

Artist groups fear impact of economic crisis

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BRUSSELS - Public sector support for culture is being threatened by Europe's current economic woes, says a pro-art advocacy network.

"We cannot but face the fact that we are in the midst of generalised crisis of extreme fragility," said Mercedes Biovinazzo, chair of Culture Action Europe (CAE), which represents thousands of pro-art groups across the continent, on Friday (9 November).

Artist groups worry about the effects of the economic crisis (Photo: Jessica McCann)

Speaking at the opening of the two-day annual CAE conference in Brussels on the "sustainability of culture" in Europe, Biovinazzo said it is necessary to place art at the heart of the political debate.

"It is in times of crisis that we need to engage politically and with a high degree of responsibility," she noted.

The European Commission, for its part, has pledged to support art and culture in Europe to tune of €1.8 billion between 2014-2020.

EU president Jose Manuel Barroso, in a pre-recorded video message delivered at the conference, said globalisation, the fragmentation of markets, and squeezed finances has placed additional pressure on culture.

"We want to encourage all levels of policy governance, local, regional, national and European level to develop integrated policies in the cultural and creative sectors," said Barroso.

The commission says its aim is to support artists, cultural professionals and cultural organisations across the EU.

"We want to ensure their work reaches as many people as possible," noted Barroso.

He also said the sectors are "an engine for growth, smart, inclusive, [and] sustainable growth." Culture represents up to 4.5 percent of the EU's total GDP and employs between 7 and 8.5 million people, says the commission.

Some of the conference participants took a different approach to the commission's economic angle on culture.

"Culture has a proven economic dimension, it generates income and employment as Mr Barroso pointed out. But it is not an instrument for economic growth," said Chris Torch of Intercult, a Swedish-based group that collaborates and networks with other culture-led projects throughout Europe.

"Culture raises questions, it disturbs us and requires a response ... it animates debates and challenges prejudice and all this is linked to peace-making, human development and individual freedom," he added.

Meanwhile, the commission noted a certain backlash when it comes to its support of culture.

Xavier Troussard of the commission's education and culture division, spoke of how some EU-based culture organisations refrain from making public the money they receive from EU funds.

He also noted that Europe's culture sector, represented by the CAE and the several dozen groups gathered at the conference, have not fully connected with the public.

"I'm not sure you are perceived in society as agents of change or agents of innovation because you have not demonstrated your own capacity to innovate in your own sector," said Troussard.

Troussard said the commission was ready to help the sector in making their value and importance more visible at the EU-level but warned that any changes "in policy making will have to be backed by a strong sense of evidence."

(EUObserver.com)