

# 70-Years-On Agenda Update 2024



The European Festival Association (EFA) marks its 72 years of existence in 2024 with the second update to the 70-Years-On Agenda, a living roadmap designed towards ensuring EFA's initiatives remain informed, adaptive and in tune with the times. Shaped by the insights of a Thinking Group, the Agenda reflects the evolving role of festivals in society, addressing pressing societal opportunities and challenges, and acknowledges the shifting arts landscape.

Each year, the 70-Years-On Thinking Group distils key shifts and frames them as points for reflection and action, evolving to mirror the "state of festivals" across Europe. In 2024, themes such as artistic freedom, financial viability, environmental sustainability, inclusivity, and the transformative potential of festivals were at the heart of several discussions held both in-person – during the Arts Festivals Summit 2024 on Usedom – and online – in the 70-Years-On Conversations. The resulting points are drawn from these group meetings or individual written contributions.

**1. Festivals at Arm's Length:** Artists, artistic leadership and programming must be protected from external pressures, allowing creativity to thrive without imposed compromise. The need for festivals and cultural institutions to remain free from political interference, censorship or intimidation has been evident. The erosion of artistic freedom in Europe calls on the community to defend the basic democratic principle of free expression, preserving the authenticity of festivals and their ability to foster genuine artistic expression. As Tiago Rodrigues, Portuguese actor, director, playwright and producer, mentions "While art contributes to societal discourse, it cannot single-handedly solve political issues like the rise of the far right. Artists must manage the frustration of arts limitations while celebrating its role in fostering dialogue and belonging. We should not ask the arts to do more than they can do. Art is not an antidote and is not also the reason bad things are happening."

**2. Festivals at a Crossroads:** Many festivals across Europe are under increasing pressure from reduced public funding and sponsorship disruptions. The financial alarms are often existential. It is critical to address how to diversify festival income streams and boost independent viability.

**3. Festivals as Meeting Points:** In thinking about addressing the violent divisions and increasing polarisation we see everywhere around us and within the political spectrum of democratic Europe, festivals wrestle with the issues of inclusion and boycott. What can festivals do to heal schisms? As Olga Tokarczuk, Polish Nobel laureate, writes, festivals can be "tender spaces" where we reconnect with the humanity of others in an increasingly fragmented world. Live arts create a place for people to be together in front of a work of art and experience it as a collective entity. Each individual experience is different and that creates a democratic experience, thoughtful and thought-provoking debates, and can inspire a more connected and harmonious society. It is the responsibility of festivals to "build a social architecture" (to quote, again, Tiago Rodrigues) that makes art as accessible as possible. Festivals must remain open to the world without imposing agendas.

**4. Festivals and Earth:** Recent years have demanded extraordinary flexibility from festivals, particularly regarding a renewed focus on environmental sustainability. Festivals can represent and evoke the rhythms of life, offering a space where art can express unusual chronologies and can place us in the face of a not eternally progressing timespan, making the pathology of the Earth the pathology of the human (as articulated by Bruno Latour, French philosopher). Art can, on the one hand, allow us to dig back into history and, on the other hand, offer atemporal flashes of insight and alternative ways of thinking that act as rescue operations for a world in crisis.

**5. Festivals as Hope:** Amid global crises, festivals remain places where hope is cultivated, not as an abstract ideal but as a practice of collective imagination. Festivals encourage resilience in the face of uncertainty. Festivals allow us to experience beauty, help restore empathy and engagement with one another on a deeper, more meaningful level. Tokarczuk's idea of "flight" – moments of transcendence and possibility – captures the essence of what festivals offer. They remind us that in a world constrained by challenges, imagination opens the door to new horizons.

These reflections underline the belief that festivals are fundamentally human endeavours. They are about people – artists, audiences, and communities – coming together to create meaning in uncertain times. They serve as bridges, not just between individuals, but also across borders, cultures and ideologies.

Festivals are not merely local events but also vehicles for fostering international connections. From hosting artists from war-torn regions like Kharkiv to collaborating with creatives in cities such as Lisbon or Budva, festivals demonstrate the power of cultural exchange. These connections often unfold in modest, everyday moments – on stage or during shared meals – emphasising that the most impactful cultural relationships are deeply human and grounded in mutual understanding.

The European Festivals Association serves as a channel for exchange, collaboration and inspiration. EFA's role is to facilitate dialogue and provide a framework within which festivals can propose, initiate or gather around meetings, projects, specific topics, etc., contributing in ways that reflect their unique contexts, priorities, and capabilities while at the same time inviting for self-critical reflection.

We look forward to continuing the exchange in 2025 together.

