

INTERVIEW

Diego Marani*
talks to Kristin Hausler**

“The European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 and the External Action of the European Union”

Kristin Hausler: 2018 was the European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH). What do you think were the main takeaways from the EYCH? What has the EYCH represented for you personally?

Diego Marani: The EYCH has given us the opportunity to emphasize the value of heritage through the lens of its different aspects: as a repository of memory; a testimony of multiculturalism; an asset for the future; an engine for touristic development; a tool of awareness and for the consolidation of a society around its history and cultural tradition. Personally this was an opportunity to discover how many things are a part of cultural heritage. Not just monuments and archaeological sites, but also customs, folklore, music, landscape, and crafts. I was also surprised to discover how many people care about their cultural heritage spontaneously, without even having a notion of what it is. They naturally feel it is important to them.

* **Diego Marani** is a novelist, translator, and newspaper columnist. In 1996, while working as a translator for the Council of the European Union, he invented Europanto, a mock international auxiliary language. He has published different articles, short stories and video clips in Europanto. He is also an essayist and novelist. His most famous novel, *New Finnish Grammar (Nuova grammatica finlandese)*, has been translated into several languages and has received the Grinzane Cavour literary prize in Italy.

Diego Marani is an Advisor for cultural policy at the European External Action Service. The interview is done by the author in his own name and within the freedom of expression as recognized by the EU Commission's Staff Regulations to engage only himself and not the responsibility of the Institution.

** **Kristin Hausler** is the Dorset Senior Research Fellow at the British Institute of International and Comparative Law in London (United Kingdom).

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KH: The EU is facing a number of challenges, with a rise in populism, large numbers of migrants crossing the Mediterranean to reach its shores, as well as Brexit of course. Do you think that cultural heritage has a role to play with regard to these current issues? If so, how?

From a political point of view, cultural heritage can be used in many different ways. It can be turned into a tool of propaganda and distorted in a nationalistic and exclusive way, using it to invent a tradition instrumental to specific political aims. This is what fascism did with Roman heritage. On the other hand, it can be used as proof of how much civilisation has always been a mixture of different cultures and diversity and show the variety in common patterns of human experience. Therefore, the role of cultural heritage very much depends on the use the political actors in charge of its preservation make of it. Our campaign was obviously intended to present cultural heritage as a wealth to share and a testimony of the common experiences that link, for example, all the nations of the Mediterranean. For us cultural heritage is an awareness-raising tool that shows how much cultures are the result of a continuous process of mixture and elaboration, where nothing remains immutable and unchanged. This is why for us heritage can inspire dialogue, understanding and spark that kind of cultural exchange that brings a society forward.

KH: In 2007, the promotion of culture was declared “a vital element in the Union’s international relations” (*Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world*). Do you believe that the objectives set at the time have now been met?

These kinds of objectives are not something you can meet once and for all. They are rather a process that goes on and evolves over time. This is its nature and also its reason for being. We have set this process in motion, the ship has sailed at last, and we are now solidly cruising in the direction of the implementation of our strategy.

KH: Could you give us some concrete examples where the EU has used cultural heritage within its external action in a constructive and effective manner?

One of the most recent and conspicuous achievements of our strategy is the EU-Western Balkans cultural heritage route. Rather than a true itinerary, it is a constellation of events that we organized in the Western Balkans around the topic of cultural heritage during 2018 and beyond with our Delegations. Other partners were involved, such as Member States, cultural organizations, national cultural institutes, and in particular their umbrella organization EUNIC. Now we are developing this initiative further, in a durable way, targeting the creative industries’ side of cultural heritage and promoting events, meetings, and projects on this subject. More concretely, among its many achievements the EU has recently restored in the Western Balkans the fortress of Golubac, the castle of Pirot, the synagogue of Subotica, the Mulla Sherif Ahmeti Mosque, and the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Flora, not to mention the Sarajevo City Hall. These are just a few examples of EU interventions in support of heritage, and then only in the region of the Western

Balkans, which is a strategic one for us. Many other interventions have taken place all over the world. The spirit of our interventions is not just to restore a site, but to support and push local people to make it a magnet of cultural activity, an engine that revalorizes the site and gives it a new life.

KH: Following calls to develop a strategy for cultural heritage in the EU’s external action and a Preparatory Action on “Culture in EU External Relations”, a Joint Communication entitled *Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations* was eventually adopted in June 2016. Could you tell us a bit more about the adoption of this document?

The Communication *Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations* has now been adopted for three years and we are fully implementing it. Over the course of time, we have had to spread awareness of its existence outside the cultural environment and make different political layers in the EU institutions and in Member States understand that culture is a horizontal issue that touches many different sectors of activities. This is why within the Council of Ministers of the EU we established a Friends of the Presidency group with the aim of presenting the Communication to all the different Council formations and through them, to Ministries in the Member States. We are now finalizing this process and we will soon present the document to the General Affairs Council of Ministers. This will be the final step of our institutional awareness-raising. Now, in view of the new Commission that is going to be appointed after the European elections, we are considering the opportunity to draft a new Communication, this time launching a fully-fledged strategy for the EU external cultural relations.

KH: A year after the adoption of the Joint Communication, the European Parliament has called for the development of an “effective EU strategy for international cultural relations”. What do you think are the areas that still require improvement with regard to the use of culture and cultural heritage within the EU’s external action? What could the next steps be?

As I just described, the next step now is the consolidation of the Communication and its completion with a new one that will be not just an indication of a process towards a strategy, but a fully-fledged strategy, as stated in the Preparatory Action of the European Parliament. This will also be the opportunity to reinforce the inter-service mechanisms that we put in place for the implementation of the strategy and give them a more stable structure.

KH: How do you think the EU strategy fits with global goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Is there more room for synergies between the EU and the universal level in this area?

The adoption of the Communication has brought about an awareness that culture today is not just an elitist pastime, but a true industry on one side and a power-

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ful political tool on the other. The EU is using culture as a playground to share and produce new culture with its partners. This process is beneficial not only for the usual aspects of intercultural dialogue, pacification and prevention of conflicts, nation-building, cultural awareness, and education, but also for economic growth and development. In this perspective culture not only perfectly fits within the global goals and the SDGs, but can be a powerful tool in their implementation.

KH: As an author yourself, how would you define cultural heritage? How does cultural heritage matter to you personally?

I would say that there are two kinds of cultural heritage: The universal one, meaning the cultural heritage generally perceived as such, that is archaeological sites, museums, monuments, and the arts; and one's personal cultural heritage. It is through your own personal cultural heritage that you interpret and appreciate the universal one. My personal cultural heritage is made of my experience as a writer and a thinker. During my life, I have learnt how to distinguish what is for me cultural heritage, what I need to preserve for my personal cultural integrity, for the preservation of my memory and experience, of the people I meet and the places I live in. I would say that my personal cultural heritage is made up more of persons than places and monuments – of persons I have met who enriched me with their lives and experience, their thinking and behaviour. Unfortunately, you cannot preserve this kind of heritage. It just remains in your memory and it fades away with you. But I think this impalpable, immaterial heritage made me a better person. And I hope the influence and the learning I gathered from the people who inspired me, who have been my heritage, will remain in my books.

KH: As a translator, what is the importance of languages in defining cultural heritage at the local, national, and European level?

Languages are for me to heritage what the Egyptian pyramids are to archaeology! Nothing perhaps is as subtle and profound, as gigantic and impalpable, as meaningful and fragile as languages as far as cultural heritage is concerned. Languages are not just the vehicle to convey our experience. They are the tool and the repository through which we live it. They contain us, because they will be there when we are gone. We are just guests in the life of languages. Through them we have the illusion of being able to grasp the meaning of life. We try with all their words to understand and explain, to apply their provisional order to our equally provisional existence. The more languages we know, the more accomplished human beings we become. Languages are perhaps the only kind of heritage that never dies. We say languages die, we consider some definitely dead, such as Latin and ancient Greek. But nobody has ever seen a language die. In fact languages never die, they simply transform themselves into something else, into some other language. And they bring into this process the knowledge and the experience of the people who spoke them. This is the reason why languages are the “mother” of all heritage.