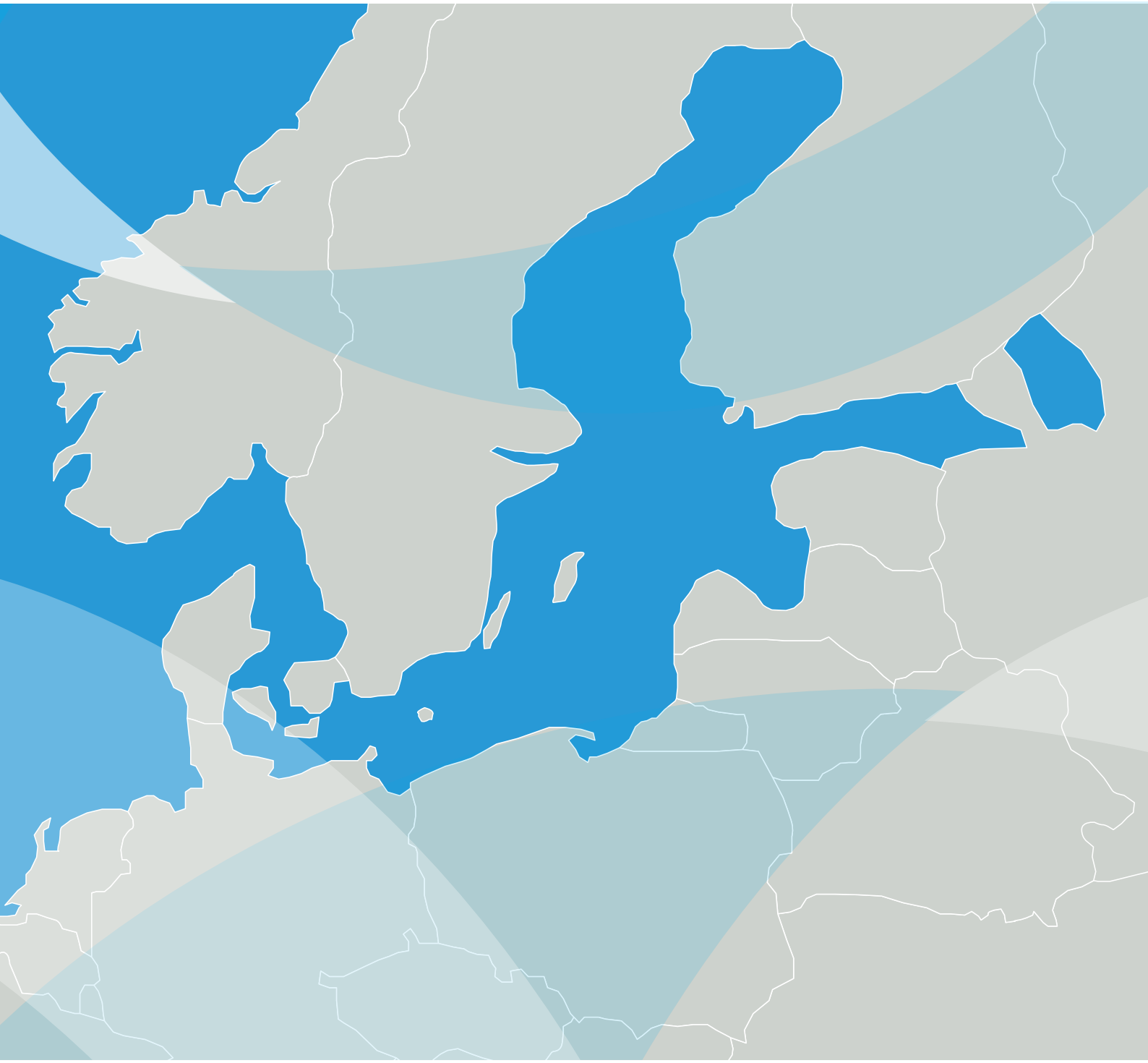
REPORT

POLICY AREA CULTURE

2022 – 2024



POLICY Area CULTURE!

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EU STRATEGY
FOR THE BALTIC
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INTRO-DUCTION

BSR Pearls cities + European Capitals of Culture in BSR

BSR Cultural Pearls Cities
2024–2026
- 2024
- 2025
- 2026

ECOCs in BSR region
2022–2026

How cities are involved in the cultural cooperation in the BSR, how awards help showcase cultural assets and cohesion.

Since 2013, Policy Area Culture (PA Culture) has been one of the 14 policy areas of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), following successful advocacy by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland and the Ministry of Justice, Cultural and European Affairs of Schleswig-Holstein (Germany).

The Baltic Sea Region boasts a rich and attractive cultural landscape and heritage, which form the basis of a shared identity and common values. Building on these strengths – and recognising culture's potential as a driver of economic growth – PA Culture works to foster territorial cohesion, enhance prosperity, and improve the region's competitiveness.

While numerous bodies in the region address cultural matters, there remains significant scope for the engagement of regional and local organisations, SMEs, and municipalities. PA Culture actively reaches out to these stakeholders, building a dynamic network of cultural and creative actors that complements the work of the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture (NDPC) and other cultural initiatives. By providing clear roles and responsibilities, enabling effective decision-making, and reinforcing results orientation, PA Culture strengthens stakeholder ownership. Strong connections to national policy-making further ensure the engagement of line ministries and consolidate political support for implementation in EUSBSR Member States.

In recent years, culture in the Baltic Sea Region has become increasingly linked to areas such as sustainability, health, and social resilience. Projects supported in the 2021 – 2027 funding period, including Arts on Prescription and CCI4Change, reflect this interdisciplinary approach and explore the wide potential of cultural engagement.

The update of the Action Plan (2026) will respond to the pressing challenges facing the macro-region today: social fragmentation, the erosion of democratic values, and the growing prevalence of mental health concerns – issues worsened by recent crises. PA Culture addresses these challenges by fostering cultural cooperation, supporting the creative industries, and encouraging inclusive participation in cultural life. Through transnational projects and policy dialogue, it aims to build a more connected, resilient, and democratic Baltic Sea Region where culture is a catalyst for sustainable development and social innovation.

Going forward, PA Culture will continue to contribute to the EUSBSR objectives to "Increase prosperity – Improved global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region" and to "Connect the region – Connecting people in the region." In particular, it will promote the region's cultural and creative sectors, support creative entrepreneurship, and seek to meaningfully engage young people. Culture has the power to integrate, to bridge borders, and to overcome social and political divisions, which makes it a vital force in shaping the Baltic Sea Region's shared future.

ACTIVITIES

STEERING GROUP MEETINGS

> A Strategic Step Forward in Turbulent Times – 10 March 2022

The PA Culture Steering Group meeting, chaired by Milda Vakarinaitė (Lithuania), brought together members online to align efforts and finalize the Interreg application for 2022 – 2024. The session unfolded against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, prompting important updates on EU sanctions. Cooperation with Russia and Belarus was officially suspended, directly impacting regional programs and cancelling the Baltic Leadership Programme (BLP) – Neighbours.

Key discussions revolved around the Interreg application, with Lars Schieber (REM Consulting) guiding members through the process and proposed activity clusters: policy coordination, Action Plan implementation, project support, and communication. Deliverables and impact indicators were outlined.

Strategic reflections sparked thoughtful contributions: Daiva Parulskienė proposed a mapping of key actors and networks in the region, emphasizing youth and non-EU engagement, while Laura Okdaldere (Latvia) underlined cultural heritage's role in sustainability. The importance of youth participation was echoed by Kaarina Williams, who highlighted the Baltic Sea Youth Platform and previous initiatives like the youth declaration in Poland.

The group also discussed revitalizing the flagship project model. Though no longer linked to funding, a "flagship" label could offer political weight and boost project visibility, which was an idea warmly received by both Kaarina Williams and Lars Schieber.

The next step? A stakeholder kick-off meeting, planned for May, to shape concrete actions and strengthen collaboration moving forward.

> Looking Back, Planning the Future of Cultural Cooperation in the BSR – 14 December 2022, Warsaw

The PA Culture Steering Group closed the year 2022 with a hybrid meeting in Warsaw and online, marking a year of dynamic transformation and setting the tone for the future. The session was a milestone moment as it welcomed the new Swedish Presidency and introduced the new PA Culture coordinators, Franziska Kapteina (Germany) and Magdalena Kleszczewska (Poland). Alongside SG members, the meeting hosted guests including Poland's National Coordinator Ewa Dębska, the Baltic Sea Youth Platform, NDPC, CBSS, and Ars Baltica.

The Policy Area coordinators presented a wrap-up of 2022, a year marked by structural change and new momentum: the Adam Mickiewicz Institute stepping into the Polish coordinator role, the launch of the Baltic Sea Strategic Point, and a series of successful events: from the January roundtable with Prof. Simon Anholt to the Interreg call results for PAC support, and from youth engagement talks to the 13th EUSBSR Annual Forum. A strong year, packed with dialogue, collaboration, and planning.

Looking ahead, the coordinators laid out a focused vision for 2023. Four key priorities are on the agenda:

- Stakeholder outreach – Reaching grassroots-level actors, especially NGOs, via local events and direct engagement. SG members were invited to help amplify PA Culture's message.
- Digital communication – A refreshed website and an engaging newsletter are on the horizon. Everyone was encouraged to follow, subscribe, and share.
- Project development support – From matchmaking to targeted outreach, PA Culture aims to be a catalyst for cultural cooperation.
- Project implementation support – An overview was shared of four projects funded under the first Interreg call.

A strong message echoed throughout: policy influence matters just as much as projects. The Action Plan emphasizes the need for policy papers, not just project implementation.
The floor opened for reflections. Robert Nilsson (Sweden) stressed the importance of disseminating information through national agencies and building bridges with NGOs. Marcus Hagemann (Ars Baltica) highlighted PA Culture's potential role as a macroregional connector and pushed for a strategic, policy-level approach to project development.
Franziska Kapteina also raised a timely question: with the Interreg BSR flagship label phased-out, should PA Culture develop a new labeling concept? Members briefly discussed the value and selection procedures of such a future model.
Next, the conversation pivoted toward new ideas: enhancing NGO involvement, boosting youth participation via the BSYP Cultural Working Group, and formalizing observer status for NGOs and IGOs. With several partners already actively engaged, the proposal to grant them a permanent observer role will be put to a vote.

The meeting concluded with a presentation by the Youth representatives of the BSYP Cultural Working Group, reminding all participants that young people should be an active part of PA Culture undertakings.

> Setting the scene for 2023 – 30 – 31 March 2023, Stockholm

Gathered in Stockholm for the second meeting under the Swedish Presidency, the PA Culture Steering Group convened on 30 – 31 March 2023 to create its policy vision for the year ahead. With a full agenda and various perspectives – youth voices, observers, and cultural actors – the meeting sparked vibrant exchanges.

The core focus was the 2023 Work Plan drafted after the December 2022 meeting. Key updates included progress on cultural cooperation across the Baltic Sea and the strengthening of cross-policy collaboration, especially between PA Culture and PA Tourism.

NDPC's Krista Petäjäjärvi spotlighted their dynamic cultural innovation projects, while CBSS's Dominik Littfass highlighted fresh funding opportunities like the CBSS Seed Money. Youth cooperation took a new shape with Aline Mayr announcing that the Baltic Sea Youth Platform is evolving into the Baltic Sea Youth Forum and calls for new members are open.
Exciting developments were shared from across the cultural projects: BSR Cultural Pearls (update by Felix Schartner Giertta) and C4C application (update by Marcus Hagemann).
The meeting welcomed fresh perspectives on funding and alignment with broader EU priorities. Blagovestka Riiser (DG Regio) presented key ERDF policy objectives relevant to culture, focusing on social inclusion, sustainable tourism, and place-based development. Her suggestion to invite DG EAC to the next SG meeting was met with interest.
Tom Schumacher provided insights into the Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP), a new support structure enhancing the Strategy's communication and coherence. With the Macroregional Strategy Week in preparation, momentum is building across policy areas.
Policy reporting for 2022 was reviewed, with a call for more input and engagement from SG members going forward. Robert Nilsson also introduced the Swedish national cultural policy and Presidency priorities, including support for artistic freedom and displaced artists.
Latvia was gearing up for its upcoming Presidency, with Kristine Lipina outlining the plans for the 14th EUSBSR Annual Forum in Riga in October. Calls for workshops and networking villages open in April with plenty of opportunities to get involved.
Continuing a discussion from Warsaw, the group revisited the project labelling debate. While early branding was seen as potentially premature, a post-delivery label was viewed as a meaningful endorsement of alignment with the Strategy.
Franziska Kapteina introduced the PA Culture Project Concept, including a draft scoring matrix for project assessment. Voting on branding and project selection would proceed via online tools. SG members were then invited to engage actively and contribute to the Interreg progress report.
The meeting wrapped up with a decision to reconvene in October 2023. There's growing momentum and the message was clear: culture has the power not only to connect but also to lead.

> New Chairmanship, New Focus – 4 October 2023, Riga

The PA Culture Steering Group met in Riga, both in person and online, for its first session under Latvian chairmanship, setting the tone for an ambitious and strategically focused year ahead. With fresh voices joining the table and complex topics on the agenda, the meeting centered on aligning culture with sustainability, sharpening PA Culture's strategic profile, and building bridges across policy areas.

The meeting welcomed several first-time participants, including Agnese Karlsone and Pirjo Hamari from the Baltic Region Heritage Committee (BRHC) and Kazimierz Musiał from CBSS. Their input added valuable depth to the conversation about cultural cooperation and policy coordination in the Baltic Sea Region.
Magdalena Kleszczewska reported on PA Culture's recent activities and ongoing calls for the cultural and creative sectors. Kazimierz Musiał previewed the upcoming CBSS Project Support Facility (PSF) call. Felix Schartner Giertta shared exciting developments from the BSR Cultural Pearls project, where 12 towns were shortlisted, with 4 to be selected by December. Pirjo Hamari presented BRHC's Work Plan and highlighted its practical focus, noting the complementarity with PA Culture's policy-level work. Krista Petäjäjärvi announced that NDPC had joined the EIT Culture and Creativity consortium, further boosting its innovation-driven mission.

A key theme was how to shape PA Culture's voice in the coming years:
Tom Schumacher (BSP) updated on the EUSBSR reporting process and signaled the start of an Action Plan revision, urging PA Culture to align with EU funding priorities. Blagovestka Riiser (DG Regio) emphasized the importance of preparing for post-2027 cohesion policy and called for PA Culture to position itself clearly within the macro-regional strategies debate.
This led to an honest reflection on past challenges, such as a policy paper from the previous funding period that wasn't adopted due to unclear national mandates. Several voices, including Kaarina Williams (Germany), Baiba Mūrniece (Latvia), and Franziska Kapteina, stressed the need to define PA Culture's profile more clearly and to produce strategy papers that could serve as lobbying tools and strengthen the Policy Area's visibility.

A robust policy session on sustainable development and culture tackled how cultural institutions can be positioned as engines of sustainability:
Baiba Mūrniece introduced the idea of culture as a global public good, sharing Latvia's efforts to adapt UNESCO's Culture 2030 Indicators. Zuzanna Przypkowska presented Poland's diverse local sustainability initiatives, including support for cultural institutions in rural areas and integration of green elements in heritage sites. Krista Petäjäjärvi and Tarja Hautamäki (Finland) reinforced the connections between culture, health, security, and social cohesion, suggesting that PA Culture can act as an umbrella to link and articulate broader policy goals.

A key outcome: Franziska Kapteina proposed a policy paper on culture and sustainability in the Baltic Sea Region, with country-specific examples and room for thematic spin-offs such as future focus on culture and health.
Franziska also presented the Work Plan for 2024, which was unanimously approved. As the group looks ahead, the next Steering Group meeting is planned for April 2024, focusing on coordination and strategic facilitation.

The Riga meeting marked a turning point – a growing network of partners, and a clear ambition to shape PA Culture into a policy-savvy, future-ready force in the Baltic Sea Region. With strategy papers on the horizon and sustainability at the heart of the agenda, PA Culture is stepping confidently into its next phase.

> Culture, Sustainability, and Strategy in Focus – 16 April 2024, online

The PA Culture Steering Group gathered online on 16 April 2024 for its second meeting under the Latvian chairmanship. With three new members – Kadri Jauram (Estonia), Dörte Törper (Germany), and Jesper F. Schou-Knudsen (Denmark) – the group opened a new chapter in strategic thinking, diving into discussions that connected local action with global trends.

The session marked the kick-off of the EUSBSR Action Plan revision process, a major step in redefining the future of the Strategy. Franziska Kapteina outlined the timeline: with templates expected in September, Policy Areas will begin crafting 2 – 4 targeted Actions aligned with EUSBSR objectives, ready for Steering Group approval by the end of the year.

Franziska emphasized the need for redefining PA Culture's objectives, building on current pillars – CCIs, cultural heritage, and values – to shape new actions that are both ambitious and strategic. A wide array of updates and reflections sparked rich discussion:
Magdalena Kleszczewska shared recent coordination activities, including major reporting efforts and upcoming events like "Culture makes cities stronger" (24 April, Warsaw) and InnoCulture Conference (18 – 19 November, Gdansk).
Jesper F. Schou-Knudsen introduced Denmark's new international cultural framework – a paradigm shift that sees culture not just as diplomacy, but as a driver of global change. Kadri Jauram previewed Estonia's priorities for its upcoming CBSS Presidency, with a strong focus on AI and heritage protection in times of crisis. Baiba Mūrniece highlighted Latvia's efforts at the UN level, including the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action, as well as regional collaborations on culture and resilience. Other updates came from NDPC, CBSS, and BRHC, touching on topics from cultural entrepreneurship to heritage in crisis and sensitive cultural landscapes.
A key discussion point was the emerging Policy Paper on Culture and Sustainability, led by Franziska. The paper will explore how culture can act both as a preservation tool and a vehicle for sustainability communication, with examples like New European Bauhaus projects. This paper is set to become a lobbying tool and cornerstone of future PA Culture actions.

With the Action Plan revision and policy paper both underway, the Steering Group is entering a pivotal phase. The next SG meeting is set for 18 November in Gdansk, alongside the InnoCulture Conference – a promising platform to connect stakeholders, spark ideas, and pilot the concept of a Baltic Sea Region cultural forum.

This meeting marked a turning point: PA Culture is not only responding to global shifts – it's helping shape them. Through sharper strategy, sustainable thinking, and cross-border collaboration, the Policy Area is stepping into a leadership role within the EUSBSR and beyond.

> Focused Dialogue for the Future – 18 November 2024, Gdańsk

Under the fresh Polish chairmanship and energized by the presence of new members, observers, and youth representatives, the PA Culture Steering Group gathered in Gdańsk to reflect, align, and shape the future of cultural cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. With the Baltic Sea Region in a time of rapid transition, the 18 November 2024 meeting offered a crucial platform to reframe PA Culture's priorities and reaffirm its relevance.

From across the region, representatives offered updates that reflected a common theme: cultural resilience in the face of budgetary and geopolitical pressures, coupled with innovative policy responses.
Latvia (Dāvids Garšva) shared an ambitious €262 million cultural budget with initiatives in infrastructure, heritage protection, and artist insurance, despite anticipated cuts.
Lithuania (Birutė Kazlauskienė) presented its comprehensive Cultural Policy Framework built on 8 cross-sectoral principles, emphasizing lifelong learning in the cultural sphere, inclusion and integration, especially for vulnerable groups.
Estonia (Kadri Jauram) spotlighted – amid budget cuts – legal reforms on artist protections through the Creative Association Act and suggested a proposal for EU-wide digital backups for cultural heritage threatened by crisis.
Finland, Sweden, and Poland all echoed the challenge of cultural budget cuts, with Sweden unveiling a new 10-year CCI strategy and Finland mobilizing regional councils to push back.
Poland (Zuzanna Przypkowska) presented legislative work underway to support young artists.
Denmark reported a cultural paradigm shift – from soft diplomacy to sustainability and systems change – alongside the launch of a Cultural Passport.

Meanwhile, CBSS, NDPC, BRHC, and UBC reinforced their roles as long-term Observers. Highlights included: Ukraine's accession as an observer to NDPC, signaling growing Baltic regional cooperation, upcoming events like Estonia's "Unwanted Heritage" workshop (Spring 2025), UBC's efforts to define minimum cultural services for cities, with a strong focus on youth and children's access to culture.

Youth representatives Anastasiia Horlikuova and Janne Tikkanen brought outcomes from the Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue 2024 to the fore, stressing funding concerns and showcasing their high-school-tested outreach activities on shared heritage. Their call for integration into the Action Plan received warm support.

Blagovestka Riiser (DG Regio) brought valuable EU-level insight, outlining upcoming initiatives under Commissioner Glenn Micaleff:

- Youth Dialogues,
- AI strategy for CCIs,
- A proposed "Culture Compass" to guide EU cultural policy post-2027.

This was complemented by discussion on how macro-regional culture strategies should evolve, feeding directly into the ongoing revision of the EUSBSR Action Plan.
The heart of the meeting centered on shaping the next Action Plan. Franziska Kapteina guided a dynamic and interactive session on the update process:

- Scope Debate: Calls ranged from narrowing the Action Plan to stay strategic (Krista, Zuzanna), to keeping enough breadth to remain inclusive (Marcus, Blagovestka).
- Emerging Priorities: Fragility of the cultural sector, Digital heritage & AI in culture, Sustainability

and green transition, underwater and coastal heritage, youth access, mental health, and professional artists' rights surfaced as key themes.

- PA Culture's Identity: Is PA Culture a driver, a platform, or a rapporteur? This question sparked lively exchange. Consensus leaned toward maintaining its role as a knowledge hub and amplifier of good practice.

Poland announced it will host the EUSBSR Annual Forum in October 2025 in Pomorskie region, alongside preparations for its EU Council Presidency. In the cultural sphere, Lublin was confirmed as European Capital of Culture 2029, with a unique plan to recognize all candidate cities as "Polish Capitals of Culture" in the years ahead.

The meeting closed with a forward-looking Interreg consultation session led by Laura Ligazzolo and Elena Kolosova, focusing on post-2027 programming. A reminder that PA Culture must remain agile, relevant, and strategically plugged into evolving macro-regional and EU priorities.

The gathering not only showcased a wealth of national and institutional initiatives—it also underscored a shared urgency to adapt culture to new political, environmental, and technological realities. Whether through artist protection, AI strategies, or youth inclusion, the Steering Group reaffirmed culture's essential role in navigating the region's future.

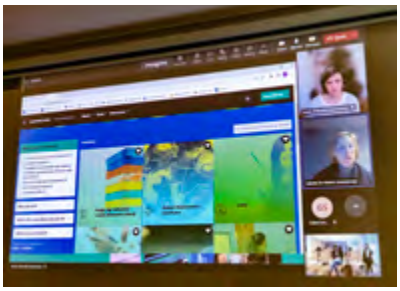
OFFLINE & HYBRID

> EUSBSR Annual Forum 2022: Roundtable 'Cultural relations in turbulent times' – 27 September 2022, Lappeenranta and online

There were two keynote speakers: Nicholas Cull, professor of communication in the field of public diplomacy at the USC and advisor to governments and international bodies across continents, spoke of Reputational Security. This phenomenon, Cull argues, is of high importance for the ability of e.g. states to engender motivation and raise support for their policies and actions. Cull mentioned the difference between international attention to the invasions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 as an example of how Ukraine and its partners have been handling the reputation and knowledge of the country's culture and identity. The Baltic countries were also mentioned as countries that to some extent have succeeded in working with their reputational status – whereas one might question to which extent this can be said for the region as a whole. Solomiya Borshosh, executive director of the Ukrainian Institute, gave a presentation on the work that the institute has been doing since its creation in 2015, precisely after the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea. Handling knowledge about the culture and art of Ukraine is an important part of the institute's strategy, and Borshosh mentioned the work of Cull as an inspiration. Since 24 February 2022, an increasing focus of Borshosh's work has been on securing the well-being and capability of Ukrainian artists in carrying out their work. However, the role of culture and the arts remains an important focus area for securing the awareness and support of the international community. Following the presentations, there was a discussion with the audience, focusing on how reputational handling and slogan-based branding differ and how reputational security is a multilateral and complex undertaking. The event was moderated and reported by Oleg Koefoed from Growing Pathways.

> Hybrid event: PA Culture Information Day on Funding – 15 December 2022, Warsaw and online

The day began with presentations on the PA Culture projects Creative Ports, CCI Contact Desk, and Arts on Prescription, delivered by their respective representatives. In the further course, important funding programs such as the Swedish Institute Seed Money, Culture Moves Europe, Interreg Baltic Sea Region and Creative Europe were presented by experts. The first presented program was the Swedish Institute Baltic Sea Neighbourhood Programme. The programme contributes to sustainable development and strengthens global competitiveness for the region. A further aim is to support and stimulate mutual and long-term relations. Isabelle de Voldere from IDEA consult and Dubravka Jurisic from Creative Flip introduced Creatives Unite and So You Need Money to participants. Creatives Unite was born in response to the pandemic as a resource platform that gathers all pertinent initiatives and information related to the Cultural and Creative Sector in the EU and beyond. So You Need Money is a personal financing toolkit that presents a tailored overview of different financing sources after completing questions. Magdalena Rausch from Goethe Institut presented Culture Moves Europe that provides mobility grants for artists and cultural professionals in all 40 Creative Europe countries. Culture Moves Europe includes 2 actions: individual mobility action with mobility duration from 7 to 60 days that started in October 2022 and residency action in 2023. The next introduced program was Interreg Baltic Sea Region.



There are four thematic priorities within the programme: innovative societies, water-smart societies, climate-neutral societies and cooperative governance. Small projects and core projects can apply for Interreg funding. The partnership for both types of projects should include at least three organisations from three Programme area countries. The programme Creative Europe was also brought closer to the audience during the event. Creative Europe is the European Commission's flagship programme to support the culture and audiovisual sectors. For questions, assistance related to the programme and help cooperating with organisations in other countries, Creative Europe Desks are in place in every participating country. The last presented Funding Program was Horizon Europe, an impact-oriented programme supporting research and innovation at European and global levels. It tackles climate change, helps to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and boosts the EU's competitiveness and growth. All types of organisations with legal personality such as universities, NGOs, and public administration can apply for funding.

> EUSBSR Annual Forum 2023: Workshop 'Youth and Culture as drivers for the development of attractive and resilient communities' – 4 October 2023, Riga

In cooperation with PA Tourism and the Council of the Baltic Sea States, PA Culture organised this workshop during the 14th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region complimenting its lead topic 'Safe and Sustainable Baltic Sea Region for Future Generations'.

The workshop "Youth and Culture Driving Resilient Communities in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR)" addressed the growing challenges faced by many cities in the region, including declining attractiveness, youth outmigration, and decreasing social, political, and civil society engagement. Against this backdrop, local authorities often struggle with limited resources to counteract these trends. The session aimed to demonstrate how culture and young people can be leveraged as key local assets to strengthen social resilience, revitalise communities, and enhance their long-term attractiveness, including for sustainable tourism in the BSR.

Bringing together local perspectives, policy-level insights, and practical examples, the session combined strategic framing with hands-on case studies and interactive audience engagement. After introductory remarks and an interactive icebreaker, the discussion was framed around three guiding questions: what social resilience means in practice, why it matters for local development, and which challenges hinder its implementation.

The core of the session consisted of four case studies offering complementary perspectives: a municipal view from Varde, a youth-focused perspective from The Committee of Youth Representatives (CYR), a macro-regional approach through the BSR Cultural Pearls initiative, and a local/regional perspective linked to Copernicus. Together, these examples illustrated different ways of building capacity within local authorities and communities by mobilising culture and youth participation.

The workshop concluded with an interactive discussion, encouraging participants to reflect on key learnings, points of disagreement, and open questions, followed by a dialogue with the panelists and an outlook on upcoming initiatives, including the next Cultural Pearls announcement.

> Hybrid event: ‘Culture makes cities stronger’ promoting BSR Cultural Pearls and Open Call – 24 April 2024, Warsaw and online

On 24 April 2024, the hybrid event ‘Culture makes cities stronger: Baltic Sea Cultural Pearls – resilient cities and regions’ was hosted by PA Culture in collaboration with the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre in the National Library in Warsaw, Poland.

The aim of the event was to introduce the BSR Cultural Pearl project and the overarching topic of ‘Social Resilience through Culture’ in light of the open call for the BSR Cultural Pearls 2025

running at the time. After some opening remarks and a warm welcome to everyone by the hosts, the first input of the day was given by Felix Schartner Giertta introducing the BSR Cultural Pearls project as representative from lead partner Council of the Baltic Sea States. Lea Lükemeier from project partner Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, who is mentor to 2024 BSR Cultural Pearl Kiel, then brought the project to life more by giving insight into her mentee's actions for the running title year.

Following this input, Adam Mikołajczyk from Best Place – European Place Marketing Institute elaborated on the question "Why do we need another title?" by highlighting the importance and impact of building a brand as well as taking part in competitions for cities and regions with multiple examples. Such an example is also Tartu2024, with the city of Tartu and Southern Estonia holding the European Capital of Culture 2024. Kadri Laanmets presented the city and region's efforts, highlighting amongst other aspects the increase in collaboration within the region and international attention gained through the title.

The final presentation by Joanna Erbel from CoopTech Hub wrapped up this part of the day with sharing parts of her research on the topic 'Urban and Cultural Resilience'. This concluded the online part of the event while onsite the exchange was continued with table discussions.

> EUSBSR Annual Forum 2024: Engagement Day – 29 October 2024, Visby

The Engagement Day marked an early start to the Forum for those new to the Strategy. About 200 participants had the opportunity to present themselves with their projects and network in the roundtable sessions led by the EUSBSR Policy Areas. The target groups for this day were civil society, youth organisations, the business sector, local authorities and Ukrainian stakeholders. ARS BALTICA organized PA Culture's participation on the day and supported in person at the roundtables on different topics. It was delightful to see multiple connections to the cultural field of expertise being present within the BSR, Ukraine and beyond.

> EUSBSR Annual Forum 2024: Workshop 'Culture X Integration' – 31 October 2024, Visby

Policy Areas Culture and Education co-hosted a workshop under the title "Culture X Integration" with the aim of exploring synergies between Policy Area Education and Policy Area Culture with the potential of cultural activities in fostering social integration among migrants and refugees. The workshop brought together about 40 participants from around the Baltic Sea and by engaging participants in an interactive way, and highlighted the power of shared cultural experiences as a bridge to understanding, empathy, and unity in diverse communities. Three inspirational showcases were presented by partners from Sweden, Germany and Poland. They did not only cover different perspectives on the overlaps between culture and integration, but also reflected the different aspects of culture itself.

Kalina Czwarnóg from the Warsaw-based Ocalenie Foundation provided insights into how migrants can be supported in familiarising themselves with life in a different culture. Participants discussed essential elements of integration programs and identified key considerations. The

discussion highlighted the need for integration measures that also target the host society, recognizing that integration is a two-way process that cannot rely solely on expectations for newcomers.

This is also the approach followed by the grassroots initiative Give Something Back to Berlin, where integration and cultural exchange are understood as beneficial to everyone – if approached in the right way. During the workshop, Mine Nang and Antonina Stasuik guided discussions surrounding the question of 'choice' and 'responsibility' within a 'trauma-informed approach' and the challenges this possibly includes in project management.

The third initiative present at the workshop was the research project The Art of Belonging: Social Integration of Young Migrants in Urban Contexts through Cultural Place-Making. The project introduced the "Cultural Rucksack for New Arrivals", a program that fostered arts and cultural engagement to help integrate new arrivals. In summer courses offered to young migrants, the focus was placed on making their stories visible, while at the same time – through art – offering them the possibility to make the city their own. Sinnika Neuhaus from Lund University and visual artist Lara Sanna started the workshop with the presentation of the general idea of Art of Belonging. The participants then developed formats aimed at connecting newcomers to their welcoming community.

The outcomes shall be integrated into the Policy Area Education emerging platform Baltic Sea Region Integrate Now, adding another dimension focussing on societal integration and participation and thereby contributing to the overarching goals of both Policy Area Education and Policy Area Culture in the context of the Baltic Sea Region.

> InnoCulture Conference 2024 – 19/20 November 2024, Gdańsk

Policy Area Culture, together with its partners ARS BALTICA, the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre, the CCI Contact Desk and Goyki 3 Art Inkubator, co-hosted the first edition of the InnoCulture Conference as a pilot for a regular Culture Forum within the EUSBSR. The event was hosted as a lunch-to-lunch event at the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre in Gdańsk, Poland. Over 60 participants from across the Baltic Sea Region followed the invitation to explore culture's innovative potential. The conference programme offered different formats for networking, during breaks and in exercises, with three keynotes and five two-day workshops held by experts from different corners of the cultural and creative field.

Kaarina Williams, Senior Adviser for Baltic Sea Region Affairs at the Ministry for European Affairs of Land Schleswig-Holstein, moderated the event. The first day gave inspirational input in the form of a 'Speed Networking' exercise led by ARS BALTICA allowing people to meet new acquaintances and get the innovative mindset flowing in a short time, followed by two keynotes and the first part of the two-day workshop formats. Keynote speaker Inese Suija-Markova, among many other qualifications Deputy Mayor of Cēsis Municipality and Deputy Chair of Vidzeme Planning Region Development Board, held her speech on the topic 'The Missing Palette: Why Innovation Needs Art and Culture'. She highlighted the five superpowers only culture as a sector could unite, namely: spark curiosity, unleash creativity, nurture compassion, create commonality and celebrate humanity. She emphasized that curiosity, creativity, and compassion are key drivers of innovation, enabling the invention and implementation of value-creating ideas, particularly across sectors, and provided practical examples to demonstrate this. The second keynote speaker of the day, Krista Petäjäjärvi, expert in arts-based innovations on multiple levels, one being her position at the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture – NDPC Secretariat in Riga, added to this notion following the topic 'Art in Innovation: Why should we care?' She began by giving research-based proof for the importance of art for innovation and the rising interest in using culture to foster societal change achieved through 'Creative Cross-Innovation'. She continued by stressing that eye-level collaboration, a joint mission and artistic/creative expertise at the core of the process are the key to success. She gave practical examples and ended by stating that incorporating arts in innovation processes needs supportive frameworks including policies and funding to evolve "from a curiosity to a driving force in crafting more sustainable futures".

The workshop formats linked culture with community, entrepreneurship, health, mobility, and sustainability, utilising the spark of creativity to inspire and give room for innovative ideas and creative solutions to current challenges, presenting and discussing tools, funding, best practices and more. The intersection of culture and the topic 'community' was addressed by Dorota Kamrowska-Załuska and Hanna Obracht-Prondzyńska from Urb Cultural Planning; Fabian Baßenhoff from Hamburg Music dove into the cultural entrepreneurship; Marta Ciesielska represented Arts on Prescription and gave insights on the connection to the field of health; Kasia Sobczak from Goyki 3 Art Incubator elaborated on the topic of culture and mobility together with Tamara Kamińska from Music Export Poland, and sustainable actions in the field of culture were presented by Lara Löser representing the CCI Contact Desk at the Goethe Institut Tallinn with Adele Newman from the project CYCLE UP!

The second day began with another networking exercise led by ARS BALTICA, freeing the mind up for the last conference day and giving more opportunity for connecting with fellow conference participants. This was followed by nine projects from across the Baltic Sea region presenting themselves to the plenum for future networking, before everyone returned to the workshop

groups from the previous day. The workshops were concluded in a plenary session with short summaries giving a glimpse of the discussions within the individual groups.

Preparing the closing of the conference, keynote speaker Kazimierz Musiał, senior adviser for priority area Regional Identity in the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat in Stockholm responsible for matters related to culture, higher education, and youth, highlighted the topic of 'Cross Sectoral Cooperation on Culture, Creativity and Innovation – A Strategic Imperative for the Baltic Sea Region'. He promoted collaborative policy-making, investing in cultural education and embracing AI solutions. Following his input, a lively discussion within the plenum was initiated with different views voiced. Rounding this off, he stressed that when wanting to reach and communicate with the political level, addressing individuals directly and staying persistent is still a vital part of the process.

This first edition of the InnoCulture Conference was just a beginning: While there is still more potential to unlock, more cross-sectoral exchange being only one of many aspects, this conference was successful in setting the stage for meaningful growth and collaboration in the future with the second edition to follow in November 2025.

ONLINE

> Online Brainstorming Workshop with Keynote Speech 'On the international reputation of the Baltic Sea Region: prospects, challenges and good practices' by Simon Anholt – 19 January 2022

PA Culture's brainstorming session was organised as a kick-off for the preparations of the new application for 2022-2024 with Simon Anholt invited as a speaker to share his thoughts about the international reputation of the Baltic Sea Region. In his short keynote speech he reflected on prospects, challenges and good practices that could serve as an inspiration not only within the field of culture and creative sectors, but for all Policy Areas working for the implementation of the EUSBSR. Drawing from his best-known research project – the Good Country Index – Simon also shared some general remarks on what is and what is not effective when it comes to fostering countries or regions international reputation.

Being critical about effectiveness of the branding practices and marketing campaigns, Simon focused on how to use cultural relations and cultural assets in general to work for the region's favour. What's needed is an organic action, networking, and raising interest in the region among countries outside of it by providing ideas and solutions that could benefit not only their citizens, but also foreign visitors and audiences. It is the countries and regions contribution to the global good by i.e. fixing the world's most urgent problems that is nowadays the most commonly recognized reason for their favorable international reputation. One of such most widely acknowledged facts about the Baltic Sea is that it is one of the most polluted seas in the world. Yet "fixing it" should not mean reversing the message with sole marketing campaigns, communication strategies, etc., but acting as coherently on the common aim as possible. Generating projects and stimulating partnerships within the region to imaginatively contribute to cleaning up the Baltic Sea together could be used as a banner and call for action also for CCI. But what sort of benefits can result from the clean Baltic Sea to the rest of the world – how can this fact contribute to the global good? How can cultural and artistic endeavours inspire global audiences and raise the interest in collaborating with BSR and countries from the region? Special attention in this context has been given to Latvia's SEA 2030 initiative.

> Online Workshop: Baltic Creative Pitch! – 23 May 2023

The first part of the Baltic Creative Pitch focused on an initial pitching round in which selected projects presented their ideas and received feedback through a Q&A session and advisory input aimed at clarifying project concepts and outlining possible next steps towards an Interreg Baltic Sea Region application. While the format was designed as a preparatory step for further project development, the process did not progress beyond this initial phase and no second pitching round was implemented.

> Online Webinar: EU Strategic Frameworks for Culture – 20 June 2023

PA Culture organised the online webinar 'EU strategic frameworks for culture' on 20 June. Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) experts provided an overview of the frameworks and funding opportunities of European cultural policy, the New European Bauhaus as well as EIT Culture and Creativity Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC). DG EAC is the executive branch of the European Union responsible for policy on education, culture, youth, languages, and sport. The first presentation was made by Maria Iglesias on New European Bauhaus (NEB) whose aim is to create a network of design centers that addresses the challenges like climate change with the key values of sustainability, inclusion and beauty. NEB has already awarded two rounds of prizes, the announcement of the 15 winners of the Prizes 2023 took place on 22 June in Brussels. Iglesias also presented the NEB Compass that is a guiding framework for decisionmakers and project managers wishing to apply the NEB principles and criteria to their activities. The next NEB Call will be opened on 4 October and will focus on innovative solutions for greener and fairer ways of life through arts and culture, architecture and design. Guglielmo Di-Cola has given an update on EIT Culture and Creativity. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) supports the development of long-term partnerships that are called Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KIC). EIT Culture and Creativity is the ninth KIC that was designed to strengthen and transform Europe's CCSI by increasing its innovation capacity and competitiveness. EIT Culture and Creativity was currently in the phase of developing its long-term strategy as well as drafting a business plan for 2024-2025 and a strategic idea. Five impact areas have been already identified: fashion and textiles, architecture, audiovisual, design as well as cultural heritage. The Moonshot Event that took place on 30 May provided an opportunity to establish a long-term and ambitious shared goal for the competitiveness of European CCSIs and their critical role in the future of Europe. Marta Jimenez-Pumares' keynote focused on European cultural policy including the framework and funding opportunities. The European Commission supports and promotes policy cooperation between the Member States and cultural stakeholders, CCS authorities, institutions and key players. The New European Agenda for Culture of the EC was adopted in May 2018. There are two ways of working with the sector: Open Method of Cooperation (a practical and structured way to bring together representatives from EU Member States) and Voices of Culture (dialogue with civil society). One of the OMC groups with 50 experts from 25 EU Member States focused on Strengthening Cultural Heritage Resilience for Climate Change and produced a report with a set of key recommendations for policymakers. Every 4 years the Member States establish the priorities of the work plan, the Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 was adopted at the end of 2022 and has 4 policy priorities with 21 actions: artists and cultural professionals, culture for the people, culture for the planet as well as culture for co-creative partnerships. Jimenez-Pumares also shortly introduced the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, the European Commission Cultural Heritage Experts Group (CHEG) that meets twice a year for exchanging information, as well as the Cultural Heritage in Action that was one of the actions of the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (EFACH action) of the European Commission. EFACH action empowered cities and regions to strengthen their cultural heritage policies and initiatives as well as develop innovative solutions to preserve cultural heritage assets. A further topic was the Urban Agenda for the EU, a multi-level working method for urban policy and practice, promoting cooperation between Member States, cities, the European Commission, and other stakeholders with the pillars of better regulation, better funding and better knowledge. The Thematic Partnerships are the key delivery mechanism within the Urban Agenda for the EU. The keynote concluded with information on EU sources of finance for Culture and Heritage such as Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, Cohesion Funds, Erasmus+ and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Detailed information can be found within the CulturEU

Funding Guide that helps stakeholders of all sizes to navigate all funding opportunities available for the 2021–2027 period. Funding opportunities beyond EU official funds can be found within the tool 'So You Need Money' by Creatives Unite. At the end of the webinar the PA Culture Coordinator Franziska Kapteina gave a brief introduction on the Policy Area and reported on PA Culture activities in 2022 such as the 'Thematic Roundtable on Cultural Relations' at the EUSBSR last year's Annual Forum in 2022.

> Baltic Sea Creative Workshops – 30 October, 15 and 30 November 2023

The new format of interactive workshops, Baltic Sea Creative Workshops, developed jointly with ARS BALTICA and CCI Contact Desk, was launched in October 2023. In the series, a three-step approach was adopted, which led participants from ideation process, through partnership building, and wrapped up with exploring funding opportunities. Such an approach allowed for a broader, more cross-sectoral and cross-PA participation.

The Baltic Sea Creative Workshop #1 'Ideation: From Brainstorming to Breakthroughs: Transforming Ideas into Actionable Plans' took place 30 October 2023 and featured Tiina-Katrina Kaber representing EnterTraining and Catalyst Estonia. Combining highly engaging teambuilding methods with concepts of change management and neuroscience in learning, her main focus lies on developing teams using the concept of entertraining: a combination of engagement, analysis and just the right amount of new info. Additionally, she often takes the stage at different events as a speaker, host and energizer. The event centred around asking three main questions on the path to transforming an idea into reality: why, who and how to take action?

For the Baltic Sea Creative Workshop #2 on 'Partnerships: From Contact to Connection: Tools for Effective Partnership Building' on 15 November 2023, expert Agata Etmanowicz was invited to support the process of developing and maintaining a "successful partnership". She designs and conducts not only workshops but also processes and programs for professionals in the cultural sector (industry-specific, cross-industry and for specific organizations). She also produces "her own" culture and artistic projects as well as helps others with the realization of their dreams. Together with Impact Foundation she created the capacity building programmes with audience development and accessibility in the core for European Capitals of Culture (for Wrocław 2016, Kaunas 2022, Trenčín 2026 and Budweis 2028) and co-operated with other Capitals, e.g. Kosice 2013 and Rijeka 2020. In the past, she has dealt with cultural policy – both locally and at the European level (from EU programs, through support for the creative sector, to European Capitals of Culture and the Eastern Partnership). For over a decade, she has also been associated with Fabryka Sztuki in Łódź and its ART_INKUBATOR.

The third and final Baltic Sea Creative Workshop #3 'Funding Opportunities: Beyond the Basics: Exploring Opportunities for Fundraising and Development' on 30 November 2023 was supported by Lars Schiber from REM Consult in Hamburg. He mainly supports EU funded projects of very diverse topics – ranging from innovation to circular economy. He conceptualises and writes applications with project partnerships as well as supports in the project management and financial management of approved projects. Beyond having supported projects and applications for more than ten years in more than a dozen regional, national and European funding programmes, he moderates events, develops and teaches at university.

In total, 65 individuals registered for this series, representing 40 organizations across 16 countries.

>> Baltic Sea Creative Workshop 1: Ideation – From Brainstorming to Breakthroughs: Transforming ideas into Actionable Plans – 30 October 2023

The first Baltic Sea Creative Waves workshop, held online on 30 October 2023 and led by Tiina-Katrina Kaber from Entertrain, focused on ideation as a strategic process for developing actionable project ideas. Addressing the challenge of selecting one idea among many, the session framed ideation as a structured transition from brainstorming to implementation.

A key takeaway was that strong and sustainable ideas emerge at the intersection of four factors: personal motivation, skills and competencies, the needs of target groups, and financial feasibility. While passion and joy were recognised as important drivers, the workshop emphasised that viable projects require alignment between the why of an idea and the how of its implementation. Drawing on Simon Sinek's Golden Circle, participants explored the importance of clearly articulating the deeper "why" as both a strategic and emotional driver that resonates with audiences and partners.

The workshop highlighted intrinsic motivation as a central element of engagement, introducing the concept of a "magic of motivation" based on relatability, competence and mastery, autonomy, purpose, and the combination of newness with social connection. Participants reflected on cultural projects as tools for inclusion, accessibility, connection, two-way learning and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Practical methods were introduced to support creative momentum, including working with creative constraints, reframing ideas through alternative contexts, and structured reflection tools such as the Six Thinking Hats. Attention was also given to understanding who ideas are created for, distinguishing between audiences and participants, and critically reflecting on potential failure and success.

The session concluded by emphasising the importance of defining clear next steps, setting deadlines, and designing ideas with continuity in mind, while opening the guiding question of who needs to be involved to turn ideas into reality.

>> Baltic Sea Creative Workshop 2: Partnerships – From Contact to Connection: Tools for effective partnership building – 15 November 2023

This workshop, led by Agata Etmanowicz, explored international partnerships in the creative sector and highlighted that meaningful cooperation is best learned through hands-on experience. The discussion addressed different forms of partnerships, ranging from purely formal or "paper" collaborations to exchange-based formats and fully collaborative projects in which partners work closely together.

Participants reflected on the diverse motivations for international cooperation, including personal learning goals, organizational development, and the expectations of funders and artists. A strong emphasis was placed on the conditions for successful collaboration, notably the importance of a shared vision and common values. Strategic preparation, for example through tools such as

SWOT analysis, was identified as a key factor, alongside the need to build trust-based human relationships through networking.

The exchange of practical experiences illustrated the wide-ranging benefits of international cooperation, including professional growth, stronger audience engagement, and increased capacity for advocacy. At the same time, common challenges were openly discussed, such as unreliable partners, underestimated budgets, and communication difficulties. Suggested solutions included clear conduct agreements, careful planning, and transparent communication from the outset.

The session also stressed the importance of well-being and enjoyment in international projects, encouraging participants to approach collaborations with realistic expectations and a spirit of mutual support. To support future partnerships, resources such as Culture Action Europe, Trans Europol, and OnTheMove were recommended for partner search and guidance on funding frameworks.

>> Baltic Sea Creative Workshop 3: Funding Possibilities – Beyond Basics: Exploring opportunities for fundraising and development – 30 November 2023

Lars Schieber from Rem Consult presented an overview of EU funding opportunities for cultural and creative projects, introducing key programmes such as Creative Europe, Interreg, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values, and the European Solidarity Corps. The presentation outlined the main objectives and priorities of these programmes, as well as typical funding volumes and eligibility requirements.

Drawing on practical experience, participants discussed challenges and lessons learned in project development. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of involving partners from an early stage, gaining a thorough understanding of programme-specific expectations, and balancing strategic ambition with realistic planning.

A range of resources for identifying suitable funding opportunities was shared, including guidance from the European Parliamentary Research Service and the Culture EU Funding Guide. In addition, the presentation provided a step-by-step approach to project development, highlighting the need for a clear intervention logic, early consultation with national contact points, and a realistic assessment of a project's feasibility.

The session concluded with a question-and-answer segment and a broader discussion on the importance of sustainability and long-term collaboration in the context of EU project funding.

COMMUNI-
CATION

Communication within PA Culture remained dynamic and highly active throughout the reporting period, with a strong focus on visibility, accessibility and consistent engagement with stakeholders across the Baltic Sea Region. The PA Culture website served as a central information hub and was continuously updated with news, events and Steering Group meeting minutes. During the reporting period, substantial progress was made towards integrating the website into the EUSBSR infrastructure. While the long-term goal is a full transition, two websites were temporarily maintained to ensure that advanced functionalities and existing content remained available without disruption.

The PA Culture newsletter continued to be a key communication channel, offering regular insights into activities, developments and opportunities within the Policy Area. Between four and five editions were published annually, reaching a broad and diverse audience of approximately 466 subscribers. In addition, PA Culture coordinators actively contributed to EUSBSR newsletters, further extending the reach of cultural topics within the macro-regional framework.

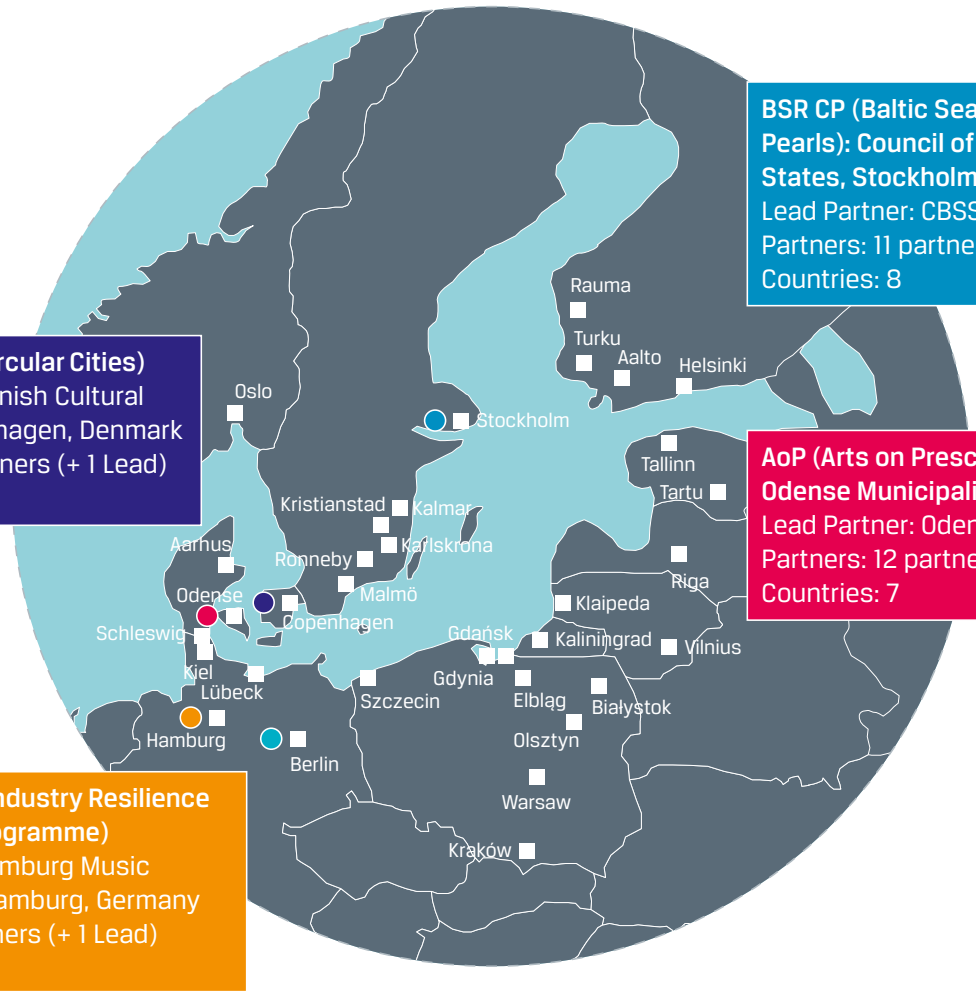
Social media played an increasingly important role in PA Culture's communication efforts and were further strengthened and professionalised over the reporting period. PA Culture maintained an active presence on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn, with frequent and timely posts on events, open calls, initiatives and inspiring examples from across the region. Follower numbers grew steadily on all platforms, particularly on LinkedIn, reflecting growing interest from institutional actors and project partners. In 2024, communication followed a coordinated concept and visual design, supported by an average of around 95 posts per platform per year. New content formats were regularly tested to increase engagement and keep communication fresh and relevant, supported by participation in external workshops on social media strategy development.

Beyond digital channels, PA Culture also expanded its communication toolbox through the development of new physical materials, including flyers and a roll-up aligned with the established visual identity. Close cooperation with the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme and regular contributions to EUSBSR communication activities ensured strong alignment within the wider strategy framework. PA Culture also reached new audiences through editorial work, including a contribution to the Baltic Rim Economies journal in 2024, which highlighted cultural and creative industries and promoted transnational cooperation within the Baltic Sea Region.

INTERREG BSR PROJECTS

CORE PROJECTS

Amongst all projects submitted for funding from the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme, its Monitoring Committee decides on a certain number of the projects to receive funding. Core projects are the main tool to deliver the change that Interreg Baltic Sea Region aims at. They prepare, pilot and transfer practical and durable solutions to the challenges they choose to tackle. In the 1st and 2nd call, in 2023, in total 5 core projects related to the Policy Area Culture were selected.



CCC (Creative Circular Cities)
Lead Partner: Danish Cultural Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark
Partners: 13 partners (+ 1 Lead)
Countries: 6

BSR CP (Baltic Sea Region Cultural Pearls): Council of the Baltic Sea States, Stockholm, Sweden
Lead Partner: CBSS, Stockholm, SE
Partners: 11 partners (+ 1 Lead)
Countries: 8

AoP (Arts on Prescription): Odense Municipality, Denmark
Lead Partner: Odense, DK
Partners: 12 partners (+ 1 Lead)
Countries: 7

MI-RAP (Music Industry Resilience Acceleration Programme)
Lead Partner: Hamburg Music Business e.V., Hamburg, Germany
Partners: 8 partners (+ 1 Lead)
Countries: 8

BSG-Go (Baltic Sea Game Support): BGZ Berlin International Cooperation Agency GmbH, Berlin, Germany
Lead Partner: BGZ, Berlin, Germany
Partners: 12 partners (+ 1 Lead)
Countries: 7

ARTS ON PRESCRIPTION IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Through the Arts on Prescription project, individuals with endangered mental health receive a medical prescription to create art works in groups, which has evident benefits on the well-being, transforming the cultural representation of mental health.

After a mental health issue such as stress or anxiety has been diagnosed or considered probable, usually therapies and medicines are suggested. This project provides a third option with creating art in a comfortable group setting. But the implementation may confront the public authorities with some obstacles: Lacking cooperation between the health and cultural sector, not enough knowledge about project management and the issue of long-term financing may be some of these.

The project set out to leverage these burdens and to conduct a pilot project beforehand. This served the discernment of the actual effects of art and social creativity on the psyche. In the evaluation process, the economic outcome and organisational strategies also were looked at. The collaboration with other regions followed.

Mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness increased sharply in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to a growing mental health permacrisis. At the same time, healthcare systems across Europe face rising demand and limited resources. There is an urgent need for innovative, preventive and cost-efficient approaches that complement existing health services.

Arts on Prescription (AoP) offers a powerful alternative. The concept enables people with mild to moderate mental health challenges, or those at risk of developing them, to receive a prescription not for medication or therapy, but for regular participation in creative, group-based arts activities. Participants are referred via trusted channels such as primary healthcare providers or social workers and supported by a dedicated link worker, who acts as a central contact point, assesses suitability and introduces participants to the programme.

AoP already demonstrated positive effects on mental wellbeing in countries such as the UK, Denmark and Sweden, while also offering potential to reduce pressure on healthcare systems through non-clinical, cross-sector solutions. Despite growing interest, AoP remains underdeveloped at European level. Public authorities face challenges related to cross-sector collaboration between health and culture, lack of implementation know-how, evaluation capacity and sustainable financing.

To address these gaps, the Interreg Baltic Sea Region project “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” aimed to establish AoP as a scalable and transferable public health approach in the intersection of Health and Culture. The project has developed an evidence-based AoP programme model and tested and adapted it through pilot programmes across Denmark, Germany, Poland, Latvia and Sweden. Key outcomes include an extensive information and training package, an online Arts-On-Prescription guide offering practical tools for planning, facilitating, evaluating and financing AoP programmes, and a find-a-mentor programme, where project partners and other Arts on Prescription advocates offer advice and support for municipalities and regions in the

Baltic Sea Region to implement their own AoP programme. Together, these outputs empower decision-makers, coordinators and practitioners to integrate Arts on Prescription into regional health systems and unlock the full potential of arts for mental wellbeing.

BSR (BALTIC SEA REGION) CULTURAL PEARLS

The project aimed to strengthen social resilience in Baltic Sea Region municipalities by harnessing the potential of local assets of culture and creativity. Culture is seen as an essential fundament of a vibrant urban life, uniting the society in creative processes.

In addition, Cultural Pearls is a title for small and medium size towns and cities that provides awarded municipalities with peer-learning opportunities and support to use culture to build social resilience. Annually, the project invites local authorities from the region to join a transformative journey. Through a meticulous selection process, the candidates with outstanding and impactful action plans on culture driven social resilience are awarded the BSR Cultural Pearls title.

The journey to becoming a BSR Cultural Pearl unfolds in stages. Initially, a selection based on motivation and concept identifies eligible candidates. These candidates then enter a phase of action plan development, creating Culture and Resilience Action Plans with access to specialised tools, webinars, and mentorship. An international jury then selects the best plans to award the BSR Cultural Pearl title.

Award recipients then embark on a one-year title year during which time their action plan is implemented. By engaging and involving their citizens, they create a sense of belonging and trust in their communities, which will make them stronger and more resilient. The Cultural Pearls network ensures visibility and provides opportunities for peer-learning with previous Pearls, support from national mentors, as well as access to materials and online webinars.

Both awardees and the other participating municipalities join the Cultural Pearls Network, gaining international exposure and continuing to enhance their community's resilience. Showcased across the region, the BSR Cultural Pearls recipients highlight the power of community and culture.

BSG-GO!
SCALING-UP BALTIC SEA GAME SUPPORT FOR A RESILIENT GAME INDUSTRY

This Interreg project, led by the BGZ (Berliner Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit mbH), developed methods to enhance the resilience in the game industry. The created tactics are made to be adaptable to other sectors like the cultural and creative industries (CCI) and create a safety net in case of future crises.

In the past years, surely all industries have gained valuable insights about their own resilience practices. Resilience, meaning the recovery from setbacks, consists of pro-active evaluation to not only return to a stable state, but also improve and strengthen socioeconomic structures. Although the gaming industry has shown to be fit for circumstances such as COVID-19, in which the mobility and communication is restricted, some weaknesses became apparent as well. For example the communication between the young creative entrepreneurs and the bilateral correspondence have potential for improvement.

BSG-Go! used the gaming industry as a pilot model for other socioeconomic fields, fostering the already functioning resiliency factors and compensating any lacking areas. Two guidelines provided orientation in the process:

- Communication: The key component for business to thrive in a productive and positive environment
- Anticipatory learning: BSG-go! emphasized the importance for young talents to realize their opportunities, take responsibility and engage in cross-sectoral work.

CCC (CREATIVE CIRCULAR CITIES)

In the project Creative Circular Cities, local authorities, business support organisations and NGOs showcased in six demo cities how cultural and creative sectors and industries can trigger circular business growth and promote circular consumption among people.

Circular transition at local level is the key first step towards a comprehensive Circular Economy (CE), as it allows a “system change” that integrates the production and consumption side at manageable scale. However, concrete practices for this are still rare in the BSR. Cultural and Creative Sectors & Industries (CCSI) can be both facilitators of circular consumption and frontrunners for circular production: As a social force, they have great influence on the mind sets of people and can promote “circular lifestyles”. At the same time, they are a business field with high innovation potential that can support circular business models. CCSI, therefore, can be drivers for a comprehensive circular transition at the local level.

CCC initiated a transnational co-creation process, in which 6 demo cities jointly developed and tested CCSI-driven approaches for an integrated circular transition. In each of them, local authorities, business support organisations and NGOs teamed up to:

- Launch enabling environments for CCSI-driven circular transition
- Help businesses to create CCSI-supported circular business models
- Promote “circular lifestyles” with CCSI assistance.

The results were processed into a “CCC Starter Kit”. It gives interested actors in other BSR cities concrete guidance to involve CCSI into circular transition and is pro-actively disseminated to them. A “CCC Policy Roadmap” facilitates dialogue with policy makers on potentials of the approach & support needs.

MI-RAP (MUSIC INDUSTRY RESILIENCE ACCELERATION PROGRAMME)

The project MI-RAP was set up to help local authorities, sectoral agencies and business support organisations to attract fresh talents to the music industry, while ensuring more cross-sectoral cooperation and integration of emerging technologies and green practices at the same time.

The music sector is a bridge between two forces: the arts and business. Only a resilient, interconnected, and innovative music ecosystem can lay the groundwork for artists to thrive, reach new audiences, and be financially successful. The sector is currently challenged by a difficult economic environment brought on by external shocks (COVID-19, climate change) and disruptive technologies. Three main developments endanger its resilience: a shortage of skilled workers; the emergence of new technologies and business models (streaming, AI); and how to green a sector that is based on transnational music exchange. Business support organisations, sectoral agencies and local public authorities have the leverage to increase the sector’s resilience in their local music ecosystems. However, they are lacking knowledge, capacities and tools necessary to put resilience-boosting activities into action.

The solution Music Industry Resilience Acceleration Programme (MI-RAP) addresses this challenge through:

- Tailored training programs/campaigns to provide workers with skills relevant to work in a changing industry
- Strategies/action plans to foster innovation and inner/cross-sectoral collaborations
- Guidance to support green practices for resource-intensive music events.
- The MI-RAP is made available on an online resource hub and transferable to actors outside of the partnership. Its implementation supports music businesses and artists to flourish, be innovative, and prosperous.

SMALL PROJECTS

In addition to core projects, Interreg BSR funds small projects that offer simpler application and implementation processes and in particular address those, who have not applied to the programme before. In the 1st and 2nd call, in total 5 small projects related to the PA Culture were selected.

BaMuR (Baltic Museum Resilience)

Taking the learnings from the COVID crisis, BaMuR was directed towards public authorities in the fields of culture and heritage, non-governmental organisations as well as small- and medium-scale enterprises. The project equipped them with a toolkit, usable in periods of stability and especially of crisis like the Russian aggression war against Ukraine, to help secure the consolation role of culture, memory and museums.

The COVID-pandemic evinced that the societal importance of culture has been underestimated before. Although many cultural institutions tried to compensate the lack of education and entertainment through digital offers, these spontaneous solutions revealed some weak spots: audience involvement, cooperation and methodical variety were mostly neglected.

Over the course of 24 months, BaMuR evaluated the past solutions and created a resiliency solution based on this research and three core focal elements: governance, digital and economic sustainability. This was followed by a pilot phase, before the developed solutions were made available for all respective institutions in the Baltic Sea Region. Collaboration was quintessential in the concepts and in the project itself, consisting of Finnish, Polish, Estonian, Swedish and Lithuanian partners. Together they wanted to increase societal and institutional resilience.

BALTIC UKH – Urban Knowledge Hubs

To increase digital literacy, this project provides authorities with the 4C Toolbox – a set of methods for the participatory creation of attractive, accessible hybrid spaces and services for information exchange, so-called Urban Knowledge Hubs.

The 4C Toolbox was born out of a need for change, since the digital transformation has shifted how people access information and communities are expecting public spaces and services to be more flexible, open, and inclusive. Hence, public institutions are being asked to be more than providers of services or information, but to act as facilitators of collaboration, civic dialogue, and innovation. This is where the concept of Urban Knowledge Hubs comes in: a bridge connecting citizens to global networks of knowledge (academic resources, digital tools, cultural archives) and simultaneously responding to local needs (helping communities learn, collaborate, and solve problems together). They are multifunctional access points, combining research, learning, culture, and civic engagement. And most importantly, they are adaptable reflecting the unique identity and priorities of the community they serve. The vision is for UKH to flourish across the BSR and internationally. The 4C Toolbox is providing practical methods for development of such hubs

through participatory innovation. It ensures that communities are not just passive users but active co-creators of the spaces and services they rely on.

The Toolbox is built around 5 interconnected phases that guide a project from its beginning to reflection and renewal. Each phase is designed to facilitate discussion between those collaborating. This is done by providing a specific tool in each of the phases. Taken together, the 5 phases form a structured but flexible framework, providing direction without being prescriptive, ensuring that projects remain collaborative, transparent, and sustainable.

The first phase is “Aims and Goals” – this is where actors establish a shared sense of purpose. With the Outcome Mapping Chart participants receive a tool to compare and align their interests, goals, and expectations. The second phase is centered around engagement: The lifeblood of participatory design, making sure that the people most affected by a project are actively involved in shaping it. With the Engagement Typology actors receive a tool to help them structure participation across the four Cs: co-creation, co-design, co-production, and co-evaluation. The third phase focuses on contributions, offering a Contribution Checklist, which helps partners map what they bring to the table – whether it is funding, staff time, infrastructure, technical skills, or community connections. The fourth phase is about accountability, ensuring clarity about roles and responsibilities by offering an Accountabilities Matrix – a simple but powerful tool to map who is responsible for what, how decisions are made, and how communication flows. The fifth phase is evaluation. Evaluation is often seen as the end of a project, but in the Toolbox it is understood as the bridge to the next cycle of participatory innovation. Two tools are included in this phase: The Voyage Log, combining metrics and stories to track progress, and the Anchoring Change Workshop, helping partners reflect together and decide what to sustain, what to adjust, and what new opportunities to pursue.

To make the Toolbox practical, this set of worksheets has been included at the back of the book. These templates are ready to use, and they can be adapted to fit individual projects.

The Toolbox is designed as both a guide and a framework. Actors can use it to:
- structure a full project from start to finish
- introduce participatory methods into an existing program
- inspire conversations with stakeholders about new directions

The Toolbox is freely available as an open-access resource, so anyone can download and use it. It is adaptable across sectors. While it was developed in libraries, it is equally relevant to archives, museums, universities, and other public institutions. It is not meant to be static. It is a living resource, growing and evolving as new institutions, communities, and contexts take it up, reimagining public institutions as dynamic, participatory spaces.

CCI4Change: Reducing energy consumption

The project connected entrepreneurs in CCI (cultural and creative industries) to public authorities to co-creatively engage citizens. The reduction of energy consumption requires drastic behavioural changes which CCI4Change aimed to encourage by sharing the mutual unique benefits of artistry and outreach.

The necessary shifts of habits are, for most citizens, complex and difficult to understand as well as execute and authorities lack the encouraging means. Art and culture can help clarify and convince in this matter, which is the reason why this project brings them together. The entrepreneurs gain new collaboration avenues to generate income and express their ideas, whilst authorities get closer to citizens.

To achieve this, three steps lined out the project's concept:

- Piloting: Firstly a collaboration model will aim to alter the energy consuming behaviours
- Toolbox development: Building on these outcomes, CCI4Change will create a toolset with tried methods to face this complex challenge and cooperate
- Case studies: To demonstrate the enormous potential behind these partnerships, three detailed case studies will be carried out, revealing the advances towards sustainability goals.

Circular FoodShift in the Baltic countries

The project Circular FoodShift provided peri-urban and rural municipalities and regions with the means to transform their food model. The organisers strived to achieve this by reducing waste in schools and gastronomy through the installation of upcycling businesses until the project's culmination in August 2025.

Because of our momentary food model, the economy advances, urbanisation and population growth heightens. The current highly profitable system is not compatible with our environmental goals though, making a change towards a circular economy necessary. But local and regional authorities, albeit motivated, often lack methods and knowledge to start this shifting process, which is further impeded by the scarcity of bottom-up collaborations.

Circular FoodShift aimed to foster cross-sectoral cooperation in the Baltic countries and to provide authorities with the tools and policies they need. In the face of growing gastronomy tourism and nutritional health problems, this project posed an important pillar in the environmental work and the development of a new food systems.

MainPotRe: Maintenance and scaling up potato growing and consumption heritage in Northern Baltic region to build up resilient communities

The Estonian, Latvian and Finnish project partners of MainPotRe promote the facilitation of access to potato seeds from genebanks for regional authorities and amateur gardeners alike. Thus, they want to lessen the dependency on other countries and improve the self-sufficiency in times of crises. In addition, potatoes form part of the regional heritage as the main crop grown there with high efficiency and nutritional value, which is why MainPotRe encompasses the distribution of local varieties.

Since the 19th century potatoes had the greatest impact on the population's diet and the agriculture of the Baltic Sea Region, with Estonia having the highest rank of potatoes per capita after the first world war. At present, the diet is richer and more diverse, the appetite for potatoes shrinks and with it the resiliency against disruptions of the supply chain. The Northern Baltic

countries, remote in relation to EU markets, are especially vulnerable, which makes the already quite popular and widely dispersed small-scale growing a perfect safety net to provide food security. But the availability of small quantities of seeds for the locally adapted varieties poses a challenge. To tackle it, the European Commission proposed new EU-wide regulations which are currently being debated and receive MainPotRe's strong support.

On the way to self-sufficient nutrition, MainPotRe formulated policy recommendations for expanding the registration of varieties. This includes:

- a toolbox for the non-commercial use
- explanation of the deposition and distribution of plant material in genebanks
- the refinement of current marketing strategies of healthy seeds of the local variations.

ACHIEVE-MENTS

Connecting culture across sectors and policies

Culture is one of the Baltic Sea Region's strongest shared assets. Its rich cultural life and heritage not only shape a common identity, but also offer powerful tools to address today's societal challenges. EUSBSR Policy Area Culture builds on this potential, positioning culture as a driver of social cohesion, well-being, and sustainable development across the region.

Between 2022 and 2024, PA Culture strengthened its role as a connector within the EUSBSR—linking Policy Areas, sectors, and stakeholders, and creating spaces where culture meets education, integration, tourism, health, and innovation.

Over the period 2022 – 2024, PA Culture demonstrated how culture can work as a transversal force within the EUSBSR:

- connecting Policy Areas and sectors,
- engaging new stakeholders,
- and translating dialogue into concrete cooperation.

Building on this momentum, PA Culture plans to:

- launch a larger cross-Policy Area initiative on culture-driven social integration, especially addressing the inclusion of marginalised groups;
- further develop platforms for cross-sectoral dialogue, linking cultural and heritage actors with tourism, education, urban planning, and other fields.

By doing so, PA Culture will continue to strengthen culture's role as a unifying and innovative force in the Baltic Sea Region.

Building bridges between Policy Areas

- Active participation in key macro-regional events, including the EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week and the EUSBSR Annual Fora 2022, 2023 and 2024.
- Stronger cooperation with PA Tourism and Council of the Baltic Sea States, culminating in a joint workshop "Youth and Culture driving resilient communities in the BSR" at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2023.
- Stronger cooperation with PA Education, culminating in the joint "Culture X Integration" workshop at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2024.
- Joint workshop preparations with PA Tourism, opening new perspectives on culture and sustainable tourism.
- First exchanges with cultural representatives from other macro-regional strategies (EUSDR, EUSAIR), laying the groundwork for future inter-MRS cooperation.

Creating spaces for exchange and inspiration

- Delivery of the interactive Culture X Integration workshop, bringing together organisations from Sweden, Poland, and Germany to showcase how culture supports migrant integration.
- Active presence in the Networking Village and Engagement Day at the EUSBSR Annual Forum 2024, significantly expanding PA Culture's stakeholder network.
- Ongoing collaboration with key partners such as Ars Baltica, the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre, the CCI Contact Desk, NDPC, and CBSS.
- Organisation of the InnoCulture Conference (November 2024) as a pilot for a future annual EUSBSR Culture Forum. This conference featured cross-sectoral workshops exploring how culture connects with health, community development, entrepreneurship, mobility, and sustainability. It also generated new connections, ideas, and momentum for future joint initiatives.

Turning dialogue into projects

- Continued cooperation with the BSR Cultural Pearls project, supporting local communities and embedding culture more strongly in local and transnational policies.
- Proactive coordination of a joint CCI session ahead of the Interreg BSR project platform call (2024), leading to the submission of a platform application focused on upskilling in the cultural and creative field.

OUTLOOK AND POLICY MAKING

Looking beyond the reporting period 2022 – 2024, culture is expected to remain a strategic field for strengthening cohesion, resilience and sustainable development across the Baltic Sea Region. While cultural cooperation has continued to prove its relevance as a connector between people, institutions and regions, persistent structural challenges still shape the outlook for the coming years. These include unequal access to cultural opportunities, fragmented support systems, and differences between national cultural ecosystems, which together affect participation, weaken the sector's ability to respond to societal change, and limit the wider policy impact of cultural initiatives.

In the next phase, emphasis is likely to shift towards reinforcing culture's role as a cross-sectoral driver that contributes not only to artistic development, but also to broader societal goals such as inclusion, democratic resilience and well-being. In particular, societal fragmentation and declining trust in institutions underline the need for cultural formats that support dialogue, community-building and civic engagement. Strengthening participation – especially for youth and marginalised groups – will therefore remain a key priority, alongside efforts to better safeguard artistic freedom and ensure that cultural spaces remain open, accessible and democratically grounded.

At the same time, the cultural and creative sector is likely to face growing pressure to adapt to rapid technological change, including digitalisation and AI. Supporting skills development, entrepreneurship and stronger networks across the macro-region will be essential to maintain competitiveness and to reduce economic precarity among cultural professionals. In parallel, sustainability concerns are expected to gain further relevance, both in terms of greening cultural practices and in safeguarding cultural heritage against increasing climate-related and geopolitical risks. This points towards an outlook where policy alignment and cross-sector cooperation – linking culture with sustainability, education, tourism, innovation and spatial planning – will become even more important.

Overall, the post-2024 period will require continued macro-regional collaboration to strengthen the long-term conditions for cultural participation, cooperation and resilience. By further integrating cultural perspectives into wider policy agendas and reinforcing transnational exchange, the Baltic Sea Region can enhance the role of culture as an essential contributor to inclusive and future-proof societies.

CONTACTS

Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Areas, European Affairs and Consumer Protection of Land Schleswig-Holstein (Germany)

Franziska Kapteina

Fleethörn 29-31
24103 Kiel, Germany
Tel: +49 (0)431 988 2116
E-Mail: Franziska.Kapteina@mllev.landsh.de

Adam Mickiewicz Institute (Poland)

Magdalena Kleszczewska

25 Mokotowska St.
00-560 Warsaw, Poland
Tel: +48 601 800 271
E-Mail: mkleszczewska@iam.pl

Socials:

www.linkedin.com/company/eusbsr-policy-area-culture

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EUSBSR EU STRATEGY FOR THE BALTIC SEA REGION Policy Area Culture

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Co-funded by the European Union

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage Republic of Poland

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