

Designed to Exclude: Cultural Frankensteins, Desensitised Spectators, and the Structural Marginalisation of Grassroots Organisations in EU

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EU cultural funding is built around a promise: to widen participation and strengthen cultural diversity. Yet programmes such as Creative Europe, CERV, and Erasmus+ repeatedly favour organisations with grant-writing capacity, established networks, and fluency in the language the system rewards.

The deeper problem is not simply unequal access: the funding architecture changes the cultural work itself.

This paper names the result the **Cultural Frankenstein**: a project assembled to satisfy eligibility conditions rather than emerging from the logic of cultural practice. Problems are reformulated to fit calls. Partners are selected to satisfy eligibility requirements. Activities are designed around work packages, indicators, and deliverables. The grant animates the project; when it ends, the partnership often dissolves with it. Reporting then requires coherence and success, leaving little space to admit failure, adaptation or misalignment with community reality.

The system also produces the **Desensitised Cultural Spectator**. Terms such as “inclusion”, “accessibility”, and “cultural belonging” began as substantive commitments. Repeated across applications, evaluations, and reports, they become signals of competence in the grant-writing genre. The applicant learns to deploy them; the evaluator learns to reward them; the programme learns to count them. Gradually, the language of cultural value detaches from the reality it is supposed to describe.

This is where the mechanism closes. Debord shows how lived cultural relations are replaced by representation; O’Neil how measurement rewards what is legible to the model rather than what is valuable in itself; Sontag how repeated representation can dull the capacity to perceive what lies behind it. Together they describe a self-validating loop: the system funds what can be represented in its language, measures it through its own proxies, then uses the reports as evidence that the model works. What falls outside that language becomes harder to see — including the practices the programmes claim to protect.

The consequences become most serious when vulnerable groups enter this logic. The paper describes the **Parasitic Consortium**: an organisation or partnership that uses disabled people, refugees, isolated elderly people, traumatised children or other marginalised groups as legitimating resources without the relationships or ethical infrastructure required to serve them meaningfully. Their lived experience becomes a needs analysis; their presence becomes an impact claim. Yet post-award monitoring is often too distant and dependent on self-reporting to determine whether genuine participation occurred.

This produces the **Abandoned Child**: once funded, the project is largely left to certify its own success. Desk-based monitoring, self-reported outputs, and final reports can validate the programme without revealing the gap between what was promised and what happened. The claim is not that all funded organisations exploit vulnerable people, but that the architecture often cannot distinguish rooted practice from a convincing simulation of it.

Meanwhile, the application economy is expanding. In the 2024 Creative Europe Cooperation Projects call, 1,663 proposals were submitted and 122 funded, a success rate of roughly 7.3 per cent; in 2025, the rate fell to around 5–6 per cent. These figures are usually read as proof of cultural demand. The paper challenges this. Application volume increasingly measures not only cultural need, but the sophistication of an application industry: consultancies, consortium-builders, and AI-assisted grant-writing tools producing evaluator-friendly proposals at scale.

AI and digitalisation accelerate the same hierarchy from two directions. AI can optimise applications for vocabulary and compliance without knowing whether applicants have meaningful relationships with the communities they describe; if similar systems enter evaluation, historical success risks becoming training data for future selection. At the same time, digital transition privileges practices that translate easily into platforms, outputs, and measurable reach. A craft tradition embodied in touch, a ritual rooted in place, or knowledge transmitted through long-term relationships may be diminished rather than strengthened by digitisation. When digital capacity becomes a marker of quality, refusal is read as deficiency. For peripheral and community-rooted practices, this becomes a **cultural identity tax**.

The result is not merely unequal access to funding. It is a closed institutional circuit. Cultural Frankensteins are produced; their performance is documented; the documentation validates the system; the system produces more Frankensteins. Vulnerable communities can be named and reported without being meaningfully served. Grassroots organisations can disappear from the applicant pool without appearing anywhere in the programme's evidence of success.

This paper is written for the people who recognise that gap from the inside: grant writers who know the difference between what an application says and what will happen; practitioners who have translated work they care about into language that no longer feels like their own; NCP and programme staff who watch capable organisations discover that the system was not built for them; and policymakers trying to repair a structure whose assumptions remain intact. Somewhere outside the grant cycle, cultural work continues slowly, relational-

ly, without a dissemination strategy, without a sustainability plan and without a single keyword from the evaluator's glossary. That is not marginal cultural value waiting to become legible. It is European cultural value already happening. The failure is not that this work has not learned to resemble the funding system. The failure is that the funding system has still not learned how to see it.

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About the author:

Desislava Pantcheva is a cultural professional and researcher based in Sofia, working across cultural policy, European cooperation, strategic partnerships and communications. With extensive experience in the development of transnational cultural projects, her work has included advising cultural organisations, building international partnerships and supporting professionals navigating European funding programmes. A key focus of her research and writing is the relationship between cultural policy and institutional structures, particularly the ways in which funding systems shape access, participation and organisational sustainability within the European cultural sector. Her recent work critically examines the mechanisms of EU cultural funding and their impact on smaller and independent cultural organisations.