



Prague forum stresses economic potential of culture[fr][de]

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Arts and culture can play key roles in Europe's economic recovery, agreed politicians, EU officials and arts experts attending the Prague Forum for Creative Europe, one of the main events of the European Year of Creativity and Innovation. EurActiv Czech Republic reports.

Politicians and experts on culture and creativity agreed that culture must not be understood in a narrow sense.

Czech Culture Minister Václav Jehlička, whose country currently holds the EU presidency, described culture as "something that is related to art [and] science," as well as to the economy, industry and education.

Economic advantages of culture, art

Jehlička stressed the "huge economic potential" of art and culture, which said should be exploited during the current crisis "when old mechanisms are failing". Cultural industries stimulate marketing, communication, human resources and product development, the minister explained.

Stressing the importance of creativity and innovation, the European Commission's director-general for education and culture Odile Quintin noted that they present a "new model for growth in the globalised world," insisting that support for the production of "immaterial goods" would have a multiplying effect.

Regarding the influence of culture on the economy, economists agreed that creativity is the basis of artistic fields as diverse as painting, music and literature. Creative industries like film, design, television broadcasting, the music industry and advertising are derived from basic types of art, and in this sense, art and creativity influence the entire economy, they explained.

David Thorsby, professor of economics at Sydney's Macquarie University, said that for culture to be productive, it is necessary to nurture these "basic" types of art and create an environment in which they can develop.

Economy 'depends on creativity and innovation'

Canadian economist Richard Florida went as far as describing creativity as "the basic characteristic of the future economic and social order," arguing that past crises reformed the foundations on which economies and societies are built.

While previous crises led to increased emphasis on industrial production, which in turn brought welfare characterised by high consumption, after the current crisis, the economy will probably depend on creative thinking and innovation, the Canadian economist believes.

Creativity will not only be the basis of economic welfare, but will also help to overcome environmental problems like climate change and air pollution, explained Florida.

Moreover, firms in the "new" economy will have to learn to capitalise on all of their employees' abilities, including their creative potential, the economist argued. Companies will become "living laboratories" that will continue to make use of the creative potential of their employees.

Indeed, Finland's approach indicates that Florida's words are more than mere fiction. Finland radically increased its research, development and innovation expenditures in the 1990s, and today the country is one of the world's most competitive economies.

Mikko Kosonen, president of Sitra, a Finnish innovation fund, outlined Finland's intention to change its innovation strategy to focus on the individual. The stimulus for innovation should not just come from developing new technologies, but also cooperating with consumers. "In the most successful societies, innovation happens outside the laboratory," Kosonen said.

'Support creativity in schools'

Conference participants agreed that creativity is not solely a trait of "talented" people, but something common to all. Experts said creativity could be seen most easily in children, lamenting that educational systems and society usually transform people to the extent that they begin to suppress their creativity. Politicians should therefore focus on ways to support and develop creativity in children.

The policies of countries like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Estonia and Sweden prove that this approach is beginning to take hold across the EU. Meanwhile, the Swedish EU Presidency, which will replace the Czech Republic at the EU's helm in July, has chosen the motto 'Support for a creative generation', suggesting a focus on boosting children's creativity.

Despite the fact that culture and art have their economic advantages, an overwhelming majority of speakers refused to look at it only from this angle and said that culture also has a strong social and spiritual dimension. Among other things, artists help other people

define their identity. They play the role of social and thus help to bring about social changes. This has in fact occurred in the past in post-communist nations.

Havel: 'Don't neglect culture'

Former Czech President Václav Havel criticised European and national politicians for including culture in their documents and manifestos as a "pleasant and humorous appendix" secondary to issues like economics and energy. Culture, after all, is what makes "a human a human" and is a means of "self-determination for mankind," Havel said.

The former president called on the EU institutions to "contemplate and perhaps alter the structure of documents" and prioritise human rights and the rule of law rather than the economy. The EU should "realise that spiritual values are the main thing that connect all Europeans," Havel said.