

Democracy Shield

Response to call for evidence

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Introduction

Pearle*- Live Performance Europe is the European federation regrouping through its members over 13,000 organisations and companies in the music, performing arts and live event sectors.

Pearle* welcomes the European Commission's initiative to strengthen the democratic fabric of the European Union through the forthcoming European Democracy Shield. The live performance sector, rooted in freedom of expression, critical thinking, and cultural diversity, plays a vital role in fostering democratic participation and societal resilience. Cultural spaces are meeting points for open dialogue, community engagement, and reflection. They help equip citizens with the tools to navigate complex societal developments and foster inclusion and cohesion in increasingly polarised societies.

Pearle* recognises the urgent need to protect the EU's democratic institutions and values, particularly given the increasing challenges to democratic systems and the integrity of the public sphere.

Comments

I) Strengthening Democratic Resilience through Culture and the Arts

Pearle* stresses that cultural organisations are essential contributors to the democratic ecosystem. The cultural sector, as a whole and in its widest possible diversity of cultural expressions and practices, helps maintain open, critical and pluralistic societies, acting as a safeguard for artistic freedom and the freedom of expression as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (Article 11) and Article 13 of the Charter, which guarantees the freedom of the arts.

Yet, cultural actors and spaces have increasingly found themselves targeted by political interference, budgetary pressures, and rising restrictions on expression. There is growing concern across Europe regarding the shrinking civic space, restrictions on fundamental freedoms, and the misuse of administrative, regulatory, or financial tools to silence dissenting voices in the arts.

We therefore call for the Democracy Shield to:

- Explicitly recognise the full spectrum of cultural and artistic expression – including both institutional and grassroots forms – as essential pillars of democratic life, societal resilience, and artistic freedom;
- Monitor and address threats to artistic freedom and cultural expression, including politically-motivated attacks on artists and cultural organisations, and ensure the protection of the artistic autonomy of individuals and organisations alike;
- Foster synergies with the upcoming Culture Compass and Civil Society Strategy, recognising cultural organisations as key civil society actors that provide platforms for public discourse.

II) Countering Disinformation with Critical Thinking and Cultural Literacy

Disinformation campaigns and foreign interference thrive in fragmented, disengaged societies. Cultural education and participation strengthen individual and collective critical thinking, contributing to a more resilient information ecosystem.

To this end, we recommend that the Democracy Shield:

- Invest in cultural literacy initiatives, particularly through education, youth programmes and community-based cultural activities and for audiences taking part in performances, concerts or other live events;
- Promote interdisciplinary cooperation between culture, education, media and technology sectors to develop tools that improve digital resilience and encourage cross-sectoral alliances to deliver innovative awareness-raising campaigns.

III) Ensure a Free, Pluralistic and Inclusive Democratic Space

The live performance sector is increasingly affected by broader attacks on civil society and the decline of open civic spaces in some Member States. These challenges are exacerbated when democratic frameworks deteriorate, including through undermined judicial independence, restrictions on peaceful assembly, opaque public funding mechanisms, or other threats to the financing and supporting of independent cultural structures.

The Democracy Shield should:

- Safeguard the fundamental rights of artists and cultural workers, including their freedom of expression and explicitly recognise the importance of curatorial freedom and thematic independence as integral elements of artistic freedom;
- Protect civil society actors working in culture by reinforcing EU-level monitoring of rule of law breaches and their impact on the arts and culture;
- Encourage and incentivise Member States to support cultural organisations that promote democratic engagement, pluralism and participation at local, national and European levels, and provide Member States with guidelines to facilitate consistent and effective implementation of such support.

IV) Support the Sector's Role in Democratic Participation

Cultural participation is a key entry point to democratic life, which is to be learnt from early childhood. Cultural participation provides the necessary competences to develop emotional

intelligence and empathy, which are key conditions for a democratic society. It fosters civic dialogue, social engagement, and citizens' trust in institutions. Studies repeatedly show that people who are culturally active are also more likely to be civically active, vote, or participate in democratic processes. However, barriers to participation remain, including funding gaps, accessibility issues, and growing inequalities in access to culture.

We therefore urge the Commission to:

- Include the promotion of inclusive access to culture and meaningful participation of diverse audiences – including young people, bicultural communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and others facing barriers – as a core pillar of the Democracy Shield, supported by targeted policies;
- Mainstream culture within all strategic responses to societal and democratic challenges, from youth policy to education to social inclusion to digital transformation through the Culture Compass;
- Ensure sustainable funding mechanisms for cultural organisations that contribute to civic engagement and democratic innovation. This should include tailored support for smaller-scale and community-based artistic and cultural actors, with simplified procedures to enable their full participation in EU funding opportunities.

V) Foster a Resilient and Democratic Online Environment

The digital shift in how culture is created and shared brings new risks. Cultural content can be copied, altered or spread without permission, especially by powerful online platforms or AI tools. This makes it harder to protect intellectual property and ensure that content is reliable and comes from a trusted source. Safeguarding creators' rights is essential to fight misinformation and keep the public space trustworthy.

Pearle* supports:

- Strict enforcement of the Digital Services Act¹ and the Copyright Directive² to make sure cultural creators are protected and their work is not misused online, and for cultural organisations not to be exploited;
- Stronger protections to ensure fair use and respect for creators' rights, so that digital platforms do not exploit cultural content without permission or proper credit;
- Clear rules to show where cultural content comes from, so people can trust what they see and know who created it, especially when AI tools are involved.

Conclusion

The European Democracy Shield is a timely and essential initiative that must respond decisively to the complex and evolving threats facing democracy in the European Union.

¹ [Regulation \(EU\) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC \(Digital Services Act\)](#)

² [Directive \(EU\) 2019/790 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on copyright and related rights in the Digital Single Market and amending Directives 96/9/EC and 2001/29/EC](#)

Pearle* urges the European Commission to embed culture and the arts as core pillars of democratic resilience. Cultural actors and organisations – from major institutions to grassroots and community-based initiatives – are not only contributors to Europe’s rich cultural heritage but also vital enablers of dialogue, inclusion, critical reflection, empathy, and civic participation.

The Democracy Shield should work in strong coordination with other EU frameworks – notably the **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)** and the forthcoming **Culture Compass** – to ensure a coherent, cross-cutting and well-resourced strategy that recognises and supports the full spectrum of cultural and artistic expression. Only through such alignment can the EU guarantee that culture and the arts are fully equipped to meet the democratic challenges of our time.

Protecting artistic freedom and strengthening access to culture are not only cultural policy objectives – they are democratic imperatives. Ensuring that citizens can freely engage with the arts and cultural life fosters stronger, more cohesive societies capable of resisting disinformation, division, and disengagement.

As the voice of the live performance sector in Europe, Pearle* stands ready to engage in further dialogue with the European institutions and stakeholders. We are committed to supporting policies that uphold the rule of law, safeguard fundamental freedoms, and reinforce citizens’ trust and participation in democratic life across the Union.