

Closing Remarks

Dear friends,

As we come to the end of this I would first like to thank our hosts, our speakers, and all of you for the openness, passion and commitment you have brought to this discussion.

This morning, we heard about the local and national context of the chitalishte movement. We learned about its rich history, its achievements, but also about the challenges that come with such a unique and complex cultural and social ecosystem.

As I am here on behalf of the European Network of Cultural Centres, ENCC, I would like to focus my closing remarks on the **European dimension**.

Because what I take away from today is that the story of the chitalishte is not only a Bulgarian story. **It is also a European story.**

The values embodied by the chitalishte are values that Europe needs today more than ever: participation, community, learning, democracy, solidarity and human connection.

And this European dimension creates many opportunities.

- Opportunities to connect through European programmes, and to participate in training, exchange and mobility initiatives.
- Opportunities to collaborate through networks such as ENCC and many other European partnerships.
- And, of course, opportunities to connect with the European Capital of Culture programme, something we discussed this afternoon and where I see enormous potential.

So yes, it is important for the chitalishte to connect with Europe.

But! But, it is equally important that Europe connects with the chitalishte!

Because what you are doing is unique.

And I think it is important to be aware of that.

- As individual chitalishta.
- But also as a network.

Sometimes the things that are closest to us are the things we undervalue. **From the outside, however, we can clearly see how special this model really is.**

And this brings me, to conclude, to a personal story.

Like five years ago, I discovered the concept of the chitalishte.

I was deeply impressed.

So impressed, in fact, that when I returned to Leuven, I spoke about it during our annual New Year's reception.

As Director of Culture, I speak every year to a department of more than 150 colleagues in my department: people working in our cultural centre, our libraries, our museum and our heritage services.

And three years ago, inspired by the chitalishte, I asked them a simple question

(to be clear, I am not making this up, this is a true story)

I asked to all of my colleagues at the new years speech:

Why do we do what we do?

Why do we come to work every day with passion and perseverance?

Why does culture matter?

And to answer that question, from my point of view, I told them the story of the chitalishte.

I described how, in villages and towns across Bulgaria, so many communities create places for their communities.

- Places where people come together.
- Places where they have access to books, literature and knowledge.
- Places where they can listen to music, make theatre, discover local artists,
- Places where they learn new skills and share ideas.

And I told my colleagues: This is, for me any how, the reason why I do what I do:

Because at its heart, the chitalishte responds to something profoundly human.

The need to belong.

The need to learn.

The need to express ourselves.

The need to meet others and feel connected.

And once we truly realise this, we understand that culture is not a luxury.

Culture is a basic human need.

Its about personal growth.

Its about mental wellbeing.

This is what touched me so deeply about the chitalishte.

It represents the very soul of what we do in culture!

So today, as we conclude this round table,

I want to thank all of you for your dedication.

Thank you for this wonderful day.

And above all, thank you for inspiring us all.

reminding us why culture matters.

The story of the chitalishte is a wonderful story

and it deserves to be shared across Europe.

Thank you

Piet