

Conference in Brno – June 11th

Theme: Culture as a Shared Language

0) Brief Introduction: To share, there must always be something to offer

First of all, I would like to thank you for your kind invitation and for giving me the opportunity to share an experience with you—one that even we in the Basque Country are not always fully aware of or value to its proper extent.

Above all, the philosophy of this conference perfectly embodies the motivation of a people who understood that, in order to open up and position oneself in the world, everything begins by guaranteeing, safeguarding, and preserving the foundations of one's identity. To share and build spaces of solidarity between citizens, societies, and countries, we must have something to offer. In this regard, the contribution that the Basque Country is making to Europe and the international community through the rebirth of its culture and its own language is highly significant. The fact that we are one of the most pro-European societies is rooted in an obstinate and fierce resilience in defending and promoting our language and culture.

I come from Donostia, the city with the largest number of Basque speakers among all the cities in the Basque Country. It belongs to a country divided between two states—the Spanish state and the French state—and is formed by the community of Euskal Herria, comprising seven territories. Furthermore, it boasts a powerful global diaspora, especially in the United States and Latin America, which is undoubtedly our great ambassador and one of our key cultural diplomacy agents—something I will also discuss throughout my presentation.

In my intervention, I will focus primarily on Donostia, the city where I live and work, and on the southern part of the Basque Country—specifically the Basque Autonomous Community. This is the area where culture, and most notably the recovery and normalization of the Basque language, has been developed in the most systematized and institutionalized way.

1) It all began sixty years ago: An integrated agenda to address the rebirth of a dormant society gripped by fear

At a time when the role, relevance, and weight of culture in 21st-century society are being debated—and as we witness an exciting discussion on new cultural agendas after the pandemic permanently altered paradigms that seemed immovable, including within the cultural sector—we have finally realized the limitations of viewing culture exclusively through the lens of artistic expression.

Fortunately, those of us working in the cultural sector today have embraced concepts and fields that until recently belonged to other domains, such as mental health, loneliness, the economy, geopolitics, and sports.

In the cultural world, rigid perspectives have often prevailed, placing culture on the periphery and in minority positions. However, as I want to explain here today, culture must aspire to win the support of the majority of society. If it renounces this mainstream vocation, it abandons its core foundations—the transformation of society and its citizens—leaving it in the hands of an elitist but largely uninfluential minority.

Along those lines, a journey of more than sixty years began, leading the Basque Country to become a widely followed model around the world. To strengthen culture, the economic muscle of society must be guaranteed. The recovery process of the Basque language cannot be understood without grasping the scope of the Mondragon cooperative model.



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1.1) Rebirth during the dark times of Franco's dictatorship: Resilience as a country brand

The Basque Country managed to overcome a dark historical period. In the 1960s, the Basque people correctly read and interpreted the strategic direction they needed to deploy to overcome the hopelessness of an era with Franco at the helm of the dictatorship.

One of the defining traits of the Basque Country has always been its capacity for resilience, and its model for normalizing the Basque language is undoubtedly a prime example of this.

Yet, beyond resilience, the Basque Country understood the need for a modern, attractive, and effective narrative. The 1960s saw the birth of *ikastolas* (schools teaching in Basque, which initially faced massive obstacles to legalization). This same period marked the beginning of the standardization of the Basque language, the birth of the Mondragon cooperative movement—now a global benchmark—and a broader renaissance of Basque culture. The rebirth of Basque culture cannot be understood without recognizing that everything was made possible by an integrated agenda with the economy at its core.

1.2) Harsh, violent, and deeply polarized moments that have happily been overcome

Throughout these long sixty years, there were incredibly painful moments, and it was specifically the terrorist group ETA that divided Basque society. Families and friendships were torn apart, and social cohesion within Basque society was broken. Consider this fact: ETA murdered more than 800 people, many of them innocent citizens, for the sole reason of not aligning with ETA's political ideology.

There were also other forms of violence, including some committed and promoted by the State, which is absolutely unacceptable from a democratic standpoint. I do not have the time to fully explore this topic today, as it would require an entire conference on its own; this is simply an acknowledgment.

The paradox I want to highlight is this: in its early days, ETA was part of that Basque cultural rebirth and enjoyed sympathy from parts of Basque society and the international community. Later, it turned into a terrorist organization that inflicted enormous damage, particularly on the coexistence among Basque people.

For years, a mythologized image of ETA existed, which needs to be debunked. Finally, ETA dissolved in 2011. Although many wounds still need to heal, today the Basque Country is experiencing a time of peace and reconciliation, though further steps must still be taken.

1.3) And what was the contribution of culture to overcoming the division in Basque society?

Although the cultural sector, like any other, works with increasingly professional criteria and tools to measure the impact of its actions, there is no doubt that part of its reach escapes purely tangible metrics.

Let us establish the framework: as the commitment to culture extends across public institutions and society as a whole, spaces for coexistence and dialogue between differing viewpoints expand. The strengthening of culture over recent decades in Donostia—a city that suffered the consequences of ETA's actions with more than 94 assassinations—has run parallel to the weakening of the climate of violence that characterized life in the Basque Country for decades.

For example, the fact that 129,000 citizens of Donostia are currently members of Donostia Kultura (the main entity managing the city's cultural policy) in a city of 187,000 inhabitants is a powerful testament to the public's commitment to culture and everything that engagement represents.



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1.4) The European Capital of Culture in 2016

Within this context, we must highlight the hosting of the European Capital of Culture in 2016, which served as another milestone on the path toward coexistence and reconciliation. In fact, the proposal presented by Donostia—which won the competition among 11 candidate cities—was based precisely on the theme that brings me to Brno today. While other cities banked on new cultural infrastructures, Donostia bet on a process that remains fully relevant today, given the current context facing Europe and the world.

There is another detail worth emphasizing: Donostia and the Basque Country's clear push for culture is not a sudden, temporary, or superficial occurrence. It represents decades of work guided by consistency, coherence, and discretion. What has been achieved today began sixty years ago through a systematic plan and an integrated agenda where, alongside culture, sports also played a key role in achieving peace.

2) Culture needs a narrative with passion and soul capable of connecting emotionally: It needs a story

Today's society needs light, certainty, and, above all, reliable narratives in a historical period marked by uncertainty and turbulence.

Furthermore, in many countries, we are witnessing a clear questioning of culture, critical thinking, and the humanities. The rise of Artificial Intelligence has sounded alarm bells, and anxiety about the future is becoming widespread.

In this current climate, the need to invest in empathy and solidarity between different ways of living and thinking becomes even more valuable. Artificial Intelligence will likely replace tasks, trades, and functions that humans have performed for decades.

However, what will remain is the nuance, the smile, and the human embrace that transcends ideologies and legitimate ways of thinking. This is where the value of culture lies.

Beyond organizing events and offering attractive programming, culture today is called upon to lead the alternative narrative that society needs to counter the dominant global discourse. As Ben Rhodes, former communications advisor to Barack Obama, points out in his book *All That We Say*, society today is hungry for good stories. Ultimately, to exercise effective leadership, culture needs an engaging and immersive story. This is where culture possesses immense space, potential for growth, and, above all, the power to exert influence.

3) The Donostia Model: Culture at the heart of the public and political agenda

All calls and messages for culture to secure real relevance and weight can easily end up as mere well-intentioned, wishful thinking. Even today, the standard reality in most cities across the globe is that culture occupies the periphery of public administrations and institutions in terms of resources and budget.

Donostia is a model of commitment to culture from a position of centrality, coherence, regularity, and credibility. The house that Donostia has built is the result of decades of work, not improvised or temporary decisions; it stands on solid foundations.

Let us look at some data illustrating the health of our culture (data corresponding to 2025). Donostia Kultura is the city's weightiest and most important entity regarding cultural policy. Alongside Donostia Kultura, other institutions shape the local cultural ecosystem, such as Tabakalera and the San Sebastian Film Festival.

- The main entity managing the city's cultural policy has **230 employees**.

- It manages a budget of **27 million euros**.
- It allocates nearly **14 million euros** to investment.
- It distributes **747,000 euros** in grants.
- There are **20 open calls** for creators.
- We manage **23 cultural spaces**.
- **281,580 tickets sold** (177,842 for performances and 103,738 for the San Telmo Museum).
- **3,003,493 euros** generated from performance ticket sales.
- **377,992 euros** generated from ticket sales at the San Telmo Museum.
- **129,000 members** of Donostia Kultura.
- **17 libraries**.
- **10 cultural centers**.
- A vibrant art scene (San Telmo Museum, exhibitions at cultural centers, *Hondalea*): **348,000 visitors**.
- Festivals (such as the Jazz Festival): **221,000 attendees**.

4) It is time to debate without prejudice what we mean by culture

Times have changed at a dizzying pace, and the current landscape forces us to rethink paradigms and frameworks that have prevailed for decades. The world of culture is not immune to this new historical era, and in Donostia and the Basque Country, we are in a process of opening up to alternative views and perspectives.

Alliances are being forged with sectors historically distant from traditional understandings of culture. Science, sports, and health are areas that now form an integral part of the cultural programming developed by both public institutions and the private sector.

5) Culture is our great flag in our international positioning

The reason I have come to Brno is to talk about culture as a bridge, a language of sharing, solidarity, and understanding among diverse groups. It is precisely this spirit that has always characterized the Basque people: sharing our way of being with the outside world. Preserving our culture and language has been the great hallmark that has positioned us globally. The way we resisted and normalized *Euskera* (a minority language) is studied with admiration by universities and governments worldwide.

The sport of *jai-alai* is another prime example of a great Basque brand that has spread across five continents. Our leading Basque companies (such as CAF, MCC, ULMA, Orona, Irizar) head global markets. Quantum computing and innovation hubs are further instruments added to the long list of strengths within our international brand.

Cultural diplomacy, sports diplomacy, gastronomic diplomacy, science diplomacy, or corporate diplomacy—all are part of the very same vocation: being present in the world by cultivating our own unique identity.

6) Our shared contribution: A fierce defense of Europe

Our commitment to Europe is built upon a fierce defense of our language and identity, from which a resolute defense of the European project is articulated. We live in times when the very idea of Europe is being questioned. It is here and now that the Basque Country is redoubling its efforts to strengthen a project we have firmly defended since its inception.

The first Lehendakari (President) of the Basque Government, José Antonio Agirre—whose government was later overthrown by forces loyal to Franco—was, alongside his party (the Basque Nationalist Party), one of the founding fathers of the European Union.

The Basque Country has always linked its fortune and its future to the European cause. This has been true since the 1950s, and today that commitment is even firmer, clearer, and unequivocal.

7) Doubts and risks: Facing uncertainty, we need a new narrative for the next sixty years

The effects of globalization and the entrenchment of increasingly individualistic frameworks in our personal and professional lives have also taken a toll on the narrative that has prevailed in the Basque Country for sixty years.

A misguided nihilism, individualism, and pragmatism lead some to question whether it is worth the effort to preserve a language as small as Basque, or whether it makes sense to confront the overwhelming momentum of English and Spanish. "What for?" some ask. "What is the point if it does not help us move around the world?"

Similarly, doubts arise over whether it is worth maintaining a commitment to the humanities within academic curricula—humanities that some view as an obstacle to modern technological narratives, blocking the docility expected by those who wish to eradicate all signs of free thought. All of this damages the hard-won reputation and prestige of the cultural sector, leading some to think that investing so heavily in "unproductive" matters is excessive.

Doubts emerge and confusion grows day by day, yet many fail to reflect on the path of success that brought us here.

The formula for success is this: to operate and position oneself in the world, you must first complete your domestic homework, secure your bonds at home, and only then begin to fly. Stepping outside into the open, where competition is fierce and the climate is cold, without having something to offer or adding value, is reckless. Therefore, it is vital to work on something distinctive and enriching for both our own community and the international one.

If we choose to lower our standards and avoid the sacrifices demanded by complex, difficult realities; if we become obsessed with uniformity to comply with globalized criteria; or if comfort and complacency come to define our existence, we will throw away everything we have achieved through decades of hard work.

Now is the time, without hesitation, to rethink the future—but without renouncing the foundations, values, and principles that have made the Basque Country a successful model for understanding the world through an honest, dedicated cultivation of our own identity.

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