

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

Desislava Pantcheva | August 2026

Abstract

EU cultural funding does not merely disadvantage grassroots organisations. It transforms what they make. The eligibility criteria and administrative architecture of Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and CERV are not neutral mechanisms that happen to exclude small and peripheral organisations—they are productive mechanisms that actively generate a distinctive cultural pathology.

This paper introduces two concepts to name it. The Cultural Frankenstein describes funded projects structurally deformed by the conditions of their own eligibility: assembled from mismatched parts, animated by grant logic rather than genuine cultural drive, performing a coherence they do not possess. The Desensitised Cultural Spectator describes what this system does to the people inside it: the progressive emptying of meaning from the language of cultural value, until «inclusion,» «accessibility,» and «cultural belonging» function as application keywords rather than descriptions of real commitments.

Together, these concepts name a closed system of institutional fiction that the current funding architecture both requires and sustains. The paper draws on six years of insider experience as Head of the Creative Europe Desk in Bulgaria, practitioner observation, programme evaluation data, and critical theory to make a case the sector has long felt but rarely named with sufficient precision to act on.

1. Introduction: The Participation Paradox

There is a paradox at the heart of EU cultural funding. The programmes that claim to support cultural diversity, grassroots creativity, civil engagement, and social cohesion, are structurally configured to reward the organisations least in need of support and to exclude those doing the work the programmes nominally exist to fund. This is not a design flaw. This is the design.

The Creative Europe programme, the Citizenship, Equality, Rights, and Values programme (CERV), and their predecessors have collectively distributed billions of euros across the European cultural sector since the early 1990s. They have funded transnational partnerships, touring productions, digital platforms, heritage initiatives, and community arts projects. They have produced thousands of final reports documenting thousands of successful outcomes. And yet the sector's own advocacy organisations, the European Parliament's research services, and the Commission's own mid-term evaluations consistently return to the same finding: the funding disproportionately reaches organisations that already have the capacity, the networks, and the institutional infrastructure to access it. The organisations creating the most socially embedded, culturally specific, and community-rooted work—small NGOs, informal collectives, peripheral and post-socialist cultural actors—remain structurally at the margins.

The standard response to this finding is programmatic adjustment: simplified application forms, lump-sum budgets, small-scale partnership categories, capacity-building annexes. These adjustments are real and, in limited ways, useful. But they do not touch the underlying architecture. They are cosmetic repairs to a building whose foundations produce the problem. As the European Parliament's own 2023 research study acknowledged, «the application process continues to be burdensome due to its complexity, length, and opaque language used... Parliament identified these as barriers that continue to be significant, in particular for small organisations and those with fewer opportunities, and the situation is seemingly not changing swiftly.» The key phrase is the last one. The situation is not changing swiftly because the forces that produce it are structural, not accidental.

This paper makes a stronger claim than the reform literature. It argues that the current funding architecture does not merely disadvantage grassroots organisations—it transforms the cultural work it funds into something qualitatively different from what it was before funding. It produces what this paper terms Cultural Frankensteins: projects assembled from the requirements of eligibility rather than the logic of cultural practice, animated by grant cycles rather than community need, performing coherence they do not possess. And it argues that this production system has an epistemological cost that goes beyond any individual project: the progressive desensitisation of everyone inside the system to the language of cultural value itself—giving rise to what

this paper terms the Desensitised Cultural Spectator.

These are not metaphors offered for rhetorical effect. They are analytical concepts, developed from practitioner experience and grounded in existing critical theory, that this paper proposes as tools for understanding a pathology the sector has long felt but rarely named with sufficient precision.

2. Theoretical Framework: Naming the Monster

2.1 Cultural Frankensteins

I propose the concept of the Cultural Frankenstein to describe a specific and recurring type of EU-funded cultural project: one that has been structurally deformed by the conditions of its own eligibility. The reference to Mary Shelley's creature is precise. Like Frankenstein's monster, the Cultural Frankenstein is not born—it is assembled. It is constructed from parts that did not originally belong together, animated by an external force (the grant) rather than an internal life force, and made to perform a coherent identity it does not possess. And like the monster, it is the creation of an institution—a well-intentioned one, operating within the logic available to it—that cannot fully acknowledge what it has made.

The Cultural Frankenstein is produced through four interlocking mechanisms: Assembly. To be eligible, organisations must construct a problem that fits the call—not describe the problem they actually have. The result is a reverse-engineered reality: community need is shaped to match funding logic, not the other way around. Partners who have never met are stitched together by a deadline, their geographic spread and organisational types selected to satisfy eligibility criteria rather than to reflect genuine shared vision or relational trust. The project is designed on the basis of what the system rewards, then populated with content.

Animation. The grant functions as the life force of the Cultural Frankenstein. In its absence, most of these partnerships would not exist, and many of the projects would not have been conceived in the form in which they were submitted. This is not in itself a criticism—external funding has always played a role in cultural production. The problem arises when the funding logic so thoroughly determines the project's form, timeline, deliverables, and partnership structure that the «cultural» content becomes secondary to the requirements of grant compliance. The monster walks because it is funded. It stops when the funding ends, leaving no sustainable trace in the communities it was designed to serve.

Performance. The deliverable system—indicators, dissemination outputs, final reports—requires the Cultural Frankenstein to appear coherent, successful, and impactful regardless of what actually occurred during implementation. Final

reports constitute a distinctive genre of institutional fiction, co-authored by applicants and funders, in which the gap between planned activity and lived reality is systematically closed on paper. This is not individual dishonesty; it is a structural requirement. The reporting architecture leaves no space for the kind of honest account that would acknowledge adaptation, failure, or misalignment between project design and community response.

The invisibility of the seams. Perhaps most importantly, the Cultural Frankenstein is sustained by a collective institutional silence. Evaluators, programme officers, NCP desk staff, experienced applicants—all participants in the system develop a working knowledge of its distortions. This knowledge circulates informally: in practitioner networks, in conference hallway conversations, in the gap between what is written in applications and what is said in private. But it is never formally acknowledged, because everyone is institutionally incentivised to perform that the system works. The monster's seams are visible to all; no one points at them.

This concept builds on and extends the literature on the projectification of culture. Scholars working in this tradition have documented how EU cultural programmes impose project-driven logic on artistic practice—what one influential study described as organisations becoming «addicted to projects,» reshaping their activities to conform to funding cycles rather than cultural rhythms. The contribution here is to name the qualitative outcome of this process: not merely the deformation of organisational behaviour, but the production of a specific kind of cultural object that is constitutively different from the grassroots cultural work it displaces.

2.2 The Desensitised Cultural Spectator

The second concept this paper introduces addresses the epistemic damage the Cultural Frankenstein system inflicts on its own participants. The Desensitised Cultural Spectator describes the condition of anyone who has been sufficiently immersed in EU cultural funding discourse to have lost the capacity to hear its language as meaningful.

The terms that structure EU cultural funding calls—cultural belonging, societal wellbeing, civil engagement, inclusiveness, accessibility for disabled and underprivileged communities—began as politically charged, hard-won descriptions of real social commitments. They entered EU cultural policy discourse through decades of advocacy, research, and political struggle. Inside the grant-writing ecosystem, they have become something else: keywords. They are deployed strategically because evaluators reward them, included in applications because their absence signals ignorance of the genre, and read by assessment panels who have encountered them so many thousands of times that they no longer register as claims about the world. The word «inclusion» in a Creative Europe application does not mean that anything is being included.

It means the applicant knows how to write.

This is the mechanism Susan Sontag identified in *On Photography* (1977) and developed further in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003): the act of representation substitutes for the experience it represents, and the accumulation of representations produces not heightened awareness but anaesthesia. Sontag argued that the photographic image certifies the event—I was there, this happened—and in doing so releases the viewer from the obligation to actually engage with what occurred. The grant application performs the same function. Writing «we will ensure accessibility for people with disabilities» certifies the commitment; it releases the writer, the evaluator, and the programme from the obligation to verify whether accessibility was actually produced. The documentation substitutes for reality.

Guy Debord's analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) provides the structural framing. Debord's spectacle is not merely a collection of images; it is «a social relation between people mediated by images.» The Cultural Frankenstein is precisely a spectacle in Debord's sense: a social relation—between funder, applicant, partner, community, and evaluator—mediated by the image of cultural value rather than cultural value itself. «All that was once directly lived,» Debord writes, «has become mere representation.»

In the EU funding ecosystem, the direct experience of grassroots cultural practice—its relational texture, its community embeddedness, its resistance to quantification—is translated into representation: into applications, indicators, reports, and dissemination outputs. What is funded is the representation. What is lost is the practice.

The Desensitised Cultural Spectator is the figure produced by long-term immersion in this representational economy. They are not cynical—or not only cynical. They are epistemically damaged: they have lost the ability to hear the language of cultural value as referring to anything outside the genre in which it appears. This desensitisation operates at every level of the system. The grant writer who includes «social cohesion» in every application without asking what it means in this specific context. The evaluator who rewards applications that perform the correct vocabulary without interrogating the substance behind it. The programme officer who defends the indicator framework because it is the only tool available for demonstrating impact to the Commission. The NCP desk professional who explains the application requirements to small organisations and watches them realise, quietly, that the system was not built for them.

It is important to be precise about what the Desensitised Cultural Spectator does not describe. It does not describe individual bad faith. Almost everyone operating inside EU cultural funding is doing so with genuine commitment to cultural value. The desensitisation is not a failure of personal integrity; it is a structural outcome of participation in a system whose representational demands overwhelm its substantive ones. This is what makes it a systemic

critique rather than a moral one.

2.3 The Measurement Trap: Weapons of Epistemic Destruction

The third theoretical pillar of this framework addresses the instrument through which both the Cultural Frankenstein is assembled and the Desensitised Cultural Spectator is produced: the demand for measurability. In *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), mathematician and data scientist Cathy O’Neil analyses how algorithmic scoring systems—built to appear objective, scalable, and universally applicable—systematically disadvantage the people least equipped to game them, while presenting their outcomes as neutral and merit-based. The opacity of the model is a feature, not a bug: it insulates the system from accountability while producing results that reinforce existing hierarchies. The parallel with EU cultural funding evaluation criteria is precise enough to be uncomfortable.

The award criteria that govern Creative Europe, Erasmus + and CERV calls—relevance, quality, impact, dissemination—function as O’Neil’s algorithm. They appear objective. They are presented as universally applicable to all cultural practice across all geographies. In practice, they reward a specific type of organisational literacy: the capacity to translate cultural work into the evaluative language the rubric expects. An organisation rooted in immaterial cultural heritage, oral tradition, embodied craft knowledge, or indigenous practice cannot score well on «measurability of impact» not because its work lacks value but because its work’s value is constitutively resistant to the metrics on offer. The rubric does not measure quality. It measures legibility to the rubric.

This is the measurement trap. The EU funding system’s demand for quantifiable proof of cultural value is not a neutral instrument. It encodes a specific theory of what culture is and how it works—one in which outcomes are discrete, attributable, time-bounded, and countable. This theory is a reasonable description of some cultural work. It is an actively distorting description of cultural practices whose value is relational, cumulative, intergenerational, and resistant to isolation within a project timeline. When a ceramics atelier transmits craft knowledge to a community across generations, the value of that transmission cannot be captured in a beneficiary count or a dissemination report. When a community theatre practice builds civic trust through years of shared storytelling, the social cohesion it produces is not measurable at the moment of a funding cycle’s close. The system demands measurement at precisely the point where the most valuable work becomes invisible to measurement.

Since it cannot measure what it claims to measure, the system measures something adjacent and treats it as equivalent: the number of transnational

partners, the number of public events, the reach of social media dissemination, the presence of a sustainability plan. These proxies are not neutral substitutes. They are adverse substitutes—they actively reward features that are structurally available to well-resourced, institutionally sophisticated organisations, and structurally unavailable to small, peripheral, or community-embedded ones. The organisation that can demonstrate five transnational partnerships and a three-year sustainability plan is not necessarily doing better cultural work. It is doing better compliance work. The system cannot tell the difference, and is not designed to.

O'Neil also documents the feedback loop that Weapons of Math Destruction create: those who score poorly are denied the resources that would help them score better next time, while those who score well accumulate institutional capital that makes future success more likely. This loop is plainly visible in the geography of Creative Europe. Western European hub organisations—with grant management infrastructure, established relationships with evaluators and EACEA, and multi-programme track records—score well, receive funding, build further capacity, and score better. Peripheral organisations, including those carrying culturally irreplaceable knowledge rooted in specific communities and territories, are progressively filtered out. The Commission's own mid-term evaluation acknowledges that «countries with stronger cultural and creative sectors tend to benefit more from the programme»—a formulation that presents structural inequality as a natural advantage, and in doing so closes off the question of whether the programme is reproducing the inequality it nominally exists to address.

There is one further dimension of O'Neil's analysis that deserves attention in this context: the invisibility of harm to the subject being scored. In the systems O'Neil analyses, those who receive adverse outcomes—rejected loan applications, poor employment scores, unfavourable risk assessments—typically do not understand why they failed. They cannot access the model that judged them. They have no meaningful avenue of appeal. The same opacity operates in EU cultural funding. A small organisation in Bulgaria or Romania that receives a rejection with generic evaluator comments—»insufficient demonstration of European added value,» «dissemination plan lacks ambition»—has no way of knowing whether it was penalised for the substance of its cultural work, for its failure to perform the correct evaluative vocabulary, or for belonging to a geography that the system's informal hierarchies have already placed at a disadvantage. The opacity is structural. The harm is real. And it is never counted anywhere, because the system has no mechanism for counting the value of what it does not fund.

2.4 The Conceptual Relationship: A Closed System

The three concepts are not independent. They are interlocking components of

a single institutional dynamic, and their relationship is generative rather than merely descriptive.

The system replaces cultural value with its representation—Debord. It deploys measurement as the primary instrument of that replacement, encoding a theory of cultural value that structurally excludes the most irreducible forms of grassroots practice—O’Neil. And through the cumulative exposure to these representations and measurements, it progressively destroys the capacity of its own participants to recognise the difference between cultural value and its performance—Sontag. The Cultural Frankenstein is the object this system produces. The Desensitised Cultural Spectator is the subject it produces. Together they inhabit a closed loop: the funding architecture generates Frankensteins; the Frankensteins circulate through the reporting and evaluation infrastructure; the infrastructure desensitises the spectators who assess them; the desensitised spectators cannot register the system’s failures; the architecture continues generating Frankensteins.

This closure is the system’s most consequential feature—more consequential than any individual barrier to access, because it makes structural reform internally unthinkable. It is not merely that grassroots organisations are disadvantaged. It is that the system has lost the capacity to register this disadvantage as a problem, because the language that would name the problem has been evacuated of meaning by overuse, and because the measurement infrastructure has rendered invisible precisely the forms of cultural value whose absence most urgently demands naming. When every project claims to serve «underrepresented communities,» when every evaluation confirms that it did, and when the scoring rubric has no mechanism for distinguishing genuine community embeddedness from its performance, the category ceases to function as a criterion. The monster performs. The spectator watches. Nobody asks if the thing is alive.

The intellectual lineage for this analysis runs from Debord’s spectacle through Sontag’s theory of representational anaesthesia and O’Neil’s anatomy of algorithmic exclusion to the projectification literature’s documentation of how project logic colonises cultural practice. What none of these bodies of work has provided is a conceptual framework that integrates these critiques and applies them specifically to the EU cultural funding ecosystem—to the particular combination of bureaucratic assembly, metric-driven evaluation, and discursive desensitisation that characterises that ecosystem. That integration is the theoretical contribution this paper attempts.

3. Fed on the Underprivileged: The Parasitic Consortium and the Abandoned Child

«Everyone instrumentalises everyone else. Donors instrumentalise aid

agencies, using them to advance their political and strategic interests. Aid agencies instrumentalise victims, using them to raise money by circulating their moments of hardship and suffering. The only people who do not benefit from the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action are the victims themselves.»

- Antonio Donini (ed.), *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action* (2012)

3.1 A Category-Level Pathology

Donini's observation was made about humanitarian action. It applies with equal precision to EU soft grant programmes when vulnerable people enter the funding logic. This section addresses what happens when the assembly logic of the Cultural Frankenstein is directed at the most vulnerable human beings in European society: people with disabilities, elderly isolated individuals, refugees and asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, children traumatised by war, bereavement, or family breakdown.

What is described here is not confined to Creative Europe. It is a category-level pathology of soft measure lump sum grant programmes—a specific family of EU funding instruments that includes Creative Europe's Culture strand, the Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV), and Erasmus+. These programmes share a common architecture: intangible outputs, self-certification as the primary compliance mechanism, desk-based monitoring as the norm, and evaluation criteria that reward the naming of vulnerable target groups. It is this shared architecture that produces the shared pathology. The pathology has two components, analytically distinct but institutionally inseparable. The first is what this paper terms the Parasitic Consortium: an applicant or consortium that has identified specific vulnerable populations as legitimating resources and built its funding strategy around their symbolic value, without the genuine community relationships, ethical infrastructure, or programmatic commitment required to serve them. The second is what this paper terms the Abandoned Child: the funded project—or the community it nominally serves—left without meaningful oversight once the grant is awarded, developing in whatever direction institutional inertia and minimal compliance requirements allow, until a final report is produced that certifies success.

3.2 The Parasitic Consortium: Four Mechanisms of Extraction

The Parasitic Consortium is not primarily a story of individual bad faith. It is the rational endpoint of a funding system whose incentive architecture makes the instrumentalisation of vulnerable populations not merely possible but structurally rewarded. The following four mechanisms describe how this

instrumentalisation operates.

Epistemic exploitation. The lived experience of disabled people, refugees, unaccompanied children, and war-traumatised youth is harvested as narrative material for applications. Their suffering is translated into «target group descriptions,» «needs analyses,» and «impact projections.» They are present in the application as a problem to be solved—legible, quantified, emotionally resonant—and absent from the project as agents with authority over how their experience is represented and used. The application does not ask what these communities need. It asks what their presence in the application will score.

Participatory fiction. EU soft grant calls routinely require or reward evidence of co-design, participatory methodology, and community involvement. The Parasitic Consortium's application describes a process in which vulnerable people are active participants in shaping the project. The monitoring architecture—desk-based, self-certified, reliant on the coordinator's own reporting—cannot verify whether this participation was genuine, tokenistic, retrospectively documented, or entirely performed for the report. The people whose lives justified the grant are, in practice, frequently consulted once, photographed for the dissemination materials, and thanked in the acknowledgements section of the final report.

Resource extraction without return. The grant funds the consortium's staff costs, project management overhead, international travel, and dissemination. The vulnerable community receives, at best, a programme of activities designed around funding eligibility rather than actual need—workshops whose timing, content, and methodology reflect grant requirements rather than community rhythms. At worst, the community receives nothing beyond the initial contact required to produce a needs analysis. The value generated by the project flows upward: from the community's symbolic presence to the organisation's budget line, to the funder's performance statistics. The flow is entirely extractive.

Nothing sustainable returns to the community.

Legitimacy laundering. This is the mechanism that makes the Parasitic Consortium not merely dysfunctional but structurally necessary to the programme itself. Creative Europe needs disabled people in its statistics. CERV needs refugees and unaccompanied minors in its annual reports. Erasmus+ needs socially excluded youth in its mobility data. The Commission needs these populations present in its outputs to demonstrate to the European Parliament, to civil society, and to itself that EU values funding is reaching those who need it most. The Parasitic Consortium and the programme are, in this sense, co-dependent. Both need the vulnerable population present in the documentation. Neither is accountable for what actually reaches them. The parasite and the host are not the consortium and the vulnerable community. The parasite and the host are the consortium and the programme—and the vulnerable community is what both of them feed on.

3.3 The Abandoned Child: Post-Award Invisibility

The Parasitic Consortium's operations depend on a second structural condition: the near-total absence of meaningful post-award monitoring. Once a grant is signed, the funded project enters what this paper terms the Abandoned Child condition—a state of institutional neglect in which the organisation that created the project, the agency that funded it, and the communities it was designed to serve are each left without the oversight, support, or accountability mechanisms that would allow any of them to know whether the project is functioning as intended.

The monitoring architecture of EU soft grant programmes is, by design, desk-based. EACEA manages hundreds of active projects simultaneously with a professional staff whose capacity for on-the-spot verification is structurally limited. Interim reports are reviewed against the narrative submitted by the coordinator. Financial statements are audited against declared costs, not against actual outcomes. Site visits are exceptional rather than routine—resources for systematic physical presence in funded projects simply do not exist at the scale the programme operates. The European Parliament's own 2023 research service study noted pointedly that no monitoring data was yet available for the 2021-2027 Creative Europe programme cycle, mid-term into its implementation. This is not an administrative delay. It is a structural admission that the programme cannot account for what it has funded.

Into this monitoring vacuum, the following patterns become not merely possible but, in the absence of any detection mechanism, effectively invisible: Hollow organisations and self-cooperation. Consortia in which the «partners» are legally distinct entities but operationally, financially, or personally connected—organisations sharing directors, sharing addresses, or created specifically to satisfy partnership requirements. This is not always fraudulent in the criminal sense. It is often the logical endpoint of a system that demands transnational partnership as a condition of eligibility without providing any mechanism to verify the substance of those partnerships. In the 2024 Creative Europe Cooperation call, EACEA's own correspondence acknowledged that a single organisation appeared in up to 35 proposals—a pattern that the introduction of a participation cap for 2025 was explicitly designed to address. The cap was gamed almost immediately: in the CREA-CULT-2025-COOP call, over 30 confirmed proposals—and potentially up to 70—were disqualified because other applicants had added organisations as associated partners via the application portal without their knowledge or consent. EACEA acknowledged the issue and noted that «the intentional inclusion of an organisation without consent is considered misrepresentation of information within the meaning of the EU Financial Regulation.» The system had no technical mechanism to prevent or detect this until disqualifications had already cascaded at scale.

Ghost experts. Applications across Creative Europe, CERV, and Erasmus+ routinely include named experts—academics, researchers, practitioners—whose CVs are attached to satisfy quality or capacity criteria in specific work packages, particularly those related to research, evaluation, or dissemination. In many cases these experts have no genuine working relationship with the organisation, are named to perform credibility for the evaluation committee, and have no meaningful engagement with the project once the grant is signed. The monitoring architecture cannot detect this: it has no mechanism for verifying whether the person listed as «lead researcher» in Work Package 3 ever attended a project meeting, produced a deliverable, or communicated with the coordinator after the grant agreement was signed. Their name in the application is sufficient; their absence from the project is invisible. The orphaned evidence base. Each of these programmes generates annual monitoring reports, programme statistics, success stories, and indicator tables that are used to justify the programme's continuation and expansion to the European Parliament and to the public. This evidence base is built almost entirely on self-reported project outputs submitted by the beneficiaries of the grants being evaluated. The programme validates itself using data it cannot interrogate. When every project's final report confirms that all planned activities were completed, all target groups were reached, and all expected impacts were observed—as the reporting architecture structurally requires—the programme's aggregate statistics record comprehensive success. What is never counted, because there is no mechanism for counting it, is the gap between what the reports say and what actually occurred.

3.4 The Literary Register: What the Critical Tradition Names

The phenomenon described in this section has a substantial intellectual lineage, though it has not previously been applied systematically to the EU soft grant ecosystem. Didier Fassin's *Humanitarian Reason* (2011) provides the most precise theoretical anchor. Fassin argues that contemporary governance of marginalised populations operates through a moral economy in which the language of suffering and compassion has come to displace a politics of rights and justice. The benevolent institution—the state, the NGO, the programme—positions itself as a compassionate actor while tightly controlling who is deemed worthy of care and on what terms. The moral economy rewards the performance of compassion, not its substance. This is the Parasitic Consortium's operating environment: a system in which naming vulnerable people in an application is sufficient to claim the moral authority of serving them.

Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004) provides the structural framing. Bauman argues that modernity systematically produces categories of human beings defined by their superfluosity—people for

whom the surrounding society has no economic or political use, who are managed, contained, and occasionally displayed rather than integrated. The EU soft grant system does not treat vulnerable populations as wasted lives—it treats them as temporarily useful lives. They are useful as long as they are legibly suffering and can be named in an application. They are superfluous again once the project closes and the final report is filed. The grant cycle extracts their symbolic value and returns them to the condition Bauman describes.

Teju Cole's essay «The White Saviour Industrial Complex» (The Atlantic, 2012) names the emotional economy at work with characteristic precision: the system is not about justice, he argues, but about «having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.» Cole's original context is Western humanitarian intervention in the Global South. The structure he describes operates identically inside the EU soft grant ecosystem, directed at European marginalised populations—disabled communities, Roma, refugees within member states, isolated elderly people, traumatised children in post-conflict zones. The geographical distance of Cole's critique is replaced by institutional distance: the consortium is not flying to Africa; it is writing needs analyses about communities it has met once, or never.

The literary register reaches its most exact formulation in Ursula K. Le Guin's short story «The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas» (1973). Le Guin describes a prosperous, beautiful city whose happiness depends on a single child being kept in perpetual misery in a basement. Every citizen knows. Most stay—they rationalise, justify, eventually stop thinking about it. A few, unable to bear the knowledge, walk away into the unknown. The child cannot be freed; the system requires its suffering. Le Guin's story is not about cruelty. It is about the structural necessity of a victim, the moral silence of those who benefit, and the invisibility of those who refuse to participate. In the EU soft grant ecosystem: the child in the basement is the vulnerable population whose suffering legitimises the grant. The citizens of Omelas who stay are the evaluators, programme officers, grant writers, and consultants who know the system is extractive and continue to operate within it—not from malice, but from institutional inertia, professional dependency, and the absence of any alternative. The ones who walk away are the grassroots organisations and community practitioners who refuse to frame their work in the required vocabulary, who cannot perform the required fiction, and who therefore receive nothing. They are the least visible figures in any evaluation of the system's success. They are the ones the system most urgently needs to hear from, and is least designed to reach.

Finally, Kafka. In *The Trial* (1925), Josef K. is accused, judged, and ultimately executed by a bureaucratic apparatus whose logic he can never access, whose charges are never disclosed to him, and whose authority is never questioned by those who administer it. The disabled person whose community centre

received a Creative Europe-funded project was never told they were a scoring mechanism. The war-traumatised child whose photograph appears in the dissemination report was never told their image raised the project's social impact score. The refugee family listed as beneficiaries of a CERV project was never informed of the grant agreement that named them, the budget that included them, or the final report that confirmed their participation. Like Josef K., they move through a system that processes them for purposes never disclosed. Unlike Josef K., they are not even accused. They are simply used.

3.5 The Systemic Indictment

It is essential to be precise about the nature of the claim being made in this section. The argument is not that all EU soft grant applicants instrumentalise vulnerable populations. The majority of organisations working with disabled communities, refugees, and marginalised youth under Creative Europe, CERV, and Erasmus+ do so with genuine commitment, real community relationships, and hard-won ethical infrastructure. The argument is that the current funding architecture cannot distinguish between genuine community-rooted work and its performance—and that this indistinguishability is structural, not accidental. The scoring rubric rewards the naming of vulnerable target groups. The monitoring architecture cannot verify whether the named groups were genuinely served. The reporting system requires positive outcomes regardless of what occurred. The evidence base built from these reports is used to justify the programme's continuation. The programme continues to reward the naming of vulnerable target groups. This is a closed loop of legitimacy production that the system both requires and sustains—and the only participants in this loop who receive nothing from it are the people whose suffering makes it run.

This is what «Fed on the Underprivileged» names. Not individual exploitation, though individual exploitation exists and is enabled by these conditions. The structural condition in which vulnerability becomes a funding resource—extracted, documented, reported, and filed—while the people whose vulnerability was extracted remain exactly where they were: unserved, uncounted, and unseen by the system that claimed, in thousands of final reports, to have reached them.

3.6 The Mirror: When the Critic Becomes the System

There is a final mechanism this section must name, because it is the most disorienting and the least discussed: the process by which organisations founded to challenge the funding architecture are gradually transformed by it into instruments of the same exclusion they were created to oppose.

The sociological literature calls this goal displacement. An organisation established to serve a mission progressively redirects its energy toward the survival conditions that sustain it, until the conditions of survival become the operative mission and the original purpose is retained only as institutional memory and public language. In the EU soft grant ecosystem, goal displacement follows a legible trajectory. The advocacy NGO that spent its first decade challenging the under-representation of peripheral communities in EU cultural funding eventually applies for EU cultural funding. It receives it. It develops grant management capacity, consortium relationships, and evaluator fluency. Its governance begins to reflect funder priorities. Its public positions on programme reform become calibrated—critical enough to maintain credibility, careful enough not to endanger the next application. It continues to publish reports about exclusion. It does not publish reports about its own transformation.

This is not a story about individual bad faith. It is a story about what sustained participation in a system does to the organisations inside it—including the ones that entered with the most explicit commitment to transformation. The system does not need to corrupt them deliberately. It selects for the version of them that has already learned to perform its language, satisfy its criteria, and internalise its theory of what counts as cultural value. The version that has not undergone this transformation is progressively filtered out. Institutional capture is not a failure of the system. It is one of its functions.

The following case is documented in full through official programme correspondence and cited with the consent of the organisations involved.

The Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW) is an established civil society organisation with an explicit founding commitment to gender equality and the inclusion of marginalised groups. Under the EU's Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV), BFW administers BIRDS in BG 2026: Програма „Ценности”—a sub-granting scheme designed to channel CERV funding to Bulgarian civil society organisations working with vulnerable and underrepresented communities. CERV's own regulation, Regulation (EU) 2021/692, explicitly lists public authorities and educational institutions among the eligible groups for funding. The European Parliament, in its resolution of 16 January 2024 on CERV implementation, further emphasised the importance of the programme's reach into the educational sector. The Ценности programme was created to extend that reach into the Bulgarian context. Its stated purpose is to support the most marginalised.

In July 2025, the programme rejected the application of Фондация КиноКлас—a small NGO proposing Кино Глас, the first cinema education

initiative in Bulgaria designed specifically for children with hearing and speech impairments. The project proposed to work with children at СУУУС „Проф. д-р Дечо ДЕНЕВ”—the only specialist school for children with hearing impairments in Bulgaria, and the only institution of its kind on the Balkan peninsula. The children live there on a full-boarding basis. Communication with them requires specialist surdopedagogues and educational psychologists employed at that school. There is no other institutional pathway to this community. Naming the school as a partner was not a procedural oversight. It was the only methodologically honest description of how the project could actually function.

BFW's eligibility rules required all official partners to be registered as non-profit legal entities under Bulgarian law. The school is a public educational institution. It was therefore ineligible as a partner. The application was rejected at the administrative compliance stage and never reached substantive evaluation.

КиНОКлас filed two appeals. The first acknowledged an error in how the partnership had been entered in the application form and requested the opportunity to correct it. The appeal committee rejected it, finding that the school appeared consistently as an official partner across both the application form and the budget, making the technical error claim unconvincing. The second appeal raised a substantive legal argument: that CERV's own regulation explicitly permits public educational institutions as eligible partners, and that BFW had imposed a more restrictive eligibility condition than the EU framework it was implementing—a condition that, in practice, made it impossible to work responsibly with this specific vulnerable group through any legitimate institutional pathway. This appeal was ruled inadmissible: repeat appeals are not permitted under the programme's complaints procedure.

BFW's final response clarified the legal basis for its position. The eligibility restriction had been approved by the European Commission at the project design stage, as part of the grant agreement governing the sub-granting scheme. BFW was legally entitled to set it. The committee then added the sentence that most precisely captures the system's logic: the eligibility criteria «do not relate to target groups but to the legal status of applicants and official partners. The programme does not restrict funding for projects working with children with disabilities or other vulnerable groups.»

This statement is administratively accurate. It is also a demonstration, in a single sentence, of the full mechanism this paper has described. The system sees the legal status and not the child. It confirms its own procedural correctness while a specific group of children—the most isolated, the

most institutionally dependent, the least reachable by any NGO working from outside—remains exactly where they were before the programme opened: unreached, uncounted, and actively excluded by the administrative architecture of a programme that exists to serve them.

What makes this case structurally significant is not BFW's conduct, which was procedurally correct at every stage. It is the layer above it. The eligibility restriction that excluded the deaf children's school was not invented by BFW. It was embedded in the programme design and approved by the European Commission before a single application was received. The Commission approved it. BFW applied it. The committee defended it. The procedure was followed correctly at every level of the system. And the children remained unreached.

There is one further dimension the documentation reveals. In their first appeal, the КиноКлас team wrote: «without this interaction, such a project risks being parasitic and appearing as populism. Our intention is genuinely to work with these children and give them a chance.» A small NGO, arguing for its own eligibility, independently arrived at the conceptual distinction this paper has tried to name: the difference between genuine community embeddedness and a performance of it. They understood that working with deaf children through their school was not a partnership of administrative convenience—it was the condition of ethical practice. The system had no mechanism for registering this distinction. The rule was applied. The appeal was rejected. The project did not proceed.

The Desensitised Cultural Spectator is not only the grant writer who no longer hears «inclusion» as meaningful. It is also the committee that confirms, with institutional sincerity, that the procedure was followed correctly—and in doing so confirms that the procedure is the problem. The Bulgarian Fund for Women did not set out to exclude deaf children from cultural participation. The architecture did. BFW reproduced it. That is precisely how the mirror works.

4.1 The Numbers

In the 2024 Creative Europe Cooperation Projects call (CREA-CULT-2024-COOP), 1,663 proposals were submitted. Of these, 122 were retained for funding—a success rate of approximately 7.3%. The 2025 call (CREA-CULT-2025-COOP) produced a success rate of 5 to 6%, meaning the volume of applications increased substantially even as the funded share shrank. The participation cap introduced for 2025—limiting each organisation to a maximum of three proposals after EACEA's own correspondence acknowledged that a single organisation had appeared in up to 35 applications

in the 2024 call—did not reduce the overall submission volume. It redistributed it. More organisations applied. The success rate fell further. These numbers are presented by the programme’s advocates, its institutional administrators, and the cultural networks that depend on it as evidence of one thing: demand. High submission volumes are read as proof that European cultural organisations want to cooperate transnationally, that the programme is vital and necessary, and that the budget is insufficient for the scale of genuine need. The argument runs consistently through every Multi-annual Financial Framework negotiation: look at the success rate; look at the thousands of organisations that applied and received nothing; this programme is chronically underfunded and the sector is paying the price.

This paper does not dispute that Creative Europe is underfunded. It disputes what the submission statistics measure—and argues that mistaking that measurement for cultural sector health is one of the most consequential analytical errors in contemporary EU cultural policy.

4.2 What the Numbers Actually Measure

A grant application is not a cultural project. It is a document produced by an organisation—or, increasingly, by a consultant, a professional grant-writing service, or an AI-assisted tool—that describes a cultural project in the vocabulary the evaluation system rewards. The relationship between the number of applications submitted and the number of genuine, community-rooted, culturally valuable projects that could be implemented is not one-to-one. It is not even close to one-to-one.

What the submission rate measures is the size and sophistication of the application industry: the consultancies, the professional consortium-builders, the application platforms, the AI writing tools, the networks that specialise in partner-matching and call intelligence. It measures how many organisations have developed the capacity to produce eligible-looking documents within the call’s requirements. It measures the reach of the Frankenstein assembly infrastructure. The organisations best equipped to produce high volumes of high-quality applications are, as this paper has argued throughout, precisely the organisations that the programme’s stated objectives should be least concerned with serving: large, well-resourced, administratively sophisticated entities with established evaluator relationships, Western European network access, and dedicated grant management staff.

The falling success rate is therefore not simply evidence of underfunding. It is evidence of the inflation of the application economy—a system where the ability to apply has come apart from the ability to deliver. As the application infrastructure grows more sophisticated, more accessible, and more automated, the number of submitted proposals will continue to rise regardless of whether the underlying cultural activity it nominally represents is growing,

stagnating, or declining. The programme's most cited performance indicator—the submission rate—has become structurally uninformative about the thing it is supposed to measure.

4.3 The Political Capture of a Statistical Fiction

The misreading of submission statistics is not a matter of analytical error alone. It is politically functional. The cultural sector's most powerful advocacy organisations—Culture Action Europe, the major European cultural networks, the sectoral umbrella bodies—have a legitimate and urgent interest in securing larger budgets for cultural programmes. Their advocacy is sincere. Their case is, in important respects, correct: Creative Europe is underfunded relative to the scale of European cultural life. The political argument they are making deserves to be heard.

The problem is structural. The argument for more funding is most persuasive when it can point to large numbers of organisations demanding access to the programme. The submission statistics provide exactly those numbers. The advocacy ecosystem therefore has a systemic incentive to present high submission volumes as evidence of cultural sector vitality and unmet need—and a corresponding disincentive to ask what proportion of those submissions represent genuine grassroots cultural capacity versus sophisticated application industry output.

The result is a form of political capture of a statistical fiction. The number that most visibly summarises Creative Europe's performance—the success rate—is deployed in budget negotiations as a measure of the gap between cultural sector need and programme resources. What it actually measures is the gap between the production capacity of the application industry and the available funding. These are not the same gap. Conflating them has real consequences: it produces budget arguments that, if successful, will deliver more money to the programme without addressing any of the structural conditions that determine whether that money reaches genuine grassroots cultural work. The Frankenstein factory will scale. The communities the programme nominally exists to serve will remain exactly where they are.

4.4 The Next Frankenstein: AI, Automation, and the Acceleration of Exclusion

The application inflation described above is not a stable condition. It is an accelerating one—and the primary accelerant is the rapid adoption of AI-assisted tools across the grant application ecosystem.

Grant-writing AI tools are now widely available, actively marketed to cultural organisations, and increasingly embedded in the consultancy workflows

that serve the EU funding sector. Their effect on application volume is already visible in the 2024-2025 COOP statistics and will deepen with each successive call. Their effect on the Cultural Frankenstein is more significant still: AI tools trained on successful past Creative Europe applications produce documents that are formally coherent, vocabulary-perfect, and structurally aligned with evaluation criteria—applications that perform optimal Frankenstein assembly. Every keyword is present. Every cross-cutting priority is addressed. Every vulnerable target group is named. The application is indistinguishable from one produced by a genuine cultural organisation with deep community roots—because the AI has been trained to produce exactly that indistinguishability. The tool does not know whether the organisation applying has ever met the communities it describes. It only knows what successful applications look like.

The organisations best positioned to deploy these tools are, again, the large, well-resourced, and administratively sophisticated. Small grassroots organisations—the ones the programme’s stated objectives most urgently need to reach—face a new and steeper barrier: not only the administrative burden of compliance, not only the co-financing requirement, not only the network access gap, but now the application quality gap produced by AI industrialisation. The organisations that were already losing the competition for funds will lose it more decisively, more quickly, and less visibly, because the AI-generated applications displacing them will look better than anything human grant writers at under-resourced organisations could produce.

If the evaluation system responds by introducing AI-assisted screening or scoring—a development already under discussion within EU programme administration—the exclusion cycle completes itself algorithmically. An AI evaluator trained on the historical record of successful Creative Europe applications will encode every geographic, organisational, and cultural bias that record contains. It will learn that Western European applicants succeed more often. It will learn that certain partnership configurations score well. It will learn that specific vocabularies signal quality. And it will apply these learned patterns at scale, at speed, and with an opacity that makes O’Neil’s original Weapons of Math Destruction analysis look almost quaint. The feedback loop—successful applications inform the training data, the training data shapes the evaluation, the evaluation selects for more of the same—will operate faster and less accountably than any human evaluation committee ever could.

4.5 Digital Colonisation and Cultural Identity

The technological dimension of this section extends beyond the application ecosystem into the substance of what EU cultural funding requires funded projects to be. Every Creative Europe call since 2021 has embedded digital

transition as a mandatory cross-cutting priority. Projects are expected to demonstrate digital innovation, produce digitally distributable outputs, develop digital capacity, and engage with the digital transformation of their sector. This requirement is presented as a response to technological reality—culture is digitalising, and funded projects should reflect that.

What this framing obscures is that the digital transition priority is not culturally neutral. It encodes a specific and geographically situated theory of what culture is in the digital age: a theory developed primarily in Western European technology and policy hubs, largely by people whose cultural reference points are compatible with digital mediation, and largely indifferent to the specific textures of cultural practices that are constitutively resistant to it.

Oral tradition cannot be digitised without being transformed into something else. Embodied craft knowledge—the transmission of ceramics technique from master to apprentice, the muscle memory of a traditional instrument, the spatial intelligence of vernacular architecture—is not enhanced by digital documentation; it is reduced by it, flattened from a living practice into an archive. Community ritual, intergenerational cultural transmission, the slow accumulation of shared cultural memory in specific places among specific people: none of these are served by digital distribution platforms, social media dissemination strategies, or the development of «innovative digital practices» as required by the award criteria. The requirement to demonstrate digital capacity is a cultural identity tax—a toll levied by the funding system on cultural practices whose value lies precisely in their resistance to the technological logic the system demands they adopt.

This is what makes the digital transition priority a form of cultural colonisation in the precise sense: the imposition of a framework developed by and for specific cultural contexts onto cultural practices that may be fundamentally incompatible with it, under conditions that make refusal of that framework equivalent to ineligibility for funding. The organisation that says «our cultural practice cannot be meaningfully digitised without being destroyed» is making a statement of cultural integrity. The evaluation system reads it as a failure of innovation capacity. The score reflects accordingly.

Kate Crawford's analysis in *Atlas of AI* (2021) frames this precisely: AI and its associated technological infrastructure are not neutral tools but registries of power—they extract from physical environments, from human labour, and from cultural knowledge, returning value primarily to those who already hold it. The digital transition mandate in EU cultural funding operates as Crawford's extractive view applied to cultural identity: it demands that peripheral, community-rooted, and non-Western-European cultural practices submit their distinctiveness to a technological framework that was not built for them, cannot represent them accurately, and will distribute the value extracted from that submission primarily to the infrastructure of the digital cultural economy rather than to the communities from which it was taken.

4.6 The Closed Circuit

The four arguments of this section form a closed circuit. Application volumes inflate because the assembly infrastructure grows more sophisticated. Success rates fall and are misread as evidence of unmet demand. Budget advocacy built on this misreading, if successful, expands the programme without addressing its structural conditions. AI tools accelerate the inflation further, widen the quality gap between sophisticated and grassroots applicants, and—if deployed in evaluation—encode and automate the existing hierarchy of exclusion. The digital transition mandate simultaneously disqualifies cultural practices that cannot be digitised on the programme's terms, reducing the diversity of genuinely eligible applicants while increasing the volume of applications from organisations that have learned to perform digital capacity regardless of whether they possess it.

The most dangerous statistic in European cultural policy is not the success rate. It is the submission rate—because the submission rate is being used to measure the health of European cultural life, when what it actually measures is the health of the European grant application industry. These are different things. They are becoming more different every year. And the political economy of EU cultural funding advocacy currently has no incentive to notice the difference, and every incentive not to.

Conclusion: Here We Are

This paper has built an argument in four movements. It has named the mechanisms by which EU cultural funding produces Cultural Frankensteins—projects assembled from the requirements of eligibility rather than the logic of cultural practice. It has described the Desensitised Cultural Spectator—the institutional condition produced by long immersion in a system whose language has been evacuated of meaning. It has introduced the Measurement Trap—the way that quantification encodes a theory of cultural value that is constitutively hostile to the most irreducible forms of grassroots practice. It has documented how these mechanisms together produce the Parasitic Consortium and the Abandoned Child—the feeding on vulnerable communities' symbolic value and the abandonment of funded projects to institutional neglect. And it has shown how the application economy inflates, how statistics are politically captured, and how AI and digital colonisation are accelerating every pathology the system already contains.

The system is a closed loop. It produces Frankensteins; the Frankensteins perform; the performance is documented; the documentation validates the system; the system produces more Frankensteins. It feeds on the

underprivileged; it abandons what it funds; it mistakes the growth of its own application industry for the vitality of European cultural life. It knows this, in the way that institutions know things they cannot officially acknowledge—in the gap between what evaluators say in private and what they write in assessment reports, in the corridor conversations at Creative Europe events, in the knowing silence of every NCP desk professional who has watched a small organisation close the browser tab.

The paper does not end with a reform agenda. Structural problems do not yield to administrative solutions, and a paper that diagnoses a closed epistemic loop cannot honestly conclude by suggesting the loop will open itself in response to a well-argued critique. But it is worth being precise about what accountability would actually require, since the paper's argument implies it: an evidence base that counts what is not funded, not only what is; monitoring architecture that can distinguish genuine community embeddedness from its performance; and evaluation criteria built on the question of what cultural value is rather than what can be easily measured. None of these are technically impossible. They are politically inconvenient, which is a different problem entirely.

What the paper ends with instead is an address—to the people for whom it was written, which is to say, to the people who will recognise every word of it. This is addressed to the grant writers who have rewritten the impact section four times to find the phrasing that scores, who know the difference between what the application says and what will actually happen, who have become so fluent in the vocabulary of cultural value that they can no longer hear it as meaning anything. You are not the problem. You are the most precise witness to the problem. The fluency you have developed is a form of institutional damage, and it was inflicted on you by a system that needed you to speak its language in order to survive inside it.

This is addressed to the theatre directors, translators, musicians, ceramicists, community arts practitioners, oral historians, and keepers of intangible knowledge who have tried to fit their practice into a project logic that was not designed for it, who have named their work in the vocabulary of cross-cutting priorities and European added value, who have felt the particular shame of describing something they love in a language that does not love it back. You are not failing the system. The system is failing to deserve your participation. This is addressed to the teachers, social workers, disability practitioners, refugee support workers, and community facilitators who have found their communities named in applications they were never consulted about, whose beneficiaries appear in final reports they will never read, who have watched EU-funded projects arrive in their communities, perform their deliverables, and leave without trace. The people in your care were not served by those projects. They were used by them. The system calls this inclusion.

This is addressed to the NCP desk professionals and Creative Europe Desk

staff across Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, and every other country where the gap between what the programme promises and what it delivers is widest—who have spent years explaining eligibility criteria to organisations that deserve funding and cannot access it, who have watched the same Western European hubs succeed year after year, who know the geographic concentration data intimately because they live it professionally. Your frustration is analytically correct. This paper is, in part, an attempt to give it a theoretical frame.

This is addressed to the policymakers and programme administrators who work within the system with genuine commitment to its stated objectives, who introduce participation caps and lump sum models and small-scale categories in genuine attempts to open the programme to more diverse participation, and who watch those reforms be absorbed, gamed, or rendered insufficient by the structural conditions they do not address. You are not wrong to try. The paper's argument is not that reform is impossible in principle. It is that reform will remain insufficient for as long as the system's fundamental architecture—its assembly logic, its measurement regime, its self-validating evidence base—remains unexamined and unchallenged.

And this is addressed to the author of this paper—who wrote it while simultaneously preparing applications, building consortia, identifying partners, and calibrating project ideas to the requirements of the next call. Who knows which partner configurations score well and which don't. Who has written «cultural belonging» and «civil engagement» and «accessibility for underrepresented communities» in more applications than she can count, and who has meant every word and watched the meaning drain out of it with each repetition. Who is, at this moment, waiting for the next grant opportunity to roll out, in the hope that this particular time the consortium will be solid and the project idea will be golden.

That is not hypocrisy. It is the condition the paper describes. You cannot critique a system from outside it when there is no outside—when the funding that sustains the work you believe in flows through the same architecture you are indicating. The choice is not between complicity and integrity. It is between participating with clear eyes and participating in the comfortable fog that the system's own incentive structure provides. This paper is an attempt at the former.

The Cultural Frankenstein is real. The Desensitised Cultural Spectator is real. The communities being fed on are real. The practitioners being worn down by the machine are real. The grassroots organisations that never apply because they already know the answer—they are real, and they are the ones the system most urgently needs to reach, and they are the ones it is least designed to find. Here we are. The next call is open. The deadline is in five months. The success rate is five percent. The consortium needs to be solid. The idea needs to be golden. And somewhere, in a community centre in Sofia or Novi Sad or Tirana

or Chişinău, someone is doing the work that none of this is funding—slowly, relationally, without a dissemination strategy, without a sustainability plan, 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.

Notes on Sources and Positionality

This paper is written from inside the system it analyses. The author served for six years as Head of the Creative Europe Desk Culture in Bulgaria (2018-2024), has worked as a cultural funding consultant across Bulgaria and the Western Balkans, and has led transnational EU-funded projects as a coordinator and applicant. The analytical framework developed here is grounded in that direct institutional experience—in the evaluations read, the applications written, the small organisations watched, discovering that the system was not built for them. Practitioner observations are based on this experience and are not attributed to specific individuals or organisations.

The case documented in Section 3.6—the rejection of Kino Klas Foundation under the „Ценности» call which is part of the project ‘BIRDS in BG - 2’ (Building an Inclusive Resilient Democratic Society in Bulgaria), co-funded by the European Union under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme”—is one in which the author was directly involved as project lead and author of the appeal letters submitted to the Bulgarian Fund for Women’s complaints committee, including the second appeal sent simultaneously to EACEA. The conceptual argument in those letters—that working with children with hearing impairing through their school was the condition of ethical practice rather than a partnership of administrative convenience, and that without it the project risked being parasitic—was developed independently of this paper and in real time, under the pressure of a complaints procedure. The fact that it arrived at the same distinction this paper attempts to name theoretically is not a coincidence. It is what the system looks like from inside it.

Academic and literary sources cited include: *Susan Sontag, On Photography (1977) and Regarding the Pain of Others (2003)*; *Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (1967)*; *Cathy O’Neil, Weapons of Math Destruction (2016)*; *Kate Crawford, Atlas of AI (2021)*; *Didier Fassin, Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present (2011)*; *Zygmunt Bauman, Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts (2004)*; *Antonio Donini (ed.), The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action (2012)*; *Teju Cole, «The White Saviour Industrial Complex» (The Atlantic, 2012)*; *Ursula K. Le Guin, «The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas» (1973)*; *Franz Kafka, The Trial (1925)*; *projectification literature including Mats Fred et al., The Projectification of the Public Sector (Routledge)*; and the «Addicted to Projects» study on EU Culture 2007-2013 (*Academia.edu, 2018*). Institutional sources include the *European Parliament Research Service study on EU funding programmes 2021-2027 (IPOL_STU 2023/747259)*; *Culture Action Europe, «Questions Unanswered: Follow-up on the 2025 Creative Europe Cooperation Call» (December 2025)*;

EACEA response letter to Culture Action Europe (25 November 2025, ref. CREA-CULT-2025-COOP); and the EACEA «Decade of Creative Europe» evaluation (2025). Statistical data: CREA-CULT-2024-COOP results (CED Slovenia, July 2024): 1,663 proposals submitted, 122 funded; CREA-CULT-2025-COOP success rate of 5-6% (Culture Action Europe, November 2025).

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.