



Short Profile

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BELGIUM – Flanders

Short Cultural Policy Profile

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1. Fact and figures

- **Political system of Belgium:** federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy
- **Official languages:** Dutch, French, and German

	2024	2019
<i>Population on January 1st</i>	<i>11 817 096</i>	<i>11 455 519</i>
<i>GDP in million EUR (Q1 of year)</i>	<i>110 251*</i>	<i>101 203</i>
<i>GDP per capita in PPS Index (EU27_2020 = 100)</i>	<i>117*</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>General government expenditure (in % of GDP)</i>	<i>54.1%*</i>	<i>51.8%</i>
<i>Public cultural expenditure in EUR</i>	<i>4 462 700 000*</i>	<i>3 402 600 000</i>
<i>Public cultural expenditure as % of GDP</i>	<i>0.7%*</i>	<i>0.7%</i>
<i>Public cultural expenditure per Capita</i>	<i>378*</i>	<i>297</i>
<i>Share of cultural employment of total employment</i>	<i>3.9%</i>	<i>4.2%</i>

Note: the figures above refer to the totals of all levels of government in Belgium; * asterisk means data are provisional

Source: Eurostat (data on 2 June 2026)

2. Cultural policy system

2.1 Objectives

Belgium is a federal country. Cultural affairs are mainly the subject of policies on the level of the Flemish, French, and German-speaking **Communities**. This refers to areas such as arts, heritage, language, media, youth policy, and sports. Tourism and immovable heritage are competences of the **Regions** (Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital Region).

Principles of **political and cultural democracy** and references to **human rights** pervade the history of cultural policies in Belgium and its Communities. Many actions conducted in the framework of these policies are in line with the principles of the Council of Europe on the promotion of cultural diversity and cultural participation, respect of freedom of expression and of association, and support of creativity.

Another historically important principle underpinning a large deal of cultural policies in Belgium and its Communities is **subsidiarity**. Here, it refers to the government not directly intervening in cultural matters, other than by means of general regulations and support measures.

2.2 Main features

This profile primarily provides information on the cultural policies of the **Flemish Community** of Belgium. These apply to people and organisations living and working in Flanders and Brussels.

The focus lies on the policies subsumed under the **Flemish policy field of Culture**. Strictly speaking, this spans arts, heritage, socio-cultural work, circus, amateur arts, sign language, and policies that permeate these different fields.

Matters such as media, sports, and youth form separate policy fields. If relevant, you will find information on culture-related affairs that are subsumed under **other policy fields** of the Flemish government or under other government levels.

Responsibilities of the Flemish authorities regarding the competence of Culture are:

- developing a strategic conceptual framework for cultural policies
- providing a set of policy instruments
- taking measures to increase the quality of the cultural offer and provision of cultural services
- monitoring (the effects of) these policy frameworks and instruments

2.3 Governance system: Organisational Organigram

Image 1: higher and lower levels of government in Belgium (*bold = government levels in focus in this short profile*)

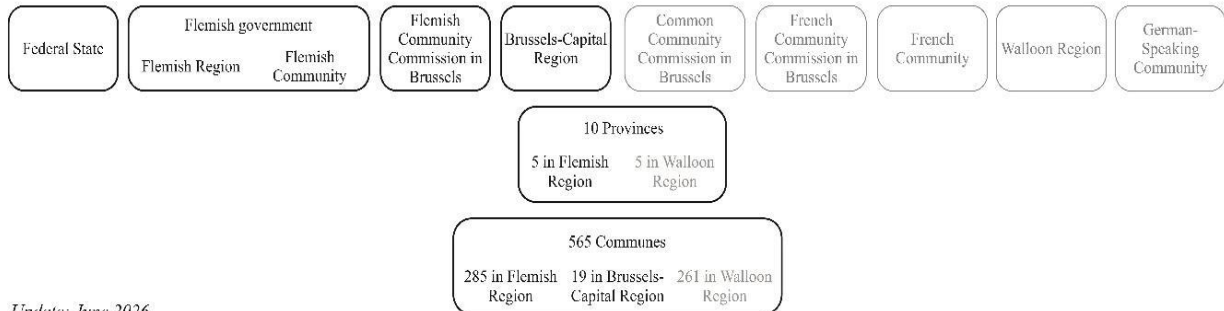
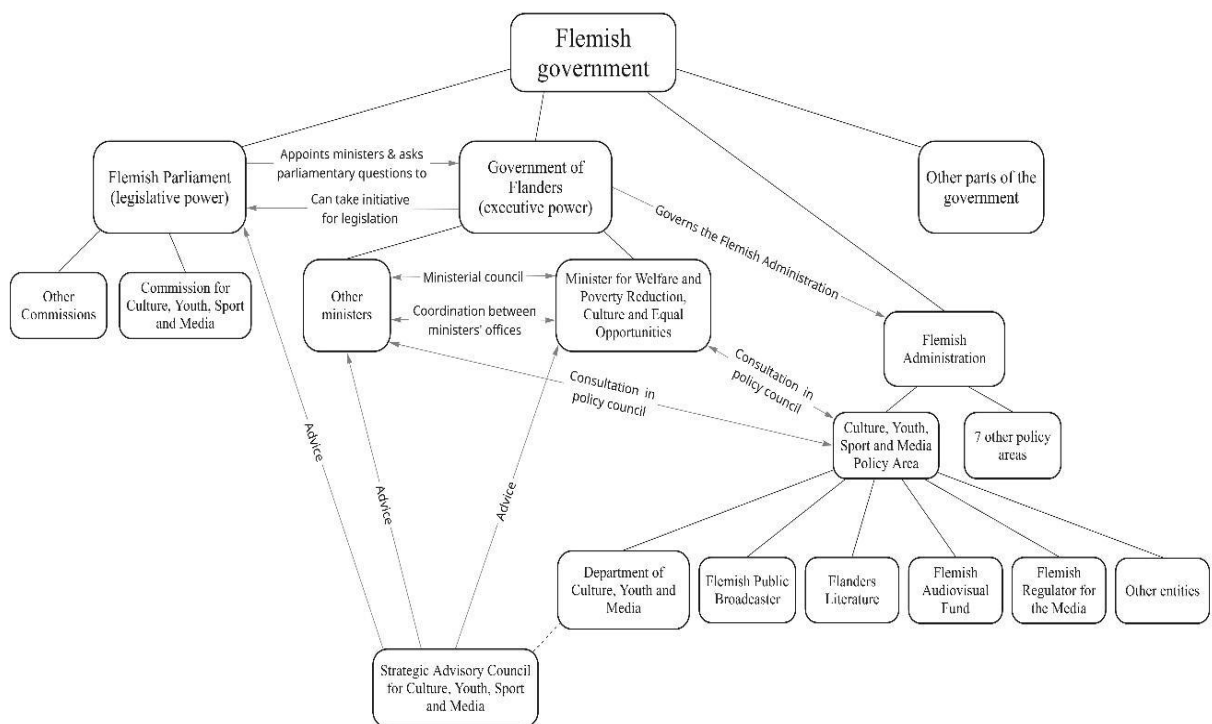


Image 2: organigram of the Flemish government



2.4 Background

- **1944-1970:** After the Second World War, cultural policies in Belgium expanded and were shaped by a drive to democratize culture — inspired by principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In line with international developments, cultural policies developed as an alternative to both the state culture of Communist countries and the market-governed system of the United States. These developments converged with the way Belgian society was historically shaped by philosophical and political divisions (the so-called ‘zuilen’, literally ‘pillars’), leading to the subsidiary government intervention in cultural affairs.
- **1970-1980:** The autonomy of the linguistic communities vis-à-vis the Federal State was further institutionalised. Through subsequent State Reforms, cultural policy was divided over the newly created government levels. In the wake of these reforms, the Culture Pact was passed. Throughout this decade, the ministers for Dutch Culture (as it was called) were Christian-Democrats, whose policies were geared towards democratizing culture (a network of culture centres and libraries was built throughout Flanders). In 1980, the Flemish and Walloon Regions were created (the Brussels-Capital Region followed in 1989).
- **1981-1992:** In the wake of economic turmoil, overall government expenditure on Culture decreased. A new, rather management-oriented style of cultural policies — which included encouraging cultural organisations to generate a private income — was introduced by Liberal ministers for Culture in the Flemish government.
- **1992-1999:** Christian-Democratic ministers for Culture continued the line of their Liberal predecessors and focussed on the traditional arts and on socio-cultural work. Legislation on performing arts, music, and museums in Flanders and Brussels was passed that provided funding for delineated periods of time and which allowed funded players to devise longer-term planning.
- **1999-2009:** Flemish government budgets for Culture increased considerably. Legal frameworks were streamlined and ‘integrated’ policies were created for the professional arts (the Arts Decree, which replaced discipline-specific regulations), cultural heritage (the Cultural Heritage Decree), and socio-cultural work (the Decree Socio-Cultural Work for Adults). The Funds for literature and for audiovisual production were also established in this period, as well as the Participation Decree. The office of Culture is held by left-wing Flemish-Nationalist ministers.
- **2009-2019:** Budgets for Culture came under pressure in the wake of the financial crisis. The number and scope of new policy initiatives on the Flemish level were

rather limited compared to the preceding decade. Notable exceptions were the reform of the Circus Decree and the new Decree on Supralocal Cultural Activities in 2018-2019. The latter was part of a reform of government levels and their remits in Flanders, as provincial authorities were largely divested of their cultural competences and local cultural policy was thoroughly decentralized. The ministers for Culture come from the Christian-Democratic and Liberal parties. In the broader political landscape, centre-right Flemish-Nationalists become a dominant factor.

- **2019-2026:** Societal crises (COVID-19, inflation, energy crisis...) and geopolitical shifts exert pressure on the workings of both the cultural field and the policy level. In Flemish cultural policy, austerity measures (general and specific budget cuts, increased surveillance on government expenditure) alternate with budget increases (e.g. in funding for the arts; COVID-19 relief measures). A series of reforms of cultural decrees takes place (6.1). Although the autonomy of the cultural field remains largely intact, the principle of subsidiarity (2.1) comes under pressure. The office of Culture is held for the first time by centre-right Flemish-Nationalist and by Socialist ministers. On the federal level, the status of the artist is reformed (6.1).

3. Current cultural affairs

3.1 Key developments

When current Minister for Culture Caroline Gennez (2024-2029) took office, she vowed to take a **progressive** course. This is reflected in her policy memorandum and subsequent papers, which herald the autonomy of arts and culture, envision a pluralistic and inclusive cultural sector, and proclaim culture as an essentially public good. It is also reflected in Gennez's public opinions, such as her plea for a cultural boycott against Israel.

The scope of policy initiatives is **ambitious**, with a series of published or planned vision statements, legislative action (6.1 and 6.2), a redrawing of the landscape of museums of art (informally called the 'Museum plan'), a reform of expertise centres ('steunpunten'), updates of codes of conduct and official procedures, tweaks in the funding system, consultation processes, and a plan to lay down fundamentals for future cultural policy (Horizon 2035).

The Minister's actions and statements, however, have met **opposition** from actors from both the cultural field and politics – including her own coalition partners. The Government of Flanders is a coalition of Socialist Vooruit (Gennez's party), Christian-Democratic CD&V, and Flemish-Nationalist N-VA (who held the office of Culture in 2019-2024). Vooruit is also part of the ruling federal coalition, which likewise spans an ideological spectrum between right and left of centre. An example is the political backlash with regard to Gennez's support for the cancellation of a concert in Ghent with conductor Lahav Shani (connected to the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra).

Another example is the '**Museum plan**'. Among other actions, this (originally) entails a transformation of the Antwerp-based M HKA from museum for contemporary art to exhibition space, with a rearranged funding structure and a cancellation of the plans for a new museum building. These plans have met headwind from several groups and organisations in the visual arts (including institutions with a politically assembled board of directors).

The Minister's ambitions also have to take into account the large-scale **austerity** measures the Flemish government is taking. Culture budgets grew during previous years, especially in the arts and cultural heritage. A similar growth of expenditure is unlikely to happen the coming years. In 2026 and 2027, budget cuts hit specific funding schemes, such as those for cultural heritage, cultural awards ('Ultimas'), expertise centres and umbrella organisations, cultural infrastructure, and project-funding in circus and supra-local policy. Voices from the cultural field criticized Gennez's budget cuts for circumventing the positive funding advices and evaluations of the affected organisations and projects.

A case in point was the outcome of the recent funding round for **civil society** organisations (socio-cultural work for adults). Six organisations lost a significant part or even all of their funding because of alleged support of a civil disobedience group and for not distancing themselves from “violent extremism”. Under pressure from coalition partner N-VA – who have frequently voiced their distrust of civil society institutions -- the positive advices of the independent expert commissions were ignored. A reform of the Decree on Socio-Cultural Work for Adults is set for 2028.

While casting a shadow on the propagated ideal of autonomy, the incident fits in a larger trend of subtle and less subtle erosion of the historical principle of **subsidiarity** (2.1) by a growing instalment of political control. Other examples include the introduction (during the previous term) of management agreements between the Flemish government and arts organisations that receive longer-term funding.

3.2 Key themes

Minister Gennez’s strategic vision statement on arts and cultural heritage puts forward a number of priorities, in line with the principles described in 3.1. These function as extra criteria for evaluating funding applications:

- Reinforcing the socio-economic position and working conditions of artists and cultural workers
- Democratization of culture and cultural democracy
- Cross-sector collaboration between culture and welfare or education
- Shared use of infrastructure
- Volunteers in the cultural sector
- Safeguarding artistic legacies and estates
- Stimulating partnerships between artistic initiatives that help foster the development of artists
- Stimulating the commissioning of art
- Embedding (participative) methods of appraisal in institutions holding heritage collections
- Stimulating collection research, especially with regard to provenance (see also 6.2)
- Stimulating collaboration with regard to publications on cultural heritage
- Developing strategies for emergency responses with regard to heritage collections

These topics resonate in part with the topics that are put forward by advocacy groups in the cultural field or that are described in **policy-advising documents and consultation processes** such as the Landscape Sketch of the Arts ('Landschapstekening kunsten').

3.3 International Cultural Cooperation

Both the Federal State and the Communities and Regions have **competences in foreign relations**. The latter can devise policies on foreign affairs with regard to their own competences. This means the Flemish government can sign agreements with (foreign) regions and other countries.

Flemish policy instruments for international cultural cooperation come in two types:

1. The **‘follow the actor’** type: players from the cultural field take the initiative for establishing and maintaining transnational connections, supported at arm’s length through funding by the Department of Culture, Youth, and Media, by Flanders Investment & Trade, and other bodies of the Flemish government. These support measures are either specifically geared towards international mobility and cooperation or are generically aimed at supporting cultural projects and organisations in their workings (which can involve international activities).
 - This exchange is in part facilitated by **international networks** in arts and culture — many of which have their main seat in Belgium.
 - Complementary to these networks, Flemish **centres of expertise** (‘steunpunten’) play an active role in establishing relations between cultural professionals beyond borders.
2. Funding schemes in which the goals and geographical reach of projects **fit more strictly into specific government strategies**.
 - E.g. the support for cultural projects provided by the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office (DKBUZA).
 - DKBUZA also acts as bridge between the cultural field and the network of **General Representatives of Flanders** – currently thirteen diplomatic representatives in other countries or in international bodies. Part of their job is to enhance the international visibility and reputation of Flanders through arts and heritage.
 - Another example are the support measures for cultural collaboration in the context of **bilateral agreements** between Flanders and other regions or countries. These are managed by the Department of Culture, Youth, and Media. Minister for Culture Gennez will focus on collaboration with Ukraine and Palestina.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives are also undertaken on the **Federal level**.

And as Belgium is a member of the EU, cultural organisations and professionals from Flanders and Brussels frequently participate in support schemes such as **Creative Europe, Erasmus+, or Interreg**.

4. Cultural Institutions

4.1 Overview

Flanders has been described as a cultural ‘nebular city’, a sprawl of predominantly small to mid-large cultural infrastructure and organisations of **private and public origin**. The distinction between both is not always clear, as some public organisations are former private initiatives and private organisations may have received some form of public support at some point in their history.

Next to this public-private interaction, the **interplay between government levels** has been a historical driver in constituting the multifaceted cultural field in Flanders and Brussels.

Table 1 focusses on cultural institutions receiving funding from the **Flemish Community** (with the exception of the general figures on cinemas). Immovable heritage sites (including nautical heritage) are also mentioned, but these are regulated by legislation pertaining to the **Flemish Region** (thus excluding the Brussels and Walloon region). Cultural institutions primarily receiving funding from the **Federal government** are also mentioned (these are mainly located in the Brussels Region).

As a consequence of the decentralizing of local cultural policy (2.4), no official figures exist on public libraries or cultural centres connected to **local governments** in Flanders. This, however, does not reflect the important roles they still fulfil in the contemporary cultural field.

4.2 Data on selected public and private cultural institutions

Table 1: Cultural institutions, by sector and domain

Domain	Cultural institutions (subdomains)	Number (year)
Immovable heritage (in Flemish region)	Protected immovable heritage sites and objects	13 713 (2026)
	Acknowledged (“vastgestelde”), but not fully protected immovable heritage sites	72 752 (2026)
	UNESCO World Heritage sites	122 (2026)
	Heritage landscapes (“erfgoedlandschappen”)	54 (2026)
Professional arts	Arts organisations (music, performing arts, visual arts, architecture, design, transdisciplinary) structurally funded through the Arts Decree	236 (2026)

	Circus organisations structurally funded through the Circus Decree	19 (2026)
	Literary organisations and literary magazines receiving multi-year funding through Flanders Literature	15 (2026)
Cultural heritage	Museums, archives, libraries and other organisations structurally funded through the Cultural Heritage Decree	106 (2026)
	Museums and memorials supported through other regulations	10 (2026)
Socio-cultural work	Civil society organisations structurally funded through the Decree Socio-Cultural Work for Adults	124 (2026)
Amateur arts	Umbrella organisations structurally funded through the Amateur Arts Decree	9 (2026)
Supralocal partnerships	Intermunicipal partnerships structurally funded through the Decree on Supralocal Cultural Policy	18 (2026)
Audiovisual	Cinemas in Flemish and Brussels-Capital Regions	45 (2024)
	Arthouse cinemas, festivals, and other organisations receiving multi-year funding through Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF)	19 (2023)
	Flemish public broadcasting organisation (VRT)	1 (2026)
	Regional television broadcasting organisations	10 (2026)
	Flemish private television broadcasting organisations	15 (2026)
	Flemish private radio broadcasting organisations	3 (2026)
	Network radio broadcasting organisations	3 (2026)
	Local radio broadcasting organisations	239 (2026)
Federal institutions	Federal Scientific Institutions and Museums	10 (2026)
	Federal Cultural Institutions	3 (2026)
	Federally funded Bi-Community cultural organisations and activities	8 (2026)

Sources: *Flanders Heritage, Department of Culture, Youth and Media of the Flemish government, Statbel, Circuscentrum, Flanders Arts Institute, Belspo, Flemish Regulator for the Media, OP/TIL, VAF, and Flanders Literature*

5. Cultural Funding

5.1 Overview

The bulk of cultural competences resides with the governments of the Communities (2.1). The Regions and federal state hold a more limited set of competences. Some of these are not strictly 'cultural' according to Belgian law (e.g. immovable heritage). However, table 2 uses the international COFOG-system, which comes with a different definition. In this respect, almost all of the **higher government levels** depicted in image 1 do cultural expenditure (COFOG groups 8.2 + 8.3).

The amount mentioned next to **lower government levels** is the sum of all communes and provinces in the whole of Belgium. Communes in Flanders are largely autonomous in how they devise their cultural policies and expenditure. Provinces in Flanders have been divested of most of their cultural competences, with a few exceptions.

Table 3 zooms in on the partition of the cultural expenditure of the **Flemish government** (see also 2.4). It follows Flemish government budgets, which apply a different categorization than the international standards used in table 2 (excluding, for example, media and immovable heritage).

A great deal of cultural policy of the Flemish Community consists of **general regulations** and **at arm's length support measures** (see also 3.3). This results in a diverse range of public funding instruments, regulated by decrees (6.1) or special funding bodies (such as the Funds for Literature and for Audiovisual Production). A diverse range of organisations and individuals can apply. A significant part of these are non-governmental organisations of either public or private origin and with a mixed public-private income structure (4.1). Depending on the type of policy instrument, subsidies are available for either non-profit or profit cultural activities.

Facts and figures on **private cultural funding** are scarcer. Surveys on charity in the whole of Belgium show that cultural goals represent about 10 to 12% of individual donations. Research suggests half of Belgian companies do some sort of sponsoring or corporate giving with regard to cultural matters. Next to these companies, there are many philanthropic foundations active in Belgium. Prominent private foundations and corporate giving programs for culture include the King Baudouin Foundation, SPES, CERA, the National Lottery, and Sabam for Culture.

Tax incentives exist to stimulate private financing of culture. Federal regulations enable tax shelters for companies investing in audiovisual and performing arts productions. The Flemish Region applies reduced tax rates on donations and on bequeathing inheritances to charities.

5.2 Public cultural expenditure by level of government

Table 2: Public cultural expenditure by level of government, in national currency and in EUR, YEAR

Level of government	Total expenditure in EUR* in 2024**	% share of total in 2024**	Total expenditure in EUR* in 2019	% share of total in 2019
Flemish government	1 477 900 000	2.0%	1 147 600 000	2.1%
Flemish Community Commission in Brussels	35 300 000	17.0%	46 400 000	24.3%
Federal government	238 000 000	0.1%	194 900 000	0.2%
Brussels-Capital Region	54 400 000	0.7%	29 500 000	0.5%
French Community	919 400 000	3.5%	664 100 000	3.3%
Walloon Region	66 400 000	0.3%	37 800 000	0.2%
German Speaking Community	31 200 000	4.5%	13 000 000	2.9%
French Community Commission in Brussels	15 200 000	2.2%	13 400 000	2.5%
All lower government levels	1 813 400 000	4.1%	1 369 000 000	4.1%
Not allocated among government levels	32 800 000	4.4%	32 100 000	4.2%
Total of all government levels in Belgium	4 462 700 000	1.3%	3 402 600 000	1.4%

Note: * At the date of expenditure; ** provisional data

Source: *National Bank of Belgium* (2025)

5.3. Public cultural expenditure per sector

The figures in table 3 are provisional budgets for culture by the Flemish government. These follow a different classification than table 2. The definitions of the fields and domains changed in 2025, making exact comparison with earlier years difficult. Overall budgeted expenditure on culture is lower than in 2025 (3.1).

Table 3: Budgeted expenditure on culture by the Flemish government in 2026, in EUR

Field/Domain	TOTAL in EUR
Dedicated to Culture	517 422 000
<i>Funding professional arts</i>	<i>157 109 000</i>
<i>Funding cultural heritage</i>	<i>87 498 000</i>
<i>Funding socio-cultural work for adults</i>	<i>83 190 000</i>
<i>Funding for digital transformation</i>	<i>20 161 000</i>
<i>Funding for cross- and intersectoral collaboration</i>	<i>15 592 000</i>
<i>Funding amateur arts</i>	<i>14 031 000</i>
<i>Allowances for cultural institutions connected to the Flemish government</i>	<i>89 156 000</i>
<i>Allowances for public funding bodies in arts and cultural heritage</i>	<i>33 531 000</i>
<i>Other funding and allowances</i>	<i>17 154 000</i>
Spanning the fields of Culture, Youth, and Media	161 510 000
<i>Government staff</i>	<i>31 259 000</i>
<i>Investments in infrastructure</i>	<i>42 111 000</i>
<i>Other expenditure</i>	<i>88 140 000</i>

Source: Flemish government, *budget preparation 2026* (October 2025)

6. Legislation on Culture

6.1 Overview national cultural legislation

The **Belgian Constitution** determines cultural affairs as competences of the Communities, as well as cultural cooperation between the Communities and international cooperation on cultural affairs. This is the result of successive State Reforms since the 1970s (2.4). The latest State Reform (2012-2014) has enabled the government of the Brussels-Capital Region to develop policies on particular cultural affairs on its territory.

Legislation of the Flemish Community is codified into **decrees**. Flemish decrees on cultural matters either apply to specific sectors or have a scope that spans the entire cultural field.

Under former Minister for Culture Jan Jambon (2019-2024) the decrees on professional arts, cultural heritage, socio-cultural work for adults, amateur arts, and participation were evaluated and modified. These modifications are in part aimed at streamlining procedures and terminology. Current Minister Caroline Gennez (2024-2029) has announced a Culture Code ('Codex Cultuur') to further **integrate** the policies on different sectors.

Certain legislation on the federal level has an important impact on cultural affairs in the Communities. This includes the **Culture Pact**, which lays down the basis for the allocation of public funding for culture.

Federal legislation on social security has historically contained exceptions for artists that receive unemployment benefits. A reform in 2022 made the conditions for being admitted to these exceptions more flexible, while rules on proving you still comply have become more extensive. The reform also made it possible for para-artistic profiles to apply to the 'status of the artist' – or more correctly: '**Artwork Allowance Scheme**' ('kunstwerkuitkering').

6.2 Overview international cultural legislation

Belgium is a member state of the EU, Council of Europe, UN, UNESCO, and the OECD. The Flemish government is involved in these **intergovernmental bodies**, either through independent relations, or through the Belgian membership (which requires coordination with other government levels). This entails implementing and monitoring treaties and policies, financial support for the workings of these bodies, and participation in working groups or conferences.

An up-to-date overview of **bi- and multilateral treaties** is provided by the Flemish government.

Current Minister for Culture Caroline Gennez has tied in policy initiatives with multilateral agreements:

- The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of the **intangible cultural heritage**: in 2026, the Belgian Permanent Delegation submitted a candidacy to have the NGO FLAME recognized as the first UNESCO Category 2 Centre for intangible cultural heritage in Europe. The candidacy was prepared by a working group including the Flemish government administration and is currently in review.
- Also in 2026, legislative action was taken to transpose the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on **Nazi-Confiscated Art** into a decree. This would entail the establishment of a restitution commission and a framework of criteria and procedures for treating restitution claims.

With respect to the latter, it is worth mentioning that the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the **illicit import, export and transfer** of ownership of cultural property was adopted by Belgium only in 2009. Transposition into federal law remains partial.

Intellectual property rights are also a federal matter. The 2019 EU directive on **Copyright and related rights** in the Digital Single Market was transposed in 2022, including the measures for the fair remuneration for the exploitation of the works of creative and performing artists.