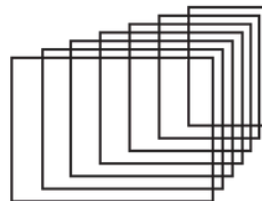




**AGORA**  
THESSALONIKI  
INTERNATIONAL  
DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL



EUROPEAN  
FILM ACADEMY

# EUROPEAN FILM ACADEMY DOCUMENTARY CHAPTER THINK TANK REPORT

Report written by: Elena Gaitanarou - AGORA

Edited by: Angeliki Vergou, Thanos Stavropoulos - AGORA

Note-takers: Artemis Doukeli, Hermione Efstratiadou, Elena Gaitanarou, Kiara Papadaki, Janka Tasi, Lilith Amelie Krausz

This report was based on verbatim session recordings and the notes of the note-takers in accordance with Chatham House Rule. All contributions are reported without attribution.

The European Film Academy Documentary Chapter Think Tank convened at the 28th Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival by the European Film Academy in collaboration with TiDF AGORA.  
Dated: 11.03.2026

We would like to thank all the participants, note-takers and moderators who attended the Think Tank in Thessaloniki.

**Table of Contents**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY..... 2**

**CONCERNS & HOPES..... 4**

**PRIORITIES & FOCUS (2027-2030)..... 6**

**COLLABORATION & INTERDEPENDENCE..... 8**

**ADDED VALUE & CONTRIBUTION..... 10**

**KEY TAKEAWAYS..... 11**

<b>Format</b>	Fishbowl Discussion ( <a href="#">Chatham House Rule</a> )
<b>Participants</b>	24
<b>Duration</b>	Approx. 2h
<b>Structure</b>	Opening Circle + 3 Thematic Sections (approx. 15 min each)
<b>Moderators</b>	<b>Matthijs Wouter Knol</b> , Executive Director of the European Film Academy <b>Brigid O'Shea</b> , Director of the Documentary Association of Europe <b>Lefteris Charitos</b> , President of the Hellenic Film Academy, filmmaker

## **Executive Summary**

Convened by the European Film Academy, in collaboration with AGORA at the Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival, this Think Tank brought together twenty-four leading European documentary professionals for a closed-door session to help shape the future of documentary representation within the Academy. The session was held in a fishbowl discussion format under Chatham House Rule, moderated by European Film Academy's Executive Director Matthijs Wouter Knol, Documentary Association of Europe Director Brigid O'Shea, and filmmaker and President of the Hellenic Film Academy, Lefteris Charitos.

The Think Tank forms a significant milestone in the lead-up to the launch of the European Film Academy's Documentary Chapter in 2027. Through facilitated dialogue, participants were invited to co-create the vision and priorities for the Chapter's first phase (2027-2030), explore collaborative models with existing documentary organisations, and lay the groundwork in order to outline the reciprocal relationship between documentary practitioners and the Academy. The approximately two-hour session was structured around an opening circle of concerns and hopes, followed by three thematic sections covering strategic priorities, collaboration and interdependence, and the added value documentary brings to European film culture.

### **Key Concerns**

Participants identified a sector under significant pressure. Shrinking budgets, the retreat of broadcasters, and streamers favouring mainstream IP have left documentary filmmakers with diminishing platforms and income. Structural inequalities between Western and Eastern European countries add on this precarity, as do growing threats to freedom of expression and a lack of visibility for documentary within European film institutions, including the European Film Academy itself.

### **Sources of Hope**

Despite these pressures, participants pointed to the resilience and solidarity of the documentary community as a meaningful counterweight. Europe's public financing infrastructure, its co-production tradition, and the argument that AI's dominance of fiction may ultimately strengthen demand for authentic, real-world storytelling were all cited as reasons for cautious optimism.

### **Strategic Priorities for the Documentary Chapter**

The proposed Chapter should focus on: showcasing the full diversity of European documentary voices; building active member engagement; revitalising distribution through new pathways; standing firmly with filmmakers at risk through legal support and public advocacy. Transparency in nomination and selection processes, and greater inclusion of filmmakers and producers in decision-making, were identified as the foundation to build members' trust.

### **The European Film Academy's Distinct Role**

Participants emphasised that the Academy should act as a connector and amplifier; not duplicate existing organisations, but fill the gaps they cannot. The most critical unmet need is coordinated, cross-border audience development: no pan-European tool or campaign model currently exists to make documentary films visible across territories. The European Film Academy is well-positioned to advocate at EU level on structural inequalities, support documentary heritage preservation, and leverage its platform to turn award recognition into genuine distribution momentum.

### **What Documentary Brings to the European Film Academy**

The session closed with a strong affirmation of Documentary's contribution to European film culture: its commitment to truth, its storytelling innovation, its alternative financing, and its capacity to drive political change. Participants argued that documentary thinking and practice should be fully embedded, not merely accommodated, within institutions claiming to represent European cinema. A thriving Documentary Chapter, it was noted, would also expand the Academy's own membership base and institutional influence.

**OPENING CIRCLE - APPROX. 50 MINUTES**

**Concerns & Hopes**

---

As an opening to the session, all the participants were called to briefly respond to the following two questions:

**What concerns you most about the future of European documentary? What gives you hope moving forward?**

The majority of the participants expressed concerns rather than hopes. Some of the main concerns were the financial precarity, the lack of visibility and distribution opportunities, as well as the fragility of the industry ecosystem, which was compared to a “sinking ship”. As a silver lining, many participants mentioned that hope can be found in the strong sense of community and solidarity as well as in the resilience and adaptability of documentary filmmakers.

**KEY CONCERNS**

- Budget cuts and shrinking financial support across the board; from broadcasters, public funds, and theatrical distribution.
- Big gap between fiction (well-funded) and documentary (underfunded).
- The collapse of television, with broadcasters commissioning less and less.
- Censorship and erosion of freedom of expression, particularly for filmmakers in politically hostile environments. A growing number of filmmakers are facing physical and economic precarity.
- The fragility of the entire documentary ecosystem, described as “crumbling” or a “sinking ship” that stays afloat nonetheless.
- Streamers pursuing large IP and mainstream content, leaving creative documentaries without a platform.
- The increasing marginalisation of documentary within European film institutions, including within the European Film Academy itself. For example, documentary cinematographers cannot be nominated for best cinematography, and selection criteria feel opaque. Documentary filmmakers feel undervalued compared to fiction filmmakers.
- The exclusion of documentary makers from key conversations around immersive media, VR, AI, and tech-industry lobbying.
- The digital application overload: funders receive growing volumes of AI-generated applications that the system cannot meaningfully assess.
- The challenge of reaching and growing audiences, particularly younger viewers and those beyond the existing documentary-loving community.
- The risk that filmmakers lose motivation due to sustained precarity, with some already dropping out of the field entirely.
- Films often disappear after festivals without long-term impact.

## **SOURCES OF HOPE**

- The resilience and solidarity of the documentary community
- New and existing initiatives, that support filmmakers at risk, keep the ecosystem from further collapse.
- The conviction that real stories and authentic voices will always find audiences.
- The argument that AI's dominance of fiction and animation may actually create the need for documentary's irreplaceable quality: real people, real stories.
- Europe's unique ecosystem of public financing, co-production tradition, and regulatory capacity.
- The example of filmmakers from outside Europe who manage with far fewer resources, serving as inspiration.
- Alternative spaces of connection built around individual solidarity rather than institutional structures.

**SECTION 1 - APPROX. 15 MINUTES**

**Priorities & Focus (2027-2030)**

---

Moderated by Matthijs Wouter Knol, Executive Director of the European Film Academy. The section opened with 3-4 participants in the inner chairs; others joined and rotated throughout. The guiding question:

**What should the Documentary Chapter prioritise in its first years?**

**Pre-session question for participants:** *"Looking at 2027-2030, what are the 2-3 most urgent needs or opportunities for European documentary that an Academy chapter could address? Where are the gaps that aren't currently being served?"*

The participants leaned more on the gaps and urgent needs, rather than the priorities. However, they pointed out that some of the gaps could be considered a priority, as well.

**PRIORITIES**

- Showcasing diversity of voices: European cinema should reflect the full range of filmmakers working with European means, including those telling stories from beyond Europe's borders.
- Active member engagement: the Chapter must encourage European Film Academy members to watch, vote, and participate rather than abstaining from the process.
- Revitalising distribution: exploring new distribution pathways, including the potential of a pan-European streaming service, and the role of impact campaigns in reaching public audiences.
- Staying in close collaboration with other European documentary associations and national bodies: acting as a united force rather than a standalone entity.
- Including filmmakers and producers in the decision-making structures of the Chapter itself
- Standing unequivocally with filmmakers at risk: legal support, protection, and public advocacy. Reference was made to a specific organization as a model, and a warning issued against repeating another Academy's failure to support filmmakers on a specific occasion.

**URGENT NEEDS**

- Resources for visibility campaigns; both within the Academy and toward the broader public. There is a need to push films further without being perceived as prioritising one voice over another.
- A clear response to the "continued attack on truth" ; disinformation, ideological pressure, and the shrinking space for investigative documentary work at the intersection with journalism.
- Ethical standards and accountability frameworks for documentary practice; in front of and behind the camera. The concept of "documentary accountability" exists internationally but is not systematically applied in Europe.
- Protection mechanisms for filmmakers addressing sensitive or investigative topics.

**GAPS IDENTIFIED**

- Re-evaluation of how the European Film Academy selects films, some members are not feeling recognised by the current selections, and disengage as a result.
- Transparency around nomination and shortlisting processes. Members feel excluded from understanding how decisions are made.
- Greater inclusion of filmmakers and producers in the Chapter, alongside commissioning editors, festival programmers, and fund representatives.
- Structural inequalities: Significant disparities in funding, infrastructure, and opportunities across different European regions.
- Protection and advocacy: Need for stronger legal, political, and institutional support systems.

**SECTION 2 - APPROX. 15 MINUTES**

## **Collaboration & Interdependence**

---

Moderated by Brigid O'Shea, Director of the Documentary Association of Europe. A new rotation of participants joined the inner chairs, with emphasis on different geographies and professional profiles. The guiding question:

**What is a gap currently missing in the documentary film ecosystem that could be a good match for the European Film Academy to address?**

**Pre-session question for participants:** *What unique role can the European Film Academy play that complements rather than competes with existing organizations? Where could joint forces create the most impact?"*

### **BUILDING COMMUNITY AND BELONGING**

- The Chapter should function as a space of belonging; not a standalone institution building from scratch, but one that engages with communities already in existence. Creating a stronger sense of belonging through events, screenings, and networking opportunities. For example; Another Academy's documentary branch offers a model: events at festivals, drinks receptions, year-round networking events that build familiarity and loyalty.
- Members will become ambassadors if they feel recognised and respected. The documentary community is not primarily motivated by money; respectful invitation and shared values are what sustain engagement.

### **REPRESENTING THE WHOLE OF EUROPE**

- There is more than one Europe. Countries that joined the EU in recent years are no longer eligible for certain Eastern European support funds, however their underlying conditions have not changed. The European Film Academy has the leverage, as a pan-European institution, to direct attention to this inequality at the EU level.
- Pan-European collaboration: Developing shared strategies for distribution, communication, and audience engagement across borders.
- Western industry practices (e.g., minimum budget thresholds for co-production) inadvertently exclude filmmakers from lower-income European countries, whose work is nonetheless serious, valuable, and award-worthy.
- Heritage and archives: in many countries, documentary film heritage is poorly digitised or physically deteriorating. The European Film Academy could advocate with national funds and institutes for better preservation.

## **WHERE JOINT FORCES WORK AND WHERE THEY DON'T**

- Festivals and co-production markets demonstrate that joining forces works well for financing and premiering films.
- The area where collaboration consistently fails is audience reach: no pan-European tool, campaign model, or network exists for making documentary films visible across territories despite the fact that European documentary audiences are surprisingly similar across borders.
- Difficulty leveraging awards for continued visibility and distribution.  
It has been detected that the European Film Academy Awards Best Documentary winners cannot leverage the award for wider theatrical distribution. No mechanism exists to create the kind of “award buzz window” that drives, for example, Oscars-period cinema-going.

## **DISTRIBUTION AND NEW PATHWAYS**

- Lobbying for increased theatrical quotas and new non-traditional distribution routes e.g., linking documentary subjects (cultural heritage, history) to educational programs or heritage sites.
- Festivals, broadcasters, and private equity partnerships are creating new distribution possibilities; The European Film Academy should monitor and facilitate these developments.

## **GAPS**

- Weak distribution networks across Europe.
- Limited coordinated audience-building strategies.
- Difficulty leveraging awards for continued visibility and distribution.
- Insufficient preservation and accessibility of documentary heritage.
- Lack of transparency in institutional and award processes.

## **ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN FILM ACADEMY**

- Acting as a connector between national academies, institutions, and filmmakers.
- Amplifying documentary-related concerns at policy and political levels.
- Supporting cross-border collaboration and increasing visibility.
- Providing a platform for collective advocacy and shared initiatives.
- Bridging regional disparities: Addressing inequalities between different parts of Europe and supporting underrepresented regions.

SECTION 3 - APPROX. 15 MINUTES

## Added Value & Contribution

---

Moderated by Lefteris Charitos, film director and President of the Hellenic Film Academy. A third rotation of participants joined the inner circle. The guiding question:

### What do documentary professionals bring to the European Film Academy?

**Pre-session question for participants:** *"The European Film Academy is an academy, not a service organisation. It serves a higher aim: to build and protect European film culture. What do documentary filmmakers, as artists and professionals, contribute to the Academy's mission? How does documentary practice and thinking enrich the broader European film community?"*

### WHAT DOCUMENTARY BRINGS TO THE EUROPEAN FILM ACADEMY

- Experimentation and innovation: documentary filmmakers work with methods, research practices, and storytelling approaches that can ground and enrich fiction cinema, making it more politically engaged, socially sensitive, and honest.
- Truth and authenticity: at a moment when audiences want something real, documentary provides what no other medium can: the presence of actual people, in actual circumstances.
- The ability to document the present for the archive of the future: what is filmed now becomes the historical record of tomorrow.
- Cost-effectiveness: Documentaries usually require far smaller budgets than fiction films. Nonetheless, we need to take into account the emotional and psychological toll the work can take on both the people behind the camera and those in front of it.
- Storytelling and communication skills transferable to journalism and political advocacy. Documentary makers are natural communicators who can articulate complex arguments to politicians and regulators.
- Creative financing expertise: documentary producers navigate fragile, patchwork financing structures that can inspire broader innovation across the film sector.
- Reach and mobilisation potential: if given the tools to identify each other (e.g., through a chapter label), documentary members can mobilise quickly around shared causes, advocacy moments, and award campaigns.

### **WHAT THE EUROPEAN FILM ACADEMY CAN OFFER DOCUMENTARY**

- Visibility for smaller films; the European Film Academy's platform can serve as a “big hug” for documentaries from smaller countries or lower-budget productions that would otherwise remain invisible internationally.
- A route to political leverage; films screened for European Parliament members have changed legislation (e.g., in Bosnia, a film shifted the legal status of wartime rape survivors). The European Film Academy can help institutionalise the follow-through that currently never happens after these screenings.
- A pathway to expand membership. Currently approximately 5,500 members in a continent of 500 million. Satisfied documentary members will become ambassadors who recruit others, growing the Academy's financial base and influence.

### **ON YOUNG AUDIENCES**

- Making documentaries “cool” and culturally relevant for young people requires strategic investment. Examples exist of Festivals having screenings in other cities of their country successfully filling cinemas with young audiences. That proves audience reach is achievable when documentary is positioned as “the place to be”.
- Young audiences engage with documentary content through their phones constantly (recording, sharing), but they don't always recognise this as documentary. Bridging that gap through community culture-building within the European Film Academy could be powerful.

### **A CLOSING OBSERVATION**

A participant noted that the framing of “documentary vs fiction” is a distraction. There is no European film culture without documentaries. The relevant question is not comparison but integration; how to ensure documentary thinking, practice, and people are fully embedded in institutions that claim to represent European cinema.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

---

**Note:** The Think Tank participants were called to write down the key takeaways from each section. This is a compilation of the participants' and the notetakers' notes.

### SECTION 1: PRIORITIES & FOCUS (2027-2030)

*Guiding question: What should the Documentary Chapter prioritize in its first years?*

- Enhance visibility, community and solidarity.
- Re-evaluation and transparency of selection strategies.
- Diversity of voices.
- Broaden genre spectrum and subject matter, promote active campaigns.
- Support alternative ways of distribution, revitalising distribution.
- Combat disinformation, advocate for documentaries & filmmakers in political lobbying.
- European Film Academy members involvement: use their voices to create change.
- Support pan-EU Doc initiatives: Need for collaboration and communication with other institutions, national funds and film academies.
- Enforce documentary accountability & ethical standards.
- Support, protect filmmakers' rights and involve them in the decision making process.

### SECTION 2: COLLABORATION & INTERDEPENDENCE

*Guiding question: What is a gap currently missing in the documentary film ecosystem that could be a good match for the European Film Academy to address?*

- Need for belonging: the European Film Academy should be a place of community and address all Europe.
- The European Film Academy should reflect the problems and needs of the film community.
- Inclusivity: There is a strong need to be recognised and be represented within the Academy.
- The need to find new ways to use the label of the Academy for distribution and visibility.
- Visibility beyond the Awards. Extend the life of documentaries. More distribution opportunities for the award-winning films in Europe.
- Organise events, film screenings and opportunities for connection.
- Visibility and recognition beyond the classic audience and towards younger people.
- Payment of services is getting very expensive.
- Inclusion of documentaries in education/schools.
- Use local knowledge and infrastructure to support European collaborations.
- Film heritage in peril of extinction: keep tradition and cultural heritage visible.
- Better understanding of how films are selected.
- Collaborate with existing academies, work with the communities that already exist, build on what is already there.

### SECTION 3: ADDED VALUE & CONTRIBUTION

*Guiding question : What do documentary professionals bring to the European Film Academy?*

- Documentary professionals can serve as a grounding factor: cold-headed, reasonable thinking. They can make the whole process more humane.
- Solidarity in the face of rising fascism.
- Experimentation, research, innovative ways of working and surviving. Creativity. Fresh energy, adaptation skills, thinking outside of the box. Good storytelling, good communication. Sensitivity.
- Managing with modest resources, creativity on (alternative) financing.
- Resilience, patience, mobilizing skills.
- Diversity.
- The European Film Academy needs to grow its members. Divide into branches.
- The need to address the crucial problems and understand the fragility of documentary filmmaking.
- More communication and alliance between documentary filmmakers and journalists.
- Urge politicians and decision-makers to put pressure on streamers when it comes to distribution, budgets etc.
- Identify key allies; who and what organizations share the Academy's goals, ambitions, morals etc. in order to compete together with big lobbying companies.
- Reach out to young audiences; make watching documentaries cool again. It can help find new ways of finance.
- Documentaries that don't come from a huge streaming platform need to be picked up and made visible around the world.
- The need for a special selective program for documentaries.
- Filmmakers need concrete pledges and actions from the European Film Academy to know that their contributions will be appreciated. They can be mobilized but they need actual tangible resources.
- The documentaries of today are the archives of tomorrow. Documentaries are key in building and protecting European film heritage.