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### Enhancing ASEAN-EU relations through cultural cooperation: Realities and unexplored potential

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# Enhancing ASEAN-EU Relations through Cultural Cooperation

*Realities and Unexplored Potential*

David Ocón and Lluís Bonet



# **Enhancing ASEAN-EU Relations through Cultural Cooperation**

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**David Ocón and Lluís Bonet**

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# Abbreviations

ABC	ASEAN Brussels Committee
ACC	ASEAN Coordinating Council
ACF	ASEAN Cultural Fund
AEMM	ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEF	Asia-Europe Foundation
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
CCI	Cultural and Creative Industries
CFSP	(EU) Common Foreign and Security Policy
COCI	Committee on Culture and Information
CSO(s)	Civil Society Organisation(s)
DG	Directorate-General
DG DEVCO	(EC) Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
DG EAC	(EC) Directorate-General for Education and Culture
DG INTPA	(EC) Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG TRADE	(EC) Directorate-General for Trade
E-READI	Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument
EC	European Commission
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
Ed.	Editor
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
e.g.	(Latin: <i>exempli gratia</i> ) for example
ENCATC	European network on cultural management and policy
etc.	(Latin: <i>et cetera</i> ) and others
EU	European Union
EUNIC	European Union National Institutes for Culture
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
ibid	(Latin: <i>ibidem</i> ) in the same place

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
i.e.	(Latin: id est) that is
incl.	including
JCC	ASEAN-EU Joint Cooperation Committee
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
n.d.	no date
NGO(s)	non-governmental organisation(s)
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SOM	Senior Officials' Meeting
SOMCA	ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting for Culture and Arts
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
\$	dollars
€	euros
¥	yen

# Foreword

In 2020, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) decided to take their relations to the level of ‘strategic partnership’. This does not mean exclusivity, but it paves the way for more deliberate, premeditated long-term policy shaping and cooperation. Mutually, these two major, long-established multilateral regional organisations are their third largest trading partner. However, this economic connectivity and the willingness to cooperate in fields like security and sustainable development so far lack an elaborated cultural dimension. This striking gap needs to be addressed, as it is only through culture that cultural awareness of and interest in each other and the subsequent competence to sustainably engage in people-to-people connection (such as, but not exclusively through, language capabilities) can be acquired.

The authors both analyse reasons for this so far underdeveloped potential, such as differences in institutional organisation and funding, and provide recommendations on how to proceed. They mention the comparatively significant cultural dimension of the ASEAN-US and ASEAN-China strategic partnerships. As both ASEAN and the EU support multilateralism and a rules-based international order, the authors stress that the development of opportunities to acquire sound cultural competency with each other is fundamental for constructive and sustainable interregional cooperation, a cooperation which is relevant for promoting international standards and regulatory practices and also especially relevant in regard to a diversification strategy of international economic relations. It is here that—complementary to existing successful bilateral cultural cooperations between individual nations in these regions—multilateral long-term agreements and funding lines can create focus, vision and an environment for long-term planning.

This study forms part of ifa’s Research Programme “Culture and Foreign Policy”, in which experts address relevant issues relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim of involving academics, practitioners, policymakers, and civil society. I would like to thank Lluís Bonet and David Ocón for their excellent work and commitment to this research. In addition, I would like to thank my colleagues, Sarah Widmaier and Ivana Putri, for their work on the conception, coordination and editing of this project.



The authors state that multilateral cultural cooperation offers more inclusive and impactful engagement opportunities in ASEAN-EU relations. They consider it timely to prepare now with concrete pilots for “a more pivotal role of culture in the future ASEAN-EU Plan of Action”, last but not least because cross-cultural cooperation can encourage socio-cultural innovation and a sense of common purpose in finding solutions for shared challenges.

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# Abstract

This study explores how multilateral cultural cooperation can strengthen ASEAN-EU ties, complementing the bilateral cultural cooperation already present in the two. Highlighting the importance of multilateral cultural exchanges in fostering mutual understanding and addressing global challenges, it emphasises that culture can serve as a bridge between Southeast Asian and European societies, supporting other forms of cooperation, such as economic, strategic and geopolitical ones. Multilateral cultural initiatives offer broader, more inclusive engagement opportunities, thereby enhancing diplomatic relations, economic development and regional stability. This research gathered data through extensive historical analysis, targeted surveys and expert interviews, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced view. The study provides targeted recommendations for policymakers in ASEAN and the EU which focus on developing long-term cultural strategies, increasing institutional collaboration and securing core funding for sustainable projects.

# Executive Summary

Individually, the EU and ASEAN are two of the most fascinating and long-lasting geostrategic entities in the world. They can preserve their cultural heritage and defend plural identities while developing interaction between them and putting creativity at the service of innovation and competitiveness. They stand out because of their unique characteristics, including a commitment to regional integration, fostering stability and promoting economic cooperation, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in global affairs.

However, despite their decades of international relevance and enduring influence, they have not cooperated with each other as much as their worldwide status and influence suggest. In cultural matters, advances in cooperation have been even more modest and slow—a potential missed. This research project aims to address that gap by providing a holistic and comprehensive analysis of the current status of the cultural relations between ASEAN and the EU and, in consultation with dozens of experts in the field, outlining a series of recommendations to inform future steps in cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU and advance their relationship.

This study delves into the multilateral cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU, emphasising its significance in complementing existing bilateral ties and other forms of collaboration, such as geostrategic and economic cooperation. It extensively analyses the historical background, current status and future prospects of cultural relations between these two regional entities.

While ASEAN and the EU have had a longstanding relationship since 1977, cultural cooperation has been less robust compared to economic and political ties. Enhancing cultural cooperation can strengthen diplomatic relations, foster mutual understanding and address global challenges collectively. Bilateral cultural cooperation has, for decades, fostered closer ties between ASEAN countries and individual EU member states thanks to institutions such as the Institut Français and the Goethe-Institut as well as ASEAN countries' cultural centres in European cities. Over the years, they have promoted cultural exchange, language learning and artistic collaboration, fostering deeper bilateral ties. However, multilateral cultural cooperation can amplify the impact of these efforts by pooling resources and coordinating actions to address broader regional challenges and create more inclusive opportunities for cultural exchange. The primary objectives of this study include understanding past achievements,

analysing the current cooperation status, engaging key stakeholders for their perspectives, and formulating targeted recommendations. This approach ensures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic, backed by quantitative and qualitative data.

## Findings

- **Motivations for Cultural Cooperation:** Both ASEAN and the EU view cultural cooperation as a means of enhancing mutual understanding, promoting regional identity and supporting diplomatic and economic relations. Cultural exchanges are seen as vital for fostering empathy and respect between diverse cultures, contributing to regional stability and global peace.
- **Challenges and Barriers:** Key challenges include limited funding for cultural projects, bureaucratic hurdles and differing cultural policies and priorities among ASEAN and EU member states. There is also a need for better coordination and communication among stakeholders involved in cultural initiatives.
- **Priority Areas for Collaboration:** The authors identify several priority areas for intensified cooperation, including digital cultural exchanges, capacity building and educational programmes, heritage preservation, and support for creative industries. These areas are seen as having a high potential for fostering innovation and sustainable development.

## Recommendations and Potential Next Steps

- **Developing Long-term Cultural Strategies:** Formulate comprehensive cultural policies which outline clear objectives, priorities and action plans for ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation. These strategies should be aligned with broader regional and global goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Increasing Institutional Collaboration:** Enhanced collaboration between cultural institutions, government agencies and private sector stakeholders is

essential for effective cultural diplomacy. This can be achieved through regular dialogue, joint initiatives and partnerships which leverage the strengths and resources of different actors.

- **Securing Sustainable Funding:** Adequate funding is crucial for the success of cultural projects. The study recommends establishing dedicated funding mechanisms for ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation, supported by public and private sector contributions.
- **Promoting Large-scale Multilateral Cultural Events:** Organising high-profile cultural events which bring together artists, cultural practitioners and audiences with space for exchanging cooperative initiatives and co-productions can enhance visibility and impact. Examples include biennales, film and performance festivals and cultural symposiums which showcase the diversity and creativity of ASEAN and the EU.
- **Enhancing Support for Creative Industries:** The creative industries are a vital component of cultural cooperation, offering significant economic and social benefits. The authors recommend providing targeted support for creative entrepreneurs, including capacity-building programmes, access to markets and opportunities for international collaboration.
- **Fostering Interregional Cultural Connectivity:** Strengthening cultural ties between ASEAN and the EU requires improved connectivity and mobility. This can be achieved through initiatives such as visa facilitation for cultural practitioners, scholarships for cultural studies and digital platforms which facilitate cultural exchange and collaboration.

The authors conclude by emphasising the critical role of multilateral cultural cooperation in enhancing ASEAN-EU relations. They argue that such cooperation can offer more inclusive and impactful engagement opportunities than bilateral cooperation, thereby strengthening diplomatic ties, promoting innovation and contributing to regional stability and economic development. The recommendations provided aim to guide policymakers in both regions towards building a more cohesive and sustainable framework for cultural collaboration.

# 1. Introduction

In an increasingly complex and volatile international arena where alliances emerge and end quickly, it can be considered successful that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) continue to survive as major actors in international politics. Due to this shared perception of success, high expectations are often on the table regarding their cooperation. Even though the two regional organisations have collaborated for more than 45 years, it was only recently—at the end of 2020, to be precise—that they committed to raising their relationship to the level of “strategic partners”. This strategic partnership includes an intensified cooperation on issues such as economic integration and trade, climate change, environmental protection and green growth, sustainable development and connectivity, maritime cooperation, and cybersecurity, among others (EEAS, 2020; ASEAN, 2024a). While this strategic partnership does not necessarily mean exclusivity, as ASEAN has similar strategic alliances with nine other countries, including Australia, Russia, China (the oldest partnership, since 2003), and Canada (the newest, signed in 2023), it signals a willingness on both sides to advance in their association, pivoting towards a more defined and calculated relationship (The Diplomat, 2021; Allison-Reumann & Murray, 2021).

ASEAN and EU countries are mutually strategically relevant for several reasons, including economic, strategic and geopolitical factors. For instance, in terms of trade and investment, the total volume between ASEAN and the EU reached nearly US\$300 billion in 2022. ASEAN and the EU are each other’s third largest trading partners, after China and the United States, which highlights their deep economic interdependence. Key exports from ASEAN to the EU include electronics, machinery, textiles, and agricultural products, while key imports from the EU to ASEAN include machinery, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and vehicles. In addition, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflow from the EU to ASEAN was US\$24 billion, which made the EU ASEAN’s 3<sup>rd</sup> most prominent source of FDI (European Commission, n.d.a; Delegation of the EU to ASEAN, 2023).

Regarding security, the EU and ASEAN prioritise maintaining regional stability and security, fostering a multipolar balance of power. The EU is a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which focuses on political and security issues in the region (EU in ASEAN, 2024a). Both the EU and ASEAN support a rules-based international order and multilateralism. Their cooperation

is essential in addressing global challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity and health crises. By working together, they can set international standards and promote good regulatory practices, essential in an increasingly fragmented global landscape (Fulcrum, 2024).

Cultural cooperation and exchanges are crucial in today's world. Beyond economic and geopolitical ties, cultural connections foster mutual understanding, empathy and respect between peoples and nations. Cultural exchanges allow individuals to engage with different perspectives, regional knowledge and language competencies, traditions, and ways of life, breaking down stereotypes and promoting tolerance and inclusivity. Enhancing people-to-people ties is also one of the priorities in the ASEAN-EU relationship, aligning with one of ASEAN's three main community pillars: socio-cultural cooperation. A core part of it, together with areas such as higher education, scientific collaboration and health, cultural exchanges are perceived as pivotal to strengthening mutual understanding and building long-term relationships, fostering a shared sense of community between the two regions (EU-ASEAN Cooperation 2024b).

Over decades, cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU has been sustained by pillars of bilateral cooperation. Through their cultural sections or centres, embassies from Southeast Asian and European countries have regularly embarked on developing cultural activities, targeted in general to promote their culture, language and arts. This work is often linked to or complemented with the work done by tourism boards which, while essentially focusing on tourism promotion, usually include cultural events and elements of collaboration with cultural institutions in the host country. Also well-known is the work of European cultural institutes actively investing in and promoting cultural cooperation and exchanges in most Southeast Asian countries. In some cases, like the Instituto Cervantes in the Philippines and Erasmus Huis/Dutch Cultural Centre in Indonesia, these are closely connected with colonial linkages; in other cases, like the Goethe-Institut and the Institut Français, they look at the region more holistically. As a result of these interactions, dozens of European-led cultural interventions and activities occur in Southeast Asian countries every year. Similarly, ASEAN countries have established cultural centres in EU countries, such as the Thai Cultural Centre in Berlin and the Indonesian

Cultural Centre in The Hague, among others, which serve as platforms for cultural promotion and exchange.

While bilateral cultural cooperation between some European and Southeast Asian countries has been present for decades, this is not the case for multilateral cultural collaboration between ASEAN and the EU which, despite nearing half a century of official relations, still shows a critical deficit. An enhanced multilateral cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU can support the strengthening of diplomatic ties, addressing jointly global challenges, contributing towards innovation and creativity, generating economic benefits, and broadening cultural exchange and understanding.

Cultural cooperation can strengthen diplomatic relations, for instance by helping to present a unified voice on the global stage and enhancing their collective influence and diplomatic leverage. By promoting cultural diversity, preserving heritage and supporting creative industries, culture can be a source of soft power, strengthening relationships and enhancing influence and attractiveness on the global stage. In addition, it can facilitate dialogue and cooperation on shared challenges such as sustainable development, climate change and social inclusion and inequality, fostering a sense of common purpose and collaboration. Cross-cultural initiatives encourage innovation and creativity, developing new ideas, art forms and cultural expressions.

Multilateral cooperation can result in collaborative projects which might not be feasible within a bilateral framework, such as large-scale festivals, exhibitions and research initiatives. ASEAN-EU's promotion of cultural tourism can boost economic growth by attracting tourists interested in diverse cultural experiences. Supporting the creative industries through multilateral cooperation can lead to economic development and job creation in both regions.

Lastly, multilateral cooperation between ASEAN and the EU can promote interaction among diverse cultures, fostering a richer and more nuanced understanding of different cultural perspectives and interregional cultural connectivity, bringing together not just two nations but entire regions, thus broadening the scope of cultural exchange.



While bilateral cultural cooperation has proven valuable in the ASEAN-EU context, multilateral cultural cooperation offers additional advantages by fostering a more inclusive, diverse and impactful cultural exchange. It strengthens diplomatic relations, addresses global challenges, promotes innovation, and contributes to economic development and regional stability. For ASEAN and the EU, engaging in multilateral cultural cooperation can significantly enhance their cultural diplomacy efforts and build stronger, more resilient cultural ties.

While, over the years, political dialogue, trade and economic cooperation, development, and cooperation on non-traditional security challenges have advanced (Delegation of the EU to ASEAN, 2022), the ASEAN-EU multilateral relationship in arts and cultural cooperation has been timid, syncopated and lacking cohesion and long-term planning. “Culture” did not appear in the first official document signed by ASEAN and the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1980 (ASEAN-EEC Cooperation Agreement), and in one of the latest, the 23-page long “Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027)”, the words “culture” and “cultural” are used sparsely, in vague statements and without detailed articulation on implementation: “to build a culture of peace and conflict sensitivity” (p.6), “enhance people-to-people exchanges and cooperation in the areas of education, science and culture” (p.13) and “promote initiatives and programmes that enhance cultural understanding” (p.14). In the recent ASEAN Secretariat’s “Overview of ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations”, updated in June 2023, the words “culture”, “arts”, and “heritage” do not appear at all.

This study addresses this gap in cooperation between these two institutions. It is grounded in the belief that enhanced cultural collaboration between ASEAN and the EU can support the overall cooperation framework between the two entities. As discussed in Chapter 2, experts from both regions validated this observation. Culture demands a dedicated space in the ASEAN-EU relationship. It can play an active ‘hinge’ role between the two regions, complementing and supporting the work of other strategic areas such as trade, climate change and sustainable development. This study aims to identify a more precise and targeted alignment for culture within the broader context of the complex geopolitical international relations between ASEAN and the EU. It actively addresses the gap resulting from the undefined role of culture by providing recommendations

derived from comprehensive historical analysis, targeted surveys and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders in both regions. These recommendations are directed at regional leaders and policymakers, particularly within their central administrative bodies: the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat.

The specific aims of the study are as follows:

- to enhance understanding of past milestones and achievements in ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation;
- to comprehensively analyse the current status of ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation, highlighting its main opportunities and challenges;
- to actively engage with key stakeholders in ASEAN and the EU's cultural sectors to gather their perspectives and recommendations for enhancing the relationship;
- to formulate a series of targeted recommendations for policymakers in both regions' central institutions.

This study focused on analysing data generated via three main sources.

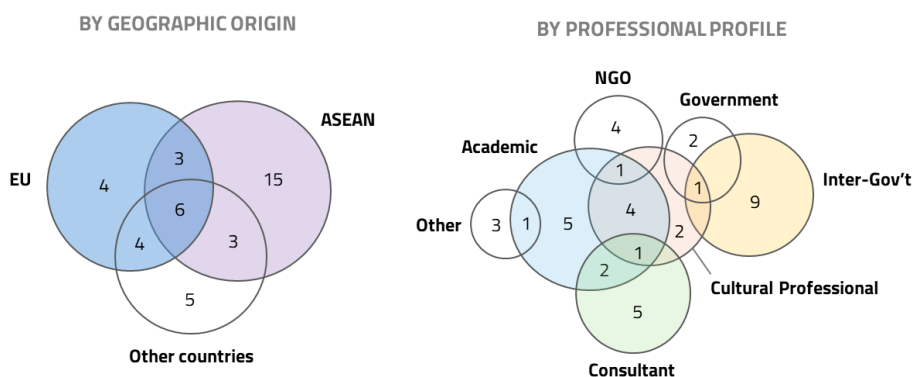
First, the authors conducted a historical overview and analysis of the cultural cooperation developed between ASEAN and the EU since establishing dialogue relations in 1977. This included institutional declarations, agreements, treaties and action plans, statistics, and scholarly studies. The desk research was conducted in January 2024.

Second, a targeted survey (see Appendix) with experts was conducted in February 2024 to assess the status, opportunities and challenges of ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation. The survey involved 40 hand-picked experts from various sectors, including academia, government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media, as well as arts managers, artists and other cultural practitioners, and international consultants.

Many of the experts interviewed have a good knowledge of international cultural relations and developed their professional careers in the last ten years in one of the regions studied: 67.5% in ASEAN member countries and 42.5 % in member states of the European Union. One of the most interesting factors of these

experts is their extensive interregional experience, as 22.5% have developed professional tasks in the last ten years both in the European Union and ASEAN member countries and up to 45% have experience in other countries in Asia, Europe or even the rest of the world. This vast international experience can be explained, in large part, by the fact that a third of them have developed professionally in intergovernmental organisations. Another third comes from the academic world, and 22.5% are professionals from arts and culture. As shown in *Figure 1*, the multiple experiences in various professional fields and geographical areas make the 40 experts interviewed a particularly relevant group, thanks to which the study presented goes far beyond the vision or analysis of the authors of this research.

**Figure 1. Profile and regions where experts who answered the survey have developed their professional experience in the last ten years.**



Third, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the cultural and non-cultural sectors of ASEAN and the EU during March and April 2024. The interviewees were chosen on the basis of their current and/or past responsibilities in the international relations arena and/or deep knowledge and understanding of cultural relations in ASEAN, the EU or both. The interviewees represented diverse profiles, including ambassadors and representatives of diplomatic missions, officials from ASEAN and EU public bodies, heads of regional and international arts and cultural organisations, international consultants, and academics.

## **2. Historical Background of ASEAN-EU Cultural Cooperation and Relations**

### **2.1 The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**

ASEAN is a regional intergovernmental organisation comprising ten Southeast Asian countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Established in 1967, ASEAN aims to promote regional cooperation and integration, enhance economic growth and development, and foster regional peace and stability. ASEAN operates on the principles of mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs and consensus-building among member states (ASEAN, 2024b). The Declaration on ASEAN Unity in Cultural Diversity (2011) emphasises the importance of cultural diversity as a foundation for unity within ASEAN. It aims to enhance mutual understanding and respect among ASEAN member states, foster regional identity and promote sustainable development through cultural exchange and cooperation.

The day-to-day operations and decision-making of ASEAN are managed by several key bodies, including the ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC), and the ASEAN Secretariat. The ASEAN Summit, held annually, brings together the leaders of member states to discuss and decide on key issues and initiatives. The ACC, consisting of foreign ministers of member states, coordinates the implementation of ASEAN decisions and oversees the work of various sectoral bodies. The ASEAN Secretariat, based in Jakarta, Indonesia, serves as the central administrative body of ASEAN, facilitating communication, coordination and implementation of ASEAN activities (ASEAN, 2024c).

ASEAN's objectives include accelerating economic growth, social progress and regional cultural development (ASEAN, 1967). The organisation facilitates economic cooperation through initiatives such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which promotes trade liberalisation and economic growth among member states. ASEAN promotes regional political and security cooperation through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which serves

as a platform for dialogue and cooperation on political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific region (ASEAN Regional Forum, n.d.).

Within ASEAN, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is dedicated to promoting social progress and cultural development in the region. The ASCC seeks to build a cohesive and inclusive ASEAN society, focusing on areas such as education, youth, sports, and cultural exchanges. Arts and culture are relevant in the ASCC as tools for fostering mutual understanding, preserving heritage and promoting creativity and innovation across Southeast Asia. By encouraging collaboration in the arts, cultural heritage preservation and exchanges of cultural performances and exhibitions, the ASCC aims to strengthen regional identity and promote a sense of community among Southeast Asian peoples (ASEAN, 2024d).

The ASEAN Brussels Committee (ABC) serves as ASEAN's diplomatic mission to the EU. It comprises the Brussels-based Ambassadors and senior officials of the ten ASEAN members. It represents ASEAN's interests and facilitates communication and cooperation between ASEAN and EU institutions.

## **2.2 The European Union (EU)**

The EU is a political and economic union of 27 European countries. It traces its origins to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Economic Community (EEC), formed in the aftermath of World War II to promote economic cooperation and prevent future conflicts among European nations. The EU was officially established through the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 to deepen integration among member states and foster peace, stability and prosperity in Europe. The EU operates on the principles of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and it has its own institutions, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European Council, the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the European Central Bank (European Union, n.d.a).

The EU operates as a supranational organisation where decisions are made collectively by its member states and institutions. Its main priorities include promoting economic growth and job creation, ensuring peace and security,

addressing climate change and environmental challenges, and upholding democratic values and human rights. The EU achieves these goals through various mechanisms such as the single market, which allows the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people within the EU; the common currency, the euro, used by 19 member states; and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which aims to coordinate the foreign policies of member states (European Union, n.d.c). Additionally, the EU provides financial support to its member states through programmes like the European Structural and Investment Funds, which invest in regional development, infrastructure and innovation.

Despite being a competence of the member states, arts and culture play an important role in the EU, particularly because of their ability to foster creativity, innovation and social cohesion. Since 2007, promoting culture as a vital element in EU international relations has been one of the three main objectives of the European Agenda for Culture, aiming to foster social, economic and cultural development. Strategies focus on intercultural dialogue for peace, heritage preservation and collaboration with global partners and regions (European Union, n.d.d). The EU assists cultural exchange, innovation and cooperation by supporting cross-cutting cultural cooperation projects from many of its programmes or, more specifically, with initiatives such as the Creative Europe programme under the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC), which provides funding for the cultural and creative sectors, such as audiovisual, performing arts, literature, cultural heritage or visual arts. Cultural diversity is celebrated as a key aspect of European identity under the motto of ‘united in diversity’. The EU promotes the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage through programmes such as the “European Heritage Seal” or innovation in cultural policies with initiatives such as the “European Capitals of Culture” or the “New Bauhaus” programme. These initiatives aim to highlight the richness and diversity of European culture, strengthen social ties between Europeans and their organisations as well as promote cross-border cooperation and with other countries beyond Europe (ibid). EU delegations overseas play a crucial role in identifying local needs, engaging communities and aligning actions with cultural contexts to achieve strategic objectives (ibid).

The EU engages with ASEAN primarily through the following two main bodies. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the EU's diplomatic service and responsible for conducting the EU's foreign and security policy. It represents the EU in diplomatic relations with ASEAN and coordinates the EU's engagement with ASEAN. The European Commission (EC) plays a key role in the EU's relations with ASEAN, particularly through various Directorates-General (DGs) which are responsible for specific policy areas. The Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA, formerly DG DEVCO) focuses on development cooperation and oversees the implementation of EU development programmes in ASEAN countries. The Directorate-General for Trade (DG TRADE) handles trade relations between the EU and ASEAN.

It is also necessary to consider the cooperation of the European national institutes for culture within EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture), often together with EU delegations in various cities and countries, via its local clusters. In collaboration with its partners, this European network of organisations engages in cultural relations and breathes life into European cultural cooperation across the region. EUNIC advocates a prominent role of culture in international relations and is a strategic partner of the EU, actively involved in further defining European cultural policy.

## **2.3 Historical ASEAN-EU relationship**

Since their creation, ASEAN and the EU have established dialogue and collaboration mechanisms which have impacted hundreds of millions of people's lives. Although they share common approaches, such as promoting international law, norms and standards, sustainable multilateralism, and free and fair trade (i.e. the EU is currently ASEAN's third largest trading partner after China and the US), their processes and outlooks are different: while ASEAN is an intergovernmental organisation, the EU is a supranational organisation.

In the EU, member states have pooled their sovereignty in certain areas (such as trade and environment) and have institutions such as a parliament, a court, a single currency, and a foreign service, which ASEAN does not have. ASEAN is governed by a series of core principles which include mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and non-interference

in the internal affairs of one another. Even though ASEAN serves a rapidly increasing population of over 660 million people, the ASEAN Secretariat, based in Jakarta, counts fewer than 400 staff, which is tiny compared to Brussels' European Commission (EC) with more than 32,000 permanent and contract employees, incl. policy officers, researchers, lawyers, and translators (European Commission, n.d.b). ASEAN's annual budget of less than €20 million is minuscule compared with that of the EU Commission, with a budget of about €187 billion for 2024 (Koh and Yeo, 2020; European Council, n.d.).

ASEAN and the European Communities established official relations in 1977 and formal institutionalisation followed with the signing of the ASEAN-EEC Cooperation Agreement in 1980, focusing on trade, economic development and political dialogue. Over the years, the relationship between ASEAN and the EU has progressed through various stages of engagement. The Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership, adopted in March 2007, set out both sides' long-term vision and commitment to work together. In 2012, the EU became the first regional organisation to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), boosting the EU's political and security engagement with the region. In 2015, the EU established a diplomatic mission to ASEAN and appointed a dedicated Ambassador, a diplomatic mission which would become fully fledged in 2021 (Delegation of the EU to ASEAN, 2022; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Today, ASEAN and the EU engage with each other at several levels:

- ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting (AEMM): This is the highest level of dialogue between ASEAN and the EU. It brings together the foreign ministers of ASEAN member states and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The AEMM discusses broad cooperation issues and the strategic partnership between ASEAN and the EU.
- ASEAN-EU Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM): This meeting is held at the senior officials' level to discuss the implementation of ASEAN-EU cooperation projects and initiatives. It covers various areas of cooperation, including political dialogue, economic cooperation and socio-cultural exchanges.



- ASEAN-EU Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC): The JCC oversees the implementation of the ASEAN-EU Action Plans. It monitors progress, identifies areas for further cooperation and provides recommendations to enhance ASEAN-EU relations.

These bodies play essential roles in facilitating dialogue, cooperation and partnership between ASEAN and the EU, covering various aspects of their relationship, including political, economic and socio-cultural cooperation.

As previously mentioned, despite cooperating for more than 45 years, it was only in December 2020 that these two organisations elevated their relationship to an enhanced level as Strategic Partners. This Strategic Partnership signals a willingness of both parties to advance in their relationship, elevating it towards a more strategic and defined relationship which includes a commitment to regular summits at the high level (EEAS, 2020; The Diplomat, 2021; Allison-Reumann & Murray, 2021).

## **2.4 Evolution of ASEAN-EU cultural relations**

Historically, in what can be considered a committed, consolidated, yet relatively slow-progressing relationship between ASEAN and the EU, the cultural relations and cooperation between the two were even timid and characterised by their lack of definition, focus, long-term vision, and investment. As a result, today, there is a substantial lack of knowledge and understanding of each other's cultures and even misunderstandings on how both realities have historically understood culture's roles and conducted internal cultural cooperation.

In Europe, for instance, little is known about the five founding ASEAN countries and how they developed regional cultural collaboration structures as early as the 1970s; since the end of that decade, they have used an ad hoc ASEAN Cultural Fund (ACF), established with the support of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) specifically to contribute to the development of cultural cooperation among their members. Essential, and often little acknowledged, is the work done in Southeast Asia by European cultural institutes like the Institut

Français or Goethe-Institut, which have both country-based and umbrella approaches to the region. There is no comparable approach by ASEAN countries in Europe.

ASEAN and the EU's achievements are frequently contrasted using similar measurable mechanisms, often considered by analysts as 'sister' organisations. This process is perceived as a recurrent condescendence towards measuring ASEAN's success, overlooking crucial regional features linked to its distinctive manner of behaving and governing itself, known as the 'ASEAN Way': an informal and personal approach to solving issues which respect the countries' cultural norms (Mahaseth, 2022). While both realities have active and creative civil societies, their operational frameworks differ. For instance, in intra-cultural cooperation terms, while in the EU cultural operators rely on solid national and regional public systems of support (both structural and financial), this is not the case in ASEAN where, with some exceptions, there is a scarcity of national platforms and funds to support culture and, at the regional level, access to support is asymmetric, often relying more on ad hoc support from external international organisations like the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) or foreign nation-tied schemes like the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development than on its regional funds.

These discrepancies and lack of alignment have also permeated the ASEAN-EU's approach to cultural cooperation and exchanges. Historically, the different agreements, declarations and plans of action outlined between ASEAN and the EU since the establishment of the relationship in 1977 have made it clear that 'cultural matters' (i.e. culture, the arts, cultural heritage, the creative industries, etc.) do not rank high in the scale of priorities in the relationship. The word "culture" did not appear in the first official document signed by ASEAN and the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1980 (ASEAN-EEC Cooperation Agreement). It was not until the 2007 Nuremberg Declaration on an Enhanced EU-ASEAN Partnership that cultural exchanges were mentioned as part of holistic people-to-people efforts to "build and nurture friendship and understanding", which also included, among others, youth, media and interfaith dialogue. There was, however, a specific mention of "deepen[ing] cooperation in the fields of arts and culture" (p. 5) alongside information and communication technology, science and technology, and education.

The subsequent quinquennial plans of action continued to mention cultural exchanges, albeit recurrently, with vague statements, e.g. the Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action 2013-2017 stated the necessity of promoting people-to-people contacts by advancing “the exchange of cultural performers and scholars among ASEAN and the EU Member States which improves access to understanding of different cultures between both regions and enhance regional awareness” (p. 8); the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action 2018-2022 committed to enhancing cooperation and cultural exchanges by promoting “the exchange of experience and expertise on public policy in the field of culture” (p. 7).

The tangentiality of the role of cultural cooperation and the lack of actionable focal points on these statements is evident, in particular, because the role of culture is often mentioned as part of a broader people-to-people approach which can encompass anything from education, youth and academia to media and information and communication technology (ICT). This tangentiality is reflected in the concerning scarcity of cultural exchanges implemented over the decades by ASEAN and the EU in terms of cooperation, generally limited to commemorative events and performances, often in the framework of more extensive educational and media fairs or celebrations. An example of these events is the ASEAN-EU Cultural Festival, celebrated on 19-25 September 2022 to mark the 45th anniversary of establishing ASEAN-EU relations. It featured film screenings, music programmes and visual arts exhibitions in Bangkok, Jakarta, Phnom Penh, and online, but it was conceptualised as a one-off event without further follow-ups (Maronati, 2022). As highlighted below in the interview section (3.2.) by some of the ASEAN and EU cultural stakeholders interviewed, little beyond ad hoc short-term cultural projects, often involving national bodies rather than the two major regional institutions, has been done in the cultural cooperation arena.

As a confirmation of that persistent tangentiality, in the recent Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027)—a follow-up of the two plans of action mentioned above—, the words “culture” and “cultural” are used even more sparsely than before, in vague statements and without detailed articulation on implementation: “to build a culture of peace and conflict sensitivity” (p. 6), “enhance people-to-people exchanges and cooperation in the areas of education, science and culture” (p. 13) and “promote initiatives and programmes that enhance cultural understanding” (p. 14). In the

recent ASEAN Secretariat's Overview of ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations, which was updated in June 2023, the words "culture", "arts" and "heritage" do not even appear. The near absence of culture as part of the partnership represents a significant contrast to the cultural engagement seen in other strategic partnerships between ASEAN and other countries, for instance the one between ASEAN and the United States (US) since 2015, and especially the ASEAN and China strategic partnership in which culture has played a pivotal role in the relationship since 2003.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the *ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership* explicitly mentions the promotion of "awareness on the safeguarding of intangible and tangible cultural heritage, as well as understanding and appreciation of each other's arts and culture" and highlights the role of "cultural exchanges as a means to promote mutual understanding and strengthen people-to-people ties". The *ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership* goes further and underscores the importance of culture at various levels, from policymakers to civil societies. It advocates, amongst others, the support of joint cultural initiatives and programmes through performances, exhibitions, and art and cultural festivals, as well as people-to-people exchanges in various artistic fields such as folklore, visual arts, music, and performances. It also supports the organisation of ASEAN-China Cultural Forums on relevant cultural and artistic themes, promotes the development of small and medium-sized cultural enterprises and facilitates knowledge-sharing in managing tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including exchanges of expertise in cultural heritage preservation. Additionally, it supports exchanges and human resource development of professionals and managers of cultural institutions such as museums, archives and libraries, cultural centres, archaeological and conservation administration, and research institutes.

## **3. Findings from the Consultation Process**

### **3.1 Survey results**

In February 2024, a targeted survey was conducted to evaluate the status, opportunities and challenges of cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU. This survey, which included questions detailed in the Appendix, involved 40 experts carefully selected from diverse sectors, including academia, government agencies, NGOs, media, arts management, and cultural practitioners and consultants. The survey aimed to gather insights from these key stakeholders on various aspects of cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU.

The consolidated results from both quantitative and qualitative questions provide valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of experts in the field. These findings shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of current cooperation efforts and highlight potential areas for improvement and further collaboration.

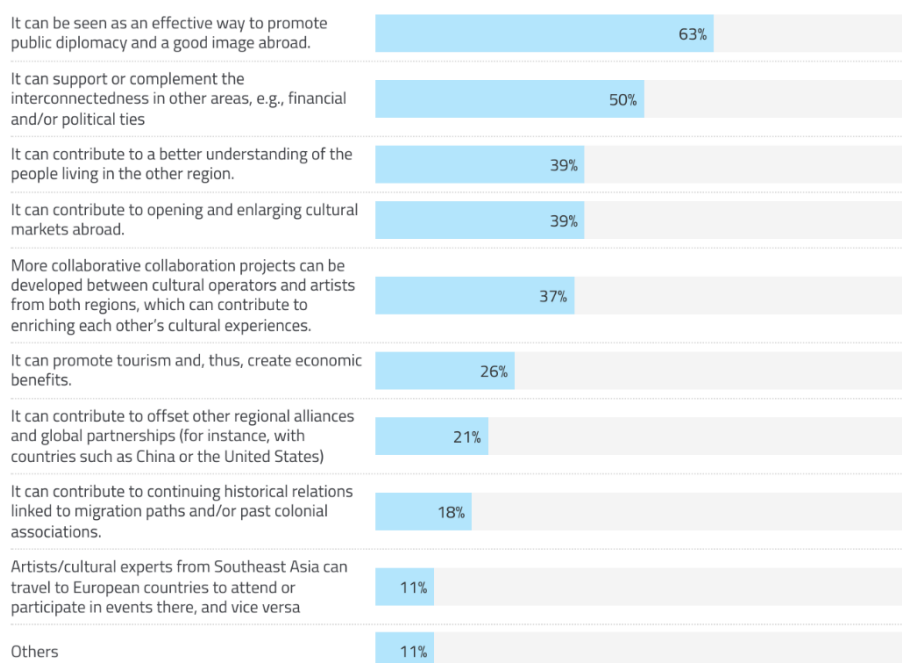
### **Primary government motivations and challenges of ASEAN-EU cultural relations**

The first set of questions aimed at understanding the motivations of the governments of both regions in promoting interregional cultural relations. The authors sought to assess the extent to which extrinsic factors such as geostrategic, political, economic, or societal considerations dominated the government's motivations in this area.

The responses confirm the hypothesis that the primary incentive to promote cultural relations between ASEAN and the European Union is extrinsic to cultural considerations. Among these extrinsic motivations, political factors such as the promotion of public diplomacy and the enhancement of an international image prevail over economic, societal or geostrategic motivations, which include aspects like expanding cultural markets abroad, promoting tourism, fostering better understanding between people of different regions, and balancing alliances with other global partners.

In terms of intrinsic cultural motivations, a third of the experts surveyed believe that strengthening relations between both regions could promote greater collaboration between cultural operators and artists, enriching each other's cultural experiences. Only 11% consider that it would facilitate the mobility of artists and cultural professionals to attend or participate in events. One reason for this scepticism could be the limited financial resources available, a primary argument in the subsequent question. Additionally, as will be seen in other questions and comments from some interviews, difficulties in obtaining visas to enter the European Union contribute to this challenge.

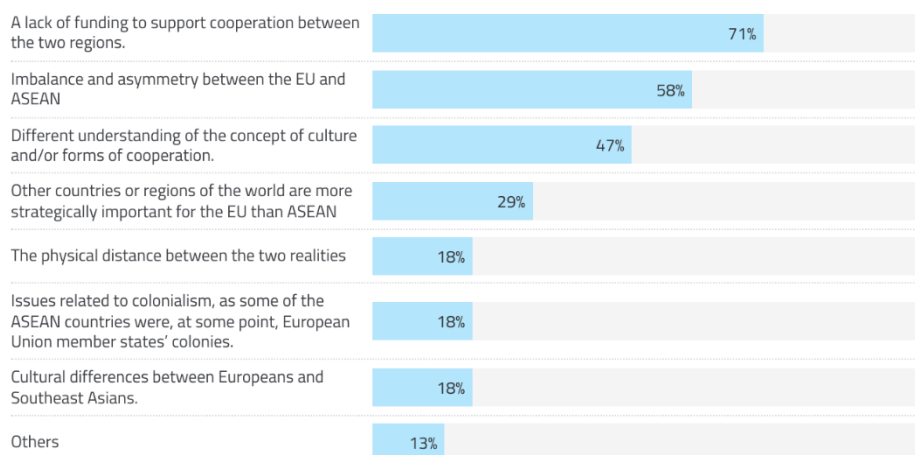
**Graph 1. Main motivations of European and ASEAN governments to engage in cultural relations with each other.**



The main challenges highlighted in promoting multilateral cultural relations between both regions are a lack of funding to support cooperation, the imbalance and asymmetry between the EU and ASEAN, and differing

understandings of the concept of culture and/or forms of cooperation.<sup>2</sup> These three distinct yet interconnected aspects explain the difficulties in developing cultural cooperation between both regions.

**Graph 2. Main challenges in the ASEAN-EU multilateral cultural cooperation.**

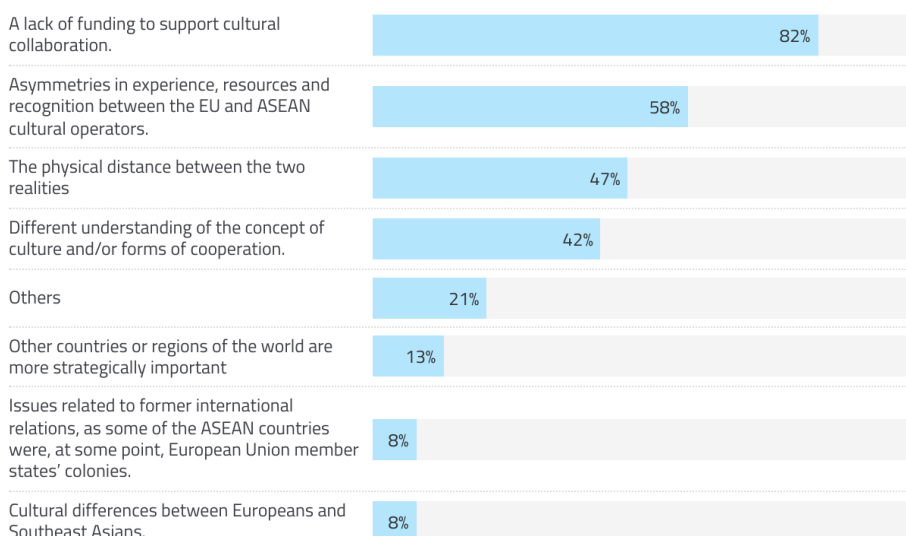


<sup>2</sup> The concept of culture can be understood in various ways, depending on the context and perspective. For instance, from an anthropological perspective, culture often refers to the sum of learned behaviours, beliefs, values, customs, and symbols. From an economic standpoint, experts might look at it in terms of cultural capital, including non-financial social assets. From a political perspective, culture can be seen as a tool for shaping national identity and promoting public diplomacy, while from an artistic one, culture is often understood as the creative and intellectual expressions of society, including literature, music, visual arts, and performance. In the framework of interregional cooperation, culture can be seen as the interactions and exchanges between different cultures, with the potential for leading, for instance, to multiculturalism and collaboration. In this context, Southeast Asian cultures tend to prioritise collective well-being and social harmony, while European ones emphasise on individual rights and personal autonomy. The approach to tradition and modernity can also differ regionally, with Southeast Asian cultures often balancing modernity with a firm adherence to traditional values and hierarchical structures and Europeans adhering to progressive ideals and rationalism, frequently re-evaluating and transforming traditional norms (McCloud, 1995; LeFebvre & Franke, 2013; Guo et al., 2022)

## Barriers and drivers for cultural professionals

A second set of questions aims at assessing the barriers which cultural professionals from European and ASEAN countries encounter when attempting to develop cultural relations between both regions, as well as the drivers and motivations which push them. The main barrier, as noted in the case of challenges, is the lack of financial support mechanisms, followed by existing asymmetries in experience, resources and recognition between EU and ASEAN cultural operators. Two other noted aspects, though less significant, are the physical distance between both regions and the differing understanding of the concept of culture and/or forms of cooperation. Additionally, experts pointed out other aspects which the questionnaire did not foresee. Among them, the problem of obtaining visas to enter Europe for Asian cultural operators stands out, as well as difficulties linked to the expectations of reciprocity between professionals from very different contexts (cultural, social, economic or political).

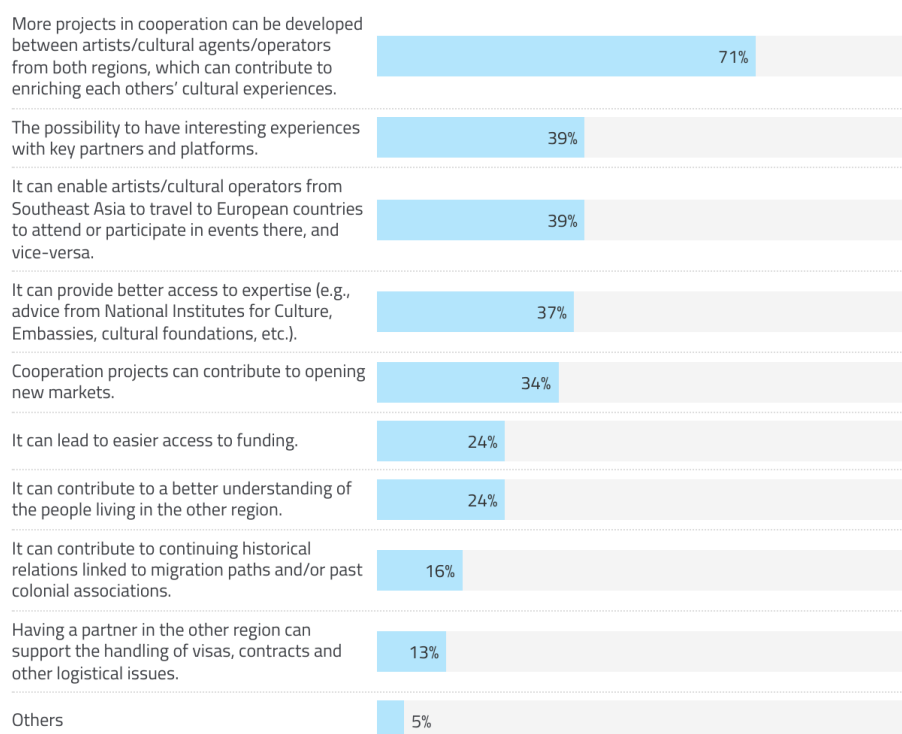
**Graph 3. Main barriers encountered by cultural professionals from European and ASEAN countries in developing collaborations.**





Regarding growth opportunities, most experts interviewed believe in the significant potential for cooperation between artists, cultural agents or operators from both regions, which can enrich each other's cultural experiences. The benefits and, therefore, the motivations which cultural professionals see are distinctly positive. They include gaining interesting experiences with key partners and platforms, enabling Southeast Asian professionals to participate in European events as well as accessing funding sources and specialised expertise more easily.

**Graph 4. Main drivers and motivations for cultural professionals from European and ASEAN countries to develop closer collaborations.**



Perceptions of asymmetry among cultural actors with experience in both regions become much more evident when respondents were directly asked about the opportunities which greater interregional cooperation can provide for cultural actors in each region.

However, the responses show some differences among the various profiles of the experts who participated in the survey. While overall they consider it important that the governments of both ASEAN and EU member states collaborate to strengthen cultural relations (scoring 5.03 on a scale of 1 to 7), cultural professionals, especially those in Southeast Asia, see it as most essential, whereas government officials in ASEAN and the EU and European cultural professionals are somewhat more sceptical.

Regarding the importance of differences in perception for cultural professionals, depending on the profile of the expert in question, the results are accentuated. Once again, cultural professionals view this as very important, surprisingly even more so for Europeans than those from Southeast Asia (5.89 and 5.78 out of 7, respectively). NGO staff are the least optimistic about the impact this could generate on cultural professionals based in ASEAN, while government officials are the most sceptical about the impact on Europeans.

**Table 1. Different perceptions of the importance of cultural relations between ASEAN and the EU depending on the profile of the experts interviewed.**

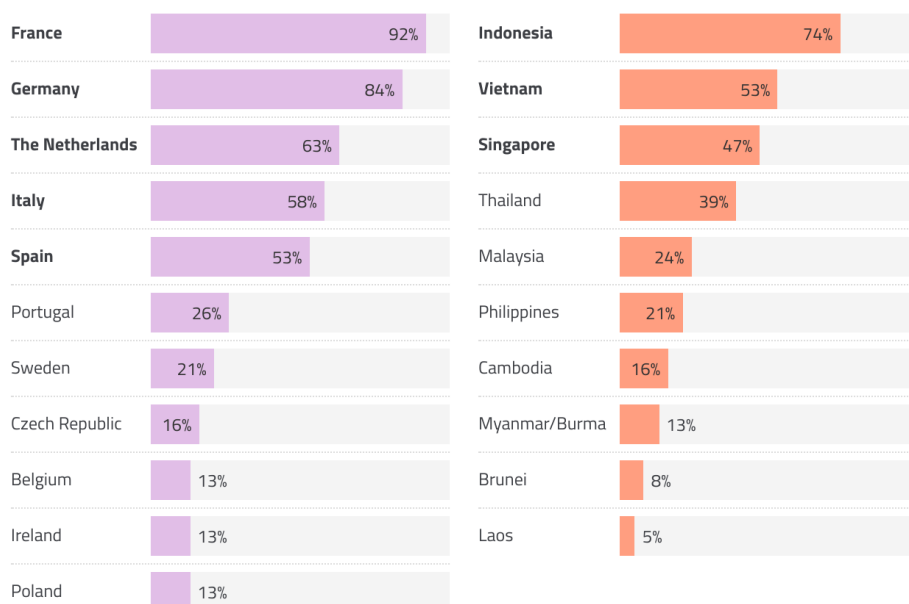
	Academic/ Consultant	Gov't Staff	Cultural Professionals	NGO	ASEAN	EUROPE	Both Regions	Other	TOTAL AVERAGE
How essential is it for ASEAN and the governments of its member countries to collaborate at the cultural level with the European Union?	5,17	4,33	5,33	4,40	5,33	4,00	4,45	5,5	5,03
How important is it for ASEAN cultural professionals to collaborate with European partners?	5,17	5,56	5,78	3,40	5,60	5,60	5,00	4,17	5,22
How essential is it for the EU and the governments of its member countries to collaborate at the cultural level with ASEAN?	5,17	4,90	5,56	4,80	5,27	5,00	4,73	5,17	5,28
How important is it for European cultural professionals to collaborate with ASEAN partners?	5,28	4,70	5,89	5,00	5,53	5,40	5,09	5,00	5,24

## **Countries benefiting from ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation**

A third set of questions focused on the countries in both regions which would benefit the most from an increase in ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation. In descending order, the five EU member states the respondents considered most important for developing cultural relations with Southeast Asia are France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain. The prioritisation of these countries can be influenced by both historical-colonial factors, including long-term consequences derived from commercial, academic, cultural, and migratory flows, and contemporary bilateral cultural cooperation efforts of certain European countries in the region, mainly France and Germany (beyond the United Kingdom, today outside the EU). The role of former colonial powers in the region is significant because of historical legacies and contemporary debates about decolonisation: France in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; the Netherlands in Indonesia; Spain in the Philippines; and Portugal in several smaller settlements.

Regarding the appeal of ASEAN countries to Europeans, aside from the colonial legacy, as previously mentioned, geostrategic and economic factors are significant. The top three countries in order of importance are Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore, followed by Thailand and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia, the Philippines and Cambodia. The most unique case is undoubtedly Singapore: despite being a small state with only 735.2 km<sup>2</sup> and 5.9 million inhabitants (as of 2023), it serves as the region's connectivity hub.

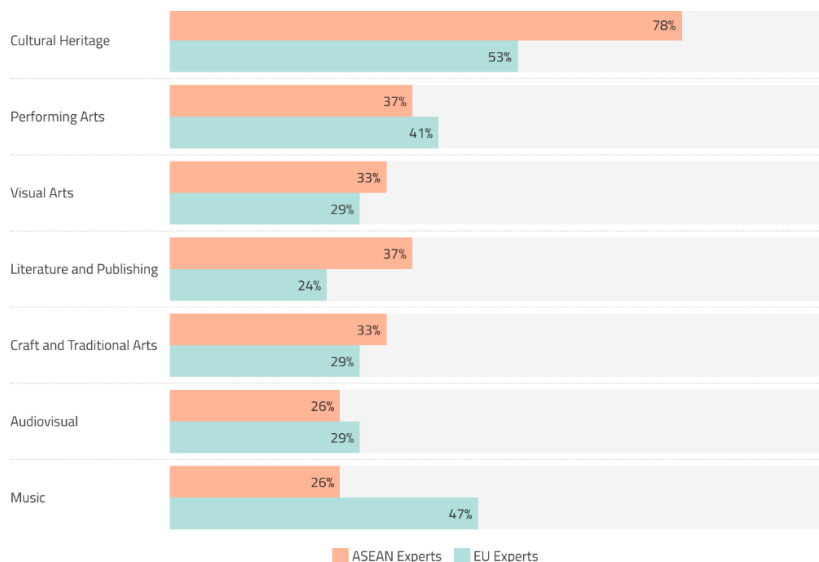
**Graph 5. The 5 most important European Union countries for developing cultural relations with South-East Asia, and the 3 most important ASEAN countries for developing cultural relations with the EU.**



## Main cultural sectors for intervention in the development of ASEAN-EU cultural relations

The responses vary when queried about the primary cultural sectors necessitating heightened cooperation between ASEAN and the EU. Notably, cultural heritage cooperation is prominently advocated by those with professional experience in Southeast Asia (78%) compared to Europeans (53%). To a lesser extent, literature, translation and publishing are also considered a priority in Southeast Asia (37%) compared to Europe (24%). Conversely, music garners more significant interest from Europeans (47%) than Southeast Asians. In other sectors, differences are less pronounced, with between one-third and 40% of experts perceiving them as priorities (see Graph 6).

**Graph 6. Main cultural sectors where more intensive cooperation between ASEAN and the EU is needed.**



## Impact of Brexit on ASEAN-EU cultural relations and the growing role of China

Two significant phenomena may have influenced relations and interregional cooperation between ASEAN and the EU recently. Firstly, the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to exit the European Union potentially impacts ties because of historical connections with some ASEAN member states (40% of the ASEAN countries were former British colonies) and the active involvement of the British Council in the region. Secondly, China's increasing influence amidst its escalating tensions with the United States poses geostrategic implications for countries within the latter's orbit.

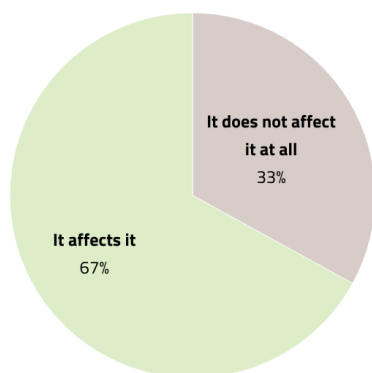
Approximately two-thirds of the respondents deem both situations pertinent due to their indirect impact on cooperation between ASEAN and the EU. However, these experts exhibit a more nuanced stance when evaluating the

specific aspects and manner in which these two changes directly influence cultural relations.

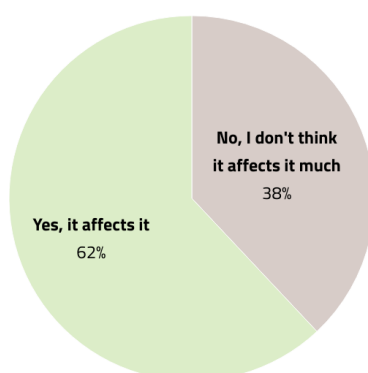
In the case of the exit of the UK from the EU, most participants affirm that this has significant implications for cultural relations between ASEAN and the EU. Historically, the UK has played a pivotal role in cultural exchanges with ASEAN countries, for instance through solid educational links and robust cultural diplomacy efforts. Some respondents expressed concerns that post-Brexit has introduced complexities such as additional visa issues and logistical challenges for ASEAN-based cultural practitioners. It has also created a void in ASEAN-EU cultural collaborations previously facilitated by the UK's presence and influence, prompting the EU to reconfigure its regional cultural strategy and partnerships. Despite these challenges, several respondents agreed that Brexit also presents opportunities for the EU to develop more cohesive, balanced and inclusive cultural collaborations with ASEAN.

**Graph 7. Effects of Brexit and the growing role of China on ASEAN-EU cooperation.**

Do you think the exit of the UK from the EU affects or can affect the cultural relationship between ASEAN and the EU?



Do you think the international rise of China in the last two decades has benefited or hindered the relationship between the EU and ASEAN?



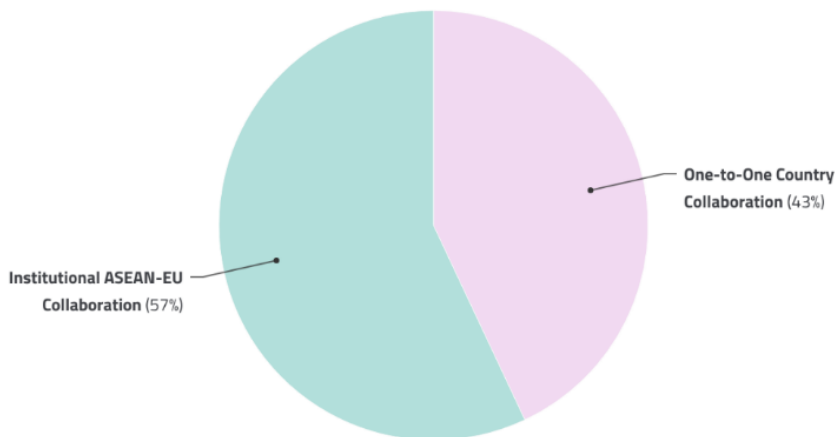
According to almost two-thirds of the respondents, the rise of China has significantly influenced ASEAN-EU relations, primarily due to China's economic dominance and geopolitical presence in the region. Many note that ASEAN countries, dependent on China economically, may prioritise their relationships with China over the EU. This has led to shifts in diplomatic

priorities and the perception of cultural exchange opportunities, with China often seen as a more dynamic partner and a closer ally. However, China's assertiveness in regional politics and economics and its tendency to dominate the regional discourses also prompt ASEAN countries to seek a balance by engaging more with the EU, especially in sustainable development, and some see it as a natural partner with similar geopolitical concerns. This scenario should naturally open new opportunities for cultural cooperation, too. Overall, China's rise has introduced challenges and opportunities for ASEAN-EU relations, shaping a complex landscape where strategic partnerships and diplomatic manoeuvring are vital considerations.

## Setup of the engagement in the ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation

The authors asked respondents about the most efficient approach in promoting ASEAN-EU cultural relations. The answers were relatively balanced, with 57% of the respondents choosing a relationship built on one-to-one ASEAN-EU individual countries and 43% leaning towards institutional ASEAN-EU collaborations.

**Graph 8. Setup of the engagement in the ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation**



Reasons among respondents who prioritise one-to-one country relationships include “more efficient[ly] focused”, “ability to communicate clearer messages”, “easier to handle relationships”, and “already existing networks of contacts and collaboration”. Other respondents who prioritised institutional collaboration between ASEAN and the EU highlighted the following reasons: “potential for more balanced and fair relationships”, “ensure diversity and areas of common interest”, “provide umbrellas under which individual countries can also exchange”, “opportunities for varied cultural collaboration programmes”, “more inclusive and open to multilateral stakeholders”, and “not all countries have the capacity and resources to individually fund transcontinental artistic and cultural collaboration – not leav[ing] aside the ‘weaker’ countries”.

Both alternatives were criticised by some respondents. One-to-one cooperations were seen with scepticism by some as “always benefitting the same countries” and “already existing and not needing more support”. Some of the respondents also expressed scepticism regarding the institutions themselves. The EU, for instance, was labelled as “extremely bureaucratic and biased in favour of competition rather than collaboration”. Some respondents expressed that “ASEAN as a block has done little real work in enhancing cultural or artistic collaboration amongst members and externally” and “historically [it has] not had a clear and coherent cultural exchange strategy” without a “strong cultural promotion/exchange department”. ASEAN was also criticised for its emphasis on “consensus among all member states [in] areas of cooperation” and its “power imbalances within ASEAN, which affects cultural professionals, particularly those in the Mekong region”.

Several respondents underscored the necessity to balance both complementary approaches, as noted by a respondent, “Combining both approaches provides a comprehensive strategy for EU-ASEAN cultural relations.”

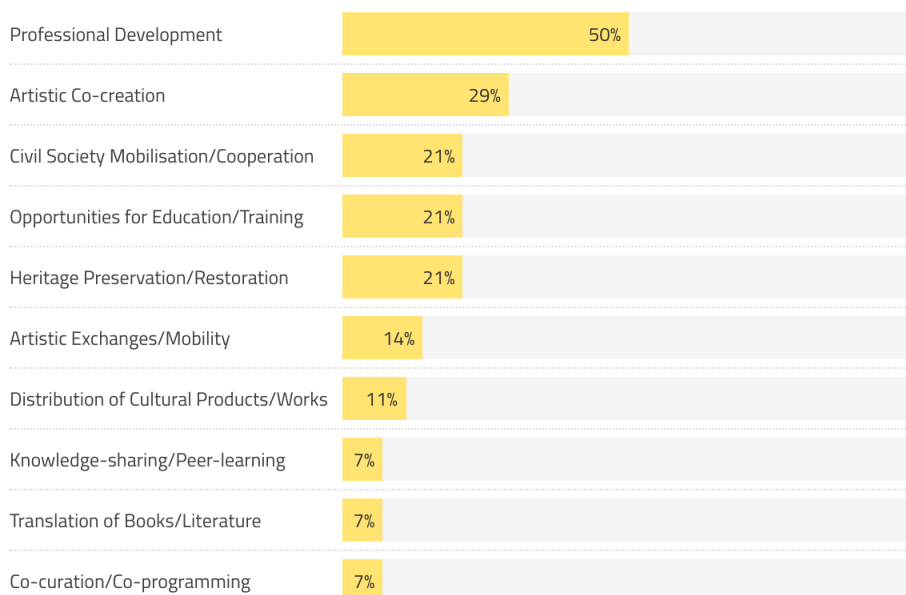


## Priority areas for ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation

Regarding areas with a perceived need for more cooperation between ASEAN and the EU, respondents highlighted ten main areas, listed below in order of importance:

1. **Professional development:** Enhancing skills and expertise among professionals in various arts and culture fields. Nearly half of the experts surveyed mentioned this area.
2. **Co-creation:** Collaborative efforts in creating and producing cultural projects and initiatives.
3. Increasing **opportunities for education and training** in the cultural sector.
4. Strengthening collaboration and engagement among **civil society organisations**.
5. Supporting **heritage preservation, restoration** and **museum maintenance**, especially in Southeast Asia.
6. Facilitating **exchanges and mobility of artists and cultural managers**.
7. Improving the **distribution** of cultural products and works.
8. Supporting **co-curating and co-programming** of cultural events and exhibitions.
9. **Sharing expertise and knowledge** among cultural practitioners through peer learning.
10. Supporting the **translation of books and literature**, particularly those from Southeast Asia.

**Graph 9. Priority areas for ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation.**



## **Actions identified to strengthen cultural relations between ASEAN and the EU**

Respondents identified the following **four main consolidated actions** as the **most crucial** for strengthening cultural relations between ASEAN and the EU:

- Involve civil society organisations and professional networks alongside the two official institutions in developing cultural cooperation strategies and programmes for cultural exchange.
- Establish an EU cultural platform in Jakarta and an ASEAN cultural platform in Brussels, backing the creation of an independently managed and endowed foundation or supporting existing cultural organisations in promoting initiatives fostering mutual understanding and collaboration between Europeans and Southeast Asians.

- Establish dedicated ASEAN-EU cultural exchange funds to support cultural exchange programmes, professional training, co-creation projects, digital collaborations, and mutual exchange scholarship programmes for arts and culture students.
- Implement dedicated mobility grant systems for artists, cultural practitioners and educators which facilitate learning, working and discovery. This system should include lesser-explored routes and could be modelled after the Culture Moves Europe programme.

Additionally, respondents underscored the importance of the following other eight actions:

- Conduct internal advocacy within ASEAN, the EU and their respective member states on the value and importance of arts and culture, including official recognition at summits with accompanying programme initiatives.
- Support the emergence and visibility of cultural networks in ASEAN countries, fostering mutual knowledge and peer learning between policymakers and practitioners.
- Balance cultural diplomacy initiatives with funding for arms-length agencies to deepen ties between the cultural and creative sectors on both sides.
- Set up structures operating on the cultural relations level without direct government interference, investing in the decolonisation of relationships.
- Facilitate more regular exchanges between representatives of ministries and arts councils to address obstacles such as funding and visas.
- Develop a digital cultural platform to showcase cultural content and enhance digital engagement and distribution. Digitally map and showcase ASEAN cultural resources in EU museums and archives.
- Support collaborative art activism projects and endorse cultural networks with greater potential than individual organisational projects.
- Support grassroots initiatives linking the two regions while fostering larger programmes among national organisations such as universities, museums, theatres, and libraries, ensuring collaborations remain resilient and avoiding prolonged waiting periods with uncertain outcomes.

## 3.2 Interview results

In March and April 2024, the authors conducted twelve in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the cultural and non-cultural fields of the EU and ASEAN. The interviewees represented five main profiles:

- ambassadors and representatives of diplomatic missions in the EU and ASEAN (two interviewees)
- officials in ASEAN and/or EU public bodies (two interviewees)
- heads/directors/CEOs of regional or international arts and culture organisations (three interviewees)
- international consultants/directors of ASEAN/EU cultural projects (three interviewees)
- academics (two interviewees)

Each interview was designed to cover a comprehensive range of topics, including the status of ASEAN-EU cultural relations and cooperation, potential areas for improvement and the role of different sectors in advancing cultural cooperation. The questions included the following: What is the status of the ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation? What are ASEAN and the EU doing well/what is working with regard to cultural cooperation? What are the shortcomings/what could be done better? What might negatively affect/slow down the relationship between ASEAN and the EU? Which main sectors (e.g. cultural heritage, visual arts, performing arts) could serve as pillars for the advancement of ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation? What measures do you think could benefit from their cultural cooperation in future?

In addition, each interview included tailor-made questions to fit each interviewee's profile. The following is a summary of the interviewees' answers, structured in several main salient topics and conclusions.

## **Current status of and deficits in ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation**

Relations between the EU and ASEAN have expanded in the last 15 years. Today, both organisations have relatively strong political engagement, reflected by regular ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meetings, including Foreign Ministers' and Finance Ministers' meetings, among others.

However, as pointed out by several interviewees, at the moment there is hardly any standing cultural cooperation between the official bodies representing ASEAN and the EU, i.e. the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. As mentioned in Chapter 1, historically, culture and the arts have not featured high on the agenda, and the advancements in this area have been modest since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1977. The focus has traditionally been on other fields, such as finance and environmental cooperation. For instance, their two main priorities in the current financial cycle are green transition and sustainable connectivity (i.e. digital sustainability, sustainable economic relations, air transportation, etc.). One area where the EU and ASEAN have increased their cooperation in recent years is youth dialogues, for instance via the EU-ASEAN Youth Forum, which can have—albeit often modestly—a cultural cooperation component.

In addition, in the same way that the European Union's international geostrategic and financial focus has for decades pivoted around the US and later China, ASEAN has been inclined to work first with its regional allies, which include Japan, China, South Korea, and India.

To illustrate arts and culture's lack of relevance in the current ASEAN-EU relations, one of our interviewees gave the example of the EU-ASEAN Policy Dialogues which, thanks to the E-READI (Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument) cooperation programme, enables the possibility of dialogues in any area for which both parties identify a need. So far, these dialogues have ranged from infrastructure standards to human rights, totalling 20 policy dialogues. The interviewee pointed out that only two areas of discussion were missing within these broad dialogues: defence and culture.

## **Necessity for an enhanced ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation**

All interviewees regard cultural cooperation between the EU and ASEAN favourably as a win-win situation, especially if it is understood as a greater reciprocal flow of knowledge, collaborations and opportunities for learning. In that sense, the authors' questions were positively received and there was a willingness from all the interviewees to contribute their insights to this research project. In general, cultural cooperation is seen as positive and necessary to advance relations internationally and within the ASEAN region. As such, all interviewees also highlighted the necessity for ASEAN and the EU to cooperate more effectively in the field of arts and culture.

Most interviewees acknowledge that ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation has been scarce, poorly driven and poorly organised, lacking consistency and a long-term vision. When it does take place, it focuses on arts and culture showcases celebrating cultural diversity rather than taking specific long-term strategic actions to improve it or take it to the next level.

While most interviewees highlighted the insufficiency of ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation engagements via the official channels of the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission, several interviewees mentioned the work done by the European Union delegations in some ASEAN countries. Currently, the EU has delegations in all the ASEAN countries except Brunei, and despite their limited staff and budget, for years they have contributed to fostering initiatives which increased awareness of the EU in individual Southeast Asian countries. For instance, most EU delegations in the region organise European Film Festivals, in some cases a long-lasting tradition of decades, as in the case of Singapore, which in 2024 reached its 33<sup>rd</sup> edition. Some interviewees also mentioned the work of the Delegation of the European Union to ASEAN, although its focus has traditionally been on sectors such as education, communication, connectivity, and human rights, rather than arts and culture, where only a minimal range of activities have been organised.

Several interviewees underscored the work historically performed by the different European national cultural institutes in the Southeast Asian region

(e.g. Goethe-Institut, Institut Français, Instituto Cervantes, etc.). Their sustained support, especially lately, towards capacity building, knowledge transfer and mobility, has facilitated exchanges and contributed to creating structures for local artists and practitioners to operate and work in regional and international cultural cooperation projects. As a caveat, one interviewee highlighted that, in some cases, some of these foreign cultural centres could be very project-based with a short-term approach, emphasising on delivering something at the end of it (e.g. a collaborative performance or publication), which does not help to consolidate structures and achieve long-term cooperation goals. It was also noted, however, that the umbrella networks' *modus operandi* of some of these regional institutions, particularly the Goethe-Institut and the British Council, have enabled and fostered regional mobility and coordinated approaches to local and regional cultural cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Several interviewees also commented on the Asia-Europe Foundation's (ASEF) work since its inception in 1997, the only permanently established institution under the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) framework.<sup>3</sup> Some underscored the valuable and, in some cases, instrumental work done by ASEF in the development of linkages between European and ASEAN cultural managers, practitioners and artists, particularly in the first 15 years since its establishment. It was also noted that the impact of ASEF in developing cultural connections and cooperation between the EU and ASEAN seems to have been reduced since its progressive expansion in the 2010s. ASEF now has a mandate which, although it continues to include EU and ASEAN countries, has incorporated other countries like Australia, Bangladesh, India, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, and Switzerland, amongst others. Furthermore, budget constraints and reduced staff have hindered ASEF's ability to substantially impact the cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://aseminfoboard.org/>, accessed on 2024-05-13.

## Shortcomings in ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation

The interviewees mentioned a series of weaknesses in the current cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU.

The first one is a need for more funding. All the interviewees mentioned the necessity of securing regular funds to move forward. Currently, no solid and structured funding mechanism actively supports or contributes to cultural cooperation.

Second, there is a lack of long-term commitment. Several interviewees criticised the limited and ad hoc cultural cooperation which ASEAN and the EU have engaged in at the institutional level within the last few decades. As previously mentioned, its focus has been more on showcasing cultural diversity via performances and films to address immediate visibility rather than a long-term commitment, which can spark the necessity of a longer-term vision which, in turn, may provide a lasting impact on and stability for the relationship.

A few examples perceived as successful were cited, which could operate as potential samples for modelling the ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation. One would be the ASEAN Cultural Fund (ACF), established by Japan in 1978 with the support of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). The ACF received a contribution of ¥5 billion from Japan (at the time around US\$25 million) for cultural interchange among the ASEAN member countries and the promotion of cultural development in the region as well as in recognition of the role of cultural co-operation in preserving the cultural heritage of ASEAN member countries and in fostering greater cultural interaction and awareness of ASEAN cultures (ASEAN Secretariat, 1979; 1994). Hundreds of cultural actions and activities, including arts and culture festivals, were organised in the ASEAN context by a Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) in the last half century using funds derived from that original ACF operational seed funding (Ocón, 2022).

The second example, the KONNECT ASEAN project, is more recent and was established and funded by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund; since 2020, it has been implemented by the ASEAN Foundation. The programme supports various activities, including arts and culture festivals, artist exchanges and



capacity-building initiatives, thereby enhancing cultural diplomacy and socio-cultural ties. By facilitating artistic and cultural exchanges, KONNECT ASEAN promotes regional integration and cultural diversity, contributing to stronger ASEAN-Korea relations and fostering a shared sense of regional identity and community (ASEAN Foundation, 2024). With an initial phase of four years completed (2020-2023), KONNECT ASEAN is currently being evaluated.

Third, slow and inefficient processes hinder cultural cooperation. Some interviewees quoted the EU's lack of agility in making decisions and its administrative burdens, paired with ASEAN's ineffective processes, staff shortage and the need for consensus, as central to explaining the slow and unproductive cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU. Beyond that, the difficulties imposed by the EU and its member states for obtaining short-term/stay visas for most ASEAN nationals to enter the EU/Schengen area, for instance to perform or participate in conferences and short training programmes, and censorship-related matters prevalent in several ASEAN countries were highlighted as well.

Finally, both ASEAN and the EU have off-focus priorities. One interviewee explained that one of the reasons why the EU does very little regarding external cultural cooperation is that most of its external financial assistance is geared towards development, leaving very little financial support for public diplomacy, including cultural relations. Another interviewee mentioned that ASEAN is still concentrating on promoting ASEAN's visibility and explaining what ASEAN is about regionally, and that hampers its motivation to engage in projects which might dilute that focus.

## **Key actors for fostering ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation**

Beyond advocating the continuation of the work done over the years by the embassies of the ASEAN and EU countries abroad, the different European national cultural institutes in Southeast Asia, multi-stakeholder organisations like ASEF, and other international organisations like On the Move, the interviewees highlighted three main actors crucial to the advancement of ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation.

### **ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat)**

The interviewees, including those linked to the ASEAN Secretariat, acknowledged the challenges experienced by the ASEAN Secretariat in leading ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation initiatives or projects due to its small size, limited staff and budget constraints. In addition, some interviewees argued that its top-down modus operandi and heavy bureaucracy constraints might limit how it is perceived among grassroots cultural actors and practitioners. Some interviewees underscored that civil societies often perceive ASEAN more as a political and economic organisation than one interested in people-to-people and cultural exchanges. Despite these limitations, most interviewees agreed that the ASEAN Secretariat needs to be part of future discussions and the implementation of cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU.

### **The European Union (European Commission)**

Some interviewees portrayed the European Commission as an organisation with sluggish and overly complicated administrative systems which contribute to slowing down international cooperation processes. However, due to its financial muscle and robustness, they generally consider the European Commission to be the necessary main driver and financial backbone of a potential, renewed ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation.

### **“Hinge role” of third party/parties**

Several interviewees highlighted that neither the European Commission nor the ASEAN Secretariat might be adequate institutions to host or champion enhanced ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation initiatives. They advocated a third party or parties which would be better positioned to implement initiatives and

projects and the logistics derived from them. In their view, these third parties should ideally take a hands-off, arms-length approach and be set to carry out public diplomacy on behalf of the European Union and ASEAN.

## Types of ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation

The interviewees supplied a variety of responses regarding suitable types of cooperation which could enhance the ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation. Most respondents agree on the three types and scope of cooperation mechanisms essential for pushing cultural cooperation between the two regions forward. These include:

- a) **capacity building** and **training the trainers**, for instance cultural managers and educators, particularly in the ASEAN countries;
- b) **scholarships** for **exchanges** and **mobility** for cultural professionals and independent artists to enable professional development. Seed funding is also required for projects based on the needs of cultural grassroots organisations;
- c) **knowledge-transfer** structures and programmes which contribute to long-term collaborations, such as in museum curatorship and artistic legislation;
- d) **policy development** for establishing sustainable structures and resilient cooperation platforms.

A few of the interviewees mentioned the EU SHARE (Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region) project in the educational sector as a potential model for designing a future ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation, as it includes components such as intra-ASEAN student mobility and improvement of ASEAN's higher education capacities (for instance, looking at the EU's credit transfer in the Bologna process). One interviewee, however, questioned its relevance for Europe and its validity as a cooperation model because of its top-down development aid approach, where Europe fully funds a project which does not have any EU component other than that the EU finances it.

One interviewee also mentioned the work done in the region by Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) and SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) in arts and culture. It was highlighted that their work is more structured and focused than most EU support mechanisms as “they are willing to invest in creating long-term and stronger collaborations by building the capacity of grassroots cultural organisations, enhancing resilience and sustainability”.

In connection with this, several interviewees voiced their dissatisfaction with the tendency of ASEAN and the EU to cooperate in ad hoc, one-off cultural projects, often intended as mere showcases of talents and diversity. In their opinion, these approaches do not contribute to elevating visibility and fail to address the above-mentioned issues of resilience, sustainability and long-term collaborations. A few examples were provided by interviewees, for instance the EU’s tendency to organise EU film festivals in ASEAN countries which, in their view, fail to create strong bonds as they are often for the consumption of expatriates, upper middle classes in the region, and perceived as self-congratulatory concerts, performances or photography exhibitions to celebrate anniversaries of diplomatic relations or commemorative summits.

## **Areas and approaches for ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation**

The interviewees supplied a variety of responses regarding suitable types of cooperation which could enhance ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation. In general, they highlighted that the young generations need to be more involved in designing ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation, especially those living in the ASEAN region, who need to be listened to more. In this section, it is important to note that not all interviewees agreed on the same areas. Some showed clear discrepancies, for instance concerning the role of cultural heritage preservation in an enhanced relationship or potentially controversial issues such as human rights and artistic freedom. The types of cooperation mentioned are presented below.

a) **Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI)** bear good potential for cooperation from a soft power perspective. CCIs are an emerging aspect in Southeast Asia. Emphasising their economic element could open up more fora for discussion and cooperation between Southeast Asia and Europe. Engaging ASEAN and EU CCIs can provoke a broader approach to cooperation and trigger collaborations in other areas, as they involve not only national Ministries of Culture but also others like Finance, Commerce and Industry, expanding the discourse rather than focusing on the artistic aspects and artists, which in some contexts in Southeast Asia may be perceived as dangerous for the government. Some specific areas mentioned were visual arts media, harmonisation of how data on cultural exports, sales and consumption among different member states is collected and presented, and evidence-based approaches to creative economies, amongst others.

b) **Focus on contemporary artistic practices and diversity** (often an area less financially supported in the ASEAN context) **without forgetting the traditional arts and culture**, which continue to be central to societal identities, especially in the ASEAN region. Music and performing arts could be suitable areas to explore here. A few interviewees underscored the relevance of the role played by culture and the arts as part of sustainable development.

c) Implement **big flagship projects** to attract attention and visibility in both regions, for instance in areas such as **visual arts and music**, in coordinated multi-pronged approaches which could draw funds from member states, the public sector and relevant cultural institutions.

d) Celebrations of **food and gastronomy** from the European and Southeast Asian regions, which have a cross-generational appeal, particularly among the newer generations.

e) Some interviewees highlighted the special interest and importance of **heritage and handicrafts** protection, preservation and promotion, particularly in the ASEAN context. However, not all agreed, with one highlighting that heritage preservation work has already received substantial support in ASEAN from UNESCO and third countries like Japan, South Korea and even individual European countries.

f) Some interviewees mentioned **human rights and artistic freedom** as potential topics to further explore the cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU, if not at the institutional level, at least in a bilateral manner. Several interviewees, however, disagreed and advocated avoiding them because of their controversial topics, particularly in the ASEAN context, which might hinder the relationship and affect the prospects for healthy and balanced cooperation.

### 3.3 Main findings of the consultation process

Three reasons seem to explain the low level of development of interregional cooperation between ASEAN and the European Union:

- the unbalanced organisational capacity between ASEAN and the European Union;
- until recently, the discrete geostrategic interest compared to other regions of the world; and
- the predominance of bilateral relations between the main countries of the two regions over coordinated action on a multilateral scale.

For this reason, it is not surprising that, when asked the question in the survey about which level of cooperation is more effective in developing cultural relations between both regions, the answer is so ambivalent: 57% believe that individual bilateral cooperation between countries is more effective, while 43% favour multilateral cooperation between ASEAN and EU as institutions (see Graph 8).

Beyond this general diagnosis, the consulted experts underscored the main trends and potentials of ASEAN-EU cultural relations, which can be summarised in the following fourteen aspects:

1. Despite a relationship spanning more than 45 years, ASEAN-EU **cultural cooperation has, historically speaking, remained low**. This may be attributed to discrete mutual geostrategic interests, which have shifted over time. The European Union recently showed an increased interest in Southeast Asia, which is linked to the rise of China both regionally and globally.

2. Consequently, there is a **significant lack of visibility** of ASEAN in the European context and of the European Union in the ASEAN context, particularly among the region's civil societies.

3. Currently, there is a **lack of institutional cultural cooperation mechanisms** between ASEAN and the EU. Most cultural exchanges and projects occur bilaterally or through third parties such as European national cultural institutes (e.g. Goethe-Institut, Institut Français, Instituto Cervantes, etc.), and multilateral organisations such as ASEF. However, these organisations have different mandates and stakeholders, leading to **significant gaps** in ASEAN-EU collaboration.

4. Cultural practitioners, artists and managers perceive the EU and ASEAN as **slow, inefficient and overly bureaucratic**. Cultural departments are often understaffed, especially in ASEAN, and **lack the necessary funds and human resources** for long-term collaborations.

5. **Administrative and logistical hurdles**, such as visa challenges for Southeast Asians and large income disparities, further impede the cultural relationship between the two regions.

6. Despite establishing an ASEAN-EU strategic partnership at the end of 2020, **culture is not considered to be strategic** in official documents, declarations and statements regarding ASEAN-EU collaboration. The near-total absence of 'culture' from the latest action plan (2023-2027) underscores the marginalisation of cultural priorities in the relationship.

7. With active discussions and collaborations in other areas, such as education, youth dialogue and sustainability, in both public offices and civil societies there is an **increasingly perceived need for enhanced partnerships in cultural cooperation**. This growing interest underscores the recognition that culture can foster mutual understanding, strengthen ASEAN-EU relations and be an economic asset, for instance through collaboration in cultural industries.

8. The deficit in cultural cooperation tools results in **numerous shortcomings affecting the regions' civil societies**, including professional development opportunities, co-creation initiatives, education and training programmes,

mobility and exchange opportunities, and heritage conservation and restoration efforts. These shortcomings are particularly acute in the case of ASEAN.

9. ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation **lags behind other strategic relationships**, such as the ASEAN-US and especially the ASEAN-China strategic partnership, which stresses the importance of cultural exchange at all levels, advocating for joint cultural initiatives like performances, exhibitions and festivals. It promotes people-to-people exchanges in various arts, supports ASEAN-China Cultural Forums and encourages the development of cultural enterprises. The partnership also facilitates knowledge-sharing in cultural heritage preservation and supports professional exchanges and development in cultural institutions.

10. **Alternative collaboration mechanisms and/or structures are necessary** to carry out cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU beyond their main institutions (the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission) which, however, need to be involved in the processes.

11. **Increased cooperation between the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission (particularly their cultural departments and other associated bodies) and civil societies** is essential for advancing cultural relationships between the two regions. These partnerships can enhance mutual understanding and appreciation and pave the way for sustainable cultural exchange, encouraging long-term relationships which benefit both regions through capacity-building interventions and shared knowledge, experiences and resources.

12. **Core funding** is necessary to elevate ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation to an acceptable level.

13. The regions' cultural actors and professionals representing civil arts and culture society-led organisations prefer **long-term and sustainable engagements and commitments** over ad hoc arrangements.

14. Both institutions and civil societies should **engage in areas where they find common ground and feel comfortable**, including contemporary artistic practices, diversity, CCIs, and less explored topics like food and gastronomy. Traditional cultural practices in the ASEAN context should also be considered, together with avoiding potentially controversial topics.



## 4. Recommendations and Next Steps

### 4.1 Recommendations

Over decades, cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU has been sustained through bilateral efforts, with embassies, national cultural institutes and cultural centres from both regions promoting their respective cultures, languages and arts. Despite longstanding bilateral cooperation, multilateral cultural collaboration between ASEAN and the EU remains underdeveloped. Enhanced multilateral cooperation could strengthen diplomatic ties, address global challenges and foster innovation and creativity. It could also support economic growth through cultural tourism and creative industries. Ultimately, multilateral cooperation offers a broader cultural exchange and deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, enriching both regions.

Given Europe's increasing geostrategic and socio-cultural interest in Southeast Asia and vice versa, as well as the importance of cooperation with European cultural actors for ASEAN member countries, the authors propose the following recommendations to enhance the cultural relationship between ASEAN and the EU. The recommendations have been divided into three sections: strategic, conceptual and operational.

#### STRATEGIC

Endow the arts and culture with **enhanced centrality** as part of the broader ASEAN-EU institutional cooperation. Culture needs to be able to participate and play a more decisive role in the interregional cooperation debates at all levels, particularly those addressing global challenges such as sustainable development, migration and refugee crises, social inclusion and inequality, political stability and governance, and digital transformation, among others, including Ministerial (AEMM) and Senior Officials' (SOM) Meetings, as well as Joint Cooperation Committees (JCC). We recommend that ASEAN and the EU scrutinise how ASEAN and China have integrated culture as part of their more than two-decade-long strategic partnership.

### **Specific recommendation**

We recommend enhancing the role of culture in the mid-term through an interim two-year pilot project (for instance 2026-2027). This initiative, monitored and evaluated accordingly, can prepare ASEAN and the European Union for a more pivotal role of culture in the future ASEAN-EU Plan of Action 2028-2032.

### **CONCEPTUAL**

We have identified the following five areas which could be prioritised for an enhanced ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation:

- professional development
- education and training programmes
- mobility and exchange opportunities
- strengthening collaboration and engagement among Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)
- co-creation initiatives
- heritage conservation and restoration efforts

In addition, the authors believe it is important to balance contemporary and traditional arts and cultural practices as well as to explore less-travelled avenues for cooperation, such as food and gastronomy, and give due emphasis to the creative and cultural industries (CCIs).

### **OPERATIONAL**

a) The authors recommend that ASEAN and the EU **allocate a sizeable core budget** for interregional cultural cooperation to operate in a long-term multi-year initiative. In the first phase, as highlighted in the strategic recommendation, they propose a two-year pilot project (2026-2027) to be subjected to a monitoring process and evaluation.

The authors propose two potential ways of channelising this hypothetical financial support:

1. Delegate the management of the ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation and its allocated funds to a third-party regional organisation. The authors believe the ASEAN Foundation could be a potentially suitable interim host for the pilot endeavour mentioned above, leveraging its experience in handling similar initiatives like the KONNECT ASEAN programme, established and funded by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund in 2020. Another possibility could be to delegate this task to the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) as a temporary pilot project.
2. Enable the formation of a consortium of cultural organisations and initiatives with operations in both ASEAN and/or European contexts. This consortium could provide expertise and targeted actions which could benefit specific fields in Southeast Asia and Europe, from the mobility of artists and cultural operators to cultural management education, amongst others. Concerning this, and as a possible follow-up to this study, the authors recommend the creation of a curated mapping of relevant organisations and initiatives currently working in different arts and cultural areas, both regionally and at the national level, which could be a part of or partner to this consortium.

b) The **organisation of a recurrent ASEAN-EU Arts Festival**, alternating between Southeast Asia and Europe, serving as a platform for showcasing both regions' rich cultural heritage and contemporary artistic expressions. This initiative addresses the lack of mutual visibility and awareness while providing a privileged space for exchanging cooperative initiatives and co-productions. The format and content of this festival should be a core component of co-creation and collaboration and developed in partnership with cultural operators and stakeholders from ASEAN and the EU to ensure inclusivity and relevance.

c) Address the challenges imposed by the EU in obtaining **short-term/stay visas** for most ASEAN nationals to enter the EU/Schengen countries, particularly for purposes such as artistic performances and exchanges, participation in conferences and short training programmes.

## 4.2 Potential next steps

The authors recommend further discussing this study in appropriate fora, where ASEAN and EU policymakers can explore its findings.

One of these potential fora could be within the framework of the regions' Senior Officials' Meetings (SOM). For instance, SOMCA is a high-level meeting point within the ASEAN framework dedicated to promoting cultural cooperation and collaboration among member states. SOMCA serves as a platform for senior officials responsible for culture and the arts from the ASEAN member countries to discuss key issues, policies and initiatives related to culture and the arts in Southeast Asia. SOMCA meetings are held periodically, typically once a year, and provide a forum for ASEAN member states to exchange ideas, share best practices and explore opportunities for joint cultural projects and initiatives. Another potential platform is at the European Commission, at the meeting level involving the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) as well as representatives from relevant international organisations, national cultural institutes and centres, civil society organisations, and other appropriate stakeholders. DG INTPA manages the European Union's external relations, partnerships and international cooperation with regional organisations like ASEAN. The DG EAC is responsible for the EC's policies on education, youth, sports, and culture.

Based on the findings of the research, making core funding available specifically for enhancing cultural cooperation between ASEAN and the EU seems crucial. This funding would not only facilitate the implementation of joint cultural initiatives but also enable the establishment of dedicated administrative structures as well as platforms and mechanisms to foster collaboration. The latter could include joint cultural exchange programmes, professional development and training, collaborative artistic projects, and cultural heritage preservation efforts.

Equally important is the identification of the right interlocutors—individuals and/or organisations who can serve as effective liaisons between ASEAN and the EU—to facilitate dialogue and cooperation. Activating this cooperation requires concerted efforts and resources to build trust, establish common goals and create sustainable partnerships which benefit both regions culturally.

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# Appendix: Survey on ASEAN-EU Cultural Relations to Experts

This survey aims to learn the perspective of experts in international cultural relations on the status, barriers and motivations for cultural cooperation between ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the EU (European Union). The survey is part of the research we are leading on behalf of the German Institute for International Cultural Relations, *ifa* (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), the results of which will be published later this year. The time needed to complete this survey is approximately 12 minutes. We would appreciate your responses by February 19, 2024. All responses will be treated anonymously. Thank you very much for your contribution!

Lluís Bonet, University of Barcelona.

David Ocón, Singapore Management University.

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1. Which response best corresponds to your professional profile (you can tick multiple options)?

- a. I work at a public administration/government department in Europe
- b. I work at a public administration/government department in an ASEAN country
- c. I work at a public administration/government department in another country
- d. I work at an intergovernmental organisation
- e. I work at an international NGO
- f. I work for an NGO that focuses on Southeast Asia
- g. I work for an NGO that focuses on Europe
- h. I am an academic
- i. I am an independent consultant
- j. I am an arts/cultural practitioner
- k. I am a journalist/I work in media
- l. Others (please specify):

2. In which geographical region has your work primarily focused in the last decade (you can tick multiple options)?

- a. A country in the European Union
- b. A member country of ASEAN
- c. Other European countries
- d. Other Asian countries
- e. Other country

3. What are, in your opinion, the main motivations of European and ASEAN governments to be engaged in cultural relations with each other? Please tick a maximum of three options.

- a. It can contribute to a better understanding of the people living in the other region.
- b. It can be seen as an effective way to promote public diplomacy and a good image abroad.
- c. It can contribute to continuing historical relations linked to migration paths and/or past colonial associations.
- d. It can contribute to opening and enlarging cultural markets abroad.
- e. It can promote tourism and, thus, create economic benefits.
- f. It can support or complement the interconnectedness in other areas, e.g., financial and/or political ties.
- g. It can contribute to offset other regional alliances and global partnerships (for instance with countries such as China or the United States).
- h. Artists/cultural experts from Southeast Asia can travel to European countries to attend or participate in events there, and vice versa.
- i. More collaborative projects can be developed between cultural operators and artists from both regions, which can contribute to enriching each other's cultural experiences.
- j. Others (please elaborate):

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4. What are the main challenges in the ASEAN-EU multilateral cultural cooperation? Please tick a maximum of three options.

- a. A lack of funding to support cooperation between the two regions.
- b. Imbalance and asymmetry between the EU and ASEAN (e.g., the ASEAN has less than 2% of the EU Commission staff, and there is a

tremendous discrepancy in budgets, with that of ASEAN being less than 0.1% of the EU Commission).

- c. The physical distance between the two realities (e.g., which implies lengthy and expensive flights).
  - d. Cultural differences between Europeans and Southeast Asians.
  - e. Different understanding of the concept of culture and/or forms of cooperation.
  - f. Other countries or regions of the world are more strategically important for ASEAN than the EU (e.g., China).
  - g. Other countries or regions of the world are more strategically important for the EU than ASEAN (e.g., the US).
  - h. Issues related to colonialism, as some of the ASEAN countries were, at some point, European Union member states' colonies.
  - i. Others (please elaborate):
- 

5. What are the main barriers that cultural professionals from European and ASEAN countries encounter to develop collaborations? (please tick a maximum of three options)

- a. A lack of funding to support cultural collaboration.
- b. Asymmetries in experience, resources and recognition between the EU and ASEAN cultural operators.
- c. The physical distance between the two realities (e.g., which implies lengthy and expensive flights).
- d. Cultural differences between Europeans and Southeast Asians.
- e. Different understanding of the concept of culture and/or forms of cooperation.
- f. Other countries or regions of the world are more strategically important (e.g., market sizes, easy access, visa waivers, etc.)
- g. Issues related to former international relations, as some of the ASEAN countries were, at some point, European Union member states' colonies.
- h. Others (please elaborate):

6. What are the main drivers and motivations for cultural professionals from European and ASEAN countries to develop closer collaborations? (please tick a maximum of three options)

- a. It can contribute to a better understanding of the people living in the other region.
  - b. It can contribute to continuing historical relations linked to migration paths and/or past colonial associations.
  - c. It can enable artists/cultural operators from Southeast Asia to travel to European countries to attend or participate in events there, and vice-versa.
  - d. More projects in cooperation can be developed between artists/cultural agents/operators from both regions, which can contribute to enriching each other's cultural experiences.
  - e. It can lead to easier access to funding.
  - f. It builds on previous experiences with key partners and platforms.
  - g. It can provide better access to expertise (e.g., advice from National Institutes for Culture, embassies, cultural foundations, etc.).
  - h. Having a partner in the other region can support the handling of visas, contracts and other logistical issues.
  - i. Cooperation projects can contribute to opening new markets.
  - j. Others (please elaborate):
- 

7. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the least and 7 being the most, how essential is it for ASEAN and the governments of its member countries to collaborate at the cultural level with the European Union?

8. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the least and 7 being the most, how important is it for ASEAN cultural professionals to collaborate with European partners?

9. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the least and 7 being the most, how essential is it for the European Union and the governments of its member countries to collaborate at the cultural level with ASEAN?

10. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the least and 7 being the most, how important is it for European cultural professionals to collaborate with ASEAN partners?

11. What are, in your opinion, the THREE (3) most important European Union countries for developing cultural relations with South-East Asia?

Austria	France	Malta
Belgium	Germany	The Netherlands
Bulgaria	Greece	Poland
Croatia	Hungary	Portugal
Cyprus	Ireland	Romania
Czech Republic	Italy	Slovakia
Denmark	Latvia	Slovenia
Estonia	Lithuania	Spain
Finland	Luxembourg	Sweden

12. What are, in your opinion, the THREE (3) most important ASEAN countries for developing cultural relations with the EU?

Brunei	Myanmar/Burma
Cambodia	Philippines
Indonesia	Singapore
Laos	Thailand
Malaysia	Vietnam

13. In which way do you think the exit of the UK from the EU affects or can affect the cultural relationship between ASEAN and the EU?

- a. It does not affect it at all.
- b. It affects it.

If you answered b, why and how do you think it affects it?

14. Do you think the international rise of CHINA in the last two decades has benefited or hindered the relationship between the EU and ASEAN?

- a. No, I don't think it affects or impacts the ASEAN-EU relationship much.
- b. Yes, it affects it.

Please explain why: \_\_\_\_\_

15. In your opinion, which option is more efficient for promoting EU-ASEAN cultural relations?

- a. ASEAN and EU, as institutions
- b. Individual ASEAN and EU countries

Please explain why: \_\_\_\_\_

16. In which *cultural sector* (e.g., cultural heritage, visual arts, performing arts, etc.) is more intensive cooperation between ASEAN and the EU needed?

In which *topics* (e.g., co-creation, distribution, conservation, exhibition, civil society mobilisation, etc.) is more cooperation is needed? What *gaps* are there in ASEAN-EU cultural cooperation?

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17. What 2-3 *specific actions* (e.g., at the institutional, policy, and civil society level) are most needed *to strengthen cultural relations* between ASEAN and the EU in the future?

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If you are interested in receiving the results of the study, please let us know which email address you wish for us to send them to (please note data entered in this field is not linked to the answers provided in this questionnaire): \_\_\_\_\_

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# About the Authors

**Dr. David Ocón** is an interdisciplinary cultural historian and anthropologist who works on Asian cultural heritage's intersections with preservation, geopolitics and sustainability. He also analyses cultural diplomacy and cooperation in Asia, particularly in and between China, Japan and the ASEAN countries. He is currently an Assistant Professor at Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences, where he teaches Cultural Diplomacy in Asia, Urban Cultural Anthropology, and Cultural Heritage and Social Sustainability, amongst others.

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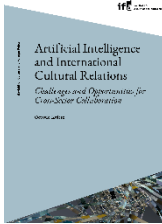
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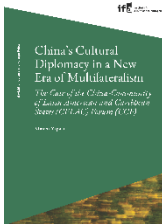


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# Enhancing ASEAN-EU Relations through Cultural Cooperation

## *Realities and Unexplored Potential*

This study explores how multilateral cultural cooperation can strengthen ties between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU), complementing the bilateral cultural cooperation already present in the two regions. Highlighting the importance of multilateral cultural exchanges in fostering mutual understanding and addressing global challenges, it emphasises that culture can serve as a bridge between Southeast Asian and European societies, supporting other forms of cooperation, such as economic, strategic and geopolitical ones. Multilateral cultural initiatives offer broader, more inclusive engagement opportunities, thereby enhancing diplomatic relations, economic development and regional stability. This research gathered data through extensive historical analysis, targeted surveys and expert interviews, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced view. The study provides targeted recommendations for policymakers in ASEAN and the EU which focus on developing long-term cultural strategies, increasing institutional collaboration and securing core funding for sustainable projects.