DIGITAL PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Study November 2020

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An Inevitable Digital Acceleration

In the spring of 2020, over the course of a matter of weeks, cultural institutes and diplomatic organisations around the world were forced to rapidly accelerate their digital transformation. Surprisingly, this revolution was not due to persuasiveness of Chief Technical Officers, nor the vision of institutional leaders. Rather, this transformation was the inevitable result of a global pandemic, forcing the prolonged closure of shared work spaces. With no choice but to adapt, diverse organizations have found themselves in need of new approaches to productivity. This has translated not only into an ongoing revaluation of hierarchical needs and priorities, but to a renewed understanding of roles and values within the new world paradigm.

Here, digital transformation is defined as **the integration of digital technology into organisational functioning, resulting in fundamental changes to (a) daily operations and (b) the way in which value is delivered to beneficiaries, partners and communities.** Digitalisation is an active, long-term process in which digital platforms and tools influence the norms, values and working routines of institutions. This applies to several technologies including algorithms, mobile networks, cloud computing, social networks, virtual spaces, collaboration platforms, etc.

The Start Of An Ongoing Conversation

This qualitative research study serves primarily to establish a broader perspective on post- COVID-19 changes, to learn from what has happened, and to share best practices. Recent months have made it clear that this digital transformation will have long-term consequences, and that organizations are unlikely to return to what was once considered 'business as usual'. The adaptation and transition phases, however, are far from over, and this study aims to start an ongoing conversation that will accompany the navigation of this complex process moving forward.

Further, this study contributes to the EUNIC 2020-2024 Strategic Framework in its aims to pursue some of the Framework's main objectives. This is done by delineating the primary ways in which digitalisation can strengthen cultural relations, and by enhancing EUNIC's capacity as a network to face the challenges raised by this digital acceleration.

EUNIC – European Union National Institutes for Culture – is the European network of organisations engaging in cultural relations. Together with our partners, we bring to life European cultural collaboration in more than 90 countries worldwide with a network of over 120 clusters1, drawing on the broad experience of our members from all EU Member States and associate countries.

EUNIC advocates the prominent role of culture in international relations and is a strategic partner of the EU, actively involved in the further definition of European cultural policy. EUNIC is a platform for knowledge sharing and for capacity building amongst its members and partners.

1 Clusters can be founded in places where at least three EUNIC members are represented. A EUNIC Cluster is the formalized presence of the EUNIC network in partner countries. Clusters operate in cultural relations with the host country by means of a local engagement strategy which is based on the EUNIC Strategic Framework.

Methodology

EUNIC launched a first survey on the global impact of Covid-19 on EUNIC members in May 2020. Expounding on this, EUNIC sought to delve deeper into digital practices: from June to October 2020, a total of 21 interviews were conducted. These discussions shed light on some of the issues that emerged in the first phase of the survey. A representative sample of EUNIC members was consulted, which included 14 cultural institute headquarter representatives and 5 EUNIC cluster representatives. Additionally, 2 external experts in creative industries were interviewed. EUNIC is extremely grateful to all the interviewees for their valuable contributions to this study.

Summary of Findings

The acceleration of digital transformation

- Three out of four EUNIC members declared that internal processes in their organisation have been digitalised or have become more digitalised due to the current situation.
- At the same time, a lack of both digital infrastructure and corresponding skills is identified as a major challenge.
- At the height of the crisis, the pandemic made institutional culture more agile, risk-tolerant and experimental.
- Internal learning opportunities and internal communication among national networks have increased during this time.
- The three leading concerns regarding long-term challenges raised by this digital transformation are security, sovereignty and the way in which climate change is impacted.

The explosion of online content

- Lockdowns and physical-distancing measures led to the massive and rapid digitalisation of cultural and linguistic activities.
- 90% of members have produced new online content.
- To differentiate themselves from the COVID-induced flood of online content, as well as to overcome the widespread experience of digital fatigue, members developed initiatives that tended towards longer, more interactive/hybrid formats.
- EUNIC members are now working to achieve more qualitative online cultural production, wider audience engagement, development of ticketing services, increased resources and better artist compensation.
- Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, language learning was the most digitalised component of the members' activities. Despite this, the closure of physical classrooms both accelerated and reinforced the already prominent dematerialisation of language learning systems.

The rise of digital and interactive communications

- Social media usage of EUNIC members' channels worldwide has increased by 21% during the coronavirus outbreak.
- Facebook remains the most important channel for EUNIC members' social media commitment (92%), followed by Instagram (61%) and Twitter (42%).
- In the digital hyperspace, continuity between local and global audiences has come with great opportunities as well as great challenges.

The reinforcement of European partnerships

- EUNIC Clusters intensified their collaboration during the first phase of the coronavirus situation,
  while headquarters focused on internal national issues.
- EUNIC Clusters delivered a strong message regarding the importance of cultural relations in times of crisis and emphasised their ability to innovate together.
- There is a need for practical training and knowledge sharing within the EUNIC community.
- EUNIC members call for bringing a European dimension to the digital shift of cultural relations.

Overarching Recommendations

Investment in digital transformation

- Implementation of a proactive digital culture strategy which includes training and development programmes for staff members
- Encouragement of experimental and risk-taking projects
- Support for and adoption of European software designed to comply with current EU legislation regarding data protection regulation (i.e. software that is GDPR compliant)
- Strategic anticipation of another potential crisis situation, which will serve to provide equipment specifically tailored to local circumstances

The digitalisation of culture and language learning

- Creation of exclusive, unique cultural experiences, be they online or hybrid
- Establishment of partnerships with artists and innovative enterprises to develop artistic practices and potential cultural experiences
- Inclusion of social-distancing constraints in next year's programmes, complemented by innovative formats
- Development of innovative and immersive digital tools relevant to language learning (augmented/virtual reality, chatbots, etc.)

The reconstruction of audience relationships through quality digital initiatives

- Collection of data on audience characteristics/needs, through surveys and analytics studies, to better understand and respond to digital ecosystems – especially concerning audiences including parents and senior citizens, who have received higher visibility in the context of the pandemic
- Becoming online influencers on the subjects EUNIC members master and connecting to other influencers in a position to link existing content
- Adoption of new metrics to measure success online
- Equal investment in physical and virtual offerings, without any differentiation
- Reliance on skilled professionals in the development of high-quality online experiences

European cultural relations: combination of resources (financial, technical and cognitive)

- Sharing of benchmarks and recommendations regarding digital tools and services
- Mutualisation of financial resources, in order to promote European languages in an interactive and innovative way
- Universalisation of peer-to-peer exchange, dialogue, knowledge sharing and best practices within local networks and clusters

The future of cultural relations

- Preparation of high-level cultural relations management for the digital era/its impact on culture
- Collaboration on new revenue models for online offerings – an action that will involve the procurement of funds from institutional and/or private investors, as digital initiatives can be attractive to various funding sources
- Development of collaborative practices as Europeans, to effectively tackle challenges including digital sovereignty, online security, and the environmental impact of institutional practices
- Dedication of budgets and schedules to joint projects concerning the digitalisation of culture

Leaving no one behind

- Incorporation of outreach to communities that lack access to the digital realm within the development of digitalisation strategies
- Reflection of the 'digital divide' in any relevant undertakings
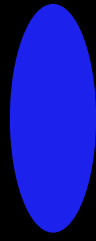
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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION BEYOND DIGITAL TOOLS:

EUNIC MEMBERS ADOPT DIGITALLY INFORMED PRACTICES

Diplomacy is at times held back by a reputation for being 'digitally-backwards'.Despite this, the study presented here reveals that nearly every EUNIC member has undergone a momentous process of digitalisation in response to the 2020 COVID-19 crisis. The manner in which each EUNIC member has undertaken this transformation is highly varied, indicating significant heterogeneity in digital communication practices. While it is clear that the COVID-19 crisis has provoked a profound and lasting change in the use of conferencing and collaboration tools amongst members, it remains to be seen how the associated tool selection processes, standards of use, and security concerns will evolve moving forward.

Social-distancing and rapid endorsement of digital tools

Challenges

With 90% of EUNIC members following work-from-home protocols at the height of the crisis, the COVID-induced transition to distanced-collaboration accelerated reliance on digital communication tools by several years. During the period reflected in the study, as concerns video conferencing (adopted by all members), 80% of members hosted public events, professional meetings and language classes over Zoom. In the same period, 50% of members used Microsoft Teams for internal communication, webinars, project management and professional meetings. For file sharing, 50% of members relied on Wetransfer, and 15% utilised institutional software designed in-house. Regarding future practices, 89% of members indicated that internal meetings will continue to be held online, and 62% indicated that internal processes in general will likely remain digital.

While the pursuit of digital collaboration tools continues to pick up speed, important challenges remain. Ensuring that this technological shift leads to meaningful improvement in working conditions will require considerable effort.

Regarding efficiency, EUNIC members point to the fact that technical training will likely be necessary to optimise their use of digital collaboration tools. Respondents assert that the digital tools at their disposal are often misused, and do not necessarily improve or even simplify internal processes. This suggests that evolution of work-culture in response to the COVID crisis has been slow relative to the swift adoption of digital tools. Exemplary of this is the fact that the number of emails between staff members "has not diminished, despite they are not being adapted for cross-functional collaboration".

Regarding access, EUNIC members have faced considerable obstacles – specifically concerning connectivity and equipment. Several organizations were unable to provide their staff with laptops prior to the lock down, and Clusters in many parts of the world are located in places where internet infrastructure is lacking. Factors like these led to the adoption of local coping mechanisms, illustrated by the use of WhatsApp as a platform for discussion and meetings in Latin America. Additionally, access to laptops, cloud computing services, and virtual private networks (VPNs) are essential features of facilitating remote access to secure data and files, further exacerbating the challenges raised by lacking regional/practical connectivity. In general, survey data made it clear that many EUNIC members found themselves ill-equipped for such a dramatic digital transition.

Increased collaboration with digital/IT departments

Finally, one undeniable facet of the digital transition experienced by EUNIC members was the incredibly important role played by digital/ information technology departments. These teams were put under a huge amount of pressure to facilitate such a massive change and proved definitively that they are much more than just a subset of cultural diplomacy missions. Failure to reinforce these teams and scale-up collaboration between IT staff and various other departments would not only impede EUNIC members from responding efficiently to the demands of the crisis, but would impede the future of cultural relations in general.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the staff in charge of digital services and infra-structure.
- Train staff members in all departments to interact with digital tools, ensuring that the digital transition is not only efficient but as inclusive as possible.
- Make plans for potential crises, ensuring that all staff members have access to the necessary equipment (keeping in mind local complexities).

New Working Methods

Adapting to such a digital transformation requires more than just updated technology. It involves an overhaul of work protocols and organisational dynamics. In addition to changing the way in which institutions communicate, the pandemic has forced EUNIC members to become more agile, risk-tolerant and experimental. These changes represent a major shift in cultural diplomacy, particularly for governmental cultural institutes.

More action, less planning

Demonstrative of this type of decisive action is the *Goethe-Institut's* development of Kulturama, a platform dedicated to the publication of online cultural events, in just one month's time. Information services emphasise that this feat was made possible thanks to the need arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic, as the crisis forced organisations to adopt an iterative method of task management – namely, one characterized by trying, evaluating and adapting projects accordingly. Under regular circumstances, project validation would have taken significantly longer. The *Goethe-Institut*'s primary objective in the creation of Kulturama has been to provide continuing support to artists, offering cultural content to audiences for whatever time period the crisis necessitates.

Horizontal approach and agility

Another example of post-pandemic institutional evolution is the relationship between *Institut français* and the French cultural network. With fewer 'one on one' meetings and more collective webinars, the way in which *Institut français* accompanies the French cultural network is now trending towards a more horizontal approach. In this vein, some smaller cultural networks like the Finnish Institutes have adapted incredibly well to the conditions imposed by the pandemic thanks to their structural flexibility and agility.

Rethinking internal communication: building communities online

More than ever, diplomatic and cultural networks have recently expressed a desire to intensify internal communication and knowledge sharing. The Czech Centres, for instance, capitalised on the crisis conditions and launch a weekly internal newsletter as well as a private Facebook group dedicated to content sharing. Though born out of necessity, these initiatives are intended to be long-term fixtures. Further, the sudden wide-spread practise of remote work appears to have engendered a bottom-up approach to collaboration among networks. This is evidenced by the rise in information sharing between local branches themselves, as opposed to the more hierarchical headquarter-to-branch pipelines that previously dominated this sort of communication.

To foster a sense of community in these digital spaces, member organizations have instated new online social routines. One example of this is the DutchCulture centre for international cooperation's implementation of a daily online discussion, facilitating engagement with staff members across the globe. The underlying concept behind this effort is the importance of both continuity and repetition in online social interaction – a principle that applies not only to internal communication but also to external partners and member-audience relationships. To enhance the feeling of community associated with in-person contact, the centre decided to engage its audience with discussion both prior to and following online events. This was executed with the help of group chats on messaging apps, and the strategy proved itself efficient and effective. Over the course of the pandemic, the DutchCulture centre for international cooperation has increased both its revenue and activity level.
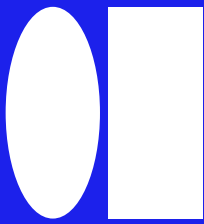
Recommendations

- **Find time to check on and experiment with processes, and reorganise accordingly.**
- **Make information more accessible and create a culture of transparency.**

Training And Capacity Building: The Epicentre Of Transformation

Cultural institutes as a whole are agile, but when integrated with governmental bodies they can often be stigmatised by ancient and inefficient bureaucracy. The COVID-19 crisis forced cultural institutions to both adapt to and prepare for unpredictable events, placing resilience and agility (or responsiveness) at the centre of transformational processes. EUNIC members must abandon reactive training and development strategies in favour of those that are more proactive. Given the fact that digital transformation is an ongoing process without a singular medium, cultural diplomacy and relations strategies must account for the assimilation of new technologies (i.e., artificial intelligence, immersive reality).

Agility and flexibility

Due to the massive shift to digital work, one third of EUNIC members reported changes in the staff members responsible for managing online presence and communication (in the form of a website, social media, newsletter, etc.). Illustrative of this is the *Geothe-Institut*'s decision to task its visitor programme employees with the management of its online platform Kulturama.
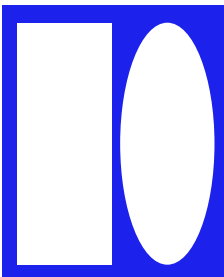
The benefits of the expansion of online training

Several EUNIC members were undergoing a technological shift at the time of the pandemic's onset, spurring the rapid scaling-up of these already existing projects. The *Goethe-Institut*, for instance, had already established an online self-training platform for its global staff. Despite this, digital online learning was not a part of the institution's daily routine, forcing significant change in a short time frame. According to the *Gothe-Institut*, the foremost advantage of the expansion of online training is the fact that digital literacy training reaches staff outside of digitally-oriented/communications departments. The training also now emphasises digital topics, like how to moderate an online conference.

Similarly, the *Institut français* had at the onset of the pandemic already developed a hybrid in-person/online format for its training, using the platform Slack to host continuous/on-demand follow up of training courses. French teachers operated out of a platform called "IFprofs", which served as a social network for French and French-speaking teachers around the world. Between March and July the *Institut français* reoriented its operations and increased the frequency of "IFprofs" webinars, resulting in the agglomeration of 7,500 participants and 23,000 rebroadcast viewings.

Finally, the *Instituto Cervantes* technology department offers yet another success story. Spanish teachers, librarians and cultural officers were able to grow their digital competencies thanks to the Institute's organisation of online training workshops covering topics like the use of digital communication tools, and how to host online events and classes. These intensive training sessions proved themselves invaluable to the continued functioning of almost all of the institute's activities.

The experiences of these organizations demonstrate how remote training and workshops are powerful tools that can be used to reach a wide variety of staff-members at relatively low cost (given the omission of travel expenses).

Recommendations

- **Include digital literacy skills in both staff job descriptions and career development objectives.**
- **Provide staff with the resources to fulfil the institutions' digital policy by training employees throughout their career.**
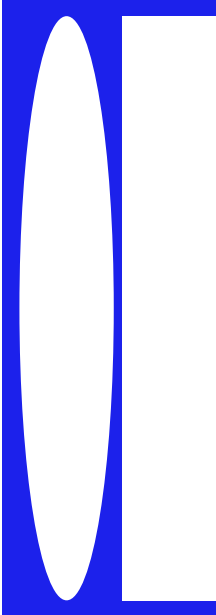
Long-term perspective

Many EUNIC members are concerned with privacy, digital sovereignty and data security. Additionally, we have recently noticed a rising interest in issues relating to climate change.

Privacy, data security and European digital sovereignty

Security gaps and lacking data protection – an unfortunate reality of many video conferencing tools such as Zoom – are of serious concern to several EUNIC members. Indicative of the extent of these concerns is the German Foreign Ministry's decision to discontinue the use of Zoom for virtual diplomacy purposes. Additionally, staff members at *Ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen)* and the *Czech Centres* were asked to neither use nor attend meetings hosted on Zoom, with the *Czech Centres* going so far as to shift their video conferences to Microsoft Teams entirely.

With the intention of supporting the greater French cultural network in its selection of digital services, the *Institut français* is now conducting a benchmark test to compare digital tools (for example, those that facilitate video conferencing, webinars and virtual classes). These comparisons are based on qualitative criteria including data security and privacy, and will contribute to the formulation of recommendations made to the network.

A notable feature of these digital security concerns is the fact that most digital tools utilised post-Corona were created in the United States. This fact has helped to fuel Europe's quest for digital sovereignty, putting major emphasis on the development of European-made tools that comply more efficiently with EU data protection regulations. The use of such tools should be encouraged by governments and public institutions alike.

Recommendations

- **Mutualise benchmarks and recommendations regarding digital tools and services.**
- **Base recommendations made to EUNIC members' networks for conferencing/collaboration tools on criteria including**
  - **the availability of multi-factor authentication.**
  - **control over who can connect to collaboration sessions.**
  - **third-party data accessibility.**
  - **whether or not the tool's source code is public.**
- **Support and adopt European software designed to comply with current EU legislation regarding data protection regulation (GDPR).**
- **Create spaces in programming to accompany these reflections, whether through artistic projects or intellectual debates.**
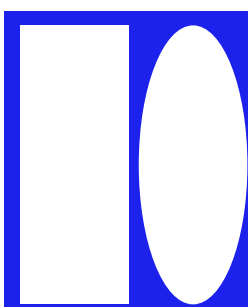
The environmental costs and benefits of digitalisation

Concerning expectations surrounding the long-term impacts of COVID, 80% of EUNIC members believe that travel will play a less important role in projects moving forward, and 50% believe that environmental awareness will play a comparatively larger role.

While travel restrictions and office closures have undoubtedly had a positive impact on greenhouse gas emissions, digital technologies remain responsible for 4% of these emissions annually – with energy consumption increasing by 9% per year[2.] This inflation can be largely attributed to an explosion in the use of videos (through conferencing or streaming), as well as increased consumption of short-lifespan digital equipment.

Even if we have not yet surpassed the awareness-raising stage, future policy decisions must necessarily take into account environmental concerns. Ways to achieve this include the adoption of responsible digital practices, or the creation of ecologically responsible websites (from a digital sobriety perspective).
Cultural institutions have a role to play in this realm, particularly in the promotion of artists as environmental whistle-blowers.

Recommendations

- **Include energy consumption in the criteria for digital software selection.**
- **Share best practices and working methodology amongst networks.**
- **Encourage and disseminate artistic creations that raise environmental awareness**
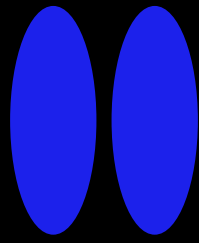
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THE DIGITALISATION DILEMMA:

IMMEDIATE RESPONSES VS. LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

International confinement along with physical distancing measures have led to the massive and rapid digitalisation of cultural and linguistic activities. Through dematerialisation, editorialisation and the production of online cultural and linguistic initiatives, members have sought to achieve several goals at once. These include meeting the needs of current audiences as well as reaching new ones, supporting damaged cultural sectors, fostering community around cultural content, promoting national and international cultural content, and more.

During the first phase of the crisis (from March to June), 90% of members produced novel online content. This primarily consisted of online cultural offerings including virtual tours and videos (78%), as well as well as live streams of events and conferences (67%).

The production of this content required EUNIC members to utilise a two-pronged approach. First, this included the swift and decisive management of cancelled physical gatherings, and second, the establishment of a solid foundation for long-lasting online alternatives.

The Three Types Of Digitalisation: Dematerialising, Editing And Producing

Dematerialisation

Lockdowns and physical distancing measures quickly rendered physical venues inaccessible, forcing members to privilege digital formats. These typically in-person events, such as film festivals, theatrical performances, live music performances or professional gatherings were either cancelled or made virtual. Examples of this will be elaborated in the section concerning digital initiatives.

Editorialisation:
through our own platforms or social media campaigns

As curators and cultural facilitators, EUNIC members are unique in their ability to identify and share the very best of 'national' and 'foreign' creations. The beginning of the crisis saw many cultural institutions releasing online content, with individual members taking the initiative to bring artists and their cultural contributions together virtually.

Online traffic suggests that audiences have actively sought out such selections, evidenced specifically by the fact that _Institut français' webpage on 'online French cultural offerings'_ was the most visited section of the institute's site between March and April 2020. The offerings found therein encompass a wide range of disciplines, including visual art, architecture, music, cinema, literature, French language discussion and public debate. Similarly, the webpage "_We are Italy_" boasts more than 400 virtual offerings, including video-performances, movies and online access to museum masterpieces.
On the musical side of things, the Estonian Institute saw quite some success with their publication of 11 playlists, amassing over 2000 streams between March and July.

EUNIC members also expanded their audience base by making existing cultural content platforms available to all, free of charge. By temporarily removing its paywall, _Institut français_' platform "Culturethèque" saw a 250% increase in subscribers, reaching 64,884 members in just a few weeks. This campaign was extended

worldwide by 134 branches and, even after the expiration of the 'free trial' period, 40% of the accounts made during this period remained active.

As discussed previously, in an attempt to make its cultural content accessible to an international audience, the *Goethe-Institut* developed its own event distribution platform in a matter of weeks. This platform, Kulturama, allows artists and cultural institutions across the globe to publish digital cultural offerings such as live streams or on demand-programmes.

Taking advantage of social media outlets, European cultural institutes used hashtags to shine the spotlight on national cultural content (for example, #laculturaentucasa (culture in your home, Spain), #culturecheznous (culture at home, France) and #czechculture (Czech Republic)). As a result, the frequency of culture-related posts on social media has increased significantly. Examples of this include *Alliance française's* regular publication of cultural content (in the form of music videos, virtual tours, museum content, etc.) and Romanian Cultural Institute's presentation of a historical series on Facebook. This series was titled "The History of Romania in One Object", and consisted of the weekly publication of an artefact in collaboration with The National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca.

Production of digital initiatives:
towards longer, more interactive and hybrid formats

COVID-19 pandemic has forced cultural institutes to make the shift to digital productions. After initially relying on the direct conversion of events from analogue to digital, new formats are being developed that allow members to differentiate themselves – a crucial capacity in a world overcome by digital fatigue.

EUNIC members and clusters alike demonstrate this trend through their move to long-form digital content, allowing a deeper look at various topics of interest. On the occasion of the virtual reinvention of its "Assise Internationales du Roman", in partnership with Villa Gillet, the *Institut français* made an important move toward long-form events by publishing conversations with authors. The insitute is additionally considering the addition of a new section of their website dedicated to long-form, insightful digital content dealing with French culture. In the same spirit, the *Finnish Institutes* organised the *Present series* on the future of culture. The *Geothe*-Institut, for their part, invited intellectuals and artists from around the world to make sense of the pandemic as part of their discussion series *"Day-Afterthought"*.

EUNIC clusters are also looking into popular audio formats, such as podcasts. Such formats have the potential to provide audiences with a reprieve from the previously mentioned screen fatigue, will still allowing interested listeners to engage in immersive narratives and inspiring conversations.

To bypass traditional one-way communication styles, interactive online initiatives like hackathons have helped bring about new types of audience engagement. Exemplary of this is The Swedish Institute's "*Kids Hack the Crisis*", an event designed to engage and unite children around the world, as well as to help find solutions to challenges faced by children in the context of the pandemic. As part of *Generation A=Algorithm* and in partnership with *Scientists4Future Heidelberg* and *The Hackathon Company*, the *Goethe-Institut* organized a climate hackathon, inviting participants from all over Europe to collaborate via online platforms on the development of innovative climate change solutions. Participatory events such as these help to recreate the sentiment of togetherness that is often lacking in dematerialised, passive online events.

As the global pandemic response evolves along with the virus (exemplified by Europe's constantly shifting pattern of partial lockdowns), hybrid event formats are becoming an increasingly attractive option for numerous cultural organisations. The *Transpoesie* poetry festival organised every year by EUNIC Brussels went vir(tu)al this past year, and was both hosted over Zoom and screened live on social media. Additionally, a handful of live events took place in the Hungarian Cultural Institute, Brussels, making for a hybrid poetic experience.

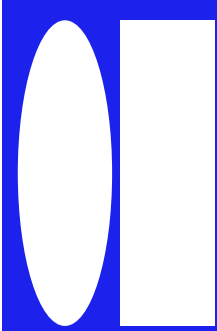## Supporting the arts and culture in addressing digital transformation challenges

EUNIC members and Clusters have shown a great deal of imagination in recent times and have remained innovative under difficult conditions. However, as many parts of the world re-enter lockdown, patience with virtual events is running thin. To address this new dynamic, members are opening their funds and programmes to artists and tech companies in an attempt to imagine new forms of intersectoral collaboration, as well as ways to network and showcase any resulting work.

One example of this kind of collaboration is EUNIC Silicon Valley's *The Grid*, a global network designed to engage artists in an international and transdisciplinary dialogue with tech communities through a wide variety of events. *The Grid* seeks to serve as a platform for exchange, where art-tech collaboration can be inspired. It additionally allows European partners to demonstrate their support of the Bay area art community. The Grid is part of European Spaces of Culture, a EUNIC programme realised in partnership with the European Commission and the European External Action Service, testing innovative collaboration models in cultures outside the EU. It is further a preparatory action initiated by the European Parliament.

In the same vein, British Council launched *The Digital Collaboration Fund*, which aims to support projects based on international collaboration and artistic exchange through new mediums given the context of current global travel restrictions. The Fund is open to partnerships between at least one UK arts and culture organisation and one non-UK organisation. Projects expected by the British Council include virtual art residencies, virtual exhibitions or showcases, online conferences, digital games, and mixed, augmented or virtual reality.

The Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes have also attempted to rethink traditional communication channels in the COVID-19 era with their project *Together Alone*. Calling for Finnish/Finland-based artists to reconceptualize collaboration and contact while physically isolated, the institutes allowed projects to take place or be made available on any alternative platform with the potential to reach a wide audience. The selected projects were then included as part of an official programme of the Finnish institutes, offering an additional platform for distribution.

Finally, *Digital November*, the yearly digital culture festival put on by the French cultural network, celebrated its fourth edition (in 2020) a bit differently. Highlighting the magnitude of the ongoing digital transformation this year's edition saw a significant increase in participants, leading *Institut français* to double the budget typically allocated to the associated events.

Language Learning Goes Even More Digital

EUNIC members' main source of income, apart from state funding, comes from language courses. It is therefore not a surprise that this area is observed to be one of the most digitized – even before the coronavirus outbreak. Providing instructors with digital skills training quickly became a central priority of many EUNIC member organizations, with the closure of physical classrooms significantly accelerating the dematerialisation of classes and learning tools.

Language learning platforms

Prior the onset of the crisis, The *Instituto Cervantes* boasted one platform for Spanish language learning, and another for teacher training. At the time of writing, the institute's academic and new technology departments are working combine these platforms into one. While this effort was undertaken prior to 2020, there is no doubt that COVID-19 contributed to its significant acceleration.

The dematerialization of French language learning has also been an ongoing process for several years, and the pandemic consequently forced a widespread deployment of the digital offering among the French cultural network: the complementary offer has now become the basic offer, which raises huge financial stakes.

The *Italian Institutes*, conversely, did not have a joint tool for virtual classes prior to the pandemic, meaning each institute was forced to manage and adapt its courses individually. In response to the crisis, the Italian MFA is now developing a centralised e-learning platform.

Promotion of European languages

Across the globe, the 2020 edition of the "European Day of Languages" was forced to move online. Despite this, EUNIC clusters were successful in attracting an audience thanks to innovative and playful initiatives.

EUNIC Japan, for instance, celebrated this day by holding a free online European karaoke event, featuring songs in each respective native language. EUNIC Peru developed a unique video game

called "Pregundados" to celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity. This retro-gaming project, produced in partnership with Peruvian universities and developers, pays tribute to well-known European historical figures, as well as to Peruvian personas known in Europe. In Warsaw, EUNIC invented with a wide variety of online activities, including a specific website for the European Day of Languages, consisting of not only online classes but also cultural debates and conversations.

Institut français went a step further with a cross-media digital campaign to encourage people around the world to enrol in French language classes. The *#plusloin* (#further) campaign highlights the experiences of celebrities and international influencers who have learnt French through social media. The programme is being rolled out via a dedicated website, multiple social networks, and a telephone number accessible on WhatsApp, through which young people from around the world will be able to converse with a native French speaker living in their country. The international French cultural network's campaign has one specific objective; namely, to support the recovery of French institutions abroad that have been affected by the pandemic by creating a dynamic that encourages enrolment in language courses.

Linguistic promotion through innovation

In 2019, the French Institute in Tunisia launched a call for a new project, Yallab', which seeks to develop immersive tools for French education and encourage French language learning in a playful way. The emphasis is placed on media that encourages immersion, whether visual or audio (for example, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, immersive podcasts, etc.).

Recommendations

- **Mutualise financial resources in order to promote European languages in an interactive and innovative way, all year long.**
- **Take advantage of the boost in online cultural presence to promote language learning, using internet-based cultural codes such as memes, short videos and targeted online marketing.**
- **Develop innovative and immersive digital tools relevant to language learning (augmented/virtual reality, chatbots, etc.).**

The Communication Challenge: Reaching Audiences Online

Online communication is characterised by specific features that impact audience relationships. Specifically, with the power to comment, share, like and participate in real time, viewers can have a direct relationship with program facilitators – regardless of the format. In response to the pandemic, 75% of EUNIC members have produced new online content, fundamentally changing audience interaction. Members emphasise the importance of digital communication, once secondary but now a major player in EUNIC network functioning overall. In the past, online communication practices primarily served offline events, but the pandemic led members to discover that digital tools have the power to promote culture in a broader way.

New audience relationships

In theory the digital realm allows members to reach a broader audience, but in reality, not all European institutes have noticed a change in their online versus offline audiences. Survey data shows that this can be explained by the type of content people were looking for or interacting with. For instance, the British Council saw a large increase in demand for educational resources related to at home language learning. In the digital space, continuity between local and global audiences appears to have come with great opportunities as well as challenges, but it is interesting to note that branches have highlighted the fact that local content, featuring local artists or speakers, tends to attract more viewers and interactions online.

Measuring audience engagement

To better understand the public's behaviour and online expectations, the Estonian Institute decided to survey its audience on an annual basis in an attempt to become more user-centric in both their online communication and content development. In the same way, the Czech Centres conducted a social media analysis to better incorporate audience feedback into their online communication.

In any of these undertakings, care must be taken to set the right priorities. EUNIC Peru considers having an awareness of audience interactions important to its functioning, but champions above all the maintenance of a strong artistic and cultural focus. Such a delicate balance of priorities necessitates sophisticated and grounded methods of monitoring success in social media engagement.

Towards a more inclusive approach

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, EUNIC London events were primarily London-oriented. The increase of online events in the last months has allowed EUNIC London to reach a broader audience, both in domestically and internationally. The engagement of older audiences, however, stood out as a challenge across campaigns. EUNIC Peru similarly noticed over the course of the pandemic that it was much simpler to connect with young adults and teenagers who were already familiar with digital tools and were seeking out educational content.

EUNIC Senegal noted that lack of equipment and low-quality internet connections additionally impacted the type of demographics with which they were able to engage. In many parts of the world, digital events and online cultural content are only accessible to elites, a fact that contrasts sharply with the attempts of European EUNIC members to reach broader audiences within a local context.

Becoming influencers

One specific advantage of online communication is that it allows institutions to reach niches they would otherwise not have access to, whether local or global. EUNIC members have the ability to address international audiences about very specific topics by targeting different communities. European national institutes, as cultural prescribers, have all the resources necessary to become online influencers, and to provide audiences with quality content concerning highly specialized topics (national or European culture, language, education, international relations, etc.).

Recommendations

- **Adapt digital communication strategies to local contexts in partner countries, taking care to make target audiences clear.**
- **Collect data on audience characteristics/needs, through surveys and analytics studies, to better understand and respond to digital ecosystems.**
- **Become online influencers on the subjects EUNIC members master and connect to other influencers in a position to link existing content.**
- **Adopt new metrics to measure success online.**
- **Incorporate outreach to communities that lack access to the digital realm within the development of digitalisation strategies.**
- **Reflection the 'digital divide' in any relevant undertakings.**

Towards A Higher Quality Approach

Avoiding the pitfalls of low-quality content

In the first stage of the crisis, in an attempt to keep with the ever urgent need to keep in touch with the public, the first online offers were sometimes made with the (poor) means at hand. After several months, EUNIC members are now working towards better online production. In order to ensure the output quality, EUNIC Peru has developed a short guide on good practices for artists and speakers taking part in online events and performances.

A virtuous circle that requires investment

To fight against low cost in online cultural content, some Clusters outsourced production to professionals: EUNIC Warsaw is now working with a professional team for its streaming events, as they are producing more hybrid events both off and online. As cultural producers, EUNIC clusters maintain that there is no reason for online content to be less qualitative and therefore less expensive than physical events.

The EUNIC community needs to invest in audio-visual production

systems in order to produce high-quality experiences that will eventually allow us to reach larger audiences and to set up a ticketing service, increase our resources and fairly remunerate artists or speakers.
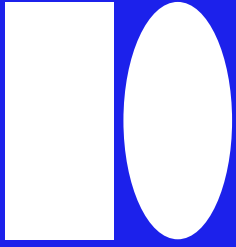
Recommendations

- **Invest equally in physical and virtual offerings, without any differentiation (especially in light of the rapid transition toward digital modes of cultural consumption).**
- **Rely on skilled professionals in the development of high-quality online experiences.**

Leaving No One Behind

Lacking digital skills and digital infrastructure are major challenges for internal digital transformation, but the audience's lack of equipment and poor internet connection are even more important issues to tackle in cultural relations. For instance, overall internet coverage in Africa is about 39%, while the world's average represents about 58%, meaning that online cultural events can only reach a small percentage of the audiences targeted by cultural institutes.

This digital gap exists beyond the global North/South divide, as even some regions in Europe still lack decent internet access. EUNIC's solutions regarding better accessibility to cultural content are numerous, though they do have to contend with the already existing telecommunication infrastructures. Nonetheless, a range of inclusive solutions can be imagined helping members to reach un-connected audiences in times of social distancing.

Low tech services

- Use accessible low-tech mediums, or low-internet usage practices such as text messaging applications, chatbots etc. For instance, the French Ethiopian Association used a chatbox for language learning during the lockdown.
- Allow offline options for digital offers (cultural or educational).
- Use "old" telecommunication services such as radio and TV. For example, the Spanish Cultural Centre in Honduras produced radio content and partnered up with local radio stations to reach distant audiences.

Thinking outside the digital box

- In Honduras, the AECID has developed "cultural emergency kits" which were sent in the most remote regions of the country and included books and CDs.
- Partner with local venues, local networks (educational networks, or even small businesses) who are able to provide internet access and devices, in order to distribute cultural contents.
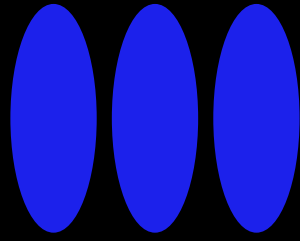
3
STRENGTHENING THE NETWORK(S) EFFECT:

ENTERING THE AGE OF DIGITAL COOPERATION

Towards Smoother Collaboration Within The National Network

Collaboration between branches has increased significantly, through knowledge sharing, joint projects in addition to a common communication strategy. Prior to the pandemic, the independent *Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes* only occasionally cooperated with each other through joint projects. As an immediate response to the situation and in an effort to support artists in these difficult times, the *Finnish Institutes* launched the online open call known as *Together Alone* – an international art project designed to document the COVID-induced state of emergency, which was supported and linked by all of the Finnish network.

Even for more integrated networks, such as the *Institut français*, knowledge sharing and exchanging best practices were more successful than ever. Institut français noticed a great interest in the headquarter's webpage dedicated to the French cultural networks initiatives online, which was one of the most successful pages in the spring of 2020.

The *Romanian Cultural Institute* is ready to apply a new strategy in the second phase of the crisis, by mutualising the contents and ideas created by the branches. The central department of communication's role would be to centralise initiatives, repack them, and share them with all branches.

Two-tier European Cooperation

EUNIC Clusters have intensified their collaboration during the first phase of the crisis, while headquarters have focused on internal issues

During the first phase of pandemic restrictions, EUNIC Cluster activities were more intense than ever before. Online meetings were attended by two to three times more people than physical meetings as staffers were suddenly overwhelmed with practical questions of high importance – especially pertaining to virtual event programming. This tendency has, however, become less marked in recent months. Since September, as part of a new model, EUNIC Clusters have started to hold meetings with a combination of off- and online attendees. The flexibility allowed by these hybrid meetings was well received.

To demonstrate to audiences and public institutions the strength of intra-European solidarity, it was of high importance for Clusters to emphasize the continued functioning of active and unified European cultural relations. Clusters succeeded in delivering a strong message regarding the importance of cultural relations in times of crisis, highlighting their ability to innovate together. While the majority of national institutes will likely see their funding decrease in coming months, pooling European resources appears to be a necessary feature of successful transformation management.

Unlike the Clusters, in the first phase of the crisis, headquarters focused on their own digital transformation, without a spare moment to check up on the practices of any EUNIC network members – let alone to develop joint projects. Although common needs were identified, such as skills development, digital production, promotion and distribution, headquarters' representatives managed these challenges at a national level. Over time, however, and along with our understanding of the complexity of the pandemic, these attitudes are changing.
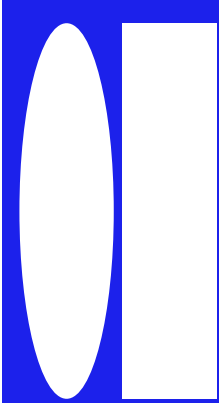
Recommendations

- **Universalise and foster peer-to-peer exchange, dialogue, knowledge sharing and best practices within local networks, clusters and between EUNIC members' headquarters**
- **Pool resources on a headquarters and local level – especially when public funding is diminished – to support culture, produce online cultural content, improve quality of output, to reach a broader audience and to be more impactful.**

Where To Put The Emphasis In The Future?

Understanding digital societies as cultural institutes

Skills development – particularly mastery of digital concepts – should focus not only on operational and technical work, but also on senior management. The *Institut français* has identified a need for its top management to be educated on digital concepts and has as a result called for a European dialogue intended to a) prepare cultural institutes for a radical shift in practices and b) establish an understanding of post-pandemic communities that have been substantially reshaped by the digital paradigm. Given that EUNIC members function foremostly as social institutions, it is now more necessary than ever for the EUNIC community to truly understand what it means to live in a digital society.

The need for practical training and knowledge sharing among EUNIC members

EUNIC members, despite having previously handled their own skills development, agree that the organisation of training regarding social media management and online event organisation (amongst other topics) would be highly beneficial to staff members. EUNIC network knowledge sharing webinars, especially those that took place during the first phase of lockdowns, were highly praised by members and Cluster representatives alike. Echoing this, members are now calling for more best practices sharing through means including short interviews, case studies and guides.

Changing national policy frameworks to include the European dimension in the digital shift of cultural relations

To bring a European dimension to the ongoing digital transformation, it will be necessary to consider reshaping our goals as national cultural institutes. Such decisions must be made at the stakeholder and public funding partner level. Without an intentional shift towards a policy framework founded upon European cooperation, national institutes will be unable to adapt to the challenges raised by a digital transformation.

Recommendations

- **Accelerate European cooperation to prepare for the future of cultural relations (specifically, by jointly applying to European calls for projects dedicated to the digitalisation of cultural and linguistic promotion, e.g. Creative Europe).**
- **Prepare high-level cultural relations management for the digital era/its impact on culture.**
- **Collaborate on new revenue models for online offerings. This will involve the procurement of funds from institutional and/or private investors, as digital initiatives can be attractive to various funding sources.**
- **Dedicate budgets and schedules to joint projects concerning the digitalisation of culture.**

CONCLUSION

Despite the evidence, the ever-changing nature of the pandemic makes it, at the time of writing, impossible to draw conclusions about the long term-impact of the coronavirus on cultural relations. EUNIC members – from government bodies to private institutes – have had varied experiences depending on their organizational type and local context. In spite of these differences, however, it can be stated unequivocally that COVID-19 was a true digital accelerator for EUNIC members as a whole. It has raised challenges regarding the rapid adoption of digital tools, the functioning of internal processes and even working methodologies themselves. Boldness, horizontal-integration and agility have become more important to cultural institutes than ever before.

As a result of these changes, EUNIC members have made swift and important moves toward the digitalisation of cultural and linguistic offerings. In the process they have been forced to rethink their place in the digital world and adapt to a competitive and challenging new reality, where digital communication is the lifeblood of cultural relations. Member organizations have learnt from their actions, and the experiences they gained over the course of the crisis will continue to give birth to an array of important lessons.

With all of this being said, it is crucial before concluding to underscore the fact that **digitalisation represents nothing more than a means through which cultural relations may persist.** In a world where technology often serves to aggravate existing inequalities, the most important mission with which cultural institutions must engage is to remain inclusive, adaptive, and innovative, championing equity and accessibility in the digital age.
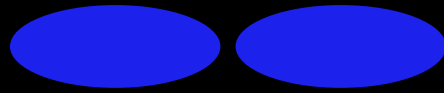
EUNIC MEMBERS DIGITAL INITIATIVES:

EXAMPLES
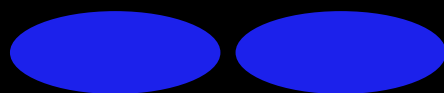
Online film screenings and film festivals

Institut français:
online film festival
IFcinéma à la carte

EUNIC UK:
online short film festival *In Short Europe*

EUNIC Romania:
European Film Festival in Bucharest

Italian MFA:
week of Italian cinema in the world *Fare Cinema*

Online festivals

EUNIC Brussels:
Poetry festival Transpoesie

EUNIC Brussels:
Women in Comics – a European perspective at the Brussels Comic Strip Festival

EUNIC Silicon Valley:
The Grid: Exposure – Art +Tech + Policy Days

*Italian MFA:
Estate all'Italiana Festival*

Online celebrations

Institut français:
Online edition of the annual *Music Day*

EUNIC Warsaw:
International Translation Day

Virtual exhibitions

The Cervantes Institute:
"Wise and Valiant : Women writing in the Spanish Golden Age"

Conferences, debate and professional gatherings

Goethe-Institut:
Couch lessons series on artificial intelligence

EUNIC Warsaw:
Social Design for sustainable cities

EUNIC Romania:
EUNIC Mixers series on how the cultural sector can adapt to the current changes caused by the pandemic

Finnish Institutes:
Present – A series of discussions on the future of culture

Dutch Culture:
Infected Cities – a series of nine livecasts about the impact of COVID-19

Hackathons

Swedish Institute:
Kids Hack the Crisis

EUNIC Ukraine, House of Europe:
Hatathon "Hack the Culture"

The Latvian Institute: *Virtual Hackathon Hackforce*

Video games

EUNIC Peru:
Pregundados

Italian MFA:
Sunrise, an original videogame for mobile devices aimed at presenting young people the Italian cultural and artistic heritage

Call for projects

EUNIC Senegal:
Lelu Di Wajal'Art initiative

Finnish Institutes:
Together Alone

British Council:
The Digital Collaboration Fund

Platforms of cultural content

Goethe-Institut:
Kulturama.digital

Italian MFA:
We Are Italy

Institut Français:
Culturethéque

French Ministry of Culture:
Culture Chez Nous

*Italian MFA:
NewItalianBooks*

Communication campaigns

Institut français:
#plusloin (#further)

Italian MFA:
*#StayTunedOnIt
#WeAreItaly*

Czech Centres:
#CzechCulture

EUNIC
EU National Institutes for Culture
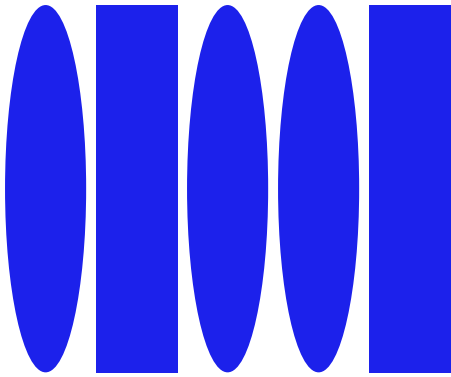
EUNIC – European Union National Institutes for Culture – is the European network of organisations engaging in cultural relations from all EU member states and associate countries. Through culture, we strive to build trust and understanding between the people of Europe and the wider world. We work to make culture count in international relations.

www.eunic.eu

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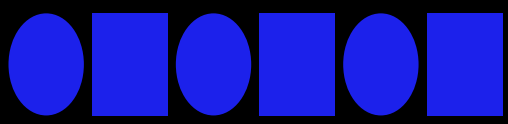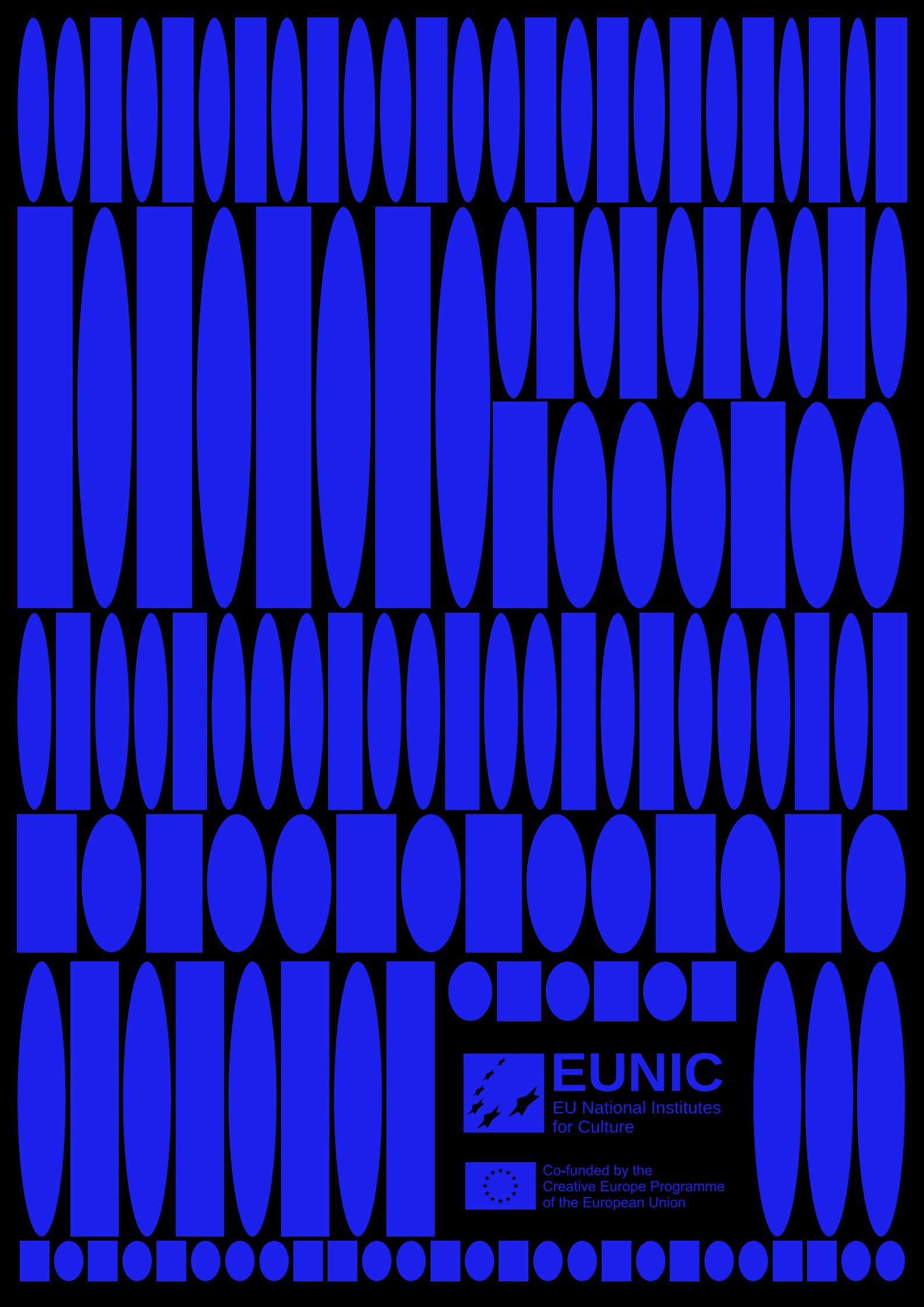
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