

Dear colleagues and friends,

I have been invited to share a personal reflection on the role of the European Festivals Association (EFA), considering the question:

What is EFA's mandate to act on behalf of the arts and festivals? What is the power and responsibility of a collective, particularly regarding solidarity and political dialogue?

To me, the role of EFA is clear: its strength lies not only in the breadth of its membership but in the shared vision of a diverse yet unified cultural ecosystem.

EFA serves as a critical voice for festivals and the arts across Europe, advocating for our interests not merely as individual entities, but as a collective force with cultural and societal impact.

At its heart, EFA's mandate is rooted in the belief that the arts — and festivals in particular — create platforms for intercultural dialogue, creative expression, and societal reflection.

Festivals bridge geographical, linguistic, and cultural divides. They foster understanding across differences.

So therefore, EFA does not merely represent festivals: it champions their power to unite, provoke, and challenge.

Navigating the intersection between arts and politics requires balance.

EFA must ensure that the collective voice remains strong in political discourse, while safeguarding the autonomy of individual festivals — protecting artistic freedom even as we engage critically with the world around us.

We can see this spirit in initiatives such as:

- **Take Five**, which explores Europe, the arts, and societal tasks,
- **Joining Hands and Hearts for Ukraine**, where festivals have paired with Ukrainian counterparts in solidarity,
- and the **EFFE Seal for Festival Cities and Regions**, encouraging cities to embed cultural values at their core.

These initiatives show commendable solidarity and commitment, and gather like-minded partners, which we might refer to as our bubble. I wonder: are we prepared to also invite dissenting voices to our tables?

Those who challenge the value of cultural funding, or who question the fact that our festivals and our theatres respect the notion of freedom of expression as we define it?

The recent dismissal of several theatre directors, such as **Matej Drlička** in Bratislava, and others, highlights growing cultural tensions in Europe.

Drlička warns of an approaching "cultural and ethical earthquake in Europe" and calls on us in the sector to do something about it.

We must ask ourselves:

How can EFA support festival directors facing political pressures?

How can we create spaces for genuine dialogue — including with those who may not share our views?

The founding vision of EFA, and indeed the Edinburgh Festival, after the devastations of World War II, was precisely to bring artists together from conflict-torn regions.

Today I feel that the mandate could possibly evolve, or perhaps we need some kind of platform that could: we must prepare settings where difficult, dissenting conversations can

take place, not to argue or force agreement, but to listen... deeply.

As Atticus Finch says in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*:
"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Ultimately, the power of the collective is not just in solidarity among the like-minded — but in the courage to welcome challenging voices, and in doing so, strengthen the cultural fabric of Europe.

Thank you.