



Policy Brief

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Developing the EU Film Festival into a two-way event with a clear international cultural relations approach

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Who is this aimed at

- Officials of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU delegations; staff and representatives of EU Member States' embassies, consulates and cultural institutions; Cineuropa managers; local curators and film festival representatives who work with EU delegations to organise EU film festivals.

Key messages

The EU Film Festival (EUFF) is an important tool for developing cultural relations between EU Member States and third countries. The European Commission has already recognised the strategic importance of the festival in its 2016 Communication "Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations" (EC, 2016, p. 14). The EUFF has great potential to strengthen two-way exchanges between local and European film professionals, while promoting the competitiveness of film industries in Europe and third countries through increased cooperation and co-productions. Previous research has also recommended more negotiations on co-productions and the screening of co-produced films at festivals, as they attract audiences by involving local creators (Helly & Chandran, 2023, p. 21). The EUFF could be further developed by clarifying its overall objectives for all stakeholders involved in the organisation of the festival, by improving two-way exchanges and integrating the festival into broader public diplomacy efforts, by supporting the organisation of side events and expanding the film repository managed by Cineuropa, and by increasing the overall financial support for the festival.

Introduction

To explore the different rationales and organisational challenges behind the EUFF, we conducted a combined desk research and qualitative content analysis of interviews with EEAS officials and EUFF organisers in eight non-EU countries that hosted the festival in 2023, namely Argentina, Canada, Chile, Indonesia, the Republic of South Africa, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and Vietnam. The desk research data consisted of various grey literature, such as communications, reports and festival catalogues, and feedback responses from festival organisers in 27 countries collected by Cineuropa in 2023. The research also included an analysis of the content of the most screened films and the ways in which they represented cultural diversity and other EU values. Finally, the results were explored vis-à-vis the EEAS's approach to strategic communication.

Statement of the problem



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Over the past decade, the EU has refined its external relations policies by emphasising bottom-up activities, people-to-people links, dialogue and mutual exchange. However, such an approach to international cultural relations (Murray & Lamonica, 2021) has not been consistently incorporated into all EU policy discourses and guidelines. This situation poses multiple challenges for cultural actors, who must navigate the demands of an as yet unfamiliar policy and its complex governance model in order to serve ambitious, long-term foreign policy goals (Dâmaso, 2021, p. 9). Previous research has shown that, in practice, the EU's foreign policy lacks a coherent doctrine at world level and "coordination could be improved at different levels [...] or through better exchange of information between the EEAS and the EU Delegations" (EP, 2022, p. 17).

In the case of the EUFF, this situation is exacerbated by its governance, which requires the cooperation of EU delegations with the national institutes of EU Member States. The managers of the EUFF programmes must therefore aim for success in the face of competing policies and approaches. Indeed, a similar point was made in the external evaluation of the EUFF commissioned by the European Commission. In it, experts identified the need "to fully align the action with future policy priorities, presentation and debate of the results of this evaluation in the short-term OMC [Open Method Coordination] group on EU international cultural relations, to provide a clearer strategic level of ambition and guidance to film festivals writ large" (Helly & Chandran, 2023, p.15). Film is an important industry at the crossroads of the EU's commercial and external relations interests. The main objective of the EUFF is not explicitly to make a profit. However, it is an implicit tool to promote and increase the visibility of European film.

Existing Policy Gap

The European Commission's Communication on the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations proposed the creation of a new funding scheme for EU delegations to organise the EUFF (EC, 2016). The idea was based on a feasibility study which found that more than half of EU delegations are involved in organising film festivals and other film events that promote the EU, showcase European culture and use film as a diplomatic tool (EC, 2015, p. 6). However, special support was deemed necessary as "a number of obstacles prevent the diversity and excellence of European films from being shown in the best conditions in many third countries: lack of professionalism, limited budgets and shortage of human resources" (EC, 2015, p. 6). Our research highlights similar practical shortcomings, such as the lack of film expertise in the EU delegations and embassies. The local festival organisations often compensate for this, but in some cases all the organising is done by the EU delegation.



The EUFF guidelines and funding criteria refer to multiple diplomatic approaches with arguably contradictory underpinnings. Our research underlines the need to sharpen the festival's diplomatic purpose by taking the international cultural relations approach more seriously and consistently into account in the EUFF guidelines, funding criteria and communication, and by better informing all EUFF stakeholders about it.

Similar observations and suggestions are contained in the external evaluation of the EUFF commissioned by the European Commission. It notes that EUFF programme managers must strive for success in the face of competing policies and approaches, and that there is therefore a need to "provide a clearer strategic level of ambition and guidance to film festivals writ large" (Helly & Chandran, 2023, p.15).

Recently, the President of the European Commission requested from the European Commissioner for International Partnerships that the EU takes "a more assertive approach in aligning its interests with its partnerships in a more contested and unstable world" (EC, 2024, p. 5). Our research suggests that strengthening the links between the implementation of the EUFF and the international cultural relations approach is compatible with such an alignment – as long as EU actors avoid an instrumentalising logic, continue to demonstrate consistency between rhetoric and action, and prioritise long-term relationships and audience-building efforts.

Policy recommendations

Our research led to several policy implications, which we summarise below.

- 1) **Communicate EUFF objectives continuously:** Clearly define and communicate the objectives of the EUFF to EU Member States in order to build consensus and shared ownership, highlighting the importance of mutuality and the need to eschew instrumentalism.
- 2) **Frame the EUFF within broader public diplomacy efforts:** Better emphasise and clarify for festival organisers the international cultural relations approach in the implementation of the EUFF.
- 3) **Focus on shared values:** Promote shared values rather than exclusively "EU values", avoiding the perception of a neo-colonial approach.



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- 4) **Support the engagement of independent film professionals and cultural workers:** Financial support for independent professionals (both European and from third countries) is crucial for their engagement. Such support is in line with the promotion of European values such as diversity and equality.
 - 5) **Strengthen co-productions:** Strengthen existing EU funding for co-productions between European and third countries and prioritise small-scale projects with local professionals and markets to foster deeper collaboration.
 - 6) **Improve two-way exchanges and highlight side events:** Develop the EUFF to better support two-way exchanges between EU and non-EU film professionals, allowing visits by non-EU professionals to the EU, supporting the screening of non-EU films at film festivals in Europe, aiming for the systematic inclusion of local films in the EUFF programme to promote balance and inclusion, and transforming side-events into dialogues, supporting co-learning, collaboration and co-productions, and using films as a basis for discussions on common challenges.
 - 7) **Develop tailored audience engagement:** Develop strategies to engage with existing and new audiences, and improve festival design accordingly.
 - 8) **Address diversity and representation in communication materials:** Address diversity in communications materials to better reflect societal values and inclusivity.
 - 9) **Increase funding for Cineuropa and Delegations:** Provide more financial support to EU Delegations and Cineuropa to increase the number and diversity of films in the repository and at the festivals and to cover costs in low-income markets.
 - 10) **Consider broader indicators in implementation monitoring:** Use non-quantitative and non-market indicators to measure the impact of the EUFF, including cultural and social outcomes, both in Cineuropa's collection of information and when assessing the implementation of the festival, avoiding a short-termist analysis of results.



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