

ICoD regional meeting

balkan europe

11 June 2026

sofia bulgaria

regional meeting: balkan europe

REGIONAL MEETING SOFIA 2026 REPORT

international
council of
design

✱ **EDFESTIVAL**
EUROPEAN DESIGN

κ^omplekt

contents

05	introduction
07	venue
08	co-organisers
13	confessions of a designer design, decisions, and impact
17	reflections on design decisions from the field
20	preparatory survey
22	diverse perspectives
25	summary
28	acknowledgements
	appendices
30	agenda
31	participants list



introduction

The International Council of Design Regional Meeting Balkan Europe 2026, held on 11 June in Sofia, Bulgaria, marked an important milestone in the Council's regional engagement. It was a great pleasure to partner once again with the European Design Festival, this time in Sofia, and to be welcomed by our wonderful hosts, Studio Komplekt. Being on the Festival's main stage also allowed us to reach a new generation of designers from the Balkans and across Europe, carrying the legacy of Icoграда forward to today's profession as the International Council of Design.

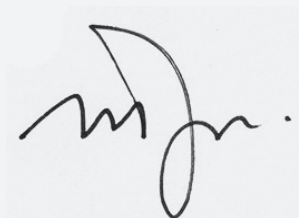
Under the theme 'Confessions of a Designer: Design, Decisions and Impact', the meeting explored how design decisions are shaped by personal values, professional responsibilities, cultural contexts and emerging technologies. Through presentations and case studies spanning creative leadership, spatial design, professional methodology and ethics, speakers shared candid reflections on the tensions, uncertainties and responsibilities inherent in design practice. The concept resonated well beyond the programme: many designers in the audience told us they had confessions of their own, and this openness made the talking circles some of the most honest conversations of the week. It is a theme we may well continue or revisit.

The afternoon's interactive session, 'Decisions in Real Time: Mapping Discussions on Disruptions That Affect Design Today', invited participants to examine how geopolitical, economic and technological changes are transforming the profession. Drawing on the Council's preparatory survey, the discussion connected individual experiences with shared challenges. The survey itself proved valuable, helping us listen to designers and see the profession

through their eyes across many contexts. Building on this, we want to keep exploring new ways of asking questions and gathering conversations.

The meeting reaffirmed that design is not simply about creating solutions, but about making decisions that affect people, institutions and society. By acknowledging blind spots, questioning assumptions and sharing experiences openly, designers can strengthen their professional responsibility and contribute more meaningfully to the public good. Sofia also showed the value of connecting regional experiences with international perspectives, turning shared concerns into opportunities for collective learning and action.

I extend my sincere thanks to the European Design Festival, our host Studio Komplekt, our speakers, facilitators and all participants for their openness and thoughtful contributions. Through continued dialogue and collaboration, we can collectively shape a more reflective, responsible and connected design profession.



Melike Taşcıoğlu Vaughan
International Council of Design
President 2024–2026



venue

The ICoD Regional Meeting Balkan Europe 2026 was hosted at Soho, Sofia, Bulgaria, as part of the European Design Festival. This collaboration placed the Meeting within a vibrant international gathering of design professionals, creating an opportunity to connect ICoD's regional dialogue with the broader activities and perspectives of the Festival. The venue provided a setting for focused presentations, open discussions, and collective reflection, while its connection to the Festival extended these conversations into a wider design community.

For International Council of Design, this integration reaffirmed the importance of bringing Regional Meetings to where designers gather and exchange ideas. By connecting professional reflection with the energy of a major design event, the Council strengthens its visibility and creates opportunities to engage with diverse voices across the profession. We extend our sincere thanks to the European Design Festival for its collaboration and support in making this gathering possible, and for helping bring International Council of Design's mission of dialogue, exchange, and professional development to the heart of the design community in Sofia.

co-organisers and host



about European Design Festival

The European Design Festival is a landmark annual event celebrating excellence in communication design across Europe. Through its awards, exhibitions, and talks, the Festival provides a platform for exchange between designers, institutions, and the public.



about Studio Komplekt

Komplekt is an interdisciplinary creative studio in Sofia, Bulgaria, working at the intersection of design, cultural management, and content creation. Through its MELBA initiative (an online archive, talks, classes, and an annual festival), the studio provides a platform for contemporary Bulgarian design and connects it with the public.









ICoD Regional Meeting Balkan Europe 2026: Confessions of a Designer Design, Decisions, and Impact

Decision-making is rarely unbiased and constantly changes as our knowledge, values, and accountability evolve. Today, our perceptions of the 'right' design choices are influenced by human sensitivity, AI, and institutions. The International Council of Design (ICoD) convened its 2026 European Regional Meeting to explore how designers set the criteria, who gets to decide, and what makes them decide, as well as how awareness or blind spots affect public life and tangible benefits. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their design approaches, acknowledging the vulnerabilities and agency inherent in design as a decision-making practice. Through shared confessions, comparative mapping, and dialogue, the event identified patterns, ethical questions, and insights into how design decisions shape institutions, technologies, and collective futures in Balkan Europe and beyond. Regional Meetings offer platforms for ICoD Members and other stakeholders to discuss shared regional challenges. By connecting these perspectives with international experiences through insights shared and compared across different contexts, they foster dialogue, exchange and a common cause within International Council of Design's global design network.







Reflections on Design Decisions from the Field

The ICoD Regional Meeting RM2026 Sofia featured four keynote presentations in the morning exploring how designers make decisions, navigate professional challenges, and respond to the cultural, social and ethical implications of their work. Samina Tanović, in “Between Context and Realities: Designing Narrative Space,” explored how spatial design shapes narratives and human experiences. Drawing on selected projects, she reflected on the tensions between creative vision and practical constraints, permanence and improvisation, and individual authorship and collaboration. Maria Todorova, presenting “Passion as a Motivator,” drew on her experience leading NEXT-DC, an independent digital creative agency working with global brands. She discussed passion, curiosity and creative courage as drivers of innovation, while examining how fear of failure and the pressure to maintain past success can limit creative exploration. Stefan Hürlemann, in “Process, Filter, Control,” examined the designer’s role in managing complexity and guiding clients through the design process. His presentation considered how designers filter information, exercise professional judgement and balance transparency with discretion, emphasising their responsibility in shaping project outcomes. Oleksandra Korchevska-Tsekhosh, presenting “Inside & Outside: Ethics and Method in a Professional Community Under the Pressure of War,” addressed the ethical challenges of design practice in wartime Ukraine. She explored how designers sustain their practice, professional standards and sense of community when working under constant uncertainty, and how the war has reshaped questions of responsibility, solidarity and visibility both within Ukraine and in dialogue with colleagues abroad. Her presentation highlighted the role of design communities in preserving collective knowledge and ethical integrity in times of crisis.

Together, the four keynotes offered candid and complementary perspectives on design decision-making, from personal motivation and creative leadership to spatial storytelling, professional methodology and ethics, and set the stage for the afternoon’s collective mapping session.

The Collective Mapping Session: Mapping Global Forces Shaping Design Decision-Making

The afternoon's centerpiece was the collective mapping session, moderated by Kyle Rath, which explored the global forces shaping contemporary design decision-making. The session opened with three presentations by Kyle Rath, Jonas Liugaila and Qin Du, examining the technological, economic and geopolitical factors influencing design practice. These presentations established a shared foundation for an interactive discussion informed by survey findings gathered from designers around the world.

The session brought participants into an intensive critical dialogue on the forces that shape design decisions across different professional and cultural contexts. Discussions addressed regional cultures, institutional structures, geopolitical conflicts, the adoption of artificial intelligence, and the ethical responsibilities of designers. Through comparisons between European, Balkan and broader global perspectives, participants examined how different environments influence design rationales, professional practices and approaches to emerging challenges.

A central focus was the relationship between technological advancement and the wider social, political and ethical contexts of design. Participants reflected on the extensive adoption of AI and computational creativity in East Asian academic and industrial practices, contrasting these developments with European approaches that navigate complex geopolitical considerations, institutional frameworks and commercial trade-offs. Rather than seeking a single universal model, the discussion highlighted the importance of understanding local conditions while recognizing the interconnected forces shaping design globally.



Preparatory Survey

Ahead of the ICoD Regional Meeting in Sofia, a preparatory survey was conducted to inform the Collective Mapping Sessions at the heart of the meeting programme. Designers, educators and design professionals from a range of countries and backgrounds were invited to reflect on how geopolitical, economic and technological disruptions are influencing design decision-making and the profession's broader responsibilities.

The survey received 52 submissions, with respondents representing a geographically diverse range of contexts across Europe, Africa, Asia, North and South America, and Australia. Respondents also represented different areas of design practice, education and research. The sample also brought together people at markedly different stages of their careers, from those relatively new to the design field to practitioners with more than 21 years of experience. This diversity, breadth of professional experience, and geographic context was particularly valuable to the survey's aim to identify not only areas of agreement, but also differences in how contemporary challenges are experienced and understood across different design contexts.

Overall, the responses revealed that designers are navigating an increasingly complex design landscape, and having to balance commercial objectives with ethical, cultural and societal responsibilities, often making difficult compromises throughout the design process. Many respondents indicated that their approaches to decision-making have evolved over time and that perhaps more than ever, their design decisions are increasingly shaped by rapid global change.



Diverse Perspectives

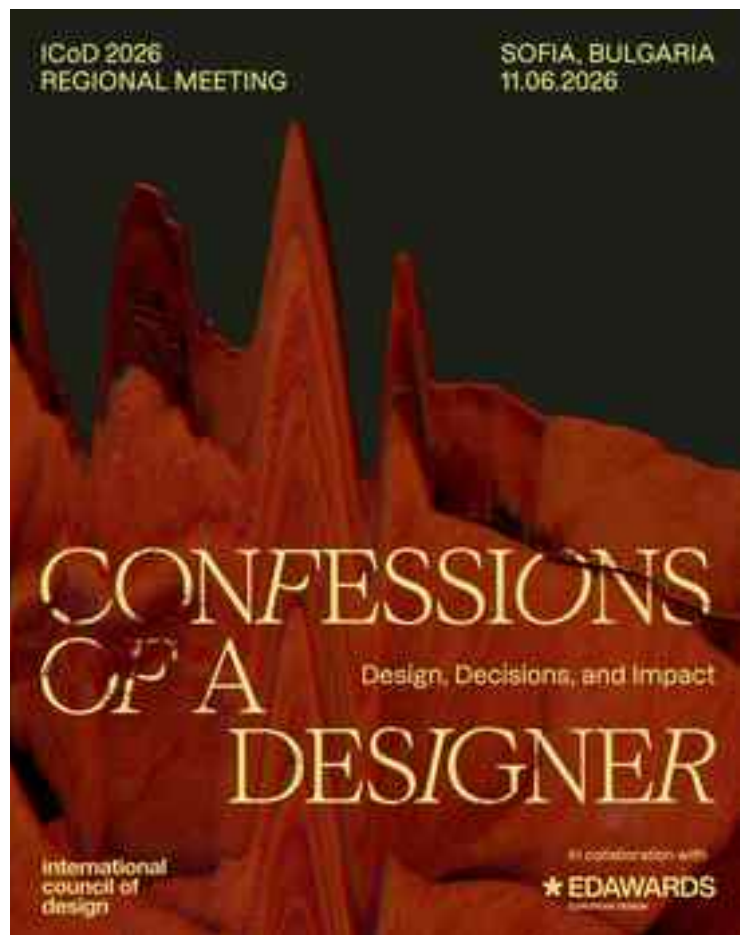
The survey findings further informed an interactive session presented at the RM, guided by Jonas Liugaila, Kyle Rath, and Qin Du. After three brief presentations, selected questions surrounding the impact of geopolitical, economic, and technological disruptions on design served as prompts for dialogue, encouraging participants to compare perspectives, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and contribute to collective discussions about the future role of design. These included:

1. Technological disruption, particularly AI, emerged as a dominant area of concern. Participants generally viewed AI as a tool with considerable potential but stressed the importance of responsible implementation, human judgement, transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the survey also highlighted the value designers place on cultural sensitivity, geopolitical interaction, environmental responsibility and the continuing role of professional expertise in guiding design decisions.
2. Furthermore, the relationship between human design intuition and AI was discussed regarding the extent to which designers should prioritise their own judgement and skills when working with emerging technologies.
3. Participants were also prompted on the environmental impact of new technologies, because it broadens the discussion of technological change beyond what AI can do to what its use might entail, and perhaps not coincidentally, survey responses indicated that environmental responsibility was an important consideration in design practice. Bringing this question into the session exposed a tension in views on the extent to which designers have influence over the ethical implications of AI use. Participants were generally split on whether the ethical use of emerging technologies (since it is so widely used

and democratised, and not limited to elite design practice) should be considered within designers' existing responsibilities towards sustainability.

4. Cultural sensitivity and representation were selected to explore the consequences of applying technologies across different social and cultural contexts. This was particularly relevant to our international ICoD audience, where assumptions embedded within technologies may not translate equally across regions and communities. Again, this revealed a variety of opposing views as to the influence designers have on whether AI can be trained to become more culturally sensitive, or if it can be censored and directed in design contexts. Many participants from Western European countries, for instance, felt that designers are not equipped (nor should it be their imperative) to alter this trajectory. By contrast, participants from Eastern Europe, and Africa in particular (countries dealing with significant issues surrounding environmental destruction, economic devastation, political instability, and warfare), were of the opinion that some form of design activism is indeed imperative in this space. For instance, the designer's role in fostering societal wellbeing spoke to the role of professional responsibility. Some described projects in which design contributed to tackling or making visible issues of sustainability, gender violence, voting processes and others. In short, they addressed consequences that design decisions can have for people beyond the immediate client or project.





Summary

The survey, alongside the open-ended discussions held during the meeting demonstrated that designers are navigating increasingly complex professional contexts shaped by political, cultural, economic and technological pressures. Beyond the Regional Meeting, these insights provide International Council of Design with an important means of remaining connected to the realities of contemporary design practice. By drawing directly on the experiences and concerns of practising designers, educators and other design professionals, the survey helps ensure that The Council's positions are grounded in the challenges designers are encountering in their everyday work, rather than developed in isolation from them. These perspectives help inform the development and ongoing review of The Council's Codes of Conduct, guide decisions about the issues and initiatives with which we engage, and help identify the concerns that should remain at the forefront of our work. In this way, the survey provides more than a snapshot of current opinion: it contributes to an ongoing dialogue between International Council of Design and the international design community we represent. Looking ahead, The Council is reviewing its Code of Conduct to help designers navigate technological disruption while maintaining core ethical principles. The next Code of Conduct, when finalised, will serve not as a rigid rulebook but as a living guide for designers seeking to harness AI's potential while preserving the human creativity and ethical responsibility that lie at the heart of professional design practice.

Apprenticeship (2011–20





acknowledgements

The Regional Meeting Balkan Europe 2026 was made possible through the generous support and collaboration of our partners: Demetrios Fakinos (European Design Awards), Adriana Andreeva and Boiana Gyaurova (Studio Komplekt), together with their teams, whose leadership and commitment enabled the Meeting to be hosted in a setting that amplified its reach and impact. We would like to give special thanks to Eva Fakinos of the European Design Festival for her work on communications, and NEXT-DC for their contributions on identity design contribution.

We extend our sincere thanks to our invited speakers and colleagues from the International Council of Design: Maria Todorova, Oleksandra Korchevska-Teshhosh, Samina Tanović, Stefan Hürlemann, Qin Du, Kyle Rath and Jonas Liugaila. Their expertise and dedication were central to shaping the programme and to the success of the Meeting. We are especially grateful to Kyle Rath and Jacques Lange for their work in developing the survey.

Above all, we thank our Members and participants, whose presence, ideas, and dialogue are what truly make these meetings meaningful.

Finally, a warm thank you to Elif Bilge, Hıdır Yüksel, Müzeyyen Yıldız from Anadolu University, and Peiwei Zhang, Weiyi Xu from Tongji University, whose volunteer assistance was invaluable in organising the event.

appendices

agenda

09:00–09:30 REGISTRATION

09:30 OPENING OF THE MEETING

09:30 – 09:40

Welcome & Context Setting

Prof. Melike Taşcıoğlu Vaughan

President (2024-2026)

International Council of Design TÜRKİYE

09:40 – 10:00

Keynote 1: “Between Context and Realities: Designing Narrative Space”

Samina Tanovic

President of ULUPUBiH (Association of Fine Artists of Applied Arts and Designers) BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

10:05 – 10:25

Keynote 2: “Passion as a motivator”

Maria Todorova

NEXTDC BULGARIA

10:30 – 10:50 COFFEE BREAK

10:50 – 11:15

Keynote 3: “Process, Filter, Control”

Stefan Hürlemann

SkalaDesign SWITZERLAND

11:20 – 11:45

Keynote 4: “Inside & Outside: Ethics and Method in a Professional Community Under the Pressure of War”

Olexandra Korchevska-Tsekhosh

Design Borsch UKRAINE

12:00–13:30 LUNCH BREAK

13.30–16.30

Afternoon — Decisions in Real-Time: Mapping Discussions on Disruptions that Affect Design Today

Kyle Rath

Non-Executive Board Member (2024-2026)

International Council of Design SOUTH AFRICA

Qin Du

Executive Board Member (2024-2026) International Council of Design CHINA

Jonas Liugaila

Treasurer (2024-2026) International Council of Design

LITHUANIA

16.45–17.00

Conclusion

Prof. Melike Taşcıoğlu Vaughan

17.00 END OF THE MEETING

18.00 EUROPEAN DESIGN FESTIVAL EVENTS

participants list

ICoD 2024-2026 Board

- Melike Taşcıoğlu Vaughan, ICoD President 2024–2026 TÜRKİYE
- Jonas Liugaila, ICoD Treasurer 2024–2026 LITHUANIA
- Qin Du, ICoD Board Member 2024–2026 CHINA
- Kyle Rath, ICoD Non-Executive Board Member 2024–2026 SOUTH AFRICA

Invited Speakers

- Maria Todorova, NextDC BULGARIA
- Oleksandra Korchevska-Teshhosh, Designer and Lecturer UKRAINE
- Samina Tanović, ULUPUBIH BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
- Stefan Hürlemann, Swiss Graphic Designers (SGD) SWITZERLAND

Observers and Regional Meeting Attendees

- Adriana Andreeva, Studio Komplekt BULGARIA
- Antonia Samokovska, New Bulgarian University (NBU) BULGARIA
- Ayça Uygungöz, Anadolu University TÜRKİYE
- Berkem Bulut, Anadolu University TÜRKİYE
- Boiana Gyaurova, Studio Komplekt BULGARIA
- Constantine Popov, Fontfabric BULGARIA
- Diana Nedelcheva, BULGARIA
- Dilek Erdoğan Aydın, Anadolu University TÜRKİYE
- Evgeniya Tsankova, New Bulgarian University (NBU) BULGARIA
- Gabriela Slavcheva, New Bulgarian University (NBU) BULGARIA
- Jurga Želvytė, Lithuanian Design Association (LDA) LITHUANIA
- Kaya Sodeva, Designer BULGARIA
- Mim Yordanova, minyagency BULGARIA
- Nikol Petkova, Designer BULGARIA
- Radina Doneva, Bulgarian Design Council BULGARIA
- Simona Minkova, BULGARIA
- Stefan Vladimirov, Question Base BULGARIA
- Stefi Peykova Krishnan, Bulgarian Design Council BULGARIA
- Tsvetoslava Ploshtakova, New Bulgarian University (NBU) BULGARIA
- Victoria Guberska-Sleiman, Software Group BULGARIA
- Zeynep Ezgi Arda, GMK / Anadolu University TÜRKİYE

Volunteer Organisation Team

- Elif Bilge, Anadolu University TÜRKİYE
- Hıdır Yüksel, GMK / Anadolu University TÜRKİYE
- Müzeyyen Yıldız, GMK / Anadolu University TÜRKİYE
- Peiwei Zhang, Tongji University CHINA
- Weiye Xu, Tongji University CHINA

Published by:

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