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PANEL 3 — Culture as a Factor for Local and Regional Development

Opening remarks — [Piotr Michałowski](#), Board Member of the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), coordinator of ENCC's Community Group on Culture and Creativity in Rural Areas, expert in territorial development and urban-rural cooperation, co-author, among others of the [Heritage As A Catalyst For Societal Transformation: Towards Viable Local Creative Ecosystems In Poland And France](#) (2024) or [An Open and Inclusive Model for Humanist Participatory Management of Cultural Heritage in Rural Areas](#) (2026).

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To begin with:

[Closing the GAP programme](#) of [ENCC network](#), and currently called "[Bridge Makers](#)";, continued after the pilot phase in the last 3 years, which is perfectly aligned with your focus. Main idea: the programme is dedicated to establishing bridges and roundtables among local cultural stakeholders and local authorities, which are often in no-dialogue... That leads to immense problems, discontinuation of activities and gap in supply-demand chains. And the advocacy paper can be found [here](#) (available in various languages).

***Q:** What is the European experience and good practice in using culture as a factor for local and regional development?*

PM: To answer this question, it is important to dive into the ENCC network important transformations, that happened actually here, in Bulgaria, in 2014. The [First World Summit of Community Arts Centers and Networks, held between September 24 - 28, 2014](#), in the historic capital of Bulgaria, the city of Veliko Turnovo, with the generous support of the Municipality of Veliko Tarnovo as candidate for European Capital of Culture 2019.

There, the ENCC finally changed its statutory document, and allowed a single cultural centre, even the individual cultural operation – to become a full member of the network. This has paved a way to multi-layered participation and cooperation, which not anymore was limited to national networks as structures meeting at the European level. From that moment, the local cultural centres received an opportunity to easily leverage the recommendations of its community members – to the policy debate on the pan-European level.

***Q:** The rural, remote and peripheral areas — how are culture and community cultural centres part of the solution to local problems and part of creating new opportunities for development, education and social cohesion?*

PM: Firstly, we should introduce the category of the **local creative ecosystem**.

The creative ecosystem is a complex matter, which can be defined in many ways, especially in terms of how and by whom it is initiated and run. The most vibrant models, where creativity mounts, sustainable and responsible growth is a fact, and the CCIs are emerging to boost future-

oriented innovative strategies – are **rarely being borne in isolation**. In multiple cases – the success is a combination of various elements. It is surely the energy and creativity from within, but also the inspiration and know-how from outside. The ENCC network and its [Working Group on non-urban culture](#) (established in 2016), have been examining throughout the years those linkages and correlations (in our publications in the [Reading Room](#)), and we discuss those topics at the [ENCC Annual webinars](#). The symbiosis of reciprocal inspiration can be achieved through iterative and genuine interactions.

The model of rural co-living or rural residencies, has that unifying feature of expecting the unexpected (for both sides) in its DNA, be it the [Summer school Maříž of collective Leštnice](#) in Czechia, residencies based on sustainability and creativity by e.g. [Ziemniaki i](#) Foundation in Poland, the [Molino Lab](#) in Spain, CRAB international project, [Komuhn](#) in Portugal, the [Mandra Project](#) located in Romanian (Transylvanian) village of Mandra or the [Baba Residencies](#) of Ideas Factory in Bulgaria. In the latter of mentioned countries, the [Narodni Chitalishta](#) network is active, which developed a platform that maps all 3,597 hubs across every municipality in Bulgaria, of which 80% is located in non-urban areas. The map provides deep insights into the condition and potential of these hubs, including granular data on financing, human resources, and the socio-demographic context at the local level. It is a very inspiring model in place.

Actually, we have just launched the [ENCC Call for Abstracts](#) for the upcoming ENCC 2027 Book on cultural creative ecosystems in non-urban areas: <https://encc.eu/articles/call-for-abstracts-local-creative-ecosystems-in-non-urban-areas>

Deadline for submitting abstracts: 30th of November 2026.

Book will be published in September 2027.

Example of non-existing ecosystems: Poland and its “Klub Prasy i Książki” /// Press and Book Club network

In between 1969-89 there were around 5000 active clubs, mostly in the rural areas of Poland. Despite the political agenda of Polish People's Republic, the one could learn to sing, act in theatrical performances, making art, organize gatherings, discussion clubs or read newspapers, books, etc. Even though they were a sphere of culture is infiltrated by the ideology and political agenda, it didn't mean that values of cooperation, creativity and togetherness were not included in this model.

Conclusion: even if the context of cultural references and associations was directly connected with the oppressive system and propaganda, there was no clear idea in 1990, after the communist regime was over, about what to propose in exchange. In reality, the changing system, erase this model, and discontinued the this network of local cultural nodes. There still exist a large group of ca. 4.000 cultural centres in Poland, while their operational model is different. Keep the two, could mean more diversity and greater inclusion.

Local cooperation models

As the models are disappearing, there is a strong need of keeping what is working well, like the Chitalishta network. While always there is a constant need to update, learn, build capacity, cognitive reflection – be curious and proactive, and be properly mapping the needs and potentials of local community (to remain needed and relevant as a local cultural centre). A resource base on local models of cooperation was provided by **the research project called [IN SITU](#)**, 2022-26 (recently completed), funded by Horizon Europe programme. This activity focused on the CCIs in the ultra-peripheral areas, making some fundamentals for the white book of recommendations on how to stir the local creative ecosystems. The website is full of interesting resources, while maybe most relevant would be **[IN SITU Policy report](#)**.

Another interesting report, of the **SPARSE PLUS project** (on rural touring), which recently published a Final report. Moreover, this interesting activity, a project called **Hybrid Lifestyles of Ex-Urbanites and Their Cultural Impact on Non-Urban Areas**, was recently completed by our colleague, Dr Gokce Diner Sanul, a post-doc researcher at Van Amsterdam Uni, and this is a summary CORDIS record for the project. The project toolkit will be released this Autumn.

Origins of the ENCC Working Group On Non-Urban Culture

I share 10+ experience of working as a head of culture house in the rural areas of Poland, I've started a few years before the European Capital of Culture Wroclaw 2016 was celebrated. From those years date origins of the ENCC Working Group on non-urban culture. But how has it all started?

From the non-acceptancy of the fact, that the region of Lower Silesia in Poland, included in the bid book, was soon after the city Wroclaw awarded with the ECoC title – disappearing from the programme for 2016. At that time, 2012-14, we already had a bottom-up network of cultural centres from the Region (growing from a small number to a large participation and regional representation). We have all understood that we need to cooperate to gain capacity and skills. And our new aim was – to bring the region back into the ECoC year. We succeeded in this, and the ECoC Wroclaw Regional Platform was created, enabling e.g. our conference, Culture for Smart, Innovative and Shared Territories to be organized in October 2016. There and then, the ENCC Working Group on non-urban culture.

The group has prepared some Manifestos (Culture for Smart & Shared Territories), policy papers (e.g. Beyond the urban, coined together with CAE, TEH, and IETM), or publications to which I contributed by sharing book chapters (e.g. Arts in Rural areas together with IETM network, or Vital Villages book with the UNI of Hildesheim). All of those abovementioned publications can be found at the non-urban culture reading room on ENCC website. Since January 2025, we also lead this **European Rural Pact Community Group on Culture and Creativity in rural areas**: (the group has 200 members as of today)

These are some of the past but yet important publications:

[Arts in rural areas by IETM, 2020](#)

[Vital Village book 2027](#)

Urban Models Based on Vital Villages model

After 10 years of field work in the rural areas, I continued my professional path as a Coordinator in the Cultural Division of the City of Wrocław (2019-21), where as part of the ECoC Wrocław 2016 legacy - I was initiating public consultancy schemes in order to bring social input to cultural policy and management, to reinforce of the flat governance structures, which are enabling to the higher extent – the active participation and sense of ownership among the community members. Another part of responsibilities are related to the legacy of ECoC Wrocław 2016, leading to participatory, sustainable and culture friendly city – a publication resulting by the special mention made by the UCLG Culture Committee of Agenda 21 for Culture Mexico Award 2021. The urban-rural linkages supported my balanced focus on territorial development and decentralization policies within the municipality. Since 2021, I'm also an observer-member of the UCLG Barcelona Culture Committee.

Some Recommendations

I'm sharing some of the identified challenges, faced by the local communities, which as deficits, could be turned into strengths – if managed properly by (based on the ENCC research and the ENCC work with communities):

- we see that the challenges cultural centres are rather similar (access to funding/finance, financial literacy, green practices, cross-sectoral cooperation, freedom of speech and expression, capacity and skills development etc.), regardless of rural/urban specificities. However, rural contexts pose additional challenges: lack of infrastructures, poor cultural policy, underdeveloped heritage-centred approach to community progress, spatial issues, etc.). This needs to be taken into account when designing initiatives, policies and funding programmes.
- The crucial aspects are related to grasping the local needs, expectations and challenges. When the policies are lacking this aspect, they become highly detached from the localities
- There are several obstacles enclosed already in the localities, since local policy makers in many cases are not interested in developing particular cultural policies, as culture tends to be neglected on a strategic level. The important steps to take would be related to incentivizing the local level of cultural stakeholders (and representatives of local authorities) on the importance of culture in local development. For that, the local idea of organising 'roundtables for culture' (e.g. every year) would allow to monitor the implementation of some goals set on the local level (or primarily envisioning the goals)
- Chances are related to the motivation of several cultural stakeholders, who believe in sustainable development through culture, and advocate for more cohesive policies on all levels, and especially for the local attention to this topic
- The most obstructive obstacles are related to multi-level hierarchy in making rather simple decisions, affecting a small number of people only and their village surroundings. The best way to move forward is to dedicate some authority and power into local structures, giving the mandate to alliances of local neighborhoods to be self-governing on multiple levels. The participatory governance models, introduced in the local context, may bring several positive values, and may prevent some inactive behaviors among some local inhabitants.
- The administration should also undergo some specific training in building local partnerships and alliances (some for cultural stakeholders), since we see in many examples those two groups not cooperating well (fundaments of starting the Bridge Makers programme). The ambitious goals should include at first local dialogue and mutual understanding.

Good luck with your projects, initiatives – and never leave your networks! If the existing ones are insufficient for your activities – create new ones. And the ENCC network is always there to help!

Piotr Michalowski
Sofia, September, 2026.