

Giuseppe Vitiello\*

# What May Be Expected from the OMC Work on Libraries (2023–2026)

An overview of data, themes, and libraries' alignment with local public policies

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**Abstract:** Sovereignty is a social construct based on the elements of authority, identity, and territory. Sovereignty in the cultural sphere is a much more liquid concept – supranational authorities conflict with national/local authorities, exclusive authority may overlap with the subsidiarity principle, and national frontiers are felt more as a limit to cross than a bordered territory. The European Union's cultural work plan aims to define a European library identity across the territory of the European Union from 2023 to 2026. The selected method is OMC (Open Method of Coordination).

After a short history of Work Plans for Culture from 2008 to 2026, the article sets the building blocks of a European library identity. It describes the institutional architecture of European programmes and, in particular, transformative policies in the cultural and social fields taking place in the form of Partnership Agreements between the European Commission and the Member States.

The article enquires on the state of health of European public libraries. Some iconic buildings have been erected, for instance in Finland, Denmark, and The Netherlands; nevertheless, funding for libraries has decreased tremendously during the 2011–2021 decade. Social innovation in libraries is being thoroughly reviewed by the LibrarIn project and the number of new library services is impressive. All these activities are performed within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Library work within the SDG framework can only be linked to local public policies that are part of the European Social Pillar through the Social Scoreboard indicators maintained by Eurostat. Since libraries are part of the local cultural infrastructure, they have all interest to benefit from the European Structural and Investment Funds.

Europe is not the same everywhere and so are European libraries; an OMC action should therefore explore the sunny, but also the dark sides of the European library planet, where the fault lines of regional disparities are singled out and filled by making reference to the European financial instruments enabling to bridge library gaps.

**Keywords:** Library policy and planning; European libraries; library statistics and indicators; library funding; 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; freedom of expression

**Was von der OMC-Arbeit über Bibliotheken (2023–2026) zu erwarten ist. Ein Überblick über Daten, Themen und die Ausrichtung der Bibliotheken mit lokalen öffentlichen Strategien**

**Zusammenfassung:** Souveränität ist ein soziales Konstrukt, das auf den Elementen Autorität, Identität und Territorium basiert. Souveränität im kulturellen Bereich ist ein viel flüssigeres Konzept – supranationale Behörden stehen im Konflikt mit nationalen/lokalen Behörden, ausschließliche Zuständigkeiten können sich mit dem Subsidiaritätsprinzip überschneiden und nationale Grenzen werden eher als eine zu überwindende Grenze denn als ein abgegrenztes Territorium empfunden. Der Kulturarbeitsplan der Europäischen Union versucht, von 2023–2026 eine europäische Bibliotheksidentität über das Gebiet der Europäischen Union zu definieren. Die gewählte Methode ist die OMC (Offene Methode der Koordinierung).

Nach einer kurzen Geschichte der Arbeitspläne für Kultur von 2008 bis 2026 erläutert der Artikel die Grundsteine einer europäischen Bibliotheksidentität. Er beschreibt die institutionelle Architektur Europäischer Programme und insbesondere transformative Konzepten in den kulturellen und sozialen Bereichen, die in Form von Partnerschaftsvereinbarungen zwischen der Europäischen Kommission und den Mitgliedstaaten stattfinden.

Der Artikel untersucht den Zustand europäischer Öffentlicher Bibliotheken. Einige ikonische Gebäude wurden errichtet, beispielsweise in Finnland, Dänemark und den Niederlanden; dennoch ist die Finanzierung für Bibliotheken in den Jahren 2011–2021 erheblich zurückgegangen. Soziale Innovationen in Bibliotheken werden gründlich vom LibrarIn-Projekt überprüft, und die Anzahl neuer Bibliotheksdienstleistungen ist beeindruckend. All diese Aktivitäten finden im Rahmen der Agenda 2030 für nachhaltige Entwicklung statt.

Die Bibliotheksarbeit im Rahmen der SDGs kann nur mit lokalen öffentlichen Maßnahmen verknüpft werden,

\*Corresponding author: Giuseppe Vitiello, [g.vitiello@retedellereti.org](mailto:g.vitiello@retedellereti.org)

die Teil des Europäischen Sozialpfeilers sind, über die von Eurostat bereitgestellten Indikatoren für das Sozial-Scoreboard. Da Bibliotheken Teil der lokalen Kulturinfrastruktur sind, haben sie ein großes Interesse daran, von den Europäischen Struktur- und Investitionsfonds zu profitieren.

Europa ist nicht überall gleich und das gilt auch für die europäischen Bibliotheken; eine OMC-Aktion sollte daher die sonnigen, aber auch die dunklen Seiten des europäischen Bibliothekssektors erkunden, um die Bruchlinien regionaler Unterschiede herauszuarbeiten, damit die Finanzlücken durch den Verweis auf die europäischen Finanzierungsmöglichkeiten gefüllt werden.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Bibliothekspolitik und -planung; europäische Bibliotheken; Bibliotheksstatistiken und -indikatoren; Finanzierung; Agenda 2030 für nachhaltige Entwicklungen; freie Meinungsäußerung

## 1 At the heart of European policies: the European Union Work Plans for Culture

In the realm of political science, sovereignty is a social construct based on three elements: authority, identity, and territory. It is a concept changing over time and constantly renegotiated within the framework of the mutual recognition of States' claims to sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Sovereignty applied to national defence is not difficult to understand. It is a notion based on a national identity and a bordered territory, where the State has the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force – as Max Weber famously stated.

In the cultural sphere, sovereignty is instead much more liquid and cultural policies convey a blurred relation between authorities and identities. Even hazier is the concept of a sovereignty applied to the field of European culture: supranational authority conflict with national and local authorities, exclusive authority may overlap with the subsidiarity principle, and national frontiers are felt more as a limit to cross than as a bordered territory. European culture is a multi-faceted concept, where plural identities coalesce and live together.

This complexity may be the reason during its formation years that the European Community's approach to culture was hesitant and not always consistent. European States refrained from setting up an overarching and supranational authority in culture; they tended to delegate cultural issues to intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO or the

Council of Europe. When the economic and political integration in Western Europe was completed, European Ministers of Culture had to disentangle ambiguous practices and conflicting notions. Their attitude became more assertive; they committed themselves towards a normative framework for culture. The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 marked a big qualitative shift with culture raising to the status of a European matter of primary public interest.<sup>2</sup>

In the Treaty of Maastricht, article 128 explicitly mentioned the contribution of the European Community to “the flowering of the cultures of the Member States” with reference to “the knowledge and dissemination of the culture and history of the European peoples; conservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage of European significance; non-commercial cultural exchanges; artistic and literary creation, including in the audiovisual sector.” This text was reproduced with almost no changes in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) and in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). The idea of a European culture based on a European identity was eventually at the forefront of European policies.

The year 2007 was crucial for the evolution of the concept of a European cultural policy. The case for European countries to work together to exercise cultural sovereignty was eventually made with the adoption of a European Agenda and a specific method reinforcing the European cultural action. The Agenda was initially set up by the European Commission with the title “Culture in a globalizing world”.<sup>3</sup> The method was the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Launched by the 2000 European Council in Lisbon, the OMC working method has taken more relevance in the EU work in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, when a balance had to be found between intergovernmentalism and supranational activities. The OMC working method makes the most out of the exchange of experiences, best practices and data exchange among Member States and allows for mutual learning around the goals set by the European cultural agenda.<sup>4</sup>

In practice, the OMC cultural work consists of elaborating a multi-annual Work Plan (hereinafter, WP) within the framework of the Council of the European Union. WPs focus on a number of priorities, themes and areas in a strategic dimension that strengthens the link between the activities envisaged by the Work Plan, the Council of the European Union, and the rotating presidencies. Since 2008, there have been five WPs: 2008–2010, 2011–2014, 2015–2018, 2019–2022

<sup>2</sup> Field (2001), Ferri (2008), *Les valeurs dans la gouvernance européenne* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Commission of the European Communities (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Ferri (2008), European Parliament (2014).

<sup>1</sup> Biersteker (2002) 167.

and 2023–2026.<sup>5</sup> WP 2023–2026 includes an action on libraries having as title “Building Bridges: strengthening the multiple roles of libraries as gateways and disseminators of cultural works, expertise and European values”.<sup>6</sup>

In 2026, the OMC Group will present a report to EU authorities, to the Council of European Union, to national and European policymakers as well as to library administrators and professionals. This report will function as a reference work for future library policies; its influence on national library policies will be at least comparable to that of the report “The Role of Libraries in Modern Societies,” published in 1998 by the European Parliament. Its conclusions may impact European programs to a certain extent but will certainly re-shape the themes and lines of action of national library policies. The OMC report will give more cohesion to an otherwise loose library scenario, with different orientations and big disparities among Member States. It is therefore important to understand the respective roles of the European Union, and of EU Member States, in particular when they elaborate common partnership agreements.<sup>7</sup>

This article has three objectives. The first is to describe the institutional architecture of European programmes. Opposite to common tenets, European Union’s most relevant and transformative policies in the cultural and social fields are not those implemented by the programmes directly funded by the European Commission (Horizon, Erasmus, etc.). The richest, all-embracing, and most productive policies are those arranged in the form of Partnership Agreements between the European Commission and the Member States, which regulate the implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

The second objective of the article is to critically examine library data, themes, and their consistency with local public policies in a perspective that is truly European, and not only focused on the brilliant achievements of a few innovative, lighthouse projects. Europe is not the same everywhere and neither are the same European libraries; an OMC action should therefore explore the sunny, but also the dark sides of the European library sphere.

On the basis of the critical remarks made on traditional library policy and planning, the third objective of the article is to sketch out a harmonious library strategy, where the fault lines of regional disparities are singled out and filled by making reference to local public policies and to the European financial instruments that enable to bridge library gaps.

## 2 A short history of Work Plans for Culture from 2008 to 2026

On 16 November 2007, the Council of the European Union issued a Resolution including a European Agenda for Culture 2008–2011 with three strategic objectives: a) promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; b) promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth, employment, innovation, and competitiveness; c) promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union’s international relations.<sup>8</sup>

The taking off of the OMC work ushered in a crucial report on cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue – still very relevant today.<sup>9</sup> Preceded by a Reflection paper written by EENC (2012) stressing the need of working on Places, Competence, Networks, and Resources, the OMC Group Members emphasised the “hybrid, mixed, infused” nature of all cultures and resolved that social cohesion is a moral obligation for receiving public funding and essential for the long-term survival of cultural institutions. They made a distinction between “intercultural dialogue” and “multiculturalism”, where the latter promoted the preservation and promotion of separated cultures, while the first is based on mutual understanding and interaction based on common goods, shared knowledge, and spaces for exchange.<sup>10</sup>

Within the general framework of intercultural dialogue, WPs often opted for a sectoral approach. The themes of artists’ mobility and an intensified circulation of works of art were central in WP 2008–2010 – artistic residence, mobility support schemes – and in WP 2023–2026 – status and working conditions of artists and creative professionals, digital revolution. Another recurrent issue was the transformation of creative industries – as a source of employments and economic growth with 5 million people working in this sector in 2004<sup>11</sup> and 7,8 million in 2023.<sup>12</sup> Suggested sub-issues were creativity in education, capacity building, and creative partnerships with other sectors (WP 2008–2010), the setting up of a “European Creative Industries Alliance” (WP 2011–2014), public policies developing the innovation potential of the creative industries (WP 2015–2018), and the emphasis on their digital transformation and green transition (WP 2023–2026).

The promotion of, and access to cultural heritage was approached in WPs 2008–2010 and 2011–2014 into mobility of collections and a European Heritage Label. Innovative

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union (2007), (2008), (2010), (2014), (2018), (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Council of the European Union (2022).

<sup>7</sup> The full list of Partnership Agreements is in European Commission (2021).

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union (2007).

<sup>9</sup> OMC Working Group of EU Member States Experts (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 9, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Council of the European Union (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Eurostat (2024a).

approaches to the governance of tangible, intangible and digital heritage and the link between culture and tourism was the object of WP 2008–2010. “Culture and tourism” turned into “Culture and sustainable tourism” in WP 2015–2018.

And last, but certainly not least, important WP achievements were attained in the field of funding for culture. The OMC work was instrumental in emphasising the contribution of culture to local and regional economic development (WP 2008–2011); a Policy Handbook was published on how to use the EU support programmes strategically, including Structural Funds.<sup>13</sup> This report was to be followed by an in-depth investigation on Structural Funds and culture requested by the European Parliament.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis on Structural Funds was timely, indeed. Structural Funds have transformed urban and rural fabrics of entire regions and facilitated the emergence of start-ups and creative enterprises in cities – Berlin, Nantes, Dublin – and in regions characterized by industrial decline in Finland and Germany.<sup>15</sup> No longer aimed at job creation exclusively, Structural Funds are now the main instrument to combat social exclusion. They have profoundly reshaped library services, for instance, in the Land of Berlin with an input of combined Structural and Land financial support (some 60 million euro since 2008<sup>16</sup> and in the Region of Puglia in Italy where funding amounted to 130 Mio. Euro between 2014 and 2020.<sup>17</sup>

### 3 Library data and regional disparities in Europe

#### 3.1 The state of health of European libraries

Any sector needs data for policy planning and management purposes. Unfortunately, libraries’ record in statistics is not brilliant. Data is hardly used to measure the progress of libraries over time, to assess the social impact of libraries on information development<sup>18</sup> or to measure the perceived outcomes of resources invested in libraries<sup>19</sup>. Only a few national institutions – Ministries of Culture, national libraries,

library associations – produce statistics; normally results are restricted to the annual number of visitors accessing library premises and to the amount of loans.<sup>20</sup> And finally, there is no agency, either intergovernmental or non-governmental, collecting data at European level in order to support European library policies.

The consequences of this neglect in data monitoring are serious. A recent study on library expenditure shows that library expenditure as a percentage of GDP decreased by 40 %, 33 %, 30 % respectively in Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands in only ten years, from 2011 to 2021. The decline was smaller in Finland and Sweden (-19 %) and in Slovenia (-14 %).<sup>21</sup> The European library sector is remarkably close to emergency from an economic perspective; nevertheless, this trend went unnoticed even among professionals.

This crisis is even more apparent from a qualitative perspective. During the “decade that shook the library world” library expenditure went down and even plummeted in some European countries if compared to GDP and cultural expenditure. Figure 1 below collates variations of national GDPs, cultural expenditure, and library expenditure in eight countries between 2011 and 2021.

It is easy to infer that investment in Spanish libraries was still significant when Spain was in full recession between 2011 and 2016 and collapsed in the years between 2017 and 2021, in line with parallel reductions in cultural expenditure. Germany, Slovenia, and Portugal show percentage variations in library expenditure that are aligned to variations in cultural expenditure, with the remarkable case of Germany having positive values both in cultural and library expenditures even in years when the national GDP per capita diminished (2011 to 2016). In Sweden and Finland, instead, library expenditure grew at much lower pace than their respective national GDPs and cultural expenditure; in Denmark and The Netherlands library expenditure plummeted from 2011–2021; at the same time, instead, national GDPs and cultural expenditure were making great strides.

Another set of data concerns the extent of regional disparities in European libraries. Portugal, for example, has a GDP per capita and a level of cultural expenditure that is almost half that of Finland. When it comes to libraries, the Portuguese expenditure is about six times less. Spanish and German GDPs are not much lower than that of Finland; however, the two countries spend six and five times less, respectively, on libraries (and 12.5 and about six times less

<sup>13</sup> Working Group of EU Member States Experts (2012).

<sup>14</sup> European Parliament (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt (2024).

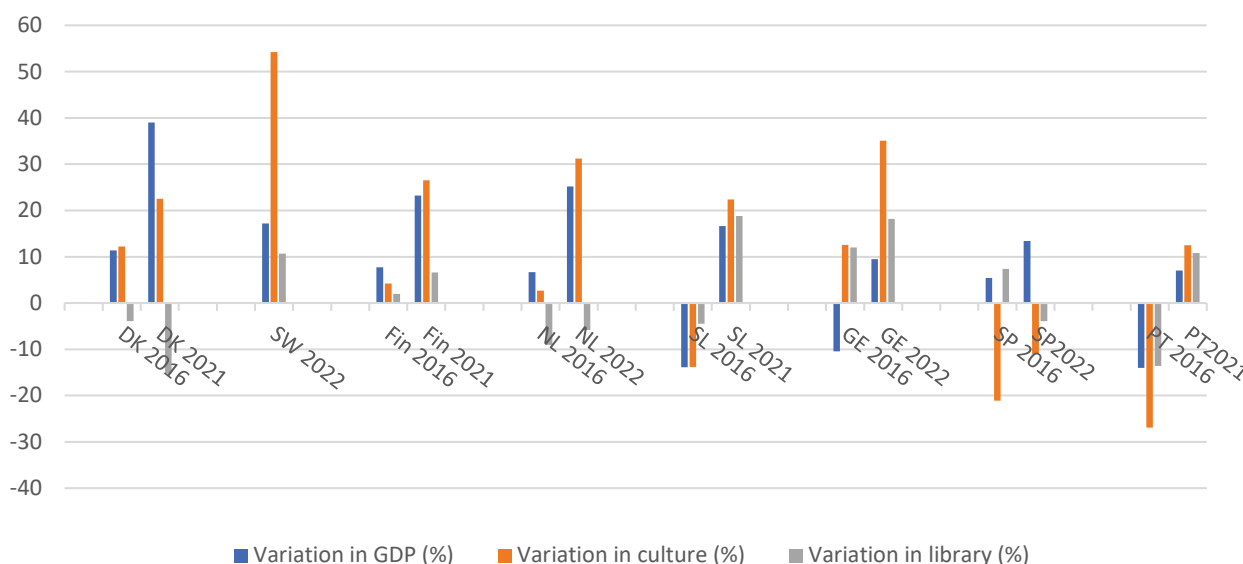
<sup>17</sup> Cavestri (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Lindblom and Räsänen (2017), Lau (1990).

<sup>19</sup> Vakkari et al. (2014) and (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Düren et al. (2019), Vitiello (2024a).

<sup>21</sup> Vitiello (2024a).



**Fig. 1:** GDP, Cultural expenditure, and Library expenditure (2011–2021) – negative/positive variations in nominal terms in relation to Year 2011, Source: Vitiello (2024b)

on library acquisitions).<sup>22</sup> No statistics are available on the Web for the bulk of Southern and Eastern European countries.

Inter- and intra-state disparities are not only an obstacle to the construction of a homogeneous library area; they are also an obstacle to the pursuit of common goals in European libraries. Good practices and lighthouse experiences are best diffused when they work in a homogeneous environment, with indicators having low levels of variations. When variations are extreme, other instruments have to be adopted.

### 3.2 The need for indicators

Areas that are critical for library policy and planning need to be monitored through indicators having universal value and being adaptable to any given situation. Here again, libraries' record is not brilliant. It was only in 2022 that the library vocabulary was normalized through the ISO 2789 standard<sup>23</sup>, where indicators prevail over definitions and priority is given to products (outputs) and results (outcomes) rather than to inputs.

Emphasis on outcomes has inspired calculators of great interest in the evaluation of library activities. The calculator promoted by the American Library Association (ALA) directly computes the positive economic effects engendered

by library use.<sup>24</sup> Following what is the best study on library impact on their environment,<sup>25</sup> the Consejo de Cooperación Bibliotecaria is also maintaining a calculator preparatory to measuring the value of library services.<sup>26</sup>

In order to be used for comparative purposes, however, library indicators must enact equalization mechanisms designed to adjust variables to the different levels of development. In the case of library expenditure, values have to be adjusted to demographic and economic variables, in conformity to COFOG (Classification of Functions of Government) standards maintained by Eurostat and OECD. This implies to break down library expenditure per inhabitant and relate it to the per capita GDP.<sup>27</sup> Another factor that allows to frame figures into an appropriate context is to calculate library expenditure as a share of cultural expenditure. These indicators are part of the Calculator "Is your city, or region, or state spending enough for libraries?" elaborated by Rete delle Reti (2025).

The combination of library (endogenous) and non-library (exogenous) indicators allows for a more accurate assessment of library activities in relation to their environment. Next to economic and demographic data, the social indicators proposed by the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development may also apply; in Europe, they are maintained by the Social Scoreboard that supports the European Pillar

<sup>22</sup> Vitiello (2024a).

<sup>23</sup> ISO 2789 (2022).

<sup>24</sup> ALA – I Love Libraries (2024).

<sup>25</sup> FESABID (2014).

<sup>26</sup> Gobierno de Navarra – Consejo de Cooperación Bibliotecaria (2024).

<sup>27</sup> Vitiello (2024b).

of Social Rights.<sup>28</sup> Some of them – such as, for example: “early dropout from education and training”, “people with overall basic or above basic digital skills”, “young people neither employed nor in education and training (NEET)”, “gender employment gap”, “at-risk rate of poverty or social exclusion”, and “at-risk rate of poverty or exclusion of children – are certainly relevant to libraries and useful for a comparative and contextualized analysis of library services in different countries, regions, cities”.

## 4 Themes on the OMC Library Agenda: innovation policies, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development, local public policies, freedom of expression

According to the OMC mandate, libraries “play a key role in the democratic, social, cultural and educational landscape in Europe at all levels”; they contribute “to democracy-building, citizen engagement and public participation activities throughout the EU, including in rural and remote areas [...] they welcome diverse groups, develop programs and activities that reflect current societal challenges, and provide access to pluralistic and reliable information and diverse cultural content in safe and accessible environments. They represent fundamental gateways to local and indigenous data, knowledge, research and culture”.<sup>29</sup>

An investigation undertaken within the LibrarIn project, funded by the European Commission’s Horizon program, identified the following social innovative themes developed by libraries: reading (including digital reading), lifelong learning, freedom of expression and democratic participation, technological and economic transformation, rural development and urban regeneration, well-being and health, and social cohesion.<sup>30</sup> The Council of Europe Recommendation on Library Legislation and Policies encompasses all these themes as elements of a library policy supported by the overarching framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is not by chance that the Recommendation comes first into the list of documents put forward by the OMC mandate.

### 4.1 Library innovation policies

Any dynamic vision open to the future implies change – the ability of being perceptive to new avenues, trends, and societal developments. Technologies are considered the mother of all innovations, even though change is the combination of content and diffusion channel – the way in which new content is successfully approached by and assimilated within a community.

The most comprehensive review of innovation in public and university libraries has been conducted by the already mentioned LibrarIn project. Beyond technological application, any new “service, program, structure, resource, concept, product, culture, system or partnership related to library services and information provision” is considered innovative practice.<sup>31</sup> Inclusive innovation is therefore the ability to adapt the technological imperative to a flexible library concept, which is able to evolve and change over time. The spectrum of applications emerging from the LibrarIn review describes the range of new library services:

- Reading and education services such as literacy activities targeting different social groups, basic literacy for children or adults left on the margins of society, STEM skills enhancement, digital literacy, cultural services (music, film, heritage).
- Community services aimed at promoting social inclusion, solidarity community building and equal opportunities to citizens and local culture, spaces offered to youth at risk of social exclusion, homeless people, migrants, ethnic minority groups.
- Health and wellness services of information on screening and preventive operations regarding individual wellness, hospitality offered to exercise classes for elderly publics.
- Creativity services with the provision of spaces suitable for the development of new creative ideas, skills or development of prototypes and combination of activities and spaces equipped for makers, coding, etc. and
- Business and finance services, assistance in filling out forms for citizen service, or spaces made available to businesses.<sup>32</sup>

One thing is the content of the new services, and another is their application on a large scale, beyond the small circle of the institutions that were first in introducing innovation. It would be naïf to think that the good practice developed in a “flagship” institution can branch out widely and extend to the entire library fabric in the absence of economic plans or

<sup>28</sup> Eurostat (2024b).

<sup>29</sup> Council of the European Union (2022).

<sup>30</sup> Rubalcaba et al. (2023), see below § 4.1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 22 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Rubalcaba et al. (2023) 24.

a vision that takes into account local needs. Economists,<sup>33</sup> sociologists,<sup>34</sup> and librarians<sup>35</sup> made the remark that, in the absence of public policies and targeted interventions on the ground, innovation can result in even greater disparities between advanced and backward-oriented actors, skilled and unskilled workers, and therefore, between libraries oriented towards modernity – where innovation thrives thanks to a favourable background – and libraries that are less fortunate and there is a sheer need of accompanying measures.

The most flagrant example of this distortion is the “Telematics for Libraries” programme included in the Third (1990–1994) and Fourth (1994–1998) Framework Programs. This EC programme provided funding for libraries up to 25 million euros (FP3) and 29 million euros (FP4) – the equivalent of 93 million euros in 2023 currency. In spite of its spectacular achievements, this investment not only failed to promote a homogeneous library development, but exacerbated disparities. As an independent report argued, the “Telematics for Libraries” program affected “only a part of the European library community: almost two-thirds of the participants [were] national and academic libraries, while public libraries accounted for only 25 percent”.<sup>36</sup>

It would therefore be a missed opportunity for all European libraries if European funding lines identified to support the OMC Report were only of cultural and educational nature – with reference to the programmes promoted by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Creative Culture, Erasmus+ and CERV. Funding lines should also concern sustainable development in libraries (through the Horizon program to begin with) and, primarily, the huge opportunities generated by the social cohesion policies known as the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs).

## 4.2 Library within the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development

During the years of pandemic, libraries fully promoted their role as “third place”; great impetus was provided, on the one hand, to remote technologies and, on the other hand, to the “social library” where no citizen is left behind. The library profession became aware of how essential its work can be to the development of a sustainable society.<sup>37</sup>

The German Library Association (DBV) argues that libraries are “per se” sustainable institutions.<sup>38</sup> The Council of Europe Recommendation fully incorporates library’s experience of sustainable development gained during the pandemic in an exercise that is, at the same time, professional, social, and political. In this perspective, libraries are promoters of people’s well-being (SDGs 1 and 3); they fight against educational poverty and inequality in education, thus ensuring continued economic growth (SDGs 4 and 8); are agents of social inclusion and cohesion (SDGs 8 and 10); through their activities of information literacy, they counter the digital divide between different layers of population (SDG 9). Libraries are cultural places of culture contrasting urban decay (SDG 11), they contribute to the growth of the democratic dimension through their information policies, encouraging democratic participation (SDG 16. 7) and protecting fundamental freedoms (16.10); finally, they contribute to territorial public policies and social partnerships (SDG 17).

An expanded concept of the library must therefore link to the social Goals of Sustainable Development of the Agenda 2030 – themselves the core notion of the European Pillar of Social Rights. A political document, the European Pillar of Social Rights includes 20 essential principles structured around three main axes: a) equal opportunities and equal access to the labour market; b) dynamic labour markets and fair working conditions; and c) social protection and social inclusion.<sup>39</sup> Although it is non-binding, the Pillar of Social Rights is already widely used in national and regional public policies; its 20 social indicators (Social Scoreboard) measure progress on objectives that are central to the policies of the European Social Fund plus (ESF+) and, in a complementary way, the European Regional Development Fund.<sup>40</sup>

## 4.3 Freedom of expression, free access to information and democratic participation

The Council of Europe Recommendation urges governments to entrust the development of library collections to the “independent professional judgment of librarians, free from political, religious, sectarian, commercial or other influences”.<sup>41</sup> This professional judgment is nowadays exercised in a climate of great political polarization, where it is difficult to maintain a balanced position inspired by tolerance and

<sup>33</sup> Such as Acemoglu (2002), Mazzucato (2013).

<sup>34</sup> Rogers (2003).

<sup>35</sup> Lor (2019).

<sup>36</sup> European Commission (2001) 32.

<sup>37</sup> NAPLE Forum (2020), EBLIDA (2020).

<sup>38</sup> DBV (2022).

<sup>39</sup> European Commission (2017), European Committee of the Regions (2019).

<sup>40</sup> Eurostat (2024b).

<sup>41</sup> Council of Europe (2023).

respect for the opinions of others. In 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) documented the censorship of 4240 titles imposed on libraries by pressure groups<sup>42</sup> (up 65 percent from 2022), with an additional 1247 requests on the waiting list. About half of the banned volumes have content close to LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) issues.<sup>43</sup>

The attempt made by political groups to target library acquisitions has also affected countries otherwise known for their liberal tendencies on issues related to gender identity and minorities. A report published by the Dawit Isaak Library in Malmö, Sweden, reveals that 28 percent of Swedish librarians in that country experienced undue pressure from politicians or members of the user community regarding the type of material or individual titles to be purchased.<sup>44</sup> Interference from political power has multiplied in recent years: in addition to the United States and Sweden, we recall the cases of France and Italy, where municipalities ruled by extremist political parties have tried to control library acquisitions.<sup>45</sup>

How can libraries counter this climate of intolerance? How can they conform to Section 1 of the Council of Europe Recommendation focused on “Freedom of Expression, Free Access to Information, and Democratic Participation”? It has been rightly observed that the profession cannot and should not remain neutral when one of its founding values is called into question.<sup>46</sup>

Strategies of resistance are multiple and should be adjusted to the needs of libraries and to their social environment, also taking into account their administrative status and relation to their funding agencies – this relation is at arm’s length in North America and several European states (for instance, The Netherlands) whereas library administration is fully incorporated into local administration in many other European states.

Where pluralism and cross-cultural dialogue are threatened by illiberal or openly fascist political parties, a realistic strategy of resistance should refer to the Council of Europe Recommendation in conformity to the following five principles.

1. *The principle of legality.* The Preamble of the Recommendation lists a series of texts underpinning the constitutional architecture of democracy in Europe. They can be divided into two categories:
  - (a) Texts outlining fundamental freedoms (for instance, the European Convention on Human rights, the UNESCO

Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions) bearing in mind that even these texts are not always effective in “Potemkin democracies” and that fifteen out of 27 European Union Member States are defined “Flawed democracies” according to The Economist Democracy Index.<sup>47</sup>

- (b) International acts signed by governments, such as the Agenda 2030 of sustainable development.
2. The principle of indivisibility. Freedom of expression, free access to information and democratic participation are mutually dependent. If taken separately, there is a risk of boomerang effect turning against the library institution that promotes fundamental values. For example, library legislation in Nordic countries<sup>48</sup> mentions the role of libraries as “public places”. Local politicians may use this legal indication to claim that the library public space is a forum for the ideological messages they wish to convey. Librarians can resist to this kind of political guidance only if a law explicitly protects their professional status and serves as “shield” against political pressure (like the French Library Act<sup>49</sup>).
3. The principle of proportionality. There are big disparities among European libraries, both at intra- and inter-state level. To give an example, the purchasing power for library acquisitions of an average Portuguese library is 15 times lower than that of a comparable library in Sweden.<sup>50</sup> It is obvious that the perception of pluralism in library collections may be felt differently if the collection development policy in Portuguese libraries is restricted to literature and frequently consulted material. This explains why librarians in some countries are so cautiously tactile to tackle this issue of freedom of expression in municipalities that are ruled by anti-democratic parties.
4. The principle of efficiency. Democracy has its costs; its development in libraries cannot take place without adequate financial support. Mayors opposing cultural diversity would find it hard to take an interest in intercultural issues. Therefore, it may be strategic for libraries to resort to European sources of local funding that have been the object of partnership agreements between the Commission and the Member States.<sup>51</sup>
5. The principle of graduality. Countries having experienced fascism and communism know that resistance to totalitarian ideologies can develop in different ways

<sup>42</sup> ALA (2024).

<sup>43</sup> Stevens (2020).

<sup>44</sup> Forslund (2023).

<sup>45</sup> Kebbee (2004), Nadotti (2018).

<sup>46</sup> Lankes (2018).

<sup>47</sup> EIU (2024).

<sup>48</sup> Finland (2016), Norway (2014).

<sup>49</sup> France (2021).

<sup>50</sup> Vitiello (2024a).

<sup>51</sup> European Commission (2021).



through a panoply of methods: passive resistance, work-to-rule, clear dissidence, and others.

## 5 Community libraries and their relationship with local public policies

The word “community” is frequently used in the Council of Europe Recommendation on Library legislation and policy in Europe. It is employed:

- In the Preamble, where libraries are defined as “as publicly accessible institutions of a cultural, educational and social nature that serve local, academic or specialised communities and/or society at large” and “community hubs striving towards a democratic, cohesive, inclusive and equitable society”.
- In the section on Freedom of expression, free access to information and democratic participation: “Libraries are created for the benefit of their user communities so as to provide people with open access to information and ideas”; and collection development “should be done in consultation with representative bodies of users, community groups or other educational, cultural and information institutions [...]; on the basis of quality and relevance to the needs of the user community”, “in conformity with the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, [libraries should] make [library collections] known to the wider community”.
- In the section Library financing – where Libraries are considered “community builders and providers of informal education; therefore, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure co-ordination with development plans and strategies of national and local communities, each with their respective responsibilities and functions”.
- In the section Global and Local Threats – where it should be assessed “the importance of library services for communities hit by threats of a local and/or global nature so as to enable a rapid and effective response to and possible avoidance of these threats”, in interaction with “the communities they serve”.
- In the section of Information and digital literacy – where “as community hubs designed to encourage the social development of the communities they serve, libraries should host and provide media and information literacy programmes and courses”.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Council of Europe (2023).

According to Bauman, community is a warm place – “a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain”, where “we can count on each other’s good will”.<sup>53</sup> The trouble with libraries begins when they lose track of the needs of their communities and are unable to connect with the cultural and social policies promoted at local level.

The European documents which map local needs are the Partnership Agreements between the European Commission and the member states of the Union.<sup>54</sup> Normally, governments flaunt successes and propose easy solutions for electoral purposes. Partnership Agreements are instead complex documents, with little room for political propaganda: governments show the soft belly of the country and national weaknesses are laid bare. They have to do so if they wish to access the resources made available by the European Structural and Investment Funds – more than 500 billion euros in the 2021–2027 period, most of which are directed toward the implementation of the European social policy.<sup>55</sup>

During the 2021–2027 cycle, five general ESIF objectives are envisaged in the form of Policy Objectives (POs):

1. a more competitive and smarter Europe,
2. a greener, low carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy,
3. a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility,
4. a more social and inclusive Europe,
5. Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories.

Scrolling through the pages of the Partnership Agreements, particularly those dedicated to POs 4 and 5 which most closely correspond to the social pillar of the EU 2030 Agenda on sustainable development, it is easy to detect relevant national variations.

In France, for example, POs 4 and 5 aim to revitalise the education sector by reducing dropout rates (8.9 % in 2017).<sup>56</sup> In Germany, the main challenges are identified in regional disparities in demographic development, the distribution of innovative technologies and the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Of particular importance in this context is the New Leipzig Charter, which advocates a fair, green, and productive urban development through cross-sectoral digitisation plans.<sup>57</sup>

In Italy, the spotlight is on the national indicators reported in the Social Scoreboard, which are far from the Eu-

<sup>53</sup> Bauman (2001) 2 and ss.

<sup>54</sup> European Commission (2021).

<sup>55</sup> European Parliament – Council of the European Union (2021).

<sup>56</sup> Agence nationale de la cohésion des territoires (2022).

<sup>57</sup> Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz (2022).

Tab. 1: Towards a European library policy – Institutional framework

Institutions	Policies	Operational framework	Resources (UE Programmes)	Indicators
European Union	European	2030 UN Agenda on sustainable development, CoE Recommendation	European Commission (Horizon, CERV, ERASMUS+...)	OECD, EUROSTAT, UN SDGs
	Partnership Agreements	European Social Pillar, OMC Library work	European Structural and Investment Funds, INTERREG	Social Scoreboard supporting the European Social Pillar
Member States	National	National Library Agendas	National resources	National library indicators

ropean average. The share of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is 12.6 % of young people in Europe; it is 22.2 % in Italy and 33 % in Southern Italy. Extremely critical is also the quality and inclusiveness of education in a country where school drop-out rates are 13.5 % at national level and 18.2 % in the South (against an EU average of 10.2 %).<sup>58</sup>

Portugal has underlined three dimensions in its social policy: (i) increasing the birth rate; (ii) promoting integration policies for migrants; (iii) ageing population. In Portugal, priorities concern the fight against unemployment, especially for young NEETs, the equal participation of women and men in the labour market, and the adaptation of workers and companies to the green and digital transition.<sup>59</sup> School drop-outs (13.3 per cent of young people aged 18 to 24 in 2021) and equal access of women and men to the labour market are also the priority objectives for Spain, together with adult education, social inclusion of vulnerable people and the fight against poverty.<sup>60</sup>

Partnership agreements orient the allocation of European Structural and Investment Funds and are aimed at institutions of a public nature. These funds are of particular interest to European libraries, whether large or small, innovative or in need of innovation, public or university. Moreover, European Structural Funds are linked to the indicators of the Social Scoreboard supporting the European Pillar of Social Rights (Eurostat 2024b) – a good match for library indicators of social nature.

## 6 Conclusions: what Policy for European libraries?

Let us now come to the initial question: how can a European sovereignty in the field of culture be exercised and shared between European Union authorities and Member States? In this relational game, supranational and national authorities shape an identity – which is at the same time European, national, and local – over a territory that is at the same time municipal, regional, national, and European.

The idea is not to measure how much Europe is injected into library policies, but in which way library policies conform to the founding values of the European identity on the one hand – for instance, the cultural rights acknowledged by the Nice Charter (fundamental freedoms, the right to education, the principle of cultural diversity<sup>61</sup>) – and how they may fulfil social rights, on the other hand.

The exercise of sovereignty – where sovereignty means not only authorities, but also their ability of making investments – is referred to European / national and local authorities in the following table.

It is clear from Table 1 that a European library policy defined by the OMC Group can only be realistic if it refers to all actors who are responsible for library action, with activities that are planned in the short-, medium-, and long-term. A follow-up should be envisaged, in the form of a Declaration, a Communication, or a Conclusions of the OMC report, also taking into account that the Council of Europe Recommendation is the only document addressing libraries that has been approved at the highest governmental level (Committee of Ministers) and is binding for European governments. Moreover, for a European library policy to be successful, a series of proposals should be put forward in which European Union's general orientation is balanced by, and reinforced with, appropriate policies at local level – more specifically through the Partnership Agreements,

<sup>58</sup> Coesione Italia 2021–2027 (2022).

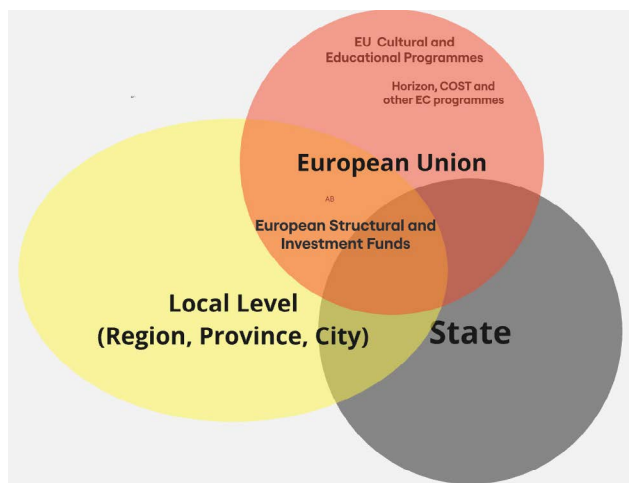
<sup>59</sup> República Portuguesa. Portugal 2030 (2022).

<sup>60</sup> Gobierno de España (2023).

<sup>61</sup> Ferri (2008).

where joint competences of the European Commission and the Member States intersect. Rather than a general European policy, libraries need models of intervention that can be modulated in relation to local communities and to their environmental situations and frameworks (compulsorily resorting to European Structural and Investment Funds when gaps are too wide).

The European Union is a community where there is no “us” – Member States policies – and “them” – EU policies. At least since 1960, when the European Social Fund was created, both policies are intertwined, and the OMC work is one of the manifestations of this intersection. “Identifying different dimensions and areas with potential and exploring funding lines under EU programmes” is one of the Target Outputs identified by the OMC action on libraries. European funding areas are represented in the following figure, with European Structural and Investment Funds being the most significant Target Output for a wide number of libraries in many European states.



**Fig. 2:** Exploring Funding lines under EU programmes (OMC Target Output)<sup>62</sup>

According to the official timetable, the OMC panel’s work on libraries should come to an end early 2025, with the rest of the year being dedicated to the drafting of the final report and the preparation of the final conference.<sup>63</sup> It is to be hoped that OMC experts produce a frank, honest and useful report where lights and shadows in libraries are fairly emphasised and the list of good practices can be replicated in, and adapted to many contexts. And it is a reasonable ambition to expect that the OMC work will reflect the needs of

European libraries, all European libraries, – so that none of them feels left behind.

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<sup>62</sup> Adapted from DBV (2019) 8 f.

<sup>63</sup> Council of the European Union (2022).

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**Giuseppe Vitiello**  
Rete delle Reti  
Italy  
[g.vitiello@retedellereti.org](mailto:g.vitiello@retedellereti.org)