Parliament through the

Green European Foundation, which can make the idea that culture stands above numbers seem like a form of benign neglect. The Greens in the European Parliament, for one, voted [100% for](#) the last budget, which allocated €2,44 billion to the cultural sector. This kind of benign neglect is pervasive among policymakers. In November 2025, the European Commission launched the Culture Compass for Europe, a strategic document that frames culture as a matter of rights, values, and democratic life rather than a sector with competing interests and a rising precariat. ERRIN, a network of European regions involved in shaping the Compass, [praised](#) the final text for its views on the “intrinsic value” of culture and in the same breath applauded the Commission’s intention to double EU spending in the next budget cycle. More often than not, the rhetoric of a “priceless” culture licenses permanent budget expansion, with little concern for which institutions are fed and which forms of life they crowd out. The harder questions about what kind of material reality these decisions create are then brushed aside or, worse, moralized as taboo under the rationale that culture stands above the economy. Meanwhile, cultural workers in [France](#), one of the most protected labor markets in Europe, earn around half the median salary despite having above-average levels of education.

To get a glimpse of the current state of affairs, suffice it to look at the film festival world, around which an upper layer of support structures has grown over the last decade. Among them, [FestivalFinder.eu](#), which is supposed to guide film professionals across Europe’s festival landscape; [The Festival Academy](#), a training structure that codifies good festival management for a traveling class of cultural professionals; the [European Festivals Fund for Emerging Artists](#), a platform that pays for cross-border residencies; the [European Film Festival](#) project, which standardizes film programs for festivals run by EU delegations abroad. Festivals, of course, are a predominantly local phenomenon; so while these structures with seven-figure endowments may keep the consultants and cultural managers busy, the pay scales at local festivals remain Dickensian. In short, the value these structures create is very limited.

In 18th century France, the Irish-French economist Richard Cantillon observed that when the king drew courtiers and office holders with their servants into Paris and paid them from taxes on the whole territory, a city of dependents grew up whose prosperity no longer tracked the condition of the countryside that fed them. Resources were siphoned from farmers into a narrow urban circle, which then reshaped tastes and status hierarchies in its own image. The EU’s cultural superstructure fits that pattern rather well: growing funds feed consultancies and training schemes around a narrow circuit of projects, while pay and working conditions at local festivals remain frozen or deteriorate.

Discussions along these lines are often treated on the contemporary [left](#) as a libertarian reflex or hostility to public goods. To be sure, the far-right is

attacking the current cultural model. In France, for example, the National Rally recently [proposed](#) a budget amendment that tries to strip the CNC (France's film funding body) of its dedicated taxes "with a view to suppressing the CNC." Politically, it frames current CNC-funded cinema as ideological "propaganda" and says only commercially profitable projects should keep getting public money. Of course, a government with that kind of power would have every incentive to bend what remains of the apparatus toward its own propaganda, which under economic autarky would rely on censorship and restriction of what cinemagoers can watch. However, the fact that this danger is real does not make the present model defensible. The current status-quo is an odd state-neo-liberal compromise: a nominally progressive project that relies on the hope that a well-connected elite, supplied with public money, will somehow generate diffuse benefits for everyone else. Calls to increase the cultural budget rest on the notion of a kind of state-designed trickle down effect: resources concentrate at the top, Brussels designs redistribution channels and evaluation criteria, and one is asked to trust that jobs and community life will "democratically" improve at the periphery.

Let's look at how the trickle-down-effect materializes for film festivals in Athens. Everybody working in Greece's cultural sector knows ESPA, short for Ethniko Stratigiko Plaisio Anaphoras, the national access to the European Union's structural and investment funds. The current ESPA covers the 2021-2027 period and while not limited to culture, provides a large part of resources to Greece's cultural sector. Greece's approved Partnership Agreement 2021-2027 [earmarks](#) €20,9 billion in EU support overall, of which about 6% is allocated to "a Greece closer to its citizens," an initiative that includes "cultural heritage" and thus cinema. While the absolute numbers are hard to estimate as projects are ongoing, it is clear that the budget surpasses the previous period by a long shot, which stood at €221 million.

In 2025, eight film festivals in Athens relied on ESPA, some directly, some through Greece's Film Center, which itself is a beneficiary. Because spending must be recorded before the year closes, events pile up in autumn and winter. Two festivals even run on the same dates in late November. Instead of shaping a stable environment for cinemas, the system encourages a rush of activity designed to spend budgets rather than nurture sustainable audience habits. The absurd scheduling collisions do little for Athens' struggling film theaters. These are embedded in a transformative process where venues are shutting down, and audience attendance is declining. Cinema attendance in Greece sits far below its pre-pandemic level. As Creative Media [reports](#), Greece reached only 57 percent of pre-pandemic audience figures. The country had [547](#) cinemas in 2019 and only [464](#) in 2024. Athens had already seen decades of [decline](#) before COVID. The expansion of festivals and support platforms does not reverse this. On the contrary, it produces visibility for institutions and programs against which the everyday infrastructure that keeps film alive is unable to compete.

Cantillon watched the crown of Louis XIV create a mega-state that absorbed resources and turned them into a courtly ecosystem with its own rules and tastes. Toward the end of the century, resentment brewed among those pushed to the lower rungs of that hierarchy. These were not the farmers he described, but the people orbiting power who saw privilege accumulate at the top while their own autonomy shrank. The sentiment spread beyond palace walls, where it met a public that felt unheard, and the mood helped clear the path to the Revolution. Today, far-right parties turn dissatisfaction with governance into a political weapon. Brussels responds by adding new cultural layers and programs in the hope that sufficient resources will generate belonging. The ESPA logo that proudly adorns the footers of Greek film festival websites and the grandiloquent “under the auspices of the European commission” might do just as much. It is similar to the “Cum Privilegio Regis” that can be found on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prints, where it showed anyone that the work was done with the King’s permission. In what way such symbolic legitimization will feed into the feeling that power sits with those who know how to speak the language of funding grants, selection committees, incubator platforms, and networking workshops, remains to be seen. What is sure, is that, were one, by the wish of some post-growth genie, to remove the money from this economy, with the court still in place, the system would reveal itself to be largely symbolic. The people, meanwhile, would still be poor.

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This month’s issue features an article by Ursula-Helen Kassaveti about Slava Tsukerman’s 1982 [Liquid Sky](#), a visual exploration of émigré life in the 1980s US. Anna Batori offers glimpses at Viktor Orbán’s outgoing regime through her reviews of Csaba Káel’s folk pop [Hungarian Wedding](#) and Gábor Holtai’s [Feels Like Home](#), an allegory on the inner mechanics of a family, and power. Finally we launch our coverage of this year’s Berlinale. Zoe Aiano saw Kristina Mikhailova’s [River Dreams](#), a river-themed exploration of Kazakhstan that is as playful as it is grave and insightful. In our Interviews section, you will find a [conversation with Mikhailova and her producer Dana Sabitova](#) about the man-made obstacles they faced while making their feature.

We hope you enjoy our reads.  
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer  
Editors

*Note: Due to delays in our publication schedule, this issue was published in the month of April 2026.*