

Arts Festivals Summit 2026 Budva

Conversation on Festival Cities and Regions: Common Challenges, Joint Strategies

17 May 2026, 9.00 – 11.00 AM, Budva

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Introduction

This workshop focused on the relationship between festivals and their local and regional authorities, with the aim of discussing common challenges and possible joint strategies. It was introduced as a conversation rather than a formal workshop, organised in the context of the [EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions initiative](#) of the European Festivals Association (EFA) and in dialogue with the civil society initiative of [A Soul for Europe](#) (ASfE). The purpose of the workshop was to exchange concrete experiences and discuss proposals that cities, regions, and festivals could take forward together.

Workshop Format and Opening

The session used a fishbowl format. Participants were invited to join an inner circle (composed by 5 chairs in total) of speakers while keeping one chair free so that others could enter the conversation at any moment. The workshop was framed in a relaxed and participatory way, with the invitation to move, listen, and intervene freely.

A short warm-up helped participants situate themselves in relation to the conversation. They were invited to indicate whether it was their first time joining this type of exchange, whether they were attending as festivals, local or regional authorities, or in hybrid roles, and where they were based geographically. This made visible that many participants were newcomers (this series of workshops have been taking place within the Arts Festivals Summits since 2022), that festivals were in the majority, and that many participants occupied mixed positions between festivals and public authorities.

As part of this warm-up participants were also asked two opening questions via a Mentimeter:

What is Europe for you?



In your view, how are the arts in your city linked to Europe?

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Festivals	STRONGLY
Collaboration	EU funding
Strongly	Funding
We have guest artists coming over in most of our festivals, and so there's a strong cultural dialogue	European Capital of Culture
Former European Capital of Culture and on-going pan-European co-operation projects	Collaboration
	Artists
Through networks and projects	Coproductions between festivals
Via shared goals, collaboration, funding, networks	Strongly
Quite well because of the work made by the festivals	Through international program mainly (with three very international festivals in the city) but outside of these festivals not as much as you would expect.
Artist exchange	Crossborder collaboration with Luxemburg is one Main aspect of the Festival
Collaboration, over 15 Festivals with European participants and projects, EU funds	EU cooperation projects, Unesco city of Literature, PEN centre, festivals ...
Moderately	

By sharing common cultural grounds. By exchange of local and European artists.	Themes and topics raising from political situations
Music. Artists. Collaboration. Funding.	The Plovdiv city was a Capital of culture in 2019.
Coproductions, exchange, heritage, shared values, cooperation, EU projects	Elefsina was the European Capital of Culture
Artist and performance mobility through creating a platform for the promotion of Greek Performing Arts	Plovdiv city was European Capital of culture in 2019

Key discussion points

To open the discussion, a few participants had been invited to reflect on the topic in advance in order to help break the ice. Nicolas also introduced selected ideas emerging from contributions in the [‘About Europe’](#) website that resonated with the conversation. These included the need to manage heritage while imagining the future; the role of festivals in supporting artists over time; the difficulty of seeing a way forward in a context marked by uncertainty; the question of which voices are not being heard in cities and regions; the effects of bureaucracy, markets, and self-censorship on artistic work; and the importance of cultural spaces as places where shared civic identity is built. A recurring thread was the understanding of culture not as an accessory, but as a pillar and an institutional and democratic force within society.

Several interventions stressed that the relationship between festivals and public authorities is both necessary and fragile. One participant described it as resembling “an old married couple”: both sides depend on each other, often misunderstand each other, and sometimes blame each other for everything. On the one hand, public authorities ask festivals to be accountable, measurable, and realistic. On the other hand, festivals ask for trust, continuity, and artistic freedom. The discussion suggested that this tension is not abnormal, but structural, and that the challenge lies in learning how to work within it without reducing festivals to instruments or branding tools.

A strong idea emerging from the discussion was that festivals should not be understood simply as events, but as civic infrastructure. Drawing on the example of Veliko Tarnovo, whose representative claimed: “roads connect places, bridges connect territories, institutions connect systems, festivals connect people”. In contexts marked by distrust, polarisation, and fragmentation, festivals were described as spaces where democracy is “silently rehearsed”. Participants pointed to the capacity of festivals to revive neighbourhoods, reconnect communities to heritage, transform public spaces into civic spaces, and create temporary communities in which diversity is experienced as a resource rather than a threat. From this perspective, the role of politics is not to manage artistic expression, but to create the conditions – trust, continuity, transparency, and space for freedom – within which culture can flourish.

At the same time, many participants underlined that the political level changes constantly, while the cultural field often works on a much longer timescale. The example of Tartu's European Capital of Culture (ECOC) year and project in 2024 illustrated both the power of culture to unite municipalities and the difficulty of securing alignment across shifting political cycles. This led to a shared recognition of the importance of middle-level actors within administrations: the people inside municipalities or ministries who understand the cultural field, advocate for shared values, and help protect festivals from excessive instrumentalisation. Similar concerns were raised from festivals in Bodrum (Gümüşlük Music Festival) and Kotor (KotorArt International Festival), where participants emphasised how election cycles, changing political priorities, and dependency on who is in power can undermine long-term planning. In these contexts, sustainability depends not only on funding, but also on continuity of dialogue, internal strategy, and the presence of trusted interlocutors in public institutions.

A second major theme concerned the relationship not only between festivals and authorities, but also among festivals themselves. From the Region Västtra Götaland came the question of how to connect a large and diverse festival landscape spread across many municipalities. Although festivals often unite people locally and contribute to democratic life, they can still operate like islands, meeting occasionally but returning afterwards to work separately. The regional perspective raised the question of how a territory can become visible as a festival region and how festivals might strengthen one another through shared communication, mutual promotion, and a stronger sense of common purpose.

Responses from Tartu, Tampere, and KotorArt International Festival suggested that meaningful cooperation cannot simply be imposed from above. Participants referred to the importance of creating connection points where festival makers can meet, build trust, and identify common interests. Tartu highlighted the role of cooperation funding, shared frameworks such as a common cultural concept, and informal networking spaces that help people begin to work together. Tampere offered an example of a network that grew out of an ECOC process and has endured because it is driven by the real needs of festivals themselves (the board is composed by festival directors) rather than by an external administrative logic. The representative from the festival in Kotor similarly warned that umbrella structures created from above, without shared ownership or local grounding, are unlikely to succeed. Across these examples, a common lesson was that collaboration must be organic, value-based, and responsive to what festival makers themselves want and need.

This last intervention also brought in a strong perspective from the NGO sector. The festival described its efforts to combine artistic programming with education, ecology, heritage, and sustainable development, while maintaining autonomy through a mixed funding model in which public support represents around half of the budget. This was presented not only as a financial necessity, but also as a condition for being able to speak with public authorities from a position of relative independence. Cooperation, however, was seen as viable only where there is a genuine sharing of values. The speaker noted that collaborations without shared values rarely endure, and that strategy documents are useful when they are regularly revisited through evaluation and reflection after each festival cycle.

The workshop also included a more critical reflection on networks. One participant from the Mosel Musikfestival questioned whether the sector sometimes creates too many networks that circulate

within the same cultural bubble and primarily reassure participants of their own importance. From this perspective, the key issue is not only whether festivals need more networks, but which networks they need. Rather than remaining in a position of constantly asking politicians for support, festivals were encouraged to present themselves as drivers of social transformation and to seek allies beyond the arts, including in fields such as sports, business, or other parts of civic life. This view also called for stronger arguments about the concrete benefits that festivals bring to regions, while recognising that such benefits cannot be reduced entirely to simplistic metrics.

This argument was challenged by others who warned against justifying culture mainly through external impacts or spillover effects. From the Netherlands, a representative from Noorderzon Festival addressed what was described as a broader legitimacy crisis in cultural policy and argued that reducing culture to hard empirical indicators can flatten the richness of artistic experience. The speaker rejected narrow “impact thinking” and advocated instead for a language of public value that is less black-and-white than conventional performance management logics. In this view, collaboration with other sectors can be meaningful, but culture should not be forced to legitimise itself only in terms of more powerful policy domains. The debate made visible a key tension in the room: how to speak persuasively to decision-makers without losing the intrinsic value and specificity of culture?

Participants from public authorities of Leuven and Ghent added nuance to this debate by insisting that cross-sector collaboration does not necessarily imply a defensive posture. In their examples, working with other domains such as sports, health, or education was understood as a way to strengthen culture’s role in the city while keeping culture central. Reference was made to the European Capital of Culture process as a framework through which cities and stakeholders can think together about how culture contributes to social change over time. In Leuven, this included efforts to create structural impact through cultural initiatives linked to well-being, such as an arts-on-prescription programme. In Ghent, it was noted that large processes and networks can be valuable when they help different actors continue working together beyond the title competition itself, especially when the role of government is to facilitate rather than impose collaboration. The national network of France Festivals also mentioned a 10-day programme in eastern France that immersed politicians in festival organisation, helping them better understand the reality of the sector. At the same time, its discontinuation after elections and regional budget cuts showed how fragile such efforts can be.

Other interventions reinforced the idea that festivals can serve as meeting grounds between culture and wider civic life. The example of the long-standing Varna Summer International Music Festival, created by the city and supported across decades, show that the festival has become a platform not only for artistic excellence but also for encounters involving politicians, businesses, and other stakeholders. Even where infrastructure gaps remain unresolved, such cases illustrated how festivals can host informal diplomacy, shared visibility, and conversations that reach beyond the cultural field. This echoed a broader point raised in the workshop: festivals are not isolated cultural products, but places where education, tourism, investment, local identity, and social connection may intersect.

Toward the end of the session, participants noted that while many opportunities and challenges had been identified, the discussion had only partially addressed the question of joint strategies. This

prompted a reflection on the lack of long-term cultural strategies in many contexts. The representative from the municipality of Veliko Tarnovo argued that a strategy should extend far beyond a short planning horizon and referred to a 30-year cultural strategy for the city as a way of reducing political volatility and sustaining investment over time. Others responded that what is often missing today is not only strategy, but also time and space for collective thinking: time to read, reflect, exchange with peers, and develop shared language. If festivals and public authorities are to move beyond reactive, short-term interactions, they need frameworks that support continuity, common vision, and stronger mutual understanding.

The closing remarks linked the workshop to ongoing and future initiatives. The facilitators referred to [‘About Europe’](#) and other EFA-related tools (such as the joint actions and work from the EFFE Seal cities and regions) as platforms for continuing the dialogue between arts, politics, and other sectors. An upcoming initiative in Lyon was mentioned as an example of a local attempt to convene festival makers and politicians around questions of dialogue and policy influence.

Overall, the workshop ended with an invitation to stay connected, continue the conversation with peers, and develop practical forms of cooperation that remain grounded in shared values, artistic freedom, and a long-term commitment to culture as a public good.

Pictures





Credits

This workshop was part of the Arts Festivals Summit 2026 of the European Festivals Association's (EFA) hosted and co-organised with Theatre City Budva, with the support of the European Union and the Ministry of Culture of Montenegro.

