The Future of Europe

Nicole Colin
Gabriel Horaţiu Decuble *Editors*

Reimagining European Cultural Diplomacy

Historical Legacies and Future Prospects of East-West Relations

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Nicole Colin · Gabriel Horaţiu Decuble
Editors

Reimagining European Cultural Diplomacy

Historical Legacies and Future Prospects of East-West Relations

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We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the European Union, whose funding made both the conference and the present publication possible. The volume forms an integral part of the project's efforts to disseminate its research findings and to foster dialogue beyond disciplinary and institutional boundaries. By bringing historical perspectives into conversation with approaches from cultural studies, media studies, and political science, it seeks to contribute to broader reflections on cultural diplomacy, social cohesion, and the evolving processes of European integration.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the University of Bucharest and the Goethe-Institut Bucharest for their committed partnership in organizing the conference. Their hospitality and professionalism created an inspiring setting for scholarly exchange and intellectual collaboration.

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Introduction

Nicole Colin and Gabriel Horaţiu Decuble

The present volume brings together the contributions presented at a conference held in Bucharest in November 2025 as part of the NARDIV project, entitled *United in Narrative Diversity? Cultural (Ex-)Change and Mutual Perceptions in Eastern and Western Europe at the Threshold of the Digital Age* (2023–2026). Funded by the European Union in connection with the Horizon Europe programme, the project explores the interactions between cultural exchange, mutual perceptions, and the interrelated processes of political transformation in Eastern and Western Europe.[1] NARDIV's aim is to comparatively analyse narratives of diversity, identity, and belonging in Eastern and Western Europe by bringing together historical perspectives with approaches from cultural studies, media studies, and political science, complemented by practice-oriented insights. The

[1] The NARDIV consortium brings together universities, cultural institutions, think tanks, and civil society actors from six European countries. Its academic partners include Aix-Marseille Université (coordinating institution), the University of Bucharest, the University of Wrocław, the University of Szczecin, the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, the University of Amsterdam, and the Germany Institute Amsterdam. The network is complemented by cultural policy institutions such as the Goethe-Institut, the Institut français de Roumanie, the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR), and European policy think tanks such as GLOBSEC and the Clingendael Institute. Additional partner organisations contribute expertise in the fields of memory culture, European dialogue, and cultural policy, see nardiv.eu.

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project uses this interdisciplinary framework to underscore the significance of such narratives for social cohesion and the ongoing processes of European integration.

A key objective is to intensify both scholarly and practical engagement with cultural diplomacy, while also identifying how civil society actors could more actively be involved in a field often perceived as abstract or institutionally distant. To this end, the project approaches cultural diplomacy not merely as an instrument of soft power, but as a complex arena in which historical experiences, cultural exchanges, and political transformations intersect. Particular attention is paid to the entanglements between Eastern and Western Europe, considered in both their historical depth and contemporary complexity. The watershed moment of 1989–1991 serves as an important point of reference in this regard, alongside longer-term processes of exchange and transformation stretching back to the Cold War period.

The NARDIV project was conceived and carried out during a period of profound political upheaval. From the very beginning, the reflections of participating scholars and cultural practitioners were shaped by far-reaching geopolitical shifts and a gradual erosion of normative frameworks, developments that significantly influenced both research topics and the course of collaborative work. When the initial conceptual work began in 2021, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had yet to come. The project proposal was submitted in April 2022, when the military escalation had just begun, and its long-term consequences difficult to foresee. Today, after several years of war, a durable peace remains elusive. Even a possible cessation of hostilities would, in all likelihood, not guarantee lasting stability, but rather mark the transition to a fragile post-war order.

In March 2022, the German Federal Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, used the term *Zeitenwende* (turn of an era), which quickly became shorthand for the profound rupture with the certainties that had shaped the post-Cold War order (Anonym, 2022). The notion referred not only to a reorientation of security policy, but also to the end of an era that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall. This era was characterised by increasing political, economic, and cultural rapprochement between Western and Eastern Europe—Russia included—and even fostered hopes for the "end of history."

In his influential thesis, Francis Fukuyama interpreted the collapse of the Soviet Union not merely as the victory of liberalism in the form of democracy and the market economy, but—drawing on Hegelian and some Marxist conceptions of historical development—as signalling the end of systemic rivalry and struggles for recognition as the driving forces of history (Fukuyama, 1992, 266–269). From today's perspective, this widely-held Western notion of a "post-historical" era appears almost counterfactual. It was rarely shared in the states of Central and Eastern Europe, whose political cultures and historical experiences were profoundly shaped by the trauma of Soviet domination. By contrast, in large parts of Western Europe—and Germany in particular—Russia's war of aggression was widely perceived as a fundamental shock to what had been seen as a stable and durable European peace order (Fukuyama, 1992, 288).

The security-related and societal uncertainties resulting from these developments were further intensified by the war in the Middle East following Hamas's

attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. However, the scale of disruption caused by these wars pales in comparison to the continuing shocks that have gripped global politics since Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025. Transatlantic relations entered a crisis of unprecedented magnitude, from which they will most likely never fully recover. While shifts in American security and defence policy had been anticipated, few observers expected such open confrontation with long-standing allies. This confrontation has manifested itself economically, through drastic punitive tariffs; politically, via the demonstrative support for far-right parties in Europe; and in foreign policy, by way of rhetoric that openly questions the values-based community long invoked in transatlantic discourse, grounded in principles such as freedom of expression, human dignity, human rights, diversity, and the protection of minorities (Trump, 2025a, 2025b; U.S. DOE, 2025). The renewed withdrawal of the United States from key international climate agreements, the drastic reduction of development policy programmes, and the termination of support for numerous United Nations organisations represent additional ruptures (CFR, 2025; Trump, 2025c, 2025d). These developments reached a provisional climax in President Trump's announcement of the possible acquisition of Greenland. In January 2026, he further declared that punitive tariffs would be imposed on imports from several European states—including Germany, France, and the Nordic NATO partners—should no agreement be reached on this matter (EP, 2026). After the European Union issued a united response and threatened countermeasures of its own, Trump temporarily softened his position. However, during his appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2026, he outlined his geopolitical vision for the United States, emphasising the strategic importance of Greenland within this framework. While he ruled out the use of military force, he nevertheless expressed fundamental doubts about the reliability of European partners, and voiced extensive criticism of NATO.

The so-called "Greenland dispute" provides further evidence of the fundamental foreign policy reorientation promoted by the current U.S. administration. International politics is no longer primarily conceived as a normatively framed multilateral order, but increasingly an arena of short-term, interest-driven transactions. This shift had already become apparent in the confrontational speech delivered by U.S. Vice President JD Vance at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, in which he sharply criticised the domestic and foreign policies of European states, and argued that internal challenges—such as irregular migration or perceived restrictions on freedom of expression—constituted the greatest threat to Europe's future. This episode reflects the changing dynamics within the transatlantic relationship[2]: in place of a rules-based international order grounded in multilateral institutions and normative commitments, there is an increasing shift towards situational transactions, assertive power politics, and the short-term maximisation of interests. Political science analyses—including research by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—emphasise that this

[2] See, in this context, the new U.S. National Security Strategy (The White House, 2025).

dynamic affects not only the strategies of individual states, but also weakens the structural framework of international cooperation (CE, 2026). The foundations of long-term institutional commitment are being eroded, and increasingly replaced by a logic of situational economic "deals" and demonstrative projections of power (CSIS, 2025; ECFR, 2026; FPRI, 2025; ISS, 2026).

The debate on Europe's strategic autonomy rekindled by these recent developments should not, however, be confined to considerations of security or trade policy. Insofar as the rupture also calls into question the cultural values and moral basis of the European project, any reflection on possible new strategies failing to account for cultural dimensions and ethical commitments risks causing lasting damage to the European integration process (EU, 2016). A courageous defence of shared values—particularly with regard to promoting diversity, equality, and intercultural dialogue—holds greater promise of strengthening cooperation and reducing the persistent asymmetries within Europe, especially between West and East. As noted above, many Central and Eastern European states possess, by virtue of their historical experiences, a particularly acute sensitivity to authoritarian expansion and imperial continuities, one that has proven especially valuable under present circumstances. Beyond economic and defence policy strategies, a common European cultural foreign policy possesses considerable potential to stabilise integration processes over the long term, expand spaces of cooperation, and counter the fragmentation of political and societal narratives within and beyond Europe.

In this sense, the current reconfiguration of international relations could be approached as an opportunity to recalibrate patterns of perception and interpretation within Europe itself, not least through a strategic reorientation of European cultural policy. Often underestimated as a pillar of European politics, cultural policy can substantially support political and economic initiatives. Such a reorientation, however, presupposes that cultural diplomacy is no longer exclusively seen as an auxiliary of national foreign policy, but is instead institutionally anchored as an autonomous element of European domestic and external policy. This would require historically evolved national initiatives—often characterised by diverse institutional structures—to be integrated within a more coherent overarching strategy.

The present crisis emphasises the need for Europe to defend existing values and normative frameworks, and offers an opportunity to reflect more consciously on the cultural foundations of integration—and to reshape them where necessary. Such a reorientation might, for example, strengthen links between European cultures of remembrance, reduce internal asymmetries, and reinforce cultural infrastructures in both Eastern and Western Europe, doing so on equal footing. It could also involve expanding transnational programmes for education, cultural cooperation, and exchange, with a view to fostering shared narratives of European resilience and enhancing Europe's capacity for action and influence.

Against this backdrop, the reflections on a possible reorientation of European cultural foreign policy announced in this volume's title are particularly timely.

While the long-term consequences of the current geopolitical upheavals remain difficult to assess with any certainty—premature prognoses would be ill-advised—it would nevertheless be counterproductive to leave these profound transformations unaddressed in a volume explicitly concerned with the strategic development of European cultural diplomacy. Given the rapid pace of events and the limited reliability of short-term political predictions, we have deliberately foregrounded thematic areas fostering longer-term perspectives from historical and cultural-analytical viewpoints, all while bringing together several of the findings identified by the NARDIV project.

Cultural diplomacy is understood here as a mediating arena in which politics, history, literature, the arts, media, and forms of social communication intersect. It constitutes an interface between state institutions and civil society—between cultures of remembrance and visions of the future—and acquires renewed strategic significance in a context marked by increasing geopolitical polarisation and resurgent nationalist tendencies. As a research field, cultural diplomacy also opens up new transdisciplinary perspectives, enabling scholars to comparatively examine processes of cultural belonging, collective memory, and symbolic representation, while productively linking theory and practice. At the same time, different emphases become visible within Europe. While some states are developing models of feminist cultural foreign policy, others continue to rely more strongly on traditional forms of representational cultural outreach. Institutions such as the Goethe-Institut, the Institut français, the Polish Institute, and the Romanian Cultural Institute can be seen as laboratories for cultural diplomacy, in which longer-term trends become visible, and the effectiveness of cultural strategies can be empirically assessed. However, this potential has only been partially explored thus far.

By comparatively examining cultural diversity, historical experience, and processes of social transformation in different European contexts—particularly with regard to the East–West constellation—the contributions assembled in this volume can, in the spirit of NARDIV, underscore existing asymmetries of perception, and develop new forms of dialogue. In times of accelerated political change, such a perspective may help to understand differences not as dividing lines, but rather as productive resources for European mutual understanding. As geopolitical uncertainties mount and the international order grows less stable, the deliberate bringing together of diverse historical experiences and cultural perspectives can serve as a foundation for renewed European cultural policy. To this end, this volume pursues not just analytical description, but also develops conceptual and practical spaces in which East and West, centre and periphery, majority societies and minorities can jointly shape the future of European cooperation.

With this in mind, the choice of venue for the final academic conference was by no means accidental. Bucharest is an exemplar of the complex entanglements between European periphery and centre, between historical experience and contemporary reorientation. The city embodies those transitional spaces in which European identity is more than an abstract notion, emerging from the tension between different memories, narratives, and visions of the future. Bucharest

may therefore be understood as a symbolic site of European self-reflection: a place where historical ruptures, processes of transformation, and new orientations become simultaneously visible.

The contributions to this volume adopt these perspectives in a variety of ways. Some discuss conceptual models for more closely coordinated European cultural policy, analyse institutional structures and funding mechanisms, and examine the cooperation between state institutions and private initiatives. Others focus on historical case studies of cultural exchange between East and West, the role of minorities, and the significance of trilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation. Feminist and postcolonial approaches to cultural diplomacy are critically discussed, strategies of nation branding are reassessed, and the implications of digital media for processes of cultural mediation are explored.

Particular attention is also devoted to how cultural diplomacy can be more effectively integrated into academic training and professional practice: what competencies are required of actors operating in this field, and how might cooperation between universities, cultural institutions, media organisations, and artistic practice be organised in sustainable ways? The volume also turns its attention to countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, as well as other candidate states for accession to the European Union, in order to explore how intensified cultural exchange might help stabilise European neighbourhood relations.

The volume's structure follows a thematic structure interweaving different dimensions of cultural diplomacy, from its historical foundations and institutional frameworks to questions of memory, power, and social participation, along with national practices and current transformations in the field.

Part I—Historical Foundations and Institutional Frameworks of East–West Cultural Diplomacy establishes the volume's historical and conceptual foundations. The contributions situate cultural diplomacy within the context of European East–West relations, and analyse its institutional and political frameworks. Historical perspectives on processes of cultural exchange demonstrate how cultural cooperation has been closely intertwined with geopolitical constellations of power, and how cultural policy has simultaneously functioned as an instrument of political influence and a space of limited dialogue. At the same time, contemporary challenges facing European cultural policy come into view, including debates on digital "culture wars," strategic communication, and the role of the European Neighbourhood Policy within a changing geopolitical landscape. Taken together, the contributions show that cultural diplomacy, while encompassing historically evolved institutions and practices, is a field that is continually renegotiated within contemporary political conflicts. They also reflect on the tension between dialogical forms of cultural mediation and strategies of nation branding, thereby touching upon fundamental normative questions of European cultural foreign policy.

Part II—Memory, Power, and Inclusion: Postcolonial, Gendered, and Minority Perspectives expands this institutional perspective by introducing critical approaches to memory, power, and social participation. The contributions analyse cultural diplomacy as a field in which historical experiences—such as colonial

legacies or socialist international relations—continue to shape political and cultural meanings. Postcolonial and migration-oriented perspectives open up new approaches to European cultural policy, and challenge established narratives of cultural representation. At the same time, the role of minorities as active agents of cultural diplomacy is brought to the fore. Case studies on Roma integration, cross-border minority regions, or Romanian–German migration and knowledge networks illustrate how cultural mediation is often carried out by actors operating beyond the framework of state institutions. Contributions addressing censorship, surveillance, and academic mobility further demonstrate that cultural exchange has historically unfolded amid tensions between cooperation, control, and political instrumentalisation. Overall, this section presents cultural diplomacy as a space marked by asymmetric power relations as well as an arena of social negotiation.

Part III—Cultural Diplomacy in Transformation: Media, Affects, and Emerging Actors traces the contemporary transformations of cultural diplomacy. The contributions in this section examine new forms of cultural mediation at the intersection of media staging, affective attachment, and technological innovation. Musical mega-events, pedagogical television formats, and artistic practices are analysed as forms of public diplomacy that shape cultural narratives about national and European identities. Several contributions address new symbolic and material expressions of cultural diplomacy, such as the reinterpretation of war artefacts as diplomatic objects in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Digital knowledge systems and artificial intelligence open up further avenues for cultural mediation, while affective attachments to Europe are discussed as an emotional dimension of cultural integration. Taken together, the contributions illustrate that cultural diplomacy is increasingly a hybrid field in which cultural production, political communication, media technologies, and social emotions are closely intertwined.

With **Part IV—National and Regional Practices: Comparative Perspectives on Cultural Diplomacy**, the focus shifts to concrete national and regional practices of cultural diplomacy. The contributions examine bilateral cultural relations, institutional models of cultural foreign policy, and long-term networks of intellectual and artistic cooperation. Historical case studies on Franco–Romanian cultural relations, cultural transformations in the context of the political upheavals of 1989–1991, and transnational meeting places of French and Russian intellectuals demonstrate how cultural diplomacy has generated both institutional continuities and new forms of cooperation over extended periods. Other contributions explore the role of non-state actors, literary translation networks, or academic institutions as mediating agents of cultural diplomacy. Through these comparative perspectives, it becomes clear that European cultural foreign policy does not constitute a uniform practice, but is shaped by diverse historical experiences, institutional traditions, and geopolitical positions.

The contributions assembled in this volume do not propose a single blueprint, but instead offer a multifaceted panorama of possible pathways through which cultural diplomacy can help stabilise and democratise Europe, and enhance its long-term resilience. They demonstrate that cultural diplomacy should not be

understood merely as an instrument of symbolic representation, but as a strategic space in which historical experience, social transformation, and political agency intersect.

With the general context outlined above firmly in mind, the texts presented here should not simply be seen as the outcome of an academic conference, or as a collection of individual analyses. Together they document a moment in which Europe is compelled to reposition itself politically, socially, and culturally; they represent a snapshot of intellectual work in policy-relevant fields under conditions of profound uncertainty. At a time when the foundations of the international order appear to be shifting, the contributions may be read as building blocks within a broader dialogue on the cultural preconditions of European agency. They reflect the effort to develop forms of orientational knowledge without yielding to premature certainties, and ultimately demonstrate that cultural understanding constitutes a crucial factor of political resilience.

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Historical Foundations and Institutional Frameworks of East-West Cultural Diplomacy

Approaching Cold War Cultural Diplomacy 'at Work.' Analytical Perspectives on East-West Scientific Exchanges, Drawing on a French-Based Area Studies Program

Ioana Popa

1 Introduction

Research on Cold War cultural diplomacy may at times be restricted to analyses of political discourse and statements of intent along with broad, abstract accounts of its institutional framework and guiding principles, due to methodological choices or limitations in available sources. The analyses I have conducted to date (Popa, 2016; 2017), and the approach advocated here, seek to move away from this perspective by examining the actors involved, the institutional and geographical contexts in which these diplomatic initiatives take shape, the constituent elements of these initiatives, and the practices that underpin their implementation. This approach also seeks to highlight the importance of a reflexive dimension, regarding theoretical and methodological options, and the difficulties that arise when conducting research on such a topic as a researcher, rather than as an expert tasked with evaluating the relevance of public policy and its results. Furthermore, this topic has now become a historical subject, as the actors are no longer alive, and it can only be documented from archival sources. I therefore situate this study within a disciplinary perspective grounded in historical sociology.

The insights presented here are broadly informed by a series of empirical studies I conducted, examining a range of mechanisms through which cultural diplomacy was enacted during the Cold War, directly or indirectly (Popa, 2010; Popa, 2011; Popa, 2015). These mechanisms include the international circulation

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of books, translation, and forms of scientific exchange, such as awarding scholarships and organising conferences and research missions. However, I draw here on a study of a Parisian academic institution—the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (hereafter the EPHE),[1] and on its East-West programs developed within its Area Studies Division, to formulate a number of research questions that address broader methodological issues. In approaching Cold War cultural diplomacy 'at work,' this study highlights several complementary angles of analysis, each illuminating different aspects of these exchanges. One perspective focuses on the hybrid state-private logics shaping cultural diplomacy; it shows how state priorities, public or private institutional imperatives, as well as individual or organisational interests intersect, interact, and sometimes collide. Another perspective highlights the trajectories and characteristics of key actors, who initiate, implement, or benefit from scientific exchanges in this context; it underlines the importance of examining how these individuals navigate different organisations, reconcile—or fail to reconcile—professional and political commitments, and negotiate the sometimes competing demands of transnational scientific collaboration and national constraints, thereby contributing to the shaping of these exchanges. Building on these perspectives, a further one considers the content and scientific and political implications of the exchange programs themselves; it sheds light on how these programs' themes, disciplinary focus, and outputs, in practice, can be politically charged, contested, or ambiguous. These analytical angles are not exhaustive—and this article is not conceived as a comprehensive survey of research outcomes; but together, they help sensitise the reader to the relevance, significance, and interconnections of multiple dimensions of Cold War scientific exchanges, offering a lens to appreciate both their complexity and their stakes.

2 The Interplay of Public and Private Logics in Cold War Cultural Diplomacy

Recounting a few key points concerning the creation of the EPHE Sixth Section in 1947 (Gemelli, 1990; Mazon, 1988, 277–356; Tournès, 2011, 317–331) and the particular stage of its institutional development it had reached by the mid-1950s—which is the focus of this analysis—provides a basis for formulating a first series of key questions. How essential is government action in cultural and scientific diplomacy, and is it sufficient? Are there other vantage points besides those of foreign ministries—and their archives, which nonetheless remain indispensable—that allow us to explore these dynamics? Can we, therefore, without completely

[1] This article is mainly based on the institutional archives of the EPHE sixth Section—Heller's (102EHE) and Velay's files (101EHE) (Service des archives, EHESS), Le Goff's files (AN-CAC)–, Sciences Po (Chapsal's files 2SP, Touchard's files), the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMAE), the Rockefeller and Ford foundations (Rockefeller Archives Center/RAC, Sleepy Hollow, New York) and personal collections archives of Braudel (MS8510, Institut de France), Francastel (INHA), Laloy (privately held).

diluting it, broaden the concept of "cultural diplomacy" to include the actions of other actors, particularly private ones, as much of the scholarly literature has done in recent decades (Depkat, 2004; Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010; Gillabert & Milani 2017)? Is the level at which an academic institution implements international scientific exchanges relevant? Does it allow us to observe—and, if necessary, "capture"—other scales and actors of cultural diplomacy?

This is especially the case when such an institution channels investments from one or several states, as well as from private actors such as philanthropic foundations, as illustrated by the institution I have chosen to study. The EPHE Sixth Section was an academic institution dedicated to the social and economic sciences, founded by historians closely associated with the journal Annales (Review, 1978; Burguière, 2006). Lucien Febvre was its first president, assisted by Fernand Braudel (who took over in 1956). While it was primarily funded by the French Ministry of National Education, its establishment in 1947 also benefited from a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. This American funding gave it an immediate special symbolic status in the context of the early Cold War, as well as opportunities to engage with international research practices and scientific networks, which were primarily transatlantic but not exclusively confined to this region. The same applied to one of its new divisions, the Area Studies Division, established in 1955 and dedicated to the study of foreign areas defined in various ways. These areas included Russia and the so-called Slavic countries, and it was within this framework that the East-West academic exchanges central to this study were launched. Specific documentation and study centres within this Division focused on these areas, drawing in particular on scientific exchanges supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such an academic institution therefore operates at what can be called a meso-level. On the one hand, it possesses a certain degree of autonomy in defining a scientific policy of its own; on the other hand, it is embedded within broader frameworks of cultural diplomacy and, in some cases, even subordinated to political and financial dynamics operating at scales beyond its own, thereby limiting its capacity for international action.

Before the Area Studies Division became a stable and "legible" institution as an object of study, researchers had to contend with its organisational fluctuations, as reflected in sometimes ambiguous or even contradictory archival records, such as organisational charts. Such fluctuations are undoubtedly familiar to researchers studying institutions in the making and attentive to their processual dimension. What is more original, however, is that academic exchanges played a significant role from the very beginning in shaping the Area Studies Division as it was being institutionally formed. This observation can be summarised by noting that, in this case, the institutionalisation and internationalisation of knowledge are interrelated and even mutually reinforcing processes (Popa, 2016, 125–150). For example, the creation of a Centre for Polish History and Civilisation Studies under the Sixth Section was stipulated in the intergovernmental cultural cooperation agreements between France and Poland in 1958, and would undoubtedly not have been possible without this framework, established by the cultural diplomacy of both

countries, together with the resources they provided. These agreements also provided for scholarships to be awarded and for symposiums to be organised, which sometimes led to joint publications and contributed to strengthening the Division's institutional and intellectual development. A further dynamic of international transfer and exchange that supports the institutional development of the Sixth Section takes a transatlantic direction, as evidenced by the Rockefeller Foundation's funding. These grants are awarded in the mid-1950s as part of the foundation's general policy to develop the social sciences in Europe and, in particular, a field known in the United States as area studies (Szanton, 2004). They enable the Sixth Section to invite American or other foreign specialists to teach courses, thereby strengthening its curriculum. They also funded research missions across the Atlantic for teaching staff recruited to the Sixth Section with French National Education funding. It is therefore evident that, in both these geographical dimensions—East/West and transatlantic—it would be artificial to compartmentalise institutional development and academic exchanges, treating them as entirely separate issues or empirical levels impervious to one another.

Furthermore, "following the 'money" (Engerman, 2009, 398)—analytically speaking—is not an anecdotal or self-contained issue, but it rather provides an empirical 'thread' that enables to identify and locate the institutions that are responsible for deciding on key elements of the Sixth Section's scientific policy and to evaluate some of its results. This approach thus helps reveal the distinct and sometimes contradictory rationales that the institution must navigate in order to carry out its projects. Incidentally, the bureaucracy surrounding these decisions has the collateral advantage of generating sources—reports, minutes, nominal lists, budgets—which, despite their administrative and thus dry nature, provide valuable material for research. Nevertheless, it is important to decode the specific rhetoric of these documents, which is designed to convince funders of the validity of financial requests or of the results achieved. Such rhetoric can lead to a tendency to overstate the originality of proposed projects, or even result in the disqualification of competitors.

Moreover, the Area Studies Division itself should not be reified, that is, treated as a monolithic entity or a homogeneous bloc. The American funding mentioned above benefits, in fact, the various centres in contrasting ways, indicating that differentiated logics operate even within the Area Studies Division. Conversely, the interweaving of funding sources from different origins also occurs, becoming even more pronounced when it comes to implementing exchange programs with Eastern European countries. These dynamics were initiated within the framework of intergovernmental cooperation agreements or conventions signed with certain socialist countries beginning in the second half of the 1950s. Consequently, the foreign ministries of the countries involved played a central role in both funding and organising these exchange programs. However, additional sources of funding were also involved, particularly in the case of the first—and most substantial—of these agreements: namely the one with Poland, as already mentioned. This initiative included financial support from an international organisation, UNESCO, as well as from the Ford Foundation, and—more sporadically and discreetly—even

from the Congress for Cultural Freedom (Coleman, 1989; Grémion, 1995; Warner, 1995; Stonor Saunders, 1999; Scott-Smith, 2002), a private transnational intellectual organisation established in 1950 to promote so-called "anti-totalitarianism." The Congress for Cultural Freedom was itself partially funded by the Ford Foundation and, covertly, by the CIA. It also operated through the Foundation for European Intellectual Cooperation (Beylin, 1996; Grémion, 1995, 474–509; Guilhot, 2006; Jílek, 2009; Popa, 2010, 435–451; Popa, 2011) whose staff were also in contact with the EPHE Sixth Section and assisted in the implementations of its Polish exchanges (Popa, 2016; 2017). These organisations were among the central non-state actors in the anti-communist struggle and were connected to—or even functioned as vehicles for—the public diplomacy of the U.S. government.

Thus, prominent Polish scientific figures, such as historians Aleksander Gieysztor and Witold Kula—who played a key role in implementing academic exchanges between the EPHE Sixth Section and the Polish Academy of Sciences—were invited to colloquia organised under intergovernmental frameworks in France. Their participation, however, was made possible through an indirect sponsorship by the Congress for Cultural Freedom,[2] arranged without their knowledge. The Congress for Cultural Freedom also financed a scholarship for Leszek Kołakowski[3] for example, one of Poland's leading philosophers, who had adopted reformist positions in the mid-1950s. Kołakowski delivered lectures at the EPHE Sixth Section on the interpretation of mysticism in the context of dialectical materialism. Additionally, with Congress for Cultural Freedom support, the EPHE's Sixth Section planned to undertake a French translation of his book on Spinoza.[4]

While implementing its own scientific policy, the Sixth Section thus managed to position itself at the intersection of two Western cultural diplomacies—French and American—reflecting the public-private divide. At the same time, it aligned its scientific projects with the cultural diplomacy efforts of socialist countries (Pasztor, 2003; Pleskot, 2007). Yet, as we have also noted, a certain porosity underlies this analytical public-private distinction. It is precisely for this reason that the term "state-private networks" (Lucas, 2002; Ninkovitch, 1981) has been proposed in the existing historiography to describe the more or less discreet collaboration between governmental agencies (including intelligence services), state-centred forms of action, and state interests on the one hand, and various private organisations—among them philanthropic foundations—on the other. Together, these actors worked to wage—and win—the cultural Cold War led by the United States. Nevertheless, it would be unwarranted to underestimate the role of the French state and its cultural diplomacy in the East-West exchange dynamics established within the Sixth Section, and more broadly. While a recent shift in research has rightly highlighted the impact of American philanthropic foundations on European social sciences (and, regarding the EPHE Sixth Section, particularly the Rockefeller

[2] C. Heller to L. Velay, 2 April 1960, 101EHE.
[3] M. Bieber to C. Heller, 7 May 1958, 102EHE.
[4] Budget 1961, 102EHE.

Foundation (Gemelli, 1990, 277–356; Kwaschik, 2016; Mazon, 1988; Popa, 2016; Tournès, 2011, 317–331), this focus has sometimes led to a one-sided emphasis in contemporary historiography on the role of these actors and on the transatlantic dimension of academic cooperation within this French academic institution. However, it is equally important to take into account the financial, logistical, and political support that the Sixth Section, its exchanges with Eastern Europe, and the studies on this geopolitical area also received from the French state and its cultural diplomacy (Popa, 2025).

3 The Sociology of Individual Trajectories: A Key Level of Analysis

A sociology of professional and social trajectories of the individual actors involved in—and benefiting from—East-West exchange programs provides an additional layer of analysis. This approach enables a more in-depth investigation of the articulations between state and private cultural diplomacies, and, more broadly, of the structural conditions that underpin the implementation of such programs. Furthermore, it prompts questions about the collusions, alliances, rivalries, and divergences between diplomatic and academic actors when they come to designing both exchange programs and studies programs on foreign regions. This sociology of trajectories not only illuminates the micro-dynamics of cultural diplomacy but also uncovers the underlying power relations that shape such programs. Various arrangements of actors contribute to these objectives and can be sociologically explored. These dynamics prompt the leaders of the EPHE Sixth Section to interact with representatives from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officers from American philanthropic foundations, along with the academics who advise them or collaborate on projects with the French institution, as well as with East European partners, including academics and members of the Academies of Sciences.

This exploration makes it possible to identify, for example, French diplomats who, drawing on their expertise in foreign regions, temporarily or permanently join the academic world, and, conversely, academics who engage with the French cultural diplomacy apparatus on a temporary basis. Together, they contribute to both the adoption and the effective implementation of cultural agreements with Eastern countries. Among those in the first category are, for instance, François de Liencourt, Deputy Director for Eastern Europe within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1957 onward; Basile Kerblay, a research officer in the same sub-directorate; and, to some extent, Jean Laloy, Director for Europe since 1956. All of them graduated from the *École Libre des Sciences Politiques* and were proficient in Russian. As diplomats, F. de Liencourt and J. Laloy had stayed in the USSR: the former was posted at the French Embassy in Moscow from 1954 to 1957, and the latter did so in 1955. After their return to France, they all pursued academic careers to varying degrees, thereby converting this diplomatic experience into academic capital, which led them to intersect with, or even join, the EPHE Sixth Section's Russian program. For instance, B. Kerblay began teaching there in 1956 and was

later appointed *directeur d'études* (the equivalent of a full professorship). Introduced by the latter, F. de Liencourt also became a *chargé de cours* and a member of the board of the Center for Studies on the USSR and Slavic Countries within the Sixth Section, as well as a member of the editorial committee of its journal, the *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*. J. Laloy was also considered for teaching a course on the USSR's foreign policy. However, his strongly anti-communist positions, deemed too pronounced, reportedly worked against him, as the leaders of the EPHE Sixth Section feared they might undermine the neutral image they sought for the Russian program.[5] Nevertheless, Laloy went on to teach regularly from the mid-1950s at another academic institution, the *Institut d'Études Politiques*.

The second category, which refers to scholars temporarily engaged in cultural diplomacy, includes, for example, Pierre Francastel, Gilbert Dagron and Gérard Abensour. Significantly, the latter two were born in very close years (1932 and 1933, respectively), and were both alumni of the *École Normale Supérieure* (admitted in 1953 and 1954). Like many in this profile of French academic excellence, they were agrégés—Degron[6] in classical literature and Abensour in Russian—, a qualification and academic path that initially led them to teach in secondary schools. However, it also enabled them to be temporarily assigned to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where they notably served as cultural attachés at the French Embassy in the USSR—Dagron from 1962 to 1964, and Abensour from 1966 to 1971. The latter had also benefited from the launch of the first academic exchanges between France and the USSR during the Thaw, spending the 1956–1957 academic year at Moscow State University. These diplomatic career episodes were followed by a return to academia: Dagron as a specialist in history and Byzantine studies, first at the Sorbonne, then at the University of Lyon, and finally at the *Collège de France*; Abensour at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations). Both scholars also collaborated temporarily with the EPHE Sixth Section and its Area Studies Division, whether in relation to teaching, in their involvement with the *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, or as interlocutors on academic exchange issues during their postings in Moscow. Pierre Francastel, for his part, an art historian, was appointed *directeur d'études* at the EPHE Sixth Section. Born in 1900, he was older than his colleagues, and his direct knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe—particularly, in this case, Poland—can be traced back to the interwar period. In the early 1930s, Francastel was appointed Deputy Director of the French Institute in Warsaw—an institution of French cultural diplomacy—where he engaged with Polish academic and intellectual circles of the time, particularly art historians, including those from other countries in the region. Appointed to the University of Strasbourg in 1936, he returned to Poland after the war (during which he had joined the Resistance), this time as a cultural attaché at the French Embassy

[5] C. Heller to P. Mosely, 21 March 1955, RAC 1.2/500S/9/95.

[6] They are the successful candidates of the *concours d'agrégation*, a competitive and prestigious examination at the national level, and a prerequisite for recruitment as a teacher in the public sector educational system.

there. He was among the first scholars to be permanently recruited to the EPHE Sixth Section shortly after its creation in 1948. A decade later, his experience in cultural cooperation and his direct knowledge of Poland were drawn upon when the institution initiated academic exchanges with this country under intergovernmental cultural agreements, and later in occasional collaborations with Soviet art historians.

These examples illustrate not only that academic and diplomatic careers are not necessarily separate when it comes to the study of foreign regions, but also that such interactions and junctions between these spheres—and the temporary redeployment of expertise—can occur in both directions. Such movements allow knowledge, skills, and professional experience to circulate across professional and social contexts, enriching both the scientific understanding of these regions and the practical support of academic exchanges as part of Cold War cultural diplomacy. While these cases are not necessarily generalisable, they point to meaningful patterns in the interplay between scholarship and cultural diplomacy.

It is also significant—and worth emphasising—that these arrangements of actors were not hermetically sealed but rather intersected with or nested within specific operations, including at the international level. After the cooperation agreements with Poland were signed, the co-organisation of conferences with the Polish Academy of Sciences was indirectly leveraged as an argument to persuade the Soviet Academy of Sciences, as well as other East European academies, to authorise the participation of some of their own members. The goal was to diversify the representation of Eastern European scholars and to foster their participation in scientific events held in Western Europe. Thus, in 1959, the Soviet historian Mikhail Alpatov and the Soviet economist Vasilii Nemtchinov attended colloquia on the Enlightenment and comparative economic issues, respectively. Moreover, representatives of the EPHE Sixth Section considered it essential to organise colloquia as a means of facilitating contact between Polish scholars and their Western counterparts. Yet the reverse was also true. American scholars collaborating with the Sixth Section also benefited from the scientific opportunities offered by the exchange program. They met with Polish colleagues in Paris and were even occasionally invited to colloquia or research missions organised in Warsaw under the Franco-Polish intergovernmental agreements. One such invitee was the Marxian philosopher Herbert Marcuse (a former member of the Frankfurt School, having fled to the United States to escape Nazism), who was invited as part of the EPHE Sixth Section's Russian program to deliver lectures in Paris on topics such as "Evolution and Critique of Marxism" and "The Development of Industrial Society and the Prospects of [East/West] 'Coexistence'." Marcuse himself was particularly eager to engage with Polish philosophers. While he travelled as an American expert, his visit was made possible primarily through his 1959 invitation from the EPHE's Sixth Section and its mediation.

Beyond formal institutional frameworks, informal dynamics of academic exchanges also reveal the importance of personal and professional ties in shaping transnational academic exchanges and intellectual elites during the Cold War.

For instance, when the Ford Foundation launched its own academic exchange programs with Poland (Czernecki, 2013; Nowaczewska 2023; Stensrud 2014), the coordinator of the EPHE Sixth Section's Area Studies Division shared information and recommended local contacts particularly to Edward d'Arms, the former deputy director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Humanities Division, who had previously supported the Sixth Section's area studies grants before moving to the Ford Foundation.[7] Unsurprisingly, scholars such as Gieysztor, Kołakowski, both previously mentioned, and the philosopher Adam Schaff, another key figure in the Franco-Polish exchange program, were among the scholars Heller recommended as points of contact in Poland. Their selection highlights the role of intellectual, institutional, and professional qualifications in facilitating cross-border intellectual circulation. Gieysztor, for instance, as the vice-rector of the University of Warsaw from 1956 to 1959, combined academic prestige with institutional leverage, while Schaff—as a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (where he directed the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology) and the Central Committee of the Communist Party—embodied the nexus of local political-academic authority and international intermediary. These trajectories illustrate how individual national backgrounds and networks determined access to transnational opportunities. The process also highlights the asymmetrical power relations inherent in Cold War cultural diplomacy: while Polish scholars gained access to Western academic resources, their inclusion was often mediated by Western gatekeepers like the EPHE Sixth Section or the Ford Foundation. Even in the decades that followed, Braudel continued to support former Polish fellows for fellowships in the USA, while also connecting them to his extensive European networks.

Academic milieus operate largely on reputational grounds, all the more so when acting on an international scale. However, the individual reputations scrutinised on such occasions are not always purely scientific, *a fortiori* in a geopolitical context like the Cold War. Political commitments or positions, as well as broader social and professional considerations, can interfere, either facilitating or preventing an invitation or collaboration. For example, in 1957, the Quai d'Orsay refused two Polish scholarship holders whom the EPHE Sixth Section wished to host for research in sociology and social psychology. These individuals were linked to the reformist newspaper *Po Prostu* and had been proposed for fellowships by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. However, after receiving information from the French Embassy in Poland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deemed their invitation inappropriate[8]: one was reportedly engaged in journalistic rather than scientific activities, while the other allegedly did not speak French. These cases of refusal are, nonetheless, rare, and the profile of the invited individuals is primarily academic and scientific—though this does not necessarily preclude political dimensions or implications related to their trajectories, positions, or activities.

[7] E. D'Arms—C. Heller correspondence, January–February 1961, 102EHE.
[8] DG-Affaires Culturelles et Techniques to Braudel, 23 December 1957, MAE-199QO231.

One must not yet underestimate the documentation work, whether formal or informal, conducted on foreign scholars considered as potential collaborators in the organisation of specific scientific projects, as invitees, or as scholarship recipients. Although the surviving records may vary in consistency depending on the source institution—being particularly rich in the case of philanthropic foundations and more patchy for French institutions—, such material was regularly gathered by the institutions involved in implementing these exchanges. The available records regarding these scholars are primarily bureaucratic in nature, consisting of nominal lists, CVs, work plans, and internship or fellowship reports. The question of conducting a prosopographical analysis based on these sources—aimed at studying the collective characteristics of groups or subgroups of fellows—is entirely relevant. However, this type of work is limited or made difficult by the fragmentary character of the preserved documentation, which prevents a coherent delineation and sociological description of these subgroups. In the case of Sixth Section's Eastern European fellows, it would still be possible, for selected years and using simple statistical methods, to systematically document and analyse at least the professional positions held, the disciplinary fields in which the fellows situate themselves, their age, and their gender.

Other archival materials sometimes yield unexpected gems, attesting to the very conduct of such investigations into the profiles of invited scholars or East European collaborators, such as the handwritten comments found on a 1956 French Ministry of Foreign Affairs form[9] concerning Adam Schaff. Before becoming one of the key decision-makers and driving forces in Franco-Polish dynamics, Schaff had already played a significant—if not outright controversial—role in shaping cultural policy during the Stalinist years. Beyond his prerogatives already mentioned, he had been appointed as early as 1948 to the first Chair of Marxist philosophy at the University of Warsaw. During this period, he published several exegeses of Stalin's writings while actively engaging in ideological attacks against non-Marxist philosophical currents and empirical sociology. The Quai d'Orsay document confirms that this reputation had been flagged by French diplomats as early as 1956: one handwritten annotation appended to it states that "Schaff is the most undesirable Stalinist intellectual in Poland."[10] The document also notes that "he is against Gomułka" (the Communist reformist leader). However, Schaff had, by that time, already joined the reformist movement himself, as other sources indicate. This archival detail serves not so much to highlight the contrast between Schaff's actual actions and the French diplomats' perceptions of them, but rather to underscore the complexity of the scholar's trajectory. It also emphasises the critical importance of cross-referencing multiple sources and historicising information as precisely as possible—all the more so in a "fluid political conjuncture" (Dobry, 1986), such as the "56 Crisis" in Poland, where actors' positions evolve

[9] "Note au sujet d'un éventuel séjour à Paris, en décembre 1956, de la Délégation polonaise qui a participé à la 6e session de la Conférence générale de l'Unesco," 10 December 1956, Direction générale des affaires culturelles et techniques, Direction Europe, QO231, AMAE.
[10] Ibid.

and are rapidly redefined—, even if the goal is not to write a positivist history. Moreover, these shifts in Schaff's positioning partially explain why it was with Schaff—rather than another scholar—that Raymond Aron (the French philosopher and sociologist, *directeur d'études* at the EPHE Sixth Section, a prominent anti-communist intellectual and a leading figure in the Congress for Cultural Freedom) co-organised, in 1962 and supported by UNESCO, one of the colloquia as a part of the Franco-Polish intergovernmental cooperation framework.

4 Exploring the Content and Implications of Exchange Programs

Insights gained from the analysis of individual trajectories and positions of key actors set the stage for an examination of the actual content of exchange programs, along with the analytical questions this may raise. One of the most complex questions to address at this level is how to grasp the intertwining of science and politics, a question whose significance has been foregrounded previously through the lens of individual actors' trajectories. This issue can also be examined through the themes of colloquia, the privileged scientific subfields favoured by these exchanges, or the intellectual content and publications produced or disseminated on such occasions.

Tensions or controversies reflecting these stakes sometimes—or even often—emerge in what may initially appear to be minor details, which are, in fact, primarily issues of symbolic display. This is exemplified by the protracted discussion over the title of the 1962 colloquium mentioned above, insisted upon by the Polish side, even though agreement on the program and the list of participants had been reached without contention. The initial title, proposed by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, encountered resistance from the committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, "for reasons unknown to me,"[11] as noted by the Secretary-General of the International Council for Social Sciences following a meeting with a representative of the Polish Embassy. The reformulation proposed by Schaff on behalf of the Polish side was considered a substantive alteration by Myrdal and the coordinator of the Area Studies Division, Clemens Heller. Ultimately, a slightly modified version of the original title was adopted, with the term "Marxist" replaced by "Marxian" to reflect one of the colloquium's key themes: the transformations undergone by classical Marxism through its development in the USSR and other countries.[12]

Moreover, the complexity of the analysis also lies in the fact that even the strategies used to circumvent the political constraints surrounding these scientific activities and exchanges themselves bear political significance. For example, during diplomatic negotiations to renew the Franco-Polish exchange protocol,

[11] K. Szczerba-Likiernik to K. Forcart, May 16, 1961, 102EHE/36.
[12] K. Szczerba-Likiernik à C. Heller, 11 July 1961, 102EHE/36.

Braudel's proposal to develop exchanges in philosophy encountered unofficial resistance from Schaff.[13] The latter was already aware that philosophy, as a discipline, was far more politically sensitive and vulnerable to political control than the economic and social history topics favoured by the EPHE Sixth Section. The general emphasis on history as a discipline—and, even more so, the opposition to the political history associated with the Annales School, whose representatives founded this academic institution, as previously noted—also made it possible to circumvent fields of study and contemporary topics more likely to generate controversy. At the same time, this orientation facilitated exchanges with partners in Eastern Europe.

The intellectual affinities between the Annales School and the Polish historical and sociological schools of the period have been highlighted by various works and testimonies (Le Goff, 1996, for example). For instance, the historian Marc Ferro, a specialist on the USSR, recounted in an interview I conducted with him that, in his view, "the Poles had been a godsend"[14] for the development of the Sixth Section, owing to the shared intellectual approach of Polish researchers and Braudel's broad conception of history. This prominence of exchanges with Poland is reflected, for example, in the number of scholarship holders: between 1957 and 1965, approximately three hundred Polish scholars—initially from the Academy of Sciences and later from universities—took part in these exchange programs, while around forty French researchers were invited to Poland.[15] In addition, about thirty Polish scholars contributed articles to French journals over the same period.

Analysing exchange programs beyond the case of Poland raises the question of the distinct trajectories of "Eastern Bloc" countries and their differentiated scientific and political assets. First of all, it is worth noting that internal differentiations within the region were taken into account, which led to a focus being placed at the EPHE Sixth Section both on its "core" (USSR) and on its geopolitical "peripheral" areas. Russia/USSR was of sustained scientific interest due to its long-established scholarly traditions and its geopolitical pre-eminence, and Russian/Soviet studies were the driving force supporting the institutionalisation of the Area Studies Division's program. Nevertheless, due to the loosening of political restrictions during the Thaw, it was with a "satellite" country as a partner that the program's internationalisation first took shape. Furthermore, quantitative disparities in fellowships flows are further illustrated by insights from mission reports or more informal testimonies that highlight these contrasts between countries. For example, Pierre Francastel notes in his correspondence how, with Soviet colleagues, "things [always dragged] on at length and in uncertainty,"[16] a pattern that reflects broader political and professional dynamics. These obstacles and limitations should not, however, be interpreted through the lens of a cultural diplomacy performance evaluator—concerned with effectiveness or impact—but rather through that of a

[13] "Procès-verbaux des réunions polonaises," November 25, 1959, 102EHE/37.
[14] Interview with Marc Ferro, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 24 May 2016.
[15] "Programme de collaboration scientifique 1957-1965," 102EHE/37.
[16] P. Francastel to G. Dagron, June 30, 1963, box 8, Francastel's files (INHA).

sociologist and a historian who seeks to understand the underlying mechanisms while resisting normative temptations and biases. The aim, rather, is to understand the underlying mechanisms and enabling conditions of these exchanges, even if this means doing so *a contrario*, through their dysfunctions or observed failures.

This is evidenced by the less visible contributions that the Franco-Polish exchanges made to the development of the Russian Center of the EPHE Sixth Section, particularly through little-studied documentation-gathering missions organised in countries such as Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. These missions were, for the most part, facilitated by the material support of the Directorate of Cultural Affairs of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They were carried out primarily by young, relatively unknown female collaborators of the Center, who, despite their strong academic backgrounds, occupied subordinate roles at the time. One of them, Marie Bennigsen (daughter of Alexandre Bennigsen, *directeur d'études* à la EPHE Sixième Section), studied Arabic, Persian, and Turkish while already mastering Russian, German, and English. From the mid-1960s onward, she made several trips to Bucharest and Sofia, where she established contacts with libraries, archives, research institutes affiliated with the Academies of Sciences, and universities. She also took part in scientific events, such as the International Congress of Balkan and Southeast European Studies held in Sofia in 1966. These missions contributed to the development of exchanges in scientific documentation and thereby expanded the collections of the Area Studies Division.

The reports from these missions attest to the positive reception encountered in these countries, notably in Bulgaria, a country that was nevertheless described as scientifically highly isolated and where several subfields of historical research could not be addressed. At that time, the Sixth Section of the EPHE was the first—and, indeed, the only—Western institution to establish academic contacts in the field of historical and social sciences. This *de facto* pre-eminence of the Parisian institution could prove advantageous and allow it to benefit from the situation—as Marie Bennigsen suggested—as Bulgarian institutions might prove "more liberal toward us than toward their own researchers."[17] A mission conducted in Albania, this time, in 1969 led to another exceptional situation for the EPHE Sixth Section, which became the only institution in France—and one of the few in the world—to receive—and in significant quantities at that—Albanian books and periodicals, thanks to the bibliographic exchanges established on this occasion. Harvard University's request to the EPHE Sixth Section for all available duplicate copies serves as an indication of the rarity of these works at the international level. This mission was undertaken within the framework of recent Franco-Albanian cultural exchange agreements but in a country described as "not easy to approach"[18] by the person who led it. It therefore also required the assistance of the French Ambassador to Albania to expedite the necessary local authorisations. The Historical Institute

[17] Marie Bennigsen, "Compte rendu de mission en Bulgarie, 5 octobre–5 novembre 1965,"102EHE/13.

[18] "Rapport de mission effectuée par Mme Seydoux en Albanie, 23 octobre-4 novembre 1969," 102EHE/17.

visited on this occasion expressed great interest in the development of Albanian studies in France, particularly because it was one of the first times it had received a visit from a representative of a Western research centre interested in Albania. It was therefore willing to support these studies by providing microfilms and documents, and even collaborating in certain projects, such as a bibliography of labor movements and socialism in Albania, conceived by Georges Haupt, a *directeur d'études* at the Sixth Section. To manage this influx of documents, the Area Studies Division also secured the temporary collaboration of one of the few people in France with the necessary skills to catalog them—once again, a highly qualified, multi-skilled woman—who, under Haupt's direction, compiled the first bibliographic inventory of French and foreign sources relating to Albania since the fifteenth century.

All these dynamics contributed to the development of a sub-sector within the so-called Russian Center of the EPHE Sixth Section, identified as a "new area." Each mission to this part of Europe thus became an opportunity to realise and highlight the development of what correspondence and administrative documents increasingly referred to as a "Balkan section" within the Area Studies Division. This section's establishment dates to around mid-1960s and gradually, albeit unevenly, expanded to cover Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece, and Turkey. About ten years after the foundation of the Area Studies Division, international exchanges—particularly concerning documentation issues—contributed, as we see, to the gradual redefinition of one of its centres' scope (even imparting centrifugal dynamics) and thus testify once again, and as had been the case at its inception, to the interdependence of internationalisation and institutionalisation dynamics.

5 Conclusion

By approaching cultural diplomacy 'at work,' this article has sought to move beyond abstract policy frameworks or state-centred narratives. Rather than treating cultural diplomacy as a coherent and homogeneous strategy, the analysis has highlighted the concrete configurations of actors, institutions, and resources through which it was enacted. Examining these arrangements makes visible the articulations between state and private actors, the circulation of individuals across diplomatic and academic spheres, and the structural conditions that shaped international-level exchanges. Cultural diplomacy thus appears less as a fixed instrument of foreign policy than as a dynamic process, emerging from the interactions and negotiations that sustained it. In this sense, studying cultural diplomacy 'at work' allows us to grasp not only its declared objectives but also the underlying mechanisms, including the tensions, asymmetries, and unintended effects that shape its implementation.

More broadly, this approach highlights the importance of methodological reflexivity in the analysis of cultural diplomacy—not because this object itself is inherently exceptional, but insofar as existing historiography has tended to foreground other dimensions. Attending to such reflexivity is all the more important

in contexts such as the Cold War, which introduced a particular layer of complexity. Indeed, the embedding of cultural and academic exchanges within the broader historical configurations of international relations (Faure, 2016; Tournès & Scott-Smith, 2017) particularly during the Cold War, has fostered reflection on the political underpinnings and implications of such programs. Given the stakes involved, scholarly attention has at times shifted from the terrain of cultural diplomacy—of which these exchanges are a vehicle—to that of public diplomacy (Nye, 2008; Osgood & Etheridge, 2010, among others) sometimes associated, in its multiple definitions, with forms of propaganda (whose euphemisation, however, appears as a condition of effectiveness). Yet tracing cultural diplomacy 'at work' invites a more nuanced perspective. It allows us to account for the subtle interplay of political and scientific logics, the ways in which the resources and positions of individual actors open or close opportunities, and how observed 'failures' often reveal underlying political constraints. In the Cold War context, such an analysis should carefully trace the entanglement of geopolitical constraints and scholarly agendas without imposing deterministic interpretations, while still accounting for the structural constraints that shaped the practices, choices, and trajectories of actors engaged in East-West exchanges.

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The Role of Cultural Policy in Countering the Division of the EU by Digital Culture Wars

Hanna Klimpe

Digital communication infrastructures have become central arenas for political contestation in the European Union in very different degrees and directions. While often framed as tools for democratisation and participation, especially in the period preceding Brexit and the first election of Donald Trump in 2016, dominant online platforms increasingly reinforce social and political cleavages by privileging polarising and emotional forms of expression. This dynamic is not incidental but structurally embedded in algorithmic systems, platform design, and the political economy of attention, and has been reinforced by the dominance of social media replacing the openness of the World Wide Web as a primary information infrastructure. So-called culture wars surrounding contested topics such as LGBTQIA+ rights, migration, or the conflict in the Middle East have been fuelled by social media debates and pose a challenge for both cultural policy and cultural institutions, particularly as they are instrumentalised by anti-democratic forces.

In academic research, culture wars describe enduring conflicts in which disputes over values, norms, identities, and symbolic meanings become central to political and social life. These conflicts are not primarily driven by material interests or policy disagreements, but by fundamentally different understandings of morality, authority, and collective belonging. The term has also entered everyday discourse, where it is often used to describe intransigent debates between liberal and conservative values or between globalised and local cultural orientations.

The concept originates in the work of James Davison Hunter, who defined culture wars as struggles over cultural authority and the legitimacy of competing

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moral worldviews, focusing primarily on the United States (Hunter, 1991, 42–45). From this perspective, conflict arises when opposing groups seek to establish their values as socially binding, turning cultural questions into sites of political confrontation. Subsequent political science research emphasises that culture wars structure political competition through identity-based divisions rather than socioeconomic cleavages (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, 3–8).

From a sociological viewpoint, culture wars operate as symbolic conflicts. Jeffrey C. Alexander highlights how moral meanings are politicised through binary distinctions that frame actors as legitimate or illegitimate, reinforcing antagonistic group boundaries (Alexander, 2006, 53–58). Political disagreement thus shifts from problem-solving toward moral judgment and identity signalling. These conflicts are increasingly shaped by digital communication environments. Zizi Papacharissi and Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts demonstrate how online platforms amplify emotionally charged and simplified interpretations, intensifying symbolic conflict and reducing opportunities for contextualised deliberation (Benkler et al., 2018, 213–220; Papacharissi, 2015, 19–23).

Of course, political discourse on social media has frequently demonstrated its emancipatory potential. Movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FridaysForFuture have shown the extent to which debates on social media can shape political discourse beyond the digital sphere, both in street protests and in parliamentary discussions. In the context of the growing attention given to political debates on social media, the term "culture wars" has itself become the object of cultural conflict. What online activists describe as "calling out," which they regard as a public exposure of perceived wrongdoing, is often referred to as "cancel culture" by those who are accused.

The emancipatory potential of political discourse on social media has been widely examined in the scholarly literature (Jackson et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2013; Tufekci, 2017). However, more recent research (particularly since 2016) has increasingly focused on critically reflecting on the dynamics of even emancipatory movements on social media. Alongside the researcher's interest in the positive effects of social media on political expression, especially within everyday discourse (Klimpe, 2022, 2024, 2025), this article will focus on the challenges that political debates on social media pose for cultural policy, especially those by algorithmic curation.

1 How Online Political Discourse Reinforces Binaries and Cleavages

The current state of research agrees that algorithmic recommender systems systematically amplify emotionally charged and divisive content. Content eliciting anger, fear, or moral outrage generates higher engagement metrics, which platforms optimise for visibility and circulation (Brady et al., 2017; Rathje et al., 2021; Tufekci, 2015). Facebook's own internal research has acknowledged that its ranking systems tend to promote content that deepens ideological polarisation by favouring

emotionally resonant posts (*Wall Street Journal*, 2021). As a result, nuanced political positions or deliberative exchanges are crowded out by simplified, antagonistic narratives that travel faster and wider. Discourses designed to be maximally "relatable" for broad audiences often remain vague or unspecific, facilitating virality while failing to address concrete, local problems.

Online political discourse reinforces binaries that fuel culture wars, as platform design actively encourages "us versus them" framings that are taken up by users. Features such as public metrics (likes, shares), quote-tweeting, and algorithmically curated feeds reward performative confrontation rather than mutual understanding (Calais Guerra et al., 2017). Digital publics are thus structured less as spaces of public discourse and more as arenas of symbolic conflict (Papacharissi, 2015). The affordances of platforms such as X, Facebook, or TikTok favour short, declarative statements that signal group identity and loyalty, reinforcing political and cultural identities as moralised camps rather than positions open to debate.

However, it is not only algorithmic structure but also the narrative logics of social media discourse that reinforce culture wars. The rise of memetic rhetorics further compress political discourse into binary moral judgements. Memes function as highly efficient carriers of affect and ideology, reducing complex political issues into easily shareable images that encode blame and virtue (Shifman, 2014, 18–25). While memes can serve emancipatory or critical functions, their political use often relies on irony and ridicule, fostering symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024; Denisova, 2019; Zappavigna, 2022). Importantly, memetic rhetorics do not refer solely to visual memes but also encompass trends or challenges that promote the viral repetition of statements or opinions, with repetition lending them the appearance of factual consensus.

The information overload characteristic of social media environments also reinforces the phenomenon of context collapse, exacerbating misunderstanding and hostility. Online communication routinely collapses diverse audiences—friends, adversaries, journalists, and political actors—into a single flattened communicative space (boyd, 2010; Rushkoff, 2013). Statements intended for specific communities are reinterpreted outside their original context, both in bad faith and out of ignorance, and mobilised as evidence of moral threat or cultural decadence. In the context of European culture wars, this dynamic intensifies conflicts around identity, values, and belonging. During Pride celebrations across Europe in mid-2023, a wave of misinformation and hostile social media posts spread widely, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries, where LGBTQIA+ rights are frequently targeted by Russian propaganda narratives. A viral post falsely claimed that national armies in some countries were creating official "LGBT units," provoking violent rhetoric and calls for persecution. In Hungary, Pride celebrations were referred to online using derogatory and homophobic slurs (Anonym, 2023).

The organisation of users into communities, often shaped by linguistic and cultural similarities, further normalises hyper-partisan interpretations within a digital environment that presents itself as mass media while remaining structurally fragmented (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018). Although users encounter

a constant stream of content, exposure is heavily filtered through personalised networks and algorithmic selection, producing what has been described as "networked fragmentation" (Benkler et al., 2018, 213–220). This fragmentation undermines shared interpretive frameworks and contributes to divergent perceptions of political reality across EU societies, complicating transnational solidarity and democratic consensus-building.

These dynamics are not merely processes to which users are unconsciously exposed. Political actors and influencers strategically exploit online polarisation. Populist movements, culture war influencers such as Andrew Tate, and foreign disinformation campaigns actively leverage algorithmic visibility and affective polarisation to mobilise supporters and delegitimise opponents (Marantz, 2019). These strategies thrive in digital environments where outrage and conflict are structurally rewarded, further entrenching divisions both within and across EU member states.

Social media does not, by itself, create culture wars. However, these dynamics demonstrate that online political discourse does not merely reflect pre-existing cultural cleavages but can actively amplify and restructure them. Understanding these mechanisms is therefore a prerequisite for developing digital cultural policies capable of counteracting polarisation and fostering a more pluralistic and cohesive European public sphere.

2 How Cross-Border Digital Fragmentation Widens EU Cleavages

Beyond polarisation within national publics, digital media environments contribute to a growing fragmentation of political discourse across EU member states. While the European Union is institutionally integrated, its digital public sphere remains deeply segmented along national, linguistic, regulatory, and cultural lines (Auel & Tiemann, 2020; Bleyer-Simon et al., 2025; Pastor et al., 2017).

Different countries consume fundamentally different information ecosystems. News media markets, platform usage patterns, and dominant intermediaries vary significantly between member states. For example, Facebook remains a primary news source in parts of Central and Eastern Europe, while messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram play a larger role in Southern Europe, and platforms such as X or Reddit are more influential in specific political subcultures (Newman et al., 2023). In Central and Eastern European countries, scepticism toward state-funded media is higher due to the communist past than in Western European countries, although trust in public broadcasting is also declining there. Research on information disorder shows that emotionally charged narratives, particularly those concerning migration, gender, or national sovereignty, are more likely to gain traction where trust in institutions and legacy media is already low (Bennett & Livingston 2018; Ručinská et al., 2023). Depending on economic conditions, quality media plays differing roles across countries. These differences shape which issues gain salience, how political conflicts are framed, and which actors dominate public

attention, resulting in parallel but weakly connected national debates about shared European challenges.

Although English functions as a lingua franca in viral digital discourse, linguistic segmentation continues to shape local debates. The European Union's multilingualism, while culturally valuable, poses structural challenges for the formation of a shared digital public sphere. Most political content circulates primarily within language-specific networks, limiting cross-border visibility and exchange (Kantar Public, 2022). Automated translation tools remain insufficient for conveying cultural nuance, irony, or context, particularly in memetic or affect-driven communication. As a result, supranational narratives, often disseminated in English, are frequently perceived as top-down communication.

These national silos are reinforced by platform algorithms. Recommender systems prioritise relevance based on users' location, language, and prior engagement patterns, thereby privileging nationally bounded content ecosystems alongside generalised topics that claim global relatability (Rieder et al., 2018). While such localisation may increase short-term user satisfaction, it structurally marginalises cross-border perspectives and European-level discourse. The result is a digital architecture that mirrors and intensifies national segmentation, even on ostensibly global platforms.

At the macro level, inconsistent platform regulation across EU member states further contributes to divergent online environments. Despite recent harmonisation efforts such as the Digital Services Act, enforcement capacities, legal cultures, and political priorities still vary significantly at the national level (Reuters, 2025). This leads to uneven moderation practices, differential responses to hate speech or disinformation (Brown, 2020). Such inconsistencies undermine the EU's ability to act as a coherent digital polity and allow culture war dynamics to flourish in regulatory gaps.

Finally, cultural narratives about the European Union are rarely addressed explicitly in digital spaces but are often embedded in entertainment formats. Influencers, lifestyle creators, and meme accounts frequently convey implicit political messages through humour, irony, or nostalgia, shaping perceptions of Europe without overt political framing (Nagle, 2017). This form of "soft populism" is particularly influential among younger audiences and difficult to regulate, as it blurs the boundary between cultural and personal expression and political communication. Consequently, Eurosceptic or nationalist narratives may circulate widely without being recognised or contested as political discourse.

3 The Role of Autocratic Forces in Reinforcing Culture Wars

Culture wars within the European Union are increasingly shaped and intensified by external autocratic actors who strategically exploit digital infrastructures to destabilise democratic societies. For these actors, cultural polarisation is not a by-product of political communication but an instrument of power projection

and hybrid warfare, in which the dividing lines between soft and hard power are increasingly blurred (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

Authoritarian governments invest heavily in digital propaganda capacities. States such as Russia and China have developed sophisticated information operations that combine state media, covert online networks, proxy outlets, and influencer-like personas to shape discourse beyond their borders (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Jankowicz, 2020). These operations are designed not primarily to persuade audiences of a single ideological position, but to amplify distrust, cynicism, and social fragmentation within democratic publics (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Pierri et al., 2023).

Disinformation campaigns, particularly those attributed to Russia, actively polarise societies within the European Union. Investigations and research document sustained efforts to exploit divisive issues such as migration, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, and national sovereignty (fourth EEAS Report, 2026). Rather than promoting a coherent alternative worldview, these campaigns inject contradictory narratives tailored to specific audiences, reinforcing existing cleavages and intensifying emotional conflict.

Culture war dynamics are an integral component of contemporary information warfare. Modern influence operations increasingly focus on symbolic and cultural fault lines in place of conventional geopolitical messaging (Pomerantsev Pomerantsev, 2019). By framing political conflicts as existential struggles over identity, tradition, or morality, autocratic actors tap into affective registers that are more mobilising and more destabilising than policy-focused debate. Culture wars thus function as force multipliers within broader strategies of cognitive warfare, and are especially appealing to the general public as they address everyday life instead of supranational, abstract values.

Many of these narratives portray the European Union as culturally decadent, morally corrupt, or oppressive toward so-called 'traditional values.' State-aligned media and online networks routinely depict the EU as hostile to national identity, religion, or family structures, while simultaneously framing authoritarian governance as a defender of cultural authenticity (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2021). These representations resonate particularly in contexts where trust in EU institutions is already fragile, reinforcing Eurosceptic and nationalist sentiments.

This hybrid warfare increasingly merges cultural conflict with political destabilisation. Information operations are often synchronised with diplomatic pressure, economic leverage, cyberattacks, or electoral interference, blurring the distinction between peace and conflict (Hansen & Gill, 2021). Culture wars serve to weaken social cohesion, distract political elites, and undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions, thereby lowering the threshold for more overt forms of coercion.

Polarisation driven by external interference reduces EU cohesion and external leverage. Fragmented societies struggle to articulate common positions on foreign policy, sanctions, or security cooperation. As internal cultural conflicts intensify, the European Union's capacity to act as a unified geopolitical actor diminishes, reinforcing the strategic objectives of autocratic challengers (Krastev & Holmes,

2019). Culture wars therefore have tangible consequences not only for democratic quality but also for Europe's role in the international system. Cultural policy thus plays a decisive role in countering hybrid warfare. Addressing digital culture wars requires not only counter-disinformation measures but also cultural and media policies that strengthen democratic resilience, shared but also locally rooted narratives, and cross-border solidarity in the digital sphere.

4 What Risks Do Digital Culture Wars Pose to Cultural Diplomacy?

Cultural diplomacy has long been a central instrument of the European Union's external relations, aiming to foster mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation through cultural exchange (European Union 2016). However, the rise of digitally mediated culture wars poses significant risks to the credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy of these efforts. As cultural meaning-making increasingly unfolds in polarised online environments, the communicative foundations of cultural diplomacy are being eroded.

Cultural diplomacy is in danger of being perceived as ideological or intrusive, especially among younger audiences whose perceptions of politics are shaped by the binary logics of social media platforms. In highly polarised digital contexts, cultural initiatives are often reframed as covert political interventions or value impositions, not as platforms for exchange. Authoritarian and populist actors frequently portray EU-funded cultural programs as tools of moral imperialism or social engineering, particularly in relation to issues such as gender equality, minority rights, or freedom of expression. Such critiques also invoke the perceived hypocrisy of European values, especially in relation to Europe's colonial past. Digital amplification of these framings fosters suspicion toward cultural engagement and reduces local receptivity to diplomatic outreach.

Polarisation also undermines shared-value communication and intercultural dialogue efforts. Cultural diplomacy relies on the articulation of broadly resonant values such as human dignity, pluralism, and solidarity that can serve as starting points for dialogue. Culture wars, by contrast, transform values into markers of antagonistic identity, making them objects of contestation rather than connection. Chantal Mouffe has emphasised that this is emblematic of the structure of contemporary political conflict (Mouffe, 2018). In digital environments optimised for conflict, attempts to communicate shared norms are easily reframed as partisan or moralising, limiting the dialogical potential of cultural initiatives.

This fragmentation weakens European narrative coherence. The European Union lacks a unified digital public sphere in which cultural diplomacy messages can circulate consistently across audiences. Instead, narratives are refracted through nationally and linguistically segmented platforms, where they are selectively appropriated, distorted, or ignored (Auel & Tiemann, 2020). This fragmentation makes it difficult to sustain a coherent European story about cultural

cooperation, peace-building, or multilateralism, particularly when competing narratives, often amplified by disinformation and propaganda, gain greater visibility. Initiatives for a European social media platform have been proposed, but considering the cleavages that already exist in the European Union, it is hard to imagine they might be realised in the near future.

Culture wars also delegitimise peace-oriented and locally grounded diplomacy. Effective cultural diplomacy is typically context-sensitive and rooted in local partnerships, emphasising listening and co-creation instead of top-down messaging. Digital culture wars, however, privilege abstract moral conflict over situated engagement, reducing complex local dynamics to symbolic battlegrounds (Ang et al., 2015). As a result, peace-oriented initiatives risk being dismissed as naïve, elitist, or politically biased, undermining their capacity to operate in fragile or contested environments—or rendering them too small to be visible within viral digital discourse.

Moreover, the speed and virality of digital communication compress diplomatic time horizons. Cultural misunderstandings or isolated incidents can rapidly escalate into transnational controversies, amplified by outrage-driven media cycles. In October 2025, a social media exchange between the Hungarian and Polish foreign ministers escalated into a broader diplomatic dispute concerning support for Ukraine and interpretations of EU policy. What began as a humorous or critical comment about legal and geopolitical issues quickly developed into sharply worded public reactions circulated widely on X (formerly Twitter) and covered by regional media (UNN, 2025). This dynamic fundamentally contradicts the slow, trust-based logic of cultural diplomacy. Diplomatic actors are thus forced into reactive communication strategies that prioritise damage control over long-term relationship building (Melissen, 2005).

Digital culture wars therefore pose systemic risks to the European Union's cultural diplomacy by eroding trust, fragmenting narratives, and politicising cultural engagement. Addressing these challenges requires a reorientation of digital cultural policy towards resilience, narrative plurality, and infrastructural support for intercultural dialogue in contested online spaces.

5 Counter-Measures: The Example of Digital Communication and Physical Spaces of Cultural Institutes

As digital culture wars increasingly shape political perception and public discourse, cultural institutes face growing challenges in maintaining legitimacy, reach, and dialogical capacity. Traditional symbolic communication strategies, effective in earlier phases of cultural diplomacy, risk becoming counterproductive in polarised digital environments. Consequently, cultural institutes must recalibrate their digital communication practices to foster resilience, inclusivity, and subtle value transmission instead of overt normative signalling.

Cultural institutes should seek to avoid highly symbolic communication, even when such gestures are institutionally tempting. Campaigns centred on emblematic markers such as Pride Month visuals or explicitly value-laden slogans are easily appropriated into culture war narratives, where they may be reframed as ideological provocation or external moral pressure. While such symbols remain important in supportive contexts, their uncontextualised deployment often reinforces antagonistic framing rather than dialogue. Strategic restraint thus becomes a communicative asset, not a retreat from values.

At the communicative level, cultural institutes should rely more heavily on recurring, everyday-life formats to convey EU-stabilising values in subtle and entertaining ways. Rather than addressing politically sensitised audiences directly, these formats often target broader publics by embedding themes such as pluralism, cooperation, or critical thinking within humour, storytelling, or cultural curiosity (Abidin, 2018). By adopting platform-native aesthetics such as short videos, participatory challenges, or serialised content, institutes can reach users beyond their traditional target groups without triggering immediate defensive reactions. This indirect value communication aligns more effectively with algorithmic visibility logics while avoiding overt politicisation.

European Union policies and institutions are frequently perceived as distant, technocratic, or culturally alien. Contextualised digital storytelling that connects European issues to local histories, everyday practices, or regional cultural references can reduce this distance and foster relevance. Such formats shift the focus from normative persuasion to interpretive mediation, enabling audiences to situate EU politics within their own lived realities.

Influencers can play an important role in supporting cultural institutions in communicating and promoting European values. Social media influencers operate within digital environments in which public debates increasingly take place and where younger and more diverse audiences can be addressed effectively. Through their personal storytelling, accessible language, and established trust within their communities, influencers are able to translate institutional messages into formats that are relatable and engaging. When influencers collaborate with cultural institutions, for example through exhibitions, cultural events, or educational initiatives, they can help make abstract concepts such as European solidarity, cultural plurality, or democratic engagement more tangible in everyday contexts. In doing so, influencers may contribute to strengthening the visibility and relevance of cultural institutions in contemporary digital communication spaces.

Local influencers are particularly important in this context. Because they are embedded in specific regional and cultural environments, they often possess a deeper understanding of local audiences, their concerns, and their communicative styles. This proximity allows them to connect European themes with concrete local experiences, thereby bridging the gap between European-level discourse and everyday life. Local influencers can thus help demonstrate how European values are reflected in local cultural practices, community initiatives, and shared heritage.

Moreover, collaborations with local influencers can strengthen the connection between cultural institutions and their surrounding communities. By acting as

mediators between institutions and audiences, local influencers may contribute to building trust, encouraging participation, and fostering a sense of shared ownership of cultural and democratic values. In this way, influencer partnerships can become a valuable instrument for cultural institutions seeking to promote European values in a participatory and locally grounded manner.

But also low-threshold physical events centred on everyday cultural topics play an important role in reducing barriers to participation. Activities such as film screenings, food-related events, music workshops, or discussions of popular culture provide shared reference points that transcend ideological divisions (Wessendorf, 2014). These formats create opportunities for encounter without requiring explicit political alignment, fostering social cohesion through informal interaction. In polarised contexts, such everyday cultural engagement can serve as a pre-political foundation for trust and dialogue.

It is important to underline that overcoming culture wars cannot occur solely within digital spaces. Hybrid formats that strengthen bonds between cultural institutes and local communities are gaining importance. Online communication is increasingly complemented by offline events, participatory workshops, or co-created cultural projects that are documented and extended digitally. This hybrid approach reinforces trust and authenticity, countering perceptions of cultural diplomacy as abstract or externally imposed (Ang et al., 2015; Bjola & Manor, 2022; Rosyiidiani et al., 2025). By foregrounding local voices and practices, cultural institutes position themselves as facilitators rather than broadcasters, mitigating hierarchical dynamics often exploited in culture war narratives.

Expertise in local cultural contexts constitutes a key institutional resource. Cultural institutes often employ staff with deep knowledge of regional histories, sensitivities, and social dynamics. This localised expertise enables adaptation of programming and communication strategies to specific environments, avoiding abstract or universalist framing that may provoke resistance (Ang et al., 2015). Internally, this requires robust knowledge-sharing structures and reflexive organisational communication that values contextual insight alongside institutional priorities.

Media literacy initiatives, both online and offline, are frequently presented as key counter-measures against polarised political discourse. These programmes aim to enhance critical engagement with digital content, disinformation, and algorithmic dynamics. However, research indicates that media literacy efforts often reach audiences already inclined toward critical reflection, limiting their transformative impact (Ang et al., 2015; Bjola & Manor, 2022; Rosyiidiani et al., 2025). While such initiatives remain necessary, their effectiveness depends on integration into broader cultural programming rather than isolated didactic interventions. Media literacy thus functions most effectively as a supportive infrastructure, not as a standalone solution.

Cultural institutes should therefore increasingly offer talks and workshops focused on media consumption practices. Instead of adopting a corrective or normative tone, these formats should emphasise experiential reflection on how individuals encounter news, entertainment, and political content in their daily

lives. Research suggests that reflexive media education that addresses emotional responses, habits, and platform affordances can be more effective than fact-based correction alone (Livingstone, 2018). By situating media literacy within everyday routines, such initiatives demystify digital infrastructures and empower participants to navigate polarised environments more consciously.

One possible format is intergenerational workshops in which younger participants support elderly people in navigating digital platforms and everyday apps in order to overcome a digital-age gap. In such settings, younger participants might demonstrate how messaging services, social media platforms, or video applications function, while older participants share their questions, concerns, and experiences with digital communication. Beyond technical assistance, these encounters can open conversations about how news circulates online, how comment sections shape perceptions of public opinion, or how emotional reactions influence the sharing of content.

By situating media literacy within everyday routines and social interaction, these initiatives demystify the infrastructures of digital media and strengthen participants' confidence in navigating them. At the same time, they encourage dialogue across generations and help individuals engage with increasingly polarised media environments in a more conscious and reflective way.

Overall, counter-measures in digital communication require cultural institutes to balance visibility with restraint, values with contextual sensitivity, and innovation with institutional credibility. Rather than competing in the attention economy through confrontation or moral signalling, effective digital cultural diplomacy prioritises relational communication, cultural translation, and long-term trust-building. In doing so, cultural institutes can contribute to stabilising fragmented digital publics and reinforcing the cultural foundations of European cohesion.

While digital communication environments significantly shape contemporary culture wars, physical and locally-embedded spaces remain essential sites for mitigating polarisation and rebuilding trust. Cultural institutes, as hybrid actors operating between policy, culture, and civil society, are uniquely positioned to translate digital challenges into locally-grounded counter-measures capable of addressing culture wars in ways that digital spaces alone cannot.

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Redefining Cultural Influence in the East: The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Challenge of Geopolitical Fragmentation

Antor Bada

1 Introduction: Cultural Influence in a Fragmented Geopolitical Space

The geopolitical transformation of Eastern Europe since 2022 has profoundly reshaped the environment in which the European Union exercises its external influence. The outbreak of large-scale war, the return of high-intensity military confrontation on the European continent, and the consolidation of antagonistic geopolitical blocs have fundamentally altered the assumptions underpinning European external action. In this context, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), initially conceived as a framework for stability, prosperity, and normative convergence through non-coercive means—faces unprecedented structural challenges.

From its inception, the ENP was premised on the idea that proximity to the European Union, combined with economic incentives, institutional cooperation, and cultural exchange, would gradually foster political convergence and societal alignment. Cultural influence played a central, if often implicit, role in this strategy. Through educational programs, people-to-people contacts, support for civil society, and the promotion of shared values, the EU sought to exercise influence primarily through attraction rather than coercion. However, the current geopolitical context raises fundamental questions about the viability of this approach.

Culture has increasingly become a contested political space in Eastern Europe. Competing narratives of history, identity, sovereignty, and legitimacy are mobilised by domestic and external actors alike. In such an environment, cultural diplomacy cannot be understood as a neutral or apolitical domain. Rather, it is deeply

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embedded in power relations and security dynamics. This article argues that the erosion of European cultural influence in Eastern Europe is not merely the result of implementation failures or insufficient resources but reflects deeper structural limits inherent in the ENP's original design.

The central claim advanced here is that the EU's traditional reliance on soft power and normative attraction is insufficient in a context of sustained geopolitical confrontation. To remain relevant, European cultural diplomacy must be explicitly repoliticised and integrated into a broader strategic framework that acknowledges conflict, competition, and societal resilience. By examining the cases of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, this article seeks to identify the conditions under which European cultural influence can still operate effectively, as well as the factors that constrain its impact.

2 Soft Power, Normative Power, and the Limits of Attraction

The concept of soft power, most prominently associated with Nye (2004), refers to the ability of an actor to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or material inducements. Cultural appeal, political values, and the perceived legitimacy of foreign policies constitute the core sources of soft power. Within the European context, this concept has been closely linked to the notion of normative power, developed by Manners (2002), who argued that the European Union exerts influence by diffusing norms such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law beyond its borders.

Normative power Europe rests on the assumption that the EU represents a distinctive form of political organisation whose principles possess a universal appeal. Through institutional engagement, conditionality, and socialisation, partner countries are expected to internalise European norms, leading to gradual convergence (Manners, 2002, 240). Cultural diplomacy, in this framework, functions as a complementary instrument that reinforces normative attraction by fostering mutual understanding and societal alignment.

However, a growing body of scholarship has questioned the applicability of these concepts in environments characterised by geopolitical polarisation and normative contestation. Normative power presupposes a minimum degree of normative consensus and a relatively permissive international environment. In Eastern Europe, these conditions are increasingly absent. Competing actors actively promote alternative models of political order and cultural identity, often framed explicitly in opposition to Western liberal norms.

Moreover, the asymmetry between the EU's normative discourse and its limited willingness to provide hard security guarantees undermines the credibility of its cultural and normative appeal. Where cultural influence is perceived as disconnected from concrete security concerns, it risks being dismissed as symbolic or ineffective. This tension is particularly visible in societies exposed to direct military threats or sustained information warfare.

The limits of attraction become especially apparent when soft power strategies confront actors willing to instrumentalise culture as a tool of coercion and mobilisation. In such contexts, cultural diplomacy cannot operate independently of power relations. The challenge for the EU, therefore, is not to abandon its normative foundations, but to reassess the conditions under which they can be credibly projected and sustained.

3 The European Neighbourhood Policy as a Cultural and Political Project

Since its launch in 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy has evolved into a complex framework encompassing bilateral agreements, multilateral initiatives, and sectoral cooperation (Diez, 2013). Although culture has never constituted a standalone pillar of the ENP, it has been embedded across various policy instruments, including education, youth exchanges, media support, and civil society funding. Programs such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and the European Endowment for Democracy have played a significant role in shaping the cultural dimension of EU engagement.

The underlying logic of these instruments reflects a technocratic understanding of cultural influence. By promoting mobility, dialogue, and institutional capacity-building, the EU seeks to foster gradual societal convergence without overt political confrontation (Diez, 2013, 198–200). This approach has yielded tangible results in relatively stable environments, particularly in terms of elite socialisation and transnational networks.

Yet, the technocratic nature of the ENP's cultural instruments constitutes a structural weakness in contexts marked by conflict and polarisation. Cultural initiatives are often designed according to standardised templates, with limited sensitivity to local power dynamics and security concerns. As a result, they may fail to resonate with broader segments of society or to counter competing narratives effectively.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of responsibilities between European institutions and member states complicates strategic coherence. Cultural diplomacy remains dispersed across multiple actors, reducing visibility and political impact. In the absence of a clearly articulated strategic narrative, European cultural influence risks being overshadowed by more assertive and centralised approaches pursued by rival powers.

This research adopts a qualitative research design combining document analysis, secondary data, and comparative case studies. Primary sources include official European Union policy documents related to the European Neighbourhood Policy and cultural diplomacy, strategic communications issued by European institutions, and reports produced by European and international research institutes. These materials are complemented by public opinion surveys and media consumption data collected by reputable organisations operating in Eastern Europe.

The empirical strategy rests on three case studies—Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—which have been selected for both substantive and comparative reasons. All three countries are central to the Eastern dimension of the ENP and have been exposed to sustained external pressure, albeit in different forms and intensities. At the same time, they display divergent trajectories in terms of political alignment, societal resilience, and public attitudes towards European integration.

The analysis does not seek to establish causal generalisations but rather to identify recurring patterns and structural constraints affecting European cultural influence. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between cultural instruments, security perceptions, and domestic political dynamics. This approach makes it possible to assess the conditions under which European cultural diplomacy retains relevance, as well as the factors that limit its effectiveness.

3.1 Ukraine: Culture, War, and Democratic Resilience

In Ukraine, culture has acquired an explicitly political and strategic dimension since the outbreak of full-scale war. Cultural production, language policies, and historical narratives have become central components of societal resilience and national mobilisation. Rather than functioning as a neutral sphere of exchange, culture operates as a domain of resistance, identity consolidation, and political communication (Kuzio, 2023).

European cultural influence in Ukraine has been most effective where it has aligned with these dynamics. Educational exchanges, support for independent media, and cooperation with cultural institutions have contributed to reinforcing democratic norms and a pro-European identity. Survey data collected since 2022 indicate a strong association between support for European integration and positive perceptions of European cultural values, particularly among younger and urban populations (Kuzio, 2023, 595).

At the same time, this influence is inseparable from security considerations. European cultural narratives gain credibility insofar as they are perceived as compatible with Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty and survival. Where cultural initiatives appear disconnected from concrete political and military support, their impact is significantly reduced. The Ukrainian case thus illustrates both the potential and the limits of European cultural influence in a high-intensity conflict environment.

3.2 Moldova: Cultural Vulnerability and Competing Narratives

Moldova represents a more fragile configuration of European cultural influence. The country's socio-economic vulnerabilities, internal political divisions, and exposure to sustained information pressure create a highly contested cultural environment. European-supported cultural and educational programs coexist

with strong external influences, particularly through Russian-language media and transnational networks (Popescu, 2021, 32–40).

Empirical data on media consumption patterns reveal that a substantial portion of the population continues to rely on non-European information sources, which actively promote alternative narratives of identity and legitimacy. In this context, European cultural initiatives often reach limited audiences and struggle to generate durable societal alignment (Popescu, 2021, 45).

Nevertheless, Moldova also demonstrates the importance of local actors in mediating cultural influence. Civil society organisations, independent journalists, and cultural practitioners play a crucial role in translating European norms into locally resonant narratives. The effectiveness of European cultural diplomacy in Moldova therefore depends less on the volume of funding than on the capacity to support these actors over the long term and to integrate cultural engagement with broader resilience-building strategies.

3.3 Georgia: Normative Fatigue and Political Instrumentalisation

In Georgia, the trajectory of European cultural influence has been shaped by a growing gap between societal aspirations and political developments. While public support for European integration remains significant, it has declined in recent years, reflecting a broader phenomenon of normative fatigue. European norms and values, once perceived as aspirational, are increasingly contested within domestic political discourse (Smith, 2020, 641–648).

Political elites have played a central role in instrumentalising cultural and normative debates for strategic purposes. Anti-Western rhetoric and selective appropriation of sovereignty narratives undermine the credibility of European cultural messaging. In such a context, cultural diplomacy risks being perceived as partisan or intrusive, rather than as a source of shared reference (Smith, 2020, 648).

The Georgian case underscores the limits of normative power in the absence of credible political commitments and security assurances. Cultural influence cannot compensate for perceived inconsistencies in European engagement. Where expectations of integration are repeatedly deferred, normative attraction gives way to scepticism and contestation.

4 Comparative Discussion: European, Russian, and Chinese Cultural Strategies

A comparative perspective highlights the structural asymmetries between European cultural diplomacy and the strategies deployed by other external actors in Eastern Europe. While the European Union traditionally relies on attraction, conditionality, and normative diffusion, Russia and China pursue more explicitly politicised

and state-centred approaches. Wilson (2023), Liik (2014) have shown that Russian cultural influence is inseparable from information warfare and historical revisionism, blurring the line between culture, propaganda, and coercion (Wilson, 2023, 112–130).

Chinese cultural engagement, by contrast, is characterised by long-term infrastructural investments, elite-oriented exchanges, and the depoliticisation of values. Confucius Institutes and educational partnerships prioritise stability and state sovereignty over normative alignment. Empirical studies indicate that while Chinese cultural appeal remains limited at the societal level in Eastern Europe, it benefits from consistency and strategic coherence.

In comparison, European cultural diplomacy suffers from fragmentation and an overreliance on normative assumptions. As Tocci (2017) argues, the EU has struggled to adapt its external action to a world of power politics, where credibility increasingly depends on the capacity to protect partners and absorb costs (88–92).

The limits of European cultural influence are not merely contextual but structural. First, institutional dispersion across multiple European actors leads to overlapping initiatives and diluted strategic messaging. Second, the separation between cultural policy and security policy reduces the perceived relevance of cultural engagement in high-risk environments.

Empirical evaluations of EU-funded cultural programs reveal uneven impact and limited sustainability. According to assessments conducted by the European Court of Auditors, cultural initiatives often lack measurable long-term outcomes and remain insufficiently connected to local power structures. Moreover, public opinion data from Eastern Partnership countries show a growing gap between positive views of European culture and declining trust in European political commitments. This discrepancy reinforces what Zielonka (2006) describes as the illusion of normative empire: a belief in the self-sustaining power of values detached from material and strategic realities (14–18).

To remain effective, European cultural diplomacy must be repoliticised without becoming militarised. This implies acknowledging culture as a contested space shaped by power relations, rather than as a neutral domain of exchange. A strategic approach would integrate cultural instruments into broader resilience frameworks encompassing information security, education, and civil society support. Empirical evidence suggests that locally embedded initiatives—such as support for independent cultural hubs, investigative journalism, and bilingual education—yield more durable effects than large-scale symbolic programs. Diez and Pace (2011, 10–12) emphasise the importance of co-ownership and reflexivity in external governance. A coordinated European strategy should therefore prioritise long-term partnerships, narrative coherence, and credible political signaling. Cultural influence cannot substitute for geopolitical engagement, but it can reinforce it when aligned with security commitments and institutional trust.

5 Conclusion

This article has argued that the European Neighbourhood Policy faces a critical juncture in its cultural dimension. The erosion of the EU's normative power in Eastern Europe reflects not a rejection of European values per se, but a mismatch between cultural ambition and geopolitical practice. The cases of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia demonstrate that cultural influence is effective only when embedded in broader strategies of protection, partnership, and political clarity. A hybrid model combining normative attraction with strategic awareness is therefore indispensable. As power politics return to Europe's eastern borders, the future of European cultural influence depends on the Union's ability to reconcile its identity as a normative actor with the realities of geopolitical competition. In this sense, redefining cultural influence in the East is not a marginal adjustment but a core challenge for the European project itself.

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The Family of Man: Nation-Branding as a Constraint on Cultural Diplomacy

Emilia Sánchez González and Claude Ewert

1 Introduction

It is labelled "the most visited photographic exhibition of all time",[1] peaking now at ten million visitors, according to the latest numbers from the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel (CNA), the custodians of *The Family of Man* in Luxembourg. It is also counted among the art exhibitions with the most extensive travelling itineraries, which peaked during its Cold War international tour with multiple copies circulating around the world. Debates on the intended message of *The Family of Man*, spearheaded by Roland Barthes' critique of Edward Steichen's humanist message, have been going in circles as long as the exhibition has been around. However, historical analyses of *The Family of Man* are sparse, mostly focusing on Luxembourg (Krieps, 2006; Krieps, 2014) or on select locations like Moscow or Guatemala (Sandeen, 1994; Sandeen, 2015). While there are numerous local analyses of one distinct location, very similar to the works by Eric Sandeen, a scholarly account of *The Family of Man's* international trajectory and its final destination is missing.

[1] As Mary Anne Staniszewski observed, "everything about the show was cast in superlatives," starting from Steichen himself, who called it "the most ambitious and challenging project photography has ever attempted" to the cover of the catalogue and the laudatory reactions of the press that reproduced these statements (Staniszewski, 1998).

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This chapter will deliver exactly such an account by drawing connections between several locations of the international tour and the reception of the exhibition in Luxembourg, thereby focusing on the cultural diplomacy aspect. We will conclude that the synthesis of this analysis presents the reader with what we labelled a 'bad practice' scenario in handling art as a matter of cultural diplomacy. Steichen's exhibition has, in various instances, been abundantly distanced from the artist's intended message of more global cooperation, highlighted by one of the final photographs in the exhibition, that of the United Nations,[2] and the humanist message of equality. We argue Steichen's message became blurred because of the nation-branding imposed onto the exhibition by the United States Information Agency (USIA) for its international circulation.

The chapter is divided into two sections, where we will initially focus on the exhibition as a floating signifier during its world tour (Trivundža et al., 2021). A remarkable pragmatism was employed to adapt the exhibition to new locations. However, this could also entail that aspects of the original message were lost in translating the text and the design. This loss represents the first 'bad practice' scenario, because the differing installations could not convey the full vision of the original from the Museum of Modern Art. However, the diversity of venues,[3] and contexts in which the exhibition was displayed also denotes a willpower to make the exhibition happen, no matter the circumstances.[4]

The second part looks at the gifting of *The Family of Man* by the US government to Luxembourg, Steichen's country of birth. After Steichen's failed attempt to launch the international tour in Luxembourg, the latter's government accepted the diplomatic gift from the USA following the conclusion of the exhibition's international tour. However, it was mostly met with neglect and barely shown during its first ten years in the Grand-Duchy. Here, we then encounter the second 'bad practice' scenario, when a gift of cultural diplomacy is taken for granted and mostly ignored, which was also met with criticism back then. After Steichen's work had been in Luxembourg for several decades, a campaign of nation-branding overcompensated for the previous neglect. This is the third and final 'bad practice' scenario, as nation-branding the exhibition, which is inherently universalist in nature, dilutes this aspect by focusing on Steichen's country of birth, which was not the country that shaped him into the artist he became.

Together, these three examples are meant to inform how not to engage in cultural diplomacy. We argue that nation-branding dilutes both the artist's message and the international component of cultural diplomacy, especially when the artist

[2] Ariella Azoulay further amplifies this notion by proposing to view the whole exhibition as a visual proxy of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Azoulay, 2015).
[3] In addition to traditional museum and galleries, venues included a department store, a palace, and a train station, (Sandeen, 2005).
[4] U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 306, Records of the United States Information Agency, series Photographs and Clippings Relating to *The Family of Man* Exhibition. College Park, MD.

has connections to the two countries involved in the exchange. Steichen's *Family of Man* and its history serve as an example of employing questionable ethical practices under the banner of cultural diplomacy; however, we will end on a positive note since the current custodians of the exhibition are aiming to revive the international spirit of the exhibition.

2 The International Tour

After a successful commencement in New York in January of 1955, where it drew crowds of more than a quarter million people, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) entrusted what had become one of its most famous exhibitions to the United States Information Agency for its circulation abroad. The USIA incorporated it into its exhibitions program and became the primary funding institution and diplomatic force behind its widespread circulation.[5] Thereafter, the global itinerancy of *The Family of Man* slowly escaped the carefully curated vision of Edward Steichen and became intertwined with the ambitions of the United States Information Service (USIS), the overseas operation offices of the USIA.[6]

How much control remained with MoMA and Steichen himself, and how much leeway was granted to the various actors who would compete for a say in the exhibition's journey around the world, is still contested. Records are often contradictory, even in the most basic elements of the tour, such as the number of copies circulating and the countries where it was exhibited.[7]

The Family of Man travelled for almost a decade and was thoroughly documented by MoMA as well as governmental institutions, including the USIA, American Embassies abroad, and the U.S. Department of State, proving that despite changing hands in the official sponsor from MoMA to the USIA, it did not completely leave the network of its creators. To enable reproducibility, the photo panels, captions, and installation instructions were sent as a package to every new destination. Ideally, the show at any location was meant to resemble the original display. However, the degree to which the USIS offices were allowed to surpass their role of sponsors or co-sponsors to become curators of the local messages is unclear and differs across locations. According to documentation from various reports held in the U.S. National Archives, certain countries, such as Japan, were

[5] While the records the Department of Circulating Exhibitions at MoMA summarize the matter as four copies *commissioned* by the USIA for circulation after 1955 and one copy *acquired* in 1957 for further circulation, negotiations on the nature of funding and degree of control the USIA would hold over the exhibition were discussed in multiple letters between the agency and MoMA since 1954, before *The Family of Man* opened in January 1955. MoMA Exhs. 569.85.

[6] An overview of the organisation of the USIA can be found on NARA, RG 306, Records of the United States Information Agency, College Park, MD.

[7] Estimates vary from 37 to 48, which is the highest number last published by the custodians of the exhibition, the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel (Hurm et al., 2018).

allowed more changes than most others.[8] Through inspection of exhibition posters and brochures kept in the same archives, it becomes clear that the USIS sought various ways of incorporating its own brand into the text and design of the promotional material. However, while Eric Sandeen believes that the agency conformed to an aim of preparing "representations of American culture but not products of the United States government" (Sandeen, 2005), the distinction between the different levels of national involvement would not have been discernible to the general public.

The approaches through which the U.S. Information Service offices exerted their power over the exhibition and diverted Steichen's message of universalism to suit its post-war foreign policy were part of a cultural offensive as much as a counteroffensive, meant to challenge "Moscow's monopoly of humanism"(Cull, 2008), a less-than-desirable international reputation of the U.S. as an artistically and "culturally backward" nation (Krenn, 2017), and establish a positive view of the United States as an exemplary, democratic, "peace-loving nation" (Hurm et al., 2018).

These national concerns explain the geopolitical background to which the USIA responded as it held a firm grip on *The Family of Man* as a prime foreign diplomacy product. In fact, the years that the exhibition circulated coincide with what Michael L. Krenn and many American cultural diplomats and scholars have called the 'golden age' of U.S. cultural diplomacy (Krenn, 2017) (and of propaganda and counterpropaganda), placed between 1953–1961.

American post-war dreams and the perceived threat of communism to the United States' new hegemonic role in the world order established ideal conditions for Eisenhower's forceful information and foreign influence campaigns. Still closely tied to the Department of State, the USIA had to justify how each cultural activity would "serve U.S. policies," which *The Family of Man* did not explicitly do and find a way to link them to "the legitimate aspirations of other peoples in the world" (Krenn, 2017). The international factor could be easily found in the universality at the exhibition's core; and thus, redirecting the global scope to highlight the Americanness of the exhibition was chosen as the most straightforward solution.

A long-term effect of this approach was that by placing Steichen's message within a distinct American framework during its tour, it actively influenced its whole legacy, largely insistent on calling *The Family of Man* an ultra-American endeavour. This association is expressed chiefly with a negative connotation, and as the author of "The exhibition everybody loves to hate" asserts, the show provides no shortage of opportunities to do so (Tifentale, 2018). Critics close to this persistent hostility include American scholars enraged at the policies of their government, Global South scholars who knowingly point out the lack of representation and imperialist background of the USIS cultural activities, and Western European

[8] Not without its fair share of controversy over which changes had been approved and who had approved them (Takenaka, 2020).

scholars eager to identify faults in US policies but less aware of the persistent European nature of the show.[9] Considering tendencies in U.S. American politics at the time of writing, it is not surprising that scholars and the public find it difficult to concede the revolutionary depictions of civil rights, anti-racism, and social openness of the show. Turner realised this reluctance to allow for positive readings within the critical scholarship over ten years ago (the US international political reputation has further plummeted by 2025) (Turner, 2012).

If we agree with Ariella Azoulay's reading of the exhibition, Steichen would have been extremely against the national appropriation of his carefully crafted universal message (Azoulay, 2015). Using Maria Bordy's photo of the United Nations mentioned in the introduction as an example, Azoulay notes how the characteristic name plates of countries at UN assemblies are barely visible, giving the gathering a supra-state quality that focuses on citizens rather than on nation states, and connects it to Steichen's vocal aim of humanity beyond national borders, of the "essential equality of humankind."

However persuasive this argument, Steichen does not seem to have openly protested or even reviewed the USIS plans at every location after 1955, given that the Museum of Modern Art cooperated so closely with the U.S. government,[10] and only correspondence about select locations like Paris, Moscow or Tokyo remains in the MoMA Archives.[11] Establishing a lack of knowledge as improbable, we are left with the assumption that he either had a favourable opinion of the USIS handling of exhibitions,[12] and did not consider his curatorial message at risk past the initial arrangements[13]—or that his patriotism made him believe the American layer of meaning on top of the universal humanism of *The Family of Man* was nothing to be concerned about.[14]

[9] Kristen Gresh remains the only scholar to dive into Steichen's life-long connection to Europe as a fundamental factor in the creation of the exhibition (Gresh, 2005).

[10] Various examples of this cooperation can be found in *Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Pressa to The Family of Man 1928–55* and a chronology of diplomatic ties at the founding of MoMA *The Family of Man: Histoire Critique d'une Exposition Américaine.*

[11] MoMA Archives. The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records 1929–1959. The Family of Man: F.M.-Washington Correspondence, U.S.I.A. and State Department. MoMAExhs 569–86.

[12] During the exhibition opening in Paris in 1956, Steichen would be directly involved in the installation and is recorded visiting the USIS local offices. Records of the Agency for International Development.

Photographs of Marshall Plan Programs, Exhibits, and Personnel [Steichen at USIS] - [PAR-7350 through PAR-7354].

[13] Initial changes in the collection and design had been agreed upon between MoMA, the USIA, and the State Department before the start of the tour. *The Family of Man*: F.M.-U.S.I.A. Seminar, April 27, 1955: Manuscript and Photographs. MoMA Exhs. 569.87.

[14] While born in Luxembourg and always nurturing his ties to Europe, Steichen considered himself a proud American, voluntarily enlisting in the American Army during both World Wars and working on exhibitions such as *Power on the Pacific* and *Road to Victory* during his directorship of MoMA's Department of Photography.

Whether the nation-branding strategy that stained the tour of *The Family of Man* was the creation of the USIS or it already existed in the museum's curatorial visions remains uncertain. However, following local performances of the show and the reception to the USA brand across the exhibition's global journey underlines the various diplomatic strategies employed in conveying the new USIS addition to Steichen's message and the diversity of responses. A report of the exhibition's showing in Mexico City between October and November 1955 detailed diplomatic encounters of U.S. Embassy and USIS personnel with Mexican diplomats who commended the show. The report also included a survey recording the demographics of the general exhibition audience. Its focus is on communicating to the USIA office in Washington, the high degree to which their objective of 'increasing favourable perceptions of the United States through its sponsorship of *The Family of Man'* was achieved. At the same time, the report documents the logistics involved in installing and promoting the show and offers possible explanations for challenges presented, notably that 21% of the visitors reported being unaware of U.S. sponsorship.[15] Notwithstanding the overall success presented, the discouraging percentage of visitors that failed to make the most crucial connection for USIA cultural activities must have influenced future performances of the exhibition, in which the nation-branding factor will become increasingly more prominent.

The show in Mexico City occurred within the first year of the international tour and did not include any additional branded catalogues, speeches by U.S. officials, or other American media products. However, the lack of augmented American elements cannot be assessed chronologically as a "lesson learned and has probably more to do with the United States" limited attention to diplomatic efforts in the Southern Hemisphere, where its influence "was so pervasive that seemingly it could be taken for granted" (Sandeen, 2015). The USA connection would have been harder to miss in the Philippines, where the show was displayed inside the American School of Manila,[16] and a considerable difference can be observed in 1959, when the exhibition would be presented within the framework of the American National Exhibition in Moscow (Mickiewicz, 2011).

Foreign press focused on MoMA, Steichen himself, or on US sponsorship when covering the show, depending on their particular political directions and the political climate at the time of *The Family of Man'*s arrival in the country; however, domestically, the show was since the beginning embraced as a diplomatic object. The Foreign Service Journal commented on the show while it was exhibited in Washington, D.C.,[17] and followed the diplomatic attempts to take the show to the Soviet Union as "a first step forward towards international understanding."[18]

[15] The survey was commissioned by the US Embassy, based on 636 oral and written interviews conducted during October and November 1955. 'The Family of Man. A Study of Audience Reactions', Box 16, International Survey Research Reports, 1953–1964, Records of the USIA, RG 306, NARA, College Park, MD.

[16] 1958. Service Glimpses. The Foreign Service Journal. October.

[17] 1955. News to the Field. The Foreign Service Journal, September.

[18] Gwen Barrows. 1958. Washington Letter. The Foreign Service Journal, July.

Comparing the bulk of media printed domestically and abroad, it seems that while cultural diplomacy hopes for *The Family of Man* were naturally directed to other countries, the narrative presented inside the United States also closely followed these 'successes' of American foreign diplomacy as a measure to keep its own public convinced.

In a thorough analysis of the USIA's uses of photography in Africa, Darren Newbury addresses how the public at home and abroad was finding it hard to keep faith in the goodwill of American policy with its public abuses of the rights of African Americans and the continued presence of White supremacy in US society (Newbury, 2024). In the eyes of US diplomats, that would have meant that domestic audiences were as much in need of convincing as foreign ones, and by all means possible. One specific change in *The Family of Man* regarding race happened early in the exhibition, when Steichen retracted his decision to include a lynching photo of a black man because the attention it received unbalanced the holistic message. Shamoon Zamir reads the original inclusion as a warrant of the exhibition's critique of the US record on race and civil rights and sustains that this goal is discernible even after removing the photograph (Hurm et al., 2018). Zamir's reading is certainly of the minority, since the removal of the lynching photo would cause a scholarly uproar led by Roland Barthes and repeated by Phoebe Lou Adams and many others since, who find the retraction inexcusable (O'Brian, 2008). Zamir implies that Steichen's decision must have been directly influenced by the planned global tour under the auspices of USIA. Meanwhile, Newbury expresses some of the same concerns but reframes the issue in a semi-fatalistic note about the uses of photography for indictment[19] and diplomatic compromises. Knowing that such a record could easily overpower any other visual connection to the United States persuaded by the exhibition, he is convinced that if the lynching photo had not already been removed in New York, the USIA would have fought to keep it out of the touring copies of the show.

It can also be argued that the original message of *The Family of Man* was not superseded by the USIA's strive for control of the exhibition message, but that both lived on simultaneously. However, the central point of this section is the undeniable instrumentalization of the exhibition for the US government's goals. And for the most part, its success in being equated to a visual record of a successful, wealthy, and humanitarian United States, despite it presenting "the world to the world" and not "[The United States of] America to the world" (Cull, 2008).

A success indeed, so great that it has overshadowed the exhibition itself. Many critics are unable to separate them. The question of the separation of art and artist is nowadays common, as is the artist and his funding, but less questioned are the art and the indirect institutions enabling diffusion and canonisation of artworks and artistic currents. What happens when institutional handovers across time also

[19] "Photography had become part of the language of international indictment, in institutions of international government, such as the UN, and in the court of world opinion with the advent of global mass communication" (Newbury, 2024).

change their approaches and ideals supporting the art? These questions should be thought carefully, not only by historians but by the CNA as current custodians of the surviving copy of *The Family of Man*, to avoid repeating USIS mistakes of trying to trick the public into buying a superficial narrative (but an additional layer of meta-narrative is optionally added by visitors who consult the audio guide, currently about 25% of all visitors).[20]

Among those who have acknowledged this important separation are Fred Turner and Madeline Ferretti-Theilig. Focusing on the exhibition's more revolutionary aspects, Turner dismisses the proclamation of *The Family of Man* as a piece of American imperialistic propaganda that seeks to make the world in its image, calling the logic behind it too simplistic. He does not eliminate the possibility that officials at the State Department might have shared those kinds of ideas, but emphasises that focusing on them exclusively is what has caused scholars to "miss the exhibition's more rebellious, antinationalist elements." His capital example is the exhibition's inclusion of many photos from Italy, Japan, and Germany, which he understands as a public call from Steichen to find equality even with former enemies of the nation (Turner, 2012). Along the same lines, Ferretti-Theilig argues that while the USIS may have indeed paraded *The Family of Man* for a time to help establish an image that mirrored its humanism onto it, and redefine the United States as 'the sole defenders of peace, human rights, (and democracy), a detailed analysis of the exhibition would prove that it would not have been possible to connect with all the people that it did around the world through an imperial message (Ferretti-Theilig & Jochen, 2017).

Nevertheless, most scholars became captive of the new American message, a narrative that surfaces with the US at the top and leads to perceptions like those of Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, who appear "caught in the paradigmatic framework set up by Barthes" (Azoulay, 2015) and describe the exhibition as an instrument of cultural colonialism within the context of the Cold War, as a politically motivated formulation of "American mythology" (Solomon-Godeau, 2017) and a "US American imperialist façade" (Back & Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2004) positioning the exhibition "where it belongs, alongside covert violence, puppet governments, and military invasions" (Turner, 2012).

In fact, the persistent association of *The Family of Man* with US propaganda is the 'worst practice' among all the shortcomings or miscommunications in translating the exhibition's message to international audiences. One could argue that Steichen did not protect his message from deformation, and that this would have been easily fixable by providing a more thorough explanation of his vision and choices (although such text would have been against the principles of free democratic viewing he meant for the visitors, and against his faith and aim in photography as a universally understood medium). The lack of labels contextualising

[20] Anke Reitz interview by Claude Ewert, video recording, 14 March 2025, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg.

historic events might have been a curatorial choice for heightened audience agency in the interpretation of the message, but it was a *faux-pas* in the transmissibility of the original message, and allowed the USIA to mould the images to suit their goals with ease.

A final explanation is the one perhaps more commensurate to the *modus operandi* of diplomacy: Steichen navigated tensions in *The Family of Man* planning as a diplomat would; he identified avenues that would be closed if not proceeded with visual and textual caution; he made compromises; he spoke to people in their language and their priorities; and sacrificed some of his own points for the sake of the show going forward and not being cancelled completely.

"The Slow Death of American Cultural Diplomacy," which Michael L. Krenn defines as starting in 1961 and extending until the end of the twentieth century (Krenn, 2017), coincides with the slow disassembly of *The Family of Man.* The last travelling copy would be dispersed in 1963 after being shown in Tehran; other copies had already been completely worn out by extensive travel, and the duplicate sent on the second European tour was standing still, not taken out of the circulation calendar, nor sent anywhere else since its long tour in Poland.[21] At the same time, a tired diplomatic sector, which had initially been extremely busy with Eisenhower's cultural campaigns against the spread of communism, saw a promising turn for their activities at the beginning of the 60 s. John F. Kennedy's election and Edward Murrow's appointment at the head of the USIA[22] gave renewed hope to finally overcome the unresolved contradictions of "The American Story" and "tell the world the truth" about the United States. The slow death, as recounted by Michael L. Krenn, tells of the internal battles between those who saw cultural diplomacy as a propaganda weapon and those who saw value in it to champion human values to a wider audience that had continued to develop in the last decade and were reaching the breaking point. On one side, the Department of State had been happy to outsource its more challenging tasks to the USIA and was now ready to take over, but probably most crucial was the re-evaluation of the need and meaning of American cultural diplomacy.

As requests to show *The Family of Man* slowed down and funding cycles for international exhibitions closed, and the circulation map became cluttered with journeys realised and journeys cancelled, new administrations must have re-evaluated if *The Family of Man* had come to the point of material and ideological exhaustion. Maybe this product was not fit to trailblaze the 60 s as well as it had in the 50 s.

A USA-sponsored One-World message would have surely become a hard sell in a cultural moment in which fundamental inequality at home fuelled the civil rights movement, President Kennedy's assassination was followed by the escalation of US military involvement in Vietnam, riots within the country ensued,

[21] Exhibitions Circulated 1957–1968. MoMA International Council. MoMA Library. New York.
[22] Edward R. Murrow was a radio and television broadcaster who reported from Europe during the war and was later head of CBS. He would become a household name following the success of the radio show, *Hear it Now*, rebranded for television *as See It Now.*

and soon Martin Luther King would also be assassinated. Post-war idealism and faith in humanity to do better, captured so well in Edward Steichen's oeuvre, had been replaced by worldwide protests against all forms of American culture, understood as "manifestations of imperialistic and militaristic power" (Krenn, 2017). It did not matter that *The Family of Man* was meant to "speak an international language of understanding," like many other art programs born in the USA, it would be blamed for its origins. In this context, the decision by the USIA to prolong the exhibition's journey would have been a difficult one. However, at this point, talks were underway to transfer the show to Luxembourg, thereby transferring the problems ahead.

3 The Reception in Luxembourg

In 1952, Edward Steichen would visit his native Luxembourg again, the first time after the wars that had devastated Europe, and wars in which he had been involved as a photographer. *The Family of Man* was, partially, born out of the destruction Steichen had witnessed first-hand, which explains the pacifism behind the exhibition. This was only reinforced by rising Cold War tensions. In order to spread this pacifist message, Steichen had always intended for *The Family of Man* to go on an international tour. His initial intention was that this tour would start in Luxembourg, the country where he was born. This was the reason for his visit in 1952, which was accompanied by a bit of press coverage, but no more. To Steichen's disappointment, his idea to start the world tour in Luxembourg was turned down. It is said that he was told that photography is not a form of art. Given that Luxembourg was still very traditional in its understanding of art (and still is to a certain extent today), it is not unlikely that such thoughts influenced the decision-making process. However, there is no hard evidence. Steichen was told that the museum he had intended to host the exhibition at was already fully booked for 1955. Furthermore, upon visiting the State Museum (now renamed the National Art & History Museum or MNAHA), Steichen acknowledged that the facilities were not sufficiently large to exhibit *The Family of Man* (Krieps, 2006). However, in retrospect, it has also been assumed that the government feared the costs of hosting *The Family of Man*, and with some goodwill, it would have found a suitable venue, as there were large community halls available in the 1950s (CNA, 1994).

It took actual diplomacy, not cultural one, to undo the damage done by Luxembourg's rejection of hosting *The Family of Man.* While some Steichen experts pointed to the absence of any reference to Luxembourg in Steichen's autobiography, *A Life in Photography*, it was Roger Krieps who was reportedly told by Steichen himself that Luxembourg had wronged him. Furthermore, it is Krieps who was credited (and who also credited himself) with the reconciliation between Luxembourg and Steichen (CNA, 1994).

However, this is just one part of the story, as recent archival findings have revealed that more diplomacy was done on behalf of *The Family of Man* than previously assumed. The Luxembourgish ambassador to Belgium, Lambert Schaus,

already inquired in 1955 about why *The Family of Man* was not shown in Luxembourg and why it was not scheduled for the tour. He recommended that the government contact the USIA to have it come to Luxembourg.[23] In the press, there were also calls on the government to secure a date for the exhibition to be held in Luxembourg.[24] However, by then the exhibition already belonged to the USIA, which was responsible for planning the tour. The Luxembourgish government had missed its chance, as there was no possibility of just changing the itinerary, although attempts were made.[25]

Given that the press and diplomatic circles were now more aware of Steichen and his work, Luxembourgish diplomats would also seek to engage more with him. While Roger Krieps likes to highlight his meeting with Steichen in New York as a turning point, the archives of Luxembourg's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveal that its diplomats in the US were also involved. It would not be until 1963 that a first exhibition of Steichen's own photographs would be shown in Luxembourg. For two weeks, Luxembourgers could visit the State Museum and admire Steichen's photographs, although many journalists regretted the fact that it was not *The Family of Man* or that the curators of the museum had cluttered the photographs too closely together.[26] The same year, Steichen was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Lyndon B. Johnson. This was brought to the attention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[27]

In 1965, Luxembourg's ambassador in Washington, Maurice Steinmetz, recommended that the Luxembourgish equivalent of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, namely the Commandant de l'ordre de mérite national, should be awarded to Steichen.[28] The award was presented to him by the Luxembourgish consul in New York on January 6, 1966. In a detailed letter to the Luxembourgish Prime Minister, the consul mentions that Steichen harboured bitterness against Luxembourg due to the events of 1952, thus confirming what Krieps said. The consul also mentioned that an even higher honour should be granted to Steichen on his ninetieth birthday. Additionally, the consul did not mention that the order had to be returned to Luxembourg in case of death. Given Steichen's old age, he omitted that.[29] Further niceties were exchanged between Steichen and the ambassador in Washington, and they remained in touch.

[23] Archives Nationales du Luxembourg (ANLux), AE-07400, Letter from Lambert Schaus to Pierre Frieden, 17 December 1955.
[24] 1955. Die Warte, Kulturelles Kunterbunt. Luxemburger Wort, December 15; 1956. Die Warte, Kulturelles Kunterbunt. Luxemburger Wort, June 6.
[25] Paul Lesch interview by Claude Ewert, video recording, 9 December 2025, University of Luxembourg Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg.
[26] 1963. Edward Steichen nun doch in Luxemburg, Journal, August 19; 1963. Aus einer kleinen Residenz. Tageblatt, August 12; untitled article, Luxemburger Wort, August 13.
[27] ANLux, AE-AW-0785-0002, Letter from the Luxembourgish ambassador to the USA to Eugène Schaus, 9 December 1963.
[28] ANLux, AE-AW-0785-0009, Letter from Maurice Steinmetz to Pierre Werner, 9 March 1965.
[29] Ibid., Letter from Pierre Wurth to Pierre Werner, 10 January 1966.

However, *The Family of Man* had already found its way to Luxembourg the year before. As a reminder, it had then belonged to the USIA, and the USA gifted the exhibition to Luxembourg. Steichen's reconciliation with Luxembourg had also already begun in 1963 when he met the Grand Duchess in Washington and greeted her in Luxembourgish. Although not explicitly stated in the cultural diplomatic exchange, Steichen was informed of the location where *The Family of Man* was to be installed in Luxembourg. The initial destination that the Luxembourgish recipients had in mind was the Alcide de Gasperi Tower in Luxembourg City, as Clervaux, although already floated as an idea, seemed too far 'off the beaten path'.[30] This information was forwarded to Steichen, who rejoiced at the idea of *The Family of Man* being in the 'Common Market' Tower, as it was then called by the Americans: "I hope they decide to place it in the new Common Market building, as *The Family of Man* would feel at home in a building bearing that name."[31]

Robert Sivard of the USIA had informed Steichen on the eventual installation of *The Family of Man* in the Alcide de Gasperi Tower on 4 August 1965, and Sivard himself had received that information on 27 July the same year. However, two days before, on 25 July 1965, the director of the State Museum of Luxembourg, Gérard Thill, wrote a letter to Steichen informing him that *The Family of Man* would be permanently installed in Clervaux.[32] This letter received no reply from Steichen, who, a month later, wrote to the State Department that he hoped it would be permanently installed in Luxembourg City. The reason that the Luxembourgers had chosen Clervaux was the myth that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's ancestors were from Clervaux, which had already been proven wrong by, somewhat surprisingly, the same Roger Krieps who was so flabbergasted by Steichen (Krieps, 1962).

It is a major blunder by the Luxembourgish recipients of *The Family of Man* that they disregarded the artist's wishes. The complete lack of incorporating the artist into the process of choosing a suitable venue for the exhibition must be considered a 'bad practice' in cultural diplomacy. The criticism of Steichen's *Family of Man* as being too American has been previously highlighted. However, the idea of placing it in the Alcide de Gasperi Tower, a new administrative building of the European Economic Community (EEC), would have underlined the international, even transnational, character. By choosing Clervaux, the authorities reduced *The Family of Man* to a distinctly American gift of cultural diplomacy. Maybe they thought that Roosevelt's myth of originating from Clervaux resonated well with Steichen, who was born in Bivange (eighty-six kilometres away from Clervaux, almost the entire vertical axis of Luxembourg), but since there was proof of Steichen's wish to have it in Luxembourg City, and even an article in the Luxembourgish magazine *Revue*, that mentioned that, it was just a disrespectful gesture towards Steichen.[33]

[30] George Eastman House Archives (GEHA), Family of Man, 1964–1997, Box 8: Folder 7, Letter from Christian Chapman to the Department of State, 27 July 1965.
[31] Ibid., Letter from Edward Steichen to Robert Sivard, 25 August 1965.
[32] Ibid., Letter from Gérard Thill to Edward Steichen, 25 July 1965.
[33] 1965. *The Family of Man.* Revue, 31 July.

When Steichen visited Luxembourg in 1966, he warmed to the idea of having *The Family of Man* in Clervaux. The castle would be a nice place to have it, he seemingly said, but we lack the black-on-white evidence for that. The idea of having *The Family of Man* in Clervaux also rang well with a later idea of local politician Jacques Santer, who wanted modern art in classic surroundings to revive the latter (Spirinelli, 2020). This might also have played into the decision-making process at an earlier stage. Nevertheless, *The Family of M*an was and is placed over an hour's train ride away from Luxembourg City.

4 *The Family of Man* in Luxembourg

With the exhibition having found a new home, the problems with handling it continued. Initially, the exhibition was only shown temporarily, first in Luxembourg City (1965),[34] then in Esch-sur-Alzette (1966),[35] and much later only in Echternach in the abbey (1974).[36] In nine years' time, *The Family* of Man had a total of six weeks of 'showtime' in Luxembourg. It was therefore hardly surprising that a newspaper from the neighbouring Lorraine region in France asked where *The Family of Man* was.[37]

For the fervent defender of *The Family of Man*, Roger Krieps, these very short and only partial shows of the exhibition became the focus of his later life and also his two final publications, where he recurringly accused the Luxembourgish government (and other institutions) of being completely insensitive to any kind of culture. While Krieps had a certain point, his writings must be taken with a grain of salt. *The Family of Man* was not high on Luxembourg's agenda. The initial showing in Luxembourg City received extensive press coverage, but the exhibitions in Esch-sur-Alzette and Echternach were only briefly mentioned. Unfortunately, there are no visitor numbers. If these had been below the estimated threshold, it would have been an economic decision not to show *The Family of Man.* Many of the photographs are very large and thus require a lot of space. If not fully displayed, Steichen's message cannot be properly conveyed.

The main issue behind permanently installing *The Family of Man* in Luxembourg was the renovations of the castle of Clervaux. It had been destroyed during World War II, and there was no immediate rush to restore and renovate it. At least not after 1962, when the castle was briefly considered by the International Institute of Historic Castles as a potential headquarters for their committee. When this idea was shelved, the government saw no urge to renovate the castle quickly.[38] This urge was also not reinvigorated by the decision to exhibit *The Family of Man* in

[34] 13 July1965.'The Family of Man' im Staatsmuseum. *Luxemburger Wort.*
[35] 22 Aug 1966. Aus dem Minett. *Luxemburger Wort*.
[36] 19 July 1974. The Family of Man. *Luxemburger Wort*.
[37] 27 March1974. Où est Family of Man? Le Républicain Lorrain.
[38] ANLux, FIN-06581, Letter from the Minister of Arts and Sciences to the Minister of Finance, 26 January 1962.

Clervaux. It was only in 1975 that the exhibition was permanently installed in the castle, but only about half the photographs were on display.[39]

Hung at random, the artist's message was barely tangible. *The Family of M*an remained a random selection of photographs in the north of Luxembourg, off the beaten path. The impression one is left with is that those in charge, the State Museum in collaboration with the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the village of Clervaux, were uninformed about how to handle the then most popular photographic exhibition of all time. Clervaux had made Steichen an honorary citizen, but this only further diluted his origins in the south of Luxembourg. The entire handling of the USA's gift of *The Family of Man* was an artistic and diplomatic mess. Artistic in the sense that Steichen's wish to have the exhibition in Luxembourg City was not respected, but also that the exhibition was only shown partially for nearly thirty years in the country. Diplomatically, it was given very little attention after the first showing in Luxembourg City, but an argument can be made for Clervaux. Given that Gérard Thill, but also others, were still convinced that Franklin Roosevelt's ancestors from the Delano side were from Clervaux, this can be seen as diplomatically sound. However, placing a diplomatic gift in the well-visited capital would have generated more exposure.

Steichen's wish to have *The Family of Man* in Luxembourg City was also known to Gérard Thill, the director of the State Museum, who was in charge of the exhibition.[40] The idea to have the exhibition in the Alcide de Gasperi building seems to have been nothing more than an idea, though. Aside from the mentions in the letters and the rumours heard at the inauguration of *The Family of Man* in Luxembourg in 1965 (echoed in the magazine *Revue*), there is no official documentation regarding the idea to place it in the new EEC building. This would have underlined the universalist message of *The Family of Man*, as the EEC was what ended Franco-German rivalry and led to cooperation between initially six European nations. The final message of *The Family of Man* may be debatable, but the strong contrast created by the photograph of the United Nations juxtaposed with the nuclear explosion is a message that stays with its visitors. Placing it in a remote castle is merely a nod to Steichen's origins, and with the Roosevelt myth in mind, it reinforces the Americanness of *The Family of Man.* Here we can observe a nation-branding of two nations on the exhibition. After the initial humdrum after the exhibition's arrival, and the news coverage after it had been permanently, yet partially, installed in Clervaux, things grew very quiet.

Luxembourg City was designated the European Capital of Culture in 1995. *The Family of Man* was to be a key element (*élément phare* in French) for this first-of-a-kind event in Luxembourg (Spirinelli, 2020). It was no coincidence that the exhibition had just been restored in time and was now fully displayed in Clervaux. It had taken twenty-nine years for the Grand-Duchy to follow up on the initial

[39] 21 March 1975. Einweihung der Photoausstellung Edward Steichen 'The Family of Man' in Clerf. *Luxemburger Wort*.

[40] GEHA, Family of Man, 1964–1997, Box 8: Folder 7, Letter from Edward Steichen to Gérard Thill, 13 September 1965.

agreement with the USA about housing the exhibition fully and permanently. The decades of neglect for *The Family of Man* came to an end in 1989 when Jean Back was appointed head of the CNA and discovered the exhibition. 'Discovering' should be considered literally in the sense of the word. When Back wondered where those photographs that were not on display were stored, he was pointed to a building next to the castle in Clervaux. Under a leaky roof, he discovered the photographs that had toured the world, now damaged by rain and pigeon droppings. Some photographs bore even footprints, and there were rumours that children had occasionally played with them.[41] The photographs were restored, and Jean Back oversaw the installation in Clervaux, adhering to the installation instructions and also by looking at the MoMA original. Steichen's arrangement of the photographs in *The Family of Man* was recreated, and his message was at last observable again.

With the Capital of Culture year approaching, something everyone labelled the Culture Year (*Kulturjoër* in Luxembourgish), the government wanted to draw attention to Steichen's Luxembourgish heritage. However, given that Clervaux is a one-hour train drive away from Luxembourg City, and that most people would be drawn to the capital, a solution had to be found to make Steichen omnipresent. The solution was to enlarge forty-four photographs of Steichen along the main avenue in Luxembourg City, thereby drawing more attention to him. This resulted in Steichen's widow, Joanna T. Steichen, threatening legal action because she considered the enlarged photographs vulgar and claimed that they infringed on copyright. This led to the enlarged photographs being cancelled.[42] Instead, another Steichen exhibition was installed in Luxembourg City but only drew 6200 visitors. *The Family of Man* attracted over 28,000 visitors, which is 8000 more than its usual numbers, making it one of the most visited exhibitions of the Culture Year (Krieps, 2014).

With the takeover by the CNA of *The Family of Man*, the exhibition gained more exposure again, but most importantly, it was in the hands of knowledgeable people. They had also understood the universalist message when Jean Back successfully applied for the exhibition to become part of the UNESCO Memory of the World register. In 2008, Jean Back hired Anke Reitz as conservator of *The Family of Man.* She would have a substantial impact on the installation in Clervaux up until 2024, the most important one being another major renovation and making the exhibition look as close as possible to the MoMA original, but also respecting the fact that this was one of the copies that travelled, meaning the photograph of the nuclear explosion was not in colour. A meta-narrative was added in the form of an audio guide, written by Anke Reitz, where she explains the historical context, the story behind the exhibition, and important facts about Steichen's life.[43] Her impact took *The Family of Man* into the twenty-first century, and yet, also makes it look the

[41] Anke Reitz interview by Claude Ewert, video recording, 14 March 2025, University of Luxembourg Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg.

[42] Barry James. 1995. In Luxembourg, A Cultural Blowup over a Famous Native Son. The International Herald Tribune, 1 March.

[43] Anke Reitz interview by Claude Ewert, video recording, 14 March 2025, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg.

closest to its 1955 original inception. It is now simultaneously at its most modern, but equally closest to its premiere at MoMA.

The CNA's efforts in contextualising and preserving *The Family of Man*, and its original message, can be juxtaposed with the government's neglect, evident early on, and its nation-branding efforts since the 1990s. The latter died down after the cultural year 1995, at least in the public sphere, but just like this author, pupils were taught about the famous Luxembourger Edward Steichen and his photography. That Steichen had lived only here for his first eighteen months of life was left out, and so was the rather complicated relationship between him and his native country. Edouard became Edward in America. Steichen's life exemplified the American dream. A family that came from nowhere, the son who would become world famous. This fame was not because of his Luxembourgish roots but his determination and the fact that he lived in a country that was (eventually) more open-minded towards photography as an art form than his native Luxembourg, where his art was only rightly recognised long after his passing. It was also because his parents believed in a better future in the USA, as many other Luxembourgers then, and that they supported their son in his artistic endeavour.

Unfortunately, the voices of nation-branding still appear. Recurringly, Steichen is made more Luxembourgish than he was. He prominently appears on the cover of a graphic novel about Luxembourg (published by Crossmedia in 2025), alongside the royal family, Robert Schuman, Charly Gaul, and John the Blind (also known as John of Bohemia). Next to no information is given about him, even less about the tense relationship with Luxembourg in the 1950s, but far worse, they attribute Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* to him. On a government website, a so-called emoxie packages the name *Family of Man* into the country's old 'Let's make it happen' logo, making it appear as something distinctly Luxembourgish in nature.[44] To be plain, both attempts at nation-branding just look clumsy.

At the time of writing, however, the CNA informed the authors that new international plans were being considered to revive the universalist message as well. It goes without saying that this message is reflected upon differently in 2025 than in 1955, and it does not stand without criticism. However, anything that underlines *The Family of Man's* international aspect, without nation-branding or Cold War propaganda, can only be regarded as a step in the right direction, as an exhibition that intended to show its viewers that diplomacy and cooperation were the way to avoid further wars. While this message rings emptier than it has since the mid-twentieth century today, and the UN is paralysed in its functioning, it can be fruitful to be reminded of Steichen's optimism. Whether one concludes that he was naively hopeful or that there is a shred of realism in his message remains a matter of debate.

Far less debatable is the fact that nation-branding undermines the pluralist messages that cultural diplomacy intends to disseminate. In the case of *The Family*

[44] Website of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg. 2026. https://luxembourg.public.lu/en/emoxies/family-of-man.html.

of Man, this was only resolved when a third party, the CNA, although funded by the government, was independent in its actions and given custodianship of the exhibition. It was not only the detachment from national institutions but also the expertise in curation and art that restored *The Family of Man's* universalist message, as intended by the artist (although that same message is also heavily debated, as previously shown). Thus, after highlighting several bad practices, one best-practice scenario that can be recommended in cultural diplomacy is that, after the diplomatic exchanges have been settled by national experts, the cultural aspect should be handled by people with the necessary expertise. As of 2025, there are many such centres that handle cultural affairs for their governments, such as the Goethe Institute or the British Council, and there are many others. However, they are predominantly found in Europe and large to medium-sized states. Therefore, a scenario like the international tour and/or the local reception of *The Family of M*an may very well repeat itself. Artists and cultural experts as stakeholders are the way forward to remove nation-branding as a constraint on cultural diplomacy.

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Memory, Power, and Inclusion: Postcolonial, Gendered, and Minority Perspectives

Colonialism as a Non-Evident Issue in Cultural Diplomacy in Europe

Beata Ociepka

1 Introduction

The colonial past belongs to the contexts that contribute to the decisions on target regions and issues covered by cultural diplomacy. In Europe, some countries were colonizers, whereas some of them would rather claim that they were colonized. These two positions potentially contribute to different approaches represented in cultural policy, both at the domestic level and when aimed at partners abroad.

This chapter[1] discusses this diversity in the context of both Western and Eastern Europe (the latter referring to EU members that joined in 2004 and 2007, having constituted the Soviet bloc before 1989; Ukraine is added as the non-EU part of Eastern Europe), while focusing on colonialism as an issue in cultural diplomacy. At the same time, the study reveals the most notorious division to be the one between "the old colonizers" and the "post-World War I newcomers" in Europe's race for colonies and their resources, which is reflected in debates about culture up to the present.

The fact that Germany, Poland, and Ukraine were selected for the purposes of this study may be surprising at first glance. Their colonial experience definitely differs and might be questionable. However, their geopolitical location in the heart of Europe linked their fate in the sense of political domination, conflict, subjugation, and eventually cooperation. Germany used to be a colonial power, officially

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accepting 1918 as the end of the German colonial era; nevertheless, the public debates in the country hardly touched upon the applicability of the colonial lens to its relations with its Eastern neighbours as a way of understanding the profound consequences of the World War II occupation as an act of brutal colonization. Poland, after regaining independence in 1918, searched for opportunities to join the club of colonizers in the interwar period. Due to Poland's history, the country serves as an example of both a colonizing and a colonized country, one that adopted the colonial frame in public discourse about international cultural relations after 1918. Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Ukrainian relations have been discussed by historians and students of culture through the postcolonial lens, even if this approach has contributed to political conflict, as the right-wing political scene in Poland has rejected any idea of Poland as a colonizer (Sowa, 2011). What is more, Germany and Poland have been interlinked by an asymmetric colonial discourse. Some of Poland's politicians and political parties accused Germany after 1989 of colonialization in not only economic and political but also cultural terms, an issue that has been recognized in Germany but hardly treated seriously. Postcolonial discourse has also been a part of Polish-Ukrainian debates, with the main question concerning the consequences of the subordination of Ukraine to Poland before the Polish state disappeared from the maps of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and in the interwar period.

Ukraine reopened the debate on decolonizing[2] culture, aimed against colonial Russia after 2014. The Ukrainian case, once again, draws attention to imperial Russia and its relations with the former Soviet Republics, which regained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union but were hardly safe from Russian cultural neo-colonialism.

Adding the postcolonial frame to the current study goes against the trend, as the majority of studies have been focused on nineteenth—and twentieth-century colonialism and culture, whereas the cases studied in this chapter come from the last 25 years. Thus, this study's intention is to concentrate on debates and developments after the year 2000, for two reasons: first, in the twenty-first century, the debates on postcolonial redress gained momentum, an observation that I illustrate here using the case of the "Benin Bronzes" and their role in the cultural diplomacy of Germany. Second, after the 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine, the colonial and postcolonial narratives became visible in the field of international cultural relations and in the cultural diplomacy of Ukraine, as well as in the other countries of Europe. Ukrainian post-colonial debates after the fall of the USSR and the inclusion of decolonization in the country's cultural diplomacy strategy became the reasons for looking at whether and how cultural diplomacy in Europe has been involved in resolving tensions arising from post-colonial debates.

[2] Decolonisation in this study relates to the process of deconstructing narratives of domination and subjugation that have their roots in colonial times, which usually takes place in the postcolonial period. The article is strongly focused on museums because these institutions should be seen as relevant actors of cultural diplomacy that contribute to the construction and proliferation of strategic narratives (the latter understood in line with Miskimmon et al. (2013, 2 and next).

In the studied field, cultural diplomacy (CD) has been understood in two ways. For the purposes of this analysis, I refer to them as the narrow and wider understandings of cultural diplomacy. In the narrow understanding, CD has been seen as belonging to activities undertaken by the state to regulate issues focused on culture in international relations through interstate and multilateral agreements. In a wider understanding, cultural diplomacy works as a subnetwork of public diplomacy, its objective being to contribute to understanding among actors in international relations, while involving them in interactions focused on culture. In cultural diplomacy that is in line with the latter meaning, hierarchical flows are replaced nowadays by multidirectional flows, and interpersonal encounters seem to be as important as achieving any political goals.[3] This means that postcolonial issues will be picked up and debated also by non-state actors in international relations. When seen as a subnetwork of public diplomacy, CD involves non-state organizations and companies that operate as actors in international relations. In the latter model, foreign ministries and ministries of culture interchangeably play the roles of originators and controllers of cultural diplomacy initiatives and their coordinators. In line with both models, ministries can cover the whole or the majority of needed funds out of their budgets.

In this study, the second, wider understanding of cultural diplomacy leads to the question: to what extent have colonial and postcolonial issues been included in state and non-state cultural diplomacy efforts in trans-European relations? Have the EU countries realized the impact of colonial and postcolonial narratives on trans-European relations? These questions result from the assumption that such narratives have been present in trans-European encounters.

Because of the relevance of postcolonial redress in cultural diplomacy in its first, narrower understanding, the study starts with the case of the Benin Bronzes.

2 The Benin Bronzes, Museums, and Cultural Diplomacy

In December 2022, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Minister for Culture Claudia Roth undertook an official visit to Abuga in Nigeria to return twenty items of Benin Bronzes from German museums. The collection, looted by the British after 1897 from the Kingdom of Benin (British Museum, n.d.) consists of plaques and sculptures made mainly of bronze. Up to the present, they have constituted the core of contemporary Nigerian identity. After they had been looted, the Benin Bronzes were dispersed in the world, sold, and exchanged between museums, many located in Germany. Some elements found a place also in Poland's State Museum for Ethnography after World War II. This collection draws attention

[3] This chapter doesn't delve into the discussion about the differences between cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations, which might be followed for example in the recent publication by Biyun Zhu (2025), but uses the definition by Beata Ociepka (2025, 23) as the frame for the narrow and the wider understanding of cultural diplomacy.

to ethnographic museums, mainly state-owned, which in CD studies are considered relevant actors of cultural diplomacy, involved not only in international cultural relations but also in creating narratives about the colonized and colonizers.

The Benin Bronzes were the object of negotiations before Nigeria gained independence in 1960, and over the years became one of the illustrative cases of the engagement of cultural diplomacy in the narrow sense in the process of postcolonial returns of cultural artifacts. The Nigerian restitution claims brought results in 2022, when the London Horniman Museum returned a part of its collection to Nigeria, whereas the 900 artifacts remained in the British Museum (Sherwood, 2022). Cynthia Scott, in her book on postcolonial returns (2020), discussed the case and contributed a relevant observation about the frames in postcolonial debates that are typical for former colonizers. At first, when British soldiers stole the bronzes, this act was seen as a consequence of the British "civilizing mission" in Africa. When the British museums refused to return them, their directors and curators explained their decisions while developing narratives about the "universality" of collections in the world's largest museums. Scott explained, while discussing a declaration that the museums signed in 2002:

> […] the directors of eighteen museums presented a united front—between the United States, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Russia—when they issued in late 2002 a defensive "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums." Illustrating the persistence of the "universalism" vs. "nationalism" debate, yet contradicting any nationalism displayed by their own policies, the Declaration reasserted that museums played a "universal" role that overrode the desire of individual countries or "racial groups" for returns (Scott, 2020, 157, 163).

The British Museum did not sign the Declaration but supported it, whereas one of the signatories was the director of the Russian Hermitage in St. Petersburg (Scott, 2020), the same museum director who supported Russia's aggression against Ukraine twenty years later (Kishkovsky, 2022). The strategic narratives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries supported the right of the colonizer to take over looted artworks.

The returns of German collections evoked a vivid debate in Germany, which is reflected in the reports of German external cultural and educational policy (Ausländische Kultur und Bildungsarbeit, AKBP).[4] The official documents on AKBP confirm that, in 2022, German dispute about its colonial heritage gained momentum (Deutscher Bundestag, 2023) and, at the same time, new programs and projects of the AKBP in the postcolonial context were being developed. They were aimed at former German overseas colonies and their inhabitants. Post-colonial returns have not been linked with the restitution of the cultural goods looted during World War II. From the perspective of this study, the declaration that the year

[4] In this article, the German AKBP is understood as an equivalent for cultural diplomacy.

1918 marks the end of the German colonial era[5] is a relevant observation, as it leaves the German Nazi-looted cultural artifacts, such as from Poland, out of the debate on colonial redress between the countries. While taking responsibility for German atrocities during World War II in Poland, this narrative excludes World War II from the German colonial past, and clashes with decolonial narratives about Germany, popular in Poland, contributing to a conflict of memory between Germany and Poland. Therefore, postcolonialism as an issue has been present in the German AKBP, but only in the version represented in international relations by the "blue water" (or "salt water") thesis. In line with the latter, colonialism meant relations of domination and subjugation between an imperial state and communities (usually forming no formal state in the Western sense) that were divided by sea, which symbolized a geographical but also cultural distance (Porter, 2008).

In the German case, the involvement of the government in the Benin Bronzes case was very direct. In the AKBP, it was reflected in the growing support for projects with the former colonies. This trend goes hand in hand with the efforts of former colonial states that have been investing in development aid for, and development cooperation with, their former colonies. Cultural diplomacy has been implemented simultaneously, even if such efforts might be understood under some circumstances as a form of cultural imperialism.[6] However, the restitution of looted cultural artifacts does not have to be an issue of cultural diplomacy, as the actors of CD, the colonized and the colonizers, can intentionally avoid the controversial issue. For example, FICEP (Forum des Instituts Culturels Étrangers à Paris), the association of cultural institutes of countries that are represented by their institutes in Paris, has as members both French and Algerian establishments of culture and cultural diplomacy, but neither the French nor the Algerian partner has introduced issues of their colonial past into the operation of FICEP (personal communication, 2024).

The case of the Benin Bronzes directs attention to the overseas colonialism of EU members who were colonizers, and who took efforts after World War II to improve relations with their former colonies. In Europe it became a symbol of looted African art and the process of its restitution. In the German case, it was more about postcolonial repair than about decolonizing the museum, although the latter trend has also been visible in Germany. The process of decolonizing museums has its roots in the 1980s. The trend reached museums with some delay, quite often as the result of citizen activism rather than the efforts of governments that were financially supporting ethnographic state museums. In this context, the Benin Bronzes, as a collection, have been a relevant case for Europe, at least for the UK and Germany and their colonial past. We can find similar examples in

[5] This is how the German government saw the question in 2018: "Im November 2018 jährt sich der 100. Jahrestag des Waffenstillstands von Compiègne und damit das Ende der deutschen kolonialen Herrschaft, die mehrere Hunderttausend Menschen in den betroffenen Gebieten das Leben kostete und die Gesellschaften in den später entstandenen Staaten bis heute nachhaltig prägt" (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019).

[6] The equation was discussed i.a. in the volume by Martina Topic and Sinia Rodin (2012).

other countries as well, such as the decolonization of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, which underwent reconstruction and was given a new mission, more inclusive and presenting the atrocities of Belgian colonial rule in Congo, one of the most relevant decolonial cases debated in Europe. The Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren contributed a lot to studies on what it means to decolonize a museum and when it might be seen as a success. Bruno Verbergt, for example, showed it as a complex process. Although the exhibitions could be changed in the foreseeable future, their impact on decolonization might be far from what was expected (Verbergt, 2020).

However, in the German case as well, the AKBP has found some spaces for postcolonial debates that focus mainly on the colonial heritage in the former Soviet Republics, such as Kazakhstan, or on the consequences of wars, such as that between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Goethe-Institut, 2025). Still, the Soviet context seems to form an acceptable, even if not "blue water," case for debates on colonialism within the German AKBP. The Goethe-Institut also realized this, and joined the efforts of Nordic European countries to debate "Nordic colonialism" as represented by the fate of Sami people (Goethe-Institut, 2023, 70).

In this context, the fact that the Benin Bronzes became an issue also in Poland might be surprising. Poland is not an evident case in this study, as a country that never had colonies overseas but had a Sea and Colonial League (Liga Morska i Kolonialna) before 1939, an association working for "more equity" in access to colonies after World War I. Poles represented the opinion at that time that the "old" colonizers were supposed to share "their colonies" with the newcomers, the states that did not exist before 1918 or that regained their statehood after World War I. But the assumption, as mentioned by Witek Orski and Magdalena Wróblewska, the curators of "Bleaching" (Wybielanie), an exhibition presented at Poland's State Ethnographic Museum in 2025, is that Poland had overseas colonies neither before 1795, nor after 1918, but in the interwar period it shared the approach to the New World as a place of Western domination. Even before regaining independence in 1918, Polish thinkers, travellers, and politicians had been taking over the colonial thought dominating in Europe as the core element of the European stance in international relations.

The "Bleaching" exhibition in Poland must be seen in this context as Poland's contribution to the debate on decolonizing museums. As not many artifacts were available to be presented, the curators directed viewers' attention to photographs. In line with approaches represented by, for example, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2012), photography from "exotic" places has played a relevant role in establishing and preserving the subjugation of the colonized, while presenting them as objects (Państwowe, 2025). This trend was also deconstructed in the collection of the Polish museum. It served as evidence that colonial narratives were being taken on by representatives of a country with no colonies.

Having no overseas colonies does not mean that the issue has not been debated in the country. The Polish postcolonial discussion actually started after 2004 and gained momentum at least twice, between 2006 and 2010 (Kołodziejczyk, 2010): as one of the consequences of joining the EU; and in 2022, when Russia attacked

Ukraine for the second time, thereby displaying its imperial and colonial understanding of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood. During this second phase of Poland's postcolonial debate, Poland's galleries and museums, such as Zachęta Gallery and the Polish Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, organized exhibitions framed by postcolonial discourses. Zachęta showed "Potential Histories" at the turn of 2024 and 2025, directly based on Azoulay's (2019) idea of potential history and focusing on postcolonial geographical spaces such as the Near East and North Africa as well as Eastern Europe, with the profound impact of Russian imperialism (Zachęta). The second exhibition in the State Ethnography Museum (mentioned above) was quite small, presenting in just two rooms the artifacts brought to Poland by collectors, travellers, engineers, or representatives of other professions who worked in African countries and collected African art. Among the artifacts were parts of the Benin Bronzes. One of the pieces from the collection was sold to the museum in Warsaw by its owner Ryszard Bojarski in 2017 and withdrawn from the exhibition in 2024. The second element came from the "Department of Ethnography at the University of Breslau; it was brought to Warsaw in 1949 […]" (Państwowe, 2025). The two artifacts link the Polish case with the German one; however, the latter also draws attention to the issue of restitution of collections lost as a result of World War II and the shift of borders between Poland and Germany. Heritage cultural diplomacy and provenience studies deal with these cases, partly done for and by museums. But the case hardly constitutes any issue for trans-European postcolonial relations, even if it does have some cultural diplomatic context.

What was exceptional in the case of the "Bleaching" exhibition was the fact that it evoked a discussion on Polish social media and online platforms that crossed the boundaries of the filter bubble constituted by users interested in culture and cultural diplomacy. A glimpse into the debates on X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube gives the impression that the space for "Bleaching" online, especially on social media, was much bigger than in the two rooms it occupied in the museum building. One of the reasons the exhibition went viral was the text by the curators, published on the "Bleaching" website and on the museums' social media. The official exhibition website stated:

> The temporary exhibition "Bleaching" is a self-critical look by the museum at its past. Its aim is to reveal colonial patterns and to attempt to grapple with them—this is an important task for an institution located in a country that has sought to fulfil its colonial ambitions while also being the subject of internal European colonization. The title of the exhibition refers to the myth of Poland's and other Central-Eastern European countries' "colonial innocence." (Państwowe, 2025)

What was relevant for the curators was the deconstruction of the ways the artifacts had been presented for years and the confrontation with the idea of "colonial innocence," which, as expected, attracted the attention of right-wing users of social media, one candidate for the presidential election in Poland in 2025 among them. As the curators of the exhibition assumed, the majority had not seen the exhibition. The online reactions were very illustrative of the approach to colonialism of these countries of the EU, who joined it after 2004 and before 1989 had belonged to the

Soviet bloc. In the right-wing debate online, the idea of any relevance of Poland in the history of colonialism was rejected and subordinated to Poland's master narrative of Poles as victims of the country's aggressive neighbours. In line with this approach, colonialism has no relevance in Polish history and Polish culture, and claiming otherwise is the core of a "pedagogy of shame," meaning that Poland's right-wing elites reject the critical approach to Poland's past (Szułdrzyński, 2017). The "Bleaching" exhibition took place after the liberal coalition in Poland won the 2023 election and took over governing Poland, an approach that suggests any discussion of Poland's participation in colonialism would not have been possible before 2023 in any state museum. This case thus illustrates how the content of CD depends on domestic politics and internal cultural policy.

The "Bleaching" exhibition was a part of a wider project called "Against Stereotypes," which offered insight into, for example, recent African art from a perspective usually neglected in Poland, that is, focusing on young artists and distancing itself from any "exotic" contexts. Consequently, the "Afrotopia" exhibition was presented at the same time as "Bleaching." Visitors also had access to the museum's permanent collections from Africa (the elements and photographs of the Benin Bronzes were moved to the "Bleaching" exhibition) and Asia, which the "Bleaching" exhibition intended to deconstruct.

The curators of "Bleaching" saw their efforts as a part of the decolonization of museums, a process which the German, but also Belgian museums underwent and which was intentionally launched by Ukrainian cultural diplomacy after 2014. The term has been used by Azulay in her seminal works on visual artifacts and their imperial power (2012). The claims by the curators of "Bleaching" to decolonize the photographs in the exhibition, which were taken by Polish travellers and workers in Africa, are in line with Azulay's ideas about how to decolonize, meaning to decode primarily photographs taken from the dominating position of the photographer. In the Polish case, it was not the power of any empire but the domination of white people that allowed for seeing the photographed people as objects rather than subjects. The curator of "Bleaching," Magdalena Wróblewska, summed up by asserting that it was not colonialism which was the issue in the Polish case, but racism, the othering of people (Majmurek, 2025).

The "Bleaching" exhibition created the potential to contribute to Poland's cultural diplomacy, but as of 2025, such developments have not been observed yet. Even if Poland's CD shared and proliferated the idea of equality and inclusion, it concentrated on positive messages, avoiding any direct references to colonialism and racism.

In the case of Germany, as well as in Belgium and the UK, the impact of cultural activists and social movements for decolonization might be traced. In Belgium the representatives of the Congo diaspora were involved in the decolonization of the museum in Tervuren, while in Germany the debate on decolonization involved journalists and experts, including in academia. It is not possible to trace the impact of any postcolonialist activism in the Polish case, probably because Poland never possessed overseas colonies. Thus, the "salt water" division also has consequences

for cultural diplomacy and decisions about the inclusion of colonial issues in CD strategies.

3 Decolonial Efforts of Ukrainian Cultural Diplomacy

The context in the Ukrainian case, however, is different. It bears repeating, after Chernetsky (2003), that postcolonial discourse became ubiquitous in Ukraine in the 1990s, reflecting relations with Russia as well as with the West, and very much focusing on culture. Since 2022, the Ukrainian Institute continued its program in decolonizing discourses, which to some extent links the Ukrainian efforts with the German external cultural policy focus on postcolonial approaches in cultural relations:

> For several years now, we have been working on decolonising the discourse around the collections of European and North American museums, particularly concerning artists of Ukrainian origin who are identified as "Russian." Since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the need for decolonisation has become even more urgent (Ukrainian Institute, 2022, 16).

Ukrainian diplomats, as well as curators and artists, observed that Ukrainian artifacts were labelled as "Russian" in the world's largest museums. From the Western perspective, the entangled question of Eastern identity leads to confusion, and to simplifications like identifying Ukrainian artists as Russian. The ways out are not easy, as the very current case of Marc Chagall, another artist from the "East," shows. The curators of the very popular 2025 Chagall exhibition in Vienna and Dusseldorf gave the following introduction to Chagall's works:

> Marc Chagall (1887–1985) is one of the most fascinating artists of modernism. The exhibition at the K20 of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, organized in cooperation with the Albertina in Vienna, is a monographic exhibition on the work of the Russian-French painter. Chagall grew up in the small town of Vitebsk (in present-day Belarus) as the eldest child of an Orthodox Jewish family and reflected on his origins throughout his life (Chagall, 2025).

Still, that text must be seen already as the result of decolonizing Eastern artists from the imperial Russian impact and as evidence that the decision about the artist's identity might be left to the artist, and its reflection may be traced in the artist's works. Because of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014 and thanks to Ukrainian efforts, the question of the ethnic and national identity of Central and Eastern European artists, whose works have been presented in museums globally, has become an issue in cultural diplomacy. It has also imbued cultural diplomacy with the colonial and postcolonial context even in trans-European relations. The cases show, however, that the missing knowledge about Eastern European identities and the relations between Russia and its subjugated nations contributed to the

overlooking of Eastern "sensitivities" and was an effect of the West's acceptance of Russian imperial power in Central and Eastern Europe.

Since 24 February 2022, Ukrainian decolonial efforts have gone hand in hand with a campaign against any cultural cooperation with Russia. Ukrainian cultural diplomacy has been involved in acting against Russian disinformation as well as in the decolonization of Russian cultural diplomacy narratives, which had dominated globally since the Soviet period. The struggle gained momentum at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival, due to the relevance of film in the cultural diplomacy of any European country and the fact that all film productions from the Soviet East were seen in the West as Russian. Daria Badior, Ukrainian film critic, explained:

> All of us in cultural institutions or fields should recognize the postcoloniality in the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. Ukraine has started this already, proposing its culture, art, and heritage for the world to explore, and opening this door to other underrepresented "peripheries." It is a hard task: The priority is always given to Russian culture actors, just as we see in the letter from the Cannes Film Festival (Badior, 2022).

"The letter from the Cannes Film Festival" Badior mentioned was the declaration officially supporting Ukrainians but at the same time offering understanding for anti-war Russians. Cannes 2022 had no official Russian representation, but Russian films had not been withdrawn from the program (Badior, 2022).

The comment by Badior was a part of a collection of articles published on the website of the Ukrainian Institute, written mainly by Ukrainians, but also by international curators, artists, and journalists, as reactions to Russian aggression and a reflection on Russian imperialism. This selection of texts gives insight into how Ukrainians understood the decolonization of Russian narratives about their culture and the role the West played in sharing them. Maria Nazarenko discussed the Paris exhibition "Red: Art and Utopia in the Land of Soviets" from 2019 from this angle, while using the case of K. Malevich, who used to be presented as Russian and whose fate in the Soviet Union was silenced (Nazarenko, 2022). Thus, the exhibition in 2019 focused on an idealized Russian utopia, while avoiding decolonization of Soviet art and leaving out the oppressive side of "Red" history. Exhibitions like that in Paris urged Ukrainian authors to understand their efforts in cultural diplomacy, in line with Dozier (2022), as "an act of resistance," which was hardly understood by the West that they accused of "Westplaining" about culture as well as other fields.[7] The fact that Ukrainian cultural diplomacy focused on the decolonization of Russian labels and at the same time pledged to cease cultural cooperation with Russia was explained by Vynogradov and Korneichuk in 2022:

> Any attention now toward Russian culture equals fewer opportunities for representation of the "minor" cultures that have historically suffered from Russian imperialism: Belarusians, Georgians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and so many others. For independent Ukraine

[7] "Westplaining" as a term became popular in 2022, meaning explanation of Central and Eastern Europe complexity by Western experts, not necessarily specialists in this matter (Kazharski, 2022).

> in the last eight years, the reappropriation of its cultural heritage has become part of the painstaking process of decolonization (Vynogradov & Korneichuk, 2022).

Ukrainian artists and curators stressed that Russia "took over the cultural legacy of the former [read: Soviet] republics" (Vynogradov & Korneichuk, 2022) and the 2019 Paris "Red" exhibition served as evidence. At the same time, Ukrainian CD has not touched upon the consequences of "salt water" colonialism. In a time of war, it hardly used the decolonial frame for cases from Polish-Ukrainian history. In fact, it was the opposite, as Polish and Ukrainian cultural institutions have been cooperating since Ukraine regained independence. The huge social capital which emerged out of this cooperation enabled Ukrainians to place many collections of their museums and galleries in Poland, to protect artifacts from Russian bombs after 2022. The idea behind the cooperation of museums from Europe helped also in 2022 to organize the travelling exhibition, titled "In the Eye of Storm: Modernism in Ukraine." The project initiated by Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid also involved the Belvedere in Vienna, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels, the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and, in 2025, the Museum of Art in Łódź. In cooperation with the National Art Museum of Ukraine and presenting their own collections, the museums achieved two objectives: presenting Ukrainian modernism in art from 1900 to 1939, for the first time so clearly differentiated from Russian, and at the same time protecting the artworks. The fact that the world realized the relevance of Ukrainian culture as separate from Russian might be seen as one of the biggest achievements of Ukrainian cultural diplomacy after 2014 and even more after 2022. These efforts have been framed by Ukrainians always with the narrative of Russian and Russian-Soviet colonial domination in culture and its disastrous impact on the fate of Ukrainian artists. As any colonial power, during the war, Russia intentionally destroyed Ukrainian museums, collections, and places of memory.

4 Any Place for Colonial and Postcolonial Debates in Cultural Diplomacy?

Since 2014, Ukrainian foreign and cultural policy has done a lot to introduce the issue of decolonization of culture into international debates and to gain "independent cultural recognition" (Dozier, 2022). The main strategy document for Ukrainian cultural diplomacy in the period 2020–2024 states at the very beginning:

> After the countries of Central and Eastern Europe gained independence at the turn of 1989–1990, many of them later established their own institutions designed to develop cultural ties, to present the outstanding achievements of national cultures, to demonstrate the continuity of their development. Their activity should be viewed through the optics of decolonisation, and the acquisition and establishment of political sovereignty through the potential and opportunities of culture (Ukrainian Institute, 2025, 2020, 14).

This stress on decolonization at the very beginning of the document, seminal for Ukrainian CD, confirms Chernetsky's observation about the ubiquity of postcolonial debate in the country and must be seen as unique in the region. Even if the Ukrainian Institute stressed the relevance of the postcolonial frame to the whole region of post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe, the fact has seemed not to be evident. Many postsocialist countries conducted their cultural diplomacy during the interwar period and also between 1945 and 1989. Their new governments after 1989 took over the existing institutions and developed new networks of cultural diplomacy, which, however, hardly touched upon decolonization. The countries of the region were in fact more involved in using cultural diplomacy for promotional purposes, making it similar to national branding. The objective of that time was to convince the Western community that they "were Europe" in order to create a more positive perception so that the countries could be accepted as members of the European community. The trend to "decolonize" was hardly visible with some exceptions, such as Poland's Pilecki Institute. As Poland's right-wing politicians and journalists used to accuse Germany of political domination and colonization of Poland, especially after 2004, so when the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) won elections in 2015, the new government established a new institution, responsible for politics of memory, called Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor. As the essential new actor of Poland's cultural diplomacy, the Institute opened its branch in Berlin in 2019, to "help defend the values of democracy and freedom from historical oblivion, as well as unveil a new perspective on the history of Europe by including the Polish experience of the twentieth century in international discourse" (Instytut Pileckiego). These objectives responded well to one of the main trends of Poland's cultural diplomacy, focused on sharing Poland's narratives about the history of the twentieth century, excluded from the mainstream before 1989 and dominated in the West by the Russian strategic narrative about the World War II. This task was relevant for Poland's cultural diplomacy between 2015 and 2023, first and foremost in Germany, and might be seen as a trend to decolonize discourses in trans-European relations.

In the Polish case, after 2023 the framework for discussing colonialism has expanded. Museums and galleries in Warsaw raised the idea of postcoloniality in their events; however, this was hardly reflected in Poland's cultural diplomacy as such. What the museums and galleries did was targeted at the domestic Polish audience and was a response to the understanding of cultural diplomacy as the subnetwork of public diplomacy. In this wider meaning, cultural diplomacy also has a domestic dimension as it feeds on the debates in the country and uses the master narratives, while also contributing to changing those narratives. The two exhibitions in Warsaw discussed here served the second objective.

In all three cases, "the colonial as a non-evident issue in cultural diplomacy" had a different meaning. In Germany, the postcolonial narratives were visible in cultural and educational policy in former colonies, meaning first and foremost dealing with the consequences of "salt water" colonialism. Poland on the one hand undertook efforts to decolonize narratives on history of the twentieth century in Europe, but the "salt water" postcolonial issues were hardly present in cultural

diplomacy. Ukrainian cultural diplomacy with its background in Ukrainian decolonization debates, defined decolonization as its relevant objective, which was not detectable in the two other cases.

5 Conclusion

One of the results of this short study rests on showcasing museums as actors of cultural diplomacy, a position achieved thanks to collaboration with their peers. Such a collaboration can, however, support political domination in the colonial sense of the word, as the 2002 "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" proves. Thus, the role of museums in cultural diplomacy is tied up with foreign policy objectives, but has also been shaped by domestic cultural policy and the dominating climate of opinion in the country. In fact, as in the Polish case, the introduction of postcolonial or decolonization topics into cultural relations depends on the domestic situation and the incumbent party's ideology. Museums as actors of cultural diplomacy thus have limited autonomy, but in democratic regimes, they have been able to launch debates on decolonization. Paradoxically, it has also happened when museums have refused to engage in postcolonial returns.

Azoulay claims that "traditional museums are the agents of colonization" and adds that "it is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world" (Alli, 2020). The latter process requires inclusion of the excluded, the former subjugated groups. The case of Belgium presented such attempts, even if they were not always successful. The examples discussed here open a further path to studying the heritage diplomacy that museums are involved in. This issue was not included in this chapter; however, it might be of relevance for cultural diplomacy between European countries such as Poland and Germany.

The focus on museums in this article results from the specifics of the three cases of cultural diplomacy. Among the three countries, Poland's museums stand out in joining the postcolonial (but not decolonial) discourse rather late. The East-West context is visible in the Polish and Ukrainian cases, but not in the German case.

Governments hardly realized that the potential of cultural diplomacy for creating understanding among nations, in the cosmopolitan sense, could be found in colonial and postcolonial contexts, while applied in trans-European relations. Cultural diplomacy seems to avoid controversial issues, problems of postcolonial and decolonial reality among them.

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Cold War Cultural Diplomacy: Romania's Relations with Africa—The Case of Côte D'Ivoire

Domnica Gorovei

1 Introduction

In the 1960s, the African continent has long been portrayed in Romania as the home of "primitive" civilisations, a characterisation that has shaped much of public discourse about non-European regions. As one journal article notes, Africa has preserved an ancient culture of remarkable originality and significance, where wooden figurines, ritual masks, and even everyday objects display a strong decorative sense and bold, refined stylisation aimed at maximum expressiveness. It adds that the artistic achievements of "Black Africa" even influenced some of the foremost creators of the modern era, including Pablo Picasso (Obrea, 1968, 14). Such representations reflect how the African continent was frequently framed as an exotic and culturally distinct space. Tradition and spirituality completed this general imaginary, as illustrated also in some published books (such as Gulian, 1964, 1967; Sobeski, 1975).

In the context of a changing world shaped not only by post-war bipolarity but also by decolonisation, the Eastern bloc recognised the importance of Asia and Africa and, from the 1950s onwards, developed cultural ties with these regions (Betts & Vucetic, 2022, 148). Both the United States (US) and the Soviet Union (SU) sought to restrict the expansion of each other's influence (Tella, 2021, 72). Contrary to claims that the Cold War is conceptually irrelevant to the Global South, superpower involvement profoundly shaped both the international context and domestic conditions in which political, social, and cultural transformations unfolded in Third World societies, such that regions including Africa and Asia would likely have developed very differently in its absence. At the same time,

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political elites in these regions frequently formulated their agendas in direct reference to the competing developmental models advanced by the two superpowers, and their ideological alignments often resulted in close cooperation with one side or the other (Westad, 2007, 3).

The notions of "cultural internationalism" (Mikkonen & Koivunen, 2015) and "transnationalism" (Dragostinova & Fidelis, 2018) allow for the joint analysis of state-led cultural projects and cross-border cultural contacts outside the state framework. Within this diverse landscape, this study contributes to the history of the international cultural relations. It is structured around the research question concerning the forms of cultural exchange and examines the transnational connections forged through cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange of the Romanian communist regime, with particular emphasis on its relations with Africa. Within the focus on the interactions between East and South, particular attention is given to Côte d'Ivoire. It examines the official cooperation as examples of "transnational connections" (Mikkonen et al., 2019, 1) that extended beyond ideological and political boundaries. The analysis also takes into consideration how these cultural exchanges are reflected and interpreted through the lens of the French diplomacy. Finally, the chapter examines whether these exchanges and representations reproduce the traditional, primitive and exoticised images of Africa illustrated at the beginning, or whether they instead follow a model oriented toward modernity. This research draws on a diverse corpus of primary and secondary sources. It is based mostly on archival documents on Africa held at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Official bilateral agreements published in the Official Journal were consulted in order to trace the legal and institutional framework of these relations.

This chapter is structured in four main sections. It opens with a discussion of culture as a key pillar of cooperation for development, setting the conceptual framework of the study. It then turns to Romanian diplomacy in Africa, tracing its orientations and instruments of engagement. The analysis continues with a focused examination of the bilateral cultural agreement between Romania and Côte d'Ivoire, viewed as a concrete expression of cultural cooperation. The final section brings these topics to life through selected illustrations that reveal how cultural cooperation has been implemented in practice. The main finding is that, despite Romania's articulation of far-reaching goals grounded in solidarity, modernisation, and socialist internationalism, these ambitions were persistently circumscribed by scarce material resources, tight party supervision of cultural activity, and fragile mechanisms of implementation.

2 Culture as Part of the Cooperation for Development

The"Second" and"Third" worlds share during the Global Cold War (Westad, 2007) a vision of progress toward modernity, solidarity, humanitarianism and fight against inequalities. The 1950s meant not only the first African independences but for the Eastern bloc it was a moment of awareness of the place and importance

of this continent (Roth-Ey, 2023). The fight against colonialism and racism—Portugues colonies in Africa and segregation regimes in the Southern region—became landmarks for the communist regimes whereas the Bandung Conference of 1955 and later the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) meant an alternative way to the bipolar models, with Yugoslavia playing an important part (Dinkel, 2019).

Joseph Nye's early-1990s formulation of "soft power" (1990a, 2004) remains the central reference for analyses of how states achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or material inducements, deriving from the appeal of a country's culture, political values, and policies. From this perspective, the Cold War is understood as having been shaped by a combination of coercive capabilities and attractive resources, since states may secure compliance when others admire their values and seek to emulate their example (Nye, 1990b, 50). Culture becomes an object of power within foreign policy, and cultural diplomacy functions as a public policy aimed at promoting elements of national culture abroad, as part of international relations (Kessler, 2020, 227f.).

This"cultural turn" redirects analysis from inter-state diplomacy to cultural and ideological dimensions of the Global Cold War, distinguishing between research on the strategic use of culture for political purposes—which shaped cultural production and reception—and studies of everyday practices and mentalities (Johnston, 2010). As the superpowers largely subordinated culture to political, economic, and military priorities, cultural diplomacy became a particularly effective means through which smaller states could express and project their "global visions" and "shape cultural imaginaries […] beyond the dominant East–West and North–South frameworks of exchange" (Dragostinova, 2021, 6ff, 15). The present study adopts the former approach in the case of East-South connections through the lens of the Romania-Ivorian relations.

3 The Romanian Diplomacy in Africa

Decolonisation introduced a pronounced North–South dimension into multilateral diplomacy after the Bandung Conference of 1955, followed by the establishment of the Group of 77 in Geneva and its increasing activism at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly during the 1970s in support of a "new international economic order" (Petiteville & Placidi-Frot, 2020, 38). Within this evolving international context, Romania's foreign policy—shaped successively by Stalinisation, de-Stalinisation, and a turn toward a national orientation socialism—pursued a broadly neutral rhetoric aimed at manoeuvring through this polarised global environment. This strategy enabled Nicolae Ceaușescu, after assuming power in 1965 following Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's death, to position Romania between Western, Eastern, and Southern actors. Like the other states of the Eastern Bloc, Romania pursued the expansion of its relations with the African continent. The regime projected itself internationally through officially promoted values, especially pacifism and human rights, presented as core foreign policy goals (Nye, 2004, 8, 17). As economic interests were the main objective, Romania's cooperation with

African countries was driven by development aid, with cultural diplomacy playing a complementary role. I identified four main areas through which development cooperation with Africa was pursued: cultural initiatives and exchanges involving youth and students; diplomatic coordination at the international level, particularly within the UN; economic development projects; and the promotion of socialism through political parties and trade unions.

Romania immediately recognised the new African states, then established relations with them and, in a third phase, in the 1970s, extended relations in order to better develop its economic and commercial interests. It maintained relations with a wide variety of regimes, some of which are ideologically opposed: socialist states such as Guinea and Congo-Brazzaville, but also states clearly aligned with the Western camp, such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire or Kenya. This pattern reflects a pragmatic, opportunity-driven approach to foreign relations, marked by limited ideological commitment and a lack of clearly articulated strategic priorities.

In this Cultural Cold War, British and French cultural diplomacy in Africa was directed almost exclusively toward their former colonies (Maack, 2001, 81f.). And the intensification of the cultural exchanges between Eastern Europe and newly African states "was noted in the West as a dangerous development" (Betts & Vucetic, 2022, 149), as illustrated by British commentary on Bulgaria's so-called "jungle offensive" (Dragostinova, 2021, 18). This pattern of scrutiny also applied to Romania and its engagement was closely monitored by the French Embassy in Bucharest. A 1971 report described Romania's approach as driven by classic commercial interests, comparable to colonial-type exchanges, aimed at accessing African markets and strategic resources. According to the French ambassador, Romania showed little ideological motivation, establishing relations with most African states regardless of their political orientation, with the exception of those aligned with South Africa.[1]

Despite these sustained engagements, the diplomatic cultural relations remain largely understudied. Existing scholarship has focused mainly on relations within the two blocs, treating Africa as peripheral, as reflected by the minimal coverage in recent works (Opriș, 2013; Stratone, 2023). At the same time, extensive and largely untapped archival materials offer significant opportunities to reassess Romania's role in Global South cultural diplomacy, a gap to which this study offers a limited contribution by a focus on illustrations from Côte d'Ivoire. A former French colony, it experienced long-term stability under President Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960–1993), a traditional partner of France. This study becomes particularly relevant for assessing how exchanges functioned with an African state embedded in Western-oriented networks. Romania recognised the independence of Côte d'Ivoire in 1960, with diplomatic relations formalised in 1967 and the opening of the Romanian embassy in Abidjan in 1974. Bilateral relations reached a turning point with Nicolae Ceaușescu's official visit in 1977, which led to a joint

[1] Ministère des Affaires Etrangères France, Direction des affaires africaines et malgaches, 1959–1979, 436, Afr. 7.4,"Roumanie", 2f.

communiqué and the creation of a Joint High Commission for cooperation in economic, legal, scientific, technical, and cultural fields, building on earlier contacts such as the 1973 high-level meeting in Morocco. Reflecting on this moment, President Houphouët-Boigny noted in a 1988 letter that Ceaușescu's visit enabled new agreements and strengthened cooperation, particularly in the economic and cultural domains.[2] Yet official summaries by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs framed cultural and scientific cooperation primarily through information, media, and training, supported by separate agreements in press agencies and radio and television.[3]

For smaller states, cultural diplomacy was an alternative key for pursuing strategic hard power objectives. State-sponsored cultural activities, such as exhibitions, concerts, and literary events, were centrally planned and closely supervised, serving the broader goal of promoting socialist internationalism (Dragostinova, 2021, 7ff). Within the Eastern bloc, bilateral cultural agreements became a standard tool of foreign policy (Mikkonen et al., 2019, 7f), and for Romania they were an indispensable component of diplomatic relations, complementing technical, economic, and sector-specific initiatives framed as contributions to modernisation and development. This approach produced a high degree of standardisation: once diplomatic ties were established, a largely uniform set of agreements was proposed, with cultural cooperation systematically included. Such practices invite closer scrutiny of the content of these agreements: whether they were adapted to African contexts during decolonisation or simply replicated a generic model, and to what extent ideological considerations were embedded within them. Romanian diplomatic archives[4] suggest that agreements were prepared in advance, with ideology playing a secondary role, revealing the limits and contradictions of these exchanges. The case of Mauritania is illustrative: despite acknowledgment that cultural activity is non-existent,[5] Romanian authorities continued to press for a cultural agreement, which the Mauritanian side ultimately did not sign. This prompts a central question: what did "cultural relations" actually encompass? The analysis therefore begins with the official texts before turning to concrete cultural policies and actions.

[2] Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, hereafter AMAE), Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1988, vol. 312, 23.
[3] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire /1979, vol. 490, 5.
[4] Senegal, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Burkina Faso.
[5] AMAE, Problem 229, Mauritania/1960, vol. 1, 11.

4 The Cultural and Scientific Agreement

This section focuses on the Cultural and Scientific Cooperation Agreement between Romania and Côte d'Ivoire, signed in Abidjan in 1977.[6] As in many bilateral cases, Romania initiated the negotiations, while the Ivorian authorities proved initially reluctant. A first draft was transmitted in 1975, yet discussions extended over nearly three years and the agreement was ultimately signed only in the context of Ceaușescu's official visit. Concluded for a two-year period, the negotiations were notably more complex than in other African cases, such as Upper Volta (nowadays Burkina Faso). Despite repeated affirmations of cooperation in official exchanges, the drafting process was marked by delays and obstacles, including unanswered Romanian correspondence. Earlier indications of hesitation existed already in 1970, when Côte d'Ivoire's Minister of Information did not accept an invitation to visit Romania, citing a crowded agenda. This pattern of reticence should be understood against the backdrop of Côte d'Ivoire's close relationship with France and its cautious stance toward engagement with the Eastern bloc.

The bilateral Cultural Agreement comprised ten articles outlining cooperation across a broad range of fields, including education, scientific research, the arts and film, media and broadcasting, sports, tourism, and participation in organised events. It also introduced a provision on "popularisation," through which each party committed to facilitating and promoting the other's cultural, scientific, and artistic achievements in accordance with domestic legislation. The preamble framed these commitments as a means of strengthening friendly relations through reciprocal exchanges in education, culture, science, public health, media, and sport. More explicit references to solidarity and development appeared in articles 6 and 8, which addressed assistance in science, education, and health, notably through the temporary dispatch of specialists under jointly agreed protocols. Despite this aspect, the agreement does not seem to be specifically adapted to the needs of a developing country, rather adhering to standard diplomatic principles of sovereignty, independence, equality and mutual benefit. The emphasis on non-interference is consistently requested by Côte d'Ivoire, reflecting lingering sensitivities after the 1969 crisis, when Ivorian authorities accused the Soviet Union of involvement in student unrest and adopted a more cautious stance toward the socialist bloc. In this context, Romania emerged as a more acceptable partner, owing both to its traditional ties with France and to the momentum generated by Ceaușescu's African tour in 1972 (Anton, 2018).

The existence of formal agreements, however, does not necessarily reflect the reality of cultural interaction. Diplomatic archives point to a certain reluctance to define exchanges with Côte d'Ivoire explicitly as cultural, revealing broader ambiguities in how these interactions were conceptualised and recorded. In the embassy's annual reports, references to a cultural program are placed under the

[6] Signed at Abidjan on 1 March 1977, the final version of the text published in *Buletinul Oficial* [Official Gazette], 4f.

heading of "propaganda." This framing was already present in the 1975 embassy plan, which classified all cultural activities as propaganda while, for the first time, proposing the conclusion of a cultural cooperation agreement and an accompanying exchange program. The 1979 plan continued this approach, consistently subsuming cultural initiatives within the broader category of propaganda.[7] This illustrates how the cultural Cold War functioned, at least in part, as a contest of propaganda and ideology (Johnston, 2010, 296). It also underscores the particular ambiguities of a communist system, where the boundary between propaganda and information was far more blurred than in democratic contexts.

To assess the real scope of these commitments, it is essential to examine the exchanges that were actually carried out. Although the Romanian Embassy in Abidjan drafted ambitious cultural plans each year, formal agreements alone did not necessarily reflect the reality of cultural interaction. The following section therefore looks at concrete examples of cultural activities to evaluate how, and to what extent, the agreement was implemented.

5 Some Illustrations

Eastern European states used official visits and ceremonial cultural events to signal cordial relations with newly independent African countries and to project political solidarity where historical ties were limited (Betts & Vucetic, 2022, 150f.). Culture thus emerged not only through state-led cultural diplomacy but also through personal exchanges (Mikkonen et al., 2019, 9; Nye, 2004, 13). From the late 1960s, international mobility became an increasingly important foreign-policy tool for socialist states. Presidential visits routinely produced economic and technical agreements, including cultural and education clauses. Their primary function was to legitimise economic cooperation and enhance Romania's international prestige, particularly during Ceaușescu's African tours. These visits helped position Romania within the North–South dialogue and closer to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Côte d'Ivoire's neutral international stance was especially significant for Romania, given its membership in both the NAM and the Group of 77, as well as the mutual engagement for the"new international economic order."[8] The African tours[9] were not only symbolic but also designed to assert autonomy from the Soviet bloc, secure economic agreements, and obtain diplomatic support. Romania's most active bilateral relationships coincided with these high-level exchanges, which consistently incorporated socio-cultural objectives. Notably, the Ivorian president was among the few African leaders who never visited Romania,

[7] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1979, vol. 489, 16ff.
[8] AMAE, Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 852, 60.
[9] 1972: Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Central African Republic, Congo, Zair, Tanzania, Zambia; 1973: Senegal, Morocco, Algeria; 1974 Liberia, Guinea; 1977 Mauritania, Senegal, Ghana. Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria; 1979 Libya, Gabon, Angola, Zambia, Mozambique, Burundi, Sudan, Egypt.

despite an oral invitation extended as early as 1975. In contrast, Ceaușescu's 1977 visit to Côte d'Ivoire,[10] widely presented as"the first by a socialist head of state," was framed as a moment of considerable symbolic and diplomatic significance.[11] At the time, hunting often served as an informal means of political bonding (Vujosevic, 2018), and Ceaușescu, an avid hunter, had hoped to include such an occasion in the program. Yet a presidential decree issued two years earlier had imposed an indefinite ban on hunting to protect wildlife, and since Boigny himself did not hunt, the idea was abandoned. For the Ivoirian president, the true highlight was the visit to Yamoussoukro, his hometown and future capital, an honour reserved for what he described as his "closest friends," a mark of particular esteem and regard.[12] Although cultural diplomacy formed part of the backdrop, it remained secondary.

Each year, the Romanian Embassy in Abidjan set out an ambitious program of cultural exchange designed to enhance Romania's visibility in Côte d'Ivoire. As early as 1975, these plans envisioned a broad array of initiatives: photographic exhibitions showcasing contemporary Romania, displays of folk art, and tours by Romanian performance ensembles in one or two Ivorian cities. Film played a central role as well, with proposals for a Romanian film week—or even a full month—in Abidjan, complemented by the broadcast of documentaries and feature films on Ivorian television, as well as radio and television programs devoted specifically to Romania.[13] A few proposed initiatives were accepted and often plans failed to move beyond the planning stage. In January 1978, for instance, during the economic exhibition in Abidjan, the Romanian Embassy put forward a proposal to organise a Romanian culinary exhibition and to include a folk ensemble in the program. The initiative was ultimately rejected by Romanian headquarters, which cited the limited flow of tourists from Côte d'Ivoire to Romania and the lack of sufficient financial resources to justify such expenditures.[14]

National holidays were systematically marked through cultural events, and Romanian diplomats consistently pressed for favourable media coverage, particularly in the wake of high-level bilateral visits. For the commemoration of *communist national holiday—23 August—, Romania* sent a documentary exhibition comprising photographs, handicrafts, books, and records, accompanied by two short films intended to reinforce the historical and cultural narrative promoted by the state.[15] The Romanian side also suggested commemorating the tenth anniversary of bilateral relations through an official message from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published in the press. This initiative, however, was ultimately abandoned, as Côte d'Ivoire did not observe such a practice.[16]

[10] February 27-March 2.
[11] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1979, vol. 490, 2.
[12] AMAE, Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 853, 8, 39.
[13] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1975, vol. 1501, 8–10.
[14] AMAE, Problem 212, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 839, 7.
[15] AMAE, Problem 212, Côte d'Ivoire/1975, vol. 1975, 2f.
[16] AMAE, Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, CDF-RSR, vol. 853, 4.

Within an international celebration of socialist unity through diversity, theory on cultural policy distinguishes between "high socialist culture" and "traditional folk culture," assigning them different political functions. High socialist culture—circulated through exhibitions, trade fairs, classical concerts, and touring exhibitions—often reproduced cultural hierarchies by emphasising the distance between Eastern Europeans and their counterparts in Africa and Asia. In contrast, traditional folk culture was promoted as a means to reduce perceived distance and to challenge such hierarchies, foregrounding shared popular traditions as evidence of the"international celebration of socialist unity through diversity" (Betts & Vucetic, 2022, 154). Romania-Côte d'Ivoire Agreement promoted reciprocal visits by writers, artists, ensembles, and filmmakers; joint exhibitions; translation and publication of literary and scientific works; and exchanges among cultural institutions (art. 3), alongside facilitated participation of cultural and scientific personalities in international events (art. 5). Together, these provisions institutionalised both elite and popular cultural forms within a shared socialist cultural diplomacy. In 1976, for example, the main propaganda event was the "Art and Culture in the RSR" exhibition, held in the Abidjan City Hall ballroom. Under the official patronage of the Ministry of Culture, it was a success, but the same report noted that "the progress made is far from reflecting the possibilities offered by this sector; propaganda activities will have to be expanded through concrete actions to other sectors such as cultural centres, libraries, and other cultural institutions."[17]

As the Romanian regime became increasingly personalised, the nature and thematic focus of cultural exhibitions organised abroad also evolved. By 1981, an exhibition held in Abidjan featured a selection of Romanian publications prominently highlighting works that conveyed the economic and political thought of President Ceaușescu. This shift reflected the growing centrality of the leader's ideological vision within Romania's cultural diplomacy and external cultural representation.[18]

The growing disconnect between planning and implementation was clearly exposed in 1977, during the tour of the Romanian "Doina" ensemble. The tour concluded unsuccessfully, leaving the performers stranded without adequate financial support and forced to endure precarious living conditions. The timing of the tour proved ill-chosen, as the summer season limited audiences, while a planned stop in Brazzaville was cancelled altogether. Romanian authorities, constrained by budgetary shortages, intervened only after repeated exchanges of correspondence and ultimately covered no more than basic food expenses. At the same time, proposals for a reciprocal visit by an Ivoirian ensemble to Romania elicited no response from the Ivoirian side, further underscoring the asymmetry between ambition and practical cooperation.[19]

[17] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1976, vol. 1334, 27.
[18] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1979, vol. 490, 5.
[19] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 851.

Educational exchange, the presence of students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and the work of specialised institutions for foreign students were part of the East-South cooperation (Dragostinova, 2021, 13). Education served as a central channel for transmitting ideas and values, with academic and scientific exchanges, scholarships, and language training playing a key role (Katsakioris, 2019; Saint Martin et al., 2015). During the Cold War, universities and national education systems lay at the heart of ideological competition, shaping elite orientations and political loyalties and functioning as instruments for influencing future leaders within broader strategies of foreign policy and national security (Tsvetkova, 2019, 139). The Agreement Romania-Côte d'Ivoire reveals a strong emphasis on education, science, and research as core components of bilateral exchange, cited at the beginning of the text (art. 1 & 2). It prioritised educational cooperation through partnerships between universities, reciprocal visits by teaching staff, the mutual provision of scholarships, and the exchange of materials intended for the production of educational content about the partner country. Scientific collaboration was likewise defined in terms of reciprocal visits by researchers and the exchange of books and scientific information, underscoring a shared view of knowledge exchange as both an academic and a diplomatic instrument.

Western countries—Britain, France, and the United States—employed comparable strategies in their cultural engagement with Francophone Africa, notably through language instruction and the establishment of cultural centres with libraries reflecting national heritage (Maack, 2001, 58). The archival documents point to a deliberate policy aimed at improving Romania's representation at the educational level in Côte d'Ivoire. Authorities sought to influence the content of school textbooks and educational television programs by supplying updated, authoritative documentary materials and by establishing institutional contacts with the Ivorian bodies responsible for educational broadcasting and curriculum development. This approach was shaped by local conditions, notably the reliance on school television to compensate for shortages of teaching staff, especially outside major urban centres. While Romania was already presented in Ivorian educational materials in a generally accurate manner, the information was outdated and limited. The policy therefore focused on providing modern reference materials and engaging directly with educational and media institutions in order to ensure a more current, comprehensive, and systematic portrayal of Romania within the formal education system, despite structural constraints such as the production of textbooks abroad, particularly in France.[20]

On the verge of Ceaușescu's 1977 visit the training of personnel was cited by the Ivoirian partner as a priority, proposing the conclusion of an Agreement on the equivalence of educational qualifications.[21] In practice, most individual student applications were rejected as Romania did not have the necessary means to

[20] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1975, 1.
[21] AMAE, Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 853, 34.

accommodate all requests. Some exceptions existed, as the one of an Ivorian candidate who wished to study medicine. Given his leftist views, his appreciation of Romania's foreign policy toward developing countries, and the fact that Côte d'Ivoire had not used its Romanian government scholarship that year, it was proposed to support him in securing a Romanian UNESCO scholarship or, failing that, a Romanian scholarship. The Romanian embassy in Paris unsuccessfully sought Ivorian approval, and the student, having returned to Paris, advised against further pressure, noting that the authorities "tended to prevent their youth from studying in socialist countries."[22] Other requests met refusal. A letter and CV sent by the head of the library of the African Institute for Economic and Social Development in Abidjan, seeking a scholarship for himself, received a negative opinion from the Ministry of Education.[23]

In 1977, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to increase publicity around Romania's achievements by highlighting the number of Ivorian university graduates trained in Romania.[24] From the mid-1970s onward, the number of Ivoirian students in Romania rose steadily, mirroring the expansion of Romanian government-funded scholarships as an instrument of educational and cultural diplomacy. In the academic years 1972–1973 and 1974–1975, enrolment remained minimal, with only two students from Côte d'Ivoire each year, suggesting a limited and largely symbolic exchange. This pattern began to shift in 1975–1976, when seven Ivoirian students were enrolled under Romanian government scholarships. The growth continued in the following years, reaching ten students in 1976–1977 and peaking at 23 in 1977–1978.[25] By 1981–1982, however, only a single scholarship was awarded, and the number of Ivoirian students declined to five the following year, indicating the fragility of these educational exchanges and their dependence on changing political and economic priorities.

Radio emerged as a central arena of cultural and informational competition, alongside festivals, exhibitions, exchanges, and the circulation of prominent cultural figures. More than a channel for news and propaganda, radio served as a powerful medium for transmitting music as well as poetry and literary works (Johnston, 2010, 299). As the Cold War intensified, radio came to symbolise a broader tension between advocates of slower, traditional forms of cultural diplomacy and those who favoured faster media capable of producing more immediate political effects (Nye, 2004, 102f.). This helps explain why radio occupied such a prominent place in Romania-Africa exchanges, a priority clearly reflected in diplomatic correspondence. Article 4 of the Agreement with Côte d'Ivoire underscored cooperation in press, radio, and television, calling for direct collaboration between media institutions and the reciprocal exchange of journalists and reporters. In this context, a journalist from *Fraternité Matin*, appointed by the Ivorian Ministry

[22] AMAE, Problem 217/B, Côte d'Ivoire/1973, vol. 1601, 2–12.
[23] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1975, vol. 1506, 1f.
[24] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 832, 12.
[25] AMAE, Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 853, 25.

of Information, was initially scheduled to undertake an official visit to Romania. Severe flooding, however, forced the postponement of the visit. As a result, Noël Zadi, who had been invited by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was replaced by Jean-Pierre Ayé, as Zadi was no longer able to participate. The visit, planned for seven days, was to be fully funded by the Romanian authorities, with the exception of international travel, and aimed to encourage broader and more substantial coverage of Romania in the Ivorian press.[26] Media cooperation intensified over the following years. In 1976, discussions took place regarding the possibility of a Radio Côte d'Ivoire interview with the Romanian ambassador, pending the necessary approvals and agreement on content.[27] Relations reached their peak in Ceaușescu's 1977 visit. This moment generated heightened media activity: more than thirty articles, information reports, and documentaries based on material supplied by the Romanian Embassy; over twenty Romanian documentaries broadcast on television; and twelve special radio and television programs dedicated to Romania.[28] That same year, a formal cooperation Agreement in the fields of broadcasting and the press was signed.

Earlier efforts had already laid the groundwork for this expansion. Between June and December 1975, ten Romanian documentary films were broadcast on Ivorian television, on the achievements of socialism (about the capital-city Bucharest, one about Cluj, another about chemistry, etc.). In radio broadcasting, two Romanian music programs were organised. Toward the end of the year, the publication of an article in the journal *Eburnea* was secured, accompanied by an introductory commentary marking the anniversary of the proclamation of the Socialist Republic of Romania. At the same time, Romanian officials identified as an immediate priority the completion of the Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation, along with a formal cooperation arrangement between the radio and television organisations of the two countries.[29] The next year, the propaganda film"Life and Culture" had been donated by Romanian Television to the television station in Abidjan, further illustrating the growing role of audiovisual media in bilateral cultural relations.[30]

The Cultural Agreement with Côte d'Ivoire emphasised cooperation in the fields of sports and tourism (art. 7). A delegation from the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire visited Romania to observe and learn from its approaches to physical education and sports development. In 1976, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also travelled to Romania to study its experience in sports organisation, in comparison with Brazil and East Germany, with particular attention to local and national structures, financing systems, and the organisation of competitive sports.[31] These exchanges took place only a few months after Nadia Comăneci's

[26] AMAE, Problem 200, Côte d'Ivoire/976.
[27] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1976, vol. 1353, 1.
[28] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 832, 40.
[29] AMAE, Problem 20, Côte d'Ivoire/1975, vol. 1501, 34.
[30] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1976, vol. 149, 7.
[31] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1976, vol. 1356.

historic performance at the Montreal Olympic Games, which had brought Romania significant international recognition in the world of sports.[32]

Reciprocity was a core principle of Eastern Bloc cultural diplomacy and featured prominently in Romanian archival correspondence, which repeatedly emphasised the need for cultural exchanges to produce mutual benefits. In practice, however, the scope and frequency of proposed initiatives often exceeded the economic and institutional capacities of partner countries. For many states in the Global South, programs articulated in the language of socialist solidarity became sources of logistical and financial strain rather than genuine exchange (Betts & Vucetic, 2022, 149). This dynamic is illustrated by a 1975 request from a cultural affairs official in Côte d'Ivoire concerning a proposed tour of the Ivorian National Ballet in Romania, then still in an advanced stage of formation.[33] While the Ivorian side viewed the tour as an opportunity to revitalise and promote traditional cultural expression, Romania conditioned its approval on strict reciprocity and the inclusion of the visit within a formally negotiated cultural exchange program. Cost-sharing arrangements for high-level visits also followed established norms: international transport was to be covered by the visiting side, while local expenses would be borne by the host.[34] Thus, the insistence on reciprocity, applied within structurally unequal partnerships, often limited rather than facilitated cultural exchange, revealing the constraints of socialist cultural diplomacy in practice.

6 Conclusion

The types of projects and exchanges examined in this article underscore the "murky line between culture, public relations, and propaganda for the perpetuation of late socialist regimes" (Dragostinova, 2021, 21). In Romania's relations with Africa, "culture" functioned as a broad and imprecise category, encompassing education, propaganda, the press, media production, youth and sports activities, and even official ideological texts. Although Romanian cultural policy was extensive in scope and covered multiple domains of cooperation, it lacked clear prioritisation or strategic coherence, resulting in a dilution of impact, particularly given the regime's limited material resources and modest achievements. This paradox was further accentuated by the coexistence of outward-facing cultural promotion and strict internal cultural censorship.

Ambitious objectives were consistently constrained by practical limitations: many cultural and technical agreements remained unimplemented, and cultural action was frequently reduced to the mere circulation of printed materials. The insistence on reciprocity, coupled with the overlap between educational and cultural cooperation, further restricted meaningful engagement, while increasing party

[32] She took the perfect 10, July 18, 1976.
[33] AMAE, Problem 217, Côte d'Ivoire/1975, 5.
[34] AMAE, Problem 220, Côte d'Ivoire/1977, vol. 852, 111.

control over cultural life narrowed activities largely to press coverage. In this context, high-level visits assumed a decisive and highly personalised role, making bilateral relations particularly important. In Côte d'Ivoire high-level encounters did not draw on references to exoticism or tradition; instead, they followed a model oriented toward modernity, marked by visits to factories and a pronounced emphasis on ceremonial events.

Comparative analysis reveals that Romania tended to propose standardised formulas of cultural cooperation, while African partners responded in divergent ways, shaped by political caution toward Eastern bloc regimes, as in Côte d'Ivoire. Ultimately, the Romanian diplomacy illustrates the contrast between expansive ambitions and limited means which rendered cultural agreements largely formalistic, more symbolic than strategic, and unsupported by adequate financial resources. Since soft power depends on receptive audiences (Nye, 2004, 120), the actual impact of these policies cannot be assumed and remains an open question for further research, particularly in light of broader socialist engagements with the developing world.

In conclusion, the contrast between grand objectives and very limited means has rendered cultural agreement in the Romania-Côte d'Ivoire case more as obligatory formalities than as matters of real interest or strategic priority, clearly without the financial resources required for their development. Moreover, since soft power depends on willing receivers, the actual impact of these policies and activities cannot be assumed and remains to be developed in further studies developing also on economic strategies.

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Cultural Diplomacy, Artistic Research, and Minority Agency: Roma Perspectives in European Cooperation

Nicole Colin

1 Introduction

The fundamental political changes that have occurred in the aftermath of Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 have triggered a radical readjustment in the field of cultural diplomacy. While Annalena Baerbock was still attempting to emulate the Swedish model (Ministère des Affaires étrangères de Suède, 2019) of feminist foreign policy within a German context from 2021 (AA, 2023), and the French minister of foreign affairs published a comprehensive feminist strategy in 2025 (MEAE, 2025a), we are now witnessing a radical break from a more or less values-driven approach to cultural diplomacy. Even the ideological debates that fuelled the Cold War—but also defined the political landscape and made orientation along the lines of friend or foe possible—were abruptly discarded and annulled by a U.S. foreign policy recently characterised by unpredictable and arbitrary decisions, and a narrow focus on short-term economic gain and political advantage.[1]

In her February 2026 policy brief entitled *One Battle after Another: Factional Struggles and the Making of Trump's Foreign Policy,* Majda Ruge argues that the current U.S. strategy is guided less by coherent long-term planning than by the pursuit of short-term "wins" (Ruge, 2026). As a result, Europe is confronted with an increasingly unpredictable partner that no longer takes the continent's status as an ally for granted, instead selectively reacting to the specific context, and threatening tariffs and political involvement in European domestic affairs should disagreements emerge. Taking this dynamic into account, Ruge recommends that

[1] See the introduction to this volume.

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the EU strategically realign itself. Europe must draw clear redlines—be they in relation to Greenland, Ukraine, or potential American interference in European domestic policy—and staunchly defend them. At the same time, the EU must not shy away from using its economic and regulatory leverage, particularly the power of the Single Market. Beyond military capabilities, Europe must demonstrate political and psychological resolve (Ruge, 2026). At the same time, it should maintain dialogue with Washington, but be prepared to emphasise the consequences should these red lines be crossed. In the longer term, Ruge suggests that the EU abandon hopes of restoring the traditional transatlantic order, and instead use the gradual U.S. decoupling as an opportunity to strengthen its agency and redefine its global role.

Ruge's analysis appears to be on point, yet like other studies on the topic from the political sciences, it only accounts for economic and security factors (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026; Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2025; Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2025; European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2026). Culture and education, two traditional pillars of soft power that play a major role in foreign policy, fall beyond the scope of her analysis, and seem to enjoy marginal status within international relations.[2] Such an approach may very well be considered limited, seeing how autocratic countries and dictatorships (China and Russia, respectively) have long been expanding their investments in these sectors, with a view to employing them for propaganda purposes (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019; Koval & Tereshchenko, 2023; Ociepka & Arendarska, 2021). The same applies to far-right and populist movements around the world. During the 2026 Security Conference in Munich, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio explicitly mentioned culture in what appeared to be an assertion of MAGA goals (Rubio, 2026). According to Rubio, culture—understood as collective history, religion, traditions, and values—fosters unity, preservation, and political power. In this sense, the Western alliance hinges not only on common economic and military goals, but also on a shared cultural and civilisational worldview. One can infer from Rubio's speech that the threats to Western civilisation are paradoxically the very ones that buttress it: freedom, equality, fraternity, diversity, and respect. The adoption of a critical perspective on its own past, on which European integration is premised, is seen by Rubio as the expression of a dangerous self-enfeeblement, one that should be replaced with triumphant national pride. From such a vantage point, the European model of an open and plural society defending minority rights and supporting cultural diversity is not just an attack on an allegedly Western "identity"—which Rubio implies is primarily White, male, and heterosexual—but also an existential threat to the future of Western civilisation as a whole. When grasped in conjunction with the common defence policy, Rubio's reasoning, which inevitably brings to mind Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the*

[2] As early as the 1970s, cultural aspects in foreign policy were considered the "Aschenputtel des Ressorts", the "Cinderella of the ministry" (Peisert, 1978, 23).

West (Spengler, 1923), once again speaks to the relevance of the cultural dimension of politics. The impact of cultural policymaking performed *ex negativo*, i.e. via various forms of state propaganda, is far more obvious than a cultural policy geared towards diversity and tolerance, whose stabilising effects are more difficult to parse out, and can be identified only via long-term historical analysis on a complex transnational level.[3]

It is against this backdrop that Rubio's speech, favouring a return to ideas considered obsolete—such as nationalism, protectionism, colonialism, and a world order based on racism—underscores the need, in keeping with Ruge, for Europe to develop a cultural strategy that would instil renewed self-awareness within its foreign policy. Developing a strategy such as the one proposed in this chapter starts with an account of cultural diplomacy in Germany and France. As the largest and most influential EU states in terms of politics, the economy, and culture, the two adopt different approaches to foreign policy, notwithstanding their structural similarities. After a brief overview of the domestic and foreign policies of both countries in recent decades, I will focus primarily on the role of minorities in cultural diplomacy. Diversity as a core European value is central to this approach, paving the way for new research avenues highlighting the relevance of cultural policy for international relations. A core question within this dynamic is the following: to what extent does the Roma question, with the Roma being the largest and historically most marginalised minority in Europe, offer an incentive to forge a new European cultural diplomacy?

2 Historical Context

The strategies for cultural foreign policy of many European countries have undergone important changes in recent decades. There has been a noticeable and gradual shift away from a cultural diplomacy primarily focused on representation to one driven by increased support for international cooperation in the cultural sphere. The two Germanys, which after 1945 were facing the historical challenge of regaining international trust in the aftermath of the national-socialist "civilisational break", can be seen as an involuntary precursor in this respect. While engaging in foreign policy was complicated in the first years after the war, cultural contacts on both sides of the Iron Curtain opened the door to collaboration and informal network building. It was within this context that cultural foreign policy in both German states became an instrument of strategic importance. In the Federal Republic in the 1950s, intermediary institutions such as the Goethe-Institut and the German Academic Exchange Service were founded to serve as formal, autonomous non-state actors. Although they are almost entirely publicly funded, unlike their French counterpart—the Institut français is institutionally bound to the French Alliance

[3] From a historical perspective, this dynamic is particularly evident in the cultural policies of National Socialism, as well as the Cold War's cultural-political conflicts (Dumont & Aubert, 2010).

on a ministerial level—they enjoy a broad level of independence in terms of programming (Colin & Umlauf, 2018, 52–61). This arm's-length principle prevents political instrumentalisation, fosters international trust, and institutionally cements the historical lessons derived from the cultural propaganda of the national-socialist regime.[4] Culture, language, and science did not chiefly serve foreign policy goals; they helped foster trust, reconciliation, and symbolic normalisation. After 1945, the cultural diplomacy of West Germany developed via a cooperative network model mediated by civil society, and oriented towards enduring relations, academic exchange, language instruction, and cultural dialogue.

The cultural foreign policy of West Germany also gained significance as an ideological rival in the context of the Cold War, especially since the German Democratic Republic was pursuing its own efforts to affirm itself on the international stage. Given the claim to sole representation of the Federal Republic—and the Hallstein doctrine observed until 1969, under which diplomatic relations with the GDR via third-party states amounted to an act of political hostility towards the Federal Republic (Booz, 1995)—cultural relations carved out a space essentially circumventing the doctrine and enabling international contacts, up through the signing of the German-German Basic Treaty and the GDR's recognition by numerous states (Pfeil, 2004; Pfeil, 2023, pp. 231–232). The primary agents operating in this space were state-run cultural and information centres known as KIZ (*Kultur—und Informationszentren*), which were abolished after 1990 following German unification, and replaced with independent cultural foreign policy institutions representing the unified Germany (Evens, 2015). The foundations for this reoriented approach had already been established in the early 1970s by Ralf Dahrendorf, and were in line with Willy Brandt's understanding of culture as the third pillar of foreign policy (Brandt, 1969).[5] Under the influence of the social upheavals of 1968, this model was, from the very onset, based on a broad understanding of culture (*erweiterter Kulturbegriff*). This meant that the notion of cultural representation was expanded to include not just prestigious cultural events—such as opera performances or the reading of canonical authors or philosophers (Altmayer, 1997, 2–3), a view strongly rooted in the French and English "civilisational" understanding of culture (Elias, 1976, 2–4)—but also events in other social circles such as architecture, fashion, and civic or political debates. By the same token, this horizontal opening up was accompanied by a vertical dynamic as well, as the traditional division between entertainment and high culture was gradually discarded, permitting the inclusion of popular forms within the cultural programme.

The foundational principles of this approach were only renewed in the late 1990s by Joschka Fischer, the first foreign minister from the Green Party in Germany, as part of his *Konzeption 2000* framework, in which he distanced himself

[4] The British Council is also organised according to the arm's-length principle (Quinn, 1996).

[5] It took almost seven years for Hansgert Peisert to publish the principles of the process initiated by Dahrendorf, in a foundational text from the late 1970s (Peisert, 1978).

even more clearly than Dahrendorf and Preisert from a representative understanding of cultural diplomacy (AA, 1999). According to Fischer, it should be used as an active instrument for securing peace, furthering human rights, and promoting international communication. Its primary goals included intensifying sustainable exchange in academic and economic cooperation, building durable peer networks, and supporting the study of German as a foreign language (AA, 1999). This approach was further developed and articulated during Angela Merkel's chancellorship (2005–2021). In its cultural and educational dimension, Germany's external engagement remained pragmatic, while also functioning in accordance with a values-based strategy. In his paper *Cultural and Educational Foreign Policy in the Global Era* (AA, 2011), the Liberal Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle placed particular emphasis on dialogue,[6] all while bringing the strategic dimension more visibly into focus. Cultural and educational foreign policy was now explicitly designated as a form of cultural diplomacy, aligned with the objective of securing German influence and pursuing national interests in an increasingly competitive global environment. Education, science, and cooperative innovation endeavours played an increasingly strategic role in maintaining long-term German competitiveness in the global competition for talent, knowledge, ideas, and partnerships. By the same token, digitalisation and social media were assigned increased strategic importance, while more extensive economic integration through transformation partnerships and co-financing models became key components of cultural and educational foreign policy (AA, 2016).

In the context of the so-called migration crisis of 2015, as well as growing authoritarian tendencies worldwide, the idea of national cultural exports was relegated to the background even further. In its stead, soft power as an instrument of dialogue and cooperation geared towards stabilising international relations became the norm. Challenges also emerged from the tension between a values-based approach and political considerations, as well as from questions regarding the actual effectiveness of such programmes (Schumacher, 2016). The response consisted of increased support for civil society actors, protection programmes for endangered artists and scientists, the establishment of digital exchange programmes, and a firmer stance in favour of democracy, human rights, and pluralism (AA, 2019). At the same time, cultural and educational foreign policy under Merkel remained rhetorically restrained, avoiding ideas seen as overly ideological. Instead, it stressed the need for multilateral cooperation, institutional continuity, and the ability to show flexibility in times of crisis.

In contrast with German cultural diplomacy, which is historically known for its strong normative-dialogical argumentation and focus on exchange, reconciliation, and network building, the French case explicitly mentions "influence" as a

[6] It should be noted that the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany has long exercised considerable influence over the Federal Republic's foreign policy orientation. This influence was particularly evident in the careers of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who served as Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor from 1974 to 1992, and Walter Scheel, who held the same offices from 1969 to 1974, before serving as Federal President from 1974 to 1979.

strategic category (Ory, 1998; Vaïsse, 2009). Unlike Germany, after 1945, France faced no obstacles to using older, state-supported traditions of language and culture to shape its foreign policy, which, due to the loss of its superpower status and rapid decolonisation process in the 1950s and 1960s, became central to maintaining relations with former colonies (Chafer & Sackur, 2002). Francophonie played a key role in creating a network based on language, culture, and political education. Colonial hierarchies were translated into a multilateral cooperation model that secured France's presence, without being openly imperial (Chaubet, 2006). From an institutional perspective, foreign cultural policy remained strongly centralised and closely tied to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unlike Germany, the French approach explicitly conceives it as an instrument of power run by the state. Republican universalism—enlightenment, secularity, human rights—set up the normative framework, which was rhetorically superimposed on colonial continuities. Culture was not so much a bridge but a strategic instrument within the international system.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the focus shifted, primarily in Africa, to development assistance and cooperation in education, while the 1990s saw a cautious modernisation that ascribed greater importance to Europe (Hargreaves & McKinney, 1997). Nevertheless, until 2000, French cultural diplomacy was guided by the overarching postcolonial logic of influence. It was closely controlled by central political authority, and was strategically used as a resource of international power in the context of enduring asymmetrical North-South relations—an approach that would only later be called into question. Although Alain Juppé and Louis Schweitzer construed culture, language, science, and media as instruments of dialogue in their 2008 publication *Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France* (Juppé & Schweitzer, 2008), French cultural diplomacy remains shaped by a politics of influence, and continues to function within the broader strategic framework of international power competition. This view was further underscored in the 2017 report entitled *Rapport sur la stratégie française d'influence*, especially with respect to the growing influence of digital communication and social media (MAE 2017). The report emphasises the importance of intellectual networks and cooperation with young elites from other countries in positions of power. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of Westerwelle's understanding from 2011, it advocates for greater coordination between the state, science, the economy, and culture. Even more so than the German version, French cultural diplomacy is regarded as a distinct and important instrument in international relations, one that provides global visibility for the French national narrative (MAE, 2017).

Comparing German and French approaches to cultural diplomacy reveals a number of similarities, such as the importance of cooperation in education, expert networks, economic partnerships, and digital communication. Differences appear when it comes to the pursuit of influence, which in the French context is still considered a valid goal. Even if the Goethe Institute and the DAAD attempt to secure local and competitive advantages for Germany, any explicit references to such goals are avoided; emphasis is instead placed on notions such as democracy, dialogue, reconciliation, network building, and promoting values, a caution that

can be explained by the country's experience with the propaganda of National Socialist cultural policy.

3 New Perspectives Post-2022

Following a prolonged period of fluctuation between value-driven objectives and the strategic deployment of soft power, Germany's external relations entered a new phase in 2021 under the so-called traffic-light coalition. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's advocacy of a feminist foreign diplomacy, which had already been introduced in Sweden in 2014, attracted attention. In 2023, the Federal Foreign Office issued a series of guidelines clearly indebted to the so-called 3R+ principles: rights, representation, resources + diversity (AA, 2023). As explained in the otherwise brief document, this framework moves beyond a traditional focus on security, commerce, and influence, and uses projects and cooperation to systematically address issues such as imbalance in power relations, gender justice, and diversity.[7] Cultural policy, particularly the role of the Goethe-Institut, is assigned a very marginal role. Of central interest are peace policy, human rights, and issues pertaining to foreign trade. The relegation of culture to such a marginal position is particularly striking, given that the Goethe-Institut has for decades been active in precisely those fields that feminist foreign policy seeks to showcase. As outlined above, the global programmes of the Goethe-Institut are by no means centred on promoting national narratives or presenting prestigious forms of high culture. They instead focus on strengthening common European values, supporting socially disadvantaged groups, and creating spaces of dialogue and cultural coproduction. They feature a heightened awareness of local contexts and are frequently carried out in collaboration with the cultural institutions of other nations. In countries marked by authoritarian tendencies, the Goethe-Institut has gained growing importance as a "safe space", providing a protected setting for the free and open exchange of views and ideas. A similar development can be observed among other European cultural diplomacy institutions, and found institutional expression in the establishment of EUNIC (2006), which brings together the national cultural institutes on a European level.

In its 2025 feminist strategy, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs went a decisive step further than the German guidelines. While Baerbock's framework marginalises cultural institutions, the French strategy assigns cultural actors a much more prominent role, defining them not merely as implicit vectors of equality and diversity, but as an explicit operational pillar of feminist foreign policy. The *Stratégie internationale de la France pour une diplomatie féministe* (France, 2021; MEAE, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), adopted in 2025, marks a qualitative shift in two respects. Unlike the German guidelines, which outline a general

[7] On the whole, the guidelines remain disappointingly vague with regard to concrete planning, in contrast to the strategy paper on feminist development policy, which presents a far more comprehensive and clearly structured approach (BMZ, 2023).

and arguably inchoate programme based on the 3R+ principles, while offering only vague reference as to how it might be implemented (Colin, 2025), the French approach develops a detailed policy framework with five broadly defined priorities, clearly specified objectives, funding mechanisms, interministerial steering instruments, and an institutionalised accountability structure.[8] The divergence between the two approaches becomes especially clear in the importance they ascribe to cultural policy. In Germany, diplomacy and cultural policy are, to a considerable degree, institutionally organised along separate lines. Consequently, within the framework of feminist foreign policy, the Goethe Institute—operating independently in accordance with the arm's-length principle—does not fulfil a strategic implementation function, its role primarily remaining one of facilitating and mediating civic dialogue. Feminist goals are thus pursued mainly through diversity programmes, protection initiatives, gender-related projects, and transnational forms of network-building (AA, 2023).

In the French context, culture is not reduced to symbolic representation, a normative reference point, or an analytical category for reflecting on power asymmetries, but is instead an integral component of the institutional architecture of feminist diplomacy, whose goal is to trigger transformational processes within society. As a result, the Institut français does not function as an autonomous intermediary independent from the state, but as an operational component of the state-coordinated *Équipe France*.[9] Overcoming gender stereotypes, supporting artists and intellectuals, and giving international visibility to feminist discourse via the French Institute are central instruments of a more comprehensive *diplomatie féministe*.

This difference cannot be explained solely by the arm's-length institutional structure of the Goethe-Institut. While the Federal Foreign Office's limited capacity to steer and oversee the programmes of this intermediary actor contributes to institutional distance—one that may, in practice, foster indifference or even mistrust on the ministerial side—the decisive factor appears to be a fundamental scepticism regarding the political efficacy of culture. The Federal Foreign Office's failure to recognise that the Goethe-Institut's long-standing commitment to principles such as diversity protection and gender equality offers strategic relevance for feminist foreign policy is correlated, inter alia, with the funding cuts of

[8] Under Priority 4, global policy fields such as climate, digitalisation, the economy, and health are explicitly defined as areas of feminist action, and gender considerations are systematically integrated within multilateral regulatory and funding frameworks. Under Priority 5, the Women, Peace and Security agenda is operationalised through concrete security-policy instruments such as training programmes, early-warning mechanisms, and institutional networks. By contrast, the German guidelines predominantly pursue a normative, values-based approach without a comparable level of operational integration.

[9] This approach is already reflected in the participatory methodology through which the strategy was developed, bringing together more than 200 international and civil-society partners in eight working groups, as well as in internal and external consultations. Their recommendations guided the drafting of the strategy (MEAE, 2023, 2).

recent years. It is also evident that the Goethe-Institut's management has failed to convince the ministry of its political relevance.[10]

The change of government in 2024 brought a new shift in the framework of German diplomacy (Balbon & Karoline, 2025). The feminist foreign policy approach was officially removed from the institutional guiding principles of the Federal Foreign Office under new Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul.[11]

Institutional differences notwithstanding,[12] German and French foreign policy both employ their respective policy frameworks to protect and legally defend socially marginalised groups. In Germany, the protection of vulnerable social groups remains an integral component of the programme, although the strategy is formulated in relatively broad and vague terms compared to France's new *diplomatie féministe,* which conceptualises specific forms of gender violence, economic marginalisation, and intersectional discrimination as risks in international politics, and advances corresponding legal and political solutions that are both concrete and multilateral. The goal of recognising minorities in all their diversity—and actively protecting them—is a major component of the cultural foreign policy of both countries. This strategic approach should be further developed in the future as part of a European cultural diplomacy based on values, one that is all the more necessary given the transatlantic mutations described above. The effectiveness of cultural representation in such a context has clearly been established in recent years by the French Institute and the Goethe Institute in Bucharest. Numerous projects implemented in cooperation with representatives from specific marginal groups subject to discrimination, such as LGBTQIA+ or Roma communities, were supported by the German-French Cultural Fund and European support programmes. The objective has been to reflect on the social role of minorities, and to develop strategies

[10] Press coverage in recent years clearly illustrates how problematic the image of the Goethe-Institut has become in the German public sphere. While as recently as 2018, under President Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, the institute was valued precisely for its independence, the tone of public debate has grown substantially more critical (Fischer, 2018; Schaper, 2025).

[11] In this context, a report by the Bundestag's Research Services (Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestages, 2025) refers to Patricia Hecht's article "Wadephul justiert sein Haus neu", which discusses a possible reorientation—or even a potential abandonment—of feminist foreign policy. While advocating a faster and more extensive promotion of women to leadership positions within the ministry, and stating that he is "convinced that the way women approach certain policy issues has been insufficiently valued in the past", the minister is quoted as arguing that "in view of current geopolitical realities and global crises, [he intends] to redefine priorities on the basis of strict austerity" (Hecht, 2025).

[12] Historically, the development of the goals and the political integration of cultural diplomacy into the field of international politics in Germany can be traced through changes in terminology: from "foreign cultural policy" (*Außenkulturpolitik*), to "foreign cultural and educational policy" (*Auswärtige Kultur- und Bildungspolitik*), and more recently to "feminist foreign policy", culminating in 2025 in the establishment of the "Division for Culture and Society" (*Abteilung Kultur und Gesellschaft*) at the Federal Foreign Office, which situates cultural policy more broadly within societal policy frameworks, encapsulated in the dictum "Cultural policy is social policy" (AA, 2026).

for attaining cultural visibility and political involvement. As shown in the concrete example of the NARDIV project described, cultural foreign policy stands out as a practice-oriented field in which feminist and diversity-oriented goals can concretely be pursued and transnationally intermediated.

4 From Margin to Centre: The Roma Minority as Cultural Mediator Between East and West

Work Package 2 of the NARDIV project brings together two of the programme's key objectives: exploring mutual perceptions between Eastern and Western Europe, and identifying how cultural transfers can help make the European narrative more diverse and inclusive in the future. Starting from the assumption that literary texts are reservoirs of knowledge, contributing scholars analyse female life narratives from Eastern Europe by reading autobiographies and autofiction as forms of collective memory that capture the multidimensional nature of political upheaval and social transformation. Methodologically, gender functions as an epistemic category, since female perspectives in dominant narratives are still largely underrepresented, especially in Central and Eastern Europe as a result of intersectional mechanisms. The subproject *From Margin to Centre: The Roma Minority as Cultural Mediator between East and West* tackles the specific everyday realities of Romnja, and attempts to gauge how innovative approaches to foreign cultural policy can help increase the visibility of minority narratives.

The starting point rests on two central and interrelated observations. First, the Roma have been culturally rooted in Europe for over six centuries, and with a population of approximately 10–12 million, represent the continent's largest minority. They have nevertheless remained largely invisible in European memory culture and cultural heritage, and hence in dominant narratives. Second, the limited knowledge available regarding the Roma community has overwhelmingly been produced over the centuries by the dominant culture, which is to say by administrations, writers, and artists. Since the nineteenth century, the latter were joined by ethnographers, criminologists, and scientific racists, who have constructed the image of the "gypsy" as the other of the European self, carrying the burden of civilisational progress (Colin & Medeleanu, 2026). This almost exclusively heteronomous image remains ambivalent, blurred, and marked by strong projection. It oscillates between dehumanisation ("parasite", "resistant to civilisation") and romanticisation ("free", "wild", "mysterious"). In this sense, as Klaus-Michael Bogdal has argued, it can be understood as a "European invention" (Bogdal, 2011, 14).

Taking all of this into account, cultural diplomacy initiatives by institutions such as the Goethe-Institut and the Institut français addressing specific Roma-related issues can yield substantial results only if co-creative approaches are systematically adopted, and Roma actors are actively involved from the outset. What is decisive here is not just the production of alternative or more nuanced representations of marginal groups, but their direct involvement in cultural production processes themselves. Only a shift of this kind can enable members of marginal

groups to transition from objects of discourse to agentive subjects of cultural self-representation (Colin & Medeleanu, 2026).

Here, foreign cultural policy institutions function less as representatives of their respective national cultures and more as transnational platforms. Thanks to their long-standing institutional presence and embeddedness in local networks, the Goethe-Institut and the Institut français possess the necessary expertise, knowledge, and infrastructure to initiate and implement such forms of artistic co-creation.[13] These institutes are able to create spaces in which informal networks can emerge between Roma and non-Roma agents, thereby enabling cultural transfers to be organised in a sustained rather than temporary manner. Under such an approach, diplomacy develops models for an inclusive European cultural policy, one that promotes participation and helps inscribe previously marginalised narratives into the European cultural sphere.

The *From Margin to Centre* project was implemented in 2024 and 2025 by the Goethe-Institut, together with the Institut français, the Institutul Cultural Român (ICR), and Aix-Marseille University, in close collaboration with the director, actress, and activist Alina Şerban. She led four workshops with Roma participants in Hamburg, Timişoara, Budapest, and Madrid, in which she assumed a triple role as artist, activist, and researcher.

Born in 1987 in Bucharest, Şerban is today the most renowned Romanian theatre director, actress, and film director of Roma descent. Despite growing up in conditions marked by poverty and persistent discrimination, she was the first in her family to pass the baccalaureate exam. She went on to study acting in Bucharest, London, and New York, and established a significant career as a director and an author.[14] She sees her art as an intersectional political practice, shedding light on the Roma community's challenges in Romania and throughout Europe. With her troupe Untold Stories, she stages plays that identify and deconstruct entrenched narrative stereotypes, creating spaces to hear previously silenced voices on topics such as Roma slavery (Șerban, 2024)[15] and structural discrimination (Șerban, 2009; Șerban & Tesăr, 2020).

Şerban's workshops for NARDIV followed a dramatic structure interweaving phases of observation, self-reflection, and collective articulation. Her method, which she developed by drawing on years of experience organising workshops with Roma youth in Romania, uses a special form of life writing that serves as the

[13] The Institut français in Bucharest celebrated its centenary in 2024, while the Goethe-Institut in Bucharest was founded in 1979.

[14] For biographical information and an overview of her artistic work, see the artist's official website: https://alinaserban.com/.

[15] On her theatre work addressing the history of Roma slavery, see Alina Șerban, *The Great Shame*, written, directed, and performed by the author (premiered 2016). The play has also been translated into French (Șerban, 2024). For critical reflections on the cultural memory of Romani enslavement and its representation in artistic and educational contexts, see Rusu (2026), Grigore (2026), Lauritzen and Zamfir (2026).

foundation for her stage work and her own emancipation process.[16] Acting as both mediator and role model, she enables other Roma—women and men alike—to gain a deeper understanding of their own situation. At the same time, by leading through example, she encourages her workshop participants to step out of the shadow of their histories and make themselves visible.

The workshop begins with a screening of the film *Gipsy Queen* (Hüseyin Tabak, 2010), in which Şerban plays the lead role.[17] The film tells the story of a Roma single mother from Hamburg who hopes to provide her children a better future by boxing. It connects the experience of poverty and discrimination with questions of parental authority and self-determination. By focusing on a complex, contradictory, and multifaceted Roma protagonist, the film proposes an aesthetic counter-narrative to the stereotyped figure of the "Gypsy", which is deliberately invoked in the title Gipsy Queen in order to confront and reclaim a historically stigmatizing term.[18]

With this in mind, the film can also be interpreted as a component of Şerban's unique life-writing method. Although the plot based on Hüseyin Tabak's script is not directly linked to any biography, one can still discern echoes of her own experience of discrimination and emancipation, with respect to both form and content. For instance, the unconventionally long seven-minute wide shot of the main character Ali's boxing match can be read as a metaphor for the Roma's excruciating centuries-long struggle against oppression.

As part of the workshop, the film serves as an introduction and emotional resonance chamber, enabling participants to question and deconstruct stereotypical representations. Building on this introduction, Şerban's autofiction opens up yet another space for reflection: her personal stories, already fictionalised in her play *The Best Child of the World*, serve as both an illustrative example and an invitation to self-empowerment.[19] Her autobiography is inspiring insofar as it transforms experiences of exclusion, migration, and resistance into an open yet protected space of communication and collective remembrance. Roma participants are invited to share their experiences of discrimination and trauma, as well as their hopes and experiences of self-assertion. The individual stories become woven into a collective narrative, showcasing marginalised female voices within the Roma

[16] For an example of Şerban's autobiographical artistic practice addressing structural discrimination, positionality, and dialogical forms of Romani self-representation, see Şerban (2009).

[17] Şerban received the German Film Award for Best Actress for her role in *Gipsy Queen* (Horvath, 2021).

[18] For an academic interpretation of the film and its gendered dimensions within Romani representation, see Kehya (2025).

[19] For her artistic work, Şerban has also received significant official recognition in Romania. With her play *The Best Child in the World*, she became the first Roma theatre director to have a production staged at the National Theatre in Bucharest. She was also awarded the Romanian National Order of Cultural Merit. On the broader significance of this institutional recognition for the development of Roma theatre in Romania, see Mojoiu (2025), Farrant (2022).

community, and assessing how they can drive a renewed European integration process, against a backdrop of persistent tensions between East and West.

From a methodological perspective, the collaboration with Şerban as mediator highlights a core tenet of the project. It was clear from the very beginning that the scholars and cultural managers leading the project, as members of the majority society, could engage in genuinely egalitarian dialogue with people who had experienced discrimination and persecution only on a limited basis. In such constellations, colonial and paternalistic patterns are almost impossible to avoid, threatening to reproduce or even strengthen existing power asymmetries. The attempt to collect Roma stories with a view to expanding their visibility in the dominant culture risks perpetuating precisely those regimes of representation that have marginalised and devalued the Roma community for centuries. Despite their benign intentions, researchers and cultural practitioners from majority backgrounds remain at risk of acting in ways that may be perceived as exploitative—comparable to journalists, photographers, or writers who have long capitalised on the precarious living conditions of Roma, with a view to meeting the expectations of sensation-seeking audiences for exoticising imagery or portrayals of misery.[20]

Yet, it would be counterproductive and even contradictory not to engage with this issue for fear of such unintended side-effects, or to exclude insufficiently sensitive non-Roma researchers from the field of Roma studies. In light of this dilemma, it is essential to develop alternative means of collaboration that integrate the methodological potential of art, intercultural exchange, and especially direct dialogue with mediating figures from the arts and academia, such as Şerban. As a director, author, actor, and activist who has personally experienced a process of biographical and cultural self-empowerment, she embodies this role in exemplary fashion. Her position at the intersection between the social majority and the Roma community enables her to cross boundaries and create safe spaces of communication where participants can freely express themselves, with no risk to their integrity or dignity.

The method developed within the framework of NARDIV, which is based on close collaboration between researchers, artists, and cultural diplomacy actors, differs in this respect from other approaches that draw on socio-pedagogical or psychological theories, among others. Despite the best of intentions, such frameworks often tend to reduce Roma people—and especially Romnja—to the status of victims, vulnerable subjects who can only be helped by external professional expertise. Such a perspective risks reproducing paternalistic effects and hierarchical regimes of knowledge between those who 'know', and those who are deemed to be "in need of help". What is more, despite its emancipatory goals, it may ultimately reinforce the very power structures it claims to overcome.

The artistic format is conducive to other forms of collaboration because it operates according to a fundamentally different logic. Instead of asymmetric role

[20] On the persistence of exoticising imagery and structural discrimination in cinematic representations of Roma, see Mitroiu (2021).

allocations, cultural practice facilitates encounters on equal footing, with all participants actively engaged in the creative process. In her work, Şerban alters the conditions of communication: experiences are not extracted, documented, or interpreted, but are instead collectively translated and transformed, performatively negotiated. In connection with marginalised groups in particular, this approach enables the concerned individuals to articulate their own narratives and actively partake in their own representation, instead of simply being the object of external representation.

Only the arts in their traditional sense as spaces of freedom—non-violent fields of experimentation where one can think and test anything—are capable of bringing such a place to life. They enable role play, experimentation with alternative futures, and the expression of repressed emotions. The specific art form of Şerban's workshop can therefore be construed as a form of artistic research that dovetails with cultural diplomacy. People who are otherwise accustomed to being seen through the lens of vulnerability become epistemic agents constructing their own narratives, and potentially that of European memory.

From an intersectional standpoint, by addressing questions of belonging, oppression, and self-empowerment, as an emancipated Romnja, Șerban necessarily finds herself engaged in a dual dialogue: with the majority society, but also within the minority itself, whose members, due among other things to their negative experiences, do not always align with her approach of greater openness towards the majority society. Within the communicative space that emerges during the workshop, the participants are not seen as victims in need of assistance, but instead find themselves on equal footing with the workshop coordinator as bearers of experience, aesthetic knowledge, and narrative competence. In short, they are experts on the realities of their own lives, authors of their own futures. Participants in Şerban's workshop therefore do not act like objects of inquiry, but as co-creators within a collective process.

Şerban's artistic practice can be read as a form of cultural translation, theoretically framed by an approach based on transcultural transfer and intercultural communication. As research has shown, transcultural mediators with cultural translation skills can establish connections between social units that would otherwise remain disconnected. They can build trust, alleviate power asymmetries, and link heterogeneous forms of knowledge. By crossing boundaries between different discourses and systems of knowledge, they create spaces of reconciliation that otherwise would not emerge, and can therefore be understood as both mediators and messengers.

The final scholarly evaluation of these processes integral to the workshop is still pending. It is expected to be finalised shortly on the basis of qualitative interviews. Particular attention will be paid to the interrelations between the artist and the workshop participants, as well as to the question of how these "hitherto untold stories" enter into and shape Alina Șerban's artistic practice. Can the marginalised voices of Roma women be rendered audible through the transformation of their narratives into aesthetic formats?

5 Conclusion

The methods tested in workshops of Alina Şerban, who served as mediator, cultural translator, and messenger in the NARDIV project, have shown that artistic formats successfully avoided the often undesired risk of reproducing asymmetric power relations. They open up spaces in which participants are not reduced to objects of intervention, but are instead agents shaping their own reality. Minority knowledge, whether aesthetic perspectives or social experiences, is vitally important for Europe, and can be mobilised more productively in an artistic and intercultural context rather than settings where marginal social groups are primarily perceived as vulnerable victims. Within an artistic framework, it is possible to create safe spaces of experimentation in which complex and painful topics—such as patriarchal structures, traditional gender roles, family conflicts, and experiences of discrimination and homophobia—can be negotiated with no fear of direct social reprimand.

From the perspective of the Goethe-Institut and the Institut français, the project's three-year implementation phase has demonstrated that collaboration with Şerban constitutes an important experimental case study for the further development of Europe's cultural external engagement. It became clear to both institutions that cultural diplomacy with social minorities works better if traditional representation formats are replaced with long-term, process-based cooperation with local artists. This nexus of research, artistic practice, and diplomatic infrastructure can explore new collaborative forms in which cultural institutes no longer function primarily as representatives of national cultures, but as platforms for transnational coproduction.

At the same time, the project revealed the structural limits of present-day European institutional collaboration. Generally, collaboration between representatives from the Goethe-Institut and the Institut français was successful, but implementation was highly dependent on local personal networks, individual interests, and programme scope for action.

This experience points to a fundamental institutional problem for European cultural diplomacy: cooperation has so far been largely project-based and informal, not the result of a stable and shared programme framework. In considering the future of foreign cultural policy, it would be important to develop overarching programmes or structurally institutionalised avenues of cooperation that enable cultural institutes to enduringly integrate successful initiatives into their work, doing so independently of local contingencies and at the European level.

This allows parties on both sides to take advantage of the positive results generated by such a subject, for both institutions and the artists involved. Şerban's workshop demonstrated that the project broadened the scope of the two institutions' respective networks. The collaboration also had a sustained positive effect on her artistic reputation and that of Roma women in Romania. The visibility resulting from collaboration with German-French institutions and contacts with diplomatic representatives, including the German and French embassies, lent her

work great legitimacy in her own country. International recognition is a decisive factor, especially for artists from marginalised communities.

In this sense, the project exemplifies how cultural diplomacy produces narratives about minorities and empowers them at the same time. For historically marginalised groups—Roma in particular, but also other frequently overlooked minorities such as LGBTQIA+ communities—institutional and international visibility is crucially important, marking a transition from cultural marginality to active participation in the European discursive sphere. Here, cultural institutions function as intermediary agents that project local experiences into the European communicative sphere, while also lending visibility to new forms of cultural belonging.

This subproject of NARDIV has extended beyond its initial framework, shedding light on a central challenge of future European cultural diplomacy: to make protecting and integrating minorities a normative objective, and to embed artistic co-creation and transnational networks through enduring institutional cooperation. This raises the question of how the protection of minorities can become a structural principle of European cultural policy. With this in mind, Europe should ascribe greater importance to inclusive foreign policy. The active integration of affected social groups stands out as a central component of this approach. This concept appears more appropriate than a feminist approach to external relations, which was recently adopted in France, but abandoned by Germany's new conservative-social democratic government.

While a "values-based foreign policy" often lacks analytical sharpness, and feminist diplomacy may trigger unnecessary resistance in some contexts, the concept of inclusivity is more precise in referring to the core issue, namely the systematic integration of excluded groups within processes of knowledge production, as well as within diplomatic and cultural representation. However, inclusivity does not simply entail adding more groups. It requires strategies that clearly analyse power relations and their corresponding intersectional entanglements related to gender, ethnicity, class, disability, and sexual orientation, and that actively involve affected groups within these processes.

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Minorities as Agents of Cultural Diplomacy: Examples from a Best-Practice Region, DE-DK

Martin Klatt

1 Introduction: Minorities, Kin-States, and Borders

National minorities in borderlands/border regions[1] are special communities.[2] They are usually the result of a historical rebordering process, where a state's border has been changed, separating an ethnic, linguistic, and/or cultural community from the nation-state, with which culture/language they identify, their kin-state. Borderland minorities are a by-product of the nationalization processes experienced in Europe during the long nineteenth century, a consequence of the re-territorialization of the map of Europe following the French Revolution and the transformation of states from feudal aristocracies and dynastically accumulated empires to modern, democratic nation-states. Two key periods are most relevant here: the end of World War I with the dissolution of the Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Empire, and the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The post-World War I peace order specifically aimed to implement the right to national self-determination and required the newly independent states to give constitutionally guaranteed protection to national minorities within their territories (Goldstein, 2002; Prott 2014). While most of the new borders were delineated by experts at the Paris Peace Conference, a few were put on a plebiscite: the border

[1] Both terms are often used synonymously, but present different approaches to lands/regions near (or across) a state border. I will use the term borderlands here as it is part of the title of B-SHAPES. It is also reflecting the openness of borderlands, which, in fact, are not territorially bounded as the term border region indicates, as cross-border interactions and flows tend to be fluid and not bound to subnational territorial divisions of a country.

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between Germany and Denmark (Schleswig), the border between Germany and Poland (Masuria and Upper Silesia), the borders between Austria and Hungary (Burgenland) and Yugoslavia (Carinthia). The popular dynamics of the plebiscites did not necessarily result in an acceptance of the new borders by the borderland population. A key lesson learned from the interwar years has been that borderland minorities, both as subjects and objects, became a source of irredentism and struggle for border revision, and a pretext for kin-states' aggressive foreign policy. The Sudeten Crisis of 1938, where Hitler's Germany, as kin-state used the Sudeten German minority to break up Czechoslovakia, one of the few successful new states as a sustainable democracy and rather wealthy society, being the prime example. But even recently, Russia used the perceived discrimination of Russian-speakers in Ukraine as a pretext for a full-scale invasion of the country.

Therefore, minorities have been suspected and accused of having open or hidden irredentist, border revisionist agendas. Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies (B-SHAPES) is a Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Action funded within the same call as NARDIV (HORIZON-CL2–2022-HERITAGE-01-03: The role of perceptions, formed by traditions, values and beliefs, in shaping European societies and politics in the twenty-first century). B-SHAPES has sought to identify, understand, and re-envision the key role of borders as a central factor in forming and changing people's perceptions of European societies and politics in the twenty-first century (European Research Executive Area (REA), 2023, 5). It includes three empirical work packages: Euroscepticism in borderlands (WP3), Borders shaping minorities' perceptions of the European project (WP4), Border landscapes as heritage (WP5). B-SHAPES has conducted research in five border regions, which all represent sensitive border legacies and issues, either historical (DE-DK, AT-IT, HU-SK, PL-CZ) or contemporary (BG-GR-TR, here the situation between the two EU member states with considerable resident Turkish minorities and neighbouring Türkiye). On the other hand, persons belonging to national minorities and national minority institutions are agents of what Birte Wassenberg and I have defined as secondary foreign policy (Klatt & Wassenberg, 2017). Their personal and institutional networks can be part of horizontal (home state—minority—kin-state) and vertical (local-regional-national-European) governance levels or networks, especially if constructive, inclusive minority policies exist (Klatt, 2017). This, in fact, opens opportunities for minorities as agents of cultural diplomacy.

A key takeaway from B-SHAPES' fieldwork is that borderland minorities live cross-border lives. Virtually all informers in all five border regions expressed that they lived a life that includes the other side of the border. The border and border crossings are essential and normal: to visit family and friends, to commute to university or even school, and to maintain cultural ties with the kin-state. Our informants' narratives demonstrate a strong familiarization with European integration and cross-border interconnectedness, albeit this is not directly expressed but rather taken for granted in what we have defined as banal Europeanism. Hereby, they demonstrate resilience to current re-bordering measures by living Europeanism

without specifically naming it (Opiłowska et al., 2026). Do these cross-border living practices make minorities cultural ambassadors? This will be reflected upon by focusing on the Denmark-Germany land border region of Schleswig.

2 Denmark-Germany: European Model of Conflict Accommodation and Minority Inclusion?

Today's border between Denmark and Germany was delineated in 1920, as one of the new post-World War I European borders. The borderline was, if not decided, but confirmed by a plebiscite of the region's inhabitants as of before 1 January 1900—a peculiar condition which excluded persons having migrated there after 1 January, but included persons having migrated from the region before 1 January 1900 (on the procedures etc. in depth Fink, 1979). The new border divided the former Duchy of Schleswig, a Danish fief connected with the Holy Roman Empire fief of Holstein since the Middle Ages and tied in personal union to the Danish crown since 1460. The Danish conglomerate state, a major European power until the seventeenth century, had been in a period of crisis since the Napoleonic wars and the loss of Norway in 1814. National awakening resulted in two competing national movements aiming to incorporate the region into their nation-state projects. Denmark lost the whole of Schleswig after the war with Prussia and Austria (on behalf of the German Confederation) in 1864. The Danish-speaking majority of Northern Schleswig was discriminated by the Prussian administration of the German Empire. When the empire's defeat in World War I became obvious in October 1918, the only elected Danish member of the German *Reichstag* mobilized political support in the *Reichstag* as well as in Copenhagen and locally to reunify northern Schleswig with Denmark based on the right of national self-determination, instead of an annexation of the whole former Duchy—which remained a goal for the more nationalist circles in Denmark (Johnsen, 2005).

The interwar years were characterized by the establishment of rather liberal minority protection regimes on one side, but also by open border revisionism, especially from the newly organized German minority in Denmark (Becker-Christensen, 1990; Klatt, 2015). After World War II, the tides turned with, if not the government, but Danish nationalists' attempts to recover South Schleswig. These were supported south of the 1920-border, where a strong popular movement lobbied for a border revision and claimed to have shifted nationality, or, rather, to have rediscovered their ethnic Danish roots (Noack, 1991; Noack, 1997). The geopolitical situation was different, though. Faced by the Soviet threat and the Cold War, Denmark and West Germany became allies and settled the border—and minority issue with two unilateral governmental declarations, the so-called Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations, which guaranteed minority rights on a basis of subjective self-identification (Kühl, 2005). The agreement included generous kin-state support for the minorities and their institutions, especially schools (Klatt, 2025). This model of ending a border struggle and accommodating the dissenters/border revisionists into a well-funded and institutionally strong national minority

has been described as a European model by the respective minorities and majority politicians ever since (among others Kühl & Bohn, 2005).

3 The Long Nineteenth Century: National or Cultural Conflict?

The dominant narrative on the Danish-German model of conflict resolution and minority accommodation is a narrative of national conflict. I will argue here that "national" is more of a cultural and linguistic conflict. As in many parts of Europe, the nineteenth century witnessed a transition from feudalism to the nation state in today's Denmark-Germany border region. This transformation had a decisive cultural-linguistic perspective of Danish linguistic and cultural emancipation from a protestant, north German cultural sphere, combined with a regional linguistic transformation to align with economic interests and cultural adaptations, resulting from increased economic interaction.

Schleswig is characterized by a three-tier East-West geography of fertile hill-lands on the Baltic Sea coast, sandy midlands and marshes, and the Wadden Sea on the North Sea Coast. It has been a crossroad of a prehistoric north-south trade route (the so-called Oxen Way, because of cattle drifts) and an east-west trade route on water using the Schlei inlet from the Baltic Sea until the Viking trading place Hedeby/Haithabu, where there was a fortified land bridge to the Treene River connecting with the North Sea. This pattern of a bridge between Scandinavia and the European continent, as well as between the Baltic and the North Sea, remained the core of the region's economy until national division in the nineteenth century created nation-states with less porous borders. The earliest record of a border is from 811, when representatives of Charlemagne and a Danish kingdom agreed on the Eider River as the northern border of the Holy Roman Empire (on the origins of the border see Krieger et al. 2013). The immediate border region was colonized from around 900–1000 by Saxon, Jutic, and Slavic settlers. Improvements in agriculture in the twelfth and thirteens century increased land use and urbanization and laid a base for state construction. By the fifteenth century, the German-speaking Schauenburg dukes had created a rather coherent proto-state as dukes of Schleswig (a fief of the Danish crown) and the county of Holstein (a part of the Holy Roman Empire). When the last Schauenburger Adolf VIII died childless in 1459, the local nobility elected his nephew, Danish king Christian I, as duke, starting a personal union with the kingdom of Denmark, which lasted until 1864.

The union brought internal peace and stabilization. Schleswig's connection to Holstein remained stable and independent from the kingdom of Denmark. The duchies were administered in German, even though a Danish dialect was the common vernacular in most of Schleswig's rural areas. The Lutheran reformation in the 1500s furthermore strengthened the role of the German language in education and the connection to protestant northern Germany with the respective cultural transfers. At the same time, state patriotism was strengthened in the symbol of the king, with regular visits to the duchies to strengthen the bonds between the beloved

monarch and his subjects (Henningsen, 2000). This model worked satisfactorily and unquestionably until the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Denmark had enjoyed a period of peace of 80 years from the end of the Great Nordic War in 1720 until the Napoleonic Wars. Faced by French troops on the border to Holstein and British pressure to hand over the fleet, Denmark became an ally of Napoleon. In consequence, Denmark was hit hard by the continental blockade and a state bankruptcy in 1813. In 1814, it lost Norway to Sweden, and an economic crisis prevailed for about 15 years.

After the war, the duchies strengthened their economic ties to northern Germany and its metropolis of Hamburg. Liberal ideas challenged the conservative restitution of the Vienna Congress, with a movement for German unity gaining momentum in Holstein. Increasing wealth of farmers in the more fertile Schleswigian Eastern hill-lands resulted in more trade with the Hamburg area and ensuing cultural transfers, and, crucial for the "national" conflict, a language change from a local Danish dialect to *Niederdeutsch*, "low German", the contemporary vernacular from today's Netherlands to Pomerania. Liberalism, the modern bourgeois ideology, divided on the language issue in Schleswig: The consensus in literate society and the ruling elite (administrators, judges, teachers, but also merchants and more wealthy farmers) of German being the language of "important things": administration, courts, higher education, politics in the new Estate Assemblies, was challenged by a few measures to strengthen Danish in the rural parts of Schleswig, were it was the vernacular of the vast majority of the local population. This caused the division of liberals in the region, aligning with one of the two competing contemporary Danish and Pan-German national movements. The revolutionary fervour of 1848 evolved into a three-years civil war on Schleswig (and Holstein), and a second, interstate war in 1864, when Prussia and Austria defeated Denmark. Then, Schleswig-Holstein became a Prussian province. National assimilation policies followed, but the new Danish minority in northern Schleswig proved resilient. After Germany had lost World War I, a plebiscite was implemented to divide the region between Denmark and Germany along today's border (In detail on the plebiscite Fink, 1979; Lassen, 1976). The 1920 plebiscite marked the end of a regional, non-national identification: people could vote for Denmark or Germany only. Visual propaganda relied mostly on emotional messages and employed symbols that elevated nationality to religion (Jebsen, 2015). Furthermore, the German propaganda was successful in aligning regional, Schleswig-Holstein sentiments and identification with national identity (Jebsen & Klatt, 2014). Culture, which, in principle, was joint, played no important role.

During the interwar years, there was considerable opposition to the new border (Becker-Christensen, 1990; Johnsen, 2005; Klatt, 2015), and the minorities perceived themselves and were perceived as the spearhead of the nation, with Othering as a key element of perceived Danish or Germanness. This Othering, though, was attempted in an environment of shared language and cultural practices. The local southern Jutian dialect *Sønderjysk* has remained home language in German minority families until today, while most families belonging to the Danish minority in Germany use German in daily life and Danish mostly only in institutional

settings (Pedersen, 2000). Shared cultural practices include regional food as well as the regional sport *ringridning*, riding rings, where a horseback rider targets rings with a lance.

Despite the ongoing national confrontation, some key elements of modern minority accommodation were implemented on both sides of the border already during the 1920s, especially the principle of subjective identification and minorities' right to form separate cultural associations for cultural self-governance (Klatt, 2025). Germany's loss of World War II resulted in some turbulence and a border conflict, but eventually the new Cold War reality secured a West German-Danish rapprochement on the border and minority conflict. In 1955, connected to West German membership of NATO, the Danish and West German governments negotiated a minority settlement implemented by two separate, but similar governmental declarations, the so-called Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations of 1955 (Kühl, 2005). The declarations implemented a top-down minority model based on the recognition of the minorities, generous kin-state funding of the minorities, while any ambitions for border revisions by the minorities or other political actors (regional and local) were stopped and revoked. The declarations lay the foundation for a positive narrative of conflict resolution and minority accommodation, as well as a continuing bilateral interest to spread this narrative (latest Klatt, 2025).

4 Minorities and Cultural Diplomacy

Minorities navigate in a nexus or triangle of minority-kin-state–homestate relations (Brubaker, 2008). Minorities negotiate with home state institutions and engage in home state politics. At the same time, they negotiate with kin-state institutions and politics, either through liaison offices, liaison visits of political delegations, official events, or direct lobbying. Kin-states support their kin-minorities' cultural life, very often with substantial financial contributions. This makes minorities international actors engaging in different secondary foreign policy activities (on the notion of secondary foreign policy see Klatt & Wassenberg, 2017; on minority agency within secondary foreign policy, see Klatt, 2017). Cultural diplomacy is one of the fields of minority agency within secondary foreign policy, and the cultural support by the kin-state qualifies as cultural diplomacy.

For the Denmark-Germany case, the involvement of the minorities in cultural diplomacy has been a historical process. It has become an unintended by-product of Denmark's and Germany's bilateral policies with the aim to abolish the geopolitical conflict about the bordering of Denmark and Germany and hereby appease the minority conflict, which had been virulent from national awakening during the long nineteenth century, with re-bordering in 1848, 1864 and 1920, plus serious challenges to this re-bordering in between and after, until 1955. In effect, the sensitivity of the re-bordering became evident when de-bordering happened with the extension of the Schengen area to the Nordic countries, decided in 1997 and implemented in 2001. The political process was accompanied by considerable local and national resistance in Denmark (Klatt, 2006; Yndigegn, 2013). In effect,

the national minorities were also a by-product of the re-bordering of Germany and Denmark, as it was consensus that the dissenters of the plebiscite of 1920 (about 25% voted for Germany in the part of Schleswig that became Danish, about 20% voted for Denmark in the part of Schleswig that remained with Germany) should not be forced to leave or assimilate, but were granted national minority status with respective provisions for education and cultural life. With the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations of 1955, their right to close relations to their kin-state and the kin-states' right to support the cultural life of their kin-minorities was codified and became a central aspect of the Danish-German minority settlement (Klatt, 2025).

5 Kin-State Support: From Cultural Offensive to Cultural Diplomacy

Kin-state support played an important role in Schleswig. Morally, it was based on a narrative of not forgetting the kin minority who remained on the "wrong" side after the border delineation of 1920 (Klatt, 2025, 169–70). In the interwar period, NGOs such as the *Schleswig-Holsteiner Bund* (League of Schleswig-Holsteinians) and *Grænseforeningen* (The Border Association) generated financial as well as cultural support by engaging with their kin minority communities and mobilizing civil society in the kin-state, not to forget the "lost" kin minority. Both kin-states financed these associations. This model continued after the Second World War: now, Denmark and Danish national activists were perceived to take advantage of the dire economic situation in Germany after the lost war. Even after the 1955 settlement, regional German politicians and, probably, a considerable part of the German oriented population, perceived Danish kin-state support as a cultural offensive with a missionary aim to strengthen the minority and eventually transform it into a majority to achieve a border revision (Klatt, 2025, 172–73; Klatt, 2006, 77–116), all the while both minorities declined in numbers when looking at minority school attendance and minority party votes. This trend changed, though, for the Danish minority in South Schleswig, from the 1970s (Klatt & Kühl, 2024). The Danish minority party SSW (*Südschleswigscher Wählerverband*—South Schleswig Voters' Association) became more popular and school attendance stabilized in an environment of demographic decline. The minority attracted families without previous in-depth contact with Denmark and the Danish language and culture. A success of cultural diplomacy via the minority? No in-depth study on the phenomenon exists, but a new period of cultural exchange and comparison emerged. For the SSW, implementing Danish solutions to German or Schleswig-Holstein problems has become a mantra as well as a narrative of political success (Klatt & Kühl, 2024). From the Millenium, this was accompanied by a Danish rediscovery of reunified Germany and especially its capital Berlin, which has become a most favoured destination for Danes' short-term tourism. Furthermore, the German minority has offensively branded their minority educational system as a regional alternative, specifically addressing Danes by advertising of the added value of an additional language.

Today, cultural diplomacy involves the two kin-minorities on many levels. First of all, the minorities' cultural associations offer a wide range of cultural activities related to and financially supported by the kin-state. Danish theatre regularly has performances in German South Schleswig, and vice versa. The same applies to concerts of all kinds. The minority's public libraries give access to the kin-state's literature and other forms of cultural productions. Events and libraries are open to the public as windows of the kin-state's as well as the minority's cultures, opening up wide opportunities of cultural diplomacy. The newly appointed general secretary of the Danish minority's cultural association held a position before as head of communication of the German Embassy in Copenhagen, where he was responsible for cultural diplomacy and a contact person for the German minority in Denmark.

Secondly, the organized and institutionalized minority-kin-state-home state dialogue is a forum of cultural diplomacy. High ranking home state and kin-state representatives participate in minority cultural events, especially the Danish minority's *Årsmøde* (annual meeting), a weekend in late spring with events arranged by every local district of the minority, the German minority's *Deutscher Tag* (German Day), a more formal annual meeting with speeches and workshops on the minority's situation, and the German minority's *Knivsbergfest*, a more informal annual gathering with games and music for all generations. Furthermore, it has become common practice for minority and majority stakeholders to participate in events of remembrance of the shared heritage of national conflict. These institutionalized meetings ensure regular dialogue and provide informal fora to address pressing issues and prevent serious conflicts. Over the last decades, the cultural life of the minorities has become more open, attracting general attention. The historic cultural struggle on ownership of the region's heritage has been replaced by a narrative of diversity as a unique feature of the region (across the border) and has resulted in a widespread perception of national minorities as bridge-builders between the two states and their populations.

6 B-SHAPES: Central Narratives of Young Minority Borderlanders

Work Package 4, Borders shaping minorities' perceptions of the European project, has examined borderland minorities in five European border regions (DK-DE Schleswig, IT-AT South Tyrol, HU-SK Danube river, PL-CZ Ciesyn/Tesin, BG-GR-TR Thrace Rhodope Mountains). We have chosen borderland minorities as communities especially affected by re-bordering trends as the border closures applied during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing an in-betweenness of minorities in the complex multi-level interactions in borderlands as well as the special role that borders have for minority communities as historical legacy, but also as part of everyday lives and familiar landscapes (European Research Executive Area (REA), 2023, 12; Tarvet & Klatt, 2023; Böhm, 2019). A citizen science-based

participatory research was applied, collecting and evaluating border-related narratives of borderland residents with a strong focus on young borderlanders (16–30). In practice, we have conducted creative arts zine-making workshops and semi-structured interviews with young borderlanders belonging to a national minority in all five regions (on the methodology in detail: Engl et al., 2025, 9–11). Key results have already been published as project deliverable reports (Engl et al., 2024; Engl et al., 2025) and scientific articles (Nicolson et al., 2025; Opiłowska et al., 2026). B-SHAPES follows Open Science principles: research data is available in pseudonymized form on the open repository Zenodo, community Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies.[3] Here, I will reflect on the results of our fieldwork in two of the five regions mentioned, the Denmark-Germany and the Greece-Bulgaria-Türkiye border regions, framed under the lens of minorities as actual and potential agents of cultural diplomacy. These regions have been chosen because of their antagonistic situation as appeased, Schengen borderland with a narrative of minority inclusion, cooperation and friendship (Denmark-Germany) and troubled, conflictual borderland with a narrative of militarization, border closure, undocumented migration hotspot, continuing geopolitical conflict and minority discrimination (Greece-Bulgaria-Türkiye).[4]

The central narratives of the young minority borderlanders from the Denmark-Germany border region (either from the German minority in Denmark, or the Danish minority in Germany) described border living as a good, rich experience. There was a strong focus on border shopping, which is a local tradition shared by minority and majority residing in Denmark: Danish taxation policies on specific products, especially sweets and alcohol, make shopping in Germany a lucrative experience; not the least with special supermarkets catering to the specific demand of Danish customers. Furthermore, all informants showed a clear tendency to a form of hybrid, mixed, or dual identity as borderlanders; there was no clear binary identification as either Dane or German. Narratives about the EU were more differentiated. One voice, for example, mentioned the EU as a central actor to ensure protection of minorities, while another voice feared that minorities would go under, or rather assimilate in a further integrating Europe. The border itself was experienced as open, but, of course, the young people remember the drastic restrictions of border crossings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The wild boar fence, a Danish sanitary measure to prevent infected wild boars from entering the country to protect the Danish pork production industry, also had a rather drastic impact on the perception of the border. The fence was constructed in 2019 as the first widely visible physical demarcation of the border. It actually is located in Denmark, but nevertheless demonstrates a fenced border, even though it only hinders the free movement of animals, not humans.

[3] More information available here: https://zenodo.org/communities/b-shapes/records?q=&l=list&p=1&s=10&sort=newest

[4] The dataset is available here: https://zenodo.org/records/18629295

The narratives from young people belonging to the Turkish minority in Greece about the Greece-Bulgaria-Türkiye borderland were different, but not totally. One difference was a stronger acceptance of the border and border controls as markers of sovereignty and places of transgression. This went along with a very clear perception of bordered space, with Türkiye on one side and Greece on the other side, but also regional space as the minority's homeland in Western Thrace. The border was also clearly identified as a protector of states, but also language and diversity faced by homogenization trends. At the same time, our informants have experienced rigid controls when crossing the external border to Türkiye, including profiling and general suspicion when Greek border guards recognize the Turkish names in their Greek passports. The "border as a fence" featured highly in these narratives as something that prevents people from freedom of movement, freedom of expression, cross-border communication, and socialization. As in Denmark-Germany, the border closures during the pandemic were experienced as a hardship, making family visits impossible. Informants also pointed out that border crossings created and maintained awareness of their joint heritage with Türkiye. While the border as a factor of separation was focussed highly on, informants also perceived the border as a bond connecting different cultures and people, as well as an instrument of or a site of cultural transfer.

Border crossings to Bulgaria did not figure as prominent or frequent (the interviews were recorded before Bulgaria joined the Schengen area). Shopping was the main reason for such crossings.

Our informants had a clear perception of being a Turkish minority in Greece. Their minority identity was perceived as both a privilege and a challenge. All had experienced feelings of discrimination, mostly regarding education and language rights, and feelings of exclusion, especially not being granted the right to their identity as a Turkish minority, but only as a Muslim minority. The border was perceived as a key factor shaping minority identity: "because the border is in the mind at the same time. It can also reveal the role of a mental conflict … as long as the border exists, the minority identity will continue to exist and be strengthened".[5] Their clear message was that they were perceived as a threat by "Greece"—the Greek state, but also people—and that "Greece" conducted a policy of deminoritization by not developing the region (leading to emigration) as well as direct discrimination and pressure to assimilate. Furthermore, the informants were very engaged in the Israel-Palestine conflict and the war in Gaza, seeing this as a threat to them, too.

[5] B-SHAPES_WP4_interview_TR-GR_2024_10-12_10.

7 Conclusion: High Potentials as Cultural Diplomats

These narratives reflect on cross-border living in an in-between. Both groups express a special borderland identity, which is shaped by both the border and by crossing the border. The pacified situation in the Denmark–Germany borderlands has already opened opportunities for minorities as cultural diplomats. In fact, the young informers witness the results of cultural diplomacy. They no longer perceive themselves as spearheads of their nation in diaspora, but, on the contrary, as transnational borderlanders frequently crossing the border. Their borderlives, or rather cross-border lives, have made them agents of cultural diplomacy on a daily basis. They might not perceive it as such, or as a conscientious act of cultural diplomacy. But, by spreading narratives, by navigating between two cultures and cultural systems on a regular basis, they demonstrate that this is possible. The stability of the minorities in size despite considerable out-migration proves the effect of this cultural diplomacy: the minority education systems of southern Denmark and northern Germany have become a competitive alternative to the public school system, chosen by parents beyond the core minority.

Even though their situation is different, the lives of young people belonging to the Turkish minority in Greece also reflect cultural diplomacy. They perceive themselves as potential bridge builders in a borderland still heavily impacted by historic trauma, but also by cross-border opportunities and a shared heritage since prehistoric times. The difficult geopolitical situation covers for the small effects of minority cultural diplomacy: maintaining contacts and social networks with home—and kin-state. This social capital can be employed on a local scale and in daily borderland lives, notwithstanding the present lack of commitment to recognition and serious engagement in cross-border cultural diplomacy by Greek and Turkish actors.

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Romanian-German Emigration and Censorship in the Daily Newspaper *Neuer Weg* 1989–1990

Ioana Maria Cusin and Ioana Hermine Fierbinteanu

1 Introduction

Nowadays, people's ability to revive the past in their imagination through memory is of great importance. This way, the past can influence the decisions we make in the present and the hopes we nurture. More than 30 years later, engaging with press censorship in Romania and with the attempts to circumvent it remains an important and topical issue. The effects of censorship and self-censorship can still be felt today, as they have shaped generations and continue to surface in discussions of social and ethical questions.

Through the interviewees—primarily journalists of *Neuer Weg* (NW), who experienced significant events during the communist period—we gained not only an individual perspective on historical events, but were also influenced collectively, as members of the Romanian-German minority. Unfortunately, many contemporary witnesses are no longer alive, especially those who worked for Romanian and Romanian-German newspapers. Therefore, we sought alternative ways to keep the history of Romanians and the Romanian-German minority alive. This enables subsequent generations—members of the Romanian-German minority who remained in the country or emigrated, as well as Romanians, to engage with the past in order to better understand its consequences and influence on the present. At the same time, this process encourages reflection on one's own values and views. This leads to the question of the growing interest in topics such as memory and

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remembrance. This interest can be explained by the decline in the number of contemporary witnesses and their direct recollections of events up to 1989, the year of the political transition in Romania. Through our work, we seek to preserve the remembering and reexperiencing of contemporary witnesses, thereby maintaining the authenticity of the past. In addition to historical sources, which serve to broaden collective perception and provide new insights, former NW journalists have been interviewed in order to record personal stories, memories, and experiences. This makes it possible to understand how different generations represent and process their memories.

2 Memorial Culture: From Individual Remembrance to Collective Identity

Assmann (2011) defines and distinguishes the concepts of remembrance and memory as follows:

> In German, a distinction is made between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. The first refers to reflecting on and sharing personal experiences in the context of culture and history – experiences that can be exchanged with others. The second, however, is understood as a way of creating a sense of collective identity for larger groups, for example through the rituals that nations use to keep their past alive. (Assmann, 2011)

Through dialogues, individuals and social groups come into contact, resulting in an exchange through which life experiences are passed on. Rüsen and Jaeger (2001, 340) point out that memories should be understood as spaces of communication that reflect the relevant orientations of individuals' life practices. People recall events that are personally significant to them, with emotions influencing which experiences are later considered important, unimportant, or associated with pain. Painful experiences are often repressed, and negative memories are unconsciously preserved and can be reactivated by specific triggers. According to Rüsen and Jaeger (2001, 340), "[memory] then serves to repress, shift, or distort the past". Thus, our sense of self is based on past events that we select, generalize, and later evaluate as our own knowledge. Once concepts and experiences are combined, figures of memory emerge. For thoughts to belong to memory, they must first be represented as a combination of concept and image: "In order for a truth to establish itself in the memory of the group, it must be represented in the concrete form of an event, a person, or a place" (Halbwachs, 2005, 28). Gudehus et al. (2010, 84) conclude that "distortions of memory" can also occur. The observed deviation of a memory from objective facts should not be regarded as an error; rather, one should ask for what purpose this deviation occurred. In this way, altered memories can be highly beneficial to our personal and social goals and, consequently, to our well-being. For example, by allowing us to view our behaviour in a specific situation as positive, or by helping us avoid memories of unpleasant experiences and thus forget them more easily. To adapt past experiences in a timely manner,

Welzer (2005, 170) meant, that people use their memory, because this is related to the *performative act of remembrance.* In literary studies, the term *memory* refers to the "collective concept of accumulated memories, functioning as a repository and a framework for individual acts of remembrance and memorial entries". Assmann's and Frevert's theory of memory (Assmann & Frevert, 1999, 35), based on Halbwachs's considerations, became the central approach in cultural studies in the 1980s. In his theory, Assmann distinguishes between two fundamental forms of collective memory: communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory refers to the social dimension of individual memory and includes the memories that are transmitted through dialogue. Therefore, a lonely person cannot develop memory at all, because "structure, perspective, relevance, conciseness, and horizon in memory arise only through affectively charged forms of communication" (Welzer, 2005, 13). Memories only gain structure through being passed on in the form of a narrative (Assmann & Frevert, 2002, 184).

Welzer (2005, 234) points out that "to tell life-story events […] is itself a life-story event". Personal memories are very important for each individual, as they form the basis of their identity. They reflect the various relationships and experiences that a person has throughout life and greatly influence self-perception and personality. An event or an object can trigger a reaction that *awakens* a multitude of individual memories, allowing them to become conscious and, under certain circumstances, to be transmitted orally. Assmann (2005, 184) emphasizes that memories often have only a limited duration and can fade or even be completely lost over the course of a lifetime. Another feature mentioned by the author is that memories are connected to the memories of others, and are inalienable and non-transferable. Each generation expresses its inner restlessness in words. Each generation reports from the perspective of past events, from its own viewpoint, and strives to pass on the stories it has experienced.

Welzer (2001, 54) emphasizes that through shared exchange, various group memories are formed. This memory exists as long as the members of a generation are alive; it is directly linked to its carriers—the contemporary witnesses of an experiential and memory community—and generally does not extend further back than about 80 years. Communicative memory arises through dialogues, which are strongly shaped by emotional memories. Emotions are important because human experiences are closely intertwined with feelings. Through emotions, we determine whether experiences are to be evaluated as positive, negative, neutral, etc., and how they are stored (Welzer, 2001, 150). Communicative memory extends back 80–100 years. A generational shift occurs after about 40 years, at which point the nature of society's memories changes, allowing dominant memories, narratives, and meanings to shape perception. Some memories are forgotten or regarded as unimportant, while new ones continually emerge (Assmann, 2005, 37). The contemporary witnesses represent approximately three to five age groups, which together form a kind of "community of shared experience, remembrance, and narrative" (Welzer, 2005, 37). When these age groups pass away, this memory will be lost, which is why efforts are made to preserve lived experiences for subsequent generations and to seek a form of social memory. The cultural memory

of individuals and societies is preserved through narrated stories and recollections. In the case of collective memory, a distinction is made between communicative and cultural forms. Through communicative memory, experiences are transmitted orally to the following generations. Complementing this is cultural memory, which focuses primarily on preservation. Carriers of such preservation include historical and autobiographical media, but also works of art and cultural artefacts, music, fashion, or architecture (Hoffmann, 2025). In this context, the term *Erinnerungskultur* refers to the specific way in which a society deals with its past (Assmann, 2005, 184–189). At the meso level, the two terms remembrance and memory refer to institutions or organizations. In organizational studies, this is referred to as "institutional memory". Organizational memory relates to the totality of stored information and knowledge within an organization, which serves to optimize decision-making. The collective knowledge of an organization can be conscious or unconscious, written or implicit, and structured or chaotic (Neusser, 2025). For Levitt and March (Neusser, 2025), memory in this context is not an inactive storage, but rather a filter that is repeatedly activated to determine what was observed, how actions were taken, and what is remembered. Organizational memory operates on multiple levels: strategic (experiences from the past), operational (certain routines and processes are binding), and emotional (attachments, fears, or pride). Five types of memory are distinguished, each serving different functions and presenting different risks: documented knowledge, lived history, routines and processes, error archives, and symbolic artifacts. Documented knowledge includes manuals, process descriptions, guidelines, and project reports, which should be consulted first by new personnel to avoid repeating past mistakes. Positive or negative narratives circulate within every organization; they are important because they influence organizational culture and the framework for action. Routines and processes encompass knowledge that is not formally recorded but is taken seriously, while symbolic artifacts are human-made creations—symbols or small changes with a strong signalling effect. Mistakes are often not discussed in organizations; they are concealed. Error archives prove that something went wrong, but they also demonstrate that lessons were learned from it.

Individual memory shapes collective memory through the accounts of contemporary witnesses, when they speak about their memories, put them into writing, or when they are mediated or become the subject of political debates. In this context, the memories of migrant groups from Transylvania, the Old Kingdom of Romania, and the Banat are considered components of collective memory in Romania, as they publicly convey personal perspectives on Romanian society, for example, regarding emigration up to and after the political transition.

Individual memories thus become integral parts of new collective narratives when they are recognized as such by institutions and achieve the desired resonance. This represents a reciprocal influence: collective memory shapes and structures individual memory, creating a dynamic sequence. At the same time, individual memory introduces new tools, impulses, or alternatives, which in turn can influence collective memory. For Halbwachs (2005, 37), memory is socially conditioned, meaning that individual memories arise only within social contexts

and thus become part of societal memory through multiple individual voices. Consequently, it can be concluded that there is a close relationship between memory and identity, because memories are selected and interpreted from the basis of both individual and collective identity. In a social context, individual and collective memory are reflected in institutional memory. This includes accumulated knowledge, experiences, routines, and historical decisions that an organization develops and stores over time (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, 88). Explicit knowledge includes documents, records, and databases, whereas implicit knowledge is based on *employees experiential*. Individual memory is embedded within collective memory. Memories arise within social groups, which define the categories of meaning, values, and interpretive frameworks. "Collective and individual memories shape how people understand themselves and their place in the world, while shared memories such as common histories, traditions and cultural narratives form the basis of collective identity, while personal memories shape individual identity" (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, 88). Collective memory relies on institutional structures as fundamental frameworks. Institutions contribute, for example, through media, archives, holidays, and other means to stability, thereby standardizing collective memory. Institutions influence both individual and collective memories. This means that, in addition to schools, museums, media, and the press, institutions play a central role in the construction of collective memories and also help determine which events and content are deemed worthy of remembrance. Individual memories can either confirm or critically question institutional narratives. At the same time, individuals and societies exert a reciprocal influence on their institutions, so that new discussions on significant political, social, and cultural issues can lead to new statements or positions. Consequently, institutional memory exhibits a certain dynamism, changing over time as a result of social mechanisms.

3 Censorship

Where freedom of expression becomes the subject of discourse, censorship also comes to the forefront. When discussing the press in communist Romania, one immediately encounters political control, which was systematically employed as an effective instrument of power by the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) from the late 1940s and later in the 1970s and 1980s, to ensure that everything was presented in accordance with the prevailing ideology. Etymologically, the term censorship derives from the Latin *censura* and refers, among other things, to the "official, usually state supervision and review of printed works, theatrical productions before their publication or performance, and of letters" (DWDS). Building on this, theorists over time have formulated different definitions of the term, which either supplemented the general thesis about censorship or interpreted it from other perspectives, thereby giving it new nuances. An example of this is the sociopolitical engagement with this concept. For Foucault (1971, 10–11), who examines censorship from the perspective of discourse and power analysis, it should not be understood merely as a restrictive state measure. Rather, censorship is seen as a

component of the control and exclusion processes of discourse, which, on the one hand, determines the content of statements within society and, on the other hand, decides which statements may be formulated and which can be relied upon. Bourdieu (1991, 115) means that censorship is shaped by social power structures and expectations, so that speakers refrain from expressing certain content from the outset, knowing already that it will not be accepted by society. In totalitarian states, however, censorship was usually closely linked to the suppression or restriction of personal opinion and information, making control of reporting a sine qua non for the publication of newspapers and magazines. Under these circumstances, press freedom was called into question. Common instruments of censorship included press control, propaganda, and bans. Repressive censorship was considered a fixed part of everyday life in Romania until the political transition. It was enforced by the political police, the Securitate, who blackmailed, threatened, disciplined, and even arrested those (journalists, writers, clergy, and many others) who critically engaged with the regime. For the same reasons, self-censorship was common in these states, as every writer knew and adhered to the politically desired propaganda. Despite these adversities, Romanian and Romanian-German journalists made efforts to keep newspapers *readable* for their audiences. Over time, several types of censorship developed. Today, two fundamental forms of censorship are mainly distinguished: preventive (or prior) censorship and subsequent (or post-publication) censorship (Markewitz, 2025). Within post-publication censorship, censorship targets (oral or written, acoustic and visual information, among others) are censored after publication or production (Roßbach, 2023). This occurs through edits such as cuts, redactions, confiscation, or sales bans. In the case of preventive censorship, objects such as books or articles are reviewed before the printing stage to ensure they comply with the generally applicable guidelines. This often led, for example, to authors in communist countries consciously practicing self-censorship in order to prevent their work (book, article, etc.) from being rejected by the responsible personnel.

With the seizure of power by the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), the press in the Romanian People's Republic came under state monopoly. In this context, in 1949, the so-called Direcția Generală a Presei și Tipăriturilor, respectively the General Directorate of Press and Publications, essentially the central state censorship authority, was established,[1] which was later transformed into Comitetul pentru presă şi tipărituri.[2] It functioned as the central organ of the state and the party. As an institution of the communist regime, it controlled the press, books, and other publications. Although this and censorship by the Central Committee were officially abolished in 1977, the function of censorship continued to be carried out by the institution: Consiliul Culturii și Educației Socialiste.[3] This gradually led to an

[1] From the name of the institution, it was not apparent that censorship was the main task of this body.
[2] Committee for Press and Printed Materials.
[3] Council for Socialist Culture and Education.

intensified form of censorship and self-censorship, which operated not only at the institutional but also at the individual level.

The rigid form of censorship did not cease to exist and became increasingly pronounced in the 1980s. Since the socialist media system adhered to the three fundamental principles: *Propaganda*, *Agitation*, and *Organisation*, in Romania, the media and press were expected to act as instruments of the RCP entirely in accordance with Marxist–Leninist ideology and to convey this attitude to the population as intended.[4] Consequently, newspapers and editorial offices had to comply with these guidelines and act as loyal representatives of the prevailing ideology, even if this systematically excluded freedom of expression to make room for utopian ideals. As a result, the informative function was considered secondary and was no longer binding for reporting. Editorial offices and staff had to continuously ensure that reporting complied with the regulations of the RCP (Romanian Communist Party) and that the narrative aligned with the desired ideological line. The fact that, for example, an article had to be reviewed by approximately six editors before publication indicates the institutionalization of censorship within the respective editorial offices.[5]

The published content[6] was mostly dictated by the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), leaving very little space in newspapers to report on other social and cultural issues. Primarily, speeches by Nicolae Ceaușescu, announcements from the RCP, and laudatory reports and commentaries were published, presenting a completely different, utopian reality. Topics addressing real societal problems—such as accidents, crimes, or the supply of food were not allowed to appear. Unwanted, and even prohibited, content also included religious topics. Furthermore, reporting on the deportation, ransom, or emigration of Romanian-Germans was strictly forbidden. The strict and often absurd editorial regulations led, for example, to the minority press using every available loophole to inform readers cryptically about matters affecting their community. In the case of *Neuer Weg*, this was primarily possible in the Culture and Local sections. The way journalists found to circumvent censorship was through allegorical language, which, however, could only be used to a limited extent. The most effective strategy, though, was the *Zwischenzeilentechnik* (Galon, 2008, 42), a method that, over the years, allowed the minority press to serve as the only "free voice" resisting the socialist regime.

[4] See Herdeanu (2014, 40–41), who argues that the media were "aimed at shaping the new, progressive person of our socialist society".

[5] In this context, Gross (1996, cited in Herdeanu, 2014, 44) notes that *"the editor, the assistant editor, the section editor, and (on the day of publication) the individual responsible for the particular issue, a party activist who acted as a supervisor, and the copyreader"* were involved in the process.

[6] Through the Romanian Press Law of 1974, the RCP took complete control of the press, so that the same party could decide over all printed information.

4 Sources of the Study: The Romanian-German Minority and *Neuer Weg* (NW)

4.1 The Romanian-German Minority

The term "Romanian-Germans" refers to several German-speaking minority groups within the territory of present-day Romania. The largest groups include the Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians, who were settled by Hungarian and Habsburg princes between the twelveth and nineteenth centuries in the regions of Transylvania (also called Siebenbürgen) and the Banat. They established themselves through craftsmanship, urban organization, trade networks, and new agricultural techniques. At the same time, they founded important cities such as Sibiu/Hermannstadt, Brașov/Kronstadt, and Bistrița/Bistritz, and contributed to the development of craftsmanship, industry, trade, forestry, and many other sectors.

Romanian-Germans also shaped cultural life through German-language schools, theatres, the press, and associations. During the interwar period, Romanian-Germans were a recognized minority with cultural autonomy. After 1945, they experienced deportations to Russia, expropriations, and severe repression under communism. All of this contributed to several waves of emigration of the German minority from Romania. Seeking a better future, more than 400,000 Romanian-Germans emigrated to Germany from the mid-twentieth century onwards. "Emigration was voluntary and highly coveted. Beginning in 1969, it was financed by the German side with billions of marks after several rounds of negotiations with the Romanian state. These agreements were strictly confidential and remain a subject of controversy to this day" (S.I., 2022).

The motives of emigration were among other things the economic and political developments in Romania (political upheaval)—incongruence between words and actions, the rise of right-wing extremist parties (e.g. Partidul România Mare), which demanded the prohibition of bilingual place names and the discontinuation of mother-tongue education for Romanian minorities and despite well-sounding statements of intent by the government, the minority felt insecure and continued the emigration process. For the collective thinking within the minority, the *Neuer Weg* (NW) served as a platform for discussing emigration.

4.2 The Newspaper *Neuer Weg* (NW) and the Investigative Approach

The first German-language daily newspaper of the Romanian German minority was called *Neuer Weg* [New Path]. Because the Romanian state aimed to portray the German minority as state-funded and censored politically, the newspaper served to spread the socialist ideology. The newspaper editorial team decided to add new sections such as cultural, children's, and science. In the 1960s, there were around 70,000 copies. After 1989, the newspaper changed its name into *Allgemeine Deutsche Zeitung für Rumänien* (ADZ).

The taboo topics in NW were until 1989: political criticism, human rights and repression, economic problems, religion and ethnic issues, international affairs, and cultural and social taboos, such as the emigration of ethnic Germans. In the present study, we based our work on the three questions: Who am I, Who are we, and What is considered worthy to remember? These questions form the foundation and summary of the theoretical content presented above and explain how individual, collective, and institutional identity is formed and by what it is influenced. The investigative approach is based on the NW-newspaper-archive from 1989 to 1990, unpublished interviews with members of the German minority (e.g. the journalists Hannelore Baier and Rohtraut Wittstock) conducted in 2024–2025, and published self-conducted interviews (Cusin, 2020, 239).

5 *Neuer Weg* between Narrative and Censorship

Control of discursive spaces was exercised by the state as a means of regulating political behaviour. The media were constantly monitored, with politically desired narratives becoming the dominant themes, thereby preventing the formation of independent opinions. Migration was considered a form of betrayal, was undesirable, and was made invisible in order to help avoid social tensions**.**

5.1 Control of Discursive Spaces

The press was an instrument of state control, as only certain topics that reflected the ideology were allowed to be published. According to Herdeanu (2014, 46) and Müller (2002, 79), in addition to religious topics, reports on accidents, crimes, and food supply were also restricted.

> Journalists were not even allowed to report in the newspaper about the emigration of their fellow countrymen – a topic that ultimately affected the minority's very existence. But it wasn't just that. On the party's orders, the newspaper was required to publish content that was effectively against emigration. This created a perfect contradiction: they had to criticize a situation that, in the reality reflected by the media, was not supposed to exist.[7]

The taboo topics in NW were political criticism, human rights and repression, economic problems, religion and ethnic issues, international affairs, cultural and social taboos such as the emigration of ethnic Germans (*Freikauf*).

[7] "Auch über die Auswanderung ihrer Landsleute durften die Journalisten in der Zeitung nicht berichten. Ein Thema, das schließlich die Minderheit existenziell betraf. Doch nicht nur das. Die Zeitung hatte, auf Weisung der Partei, regelrecht Kampagnen gegen die Auswanderungen zu veröffentlichen, sagt Emmerich Reichrath rückblickend. Damit war der Widerspruch perfekt: Man hatte einen Zustand zu kritisieren, der in der von den Medien reflektierten Realität eigentlich nicht existieren sollte" (Müller, 2002, 79). Unless otherwise indicated, translations from German are by the authors.

> An agreement was reached to allow 11,000 people to emigrate annually, in return for Hermes credits totaling 800 million DM and a payment of 4,000 DM per person. If the number of emigrants rose to 13,500 per year, the payment was to increase to 5,000 DM per person. (Leber n.d.)[8]

From the self-conducted interview with the writer Hans Liebhardt, former editor of Neuer Weg and the ADZ, it emerges that the editorial leadership was aware of political control, yet used the available leeway to create a newspaper in line with their objectives. In the past, certain topics were off-limits. Censorship was always present, so one had to be very careful about what and how one wrote.

> People unfamiliar with the situation often speak of state censorship. At NW, control was exercised by the Press Department of the Central Committee (ZK) of the Romanian Communist Party (RKP). The censors were administrative officials who, in practice, had little discretion. They worked from a list specifying what was allowed and what was forbidden. However, they were not only responsible. As I mentioned, the ultimate responsibility lay with the ZK Press Department. The NW editors had a different kind of access to certain censors. Editor-in-chief Breitenstein always maintained good relations with the political leadership. Breitenhofer, a member of the ZK, the State Council, and Parliament, was such a prominent figure that the censors feared him. When he approved something, it was generally accepted as correct, though he never pushed too far. It is therefore more accurate to speak of the collaboration between NW's leadership and the Press and Propaganda Department. The editors were aware of this relationship. In the end, the guiding principle was that the content had to follow the political line. Loyalty to this line was crucial – it was a matter of *being on the line or not on the line* (Liebhardt 2020, cited in. Cusin, 2020)[9]

Loyalty to this line was crucial—it was a matter of being "on the line or not on the line".

The quote above presents a situation in which journalists in Romania were forced, up until the 1989 political transition, to portray a reality such as the emigration of the Romanian-German minority, that, according to the official media

[8] "Vereinbart worden sei eine Zahl von jährlich 11.000 Ausreisenden, für die im Gegenzug Hermes-Kredite über 800 Millionen DM gewährt werden und ein Kopfgeld von 4.000 DM fließen sollten. Ab 13.500 Ausreisenden im Jahr sollte sich das Kopfgeld auf 5.000 DM pro Person erhöhen".

[9] "Leute, die sich nicht genau auskennen, sprechen oft von staatlicher Zensur. Die Kontrolle beim NW war die Presseabteilung des ZK der RKP. Die Zensoren waren ausführende Beamte, die im Prinzip wenig zu sagen hatten. Sie besaßen eine Liste mit dem, was erlaubt ist und was nicht erlaubt ist. Sie [Liste] war nicht die einzige schuldige. Die Verantwortung war wie gesagt, bei der Presseabteilung des ZK. Die Chefs vom NW hatten dort einen anderen Zugang auf irgendwelche Zensoren. Chefredakteur Breitenstein hatte immer einen guten Draht zur politischen Führung. Breitenhofer war Mitglied im ZK, im Staatsrat und im Parlament. Er war so, dass die Zensoren vor ihm gezittert haben. Wenn er etwas gesagt hat, dann war es so im Prinzip richtig. Natürlich ist er nie damit zu weit gegangen. Man sollte von daher über die Zusammenarbeit der Leitung des NWs und der Presse- und Propagandaabteilung sprechen. Das wussten die Chefs. Und dann hat man gesagt, dass das die politische Linie ist. Linientreu, das war sehr wichtig. Es hieß: "E pe linie sau nu e pe linie!!"

narrative, was not allowed to exist. This created a split in perception, as the journalist or the individual had to navigate between a reality dictated by institutions and their own knowledge of the world. For the individual, this meant that lived experiences could neither be depicted nor mentioned, causing personal memories to be suppressed, distorted, or tabooed. At the same time, the collective memory was being rewritten, as the Romanian state imposed conditions, for example, denying emigration within the collective narrative resulting in an artificial reality in which crises or problems did not exist.

The media are central actors in the construction of collective realities. When a state forces the media to officially deny phenomena such as emigration, the collective memory is rewritten, contributing to a situation in which history and the present can no longer be considered a fixed part of communal identity. The quote also shows how the *Neuer Weg*-newspaper lost its own institutional identity and, instead of independent reporting, became an extension of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP). In this way, the newspaper was transformed into a tool of political identity and redefined in its role.[10]

The press was no longer an instrument of information, but served the exercise of power, controlling truth and memory. Journalistic values such as enlightenment or critical thinking were replaced by obligations to propagate. People experienced a contradictory reality. Multiple generations looked back on a manipulated version of reality, while institutions produced an official reality that often contradicted actual social experience. The interview demonstrates that authoritarian systems systematically shape, control, and distort identity and memory on three levels. The Romanian-German children's author Hedi Hauser worked as an editor/proofreader at the daily newspaper Neuer Weg, spent many years as chief editor at the Kriterion Publishing House in Bucharest, and held political positions as a representative of Romania's German minority. According to her, Romanian-German authors had more leeway than their Romanian colleagues, due to the German language:

> Despite everything, the Romanian-German poets enjoyed greater freedom to express and publish their views than their Romanian counterparts. The state authorities tolerated this to a certain extent, believing that it would have little impact on the general population and would be positively received in the West. (Bruss, 2011)[11]

[10] In Romania, the first faculties of journalism emerged only after 1990; prior to that, there were no university-level degree programs in journalism as independent faculties. Narcis Ronald Popescu, "The Party School of Social Sciences 'A. A. Jdanov' 1948–1958" (Popescu, 2011). In 1945 and 1946, two political schools were established in Bucharest: the Higher School of Social Sciences 'A. A. Jdanov,' where journalism courses were offered, and the Higher Party School 'Ştefan Gheorghiu' which merged with the Higher School of Social Sciences 'A. A. Jdanov' in the 1958/1959 academic year. Journalism courses were also taught there" (Petcu, 2010).

[11] Interview with Hedi Hauser (2011): "Trotz allem hatten die rumäniendeutschen Dichter mehr Freiheit, ihre Meinung zu äußern und zu veröffentlichen, als ihre rumänischen Kollegen. Die Staatsführung ließ sie in gewissen Grenzen gewähren, weil sie meinte, das hätte wenig Einfluss auf das Volk und käme im Westen gut an."

5.2 The Role of the "Cap Limpede" in the Romanian-German Press until 1989

The *Neuer Weg*-journalist Emmerich Reichrath recounted in an informal conversation at the NW editorial office after the 1989 political transition how the *cap limpede*[12] rejected one day the press-ready edition of NW because, at the very last moment, he discovered a mistake that could have had serious and severe consequences for the responsible editors. On the front page of the newspaper, a letter was accidentally swapped in the headline: Lenin der Lenker (*Lenin the Leader*) was mistakenly printed as Lenin der Henker (*Lenin the Executioner*).

5.3 Examples of Avoiding Censorship

Despite the restrictions, thanks to the standard Romanian-German language (Lăzărescu, 2013, 369–389).[13] NW journalists had several degrees of freedom and multiple ways of expression. All of them had to be mindful of self-censorship while editing. At the same time, they were obliged to comply with censorship regulations, even when reporting on topics that were of critical importance to the German minority.

The journalist Hannelore Baier reported in a 2025 interview that she began her work at NW in early March 1984. She was "trained" by a colleague for one week, that is, she learned what could and could not be written and how, so that she had to confront self-censorship from the start. For example, one could report on an organ concert, but it was not allowed to mention that it took place in a church or to use the word *priest*[14] (Müller, 2002, 79; Cusin and Fierbințeanu 2025). Photos of the church were not allowed to appear, so NW's photographer Edmund Höfer came up with the idea of climbing the church tower to present the surrounding area from a bird's-eye view, allowing readers to recognize the church. In reporting for German-language newspapers in Romania, from October 1971 (Herdeanu, 2014, 63) onwards, German place names were no longer allowed. Instead of the toponym *Hermannstadt*, the phrase *die Stadt am Zibin*[15] was used. Even the newspaper *Hermannstädter Zeitung* was renamed *Die Woche.*

[12] Cap limpede means the suppression of "misinterpretations". This included: rejecting rumours or criticism, exposing so-called "hostile influences", and discrediting dissenters as confused or ideologically immature.

[13] "Rumäniendeutsch ist das in einigen Gebieten Rumäniens in der überregionalen Kommunikation verwendete Deutsch, allgemein unter der Bezeichnung Rumäniendeutsch bekannt, […] das als eine eigenständige Varietät der deutschen Sprache betrachtet werden kann. […] trotz ihrer fehlenden Amtssprachlichkeit im Sinne von Ammon (1995) ist der Anspruch auf Standardsprachlichkeit berechtigt."

[14] At the NW editorial office, journalists often received information for the local section from the priests of the German community; however, they were not allowed to mention the source in their reports, because the title "priest" was prohibited.

[15] It is a tributary of the Olt River (in Romanian, Olt). The name of the river in Romanian is Cibin.

Religious holidays were not allowed to be presented as such, so an *atheistic* designation was used. Christmas appeared in Romanian and Romanian-German media as *Luna cadourilor* or *Month of Gifts*. Even churches were not permitted to appear as religious spaces in the communist press, but only as reinterpreted places of memory or monuments that excluded faith. Religious symbols were not completely erased, but rather emptied of meaning and instrumentalized:

> German culture often touches on church-related topics. During the communist era, however, church subjects were largely off-limits. There was a regulation stating that when depicting church monuments or images, the cross should not be shown. You could show the church itself, but not the cross. Many Protestant churches had no cross at all; in its place there was a sphere or simply the church tower spire. Of course, there were exceptions. I recall, for example, a full-page article in 1987 devoted entirely to the Black Church. This may have been connected to the church's restoration at the time. On the day of the ceremonial reopening, the page was published, and I wondered how we could feature the church interior with the altar in the centre of the page. I was curious whether it would actually appear in the newspaper the next day – and it did, surprisingly. The *Neuer Weg* article was even mentioned on Romanian radio as part of a press review. At times, one had to constantly ask: is this allowed or not? For the communist ideology, churches were not religious places of worship but monuments. As such, one could write about them, but not as religious objects. The same applied to Christmas. Since it was a religious feast, it was not allowed to be mentioned. You might find that surprising, but for us, that was completely normal. (Cusin, 2020)[16]

Images of churches were therefore allowed to appear, but the cross as the main symbol had to be removed. This created both an alienating and a distancing effect, in which spirituality was absent. Churches and monasteries became the foundation of discussion, yet their actual functions were denied. As a result, the collective memory was fragmented. Because of censorship, individuals had to adapt to the *normalized absurd*. Exceptions became part of everyday life; identity was not formed through public resistance but through the negotiation of what was possible

[16] Interview with Rohtraut Wittstock (2020): "Die Kultur der Deutschen berührt oft auch kirchliche Themen. Und zu kommunistischen Zeiten wurden kirchliche Themen überhaupt nicht berührt. Es gab in diesem Zusammenhang eine Bestimmung, dass man wohl bei Kirchendenkmälern und Kirchenbildern das Kreuz nicht zeigen lässt. Man durfte die Kirche zeigen, aber nicht das Kreuz! Es gab viele evangelische Kirchen, die überhaupt gar kein Kreuz hatten. An dessen Stelle stand da eine Kugel oder einfach der Turmspitze. Es hat allerdings auch Ausnahmen gegeben. Ich kann mich z.B. an eine große Seite erinnere, die 1987 allein der Schwarzen Kirche gewidmet war. Es kann sein, dass es sich damals um die Restaurierung der Kirche handelte. Bei der feierlichen Eröffnung wurde die Seite veröffentlicht, und dabei habe ich mir die Frage gestellt, wie wir den Innenraum der Kirche mit dem Altar in der Mitte der Seite veröffentlichen könnten. Ich war gespannt, ob das am nächsten Tag in der Zeitung erscheinen wird. Und es stand wirklich da. (*Erstaunt:*) Der Artikel aus dem NW wurde sogar im rumänischen Rundfunk erwähnt, im Rahmen einer Presseschau. Es war so, dass man sich manchmal fragen musste: Geht das oder geht das nicht? Kirchen waren für die kommunistische Ideologie keine religiösen Kultstätten, sondern sie waren Denkmäler. Als solche konnte man über sie sprechen, nicht als religiöse Objekte. Und was Weihnachten anbelangt, war das genauso. Es ging dabei um ein religiöses Fest, von daher durfte man es nicht erwähnen. Sie wundern sich, aber für uns war das das Normale (*lächelt*)".

and impossible. The question *Is this allowed or not?* became an everyday routine in the press. Morality and religion no longer mattered; they were replaced by politically pragmatic self-control. Identity continuously oscillated back and forth. Because the cross and Christmas were taboo topics that could not be shown or mentioned, they gained a new symbolic meaning: the gap itself became a mediator precisely because it existed. Such gaps paradoxically had a balancing effect on collective memory. They represented knowledge that could not be explicitly expressed and connected those who recognized what was missing. Christmas thus belonged to the memory of individuals and became a stable component of identity precisely through its omission. The journalist Rohtraut Wittstock reported on the Black Church, in which censorship rules were not entirely followed, an occurrence that was rare at the time and represented breaks in the political discourse. Under communism, identity was split, as there was a significant difference between personal and social identity. Memory was maintained not through preservation, but through allusions, deletions, and exceptions. Faith was reduced to a monument, stripped of its original meaning.

5.4 Simplified, Folkloristic Portrayal of the German Minority

The editors reported in the local section on cultural events that concerned the minority. Very often, they covered a celebration, a ball, and, of course, the folk dances, so that the cultural identity was reduced to unproblematic folklore. Baier (Cusin and Fierbințeanu 2025) recalled an article in which the number of dance couples was mentioned: "50 couples danced this year in….". No comparisons were made, yet readers could read between the lines that, since the previous report the year before, many community members had left the country—a further veiled reference to emigration that could not be openly mentioned. Regarding memory, the recollection was shaped by facts (50 couples) and familiarity with the situation. The collective identity was maintained in coded form, as the information could not be openly expressed. The 50 couples became a symbol of the fragmentation of the Romanian-German community.

5.5 The Emigration of Romanian-Germans in *Neuer Weg*

One of the taboo topics in the daily newspaper *Neuer Weg* (NW) was reporting on the emigration of the Romanian-German minority. Müller stated, following an interview with Emmerich Reichrath in 1997:

> The newspaper, on the party's orders, was required to publish outright campaigns against emigration, Emmerich Reichrath recalls in retrospect. This created a perfect contradiction:

> one was expected to criticize a condition that, in the reality reflected by the media, was not supposed to exist at all. (Müller, 2002, 79)[17]

From the statement mentioned above, it becomes clear that there was a huge discrepancy between the socialist state—or the authoritarian system—and the construction of everyday reality. Consequently, the press in Romania until 1989 created a fabricated identity, while a different reality developed in the personal memory of the individual. In retrospect, it is evident how strongly communist propaganda shaped general perception and identity. Instead, the NW-newspaper was regularly required to report on the decay of the West, which led to the adoption of articles from foreign press that served the purposes of the prevailing ideology, as is evident from the following headlines*: Extreme wealth—extreme poverty. A hint of decay/scenes from the New York subway* (1989)[18] and *In the slums, poverty runs rampant, while one has to pay $3000 for a kindergarten place* (1989).[19]

The topic of emigration, which had been completely suppressed in NW until 1989, came to the forefront after the fall of communism through contrasting written statements by public community representatives and private citizens. The publication of these texts led to the first free debate[20] in the newspaper Neuer Weg. These were reflections on the future of the German minority in Romania and the preservation or loss of their own identity. A central issue in this context was the question of the social status of the Romanian-German population: *Should members of the German minority remain in Romania, or should they confront the role of late repatriates* (Spätaussiedler) *in the Federal Republic of Germany?*

The Romanian-German historian Hermann Fabini wrote in the early 1990s: "For a large part of our compatriots, the concept of hope became associated solely with emigration, while another, significantly smaller group often clung almost desperately to the preservation of what already existed" (Fabini, 1990).[21] From this, it can be inferred that the hope for self-fulfilment of individuals was associated with stability and adequate living conditions in the FRG, with the individual taking precedence over the collective. For those who wanted to remain in their homeland, home and tradition were part of their self-perception. For the collective identity,

[17] "Die Zeitung, hatte auf Anordnung der Partei, regelrecht Kampagnen gegen die Auswanderung zu veröffentlichen, sagt Emmerich Reichrath rückblickend. Damit war der Widerspruch perfekt: Man hatte einen Zustand zu kritisieren, der in der von den Medien reflektierten Realität eigentlich nicht existieren sollte".

[18] Extremer Reichtum—extreme Armut. Ein Hauch von Untergang/Szenen aus der New Yorker U-Bahn (Anonym, 1989).

[19] In Slums grassiert die Armut. Wo man 3.000 Dollar für einen Kindergartenplatz bezahlen muss (Anonym, 1989).

[20] This was not a debate in the proper sense, but rather contrasting statements from readers who felt directly addressed by the topic of emigration and responded on their own initiative.

[21] "Für einen Grossteil [sic!] unserer Landsleute wurde der Begriff Hoffnung nur noch mit der Auswanderung assoziiert, während ein anderer, wesentlich geringerer Teil, oft krampfhaft an Erhaltung des Vorhandenen festhielt".

emigration represented a significant change, as ethnic cohesion had to be dissolved and transferred to the FRG, requiring the collective heritage and networks to be reinterpreted under new circumstances. Collective uncertainty arose from the dilemma of leaving (for a future and a new life) or staying (to preserve language, culture, and community).

While the minority grappled with this existing identity conflict, the new state leadership, through former President Ion Iliescu, appealed to the emigrated Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians to return to their homeland.

Censorship and self-censorship shaped reporting both in content and language. An ambiguous language was employed. After the political transition, the first written engagement with a political topic took place, as an asynchronous dialogue that ultimately divided the minority.

6 Conclusion

In this article, individual memory was documented through interviews with eyewitnesses and journalists from *Neuer Weg*-newspaper. Their collective and individual memories reflect their personal understanding of their identity. The two are closely interconnected and help individuals understand their place in society. Stories, traditions, and cultural narratives form the foundation of collective identity, while personal memories shape individual identity.

In communist Romania, media and power structures systematically instrumentalized reality ideologically, continuously challenging both memory and identity. Censorship and self-censorship led to a polarization of personal identity. There was even a loss of identity due to restrictions on reporting certain topics, such as migration, deportation, or ransom.

Censorship and self-censorship created official taboos and unofficial rumours, producing two parallel realities. This forced journalists to rely on the *between-the-lines* technique to convey taboo topics. It was the last creative outlet for the newspaper to inform its readership. In this way, *Neuer Weg* became a cryptic *lieu de mémoire*—a site of memory encoded within the constraints of censorship.

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Cultural Exchange Under Surveillance: Klaus Heitmann and Romanian-West German Academic Relations (1960s–1980s)

Irina Nastasă-Matei

Research carried out over the past decades on cultural exchange during the Cold War has shown that, despite opposing and competing economic systems and political regimes (planned economy versus market economy, state socialism versus liberal democracy), ongoing cultural relationships and exchanges existed between the countries of the "Soviet bloc" and those of democratic Western Europe (David-Fox, 2014, Dragostinova & Fidelis, 2018, Mikkonen & Koivunen, 2015).[1] These policies were shaped, of course, by the dynamics of the Cold War and functioned as instruments of soft power. They were not a one-way transfer but a reciprocal exchange, with influences moving in both directions, even if at times asymmetrical.

This article analyses the work of the West German Romanist Klaus Heitmann during the 1960s-1980s from two complementary perspectives: on the one hand, through his engagement with Romania and Romanian culture, and on the other, from the perspective of the Romanian authorities and cultural milieu. This approach highlights the role of multiple actors involved in cultural exchange, operating on several levels: scientific and academic collaboration; cultural diplomacy; and the shaping of public opinion in both countries to create mutually favourable

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images. These exchanges also shaped the often contradictory or divergent ways in which educational, cultural, diplomatic, and surveillance institutions functioned in communist Romania. Finally, they fostered personal relationships and networks of friendship that, beyond state policy, played a decisive role in intensifying exchanges and cultural diplomacy between the two countries.

The article begins with a sketch of Klaus Heitmann, focussing on his interest in Romanian studies and his concrete connections with Romania. It then analyses how the Romanian authorities and the cultural environment of the 1960s–1980s perceived Heitmann. The analysis shows that, especially after 1967, he was regarded as a valuable asset to Romanian cultural and public diplomacy.

First, both Romanian intellectuals and politicians considered it a major advantage that a well-known Western Romanist scholar had devoted significant effort to promoting Romanian culture and defending its merits internationally, especially as Romanian culture sought to assert itself as rich and prolific.

Second, Heitmann's research interests closely aligned with Ceaușescu's renewed drive to promote Romania abroad, particularly by emphasizing the ethnic continuity and linguistic uniformity of certain historical provinces that had been or were part of Romania. Heitmann's work, which argued against the existence of the so-called "Moldovan language", in fact an artificial Soviet construct used to designate the Romanian spoken in Bessarabia, was especially appreciated. Above all, Heitmann was seen as a great friend of Romania and a key actor in Romanian cultural diplomacy because he consistently upheld, in his academic publications, press articles, and international conferences, the thesis of the continuity of the Romanian people in Transylvania. From the late 1960s onward, an old "cultural war" between Romania and Hungary intensified; it dated back to the interwar period, when both countries, through various forms of cultural diplomacy (institutions, publications, scholars, and participation in international congresses), sought to influence international public opinion: Romania to legitimize Transylvania as part of its national territory, and Hungary to justify its territorial claims to the region (Nastasă-Matei & Nastasă-Kovacs, 2023).

Third, the cultural and academic collaboration between Romania and West Germany, facilitated by Heitmann, also served to legitimize the Ceaușescu regime. The fact that Heitmann, as Professor at the University of Heidelberg and Director of the Romance Studies Seminar there, collaborated with universities and institutes in Romania and maintained particularly good relations with the Union of Writers of the Socialist Republic of Romania (hereafter SRR) was taken as evidence that the Bucharest regime was respectable, that Romania's cultural and academic scene was valuable, and that extensive collaboration across the "nylon curtain" (Péteri, 2006) was possible.

However, like all foreigners who visited Romania or maintained connections with its citizens, Heitmann did not escape the close surveillance of the Securitate. The pretext for this monitoring was based on often absurd suspicions of espionage or on alleged critical attitudes towards the communist regime attributed to Heitmann. He was also targeted because Romanian intellectuals who received

scholarships or were invited to lecture at the University of Heidelberg were themselves either under surveillance or acting as informants, and their contacts with Heitmann were systematically recorded, reported, and analysed by Securitate officers. Furthermore, the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, home to two major academic centres, Heidelberg and Freiburg im Breisgau, also hosted a significant nucleus of Romanian exiles connected to the Freiburg library. These exiles were largely hostile to the Bucharest regime, and within this context, Klaus Heitmann appeared in the Securitate files as one of the figures associated with this milieu.

The article also aims to describe Heitmann's network of friends and collaborators, both in Romania and within the Romanian exile community in West Germany, in order to show how personal relationships and intellectual friendships could be essential to the development of academic projects and to the intensification of cultural exchange between the two countries. Heitmann published important co-authored volumes with Romanian linguists and literary critics, maintaining his closest relationship with Ovid Crohmălniceanu. He invited numerous Romanian intellectuals to the Romanian Studies Seminar in Heidelberg, where they delivered lectures or read from their novels and poems to German students; he supported Romanian applications for DAAD fellowships; and he organized scholarly and public events dedicated to Romanian culture. More generally, through the Romanian Studies Seminar in Heidelberg, he created a favourable environment for the promotion of Romanian culture in West Germany.

This article offers a synthesis of these contributions, highlighting the significance of this Romanist scholar in the cultural diplomacy between the two countries, even within a political context that was not always favourable: shaped by the Cold War and by a socialist state that became increasingly authoritarian and distrustful, especially in the 1980s.

1 Klaus Heitmann: A West German Romanist and Scholar of Romanian Culture

Born in 1930 in Mülheim an der Ruhr, Klaus Heitmann was an important German Romanist. He studied in Cologne and Freiburg im Breisgau, earned his doctorate at the University of Freiburg under Professor Hugo Friedrich with a dissertation on Petrarch (Heitmann, 1958), and subsequently held professorships in Romance studies at the University of Marburg, the Technical University of Berlin, and, finally, at the University of Heidelberg, where he retired in 1998. In the early phase of his career, his academic work focussed on Italian culture as well as on French literature and theatre (Heitmann, 1970), before gradually shifting towards the Romanian language, literature, and culture more broadly.

His interest in the Romanian language and culture emerged during his doctoral studies. Out of curiosity, as he stated in several interviews, he began teaching himself Romanian in 1953 using the textbook *30 Stunden Rumänisch für Anfänger* [*30 Hours of Romanian for Beginners*], a manual for soldiers published during the

Second World War and written by Erwin-Ernst Lange-Kowal, a renowned German linguist and one of the most important disciples of the Romanist scholar Ernst Gammillscheg.[2] This period was significant, as Heitmann repeatedly noted, because the 1950s had been "the years when Romania had become, for the West, a country […] emerging from beyond the mist, vanished behind the Iron Curtain" (Durnea, 2004). After 1989, he stated:

> In the first half of the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, Romania appeared to the outside world – and to Romanist research in the Federal Republic of Germany – as a distant and inaccessible country, a *terra incognita.* It was precisely for this reason that I was drawn to focus on this far-flung corner of the Roman cultural space. As my interest in the field grew, and as I deepened and enriched my knowledge of the language and literature, I became increasingly convinced that this *terra incognita* was well worth the effort. It could attract the interest of Romanists just as much as regions that, thanks to more favorable historical circumstances, had traditionally drawn attention. (Durnea, 1992)

In other words, Heitmann was captivated by the new language and culture to which he was beginning to gain access. Soon, in 1956, his first article on the Romanian language was published, "Die Bemühungen um die Literatursprache in Rumänien" [Efforts to Promote the Literary Language in Romania] (Heitmann, 1956), and in 1958, he published, in the philological journal Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen [Archives for the Study of Modern Languages], a bibliography of Romanian literature. This latter work was heavily criticized in the Romanian press by the literary critic Romul Munteanu, who accused the West German Romanist of ideological bias and of rejecting socialist cultural and spiritual values:

> Unfortunately, the synthesis that the author sought to present to German readers, particularly in connection with Romanian linguists' discussions on the literary language, was significantly undermined by coarse attacks on the Marxist orientation of the Romanian researchers, and by a tone of sarcasm and malice that called into question many of the author's claims, which were already lacking a scientific basis. (Munteanu, 1959)

At that time, Romul Munteanu was merely expressing the tensions of the era, with the late 1950s weighed down by the political and ideological conflicts of the Cold War. Although Munteanu described the young and still-unknown Heitmann in that article as a "ridiculous swordsman, who wants at all costs to fight against values that have imposed themselves with or without his will", concluding that his works could not be "used with confidence by foreign researchers […] remaining a mere, highly subjective expression of a person with an opaque mind, incapable of

[2] Ernst Gamillscheg (1887–1971), a German philologist and Romanist scholar of Austrian origin, led in the late 1930s, a seminar in Romanian philology at the University of Berlin attended by young Romanians with Nazi or Legionary sympathies. In 1939, he founded a Romanian-German study circle, and from 1940 to 1944, he served as director of the German Institute for Science in Bucharest, an organ of Nazi propaganda. He was also vice-president of the Romanian-German Society in Berlin, founded in 1943.

grasping the new breath of history and the true values of art" (Munteanu, 1959), he would later, in the 1970s and 1980s, become close to the German Romanist. This rapprochement occurred in a completely different political and cultural context: that of Romania's opening to the West, but also of Heitmann's diminishing anti-communist stance and the reduced ideological sensitivity of Romanian intellectuals.

In 1960, Klaus Heitmann visited Romania for the first time, attending summer courses in Romanian language and literature, history, and art in Sinaia. He then made friends among the country's intellectuals, meeting, probably for the first time, Ovid Crohmălniceanu and Paul Cornea, with whom he would maintain lifelong relationships. This was the first of a long series of trips to communist Romania. On this occasion, he was also interviewed, along with three other researchers, curiously, all from Western countries (FRG, Italy, Switzerland, and Sweden), even though most participants came from the USSR, other communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, or Latin America. It is clear, however, that the Romanian press was primarily interested in the perspective of Western intellectuals and in the prominence of Romanian language and culture in this context—that is, the role these programmes played in cultural diplomacy, particularly in relations with the West. During this interview, Heitmann emphasized that Germans knew too little of the Romanian language and literature, even though, in his view, it deserved to receive international recognition. He also expressed his particular interest in the work of Mihail Sadoveanu, whom he considered one of the greatest contemporary storytellers: "As a poet of nature, he has no equal in the West. There should not be a small corner of the world where he is not read" (Zalis, 1960). Indeed, throughout his career, Heitmann not only analysed but also popularized in German the works of Romanian intellectuals such as Titu Maiorescu, Mihai Eminescu, Ion Luca Caragiale, Lucian Blaga, Eugen Lovinescu, George Călinescu, Marin Preda, Eugen Barbu, Nicolae Labiș, George Coșbuc, Carmen Sylva, Urmuz, Eugène Ionesco, and others.

In 1967, the year marking the resumption of diplomatic relations between Romania and West Germany, Heitmann's presence in the Romanian cultural and intellectual sphere, as well as his visits to Romania, intensified. He increasingly collaborated with Romanian researchers, gained access to published materials, and produced an increasing amount of research on Romanian literature from both historical and contemporary perspectives. He was also increasingly seen as a friend of Romania, promoting Romanian culture in the West. Heitmann explicitly noted this moment in a nearly full-page report on Romanian–German relations published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Heitmann, 1967). This was not his only article of this kind; throughout his career, he published several analyses on the subject. He was particularly appreciated in the Romanian press because he highlighted this period in contrast to the pre-communist past, emphasizing an alleged—more imagined than real—resistance of the Romanian cultural environment to Nazi influences (Anonym, 1967).

Klaus Heitmann published numerous research articles on the Romanian language and literature.[3] He served as director of the Marburg Romance Studies Seminar in the 1960s, but more importantly, as Professor of Romance Studies at Heidelberg and director of its Romance Studies Seminar, he contributed enormously to the promotion of Romanian culture in West Germany. As will be shown below, Heitmann was highly active in organizing conferences in Romance Studies, where he promoted Romanian language and literature, as well as events specifically devoted to Romanian culture. Furthermore, many Romanian intellectuals and writers of the period were invited to the Romance Studies Seminar, including some who later came to be regarded as dissidents.[4]

Heitmann also supported the applications of numerous Romanian intellectuals for DAAD scholarships. Although not all of these initiatives were successful, particularly in the 1980s, when funding for Romanians was severely limited, many intellectuals nevertheless owed their opportunity to study in West Germany during the Cold War to Heitmann.

As he was particularly appreciated during the communist period, Heitmann's renown grew even further in Romania after 1989, which is unsurprising given that cultural exchanges and the mobility of publications and intellectuals had become much more intensive. Numerous articles about him and his work, published both during his lifetime and posthumously (Anonym, 2000, Constantinescu, 2018; Damian, 1976, Durnea, 1992, Ornea, 1996; Șora, 2000), appeared in the cultural press; he was widely interviewed (Anonym, 1983c; Crohmălniceanu, 1980; Cornea, 1992, Durnea, 2004; Șeicaru, 1992), and frequently visited Romania for academic meetings and public lectures. In 1991, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Bucharest, and in 2000, he became an honorary member of the Romanian Academy.

[3] Notable among these are his 1965 study *Die rumänische Sprache und Literatur in Bessarabien und Transnistrien. Die sogenannte moldauische Sprache und Literatur* (Heitmann, 1965); the 1985 volume *Das Bild der Rumänen im deutschen Sprachraum. 1775–1918. Eine imagologische Studie* (Heitmann, 1985); *Rumänisch-deutsche Interferenzen* in 1986 (Heitmann, 1986); *Oglinzi paralele: studii de imagologie româno-germană* in 1996 (Heitmann, 1996); *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu și influența catalitică a culturii germane*, co-authored with O. Crohmălniceanu in 2000 (Crohmălniceanu & Heitmann, 2000); and many others. Heitmann was also the main contributor on Romanian culture to West German dictionaries and encyclopaedias in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (*Biographisches Lexikon,* 1973/1981; *Brockhaus* Enzyklopädie, 1967; Kayser & Horst, 1961).

[4] Among them were Ovid Crohmălniceanu, Paul and Andrei Cornea, Ana Blandiana, Romus Rusan, Mircea Dinescu, Mihai Isbășescu, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, Maria Banuș, Gabriela Adameșteanu, Eugen Simion, Marin Sorescu, Mircea Iorgulescu, Dumitru Micu, Alexandru Zub, Dan Berindei, and many others mentioned below.

2 Klaus Heitmann and His Role in Romanian Cultural Diplomacy

Romanians could only be grateful to the West German Romanist for his dedication to the Romanian language and culture and for his efforts to promote them abroad. This appreciation was evident in the press of the time, in private correspondence among intellectuals, and in official documents, particularly Securitate intelligence reports, which kept Heitmann under surveillance.

From the very beginning, Heitmann's mastery of Romanian, which he reportedly spoke "like a God" (Simion, 1982), was highly appreciated. It often created confusion and led some to believe that he had been born in Romania and only later emigrated to the FRG, which, of course, was not the case. Moreover, as noted by the Securitate agent "Horia" in a 1986 intelligence report, Heitmann "enjoyed great influence because he was German, with no Romanian or Saxon ancestry, yet had invested himself in Romanian culture as few had in Germany, and even more than Romanian exiles".[5] The same report emphasized that Heitmann's interest in Romania and his writings about it were motivated not by personal gain, but purely by conviction and admiration, grounded in a firm belief in the value of Romanian culture.

Heitmann's interest in Romanian culture also aligned perfectly with the new momentum given by the Ceaușescu regime to promote Romania abroad. In this way, the German Romanist served as a reference point for demonstrating the universality and particular value of Romanian culture. In 1976, for example, in an article on the "literature of the national epic" by George Munteanu, a writer and professor at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest, written during preparations for the Congress of Political Education and Socialist Culture,[6] Heitmann was cited as a model foreign intellectual who recognized the importance of Romanian culture and contributed both to its popularization and to enhancing the country's prestige (Munteanu, 1976).

At the time, there was an almost obsessive concern with understanding why Romanian poetry and literature were insufficiently known abroad and lacked international recognition, and Heitmann was one of the foreign intellectuals from whom much was expected in this regard. He himself made this an objective of his professional career, publicly asserting on multiple occasions that he was convinced Romanian literature was in no way inferior to that of other Southeastern European countries, despite receiving far less attention, and questioning "why the Nobel Prize had not been awarded to Mihail Sadoveanu, Lucian Blaga, or Tudor Arghezi?" (Crohmălniceanu, 1980). Numerous reports on diplomacy and cultural exchange (ranging from press coverage intended for the general public to secret

[5] The Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS). (1986, October 22). *Informative dossier no. 243117:* Information note from "Horia". Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[6] The Congress of Political Education and Socialist Culture, Bucharest, 2–4 June 1976.

Securitate documents intended solely for repressive authorities) illustrate in detail the contexts in which the German Romanist advocated for the value of Romanian literature, even promoting, one might say, a form of literary exceptionalism.

Heitmann's very collaboration with Romanian cultural institutions, and especially his frequent presence in the country, served as a source of legitimacy for the Ceaușescu regime. The fact that the German Romanist, a professor at the University of Heidelberg and director of its Romance Studies Seminar, maintained cultural and academic exchanges with universities and institutes, and particularly with the Union of Writers of the Socialist Republic of Romania (USR), constituted an implicit statement that the Bucharest regime was worth engaging with, that Romania had an intellectual and cultural life compatible with that of Western countries, and that cultural exchanges across the Iron Curtain could be intense and fruitful, despite the opposing political systems of the two states.

Heitmann was thus a constant presence in Romania, notably throughout the 1980s. In July 1985, while attending the Writers' Symposium organized by the Union of Romanian Writers, he noted that this was his sixth visit to the country. I have not been able to reconstruct all five of his previous visits, but his 1960 trip to the foreign school in Sinaia is certainly documented. There was also a visit in April 1980, again at the invitation of the USR (Crohmălniceanu, 1980), as well as his participation in the conference on "Aspects of Romanian-German Cultural Relations", organized by the House of Culture of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bucharest and the USR from 13 to 15 October 1983 (Anonym, 1983c; Heitmann, 1986).

In fact, in 1985, Heitmann visited Romania for a second time that year to participate, from 14 to 20 October, in West German Cultural Week, a rather diplomatic event that brought together many political guests and to which numerous West German cultural figures were also invited (Anonym, 1985; Lerea, 1985). Heitmann also offered small "gifts" to the Ceaușescu regime, occasionally expressing admiration in the press for matters not directly related to Romanian culture but to the communist administration, as illustrated by an excerpt from an interview he gave during a visit to Bucharest in April 1980:

> I have already gained some knowledge of the country. One of the objectives of my current visit to Bucharest is to see how this beautiful metropolis has been rebuilt after the 1977 disaster. Walking through the city in recent days, I have been impressed by the speed and efficiency of the reconstruction work. Bucharest has been enriched with new buildings, some of which are remarkable from an architectural point of view. (Crohmălniceanu, 1980)

Heitmann also made a valuable contribution to Romanian cultural diplomacy through his scholarly work. From this perspective, his most significant work is *Das Rumänenbild im deutschen Sprachraum 1775–1918. Eine imagologische Studie* [The Image of Romanians in the German Linguistic Sphere, 1775–1918: An Imagological Study], published in 1985. The book was very well received in Romania, with contemporary critics praising the Romanist's objectivity and meticulousness in

outlining a model of "Romanian ethnopsychology" (Anonym, 1987d), and Romanian intellectuals were grateful to Heitmann for "taking a stand against certain malicious and disparaging distortions about Romanians by foreign writers of our time".[7]

In reality, *The Image of Romanians* did not necessarily present a wholly positive view of Romanians, but it succeeded in countering certain negative stereotypes (such as the notion that Romanians were "lazy") by analysing various aspects of their image within specific socio-economic and political contexts (Cercel, 2015), aiming to uncover "the politico-ideological determinations of all the authors considered" (Heitmann, 2014). Moreover, Heitmann included in his analysis the territory beyond the Carpathians—Transylvania—which, although not part of a Romanian state during the period under study, was associated with the Romanian cultural environment, with imagined Romanian borders encompassing, from the Romanist's perspective, the Transylvanian space.

In 1986, in Heidelberg, under Heitmann's coordination, the volume *Rumänisch-deutsche Interferenzen* (Romanian-German Interferences) was published, compiling the proceedings of the conference held from 13 to 15 October 1983 in Bucharest, organized by the USR in collaboration with the House of Culture of the FRG in Bucharest. This work was also very well received in Romania and earned the gratitude of the country's intellectuals for promoting Romanian culture in the West. In a review the following year, S. Doinaș wrote:

> The elegant work published by Klaus Heitmann also serves as a reminder of what remains for us to accomplish today. Contact with any great culture increases our chances of attaining universality. 'All that has been entrusted to me is good,' Goethe said. Upon reading these rich *Interferences*, any foreign man of culture will recognize that we Romanians are far more European than some are willing to believe, precisely because we have been able to receive so much, and selectively, of what constitutes part of Europe's intellectual heritage. (Doinaș, 1987)

Several publications by the German Romanist promoted the idea of ethnic continuity and linguistic uniformity in the historical provinces of Romania. His work *Rumänische Sprache und Literatur in Bessarabien und Transnistrien. Die sogenannte moldauische Sprache und Literatur* [Romanian Language and Literature in Bessarabia and Transnistria: The So-Called Moldavian Language and Literature] (Heitmann, 1965), published in West Germany in 1965 and translated into Romanian only in 1991 following the fall of the Iron Curtain, argued against the existence of the so-called "Moldavian language", which was in fact an artificial Soviet construct used to designate the Romanian spoken in Bessarabia. Heitmann reiterated this point in 1989, publishing the term "Romano-Moldavian" in the *Lexikon der rumänischen Linguistik* [Lexicon of Romanian Linguistics] (Heitmann, 1989). This was a well-recognized fact among intellectuals in Romania and the

[7] CNSAS. (1987, February 10). *Informative file no.* 243117. Information note from "Ana-Maria".

Republic of Moldova, but Romanian authors could not address it for fear of provoking diplomatic tensions with the USSR. As a West German scholar, Heitmann faced no difficulty in addressing the topic, and his foreign perspective lent credibility to the objectivity of his analysis: what interest could a German have in recognizing (or denying) a language "invented" by the Soviet regime? Only in the early 1990s was the significance of this article officially acknowledged in Romania, where it was considered "the first comprehensive treatment of the problem, based on a very rich bibliography, often difficult or entirely inaccessible, outlining the historical framework of the issue and proposing a periodization of its evolution that no subsequent research could ignore" (Vintilă-Rădulescu, 1992). This, however, does not suggest that the Ceaușescu regime disapproved of Heitmann's approach, particularly since it came from a Romanist well respected in the West. In fact, Heitmann also published a "taboo" article in 1988 concerning Bessarabia, on the reception of Mihai Eminescu's poetry in the Moldavian Soviet Republic (Heitmann, 1988).

One of the major objectives of Romanian cultural diplomacy after 1918 was the issue of Transylvania. There was a long-standing cultural struggle between Romania and Hungary to persuade public opinion of the ethnic and historical legitimacy of Transylvania's inclusion within each state's borders, a struggle that was particularly visible in Germany. During World War II, for example, a Romanian Institute operated in Berlin with precisely this purpose: to counter the cultural diplomacy of the active Hungarian Institute in the German capital and to assert Transylvania's Romanian character (Nastasă-Matei & Nastasă-Kovacs, 2023). These efforts resumed after 1965, albeit in a less coordinated and institutionalized manner. Romanian specialists, especially historians and linguists, participated in scholarly conferences in West Germany and other Western countries, receiving mandates from their institutions as well as from authorities such as the Securitate, in order to respond to any scholarly interventions deemed unfavourable to Romania and to promote the idea of linguistic and demographic continuity of Romanians in the historical provinces, particularly Transylvania.

Such accounts and reports can be found in information notes sent to the Securitate or the Romanian Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE), written by various Romanian historians and linguists of the period, such as Alexandru Zub, Grigore Ploeșteanu, or Andrei Corbea. Importantly, these submissions do not necessarily indicate that these intellectuals were acting as political police. The reports were simply forms that any intellectual leaving the country, whether on a scholarship, for research, or to attend conferences, was required to complete and submit to the authorities. They often contain revealing information about the nature of Romanian cultural diplomacy, particularly towards Western audiences.

This highlights the importance of individuals and their personal relationships abroad, which were essential for Romanian cultural diplomacy. Organizational efforts were often inconsistent, funding was minimal, and most accomplishments resulted from personal initiative, motivated by professional interest and scientific passion, rather than from a well-planned, state-supported investment. For instance, in a report describing his long trip to West Germany in 1985, to attend the 16th

Congress of Historical Sciences in Stuttgart and conduct research sessions in Heidelberg and Munich, Grigore Ploeșteanu (source "Gore") described the extensive Hungarian cultural diplomacy, supported by a solid infrastructure: the Ungarisches Institut in Munich, along with two associated scholarly journals, *Ungarn Jahrbuch* and *Studia Hungarica.* According to him, these publications covered not only research on Hungary itself but also on Transylvania, and he concluded: "In general, I observed, through books and studies, the active presence of Hungarian historians, not only those who had emigrated to West Germany and other Western or overseas countries, but also those from the Hungarian People's Republic". He further noted that "there is an attempt to disseminate the opinion that the national issue has not been resolved in our country and that Romanian–Hungarian divergences exist", and that Hungarian historiography promoted the idea of federalization or independence of Transylvania. Most German historians, Ploeșteanu wrote, were more familiar with the Hungarian perspective: "we currently lack historians in Munich to support our interests". As a solution, he proposed creating a Romanian library in Munich and inviting several Romanian historians who "would defend the historiography of Transylvania in line with national interests".[8]

Stela Marieș (source "Ana-Maria") made similar arguments when she sought permission to attend a historians' conference in Mannheim in November 1988, to which Heitmann himself had invited her:

> Our presence at the symposium, accompanied by a presentation, seems all the more necessary because Hungarian historiography is present and represented from the very first day of the proceedings by the presentation of Professor András Gergely from Budapest, entitled *German Future Plans for Southeast Europe around the Revolution of 1848.* It is likely that other Hungarian historians will participate in this international scholarly event, in addition to those officially registered. The chauvinism recently adopted by Hungarian historiography toward us, particularly regarding the issue of Transylvania, is well known.[9]

In this context, Klaus Heitmann was one of the West German specialists who supported Romania's cause, including on the question of Transylvania. This approach is also evident in his volume *The Image of Romanians*, which included Transylvania and thereby acknowledged the historically Romanian character of the territory. The issue was recognized both by specialists and by the Securitate, as evidenced by the side note of the 1987 intelligence report cited above:

> Each page of the book addresses the earliest inhabitants and the numerically strongest ethnic component (in Transylvania). The idea of the antiquity of the indigenous state and the continuity of Romanian life on their ancestral land are therefore the theses that Professor Heitmann strongly asserts in his writings, thus providing concrete proof of his support for us.[10]

[8] CNSAS. (1985, October 7). *Informative file no.* 243117. Information note from "Gore."
[9] CNSAS. (1988, August 9). *Informative file no.* 243117. Information note from "Ana-Maria."
[10] Ibid.

Thus, the German linguist's arguments concerning Transylvania were widely appreciated by the Romanian authorities, particularly when he presented them at conferences abroad and when they were simultaneously reported in the domestic press. Indeed, Heitmann was frequently cited in periodical articles discussing historical issues, particularly the Dacian roots of the Romanian people, a topic popular at the time, or the continuity of Romanians in Transylvania (Anonym, 1983b).

Heitmann's genuine passion for Romanian culture established Heidelberg as an important center for its promotion in West Germany. While seminars in Romance studies and Romanian language courses existed at several West German universities, Heidelberg was particularly active in this regard (Crohmălniceanu, 1980). At Heitmann's insistence, and following arrangements with the Union of Romanian Writers (USR), Sami Damian (Samuel Druckman) was hired in 1974 as a professor of Romanian language at Heidelberg. Damian, himself a writer and literary critic, not only offered Romanian language courses to German students but also actively promoted contemporary Romanian literature there. He was later succeeded by Gelu Ionescu, who continued similar work between 1995 and 2002. With Heitmann's retirement, this chair was also discontinued, demonstrating that it was the linguist's efforts that had driven this fruitful cultural diplomacy on behalf of Romania.

3 Klaus Heitmann's Doppelgänger: Surveillance Under the "Haiduc" Objective

Despite the esteem Klaus Heitmann enjoyed in Romanian circles, he had a Doppelgänger[11]: a German academic who, in the eyes of the Securitate, was allegedly spying on behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany and contributing to the defection of certain Romanian intellectuals to the West.[12] These were the arguments advanced by Securitate officers when they decided to open an informative investigation file (DUI) on target "Haiduc" in October 1986.[13] In fact, Heitmann had been under Securitate surveillance for a long time, already since the early

[11] Katherine Verdery used the term "Doppelgänger" as a conceptual tool when analysing her own Securitate file in Romania. It refers to the "official" or "surveilled" version of herself constructed by the secret police, which was different from her lived identity (Verdery, 2018).

[12] This was a common accusation against Western intellectuals. In 1988, for example, the West German chemist Hans-Joachim Cantow was denied entry to Romania, even though he had been invited to a conference in Bucharest, because he had been on the list of undesirable persons since 1983, suspected of recruiting Romanian specialists from the "P. Poni" Institute in Iași, whom he allegedly persuaded to stay in the FRG. His inclusion on this list was due to the fact that between 1979 and 1983, five chemists from the Poni Institute had refused to return to the country after research stays in the Federal Republic of Germany. See CNSAS. (n.d.). Information note from "Cornelia," Informative file no. 243117.

[13] CNSAS. (1986, October 1). *Informative file no.* 243117. Report, Ministry of the Interior, Directorate 3.

1980s. He appears in an internal Securitate note from July 1983, which detailed the activity of an alleged network of employees from the University of Heidelberg who, in the service of "West German counter-intelligence organs" or the foreign police (Ausländerpolizei), were engaged in "studying, verifying, and recruiting Romanian intellectuals through the scholarship system".[14] According to Securitate officers, this network allegedly included, besides Heitmann, Gheorghe Stanomir,[15] originally from Brașov, assistant at the Faculty of Philology at the University of Heidelberg, as well as Sami Damian, already mentioned, professor of Romanian language. The report notes that Damian, "although he is considered the Romanians' man within the university, does a great deal of harm to the country, as he is intensely used to recruit Romanian citizens who are scholarship recipients", and that he "uses every opportunity to express his aversion to the political and cultural line of our party and state".

Heitmann also appears on a list of West German agents compiled by source "Pamela" in March 1985, in an attempt to prove to the Securitate that "West Germans send their agents under the cover of people of art and culture".[16] These two documents, along with a few marginal annotations on documents relating to other matters in which Securitate officers designated Heitmann as a spy or agent,[17] constitute the only evaluations of this type concerning the German Romanist, despite the fact that his file at CNSAS contains over 200 pages, an indication that even the Securitate did not take this hypothesis too seriously. Nevertheless, it was a sufficient pretext to justify his continued surveillance. Thus, Heitmann appears in almost all reports submitted to the Securitate by Romanian intellectuals who had visited Heidelberg or participated in various academic events in the area; his correspondence with friends and collaborators in Romania was intercepted; information was collected about him from Securitate sources; and he was placed under surveillance during his visits to Romania.

Heitmann was subjected to the most intensive surveillance in October 1985, when he came to Bucharest together with other West German intellectuals, such

[14] CNSAS. (1986, 14 July 4). *Informative file no.* 243117. Note from the Ministry of the Interior, State Securitate Department, addressed to the Head of the Securitate.

[15] Gheorghe Stanomir (born 1949) is a German linguist and writer of Romanian origin. In 1972, he was awarded a scholarship in the Federal Republic of Germany, where he settled and held various positions in pre-university and university teaching, as well as in several German archives. He served as a research assistant to Prof. Johannes Hubschmid at the Romanisches Seminar of Heidelberg University and worked as a lecturer in Romanian language and literature under the chair of Prof. Rupprecht Rohr at the University of Mannheim.

[16] CNSAS. (1985, March 29). *Informative file* 243117. Note.

[17] Comments on an information note from the source "Gore", 7 October 1985: "Klaus Heitmann from Heidelberg is an agent of the BND [Bundesnachrichtendienst—Federal Intelligence Service] […]; the development of the source's connections with him, especially since Heitmann has an interest, is of operational importance for us"; or Top Secret Report, 16 Oct 1985, when his room at the Lido Hotel was searched, as he was "suspected of being an agent of the Federal Intelligence Service". CNSAS. *Informative file* 243117.

as Rupprecht Rohr, Holm Sundhanben, Klaus-Detlev Grothusen,[18] and Lothar Meier,[19] to participate in the "Cultural Week of the Federal Republic of Germany". The Securitate followed their every step: their arrival at the airport, accommodation at the Lido Hotel, visits to the Cultural Service of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Athenaeum,[20] the Academy of Social and Political Sciences, and the National Center for the Promotion of Collaboration and Friendship with Other Peoples, as well as visits to acquaintances, shops and bookstores, churches, and so on.

In addition to continuous physical surveillance, listening devices were installed in their hotel rooms, and the rooms were searched, secretly, two days after their arrival.[21] In Heitmann's case, Securitate agents photocopied his notebook as well as all the business cards they found, in order to identify the Romanian friends and collaborators with whom he met, as well as his daily schedule. This was necessary because, as the surveillance reports of the time indicate, the agents responsible for the operation had considerable difficulty identifying those who visited him at the hotel or those with whom the Romanist met in Bucharest. In most cases, these were well-known Romanian intellectuals, but the Securitate agents were unfamiliar with the Romanian intellectual milieu in which the German professor operated.

Moreover, the surveillance reports show that almost nothing Heitmann did during that period appeared suspicious. Apart from attending cultural and academic events and visiting friends,[22] he spent most of his time browsing bookstores, visiting the old churches in central Bucharest, stopping at a few cafes and restaurants such as Capșa, and generally walking along Victoriei and Magheru Boulevards. In any case, there was nothing out of the ordinary, even though the agents were particularly attentive to whether Heitmann might show interest in queues, infrastructure, or the supply situation in the stores:

> Even though he sometimes used a map while moving around the city (during walks), he was noted to be well oriented within the central area. When he was alone with his wife, moving around the city, he always showed curiosity about food establishments (meat shops, bakeries, self-service restaurants), paying attention to those where queues formed. He would observe carefully before entering to see what types of products were sold. He also visited bookstores and spent considerable time at stands and kiosks selling newspapers, magazines, and books. Another aspect that interested him was public transportation, traffic congestion at stations, and buses equipped with methane gas bottles. He photographed some of these aspects. It was not observed that he took any measures of self-control, although he occasionally looked around. He was very frugal in his purchases.[23]

[18] He himself pursued: the "Grosu" target.
[19] The "Man" target.
[20] CNSAS. *Informative file* 243117. Surveillance reports on the "Haiduc" target.
[21] CNSAS. (1985, October 16). *Informative file* 243117. Top Secret report, hotel search.
[22] "He has acquaintances in our country, whom he visited. The ease with which he went to their homes suggests that he knew them beforehand", CNSAS. 28 Oct 1985. *Informative file* 243117. Surveillance report.
[23] Ibid.

Heitmann's surveillance file also includes his correspondence with various Romanian intellectuals during the 1980s. He appears to have had the most frequent and personal exchanges with Ovid Crohmălniceanu, Paul Cornea, and Dumitru Hîncu. These were also his closest collaborators in Romania, with whom he exchanged not only scientific opinions and academic publications but also personal information, with the professional relationship overlapping with evident mutual affection and support. In fact, Heitmann co-authored a volume with Crohmălniceanu (Crohmălniceanu & Heitmann, 2000), and Dumitru Hîncu translated *L'image des Roumains* into Romanian (Heitmann, 2014), among numerous other collaborations.

The Securitate intercepted his correspondence with Maria Banuș, Dan Berindei, Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, Daniela Crăsnaru, Mircea Dinescu, Alexandru Duțu, Nicolae Manolescu, Adrian Marino, Dumitru Micu, Gelu Naum, Zigu Ornea, Marin Sorescu, Dan Zamfirescu, Alexandru Zub, and others. Beyond the essentially scientific content of many of these letters, it is clear that the Germanist had built a network of intellectuals in Romania with whom he collaborated intensively. They sent him books and magazines and even assisted him with his research in libraries and archives throughout the country. In turn, Heitmann sent them publications on Romania released in West Germany (even though these often did not arrive or arrived late), invited them to participate in scientific events in West Germany or to give lectures at the Romanistic seminar at Heidelberg University, and supported them with recommendations, interventions, and advice to facilitate their applications for DAAD scholarships. Among these were also individuals to whom he granted numerous interviews published in the country's press and who reviewed all of Heitmann's publications, including those not directly related to Romania.

Heitmann appears quite frequently as a person of interest for the Securitate in connection with the Romanian Library of Freiburg im Breisgau. Founded in 1949 by Romanians in exile, the Library initially operated out of the apartment of its first director, Virgil Mihăilescu. As its collection expanded, it later received a proper headquarters in Freiburg im Breisgau, funded by the regional authorities (the state of Baden-Württemberg). The Library's relations with the Romanian state were non-existent until the 1960s, after which they became tense over the following decades. On one hand, the employees and associates of the institution were hostile to the communist government in Bucharest, asserting that the Library represented a centre of Romanian resistance abroad and a means of preserving national identity. On the other hand, the founder, Virgil Mihăilescu, and his close collaborators involved in managing the Library, such as Professor Paul Miron, had been members of the Iron Guard and remained active within the legionary exile community, whose publications were primarily housed in the institution. Relations with the Romanian state were therefore conflicted, and the Library was closely monitored by the Securitate, particularly through informants. Klaus Heitmann himself played a role in this institution, serving on the management committee established by the state of Baden-Württemberg to ensure strictly cultural activity and responsible budgetary spending. From this perspective as well, Heitmann was under Securitate surveillance. Most of the informative notes mentioning him refer to the situation

at the Library after 1986, when the former director, Mihăilescu, retired.[24] He was replaced by Ion Iancu Bidian, who, although too young to be suspected of Iron Guard affiliation, surrounded himself with former legionnaires such as Constantin Nagacevschi and advocated severing all ties between the Library and communist Romania. In this context, Heitmann not only opposed the new management but also took steps with the state administration to prevent Bidian from becoming the new director, which ultimately led to the withdrawal of the subsidy provided by the regional administration.[25] He also publicized the situation, protested alongside Klaus Schroeder, a professor at the Freie Universität Berlin, and Luminița Fassel, a former Library employee. Eventually, Heitmann resigned from the management committee.

Documents from the CNSAS archives also show that the Germanist did not support or associate with the legionary exile in West Germany. An informative note from 1987 mentioned that he "saw it as very divided, without any political weight and without any possibility of consolidation due to the many ideological and personal contradictions, which, according to Professor Heitmann, sharpen and radicalize the legionary exile".[26]

4 Academic Networks and Romanian–German Collaborations Around Klaus Heitmann

Klaus Heitmann was not only interested in the Romanian language and culture; he also established connections with numerous Romanian intellectuals, which greatly contributed to their scholarly development. Through Heitmann, they gained access to foreign literature, were invited to conferences in the Federal Republic of Germany, and spent extended periods in West German libraries and universities through research internships and scholarships obtained with his support. Beyond his publications, it is particularly the networks that he built and maintained that merit recognition for their contribution to a certain openness of Romanian culture during the Cold War. As Sami Damian noted in a 1976 article: "Heitmann knows our country and maintains extremely fruitful relationships with Romanian scholars in language and literature" (Damian, 1976).

As previously mentioned, the collaboration between Heitmann and the literary critic Ovid Crohmălniceanu was the most productive. Beyond joint publications and a rich correspondence, both scholarly and personal,[27] the two men met frequently, forging an intellectual friendship that transcended the boundaries of the Iron Curtain. Crohmălniceanu participated in numerous conferences and colloquia in the FRG during the communist period and was invited to many others, though he

[24] CNSAS. (1986, October 8 and 22). *Informative file* 243117. Information notes from "Horia."
[25] CNSAS. (1987, October 3). Informative file 243117. Information note from "Horia."
[26] Ibid.
[27] CNSAS. *Informative file* 243117; CNSAS. *Informative file* 38799. Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu.

was not always able to obtain an exit visa. He also benefited from a DAAD scholarship at the University of Heidelberg in 1987, of course, at the invitation of his friend Heitmann.[28] Referring to the long list of Romanian intellectuals invited by Heitmann to Heidelberg, Sami Damian noted: "Naturally, Crohmălniceanu, who had long maintained close relations with Professor Heitmann, was at the top of the list. He came here benefiting from academic and university scholarships from renowned foundations, on the recommendation of his patron. He did not always obtain a Romanian visa, blocked by the intrigues of petty and malicious competitors within the milieu, always ready to place obstacles and spoil the joys of others. At other times, he missed the opportunity to travel because he had fallen into oblivion, side lined by the party's powerful" (Damian, 2000).

Sami Damian himself contributed significantly to establishing the Heidelberg Seminar of Romance Studies as an important centre for research on the Romanian language and literature, "a bridgehead of Romanian culture in the West" (Durnea, 2004). An essayist and literary critic, he was invited by Heitmann, on the recommendation of Crohmălniceanu, to take up the position of Romanian language lecturer at the seminar. Arriving in Heidelberg in 1974, he refused to return to Romania, holding this position until 1995. Under his direction, the Romanian language lectureship was particularly active, as Heitmann himself emphasized in several interviews, because Damian's interest in contemporary Romanian literature meant that the position went far beyond a mere language learning space: it became a place for debate and intellectual stimulation. Victor Durnea, a DAAD scholar in Heidelberg in 1987, recalled in 1992 that the lectures were "in fact genuine debates of ideas, as the participating students were from Romania. As a result, the topics involved the close reading of literary texts of very high value, as well as issues of literary theory or the philosophy of culture" (Durnea, 1992).

It was also at Heitmann's invitation that the literary critic Gelu Ionescu came to Heidelberg, following Damian's retirement, to take up the position of Romanian language lecturer. A professor at the University of Bucharest, he had attracted the German Romanist's attention with his doctoral thesis on Eugène Ionesco. The two met in person in Romania in the early 1980s (Ionescu, 2002). Ionescu subsequently fled Romania in 1982 and worked for a period as a reporter for Radio Free Europe. Between 1995 and 2002, he successfully continued the work begun by Heitmann and Damian at the Romanian language lectureship and within the University of Heidelberg's Seminar of Romance Studies.

Among the colloquia and conferences in West Germany to which Heitmann invited Romanian intellectuals, one may mention a session of the Cantemir colloquium, organized in December 1973 in Freiburg im Breisgau. Several dozen Romanian intellectuals participated, including Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, Mihnea Gheorghiu, Mircea Malița, Edgar Papu, Vintilă Mihăilescu, Ștefan Ștefănescu, Petre Caraman, Virgil Cândea, Alexandru Duțu, Viorica Dinescu, Dan Zamfirescu, Alexandru Zub, and others. Subsequently, the participants visited the

[28] CNSAS. *Informative file* 38799, vol. 3, 239.

Seminar of Romance Studies at the University of Heidelberg: "A pleasant trip, which later became traditional, then led the participants first to Heidelberg, where the Romanist Professor Klaus Heitmann hosted a reception in their honour" (Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, 1973).

The meeting was repeated in 1977, again with strong participation from historians and literary specialists from the Socialist Republic of Romania (Izbășescu, 1977). In 1983, Heitmann arranged for Dan Berindei to be invited to the Mannheim branch of the Southeast European Studies Society (Südosteuropa Gesellschaft) to give a lecture on the European context of the 1848 Revolution (*RL*, April 28, 1983, 5). Other similar examples include the invitation of Alexandru Zub to the Ranke colloquium in Heidelberg in 1985; Paul Cornea to the Comparative Literature Congress in Munich in 1986; Crohmălniceanu and Micu in 1988 to the "Academic Week of the Southeast European Studies Society" in Tutzing; and Stela Marieș, also in 1988, to a colloquium of the same Society in Mannheim.[29]

Many other Romanian intellectuals were invited to give lectures at the Seminar of Romance Studies at the University of Heidelberg: Marin Sorescu in 1978 (Anonym, 1978), the literary critic Ion Negoițescu, the poet Dorin Tudoran (Anonym, 1980a), Ștefan Bănulescu, Mircea Dinescu (Anonym, 1980b), Maria Banuș, and Sorin Titel in 1980 (Anonym, 1980c), Petre Solomon (Anonym, 1981a) and Constantin Țoiu in 1981 (Anonym, 1981b), Mircea Dinescu again in 1983 and 1984 (Anonym, 1983a), Ioana Crăciunescu and Daniela Crăsnaru in 1984 (Anonym, 1984), with Crăsnaru invited again two years later[30]; Ileana Mălăncioiu, Sonia Larian, Lucian Raicu (Anonym, 1987a), Ana Blandiana, and Romulus Rusan in 1987 (Anonym, 1987b), and Florin Manolescu and Marin Sorescu again in 1988.[31] In 1986, Mircea Iorgulescu also spent several weeks at the University of Heidelberg, again thanks to Heitmann, conducting research for a book on Panait Istrati (Iorgulescu, 1986). For this reason, the Securitate opened an informational surveillance file on him to monitor his relationship with the West German Romanist more closely.[32]

Heitmann had also repeatedly invited Nicolae Manolescu, Romul Munteanu (then director of Univers publishing house), and Gabriela Adameșteanu to the Seminar of Romance Studies at Heidelberg, but they either did not receive the invitations or were denied exit visas. In the case of Nicolae Manolescu, for example, because his correspondence was being intercepted and withheld by the Securitate, Heitmann had sent the invitation inside an envelope from Sami Damian addressed to Mircea Dinescu. This too was intercepted, so Manolescu was again unable to give a lecture in Heidelberg. The previous year, although invited, he had also been prevented from leaving the country because the administration of the University of Bucharest, where he taught at the Chair of History of Romanian Literature,

[29] CNSAS. Informative file no. 243117.
[30] Ibid.
[31] CNSAS. *Informative file.* 243117.
[32] CNSAS. (n.d.). *Informative file* 243117. Information note from "Loretta."

had not granted permission.[33] Heitmann expressed disappointment at these obstacles imposed by Romanian institutions and publicly denounced them whenever he could, reproaching the Romanian Ministry of Education in particular for either its opposition or its complete lack of cooperation with the University of Heidelberg on the matter.[34]

As mentioned earlier, Heitmann served as an intermediary, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, helping Romanian intellectuals from his circle obtain DAAD scholarships in West Germany. He appears to have collaborated in this regard with Edmund Pollak, a key figure in the administration of the Rektorenkonferenz (Conference of Rectors)[35] and, for a time, its director, as recalled by Ileana Mălăncioiu, herself a DAAD scholarship recipient in 1986. She described obtaining the scholarship as follows: "[It was] thanks to the good impression made by my book *Urcarea muntelui* [The Ascent of the Mountain] on some of our colleagues in Germany and on Professor Klaus Heitmann", also noting "the help provided by Mr. Pollak, whom I did not know, first to obtain the scholarship, then to avoid losing it because of the visa" (Mălăncioiu, 1999). Similarly, Sami Damian acknowledged in an interview that "the door to university scholarships opened with a recommendation from Professor Heitmann and a word from E. Pollak to the Conference of Rectors" (Solacolu & Damian, 2022).

On Heitmann's recommendation, the ethnographer Cornel Irimie, director of the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu, received a DAAD scholarship, enabling him to conduct research and teach for three months at the Seminar of Romance Studies at Heidelberg (Anonym, 1973). The poet Dorin Tudoran also obtained a scholarship at Heidelberg through the intercession of Heitmann and Damian in 1980–1981. Likewise, Andrei Cornea, the son of Heitmann's friend Paul Cornea, received a DAAD scholarship in 1982,[36] initially for two months, later extended to five months, under the guidance of Heitmann and Damian and with the support of Gabriel Liiceanu, who was at Heidelberg at the time conducting research funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.[37] In 1984, Mircea Iorgulescu was also a DAAD scholar in West Germany, and in 1986, the literary historian Dumitru Hîncu received a DAAD scholarship at Heidelberg. In 1987, and again in 1990, the writer Victor Durnea benefited from DAAD scholarships at Heidelberg. Reflecting on these periods, Durnea expressed gratitude to Heitmann both for his support in

[33] CNSAS. (1986, April 22). *Informative file* 243117. Letter from Heitmann (in fact from Sami Damian) to Mircea Dinescu.
[34] CNSAS. (1986, November 5). *Informative file* 243117. Information note from "Radu Ionescu."
[35] Hochschulrektorenkonferenz [German Rectors' Conference] is an organization bringing together universities and higher education institutions, established in 1949 in West Germany under the name Westdeutsche Rektorenkonferenz [Conference of Rectors of West Germany].
[36] CNSAS. *Informative file* 227882: Andrei Cornea was interrogated upon his return by the Securitate, but he refused to provide any details about his stay in the FRG.
[37] Humboldt Club of Romania. (1994). *Romanian fellows of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.* Editura Enciclopedica.

obtaining the scholarship and for the intellectual exchanges and scientific recommendations he provided. He also emphasized the importance of these scholarships for the Romanian cultural milieu during the communist era, recalling how he brought back photocopies of works consulted in West Germany, fearing they might be confiscated at the border, in order to lend them to his friends and colleagues. All scholarship recipients did the same: "Upon their return, they spread around them a little light from Heidelberg" (Durnea, 1992).

Many interventions and recommendations for obtaining scholarships, however, were unsuccessful. Especially during the final years of the communist regime, funds allocated by West Germany for Romanian scholarship recipients had become increasingly limited, due to an authoritarian government that had significantly restricted relations with the FRG. In a letter addressed by Heitmann to Mihai Gramatopol, whom he had recommended in 1988 for a DAAD scholarship, he explained that funding had been sharply curtailed, that only two spots had been allocated that year for Romanian recipients, and that, in general, "the likelihood of obtaining West German scholarships for Romanians was becoming increasingly slim".[38]

Also in 1988, Heitmann recommended Zigu Ornea for a scholarship, but received a negative response on the grounds that no funds were available.[39] Gelu Naum was likewise disappointed that the Romanist's recommendation had not enabled him to secure a scholarship from the West German state. Although their correspondence shows that they intended to keep trying until successful, Naum lamented, in 1988, "the unpleasant news, reflecting the financial scale and values of those who decide".[40]

Once a scholarship was obtained, another challenge was securing permission to leave the country. In 1988, for example, Dumitru Micu applied for a DAAD scholarship at Heidelberg, his application being "supported in the most energetic manner" by Heitmann. Yet, the response was delayed, and although Micu was summoned to the FRG embassy to complete various forms, his chances of success seemed slim. He wrote to Heitmann: "I fear that, even in the event of a positive response, I will not be able to take advantage of the opportunity offered. According to the education law, no teacher may leave the country during the school year". Indeed, Micu could not go abroad despite being awarded the scholarship. Similarly, when Heitmann invited him in 1988, together with Crohmălniceanu, to participate in the congress of the Southeast European Studies Society in Tutzing, Micu was unable to obtain authorization from the University of Bucharest, even though his colleague, a professor at the same institution, received approval and was able to attend the meeting in West Germany.[41] In other words, only some of the Romanian intellectuals invited by Heitmann were actually able to take advantage of these opportunities; ultimately, it was the Securitate and the institutions

[38] CNSAS. *Informative file* 243117. Letter from Heitmann to Gramatopol Mihai.
[39] CNSAS. *Informative file* 243117. Letter from Heitmann to Ornea.
[40] CNSAS. (1988, April). *Informative file* 243117. Letter from Gelu Naum to Heitmann.
[41] CNSAS. *Informative file* 243117. Heitmann-Micu correspondence.

of the communist state that decided whether, and when, a person could leave the country.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of the West German Romanist Klaus Heitmann's activities in relation to communist Romania between the 1960s and 1980s highlights an important episode in Romanian cultural diplomacy during the Cold War and offers an example of the dynamics of cultural exchanges between two countries situated on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain.

Heitmann was, without a doubt, a passionate advocate of the Romanian language and culture, and his contributions to their study in the West were recognized and supported by the communist regime in Bucharest. However, the relationship between the German Romanist and the institutions of the Romanian state was marked by ideological obsessions, as well as by a reflex to monitor and control any person or cultural asset crossing the Iron Curtain. This article thus shows how Heitmann, through his scholarly engagement with Romanian culture and his interactions with Romanian society and its intellectuals, both benefited from and was hindered by the communist regime.

Heitmann was an important cultural mediator who intensified Romanian–German exchanges, even in a difficult political context marked by control and Cold War tensions. He built a network of Romanian collaborators and friends (both from within the country and from the exile community) by publishing joint volumes, inviting Romanian writers and linguists to Heidelberg, supporting scholarships, and organizing events dedicated to Romanian culture. This was extraordinary for Romanian intellectuals, as it represented one of the few opportunities they had to leave Romania and experience a different cultural and academic environment. His personal involvement in this project was so significant that, after his retirement, the Romanian language lectureship at Heidelberg was discontinued.

This article aimed to discuss Klaus Heitmann primarily through the lens of his importance for Romania's cultural diplomacy at the time, in which he was a valuable actor, although sometimes viewed with suspicion by the authorities. His legacy as a Romanist and the impact of his work on Romanian linguistics and literary history are also regarded as essential by specialists, as evidenced by the numerous awards, distinctions, testimonies, and scholarly publications devoted to his work, even if an analysis of these aspects falls outside the scope of this article.

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Cultural Diplomacy in Transformation: Media, Affects, and Emerging Actors

The European Union: A *Lovemark* Unlike Any Other? a Legal Inquiry Trying to Understand How the EU Shapes Perceptions, Emotions, and Sense of Belonging

Lyvia Sylvestre

1 Introduction

> Union citizenship is destined to be the fundamental status of nationals of the Member States, enabling those who find themselves in the same situation to enjoy the same treatment in law irrespective of their nationality, subject to such exceptions as are expressly provided for.

With this now-iconic statement, delivered in Case Grzelczyk,[1] the Court of Justice signalled its ambition to overcome a fragmented landscape of fundamental rights protection through a form of constitutional integration driven by individuals. The first part of the formula—Union citizenship as the 'fundamental status'—has often been read as heralding a teleological project of political belonging. Although historically and normatively distant, it resonates rhetorically with the idea of a collective destiny, reminiscent of the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

Despite the fall-out of the unique Constitution for the European Union (the EU) in 2004 planning to constitutionalise the recognisable symbols of the EU, some symbols remain in the collective memory as undeniable symbols of the European Union (Gialdino, 2005, 80–85):

- the flag of twelve stars,
- the anthem ('Ode to Joy'),
- Europe Day (9 May),
- a sole currency (the Euro),

[1] Grzelczyk v. Centre public d'aide sociale, EU:C:2001:458, para. 31.

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– an Europe Day celebrated on each of 9 May as a remembrance of the Schuman Declaration and a remembrance of the EU's 'Founding fathers',[2] and
– the motto 'United in Diversity'.

Particularly, the motto 'United in Diversity' seems to be the reverse of the American motto: 'E pluribus unum', that can be translated as 'out of one, many'. This intention can be linked to Article 167 [1] of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The EU has built an imaginary around these symbols that became an integral part of the EU political identity as the EU employs a symbolic repertoire akin to that of nation-states mirroring the US example (Saurugger & Thatcher, 2019).

In this context, the EU has increasingly relied on instruments of Soft Power to consolidate internal legitimacy and external influence. Long been described as an *unidentified political object*, the European Union as a *sui generis* legal order, is situated somewhere between a federal polity (Weiler, 1999, 10–101) and an international organisation (Maduro, 1998, 74–76).

In political science, the EU's approach has been described as a form of *Nation Branding* and, more ambitiously, a quest to become a *Lovemark*—a brand capable of eliciting loyalty beyond rational preference. Yet the European Union (EU)—a supranational legal order without parallel—presents a compelling case for importing the metaphor. Furthermore, doctrines such as direct effect and primacy[3] foster a form of juridical loyalty that is unparalleled in international law. In addition, case law such as the OSHO trademark decision[4] illustrates how EU law itself must grapple with concepts of emotional resonance and symbolic meaning in market regulation, beyond borders.

This prompts a strictly legal question: does the EU legal order display structural features that resemble those of a *Lovemark*—that is, a normative system capable of generating attachment, voluntarism, and loyalty through its very legal architecture? This paper argues that it does, not because citizens literally 'love' the EU, but because the EU has developed doctrines, narratives, and symbolic practices that create an affective dimension within its legal order (Bailleux et al., 2019, 71–84). Therefore, this legal inquiry approaches that question through the metaphor of the *Lovemark*, a term coined in marketing theory to describe entities that inspire trust, emotional attachment, and loyalty beyond rational calculation (Roberts, 2005).

By analysing EU citizenship jurisprudence, constitutional case law,[5] and cultural competence under Article 167 TFEU, this paper argues that the EU is

[2] Opinion of AG Sharpston, 2019, paras. 246, 256.
[3] This was affirmed in Case 6/64, *Costa v ENEL.* (1964). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:61964CJ0006&from=EN.
[4] Osho Lotus Commune v EUIPO, 2017, para. 109.
[5] Grzelczyk v Centre public d'aide sociale, EU:C:2001:458, para. 31; Rottmann v Freistaat Bayern, 2010, para. 51; Ruiz Zambrano, 2011, para. 42; Kadi and Al Barakaat v Council and Commission, 2008, para. 326; Wightman and Others, 2018, para. 50; trademark law (Osho Lotus Commune v EUIPO, 2017, para. 109).

progressively constructing what may be termed as an 'European cognitive cultural exception'. This exception reflects a form of authority grounded in juridical intimacy and emotional sovereignty, supporting the emergence of a distinct 'European Dream' and a normative form of 'European exceptionalism'.

The use of branding metaphors in legal analysis requires methodological caution. Therefore, this Paper does not suggest that the EU is a brand in a doctrinal sense, nor that emotional attachment replaces legal obligation. The *Lovemark* metaphor is rather employed as an analytical lens to examine how law can generate affective loyalty and normative allegiance in a non-state polity.

2 A- Storytelling and Re-invention

2.1 Storytelling as a Tool for Juridical Intimacy and a Matter of Belonging

Unlike classical nation-states, the EU has developed a legitimacy model that relies heavily on legal protection, rights-based empowerment, and the symbolic recognition of individuals as central actors in the integration project demonstrating its cultural dimension (Lähdesmäki, 2017). This dynamic produces what may be described as an intimacy-based constitutional narrative, whereby individuals experience EU law not as a distant regulatory framework, but as a normative order that is attentive to their personal autonomy, dignity, and wellbeing (Blockmans, 2018, 385).

Often described as constitutional or teleological, this language, evokes emotional resonance (Shaw, 2018) and positions the EU as a normative home for its citizens (Davies, 2018, 1442–1460). As the EU cannot rely on patriotic loyalty or state-based emotional commitments, it cultivates legitimacy through rights, recognition, and value-driven narratives (Ferrera, 2019), juridical intimacy compensates for structural features the EU lacks: a single demos, longstanding national myths, and coercive authority. Therefore, the EU constructs a sense of closeness and mutual trust that strengthens voluntary allegiance to the supranational project, by consistently positioning individuals at the heart of integration (Van Gend en Loos, 1963). This model aligns with theories of post-national constitutionalism (Habermas & Rehg, 2001), which emphasise attachment through norms, fairness, and legal protection rather than ethnic or territorial belonging (Kumm, 2009, 258–326).

2.2 From 'Aspirational' to 'Lovable'

Kevin Roberts, former CEO of the publicity Agency Saatchi and Saatchi defines a 'Lovemark' as a brand that inspires'loyalty beyond reason' (Roberts, 2005). Peter Van Ham considers that the EU can fit this narrative of a 'Lovemark' and become a cultural superpower (Van Ham, 2005). It will have, however, to adapt the 3 criteria established by Kevin Roberts to fit its new narrative (Table 1):

Table 1 Distinctive criteria of a *Lovemark*

3 distinctive criteria of a *Lovemark* according to Kevin Roberts	3 distinctive criteria of the EU as a *Lovemark* brand translating this concept
Mystery	Symbolism
Sensuality	Story telling
Intimacy	Sense of belonging

By creating its own narrative based on the *Lovemark* concept, the EU can position itself as a 'lovable' brand built on: symbolism, feelings, emotion, affection, recognition, identity, and attachment, as demonstrated by the communication of the EU Delegation in Geneva, marking the anniversary date of Europe Day (9th of May 2019) with a variety of cultural activities, promoting the 'I love EU' as an EU landmark.

Traditionally, legal systems rely on authority rather than affection. However, the EU's legal structure integrates emotional dimensions more than is often acknowledged as demonstrated in the judgment Osho Lotus Commune.[6] In 3 subsequent judgments made by the Court,[7] dismissing the German company Sprd.net AG's actions against the European Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO), the Court rejected the registration of the sign 'I love', 'I' as the capital letter and the sign love as a red heart [ ])[8] as three different trademark respectively positioned on three different clothing). Although the General Court doesn't support the plaintiffs argument, she informally admits that emotional perception plays a role in legal reasoning by considering that:

- emotional perception matters in trademark law;
- affective meaning can take the form of signs;
- brands can embody identity & symbolic resonance.

2.2.1 The Construct of Supra-Nation Branding as a Symbolic Narrative Transcending National Boundaries

The Union seems to construct a coherent symbolic narrative that transcends national boundaries and presents Europe as a distinctive moral and political community, that enforce its identity-building efforts increasingly to resemble a strategy of supra-nation branding (Bailleux et al., 2019, 71–84).

More than a projection, Cultural diplomacy is positioned as a vector of EU external relations and a mean of supra-nation branding[9] and uses the EU's

[6] Osho Lotus Commune v. EUIPO, 2017, para. 109.
[7] Sprd.net v. EUIPO, 2025.
[8] The graphic is sourced from a public judicial record of the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECLI:EU:T:2025:695).
[9] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations*. JOIN/2016/029 final. Brussels, 2016.

diverse cultural heritage to build emotional connections and loyalty beyond reason with both citizens and the external world (Lähdesmäki, 2017)—Uniqueness as a distinctive identification/identity/brand.

Often seen primarily as a constraint on supranational intervention—within this context—the subsidiarity principle unexpectedly functions as a branding asset by ensuring that the Union acts only where national action is insufficient (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012, Art. 6(c)). Therefore, the subsidiarity principle reinforces the perception of the EU as a proportionate, responsive, and respectful authority (Ferrera, 2019), thereby supporting a governance style that enhances citizens' trust (Schmidt, 2013).

In the meantime, EU branding is deployed to counteract negative perceptions—bureaucratic opacity, democratic deficit (Levrat, 2012), economic technocracy—and to reinforce the Union's narrative as a values-based community committed to democracy, equality and human rights 2015 (Baygert, 2015).

3 The European Cultural Diplomacy as a Tool to Project the EU's Uniqueness

3.1 The Projection of Uniqueness and Sense of Belonging Through Constitutional Identity

Article 2 TEU plays a central role in constructing the EU framework by defining the EU's foundational values—human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and human rights—not as optional aspirations but as binding constitutional commitments. The Court reinforces this in Wightman, 12 where it emphasised that EU membership is grounded in the 'fundamental principles' of democracy and the rule of law. This value-centred framing positions adherence to EU norms not as mere legal obligation (Walker, 2016, 148–177), but as loyalty to a community defined by substantive ethical commitments (McCrudden & O'Leary, 2013). Crucially, a distinctive feature of the European Union's constitutional architecture is the extent to which its binding nature paradoxically depends on voluntary attachment and normative allegiance rather than coercive force (Weiler, 1999, 10–101). To cultivate this voluntary attachment, the Court encourages individuals to conceive of themselves as belonging to a supranational community—a form of voluntary self-identification that exceeds functional economic integration (Shaw, 2018), by elevating citizenship to a normative identity marker. The mechanism of rights-based protection reinforces this systemic loyalty (Davies, 2018). Internally, this is evident in *Zambrano*,[10] where the Court held that EU citizenship precludes national measures that would deprive individuals of 'the genuine enjoyment of the substance of the rights' of citizenship, using a protective formulation that borders on the intimate. Externally, the Court projects this same defensive posture on

[10] Ruiz Zambrano, Case C-34/09, EU:C:2011:124, para. 42.

the global stage;in *Kadi*,[11] the Court asserted that the EU's constitutional identity requires the protection of fundamental rights even against binding resolutions of the UN Security Council. By positioning EU law as a guardian of the individual –against national authorities, external international actors, or even global security regimes (Kumm, 2010, 106–118)—the Court constructs a narrative in which individuals may trust the supranational order to protect their dignity and autonomy (Everson & Eisner, 2007, 98). Such cases frame EU law not as a distant regulator but as a guardian, contributing to affective trust and voluntary allegiance. Ultimately, the EU's emerging rule-of-law conditionality regime, notably Regulation 2020/2092, further institutionalises normative allegiance into a hard law enforcement mechanism.[12]

3.2 Counter-Narratives and the Contestation of Supranational Attachment

Despite these integrative narratives, attachment to the EU remains deeply contested.

Closely related is the critique of sovereignty erosion, which asserts that supranational integration displaces national autonomy, identity and self-determination (Mudde, 2007, 23). Populist movements in several Member States have leveraged this narrative to argue that the EU represents an intrusive liberal or cosmopolitan project that threatens national cultures, lifestyles and political traditions (Moffitt, 2016).

Another form of contestation centres on the impossibility of a unified European identity. Scholars such as Brubaker (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) have argued that the EU cannot generate a singular cultural or sociological identity given the linguistic, historical and cultural heterogeneity of Europe. The presence of counter-narratives confirms that the EU is no longer a technocratic regulatory regime but a politically meaningful entity capable of generating loyalty, resistance, and emotional mobilisation (Dani & Menéndez, 2021). This dynamic supports the broader argument that the EU is engaged in a cognitive-cultural project shaped by legal narratives, value commitments and symbolic communication—an endeavour in which the *Lovemark* metaphor captures both the ambition for supranational loyalty and the fragility of emotional allegiance in a diverse political union (Lähdesmäki, 2017).

Attachment to the EU remains contested as highlighted by critiques of democratic deficit, sovereignty erosion, neoliberal bias, and cultural homogenisation that challenge the Union's emotional legitimacy (Zhou, 2022). Brexit exemplifies the fragility of supranational attachment. Yet contestation does not totally

[11] Kadi and Al Barakat, Joined Cases C-402/05 P and C-415/05 P, EU:C:2008:461, para. 326.
[12] Wightman and Others, Case C-621/18, EU:C:2018:999, para. 50.

negate the EU's *Lovemark*-like qualities. On the contrary, the intensity of counter-narratives confirms that the EU has become a symbolically charged object, capable of generating both loyalty and resistance.

3.3 Article 167 TFEU and the Expansion of Cultural Competence Towards EU *Lovemark* Branding

Despite the mandatory obligation to comply with the principle of subsidiarity, European institutional actors try to assert the EU's new cultural legitimacy in international relations by implicitly extending the legal scope of article 167 TFEU (Psychogiopoulou, 2007, 25–130). Therefore, cultural diplomacy is used as a modernised tool for asymmetric communication as demonstrated by the initiative NARDIV—Unity in diversity, looking to overcome the EU's traditional flaw of lacking an unique voice,[13] versus public diplomacy as a traditional tool for state communication and more conservative channels for multilateral diplomatic relations.

It appears that Cultural diplomacy promotes a narrative of Europe as a peaceful, diverse, and rights-protecting actor respecting the rule of law, supported by the European Court with Case LM.[14] European cultural diplomacy seems to operate as a complementary vector for cultivating what may be described as juridical intimacy—a form of emotional and normative closeness between individuals and the EU legal order, where the respect of human rights remain at the centre of this relationship.[15]

3.4 Redefining the EU's 'Sui Generis' Nature Towards a 'Sui Generis' Cultural Sovereignty?

Although formal cultural competences remain limited under Article 167 TFEU (Craufurd Smith, 2017, 59–82),[16] the Union's strategic use of cultural diplomacy, heritage programs and branding initiatives has expanded its presence as a cultural normative power—a diffuse yet powerful position through which it articulates and promotes values such as diversity, human rights, peace and sustainability (Van Ham, 2005, 227–243). The European Union's longstanding characterisation as a *sui generis* polity—neither a state nor a conventional international organisation—provides fertile ground for the emergence of what may be termed a *sui generis*

[13] European Commission. *Eurobarometer 64: Public Opinion in the European Union*. Brussels, 2005.
[14] Minister for Justice and Equality v LM, Case C-216/18 PPU, ECLI:EU:C:2018:586.
[15] European Commission. *Special Eurobarometer 517: Future of Europe*. Brussels, 2022.
[16] In line with Article 6 c TFEU, 2016.

cultural sovereignty, a form of authority that derives less from coercive competences than from narrative influence, value projection and symbolic governance (Phelan, 2012, 367–385).

Not merely symbolic, emotional sovereignty can be conceptualised as a supranational cognitive-cultural project because it creates a mental and affective space in which the Union's authority, legitimacy, and identity are internalised, not simply obeyed. In this perspective, it is a crucial component of what can be considered as an European cognitive cultural exception, enabling the EU to cultivate loyalty, trust, and identification that transcend conventional legal or territorial mechanisms of authority. This development gives rise to an European cognitive cultural exception. Unlike the classical cultural exception in trade law, this exception operates at the cognitive and affective level. It protects and projects a shared European identity through law, values, and symbolic governance. This exception therefore supports the emergence of an *European Dream*—an aspirational narrative centred on mobility, rights, peace, and dignity—and a form of European exceptionalism that is normative rather than territorial, legal rather than military (Rifkin, 2004).

4 Conclusion

Through its legal architecture, symbolic initiatives, and cultural diplomacy, the European Union is actively constructing an 'European Dream'—an aspirational narrative of rights, mobility, and shared values that fosters loyalty, identity, and emotional attachment among its citizens. Beyond law (Craufurd Smith, 2017, 59–82), the EU cultivates emotional and symbolic attachment through cultural diplomacy, place branding (Baygert, 2015, 133–151), and identity narratives, including Erasmus+, Capitals of Culture, and Europe Day celebrations, which communicate a collective vision of peace, diversity, and solidarity. One might wonder if this aspirational architecture constitutes a form of European exceptionalism?

Symbols, judicial storytelling, and value-based reasoning reinforce the EU's constitutional identity (Bailleux, 2024, 49–76), while cultural diplomacy by an extensive interpretation of Article 167 TFEU's scope deepens emotional connection within, and beyond Europe. The emergence of this new paradigm offers a new lens through which to understand the EU's authority, resilience, and evolving nature in an era of political contestation. Its development of a distinctive cultural-legal project, value-driven exceptionalism, has given rise to what may be conceptualised as an European cognitive cultural exception: a normative and symbolic framework in which the Union protects, projects, and codifies a shared cultural identity, not solely through coercive or regulatory means, but via cognitive and affective influence. Unlike the classical notion of a 'cultural exception' in trade law, this cognitive-cultural exception thus allows the EU to maintain a distinctive political, normative, and symbolic identity within a global system dominated by nation-states and market forces: an unique *polity.*

This paper has demonstrated that the European Union's identity and legitimacy depend on a combination of legal authority, symbolic coherence, narrative construction, and cultural engagement by analysing these features through the lens of the *Lovemark* metaphor. It has also analysed that the EU cultivates a form of attachment and voluntary allegiance that transcends traditional notions of political loyalty. Furthermore, the EU legal order displays feature analogous to a *Lovemark*: it cultivates attachment, loyalty, and identification through juridical intimacy, emotional sovereignty, and cultural-symbolic governance. The emerging European cognitive cultural exception concept seems to capture this evolution, offering a conceptual framework for understanding EU legitimacy beyond coercion.

However, the metaphor has limits. Emotional attachment is uneven, reversible, and contested. Yet in a polity defined by diversity and voluntarism, the ability to inspire loyalty through law, values, and culture may be the EU's most distinctive—and fragile—form of authority.[17]

In essence, the European cognitive cultural exception reflects the Union's capacity to cultivate emotional and normative allegiance, protect its shared values and identity, and assert a form of soft power and symbolic sovereignty that is unprecedented in international law. It represents an evolution of the EU's *sui generis* nature into a value-driven, affective, and cognitively anchored polity, in which law, culture, and narrative are inseparably intertwined to sustain both legitimacy and cohesion. Whatever the path that the EU chooses to follow, one thing is certain: the EU is building a new *European Dream* unlike any other, towards an European cognitive cultural exception.

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[17] See European Commission. (2007). *A European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World*; European Commission. 2018. *A New European Agenda for Culture*. European Parliament. 2022. *Resolution on the Implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations.*

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#Newyearsconcert: The Diplomatic Potential of a Global Broadcast Event in the Age of Social Media

Sophie Picard

1 Introduction

On January 1st each year, millions of viewers worldwide tune in to watch the Vienna Philharmonic New Year's Concert, broadcast live from the Golden Hall of the Musikverein in Vienna. This annual event, with its distinctive repertoire of Strauss family waltzes and polkas, has become a global cultural phenomenon, reaching audiences in over 90 countries. As a media event, it affords Austria, a small Central European country, exceptional visibility on the international stage and convenes, for a few hours, a global community of television viewers and radio listeners. However, the New Year's Concert has rarely, if ever, been examined as an example of contemporary cultural diplomacy, and more specifically musical diplomacy.

This article therefore explores the diplomatic potential of an event that is intended to be purely musical and therefore non-political by examining its reception—indeed, its micro-reception on social networks. In recent years, numerous studies on the links between music and politics have prompted theoretical and conceptual reflection on the use of the concepts of 'music diplomacy' and 'music propaganda,' as well as 'musical nation branding,' which are used to describe extremely heterogeneous phenomena.[1] By analysing reactions to the 2025 New

[1] See the literature review conducted as part of the project *Musique, diplomatie et propagande* (Canada Research Chair in Music and Politics): Marie-Hélène Benoît-Otis, Marie-Pier Leduc, *La musique au service du pouvoir*, Chaire de recherche du Canada en musique et politique, https://crcmp.org/projets-de-recherche/la-musique-au-service-du-pouvoir/. The results presented in this article were first discussed at the workshop *Music, Diplomacy, Propaganda: Towards New Definitions* (16–18 October 2025) at the Faculty of Music of the University of Montreal, and organized by Marie-Hélène Benoit-Othis and Marie-Pier Leduc.

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Year's Concert on X and Instagram, this article aims to understand how part of the audience embraces what has become a veritable media ritual: to what extent does the community of active viewers on social media ascribe political dimensions to the event? What do social media posts and comments reveal about audience perceptions of the musical program and accompanying elements, such as the intermission film and ballet performances? In short, do audience reactions enable us to better categorize the New Year's Concert? To attempt to answer these questions, this study considers the event from the perspectives of music propaganda, nation branding, and music diplomacy. Ahead of this, the first part looks back at the history of the concert as a media event and presents the study's methodology.

2 The New Year's Concert, a Media Event and Its Resonance in Social Media

Although its origins can be traced to the last third of the nineteenth century and the establishment of the *Johann-Strauß-Konzerte*, the first New Year's Concert by the Vienna Philharmonic is generally considered to have taken place on December 31, 1939, when Austria was part of the German Reich (Rathkolb, n.d.). From the outset, the event was conceived as a media event: its broadcast via the Großdeutscher Rundfunk, the unified radio broadcasting program in Nazi Germany, made it possible to virtually unite listeners across the various German and occupied territories. The New Year's Concert was thus a central element of the Nazi regime's strategy of 'propaganda through entertainment' (Rathkolb, 2022, 5): the 'semi-popular' (Trümpi, 2011, 255) works of the Strauss family, which still constitute the bulk of these concerts' repertoire today, helped shape the image of an orchestra rooted in an authentically Austrian tradition. During the war, the waltz, with its ostensibly popular character, was presented as integral to German identity; after the war, when the New Year's Concert had already become a tradition led by conductor Josef Krips (who had been persecuted by the Nazis due to his Jewish origins), the same waltz was reinterpreted as 'Austrian' DNA, distinct from German identity, thereby enabling assertions of a (wholly illusory) resistance to the Nazi regime (Rathkolb, n.d., 6; Trümpi, 2011, 258–263). Beyond the obvious instrumentalization of a musical genre, it should be noted that from the outset, radio broadcasting was essential in completing the propagandistic nature of the New Year's Concerts.

Today, the broadcast of the New Year's Concert has become one of the most popular classical music programs of the European Broadcasting Union, and it would be valuable to reconstruct the history of this media event step by step. As early as the 1930s, in the New Year's Concert's prehistory, the event was conceived from a transnational perspective: the Strauss concerts performed on New Year's Day in Vienna were announced by RAVAG, the Austrian radio station, as 'European broadcasts' and rebroadcast by national stations (Theis, n.d.). In the postwar years, the event was first broadcast on radio (Hellsberg, 1992, 570) and then, from 1959, on television, with Eurovision and Intervision broadcasting it internationally (Rathkolb, 2022). Since then, the number of receiving countries

has steadily increased, reaching 93 national stations in 2025, not counting live streaming via Medici.tv (Wiener Philharmoniker, 2025). The number of viewers is estimated at around 50 million worldwide, including 20 million in Europe (European Broadcasting Union, 2026a).[2] By comparison, the Eurovision Song Contest, considered one of the world's most-watched non-sporting events, attracts approximately 160 million viewers annually (European Broadcasting Union, 2026b). In this sense, the New Year's Concert is indeed a global 'media event,' i.e., an event that is only experienced as such through its media coverage (Hepp & Couldry, 2009).

With the advent of social media in the 2010s, a resonance space has emerged around media events: by practicing 'dual screening' (Vaccari et al., 2015), i.e. switching between live broadcast and social media, users can document their 'participation' in the New Year's Concert by commenting on, critiquing, or amplifying the images and messages transmitted by television or radio. What do these reactions show about the political dimension of this cultural event?

The following analysis is based on a collection of messages posted on X and Instagram between December 24, 2024, and January 2, 2025, containing the hashtag #newyearsconcert in 19 languages. X and Instagram were chosen for their popularity at the time of the event (although X's popularity has been declining since the beginning of 2025, due to Elon Musk's involvement in Donald Trump's administration). The hashtag list was compiled following surveys, which resulted in the exclusion of certain languages not widely used on the chosen social networks.[3] Data collection via the official X API and Instagram web scraping yielded a total of 5,426 posts in 39 languages.[4] Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution by language for the 10 most represented languages.

The breakdown by language reveals that Spanish-speaking users are the most active on social media in commenting on the New Year's Concert. They are followed by Italian-speaking users, likely due to the 2025 New Year's Concert being

[2] Herta and Kurt Blaukopf, whose book on the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra was published in 1992, put forward much higher figures: they estimate that nearly 300 million people worldwide listen to or watch the New Year's Concert, including radio and television broadcasts (Blaukopf and Blaukopf 1992, 310).

[3] List of hashtags: #newyearsconcert; #neujahrskonzert; #concertdunouvelan; #conciertoañonuevo; #conciertodeañonuevo; #koncertnoworoczny; #concertuldeanulnou; #concertodicapodanno; #concertodeanonovo; #nieuwjaarsconcert; #concertdeanulnou; #újévikoncert; #novoletnikoncert; #novorocnikoncert; #novorocnykoncert; #novoročnýkoncert; #uusaastakontsert; #новогоднийконцерт; #новорічнийконцерт.

[4] The data was collected by Thomas Lecat (Le Cube SHS). For X, it was collected via the official API, which retrieved 2,922 tweets. As Instagram does not offer an API, the data was collected via web scraping, which retrieved 1,069 posts. In addition, comments from official posts on the Vienna Philharmonic's Instagram account (@viennaphilharmonic) during the target period were collected. This additional collection yielded 1,502 comments on 9 posts. After filtering and harmonizing the data, the corpus contained a total of 5,426 entries. The language detection tool identified 39 languages used in the posts. All of the data analysed in this article has been stored on a secure server and can be consulted upon request.

Table 1 Distribution of posts by language (10 most represented languages)

Detected language	Number of tweets/posts
Spanish	1855
Italian	831
English	689
German	684
Dutch	433
French	131
Portuguese	117
Russian	115
Polish	86
Japanese	60

led by Italian conductor Riccardo Muti, who was invited to the event for the seventh time. Surprisingly, English ranks third, tied with German. German's lack of overrepresentation in the corpus confirms that the New Year's Concert has a more international than national reach on social media. Eastern European languages (Bulgarian, Croatian, Hungarian, Macedonian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Czech, Ukrainian) are only weakly represented, with a total of 274 posts. This weak resonance may be surprising given the historical ties between these countries and Vienna, the former capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[5] It should be noted, however, that the distribution of posts by language does not permit conclusions about the nationalities of those who follow the New Year's Concert on television or radio. Whether people post on social media depends as much on communication habits, which vary from one cultural area to another. Furthermore, certain cultural areas, particularly in Asia, favour social media platforms other than X or Instagram, which could not be taken into account in this study.

It is important to note that a significant proportion of the publications—approximately 20–25%—do not refer directly to the Vienna Philharmonic New Year's Concert but rather to New Year's concerts held in other cities. This data was retained, as these publications often contain more or less explicit references to the Vienna concert, which is generally perceived as the 'original' in contrast to numerous 'copies.' To cite merely two examples from the corpus, the San Carlo Theater in Arona (Italy) advertises a New Year's concert entitled *Arona come Vienna*[6]; a show entitled *Salute to Vienna* featuring pieces by Johann Strauss, Franz Lehár, and

[5] As the New Year's Concert was broadcast in the USSR by Intervision during the Cold War, it would be interesting to study the reception of this event in the Eastern Bloc countries in more detail. I would like to thank Ioana Hermine Fierbinţeanu for bringing this issue to my attention.

[6] @aronamusicacademy, post dated January 2, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEVY5NIo5kS/.

others, and ballet dancers is being performed in several cities across North America.[7] Many New Year's concerts worldwide include waltzes and polkas in their programs and perform the *Radetzky March* Op. 228 as an encore—'in the Viennese style,'[8] as some posts indicate. Sometimes the reference adopts a competitive tone: a tweet accompanied by a photo of the New Year's Concert at La Fenice in Venice, broadcast by RAI, the Italian television station, proclaims: 'Il vero ed unico #ConcertodiCapodanno' ('the true and only one #newyearsconcert').[9] A Polish-language tweet also makes enthusiastic reference to Vienna: 'What a Vienna New Year's Concert, what a show! Eclecticism rules!'[10] In this case, the video shows a conductor leading the audience in applause, as is customary during the *Radetzky March* in Vienna, yet the music heard in the background seems to be traditional music. The comparison with Vienna thus assumes a different character and can be understood as a form of cultural assertion vis-à-vis the Viennese model. These examples demonstrate that even when the reference to the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Concert is not immediately apparent, publications concerning local events nonetheless contribute to the discourse surrounding this event.

The corpus includes approximately one hundred Russian-language Instagram posts that constitute an exception: only one explicitly refers to the Vienna New Year's Concert, while the others reference concerts in various Russian cities with no detectable allusion to the Viennese model. In the geopolitical context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, this absence—notable in comparison to all other languages—could possibly be interpreted as a rejection of an event associated with the Western world. It is also worth noting that in comments posted in response to the @viennaphilharmonic account, three Russian-speaking users welcomed the New Year's Concert broadcast by a Russian media outlet, as such broadcasts had been interrupted in previous years following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: 'How wonderful that they have resumed broadcasting to Russia ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ Happy New Year!'[11] Anecdotal though they may be, these comments confirm that the New Year's concert occasionally cross media spheres that normally have little communication with each other.

The examples cited thus far highlight the corpus's considerable heterogeneity, including with respect to communication modes. Social media involves different types of actors, which entail different modes of communication: among the posts analysed, a number originate from institutional actors such as embassies

[7] See, among others: @salute.to.vienna, post dated December 29, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEJz6psiJzH/?img_index=4; @salute.to.vienna, post dated December 30, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DENkM5zP80H/; @salutetovienna, post dated December 31, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEQZEOTvd-1/.

[8] @klasikaviva, post dated December 29, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEK-rhlsnae/.

[9] @valpaz84, post dated January 1, 2025, https://x.com/valpaz84/status/1874431020168339738.

[10] @TrepavicicaA, post dated January 2, 2025, https://x.com/TrepavicicaA/status/1874601776504299686.

[11] @tory_tatu, comment to the post from @viennaphilharmonic dated January 1, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEP7LtCCJe8/.

or cultural institutes; others were published by media outlets—television, radio, press—that relayed the event. These public actors address a community that is generally national in scope for the New Year's Concert. The posts demonstrating participatory culture and thus individual engagement are those on private accounts, sometimes posted in response to public actors' accounts. However, it is important to distinguish between those who use social media to communicate publicly about their activities to larger or smaller communities and those who use it for semi-private communication whose content is not always decipherable beyond the circle of immediate recipients. Nevertheless, these different communication modes, taken together, enable the definition of different levels of meaning ascribed to the New Year's Concert as a media event.

3 The New Year's Concert as 'Propaganda-Through-Entertainment'—Between Continuity and Rupture

Given that the New Year's Concert was originally part of a Nazi propaganda strategy, it may be useful to consider the existence of some form of continuity, not on an ideological level, but on a formal level: to what extent can the broadcast of an apparently non-political classical music program on television stations worldwide be considered an attempt at unification, but also at entertainment comparable to that promoted by the Nazi regime through radio broadcasts within the Reich? The Vienna Philharmonic was heavily criticized in the 2010s for allegedly concealing its Nazi past; since then, historians' work has enabled reconstruction of this complex period and raised public awareness (Rathkolb, 2022; Trümpi, 2011).[12]

In the analysed corpus, approximately twenty publications, most in German, refer directly to the New Year's Concert's origins, generally in a factual manner.[13] A single tweet, posted by a pro-Palestinian organization's account, establishes a direct link between Nazi propaganda strategy and what is denounced as a form of Western propaganda in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict context: 'The enlightened and cultured West celebrates its ritual #NewYearsConcert in #Vienna. Sometimes unquestionable BEAUTY serves to conceal BARBARISM, as was the case with Nazi Germany, which adored the #Strauss family. Meanwhile, the #GenocideinGaza continues. #HappyNewYear'[14] The implicit comparison between the

[12] Attempts to reconstruct and reflect on the orchestra's Nazi past were initiated in the 1990s by Clemens Hellsberg, himself a member of the Vienna Philharmonic (Hellsberg 1992, 459–505).

[13] The keyword 'Nazi' appears 21 times in the corpus. The keywords selected for analysis were systematically searched for in the 39 languages of the corpus.

[14] 'El Occidente ilustrado y culto celebra en #Viena su ritual del #ConciertoDeAnoNuevo A veces la incuestionable BELLEZA sirve para ocultar la BARBARIE, como ya pasó con la Alemania Nazi, q adoraba a los #Strauss Mientras, prosigue el #GenocidioenGaza #FelizAñoNuevo 2025.' @HW4PalestSpain, post dated January 1, 2025, https://x.com/HW4PalestSpain/status/1874422800204877969.

Holocaust and Gaza constitutes antisemitic discourse that should in no way be legitimized. Like other media events such as the Eurovision Song Contest, the 2025 New Year's Concert is used by certain accounts to criticize the policies of the State of Israel in Gaza. What appears rhetorically interesting here is the parallel drawn between history and current events, which enables a political interpretation.

In the corpus studied, the connection to winter 2024–2025's geopolitical events is rarely established in such a direct and accusatory manner. Nevertheless, some social media users discuss what they perceive as the event's politicization, either to denounce it or, conversely, to highlight it as positive.[15] For example, one Italian-language account praises what it perceives as political engagement on the conductor's part: 'Ce ne fossero in Italia di artisti e politici come il Maestro Riccardo Muti.' ('If only Italy had artists and politicians like Maestro Riccardo Muti.')[16] Indeed, during his traditional New Year's greetings to the audience, Muti solemnly declared: 'Nella mia lingua italiana e da italiano auguro tre cose: pace, fratellanza e amore in tutto il mondo!' ('In my Italian language and as an Italian, I wish for three things: peace, brotherhood, and love throughout the world!') (Irrgeher, 2025) With the word 'world,' the conductor emphasizes that he is addressing a global audience and that during the concert's two hours, he creates a community of viewers symbolically representing humanity. The media event is thus effectively deployed to reinforce the sense of belonging to a global community and to convey a message that can be understood as universalist and pacifist. The four key terms in Muti's address are repeated on social media by approximately 8% of users: the word 'peace' appears 442 times in the corpus, the word 'love' 356 times, and the word 'world' 375 times. Accounts that choose to repeat these terms mostly act as multipliers of a political message that, though vague and general, can have a singular impact in the context of rising global tensions in winter 2024–2025. In this regard, it is significant that the word 'fraternity' appears only 26 times in the corpus: social media users clearly exercise selectivity regarding the message offered to them.

Muti's address and its replication in the resonance space constituted by social media reflect a form of continuity—from a formal perspective—with the propaganda-through-entertainment strategy implemented by Hitler's regime: media coverage of the event enables virtual unification of a community conceived on a national scale during the Nazi era and on a global scale today. While the term 'propaganda' itself does not appear in the corpus to describe the current event, some social media posts demonstrate that it can be perceived—whether negatively or positively—as a tool for political messaging.

[15] The keyword 'politics' appears 16 times in the corpus.

[16] @IoMiChiamoG, post dated January 1, 2025, https://twitter.com/IoMiChiamoG/status/1874475015502254546.

4 The Scope of Nation Branding Around the New Year's Concert

In their reviews of the New Year's Concert, music journalists tend to critique the event's marketing aspects, which they distinguish from its purely musical dimensions. Indeed, the event is widely perceived as part of Austria's nation-branding strategy, one pillar of which is the myth of Austria as a musical nation (Szabó-Knotik, 2009). Elements perceived as components of a marketing strategy include the intermission film and Vienna State Opera Ballet performances filmed in advance at iconic locations. These television segments, produced by ORF, Austria's public broadcaster, are designed—often in conjunction with commemorations—to present a somewhat different image of Austria, removed from Sissi, Schönbrunn, the waltz, and ski jumping with which the country is commonly associated. In recent years, the intermission films have highlighted Burgenland (2021), a lesser-known Austrian region, and composer Anton Bruckner (2024), less popular than his compatriot Mozart. In 2025, on the bicentenary of Johann Strauss's birth, director Barbara Weissenbeck sought to situate the composer—whose music forms the New Year's Concert repertoire's core—within intercultural and intermedial dimensions (Weissenbeck, 2025). Drawing on Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which features the iconic Waltz Op. 314 *An der schönen blauen Donau* in its soundtrack, the film *2025: A Strauss-Odyssey* depicts an interstellar and musical journey enabling viewers to discover numerous musical traditions and styles freely inspired by the Viennese waltz. Similarly, the ballets for the 2025 New Year's Concert were filmed in unusual locations: the Vienna Museum of Science and Technology, paying tribute to the locomotive's invention, and the Hotel Semmering, once a hotspot for intellectual gatherings in the first half of the twentieth century, now largely forgotten (Traxl, 2024).

If we understand nation branding, following Jessica Gienow-Hecht, as 'the desire to be heard in a specific way,' (Gienow-Hecht, 2014, 259–274) we can discern in the films produced by ORF and broadcasted worldwide an attempt to renew the country's image while remaining rooted in tradition. Social media's resonance provides some indication of this endeavour's success. Within the corpus, the keywords 'intermission' (32), 'Kubrick' (16), 'Odyssey' (29), 'Rocket' (8) can be used to identify posts that refer directly to the intermission film; the keywords 'Semmering' (3), 'hotel' (11), 'railway' (17), 'locomotive,' and 'technology' (6) reference the ballet films.[17] The resonance is evidently extremely weak. Furthermore, when the film *2025: A Strauss-Odyssey* is referenced, the tone is often ironic or critical. The nation-branding strategy adopted by ORF thus appears to have limited reach on social networks.

What prevails are references to the New Year's Concert's ritual elements: a program built around the Strauss family's works ('Strauss' appears 250 times in the corpus); the waltz *An der schönen blauen Donau*, traditionally performed as encore

[17] The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of occurrences of the keywords in the corpus.

('Danube' appears 467 times in the corpus); the *Radetzky March*, traditionally performed to close the concert ('Radetzky' appears 139 times, not to mention the countless photos and videos posted on social media showing viewers clapping along with the audience or using clapping hands emojis, which also refer to this iconic moment in the concert); ballet in a more classical sense, without reference to staging ('ballet' appears 922 times). In posts, these terms are very often associated with ideas of tradition, beauty, majesty, and positive emotions expressed by emojis conveying joy, admiration, or gratitude. Overall, the recognition effect appears to outweigh the surprise effect.

Here we can discern the limits of the nation-branding strategy as conceived by Austrian cultural and media officials: attempts to revamp Austria's image appear to clash with public demand, which imposes its own—conservative—image of the event. One might also question what image this represents: the term 'Austria,' sometimes accompanied by a hashtag, appears 360 times in the corpus, representing merely 7% of posts. The number of users emphasizing the New Year's Concert's geographical and cultural origins thus remains relatively low. It is as though the 'New Year's Concert' brand has become detached from its original cultural context. Most posts emphasize the personal or familial tradition of watching the program—at home, with family, or with friends. The keywords 'tradition' (777), 'home' (1,261), and 'family' (207) dominate the corpus. The countless photos depicting people watching the concert in their private spheres constitute a social media genre in their own right. These images capture sequences from the concert or related programs broadcast on television, combined with accessories or other elements suggesting participation in the event, such as champagne glasses, tea sets, hands applauding or conducting, and so forth. The deliberate contrast between the professionally filmed image and the amateur photograph—but especially between the event's in situ solemnity and the often-mundane dimension of the private sphere, suggested by the presence of pets, blankets, or woollen socks in the images—constitutes a means of appropriating the New Year's Concert. Humour and occasionally self-irony enable simultaneous affirmation of attachment to a tradition and distancing from it. In the meantime, these inward-looking scenes also signal a form of rejection of ORF's nation branding strategy.

5 The New Year's Concert: A Form of (Participatory) Musical Diplomacy?

The New Year's Concert can finally be examined from the perspective of cultural diplomacy, and more specifically, musical diplomacy. As with propaganda and nation branding, this final section examines social media users' involvement in this diplomatic dimension and, consequently, its impact on those who follow the event via radio and television.

The diplomatic dimension manifests at several levels in the New Year's Concert's design and media coverage. One example is Austrian leaders' policy of inviting foreign heads of state—in 2025, for example, Chancellor Karl Nehammer

invited Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson to attend the concert and circulated a photograph of the two at the Musikverein on social media.[18] In terms of media coverage, the European Broadcasting Union's broadcast and the annual addition of new national and regional broadcasters likewise form part of a soft power strategy. It is also worth noting that Austrian embassies and cultural institutes worldwide use social media to promote the New Year's Concert.

On social media, it is principally the conductor invitation policy that elicits diplomatic interpretation. Since 1987, the Vienna Philharmonic has annually invited a new conductor for the New Year's Concert. The musicians emphasize musical criteria in justifying their choices, and the conductor's nationality is not among the elements featured in institutional communications about the concert. For social media users, this information is regularly interpreted symbolically: in 2025, Muti's Italian nationality is highlighted by numerous accounts, Italian-language or otherwise ('Italy' and 'Italian' appear 96 times in the corpus). On X, we can read: 'Favoloso come sempre. Muti grande maestro e orgoglio italiano.' ('Fabulous as always. Muti, a great maestro and pride of Italy.')[19] In many posts, Muti—who identifies himself as Italian in his audience address—is perceived as an ambassador for his country of origin in Austria and, above all, to the world. In response, other users call for a conductor representing their nationality, such as one Spanish-language user who asks: '¿para cuándo un director español en el #ConciertoDeAnoNuevo?' ('When will we have a Spanish conductor at the #NewYearsConcert?')[20] This patriotic impulse manifests at other levels in publications highlighting a particular musician's or dancer's nationality, with one Polish-language account emphasizing the 'specifically Polish touch'[21] that double bassist Jurek Dybała brings to the orchestra, and another Spanish-language account expressing joy at recognizing Salamanca-born dancer Andrés García Torres on screen with the words 'Siempre Salamanca.'[22]

What is striking is the contrast between the Vienna Philharmonic's communications, which emphasize the orchestra's Austrian roots, and the insistence with which social media users highlight its international dimension. One explanation may be that broadcasts on different national channels are framed differently. The broadcasting media—and especially the commentator's personality—yield markedly different television experiences: indeed, viewers do not participate in the same event whether it is presented by Theresa Vogl on ORF in Austria, Martin

[18] @karlnehammer, post dated January 1 2025. https://x.com/karlnehammer/status/1874434228072640820.

[19] @EnricohMancuso, post dated January 1, 2025, https://twitter.com/EnricohMancuso/status/1874473809883066421.

[20] @rafagaray99, post dated January 1, 2025, https://x.com/rafagaray99/status/1874798487562494377.

[21] @tecza.aleksandra, post dated January 1, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DESDZQoICUB/?i.

[22] @MREcheandia, post dated January 1, 2025, https://x.com/MREcheandia/status/1874422725227548928.

Llade on RTVE Uno in Spain, or Andrzej Sułek on Polish radio station Dwójka. For instance, in his commentary, Llade quoted poet Ángel González, whose name is mentioned by eleven accounts. Presenters and television channels are also regularly tagged on social media. This underscores that social media users do not always participate in the global sphere created by the media event; the communication framework is often designed on a more modest scale—frequently national but sometimes regional. As an example, one Polish-language account retweeted the announcement by Polish public channel Dwójka (TVP2) with a critical comment: 'Tego nie można przegapić! Mimo, że w reżimowej neotvp, ale od lat u mnie pozycja obowiązkowa.' ('This is not to be missed! Although it is part of the regime's neotvp, it has been a must-see for me for years.')[23] By alluding to debates about Poland's media landscape, the user situates the New Year's Concert within a discursive constellation far removed from the event itself.

Despite national competition and divergent experiences among social media users, are there non-musical topics discussed across the board in the resonance space created by social media? The corpus contains hashtags such as #stopwars, #zelensky, and #gaza, as well as tags such as @elonmusk, which reference major geopolitical crises or upheavals including the war in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States with Elon Musk's support; nevertheless, these references remain anecdotal.

There is one topic repeatedly addressed across the corpus's different languages: women's representation in the worlds of music and culture. The fact that the Vienna Philharmonic has never invited a female conductor for the New Year's Concert is a recurring criticism, repeated annually in traditional media and on social media alike. However, in 2025, for the first time, a work by a female composer—Constanze Geiger's *Ferdinandus-Walzer*—appeared in the concert program. Whether lamenting women's underrepresentation in the music world or, conversely, highlighting the tribute paid to a lesser-known women composer, numerous posts emphasize this tentative renewal: 'Constanze Geiger' appears 81 times in the corpus, the keyword 'women' 195 times, and the term 'female conductor' 59 times. The incipient feminization of the New Year's Concert repertoire can be interpreted as a means of highlighting feminist issues in a sphere with global resonance, with the orchestra serving as model; it can also be interpreted as the Vienna Philharmonic's discreet response to criticism voiced annually in media, including social media. In this sense, a diplomatic dynamic indeed surrounds the media event.

A number of social media users therefore place themselves in a sphere of international interaction and exchange and use the event to highlight regional, national, or international interests. Can we therefore, following Jessica Carniel, speak of a form of 'participatory diplomacy' regarding the New Year's Concert (Carniel, 2024)? Listeners and viewers are certainly not invited to vote in support of participating countries' representatives, as occurs in the Eurovision Song Contest, yet

[23] @Iza72S, post dated January 1, 2025, https://x.com/Iza72S/status/1874412870282379426.

social media enables them to express support for or opposition to conveyed messages, to act as multipliers, or conversely, to demonstrate their rejection of any political instrumentalization of the event.

6 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the diplomatic potential of the Vienna Philharmonic New Year's Concert through an analysis of its reception on social media. By analysing over 5,400 posts and comments from X and Instagram, it has revealed the multiple, often contradictory ways in which global audiences engage with this annual media event. While the New Year's Concert is generally presented as a purely musical celebration, its audience reception is far from apolitical. The analysis demonstrates three key dimensions through which the concert operates diplomatically. As music propaganda, the concert's historical origins continue to resonate in contemporary discourse. Although references to its Nazi past are relatively infrequent in the corpus, their presence indicates an awareness among some audience members of the concert's complex history. This historical consciousness coexists —curiously—with the event's contemporary celebration as a symbol of peace and high culture. As a form of musical nation branding, the concert projects Austrian identity effectively. However, ORF's television program, designed to modernise the 'Austria' brand, generates less social media engagement than it's long-standing cultural imaginery. Most significantly, the concert operates as an instrument of music diplomacy through what might be termed 'participatory cultural diplomacy.' Social media platforms transform passive television viewers into active participants who not only consume but also interpret, contextualize, disseminate, or even ignore the concert's messages. The multilingual, transnational nature of the conversation demonstrates how the concert creates temporary communities of shared aesthetic experience that transcend national boundaries. However, this study also reveals important limitations and tensions. The political dimensions that emerge in social media discourse often appear despite, rather than because of, the concert's official messaging. Above all, for the majority of social media users, the New Year's Concert remains primarily associated with the private sphere, outside of any political considerations: messages of peace, as well as Austria's image as a modern and pluralistic state, are ignored or even rejected. These findings suggest that in the age of social media, cultural diplomacy is no longer a unidirectional process controlled by institutions. Instead, it becomes a negotiated space where official narratives interact with, and are transformed by, diverse audience interpretations. The New Year's Concert's diplomatic potential lies precisely in this tension: it is powerful enough to convene a global community, yet open enough to accommodate multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings.

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Romanian National Minorities in the Digital World: Linguistic Justice and Cultural Representation as a Vector for Technological Acceptance

Sarah Hassnaoui

1 Introduction

In Romania, cultural diversity has become a reality in social life, education, and the formation of post-modern society, as well as in national, European, and international communication strategies (Cuc, 2014). This dynamic is part of a historical process linked to the presence of ethnic minorities in the region, following the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires, which lead to a process of nationalization (Brubaker, 1995). Thus, there are officially 18 national minorities in Romania (Ungureanu, 2020) that are represented culturally and politically by various organizations, sometimes considered as "parties." They emerged in 1991 and can nominate candidates in elections, which allows them to be represented in the Parliament, in the central government, and in local instances. National minorities also have cultural institutions (theatres, museums, institutes) that are recognized nationally and internationally, (for example: the Roma Culture Centre Romano Kher in Bucharest, the Cultural Centre of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, and the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca), but also schools, print media, and other media outlets. National minorities are therefore an integral part of Romania's national space, from a legislative and institutional point of view, benefiting from state protection for their cultural, linguistic, and political rights.

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In the twenty-first century, digital technologies affected cultural, linguistic, and political rights, by enhancing previous concerns, especially around "communicative injustice." In the communicative injustice field of study, we consider injustice as being the result of communicational failures—that is the inability for messages to reach an audience for diverse reasons (status of the messenger, cultural difference, incomprehension of testimonies, epistemic resources, etc.). Digital technologies can affect communicational injustices in many ways. Politically, technologies can lead to exclusion and even marginalization, for example, in the context of the digitalization of public services (Muracciole & Massé, 2018), but they can also empower certain groups, by decorrelating identities from the Nation-State (Tardif & Farchy, 2011), and, therefore, enhance old and new identity claims (Jiménez & Garai-Artetxe, 2025). Similar dynamics are visible culturally: technologies can contribute to cultural homogenization or the emergence of hybrid identities or they can be a leverage tool for minority groups, enabling them to mobilize their communities (Mattelart, 2007). The study of cultural and linguistic rights with regards to digital technologies evolve around the questions of cultural diversity, identity, and accessibility. Linguistic justice (Hordecki, 2025), that questions power-dynamics based on linguistic capital is particularly crucial in online environments, especially as *decouvrability* (the capacity for a content to meet an audience) is crucial to preserve cultures (Guèvremont et al., 2025).

To investigate the disruptive potential of digital technologies, in the political, cultural, and linguistic fields, Romanian national minorities, offer, therefore, an interesting approach. On the one side, their status of "minority" can be threatened by digital dynamics while, on the other side, their inclusion in the Romanian national space, offers a perspective on how minority actors, that are however not marginalized, behave in digital contexts. The aim of this communication is, therefore, to understand how exchange and transformation processes influenced cultural dynamics in Romania, in the region, and online. Doing so, the communication is organized in two parts. The first part presents the result of research—mixing interviews and online ethnography, to question: How do political and cultural actors representing minorities perceive digital technologies? Is it an opportunity for their conservation, dissemination, and connection activities? On the contrary, could technology threaten their fight for cultural preservation and political-cultural representation? Are minority groups implementing strategies to spread their work in transnational and digital spaces, demonstrating cultural resistance? Doing so, it addresses the cultural diplomacy practices—through the angle of minorities in transnational spaces, historical dimensions of minority dynamics, but also effects of societal digitalization in politics and minority-majority dynamics.

The second part aims at proposing theoretical and methodological approaches regarding one of the results of this study: the sentiment that minority groups accept technologies more easily, and see it positively, when they are protected by the state. Indeed, looking at the results, we identified that the political and social integration, and, therefore, the security feeling that minorities have towards digital

technologies, would influence their use. We identified that the national minorities' perception and use of technology seemed correlated to the degree of political integration, and their feelings of security within a given society.

2 Conceptual Framework: National Minorities, Technologies Perceptions and Uses

Brubaker (1995) defines national minority by emphasizing that a national minority is not limited to a demographic reality, but is a dynamic political position combining three main demands: first, public recognition of belonging to an ethnocultural nation distinct from the majority; second, recognition of this ethnocultural nationality by the state; and third, recognition of the collective cultural and political rights associated with this nationality. According to Brubaker (1995), national minorities struggle, with two contradictory goals: on the one hand, they must demand recognition and the defence of their particular rights; on the other hand, they must assert their belonging to the national space and their similarity to others. Consequently, they expect the state to adopt an attitude that promotes national unity. Therefore, national minorities raise political and symbolic issues in a multicultural, nationalizing state (Braun, 2016) as historical ethnic groups that have preserved their cultural, religious, and linguistic characteristics for centuries (Ungureanu, 2020).

Due to this position, it is interesting to study the link that national minorities can establish with digital technologies, which provide access to a transnational space and new tools, affecting existing dynamics. Romanian national minority organizations can use these technologies as a means of claiming certain rights and promoting the group's specific characteristics or even strengthening its belonging to the dominant group. As Romanian national minority organizations are present in digital spaces, their relationship to technologies can be addressed through two elements: their perception and their use of technologies. The perception of digital technologies by national minorities can correspond to the "approaches to virtuality," which Proulx and Latzko-Toth (2000) classify into three groups based on the relationship between the real and the virtual (replication of the real by the virtual, improvement of the real by the virtual, continuation between the two spheres). Drawing on the concepts of virtuality (Proulx & Latzko-Toth, 2000), we have identified three possible perceptions of the relationship between national minorities and technology: digital technologies can simply replicate existing political models; they can reform and improve or alter them; or they can merge them, with constant interaction between the "real" political sphere and the digital sphere. Parallelly, the field of internet studies and the sociology of usage allow to explore the role of technology in social relations, forms of engagement, and relationships with politics (Beuscart et al., 2019). These approaches make it possible to document long-standing social phenomena, such as the relationship between national minorities and the state, and to identify how they have evolved in the face of the internet.

3 Methodology: National Minorities, Technologies Perceptions and Uses

These conceptual elements helped building on the methodology. To study the perception of digital issues by Romanian minorities, we propose a triangulation of methods, focusing on discourse on digital technology in interviews and through digital communications, and the use of digital technology by so-called "political" organizations representing Romanian national minorities.

First, the perceptions of digital technologies were approached through the discourse of minority representatives, collected (1) through semi-structured interviews with representatives of cultural and political unions of Romanian minorities, and (2) through social media/internet websites communications. In total, we conducted four interviews, organized in the timeframe between May 2025 and July 2025, with 4 representants from the German union FDGR/DFDR, the Turkish union UDTR, the Hungarian party UDMR/RMDSZ, and the Hungarian theatre in Cluj. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing us to establish the profiles, backgrounds, and motivations of the people working for these organizations, but also discussing work related to minorities (historical context, main prerogatives, issues), minorities and digital issues (issues at different levels—local, national, and international—and in different areas—cultural and political), and possible developments in uses and issues. We also built a corpus of 38 pages of websites, social media posts, website news articles, and position statements. To collect this corpus, we used intentional sampling and selected 10 websites of minorities' organizations. On these websites, we selected data related to the topic of digital—using the search bar, to extract posts and information about digital perception of these organizations.

We then analysed the organizations' uses through inductive thematic coding of websites and social media. For example, a website available in the minority language, Romanian, and in English could be coded as "desire for accessibility" due to its multilingualism, but also as "international audience" due to the presence of English. In total, we analysed 10 minority websites and social networks (including the German union FDGR/DFDR, the Turkish union UDTR; the Serbian party USR, the pro-European Romani party, the Ukrainian union UUR, the Russian Lipovan community CRLR, the Polish union UPR/Dompolski, the Greek union, the Bulgarian union UBBR, and the Jewish federation).

4 Mobilizing and Educating through Digital Technologies

Minority organizations use digital technologies as a tool for mobilization and education, to build communities and extend their "real-life activities." They "present every cultural and political event immediately on Facebook […] it's bilingual, it's

also for Romanian,"[1] and propose impactful activities locally and transnationally, as illustrated by the Turkish Union, that participated in a campaign to aid victims by collecting and sorting essential items following the 2022 earthquake or implemented educational project in the cities of Izmit and Samsun to develop bilateral relations in the fields of education and culture between Romania and the Republic of Turkey.

The use of social media and digital tools is guided by the demography of the minority groups: for example, the German minority being an aging minority, "also need[s] the print media […] older people don't use Facebook, for example, or other social media, but they read newspapers all the time."[2] On the opposite, when there are younger members, education is central in the minority organizations prerogative. Indeed, most of these organizations support linguistic and religious education, and in some cases, they even have historical schools. The German minority, for example, has "a very old tradition of German schools here in Romania: in Sibiu, for example, the school was founded in 1384, at a time when there were none in Berlin."[3]

Digital technologies are more and more relied on to expand educational activities. For example, online Polish language courses are offered by the Polish Union. Likewise, the national conferences of Ukrainian mother tongue teachers allowed to discuss education in a digital context, with a view to considering modern strategies, methods, and techniques in the digital age, the use of online platforms, and digital educational applications and content to improve the teaching-learning process. Other topics are addressed by organizations in terms of education and digital technology, ranging from the digitization of the Austrian library at the University of Cluj to reflections on cross-border cooperation in education with Ukrainian schools, providing them with versatile digital educational spaces. This education can also involve teaching about technological tools, such as the radio school project for minorities offering technical training in digital storytelling promoted by the Polish Union. Digital literacy also involves education about the platforms themselves. For example, the Ukrainian Union offers a guide on its website for protecting and recovering social media accounts in Ukraine, provided by the National Cybersecurity Directorate (DNSC) and intended for the Ukrainian community in Romania and Ukrainian refugees.

[1] All verbatims come from interviews. Here: Representant of the German minority (FDGR/DFDR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (online).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

5 Cultural Representation and Visibility through Digital Technologies

Digital technology also offers innovative solutions for heritage preservation and visibility. Most of the minority organizations under study used technologies to digitalize heritage. For example, the "Spotlight Heritage—Patrimoniul sub reflectoare" project is a digital cultural initiative that aims to digitize Timisoara's physical heritage using digital technologies (web, mobile, AR, VR, and XR) to spark the interest of younger generations through digital historical storytelling. Other projects include the creation of physical, digital, institutional, and personal archives in 2004, by the Evangelical Church of Romania (linked to German minorities) for the protection of knowledge, and the digitization of documents from several private and public collections in the case of the event on Bulgaria, with the aim of presenting real-life stories in a fun way, transmitted through family monographs or large-scale events.

These digitization efforts have led to the creation of virtual museums and online libraries: the representant of the Turkish minority, for example, states

> We currently have a program called the MIRAS online museum. It is an online museum for Turkish and other minorities in Romania. So we have things that showcase minorities online, but we need to have more and create bigger projects that include all minority groups, as we could probably take a step forward and create something multi-ethnic.[4]

The Serbian Union offers a digital library that is entirely available in English, as it is internationally oriented with the ambition of making facts and documents about the Serbian community in Romania available to a large number of visitors from around the world. This project, Digitalna biblioteka Srba u Rumuniji—Digital Library of Serbs in Romania, is motivated by the ambition to save rare and hard-to-access copies of old books, magazines, and newspapers in Serbian published in what is now Romania from destruction and oblivion. The initiative arose from the Timisoara organization's desire to digitize the unique collections of Serbian newspapers in the local Serbian library, but now covers a much broader spectrum, with 16,400 documents. Similarly, the Russian Lipovans also have an online library, Biblioteca Mănăstirii "Uspenia," which contains restored, digitized, processed, and catalogued copies that showcase the cultural, historical, and spiritual identity of the community.

Digitalization also plays a role in enhancing the "lieu de mémoire," described by Nora (1984–1992), particularly in the case of the Holocaust, which affected Romanian Roma and Jews. For example, on the Roma Party website, the only mention of the term "digital" refers to information about the digitization of the Auschwitz

[4] Representant of the Turkish minority (UDTR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

Museum. Similarly, the Jewish Federation of Romania mainly uses digital technology for memory issues, such as in the digital art exhibition "I, You & Them" (about the Holocaust) by artist Sarah Einik, or during Holocaust commemorations.

Beyond the digital preservation of tangible heritage, other strategies are being implemented by national minorities to gain visibility and protect the intangible elements of their cultures:

> We must first examine each of our minority groups and consider that we need to have a better online presence and present ourselves more effectively on a larger scale. The online environment also allows everyone to express themselves easily. We must therefore educate those who are unfamiliar with each of the minorities.[5]

On their website, the Russian Lipovan community dedicates tabs to history, geographical distribution, religion, traditions, traditional occupations of the community, architecture, traditional costumes, and gastronomy. The Turkish Union shares news about cultural activities raising knowledge around intercultural dialogue, for example in 2023, the Union organized a symposium to present the traditions and customs practiced during the spring festivals in six ethnic communities in Dobrogea. This event featured presentations on Romanian customs for the spring festivals of Dragobete, the Day of the 40 Martyrs, and the Annunciation (for Romanian Christians and Greeks), Maslenita, Nevruz (Turkish and Tatar), and the religious festival of Flowers (Ukrainian). The previous year, Neyruz was also the occasion for an inter-ethnic "Community Spring" Festival. Other activities such as creative workshops for children or students, culinary festivals such as "Golden Baklava," and a show on Turkish Language Day are opportunities to preserve and share community culture, including online. Particular attention is therefore paid to ways of digitally preserving minority skills and cultures, especially in the case of projects involving several actors. For example, on the Polish Community website, there is information about several projects run by the UNESCO Centre in Suceava, such as "Digital Bukovina" to document and share the Polish cultural heritage of Bukovina, or the creation of online recipe books based on traditional dishes specific to the ethnic groups of the participants, thanks to direct interaction between representatives of minority organizations in Romania. Everyday lives can also be documented thanks to technologies: following a documentary by Edward Serotta (photographer, writer, and film producer), a project was set up to digitally preserve the memories and photographs of Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe, with photographs of Jewish families accompanied by short stories. Similarly, the Roma Party documents the life of the community using social media as a media tool. The party is present on all platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) and offers content that reflects the reality of Roma life and documents the lives of Roma people, such as videos entitled "Roma in Romania." For example, one of these videos focuses on two towns in the Brasov region, with the caption "two

[5] Representant of the Turkish minority (UDTR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

municipalities facing the same problems: lack of roads, difficult living conditions, considerable challenges in terms of children's education. What do people say, what are the authorities doing, and how many more generations will have to wait for things to change?" Thus, this strategy is not without political interest, as it also documents the efforts that need to be made to improve the community's life.

In some projects, technologies are intertwined with the patrimonialization process: to create art craft, as

> AI has created beautiful art that is part of our culture […] However, it is superficial. What concerns us is that craftsmanship may decline because people don't know how these paintings are made. […] But we hope that by seeing more works of art, people will be more inclined to take an interest in craftsmanship, in how the works were made, in how the paintings were created (…) Our only concern is that people will become superficial and not be interested in how things are made.[6]

In a European 2020–2022 Erasmus+ program, the Greek Union dedicated part of the project to updating and improving the digital skills of dance teachers at partner institutions. This participates in facilitating a better understanding of traditional and contemporary dances in partner countries and including cultural diversity to create more educational and artistic tools/methodologies, allowing a better understanding of traditional and contemporary dances in partner countries and incorporating cultural diversity to create more educational and artistic tools/methodologies.

6 Technologies and Democracy: A Threat for the National Minorities?

Accessibility and democracy are central in the preoccupations of national minorities' organizations who play the role of mediator to improve access to information for their communities. First, they are concerned with linguistic accessibility. The recent example of COVID has illustrated the challenges associated with the production of documents distributed online:

> During the COVID period in Romania, all of the government's emergency laws were implemented immediately after their publication, and they were always in Romanian, but not in any other language, nor in a minority language. (…) Our organization did the translation and put it on our website, and we translated all the forms and everything you needed, all the paperwork for our community.[7]

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Multilingualism is therefore a key requirement for digital inclusion: as the Ukrainian Union points out in a post on International Mother Language Day, 43% of the world's 6000 languages are endangered, and fewer than 100 languages are integrated into digital systems and a few hundred into education systems.

Accessibility is especially important in the context of administrative digitalization. The Ukrainian Union is exploring strategies to make public administration more transparent and effective in its communication with citizens, for example through the role of representatives and the development of communication channels adapted to new technologies to streamline administrative processes, and reflects on digitalization of cross-border cooperation between Romania, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova. Access to the Romanian political arena can also be negotiated by organizations representing minorities in the digital space. Thus, it is not uncommon for content published on the Romani Party's social media accounts to demonstrate the use of digital technology as a means of making its voice heard politically, while documenting the lives of the Roma. For example, in the case of a post about the lack of infrastructure for Roma in certain cities, the party can challenge local and national governance with a caption inviting responses. In other cases, such as with the Hungarian party, digital publications are an opportunity to promote positions taken at congresses or within the European Parliament.

However, lately, technologies appeared to also be a threat to democracy. Indeed, the 2024 Romanian elections raised national awareness of the dangers that can be associated with digital technology. The 2024 elections brought a far-right candidate, Calin Georgescu, who was little known in the political sphere, to first place. In December 2024, the Constitutional Court cancelled the election due to suspicions of Russian interference that had enabled the candidate to run a massive and successful campaign on TikTok. The presidential election was then rescheduled for May 2025, with the candidate banned from running, and lessons are being learned: "We are still in the period where we need to look at what happened in December last year, as if we were still learning lessons from it, but so far there haven't been many problems in this regard."[8]

Indeed, initial discussions have emerged around the need for Romania to develop digital sovereignty and institutions capable of preventing uses that would undermine democracy:

> We have had several elections […] the Romanian Constitutional Court had to hold a new election simply because we, or the authorities, noticed foreign interference in the entire process, and we witnessed serious attacks on various digital platforms against national institutions. This is therefore a strong signal to society as a whole that we are very vulnerable to this threat. Romania needs to be more aware, we need clearer legislation on this issue. We need institutions that have specific means to stop and trace these attacks. Regarding the online hate speech that emerged around these elections, minority representatives also believe that new tools need to be developed.[9]

[8] Ibid.

[9] Representant of the Hungarian minority (UDMR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

Moreover, hate speech online can threaten the national minorities directly, especially after these elections. Programs start addressing the issue, as: "We know from the last elections that the authorities are taking a closer look at how people can manipulate or spread other beliefs or hate speech on the internet. And this is the first incident where we have felt the dangers of social media"[10] as: "Since COVID, there has been a forced digitization of society, and even of institutions. And of course, society's digital culture is not up to par, so we would need more education in this area, and of course, that also means including the fight against hate speech and discrimination."[11]

However, it is impossible to implement solutions, despite the existence of a legal framework. For example, the European tool for monitoring hate speech against minorities, by the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), to report any violations of the law, only provides descriptive information about what is happening online but doesn't allow to take actions.

7 National Minorities in Digital Environments: A Continuation of Real-Life Dynamics

Brubaker (1995) emphasizes the dynamic political position of national minorities in regions formerly dominated by empires, with a double struggle for the recognition of their rights and identity, as well as for their integration into the national space. This dual struggle is reflected in the use and perception of digital technologies. Indeed, we see a use of technologies that aims to mobilize the group and highlight the historical, linguistic, and cultural characteristics of minorities. This translates, for example, into a concern for education within the minority or the digitization of tangible and intangible heritage. In doing so, national minorities demonstrate their concern for integration into the national space. They demand linguistic accessibility to administrative content, call for more measures against online hate speech, which divides society, and participate in discussions on the protection of national integrity and democracy in the face of foreign interference enabled by digital technology.

Thus, Romanian minority communities demonstrate the continuity of the actions they have undertaken since the founding of organizations representing their interests in the early 1990s, thanks to technological advances. In doing so, Romanian national minorities do not separate identity and culture from the nation-state (Tardif & Farchy, 2011) and do not politicize their cultural demands, as other

[10] Representant of the Turkish minority (UDTR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

[11] Representant of the Hungarian minority (UDMR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

stateless nations would do (Jiménez & Garai-Artetxe, 2025). Indeed, they consider themselves part of the national unity, whereas minorities "had a home there before Romania, which remained their home even after the arrival of Romania."[12]

Many initiatives by Romanian minority communities aim to raise the profile of their culture, history, and language. They set up museum, archive, and digital library projects, or create online content about their identity. As a result, while there is no evidence of identity construction through digital means or symbolic and aesthetic reinvention among organizations representing minorities, there is a strong desire to preserve and promote national cultural wealth. In doing so, minority communities are establishing "digital heritage" projects. These projects can be carried out on different scales and, in some cases, receive support from the Romanian government, international organizations such as UNESCO, or European programs such as ERASMUS+.

Heritage preservation thus serves two purposes. On the one hand, it aims to preserve heritage for the group, but on the other, it also seeks to promote it to national and international audiences, as well as to similar groups. This phenomenon of heritage preservation reveals an intensification of the proliferation of places of memory, as described by Pierre Nora (1984–1992). Indeed, thanks to the digital world, opportunities to create supports for collective memory are multiplying, and the exploitation of these possibilities by national minorities demonstrates that national minorities are part of the movement that consists of the proliferation of educational tools, commemorations, and heritage. In doing so, they are once again caught up in a dual dynamic: protecting a particular and shared tangible and intangible heritage, and producing a memory and a counter-memory that is unique (for minorities) and shared (for Romania as a whole, and even for Europe).

7.1 A Confidence and Positivity Towards Technologies Thanks to the State's Support

In general, the Romanian national minorities see the state in a positive light regarding minorities management, especially in Europe:

> All minorities are part of a group in Parliament, which is a constitutional right in Romania according to which all minorities must be represented in the Romanian Parliament […] After participating in numerous European projects concerning minorities, I must say that Romania is one of the countries that takes best care of minorities, better than most European countries. In no other country in Europe do the state and the government help minorities as

[12] Representant of the Turkish minority (UDTR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

> much as Romania does. In no other European country do the state and government help minorities as much as they do in Romania. We have no restrictions, and all our projects are supported by the Romanian government, which is something that needs to be said in this regard.[13]

This sense of protection seems to foster a positive view of technology, as Romania recognizes the pressures of globalization on cultural diversity and actively responds with policies that include and support its national minorities.

7.2 Diversity in Use and Perception

Although there are many similarities in the perceptions and uses of digital technology among Romanian national minorities, due to their status, each representative body approaches digital technology differently. Thus, interviews and analysis of minority strategies highlight the fact that activity in the digital space can reflect the "offline" reality of minority groups, when they perceive themselves as less integrated into the majority space. For example, when the interviews mentioned very peaceful relations between the minority group and the majority, all the topics discussed focused on ways to promote minority cultures and heritage, and in this case, digital technology served as a tool for empowerment, enabling mobilization, coordination, and mutual aid.

On the contrary, the need to produce "counter-discourses" by illustrating the realities of minorities and the existence of alternative discursive spaces has emerged as a necessity for minority groups suffering the most from prejudice. To explore this theme further, it would be interesting to continue the research by proposing criteria that would allow these observations to be verified, specifying what might be indicative of a feeling of political exclusion—such as being at the centre of controversy, having a complex history, being a majority minority, or being particularly victimized by prejudice. The differences between digital uses and perceptions could then be compared between groups.

8 Reconsidering the Role of the State and Legal Framework in Technologies Acceptance, Uses and Perception

These results and discussions highlight that the diversity of perceptions and uses of digital technologies by Romanian national minorities can vary, according to their feeling of security and inclusion within a given society. We hypothesize that this

[13] Representant of the Turkish minority (UDTR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

feeling can depend on various factors, such as the protection offered to minorities by the state, the political representation, the social inclusion, and the historical background.

8.1 Technologies Acceptance: Theories and Previous Empirical Research

Technologies acceptance has previously been studied through various theories. The most common theory is based on the reasoned action theory, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), that defines the link between believes, attitudes, norms, intentions, and individual behaviours. In this model, external stimuli influence and modify individual believe structures, that themselves influence behaviours: reasoned action theory can, therefore, help understand individual choices in front of various alternatives. As an application example, this has been used to identify behaviours and attitudes towards technologies and differentiated between men and women with variables in uses based on innovation, user and institutional, political, social, and cultural contexts (Kouboura et al., 2022). In this study, other models enrich the approach, with social and cognitive psychology models, that insist on perception in the selection process: social perception will guide socio-economical behaviours (Kouboura et al., 2022).

Further theories propose an enrichment of the framework of influence over behaviours. Along with reasoned action theory, other traditional approaches of technologies acceptance include the theory of planned behaviour, the stages of change model, and the transtheoretical model (Alami, 2023). The theory of planned behaviours has been developed by Ajzen (1991) to improve the reasoned action theory by including the consideration that actions are influenced by behavioural intentions, themselves influenced by attitudes towards the behaviour, social subjective norms, and the perception that one has over his control of the situation (Alami, 2023).

The unified theory of acceptance and use of technology—UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2012) investigates eight concepts to understand the adoption and diffusion of technologies for consumers, including coming from previously mentioned theories. Doing so, it looks at three constructs that can be added to the UTAUT, such as hedonic motivation (fun and pleasure from the use of a technology), price value, experience, and habit. It also proposes extensions including the moderating role of age, gender, and experience on these constructs, and the moderating role of experience over behavioural intentions. It highlights the complexity behind technological acceptance and use, as many factors are interplaying.

8.2 Confrontation of these Theories with our Previous Research

In the technological acceptance theories, the link between political inclusion of minorities and technology acceptance has been addressed through the analysis of cognitive approaches of technologies that can be applied to the general population, but lacks contextual context when applied to national minorities. To add complexity by looking at acceptance—here perception and use—by the minority organizations that also participate in creating social and political norms around technologies—it can, however, be interesting to look at these existing approaches.

We identified the importance of security feeling for the minorities' representatives, in their discourse around technology. This corresponds to the believes, attitudes, and norms determining actors acceptance, in Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory. As these elements correspond to behaviours and cognition, and can be influenced and modified by external stimuli, it would make sense considering that political security of minority actors participate to their positive technological perception. Moreover, models who investigate not only the gender identity, but also the institutional, political, social, and cultural context (Kouboura et al., 2022), or around the importance of control feeling over the situation (Alami, 2023) offer a good approach of these topics. The role-played by control over the situation is here particularly interesting, since it can correspond to what we identified as the role of the state and the legal framework: if one has a sentiment of security thanks to the legal and political environment, he will have an increased perception of control over the adopted technology.

9 Opening and Conclusion: Understanding Perception, Acceptance and Use of Technologies by Minorities—The Need for Further Research

The reasoned action model, as developed by Ajzen and Fishbein, has been mostly used to anticipate intentions and actions, by assessing how behaviours are formed in response to the probability of an event. In this study, we are interested in enriching the knowledge around what political condition (for example: a state protecting minorities) could influence the behaviour, and, therefore, the perception and use of a technology, by political representants of the minority groups.

Investigating this topic would allow to broaden previous theories, that look at technologies' acceptance by "usual users" or consumers (Venkatesh et al., 2012) and in everyday life, but do not investigate the use by political representants of "the minorities."

To propose solutions, for a better understanding of the link between minorities, technologies, and political environment, we came up with methodological propositions, that could be implemented in further work. To start with, we propose a discourse analysis that allows to investigate this hypothesis, by (1) looking at the way minorities perceive themselves and their inclusion, as well as the political

protection that they benefit from (integration) and (2) looking at the discourses of minorities towards technologies (acceptance). These two elements would then be compared with one-another, in order to highlight how they relate to each other. For example, inclusion can be highlighted in discourses when validating the system/model for minorities, as: "That's also an European model for other countries, and for us, it's very important to hold these schools in German language."[14] Or: "After participating to many European projects with minorities, I have to say that Romania is one of the countries that has the best care for the minorities, better care than most of the European countries. In no other country in Europe does the state and the government help minorities at the level that Romania does."[15]

Similarly, positive description of political models highlights a perceived historical continuity in the national minorities' presence and political integration. Eventually, in some cases, the link integration-acceptance is made clear:

> Romania not only acknowledges the pressures of globalization on cultural diversity but actively responds to them with policies that include and support its historical national minorities. These measures are part of a broader effort to ensure that minority cultures remain visible, valued, and preserved in both national and international digital spaces.[16]

However, these methodological approaches would be even more interesting if it considered further data than discourses. To deepen the question of political inclusion and its impact on security perception by national minorities, we would propose to add further historical and political data, such as historical incidents between majority and minority, analysis of the dynamics during the creation of Romania, or the discourses within the society on these minorities, for example.

Therefore, further work should investigate the following questions: how can one define the integration of a national minority into the national space? Which indicators can we use? How do we investigate the link between integration and technology acceptance? We invite researchers in political science, communication, and social sciences to investigate these questions, in order to enrich our knowledge about actors representing minorities, that are not from the margins/subalterns. This research would benefit technological acceptance theories, but also political theories around minority/majority dynamics, by going beyond dichotomies around power distribution. Moreover, this research would also serve the purpose of understanding political and cultural dynamics online, and, therefore, propose refined recommendations around topics such as online linguistic justice, epistemic injustice, cultural preservation, and social dynamics or identity politics in the digital age.

[14] Representant of the German minority (FDGR/DFDR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (online).

[15] Representant of the Turkish minority (UDTR), Interview conducted by the author in June 2025 (Bucharest).

[16] Representant of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, answers provided by email, June 2025.

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The Rocket inside the Precious Object: Retracing the Lifepaths of Ukrainian Diplomatic Gifts Made from Fragments of Weapons (February 2022–Present)

Jean-Philippe Miller-Tremblay

1 Introduction

Being surrounded by objects made from weapons is part of the daily lives of those living in wartime and oftentimes peacetime (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2009; Henig, 2019; Kim, 2016; Saunders, 2011; Sisavath, 2021; Uk, 2016).[1] They can have day-to-day uses such as flower vases, letter openers, cooking apparatuses, lighters, while others can become highly valued pieces of jewellery, diplomatic gifts, artworks, or common decorative items; they can be found in art galleries, households, restaurants, shops, or even governmental institutions. Facing this diversity, how can scholars engage with their existence and the narratives that surround these artifacts related to war at least from a material perspective? In the last twenty years, a limited number of them have tried to answer this question. The "volatility" of such objects regrouped under the common denomination of "trench art" has been well studied by historian of the First World War Nicholas Saunders amongst others. According to the latter, "trench art" "may be considered as […] any item made by soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians, from war materiel directly, or any other material, as long as it and they are associated temporally and/or spatially with armed conflict or its consequences" (Saunders, 2003). It is important

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to add that according to this definition, this "armed conflict" does not have to happen in trenches; it is a concept that is aimed to be polyvalent. They can alternatively be seen as "junk (war debris), kitsch folk-art item, treasured memory object, memorial, political statement, and sensorial touchstone to deeply held emotions" (Saunders, 2017) while one of their common characteristics is that the meaning of these conflict-related objects can vary greatly in wartime but also during their post-war existence (Carr & Mytum, 2012).

In 2025, I started to interview jewellers, sculptors, and metal workers that were transforming weapons' fragments into artworks since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. I realized that through these objects are memorialized diverse war experiences and the medium used, the materiality of warfare, is for them crucial to do so. Accordingly, in the specific case of today's Ukraine, there is urgent work to be done to record the complex existence of these substantial fragments of memory. Indeed, the input of those who participated and are participating in the current existence of these items could be "lost". This mistake has been made in the past, as comparable objects collected by museums only in the aftermaths and considered essentially as curiosities and militaria limited the biographical data recorded on them (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2017) and rendered them essentially mute (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2009).

This contribution will focus on the work of one such artist: Stanislav Drokin. An internationally renowned jeweller before the war, collecting and using fragments of rockets that fell on the ground near his home in Kharkiv became part of his artistic rationale starting from the beginning of the full-scale invasion. This gave birth to a new project called "Forget-Me-Not". Drokin stated that "it included two types of objects: brooches for ladies, wearable, and objects (not brooches) framed under glass for hanging on the wall".[2] I will focus on those that became diplomatic gifts. Concentrating my attention on such cases will allow me to adopt a "biographical" approach to the study of objects; its specificity and heuristic potential will be unfolded in the next section.

My research is framed by the following question: what part does Drokin's work plays in today's Ukrainian diplomacy? According to Catherina Carta, cultural diplomacy, understood as the "deployment of cultural symbols, messages and resources […] in pursuit of stated goals", involves "the representation of a 'collective cultural agency', one that is staged through processes of selective elaboration of common stories" (Carta, 2020, 5). Can we hypothesize that his work is a materialization of Ukrainian "collective cultural agency", embodied in the metamorphosis of a spent weapon given to a precious ally in view of securing his support?

A word has to be said about my conceptual choice. "Trench art" voluntarily emphasizes the relationship of the resulting objects with warfare and its cultural and material environment, which is, in this instance, central to its multifaceted value. I will thus favour it when compared to other concepts such as "found

[2] Email from Stanislav Drokin to the author, 2026.

object", consisting in the integration into a work of art of common everyday items usually unrelated to war. In short, the relation with warfare being reminded at each and every moment of their existence, it is of primordial importance to put it at the forefront when reconstructing their "life path".

2 Biographies of Objects

As such, my methodological approach is mainly inspired by Thierry Bonnot's work on the notion of "biography of objects" (Bonnot, 2002; Bonnot, 2014; Joy, 2009). For Bonnot, as well as for Igor Kopytoff (1986) before him, objects in themselves have no value. They become valuable through the evolving, multiple, and interactive relations between their technical, patrimonial, social, economic, symbolic, and emblematic aspects (Bonnot, 2002, 23). The process of meaning-making is thus a continuous one and is also influenced by the input of the researcher himself. Through his or her gaze, he or she also gives value to the subject of his study (Bonnot, 2014, 12). I am also sensitive to a new materialist approach that is compatible with this biographic method. As such, I also take into account that weapons are not "static material objects" but are "technical beings in perpetual formation, transmuting in tandem with their ambient milieus" (Bousquet et al., 2017, 2). More generally, this approach supposes that we take seriously the following ideas: "that technological and natural materialities [are] themselves actors alongside and within us" (Bennett, 2010, 47); and that the "material world and its contents are not fixed, stable entities, but relational, uneven and in constant flux" (Fox & Alldred, 2017, 4).

Recording these biographies of objects requires an approach combining anthropology, history, art history, and economics, as well as knowledge from metallurgy and the arms industry. Some of the stages of their "lives" that form the building blocks of my inquiry are: (1) the manufacture of the weapon itself as well as its use in warfare or not; (2) the amateur or professional recuperation (by non-specialized soldiers, civilians or deminers, for example) of the weapon; (3) any operation on the latter, whether it involves neutralizing its explosive contents, melting, cutting or assembling it with other objects; (4) finally, carrying it on one's body or exhibiting the finished object. A number of other intermediate operations are also examined, particularly economic ones, such as the sale or donation of raw materials or the finished work.

To write these biographies, I focus on the stakeholders' participation in their lives, be they collectors of raw materials, craftspeople, sellers and buyers, ambassadors and politicians, centring on what led each of them to engage with these artefacts, be they motivated by a want to participate to the war effort, a taste for exoticism, an attraction for a war trophy or a need to know more about, or even share, another's suffering. I will be especially attentive to the differing conceptions that they have of them. For instance, an object made from a weapon can be, for the recipient, a prized sample of a faraway violence celebrating the destructive nature

of a former weapon, while from the point of view of the craftsperson, its partial or total metamorphosis can be aimed at warding off violence.

I also sought to find the right methodological and conceptual tools to do research remotely with men and women living in a country at war. Publications by the members of the LivArch project (Kuczyńska, 2025; Wylegała, 2025), focusing on working with the refugees from Ukraine in Poland especially, were key to refine my course of action on many fronts: caring for the interviewees and their emotional reactions by contacting them after the interview for example; securely preserving the data collected; recruiting interviewees through the snowballing effect with the main objective of not reactivating trauma.

While similar on many levels, the conditions of my inquiry were also radically different on one point: I am mainly working online with interviewees that are in a country at war and have access to internet. On that point, I have to say that it was easy to reach artists and curators that were living in Ukraine. They were also generous with their time and efforts to make me understand their impulse to engage in such an endeavour. Through curators, which were well visible online and whom in general spoke English, I could interview all generations of artists. The main methodological problem is that it is very difficult to fully engage with the transformed materiality of warfare through online means. For example, after a two or three hours interviews, which was the norm, a virtual visit of the artist workshop was the endpoint almost every time: a very frustrating experience for all involved considering the difficulty of rendering this material environment.

3 Stanislav Drokin's "Forget-me-Not" Project

During the online interviews and email exchanges with Drokin from May 2025 to March 2026, the main following questions were raised: Why would he collect and transform fragments of weapons? What are the dimensions of authenticity, and what makes the final object valuable? How does the diplomatic gift-giving process work?

Considering that the Ukrainian market for high jewellery quickly collapsed under the pressure of the war (Statista, 2025), Drokin judged that there was a shift from a dominant interest in precious metals, such as gold, to "the idea, the social message of the author" and to the related use of non-precious and thus more available metals such as bronze, titanium, and steel. He then started to collect steel fragments himself on the ground, which were everywhere, their "free forms" that were the result of the explosion becoming a source of inspiration. It is the availability of the material and their unique texture that attracted Drokin, not the fact that it was coming from a weapon. A symptom of this was his difficulty in assessing which weapon was the source of the shards taken, although according to him, the knowledge on weapons was—and still is—forced on all Ukrainians. Indeed, as a consequence of the need for survival, they would be able to recognize about all of them. As such, he came to the conclusion that these shards come from rockets

that are presumably launched from a BM-21 Grad, a self-propelled 122 mm multiple rocket launcher designed in the Soviet Union which has been in use since the early 1960s. The type of steel used in the making of rockets is very specific. Similar to that of artillery shells, it "is designed to be strong enough to withstand the forces of firing […], but brittle enough to shatter into small fragments when the explosive inside detonates" (Open Source Centre & RUSI, 2024, 42). Accordingly, because of its splintering nature, the resulting steel parts designed to kill or maim can be small enough to become objects adorned on the body.

The artwork's authentication process was paramount and documenting the collecting process was key. There are at least two possible explanations to this: first, it is well-known to today's artists in general and has become an essential part of value-making. As Thierry Lenain suggested, forgery has become a "modern obsession" in the Western world (Lenain, 2011), the other side of the medal being that authenticity also became intimately linked with modernity as Nathalie Heinich as shown (Heinich, 2014). Heinich points out three different categories of what she calls "the test of authenticity":

> The first concerns what is now known as "traceability," in other words, the history of the object's movements; the second concerns substance, in other words the material components of the object; and the third concerns style, in other words, in strictly artistic terms, the formal characteristics – touch, design, color, sound, way of occupying space or arranging words, etc. (Heinich, 2014, 2)

Second, this authentication process is intertwined with the accumulation of evidence as to the destruction caused by the ongoing war. Indeed, some of the artist's energy went into establishing a clear "traceability" of the "substance" used, so that there would be no doubt whatsoever that the material that formed the core part of his artwork came from weapons fired on a battlefield in Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Indeed, Drokin did not simply take the fragments from the ground to his workshop. He took pictures of the places where he collected these steel shards, showing the resulting destruction, as well as GPS points to track down its provenance as precisely as possible. Identification numbers were also given to those shards that would then become part of the jewellery.

Something can also be said of the profusion of this material by assessing the Russian doctrine on the use of artillery and rockets. It is and has been a crucial part of Russia's "way of war". As Sam Cranny-Evans wrote in August 2023, "Russia uses artillery as its primary form of lethality in the deep and close battles", while other arms position themselves to help artillery achieve its goals (para. 5). Since the beginning of 2024, artillery has given way to the use of more precise drone strikes, as the concentration of forces, "generally deemed prerogative for effective manoeuvres", is no longer possible because of an increase in detection capacities (Murgia, 2024, 16). But steel fragments from previous fights are still scattered on the ground in number.

Indeed, this prominent character of artillery and rocket fire also explains the predominant presence on the ground of the steel pieces used in Drokin's work.

Judging from the pictures taken by the artist during the collecting phase, the availability but also the invisibility of such material is striking. Be they freely lying on the road amongst debris of similar form and colour patterns as well as alongside what may be unexploded ordnances that penetrated face down in the asphalt without detonating, or showing their destructive potential through the holes made on a children's pirate-themed playhouse in a park, their rusty hue appears to the acute observer amongst the rubble but also fades amongst leaves, gravel or broken-down trees.

As for the resulting artwork, it is not just the steel piece itself as found on the ground. The artist will then put it under fire to get rid of the rust. This procedure will also blacken it. It will then be associated with other metals. The certificate of authenticity accompanying the works gives us precise indication on its making:

> the piece is made in the form of a brooch from a steel fragment of a free-form Russian projectile with nine stylized forget-me-not flowers randomly arranged on the front plane and *one* stylized flower located on the back. The flowers are made of oxidized blue titanium and attached to the fragment by bronze pins with teardrop-shaped balls in the centre. This piece is handmade. The method of wearing the brooch is carried out using a neodymium magnet in a fabric case.[3]

But it is important to note that the shape of the steel fragment will not be modified, keeping its sharp edges—according to the artist's intention of preserving its "free form"—and making it unique.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian craftspeople are usually visible on, and selling their products using, social medias such as Telegram, Instagram, or Facebook or selling platforms. Drokin's new work circulated widely. According to Drokin, an article published in July 2022 by *The New York Times* gave much visibility to his work (Gomelsky, 2022) as well as the auction of a "Forget-Me-Not" brooch by Sotheby's in November 2022. All the earnings for this auction, that is 12,600 Swiss francs, went to the Lviv-based Superhumans clinic (Taylor, 2024) which helps victims of the war who lost a limb.

Article22.com, a New-York-based online selling platform and gallery specializing in the transformation of war materiel, approached him after becoming aware of his work through the aforementioned article published by the *New York Times* according to Drokin. This name was inspired by the article 22 in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Before the war in Ukraine, it mainly sold bracelets, earrings, necklaces and rings made by craftspeople based in Laos—and "finished" in the capital, Vientiane, or in New York—using nickel-free "military grade aluminum" of "bombs, plane parts, military hardware and other aluminum scrap" used by the United States around the Vietnam War (Article22.Com, 2025a). Endorsed by British actress Emma Watson, this initiative is named "Peacebomb", its slogan

[3] Certificate of authenticity, Forget-Me-Not, number 2–25022022. The number of titanium flowers differs from one piece to the other. This certificate accompanied the piece sold on Sotheby's, mentioned below.

"Buy back the bombs" being undoubtedly addressed to American buyers (Article22.Com, 2025b). Their partnership with Drokin resulted in another page being added to their website. Entitled "Shop Revival Ukraine", "fercupium" pendants also made from rocket fragments are exhibited about twenty at a time and are often listed as sold out (Article22.Com, 2025c). While the popularity of his work is undeniable, Drokin admitted that he has faced very different reactions to it. Put bluntly, some see the weapon, others see his creation. But the social aspect of his project prevails, as according to Drokin:

> In addition to clearing the debris, Article22's mission is to defuse unexploded bombs, transferring a percent[age] from sales to the Mine Advisory Group (MAG) to finance this work. Through the "Revival" project, Article22 finances similar MAG projects in Ukraine.[4]

Additionally, the artist does not consider his work as an aestheticization of destruction but as a beneficial metamorphosis:

> The goal of the project is to transform the negative energy of destruction into positive energy of creation, and to finance the demining of Ukraine. The pieces symbolize a call to unite the entire civilized and democratic world against wars, dictatorships for the sake of the future life of all humanity.[5]

It is also of note that "transforming weapons into art" equalling "transforming horror into beauty" has been a known endeavour at least since the First World War and the birth of industrial warfare. Saunders has suggested that in such contexts, this "art of war" could be seen as a "graphic demonstration of how the shapes and forms of civilization could dominate those of war through artistic transformation", therefore "reif[ying] […] civilized virtues and sensibilities" (Saunders, 2003, 175).

As to the making of the "Revival" pendants, they also consist of rocket fragments, but this time they are fused with bronze—following a process the artist called "bi-metal casting"—in which precious stones are embedded. This method is for Drokin similar to Ganga-Jumna known in ancient India (Untracht, 1985). These pendants are priced between 1500 and 4500 American dollars each.

To go back to the "Forget-Me-Not" project, objects such as the one that was auctioned on Sotheby's became diplomatic gifts. Drokin himself gave impulse to what can be seen as his own form of grassroots diplomacy. According to Drokin, the process can be described as such:

> Given the large number of friends, acquaintances, and volunteers, I am able to find ways to send Forget-Me-Not's through them as diplomatic gifts. I make these decisions myself, having learned in advance about the opportunity to do so. My goal is not to lobby for Ukraine's interests or supply weapons, but to express my gratitude for support as an artist and patriot.

[4] Email from Stanislav Drokin to the author, 2026.
[5] Ibid.

> I am a simple Ukrainian artist and teacher, not affiliated with politicians or diplomats. My goal is social and creative.[6]

In February 2023, around the State of the Union to which the Ukrainian ambassador to the United States, Oksana Markarova, the then ambassador of Ukraine to the United States, gave one to First Lady Jill Biden. According to the *Report of Tangible Gifts Furnished by the White House—Executive Office* for year 2023, this object listed as a "Steel Fragment Forget-Me-Not Flower Brooch" is "[r]etained for Official Use in the East Wing [of the White House]" (U. S. Federal Register, 2025, 367).

A word also has to be said of the US government's official attitude to diplomatic gifts. As, historically, they have "represented the corruption influence of the absolute monarchies of the Old World", there is today a framework set by the Foreign Emoluments clause of the U. S. Constitution, which is itself "building on Article VI of its forerunner, the Articles of Confederation" (Brummell, 2021, 146). This clause of the Constitution stipulates that "no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State".[7] But on the other hand, refusing such a gift would also be damageable to the relationship between the donor and the recipient, which explains why under the heading "Circumstances justifying acceptance" of the report we can read the following sentence: "Non-acceptance would cause embarrassment to donor and U.S. Government". It is also significant that this same sentence is attached to every gift listed in this report, without exception. The rationale behind the acceptance of a gift is thus the same, no matter who the donor is or the appraised value of the gift.

The narrative around this work stated that it was created on 4 July 2022. It may be recalled that the United States Independence Day commemorates the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776 by the Congress which ended the subjection of the thirteen colonies to Great-Britain. The underlying message was that on that day of 2022, Kharkiv was shelled and Ukraine was itself fighting for its independence, a struggle that the U.S. should not be insensitive to in view of its own past.

In January 2025, two weeks before the inauguration of Donald Trump, the press revealed that this piece was appraised by White House experts at more than 14,063,00 American dollars (such as Nelson, 2025). Articles were published just after the aforementioned register of gifts to the White House was put online on 3 January 2025. According to the press, this polemic came in the wake of the American presidential elections in 2024. President Zelensky had visited an ammunition plant in Scranton, Philadelphia, alongside Democrat governor Josh Shapiro in September 2024. No Republicans were invited (Méheut, 2024). Members of this

[6] Ibid.

[7] U. S. Constitution 1787, Art.1, Sect. 9, Cl. 8.3.

party such as Mike Johnson called for Makarova, who had organized this visit, to be fired. In August 2025, seven months after Trump was inaugurated as the next American president, Markarova was no longer in office.

It is possible to hypothesize that the conflict around this artwork's estimated monetary value was preparing the end of American support to the Ukrainian war effort and somewhat ironically, of the provision of new weapons to Ukraine. An article from the *New York Post* was especially clear in its message to the American public, indicating that if Ukraine could afford to make such gifts, it did not need U.S. resources (Nelson, 2025).

The Ukrainian ambassador to the United States, Oksana Markarova, in office since February 2021, defended the significance of this gift on social media X by saying that it "turn[ed] Russian aggression and [the] Ukrainian pain into resilience and creation", while adding that the "value of its materials was less than 1$".[8] At first glance, Markarova's reaction to this polemic may seem contradictory as it calls attention to how valueless but also valuable this piece is. But it encloses two different strategies: one highlighting vulnerability and the other, strength. In view of a continuous American participation to the war effort, Drokin's work is first reduced to the market value of the raw material, especially the steel used to make it, expressing the need for further aid. But its high cultural value is put forward in the following part, this brooch becoming a symbol of tenacity and thus attuning to the prevailing discourse in the West on Ukrainian resilience.

Later on, another "Forget-Me-Not"—not a brooch this time but a framed piece—a was given by the artist to the mayor of Albuquerque, Timothy M. Keller, who made Kharkiv, Drokin's home, its "sister-city" (City of Albuquerque, 2023). Discussions started in early 2023 and on 29 June 2023, this partnership was acted during a virtual meeting between Keller and Kharkiv mayor Ihor Tereknov. During this meeting, the gift made by Drokin was shown to the camera. This "sister-city" program, which exists to this day, provides funds for sports initiatives in Kharkiv through the Sister Cities Albuquerque foundation, which also relies on private donations.

Another glass-framed "Forget-Me-Not" was given by the artist to the president of the Czech Republic, Petr Pavel. A letter by Drokin to the president stated that it was given because he was "deeply impressed by [his] actions in helping to provide ammunition to Ukraine in a difficult time of war".[9] This letter was sent by the artist himself after a speech made by Pavel during the seventh Ukrainian lunch, on the margins of the Munich Security Conference in February 2024. In August 2024, the Czech Republic could provide 500,000 artillery rounds out of the 800,000 promised because Russia was faster in providing credits to possible producers, price for such weapons quadrupled since the beginning of the war on the international arms market (Wien, 2024).

[8] Post from Oksana Markarova on X, 3 January 2025.

[9] Letter from Stanislav Drokin to the President of the Czech Republic Petr Pavel, 17 March 2024, shared with the author.

This same letter from Drokin to the president of the Czech Republic also informs us of the following:

> As a sign of gratitude, please accept the piece 'Nezabudka [Forget-Me-Not]' No. 724-17022024, dedicated to the 724th day of war, February 17, 2024, the day when you, Mr. President, made a speech at the 7th Ukrainian lunch, which took place on the margins of the Munich Security Conference. 'Nezabudka' pieces were given as a gratitude to representatives of the authorities, public institutions, patrons from the USA, Great Britain, Japan, Germany, the Czech Republic and other countries that help Ukraine. In Ukraine, 'Nezabudka' pieces are located in the National Museum of the History of Ukraine, the National Literary and Memorial Museum of H.S. Skovoroda and the Kharkiv Art Museum. They were handed over to officials, representatives of the authorities, the State Emergency Service, public institutions and volunteer associations of the Kharkiv region and other places, soldiers, doctors, energy workers, volunteers, artists and ordinary citizens who contributed to the Victory of Ukraine.[10]

4 Conclusion: Ukrainian "Trench" Art and Cultural Diplomacy

I hope I have shown here that the material culture of diplomacy is a promising avenue opened in the wake of the socio-cultural turn of diplomacy studies in the last twenty years (Meersbergen, 2024). In any case, it points again to the centrality of local initiatives in supporting the war effort. It is related to what Anna Lebedev describes as a Ukrainian attitude towards institutions: trying to patch up blank spots and to smooth their shortcomings (Lebedev, 2025). In short, a horizontal state-building paradigm that materializes the idea that war is everyone's business is coupled with a multifaceted "hot memorialization" of the conflict through the transformation of weapons in artworks in view of convincing allies to act. According to Alexandra Goujon, this concept can be described as "a powerful public retelling of the past, evoked in a turbulent present and for an uncertain future" (Goujon, 2023, 833), which Drokin's work materializes.

As Svitlana Biedarieva also suggests, art is closely intertwined with Ukrainian identity construction. It predates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and in its recent opposition to pro-Russian force and could at least be traced back to the Orange Revolution in 2004, which can also be seen as a turning point in the "conceptual and formal changes in Ukrainian art" (Biedarieva, 2024, 3). Drokin's work could combine two trends in Ukrainian art after 2022: "recording, testifying, and reflecting on the atrocities"; and providing a "profound analysis of the ways for self-understanding and the emergence of identity" (Biedarieva, 2024, 3). In short, it is not only about documenting the war; it is also about transforming it to give it meaning.

In conclusion, this study of the "life paths" of these objects aimed, first, to improve our understanding of the (re)configuration, through arts and crafts,

[10] Ibid.

of societies that experienced or are experiencing war and second, to examine the emergence of a potential dialogue around a shared material culture of war that today crosses cultural boundaries. Indeed, this example also points out to a transnational material culture of warfare.

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Artificial Knowledge in Cultural Diplomacy: Opportunities within the Civil Protection Framework

Alexandru Ioan

1 Introduction

In recent years, the combined effects of digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI), and new forms of global risk have transformed how states and non-state actors engage in cultural diplomacy (Ang et al., 2015; Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Cultural diplomacy—broadly understood as the deployment of cultural expressions, narratives, and exchanges to foster mutual understanding and advance foreign policy goals—has increasingly moved beyond the exclusive domain of national cultural institutes and foreign ministries to include cities, civil society organisations, artists, and hybrid public–private partnerships (Jin, 2024; Kolokytha, 2022; Šešić et al., 2017). At the same time, the field of civil protection has gained strategic prominence in Europe, as climate change, pandemics, technological accidents, and hybrid threats place unprecedented pressure on societies and institutions (De Paula & Gonçalves de Freitas, 2024; Paluch, 2024). In this evolving landscape, knowledge—how it is created, managed, and communicated—becomes a critical resource for both cultural diplomacy and civil protection (Bratianu et al., 2020).

AI introduces a qualitatively new dimension to this knowledge landscape. Beyond familiar applications such as translation tools, recommender systems, and social media targeting, AI systems are increasingly capable of generating not only content but also what some scholars conceptualise as artificial knowledge: knowledge produced exclusively through artificial processes, without direct human intervention in the inferential chain (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2025a; Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2025b; Bratianu & Ioan, 2025). This shift raises profound questions

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for knowledge management (KM), particularly in domains that are normatively charged and symbolically dense, such as cultural diplomacy and international disaster relief (Konovalova, 2023; Kulesz, 2024). If cultural narratives, risk assessments, and crisis-related messages can be shaped or even generated by AI, the implications for trust, legitimacy, and accountability in international relations are significant (UNESCO, 2021).[1]

At the same time, cultural diplomacy itself is undergoing a transformation from a predominantly state-centric practice to a more networked and multi-actor ecosystem. Cities, nongovernmental organisations, diasporas, and grassroots initiatives increasingly act as cultural diplomats in their own right, co-producing narratives about identity, memory, vulnerability, and resilience (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Rachmawati et al., 2024). Civil protection actors—emergency services, civil protection authorities, and volunteer organisations—are part of this ecosystem whenever disasters become moments of transnational visibility. Cross-border assistance missions, commemorations after major emergencies, and media coverage of international solidarity efforts all contribute to how societies perceive both risk and mutual support (De Paula & Gonçalves de Freitas, 2024). In this sense, civil protection can be seen not only as an operational field but also as a stage where cultural diplomacy is performed under conditions of crisis.

Within the European Union, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) provides an institutional framework for coordinating disaster prevention, preparedness, and response among member states and participating states (European Union, 2013; European Union, 2021; Lesińska-Staszczuk, 2022). It also shapes how narratives of solidarity, burden sharing, and European identity are articulated before, during, and after emergencies. As AI tools are progressively introduced in early warning, situational awareness, and public communication, the potential emergence of artificial knowledge within this framework calls for a systematic conceptual exploration (Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023). How might AI-generated analyses, summaries, and narratives influence the way cultural meanings of risk, assistance, and solidarity are constructed and communicated across borders? And how could these dynamics open new opportunities—or risks—for cultural diplomacy that is more inclusive of civil society actors?

This paper engages with these questions by focusing on the intersection of artificial knowledge, cultural diplomacy, and civil protection. It argues that the civil protection framework provides a particularly revealing context in which to study emerging opportunities for using artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy: crises compress time, raise the stakes of communication, and make the symbolic dimension of assistance especially visible (Konovalova, 2023). At the same time, civil protection is one of the policy areas in which the European Union has developed robust mechanisms for coordination, pooling of resources, and communication with both institutional partners and the wider public (Paluch, 2024).

[1] UNESCO. 2021. *Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics

This combination of operational urgency and communicative visibility makes it a fertile ground for exploring how AI-generated knowledge can be integrated into knowledge management systems that support both crisis response and narrative construction.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a conceptual and exploratory approach. It synthesises existing literature and policy documents on AI, artificial knowledge, and knowledge management, on cultural diplomacy and digital soft power, and on the evolution of the European civil protection framework (Ang et al., 2015; Bratianu & Ioan, 2025; De Paula & Gonçalves de Freitas, 2024; Kulesz, 2024). Rather than presenting empirical case studies, the analysis seeks to map key concepts, identify relevant dimensions of interaction, and highlight emerging opportunities and risks. In doing so, the paper responds to the broader objective of the NARDIV initiative to enhance academic and practical engagement with cultural diplomacy and to formulate recommendations for a more effective inclusion of civil society in what is often perceived as an abstract and inaccessible domain.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: What opportunities does the integration of artificial knowledge into cultural diplomacy create within the European civil protection framework, particularly with respect to the involvement of civil society? By addressing this question, the paper aims to make three contributions. First, it clarifies how artificial knowledge can be meaningfully distinguished from other AI-generated outputs within the context of knowledge management (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2025a; Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2025b). Second, it positions cultural diplomacy and civil protection as interconnected fields where narratives of risk, solidarity, and identity are co-produced (De Paula & Gonçalves de Freitas, 2024; Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Third, it outlines a set of conceptual opportunities for using artificial knowledge to support more inclusive, dialogical, and resilient forms of cultural diplomacy, while also acknowledging the ethical and governance challenges that such integration entails (Kulesz, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this paper is built around the intersection of three domains: artificial knowledge and knowledge management, cultural diplomacy, and the European civil protection framework. Together, these domains provide the vocabulary and analytical lenses necessary to understand how AI-generated knowledge may create new opportunities for cultural diplomacy within the context of civil protection.

From a knowledge management perspective, the emergence of artificial knowledge marks a significant qualitative shift. Classical KM literature is grounded in the idea that knowledge originates in human cognition and social interaction, and that organisations must design processes and infrastructures to capture, store, share, and apply that knowledge effectively (Bratianu et al., 2020). With the advent of powerful machine-learning and generative AI systems, however, it becomes possible for

new knowledge claims—hypotheses, classifications, interpretations, even normatively loaded narratives—to be produced exclusively through artificial processes, without direct human intervention in the inferential chain (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2025a; Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2025b; Bratianu & Ioan, 2025). Artificial knowledge, thus understood, is not simply a large volume of data or a set of algorithmic outputs; it is structured information that aspires to epistemic status and can be integrated into decision-making and communication.

This has at least three implications for knowledge management. First, organisations must revisit the boundaries between data, information, and knowledge, as artificial systems blur these distinctions by learning from massive datasets and producing highly contextualised outputs. Second, the governance of knowledge becomes inseparable from the governance of AI models, including questions of training data, transparency, and accountability. Third, the integration of artificial knowledge into human decision processes requires new forms of hybrid knowledge practices, in which human actors interpret, validate, and situate AI-generated content within institutional and cultural norms. In domains such as cultural diplomacy and civil protection, where legitimacy, trust, and symbolic meaning are central, these implications are especially salient.

Cultural diplomacy provides the second pillar of the framework. It can be understood as the deployment of cultural resources—arts, heritage, language, education, and media—to shape foreign publics' perceptions, foster dialogue, and support broader foreign policy or societal objectives (Ang et al., 2015). Over the past two decades, cultural diplomacy has evolved from a primarily state-centric practice to a more distributed and networked field, in which cities, cultural institutions, NGOs, and civil society actors play increasingly central roles (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Municipal cultural festivals, bottom-up initiatives, and translocal networks often act as de facto cultural diplomats, projecting images of identity, openness, and resilience that complement or complicate official state narratives (Kolokytha, 2022).

Digitalisation has further transformed cultural diplomacy by creating new channels and formats for cultural exchange. Social media platforms, digital archives, and virtual exhibitions allow states and non-state actors to reach global audiences directly, while also enabling publics to respond, reinterpret, and remix cultural content (Jin, 2024). This interactive, participatory dimension challenges older models of one-way cultural projection and opens space for more dialogical forms of soft power. At the same time, it introduces new asymmetries and risks, as algorithmic curation, disinformation, and unequal access to digital tools can shape which cultural narratives become visible and credible (Rachmawati et al., 2024). AI-generated content and artificial knowledge amplify these dynamics, as they can be deployed to create tailored narratives, translations, and framings that respond to the preferences and expectations of specific audiences.

The third pillar of the framework is the European civil protection context. The Union Civil Protection Mechanism[2] provides a legal and institutional basis for coordinated disaster prevention, preparedness, and response among EU member states and participating states. It supports risk assessment, joint training, cross-border assistance, and the development of shared capacities and reserves. Beyond its operational functions, however, the UCPM also plays a narrative role: it materialises and communicates ideas of European solidarity, mutual aid, and collective resilience in the face of disasters (De Paula & Gonçalves de Freitas, 2024; Paluch, 2024).

Disaster events and international assistance operations are moments of intense symbolic production. Media coverage, public statements, commemorations, and visual imagery associated with emergency interventions all contribute to shaping how citizens, partners, and affected communities perceive both risk and the political meaning of assistance. Civil protection thus becomes a stage where cultural diplomacy is implicitly performed, as messages of empathy, responsibility-sharing, and common values are communicated across borders. When teams from different countries operate side by side, or when a country receives assistance from its neighbours and EU partners, these interactions can reinforce or contest existing narratives about identity and belonging in Europe.

Bringing these three pillars together allows us to conceptualise the use of artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy within the civil protection framework as a specific configuration of AI-enabled knowledge practices, symbolic communication, and institutional structures. In this configuration, AI systems may generate situational analyses, risk visualisations, or narrative summaries that not only inform operational decision-making but also shape how events are framed for domestic and international audiences (Konovalova, 2023; Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023). For example, AI-generated multilingual summaries of assistance operations could highlight particular aspects of solidarity or local agency; AI-driven analysis of social media could identify emerging narratives of gratitude, distrust, or contestation; and generative models could assist in producing educational or commemorative materials related to disasters.

At the same time, the integration of artificial knowledge into this space is constrained and guided by ethical and normative considerations. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence underscores the need for human rights, inclusiveness, and cultural diversity to be safeguarded in the design and use of AI systems. In the civil protection field, where decisions can affect vulnerable communities under stress, concerns about bias, misrepresentation, and the instrumentalisation of suffering for image-building are particularly acute. In cultural diplomacy, similar concerns arise when AI is used to curate or generate cultural content that purports to represent identities or histories. The framework

[2] The Union Civil Protection Mechanism was established by Decision No. 1313/2013/EU and strengthened by Regulation (EU) 2021/836.

adopted in this paper therefore assumes that any exploration of opportunities must be coupled with attention to governance, transparency, and participatory oversight.

Finally, the conceptual framework highlights the specific role of civil society within this triadic configuration. Civil society actors—volunteer organisations, community groups, NGOs, and informal networks—are both subjects and producers of cultural narratives in times of crisis. They can benefit from artificial knowledge tools that make information more accessible, translate technical risk assessments into understandable formats, or amplify their voices in transnational conversations. Conversely, they can also act as watchdogs and co-creators, contesting AI-generated framings that they perceive as inaccurate, exclusionary, or paternalistic. Positioning civil society at the heart of the framework aligns the analysis with the broader objective of reimagining cultural diplomacy as a more participatory and less state-centric field, particularly when it operates within the highly visible and emotionally charged context of civil protection.

In sum, the conceptual framework developed here treats artificial knowledge as a new layer within existing knowledge management systems; cultural diplomacy as a multi-actor field of symbolic interaction increasingly mediated by digital technologies; and civil protection as both an operational domain and a narrative arena where European solidarity is enacted. The following sections build on this framework to examine more specifically the opportunities that arise from integrating artificial knowledge into cultural diplomacy within the civil protection framework, and the implications this may have for civil society participation and the governance of AI-driven knowledge practices.

3 Opportunities Analysis

Building on this conceptual framework, it is possible to identify a series of opportunities that arise when artificial knowledge is integrated into cultural diplomacy within the civil protection framework. These opportunities do not eliminate the ethical and governance challenges discussed in the literature, but they point to concrete areas where AI-generated knowledge could support more inclusive, dialogical, and effective practices of communication and cooperation (Kuless 2024; Konovalova, 2023).

A first cluster of opportunities concerns multilingual communication and accessibility. During disasters and international assistance operations, timely and accurate information must be communicated to diverse audiences, including affected communities, volunteers, foreign partners, and domestic publics. AI systems capable of generating artificial knowledge in the form of multilingual summaries, explanations, and contextualised descriptions can help lower linguistic and technical barriers, making complex information more understandable for non-specialists (Konovalova, 2023; Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023). In the context of cultural diplomacy, this can translate into narrative practices that foreground empathy, solidarity, and local agency rather than solely institutional perspectives. Artificial knowledge could thus support more inclusive storytelling about civil protection interventions,

where the voices and experiences of communities and civil society organisations are made more visible through accessible translations and adaptive explanations.

A second set of opportunities relates to the dynamic framing of events and the construction of real-time narratives. Disasters are evolving situations in which initial information is often incomplete or fragmented. AI systems can process large volumes of data from sensors, reports, and social media, generating synthetic overviews and trend analyses that can be used to inform both operational decisions and public communication (Paluch, 2024). When embedded in knowledge management systems, such artificial knowledge can help cultural diplomacy practitioners, communication officers, and civil protection authorities to align messages across different channels and audiences. Rather than relying on ad hoc or purely reactive communication, actors can draw on AI-generated insights to emphasise shared values, mutual support, and recognition of local knowledge, thereby reinforcing narratives of European solidarity consistent with the spirit of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. The communicative role of artificial knowledge in this context can be understood as part of a broader information pipeline from heterogeneous data sources to narrative outputs for different audiences (Fig. 1).

Third, artificial knowledge offers opportunities for education, training, and remembrance. Cultural diplomacy is not limited to immediate crisis communication; it also encompasses long-term efforts to foster understanding of historical events, collective memories of past disasters, and lessons learned from international cooperation (Ang et al., 2015). AI-generated reconstructions, scenario narratives, and interactive learning materials can be used to create educational resources that connect civil protection experiences with broader cultural and historical contexts. For example, artificial knowledge could support the development of virtual exhibitions, interactive timelines, or role-playing scenarios that illustrate how international assistance missions were carried out and how local communities

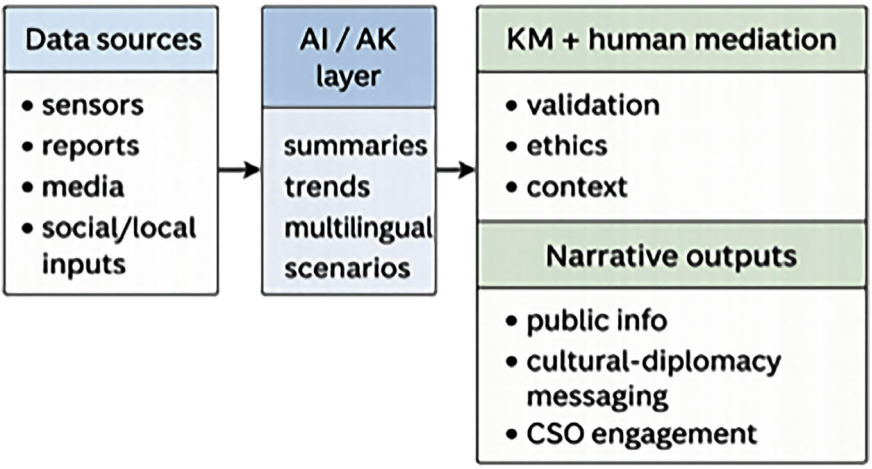

Fig. 1 From heterogeneous data to narrative outputs. *Source* Author's own concept

contributed to resilience. Such resources can function as instruments of cultural diplomacy by showcasing practices of mutual aid and shared responsibility, while simultaneously providing training tools for practitioners and volunteers.

A fourth opportunity lies in the enhanced visibility and empowerment of civil society actors. As noted in the conceptual framework, civil society organisations and informal networks are key carriers of cultural narratives in times of crisis. AI systems that generate artificial knowledge from heterogeneous data sources—such as local reports, community media, and social platforms—can help surface narratives that might otherwise remain marginal or invisible (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021). This can enable cultural diplomacy initiatives that highlight grassroots forms of solidarity, community self-organisation, and intercultural cooperation. Moreover, by providing civil society actors with access to AI-assisted tools for analysing their own activities and communication environments, artificial knowledge can be harnessed to strengthen their capacity to engage in transnational dialogue and advocacy (Rachmawati et al., 2024). These interactions can be conceptualised as a network in which civil society occupies a central position among institutional, media, and AI actors (Fig. 2). In this sense, the integration of artificial knowledge into civil protection-related cultural diplomacy aligns with NARDIV's objective of making the field less abstract and more accessible to non-state actors.

Fifth, artificial knowledge can improve internal learning and reflexivity within the civil protection and cultural diplomacy communities. Knowledge management in these domains has long struggled with challenges of capturing tacit knowledge, documenting lessons learned, and ensuring that insights travel across organisational and national boundaries (Bratianu et al., 2020). AI systems that analyse after-action reports, evaluation documents, and media coverage can generate higher-level patterns and comparative insights that would be difficult to obtain

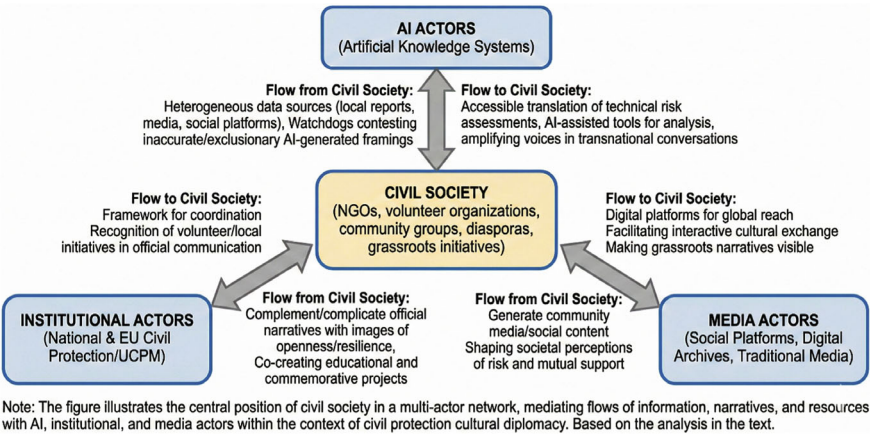

Fig. 2 Civil society as a central actor in artificial knowledge–enabled cultural diplomacy within the civil protection framework. *Source* Author's own concept

through manual analysis alone (Bratianu & Ioan, 2025). When interpreted critically by human experts, such artificial knowledge can help identify recurring narrative blind spots, stereotypes, or gaps in the way civil protection assistance is represented and communicated. This, in turn, can inform the redesign of cultural diplomacy strategies and training curricula to be more self-aware and responsive to diverse perspectives.

A sixth cluster of opportunities emerges in the realm of anticipatory governance and scenario building. Civil protection increasingly emphasises prevention and preparedness, including risk communication and community engagement before disasters occur (De Paula & Gonçalves de Freitas, 2024). Artificial knowledge can support these efforts by generating plausible narratives about future risks, simulating how different publics might perceive and respond to specific messages, and identifying potential sources of misunderstanding or resistance. Coupled with participatory methods, such as workshops or co-design processes with civil society, these AI-generated scenarios can help cultural diplomacy practitioners test and refine communication approaches in advance, thereby reducing the likelihood of miscommunication during actual crises (Konovalova, 2023). These differentiated but overlapping roles across the disaster management cycle are summarised in Fig. 3.

Across all these areas, the opportunities associated with artificial knowledge are conditional on robust ethical and governance frameworks. The same capabilities that enable more inclusive and responsive communication can also be misused

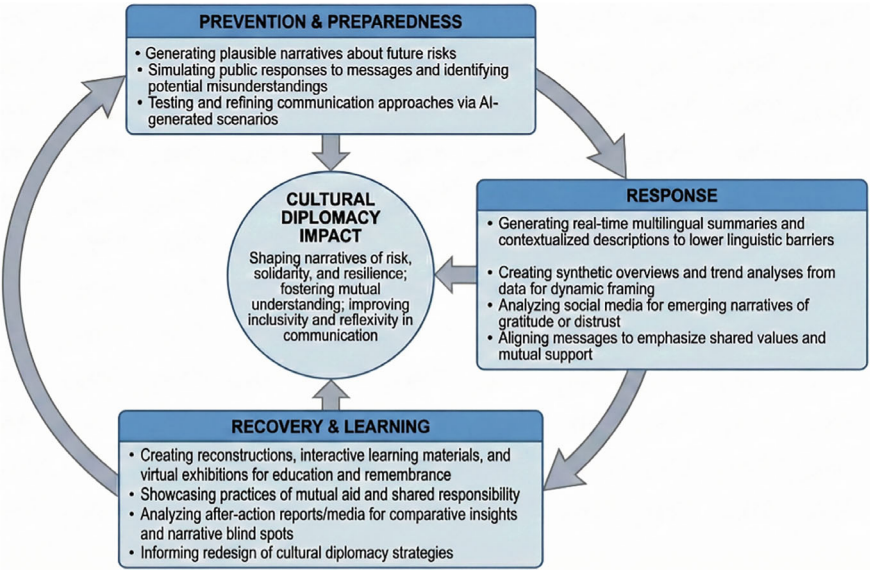

Fig. 3 Artificial knowledge–enabled opportunities for cultural diplomacy across the disaster management cycle. *Source* Author's own concept

for manipulation, selective visibility, or the reinforcement of existing inequalities. For this reason, each of the opportunities outlined above presupposes human oversight, transparency about the use of AI, and mechanisms for feedback and contestation by affected communities and civil society actors (Kulesz, 2024). When these conditions are met, artificial knowledge can function not as a replacement for human cultural diplomacy, but as a complementary layer that enhances the ability of institutions and communities to manage, share, and co-create knowledge in the high-stakes context of civil protection.

The analysis in this section thus suggests that artificial knowledge can play a constructive role in mediating between operational exigencies and symbolic communication, between institutional agendas and civil society voices, and between national perspectives and European narratives of solidarity. The next section turns to the broader findings and implications of this exploration, considering how these opportunities interact with ethical concerns and what they may mean for the future governance of AI in cultural diplomacy and civil protection.

4 Findings and Implications

The analysis conducted in the previous sections suggests several overarching findings about the role of artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy within the civil protection framework. First, artificial knowledge operates most productively as an intermediate analytical and interpretive layer between operational realities and public narratives. Rather than replacing human judgment, AI-generated summaries, trend analyses, and scenarios can support human actors in navigating the complexity, speed, and emotional intensity that characterise disaster situations (Pokhriyal & Koebe, 2023). In this sense, artificial knowledge reinforces the centrality of knowledge management in both cultural diplomacy and civil protection, while simultaneously transforming its modalities through algorithmic processing and generative capacities.

Second, the opportunities associated with artificial knowledge reconfigure the roles and relationships among key actors. Cultural diplomacy is no longer only a matter of state institutions projecting curated narratives abroad; it increasingly involves cities, civil society organisations, media, and international mechanisms such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. Artificial knowledge can amplify this trend by enabling more finely tuned, multilingual, and context-sensitive communication that takes into account local perspectives and grassroots initiatives. At the same time, civil protection authorities, traditionally oriented towards operational effectiveness, find themselves engaged in symbolic practices of representation and meaning-making that are partly mediated by AI systems. The resulting configuration can be understood as a multi-actor ecosystem in which human and artificial knowledge co-produce narratives of risk, solidarity, and resilience (Fig. 4).

Third, the findings highlight the conditional nature of the opportunities identified in Sect. 3. Artificial knowledge can enhance accessibility, visibility, and

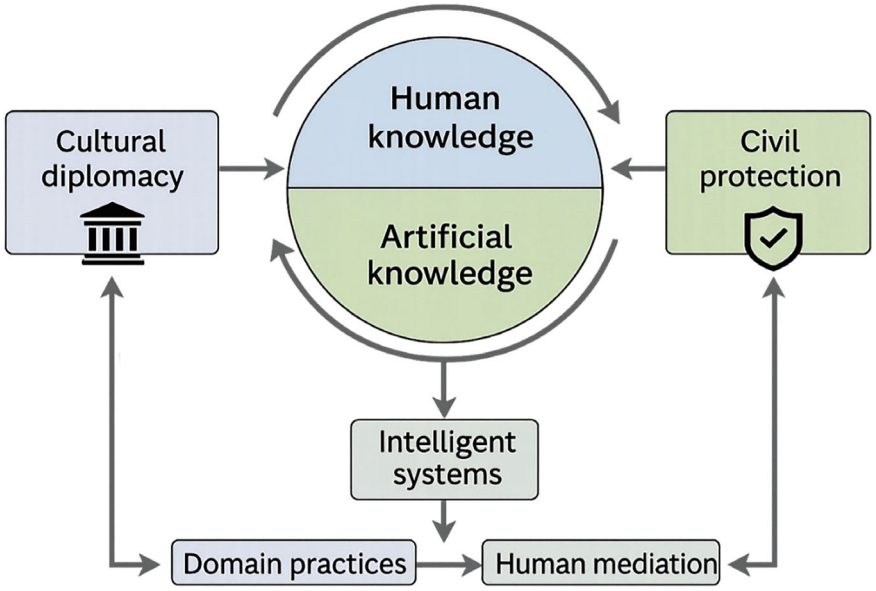

Fig. 4 Interactions between human and artificial knowledge in a multi-actor ecosystem of cultural diplomacy and civil protection. *Source* Author's own concept

reflexivity, but only under conditions of robust ethical governance and meaningful human oversight. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence emphasises principles of human rights, inclusiveness, and cultural diversity, which are directly relevant when AI is used to generate or mediate cultural narratives. Without appropriate safeguards, artificial knowledge risks reproducing or exacerbating existing inequalities in voice and visibility, privileging certain perspectives or languages over others, and enabling strategic image-building that takes advantage of suffering. The integration of artificial knowledge into cultural diplomacy and civil protection thus requires not only technical solutions but also participatory mechanisms through which affected communities and civil society actors can contest, correct, or enrich AI-generated framings (Konovalova, 2023; Kulesz, 2024).

Fourth, the analysis underscores the potential of artificial knowledge to support the inclusion of civil society in cultural diplomacy, in line with NARDIV's objectives. By lowering barriers to information, illuminating grassroots narratives, and providing analytical tools that can be appropriated by non-state actors, artificial knowledge can help transform cultural diplomacy from an elite-driven and institution-centric practice into a more distributed and dialogical process (Kolokytha, 2022; Rachmawati et al., 2024). In the civil protection context, this may translate into greater recognition of volunteer organisations and local initiatives in official communication, as well as into new forms of co-produced educational and commemorative projects. However, this potential inclusion is not

automatic: it depends on deliberate design choices regarding which data sources are incorporated, which languages and platforms are prioritised, and how access to AI-enabled tools is distributed.

Fifth, the findings have implications for future research on artificial knowledge, cultural diplomacy, and civil protection. Conceptually, there is a need to refine the distinction between artificial knowledge and other AI outputs, clarifying the conditions under which AI-generated content can be treated as knowledge within institutional decision processes. Empirically, future studies could analyse specific deployments of AI tools in civil protection communication or cultural projects associated with disaster response, examining how artificial knowledge actually shapes narratives and perceptions in practice. Normatively, scholars and practitioners will need to engage with emerging regulatory frameworks for AI in the European Union and beyond, exploring how these interact with existing legal instruments on civil protection and with soft-law guidelines on cultural policy and digital governance.

Overall, the implications of this exploration point towards a cautious but proactive integration of artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy under the civil protection framework. Artificial knowledge should be approached as a resource that can strengthen, rather than weaken, the dialogical and participatory dimensions of cultural diplomacy, provided that it is embedded within transparent, accountable, and culturally sensitive governance arrangements. For policy-makers and practitioners, this means investing not only in technological infrastructure but also in training, ethical oversight, and cross-sectoral dialogue that includes civil society and academic actors. For the academic community, it suggests the value of interdisciplinary work that brings together knowledge management, AI ethics, cultural diplomacy studies, and disaster research to better understand the evolving ecology of human and artificial knowledge in times of crisis.

5 Conclusion

This paper has approached artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy through the specific lens of the European civil protection framework, arguing that disaster-related cooperation offers a particularly revealing context for examining the opportunities and risks associated with AI-generated knowledge. Rather than treating artificial knowledge as a purely technical phenomenon, the analysis has situated it within a dense web of institutional arrangements, symbolic practices, and multi-actor interactions that shape how risk, solidarity, and resilience are communicated across borders. The result is less a definitive model than a set of trajectories along which research, policy, and practice may evolve.

Looking ahead, one key direction concerns the institutionalisation of artificial knowledge within the Union Civil Protection Mechanism and related European structures. As AI tools become more deeply embedded in early warning, situational awareness, and communication systems, questions will arise about how artificial knowledge is validated, archived, and made accountable as part of the broader

knowledge base of civil protection. Future work could examine how standard operating procedures, training curricula, and cross-border exercises incorporate artificial knowledge, and how these choices influence the narrative dimension of European solidarity during crises (European Union, 2013; European Union, 2021).[3]

A second direction relates to the experimental use of artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy projects that orbit, but are not limited to, emergency events. Artistic collaborations, museum exhibitions, and educational programs that engage with themes of disaster, memory, and international assistance could deliberately integrate AI-generated narratives, visualisations, or interactive elements, while making this artificial mediation transparent to audiences. Such projects would offer a laboratory for observing how publics perceive and negotiate the presence of artificial knowledge in cultural representations, and how civil society actors appropriate or contest it.

A third trajectory concerns the co-evolution of ethical and regulatory frameworks. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and emerging EU legislation on AI provide normative anchors but are still in the process of being interpreted and operationalised in sector-specific contexts (UNESCO, 2021). Cultural diplomacy and civil protection offer testing grounds in which the stakes of representation, inclusion, and justice are high, particularly for vulnerable communities affected by disasters. Interdisciplinary research could follow how ethical guidelines are translated into concrete design requirements for AI tools, how oversight mechanisms are implemented, and how spaces are created for affected communities and civil society to influence these processes (Konovalova, 2023; Kulesz, 2024).

Finally, from a broader perspective on knowledge management, artificial knowledge in cultural diplomacy invites a rethinking of how organisations learn from crises and from each other. If AI-generated analyses and scenarios become routine components of sense-making, then the epistemic culture of civil protection and cultural diplomacy institutions will evolve accordingly (Bratianu et al., 2020; Bratianu & Ioan, 2025). Future studies could explore how practitioners negotiate tensions between speed and reflection, between standardisation and sensitivity to context, and between institutional narratives and the pluralism of civil society voices. In doing so, they would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how human and artificial knowledge can be combined to support not only more effective crisis response, but also more inclusive and participatory forms of cultural diplomacy in an increasingly uncertain world.

[3] European Union. 2013. *Decision No. 1313/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism. Official Journal of the European Union, L 347*, 924–947; European Union. 2021. *Regulation (EU) 2021/836 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 amending Decision No. 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism (Text with EEA relevance). Official Journal of the European Union, L 185*, 1–7.

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Teaching English as a Foreign Culture? The British Council and Pedagogical Television

Darius Wainwright

1 Introduction

In January 2026, the BBC Persian Service announced a temporary expansion of its daily live broadcasts. As well as an extra 30-minute daily shortwave and longwave bulletin—8–8.30 pm. Iran Standard Time—executives also upped the amount of current affairs news content available online, and via its Persian language television channel. Such an increase, remarkable given the ongoing funding issues undermining the BBC overseas programming's continued existence, sought to counteract the Iranian authorities' shutting down of internet access to its wider populace in response to the ongoing popular protests in the country (BBC Media Centre, 2026; *The Guardian,* 2026). These proceedings further highlighted the troubled relationship between the broadcaster and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the television service's 2008 launch, the Iranian authorities have tried to jam its transmissions, directly threaten its staff, and detained relatives of its technicians, producers, and journalists. The continuance of such aggressive tactics compelled the BBC in March 2018 to appeal to the UN's Human Rights Council in Geneva to persuade the Iranians to halt these practices (BBC News, 2018).

The use of televisual media by British government-affiliated organisations to engage with Iranian audiences predates BBC Persian's launch, as well as the Islamic Republic established in the 1979 Revolution's wake. Its roots intersect with the founding of Television Iran (TVI), the country's first terrestrial channel, in the late 1950s. Unlike in its current iteration, however, the British Council, not the BBC, devised and presided over this endeavour. The Foreign Office had established the organisation in 1934 to inform foreign publics about British norms,

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values, and ideas. They proceeded to open the Tehran office in 1942, in the immediate aftermath of an Anglo-Russian invasion of Iran. Presuming that the then ruler, Reza Shah, sympathised with the Axis powers, British and Soviet military forces assumed control of the north and south of the country respectively (Kozhanov, 2012, 479–497). Council officials initially sought to counteract Italo-German propaganda which sought to sow popular resentment towards Britain's presence in the country (Abdul-Razak, 2016, 817–835). After 1945, the organisation largely focused its efforts on English language teaching, via summer schools and pedagogical courses for schoolteachers, or direct lessons in its branches in the cities of Tehran, Esfahan, Mashad, and Shiraz.[1]

The British Council's forays onto Iranian television complemented these activities. Between 1958 and 1962, its officials were involved in the *English by Television* programme that ran twice weekly on TVI. The endeavour, the first of its kind for the organisation globally, provided the agency with a unique opportunity to shape the Iranian media landscape, and directly affect the teaching of English. Yet the programme also revealed the fundamental flaws which undermined Britain's cultural diplomacy in Iran during the rule of the last Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, while also highlighting the boundaries British Council branches in the country needed to work within. Governmental whims and internal bureaucratic politics bookended *English by Television.* The Ministry of Education initially asked the British Council to produce and deliver the program, with executive disinterest a decade later resulting in the programme's cancellation. The endeavour also highlighted the pressing issues which undermined the UK government's attempts to promote British cultures and values—what the political scientist Joseph Nye termed soft power—to Iranian audiences during the Pahlavi era (Nye, 1992, 3–5). As well as lacking the funding and staff to undertake a comprehensive cultural diplomacy program, a failure to interact and engage with a wide cross-section of Iranian society, beyond educated, urban elites, undermined attempts to foster greater Anglo-Iranian mutual understanding.

Few histories have acknowledged the organisation's promotion of Britain's culture overseas and engagement with foreign publics. Whereas several works have denoted the British Council's collaborations with their American counterparts during the Cold War, others, from an art history perspective, reflect on some of its exhibitions (Byrne, 2013; Fisher, 2009; Koç and Önal Özkan Ko & Çigdem Önal, 2021; Taylor, 1999). Many scholars who have examined the agency have also explored its initiatives and endeavours during the Second World War (Birn, 1989; Byrne, 2023; Corse, 2014; Donaldson, 1984). Historians have recently broadened the scope of focus away from these topics, analysing how national and international developments have moulded and shaped its activities in certain countries

[1] Derek Traversi (British Council Representative, Iran) to the British Council's Education Department, 8 April 1958, The National Archives, London, Records of the British Council, Broadcast of TV Programme *English by Television* by Television Iran, BW 49/15 (hereafter document, date, TNA, BC Records, file reference).

(Feather, 2024; Simony, 2023; Wainwright, 2024). In scrutinising the British Council's televisual work—an aspect of the UK's cultural relations typically associated with the BBC—this chapter provides a unique insight into the innovative ways agency officials sought to influence and shape overseas societies (Potter, 2019). It also supplements a growing body of work which discusses the agency's activities in the country (Borjian, 2011; Wainwright, 2022). Indeed, in focusing on Iran, the analysis underlines the necessity of further examinations of twentieth-century Anglo-Iranian cultural interactions. As a dedicated Persian language broadcast station and the provision of more resources to its Iran operation than to most other nations demonstrates, Foreign Office figures prioritised engaging with Iranian peoples (Borjian, 2013; Niles Maack, 2001). Despite this emphasis, most histories of western cultural interactions focus on the activities of the United States government, and affiliated organisations, in developing ties with the country's government and people (Collier, 2013; Nemchenok, 2010; Offiler, 2015; Summit, 2004).

The analysis here therefore illustrates the British Council's historic contributions to driving and shaping post-1945 UK cultural diplomacy, a case study from which to draw wider judgements about the nature and determinants of its endeavours. It also provides a unique insight into Anglo-Iranian relations, underlining how the promotion of culture acted as a key tenet in shaping bilateral ties during the Pahlavi era.

2 Anglo-Iranian Governmental Strongarming and Geopolitical Considerations

The British Council in Iran did not regard *English by Television*, or pedagogical television more broadly, as a constituent part of their modus operandi. Officials in its Tehran office devised the initiative because the Iranian Ministry of Education asked the agency to produce an instructional televisual language programme. Such a request arguably provides an indicator of the government's favourable view of the organisation's activities during a tumultuous period. In 1952, the UK Foreign Office had ordered the British Council to leave Iran, due to the ongoing Anglo-Iranian Oil Crisis. After committed nationalist Mohammad Mossagdeh's appointment as Prime Minister a year earlier, the government had nationalised the oil industry, which had hitherto been under British control (Marsh, 2007, 25–30). A failure to resolve the dispute, combined with apparent threats to Council property and staff, persuaded the Foreign Office to cease agency operations in the country until 1955.[2] From its reopening, the agency focused its efforts on organising summer schools for English language schoolteachers across Tehran. Officials reached out initially to the Ministry of Education to both help publicise this endeavour and receive access to school facilities. The endeavour epitomised

[2] Minutes of Beirut Conference of Middle Eastern Representatives, 20–21 March 1955, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/14.

what Council officials later termed "the trickle-down approach." With limited staff and finance—combined with fears that the United States Information Service, a better-funded American counterpart, would "crowd them out"—staff prioritised interactions with government officials, intellectuals, and business figures on the premise that these elites would apply any knowledge or ideas the British Council imparted onto others. In so doing, the British Council would indirectly shape Iranian society in the long run.[3]

The agency's work to develop and improve English language teaching pleased the Ministry of Education. The government institution, cognisant of a demographic surge in young people, Iran's economic modernisation, and growing popular interest in the Anglophone world, recognised that English language comprehension was crucial to the country's future development. Its officials had subsequently identified the emerging televisual medium to consolidate and develop these pedagogical efforts. When the Shah announced TVI's launch in June 1958, Education Ministry executives asked the broadcaster to dedicate two 30-minute slots per week to English language teaching. They proceeded to inform TVI that, as demonstrated through their work with Tehran's schoolteachers, the British Council had the means, resources, and willingness to produce such a programme.[4]

Such a request chimed with the UK Foreign Office's vision for developing Anglo-Iranian cultural relations. In communiques to the British Council in Iran, officials working in its Cultural Relations Department framed pedagogical television as a chance to engage with a wider cross-section of society, "an opportunity to demonstrate that the UK does not just work with elites only." In presenting, and promoting, "British life" more widely, the British Council could help foster political and economic reforms which can reverse gaping financial inequalities and authoritarian rule.[5] The Whitehall office, seemingly, regarded societal issues in Iran as an existential threat to the ruling regime, and therefore their reliance on the country as an oil supplier.[6] The UK's Embassy in Tehran, likewise, perceived the scheme as another avenue to help achieve the aim of engaging Iranian "opinion makers." Television, the staff argued, was "a rapidly expanding medium," with the potential to reach "all parts of the country in the next decade." The British Council, therefore, could "spearhead" the UK's attempts to shape Iranian cultural life more holistically.[7]

[3] British Council Representative in Iran's Annual Report, 1958–1959, 8 May 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/17.

[4] Derek Traversi (British Council Representative, Iran) to the British Council's Education Department, 8 April 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[5] Foreign Office Cultural Relations Department to the British Council in Iran, 29 October 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/25.

[6] Richard Highwood (British Council, Director of Middle East), to Derek Traversi (British Council Representative, Iran), 6 January 1955, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/24; British Council Representative in Iran's Annual Report, 1955–1956, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/17.

[7] British Information Services Tehran Annual Report 1966–1967, undated, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/31.

Despite the meagre resources at their disposal, Embassy and Foreign Office figures pledged to assist the British Council.[8] The former approached officials they deemed best suited to write, produce, and present a television programme on the British Council's behalf. Due to his previous experience working on a similar show in West Germany, the Embassy selected a visiting UK English Literature lecturer at the University of Tehran, Allan Grant, to produce the programme. Likewise, they appointed Professor John Mills, an English language lecturer on a year's secondment at the University of Shiraz, to present and devise scripts.[9] While the Embassy focused on securing staff, the Foreign Office's Cultural Relations Department sought to make this programme "as attractive as possible" despite its comparatively low allocated budget of £5000 per annum. Its officials argued that episodes should emphasise and extol the virtues of life in the UK, especially in London, as this is what most Iranians would be most familiar with. In this vein, the titles and credits should therefore showcase Britain's capital city.[10] Both of these displayed stills of Westminster Bridge, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, a stereotypical London police officer, and a London bus driving across Piccadilly Circus.[11]

Governmental pressure from both sides accordingly forced the British Council's Tehran branch to focus their efforts on devising an English language television programme. Although they maintained such a show possessed little-to-no pedagogical value, officials presented the endeavour as an opportunity to showcase Britain, and so-called "British values," to Iranian audiences.[12] Senior British Council figures in London shared their vision. As it was the organisation's first attempt overseas to use television to teach the English language, the endeavour was "a unique opportunity." Not only did this initiative have the potential to build ties between the British Council and Iranian television broadcasters, but it could also be used as an experiment. If Iranian audiences enthusiastically respond to the show, the British Council could amend the production, scripts, and premise for branches in other countries to use.[13]

Agency officials in London and Tehran, moreover, viewed pedagogical television as an opportunity to exploit a gap the Americans had left in their much more

[8] David Speares (British Embassy, Tehran) to Simon Stevens (*English by Radio* producer, BBC), 31 May 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[9] Richard Highwood (British Council, Director of Middle East) to the British Council Personnel Department, 23 July 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[10] Press Section, Foreign Office to British Embassy (Tehran), 10 June 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[11] Titling film for *English by Television* presented by Television Iran by arrangement with the British Council in Iran, 14 July 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[12] Annabelle Knatchbull-Hugessen (British Council, Iran) to Derek Morgan (British Council, linguistic adviser to the Education Division), 24 November 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15; Robert Close (British Council, London) to British Council Education Division, 27 November 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[13] Richard Highwood (British Council, Director of Middle East) to the British Council Personnel Department, 23 July 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

holistic, comprehensive cultural diplomacy initiatives. In the aftermath of the CIA-backed August 1953 coup, which resulted in Mossadegh's removal from office, the United States Information Agency's more comprehensive initiatives enabled the organisation to shape Iran's education system, youth activities, and radio stations. Equally, the Iran-America Society, a United States Embassy-run bilateral organisation with a similar remit to the British Council, possessed a far superior building, had the resources to teach more students than the UK agency, and could attract musicians and lecturers. The organisation, as such, not only reached students and teachers, but educators, government officials, and middle-class professionals.[14] The United States' recently obtained role as the dominant western power in Iran displeased the British Council, who feared the United States' ever-growing presence in Iran would "drown them out."[15] The State Department-backed United States Information Agency had hitherto not used television as a pedagogical, soft power tool in Iran. Through teaching English by television, British Council officials claimed they could promote UK accents and spellings, helping to ensure that these, at least, dominated over American equivalents among the wider Iranian populace.[16] Considering the agency dedicated more funding and staff to its Iran operations to all other nations aside from Hong Kong and Canada, it was imperative that its endeavours could demonstrate tangible results.[17]

3 English by Television

With these considerations in mind, British Council officials in both London and Tehran proceeded to develop the programme. Starting on 4 October 1958, one day after the channel began transmitting to the public, TVI broadcast *English by Television* on Saturday and Tuesday evenings from 6–6.30 pm.[18] The first series ran for 9 months, until June 1959. After a three-month hiatus, where TVI broadcast reruns of the most popular episodes, the second series aired between September 1959 and June 1960. *English by Television* staff used the break as an opportunity to plan, write, and produce more episodes.[19] The first half of each programme targeted beginners, with elementary teaching sessions. These usually covered grammatical rules, structure, and intricacies of the English language, notably tenses, vowels,

[14] Roger Stevens (British Ambassador, Iran) to the Foreign Office, 13 December 1956, TNA, Foreign Office Records, FO 371/120724.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Derek Traversi (British Council Representative, Iran) to the British Council's Education Department (London), 8 April 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15; Record of British Council memo to all British Council offices, 20 March 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[17] Director Middle East to Controller Overseas B Division, 18 November 1964, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/19.
[18] John Mills (British Council, *English by Television*) to British Council Education Department (London), 30 September 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[19] John Mills (British Council, *English by Television*) to Richard Highwood (British Council, Director for the Middle East), 5 October 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

consonants, and the difficult *th* sound, with diagrams and visual cues used to assist viewers.[20] The second segment's content, likewise, catered for more conversational and fluent speakers. The latter initially comprised of short 12–15-minute films that showcased life in the UK, introducing new vocabulary to viewers in the process. To showcase British norms, cultures, values, and way of life, these sections initially centred around a theme. Segments, for example, focused on the works and lives of both William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, in conjunction with documenting British regions. As well as focusing on Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland—the countries which make up the UK—episodes provided instructional information on, among other places, East Anglia and the West Country.[21]

An analysis of *Ulster*, a short 10-minute documentary on Northern Ireland produced in 1941 but used in a February 1959 *English by Television* episode, underlines many of the issues which blighted this initiative, and the British Council's operations in Iran more broadly. To use a politicised, unionist term Northern Irish protests appropriated to exclude nationalist, Irish groups presented a monocultural vision of the region far removed from the reality and the ongoing civil disobedience which would escalate during the 1960s (Corthorn, 2023, 1760). It was unclear, moreover, what message the Council sought to convey in showcasing regional industrialisation and its contribution to British armed services during the Second World War to Iranian audiences, whose experiences and culture was far removed from what was depicted on screen (British Council, 1941). Officials' difficulties, seemingly, in engaging with a wide cross-section of the country's people undeniably impacted their decision-making. Most, if not all, staff possessed a limited proficiency in the Persian language. Outside of political elites and business figures who possessed a comprehension of English or another European language, the Council did not engage with a representative cross-section of Iranian society.[22] Yet wider budget constraints—which mired all the British Council's activities in the country—also contributed.[23] Indeed, from the outset, budgetary problems constrained the programme's production. Prior to the first episode's transmission, staff salaries and advertising costs had forced the agency to take money away from the British Council's Turkey offices.[24] They also refused to request financial assistance from the Iranian government, as British Council officials suspected that this

[20] Derek Traversi (British Council Representative, Iran) to Richard Highwood (British Council, Director for the Middle East), 7 December 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[21] John Mills (British Council, *English by Television*) to Robert Curling (British Council, Films Department), 10 December 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[22] Michael Bootle (Arts Division, British Council) to John Hanson (British Council Representative, Iran), 2 February 1977, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/36.
[23] John Hanson (British Council Representative, Iran) to the British Council Arts Division, 4 February 1977, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/36.
[24] British Council Middle East Department (London) to British Council in Iran, 11 June 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15; Richard Highwood (British Council, Director of Middle East) to the British Council Personnel Department (London), 23 July 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

would antagonise the Ministry of Education.[25] The BBC's unwillingness to assist the agency with this television programme compounded the funding issues. As the broadcaster characterised the Council's foray into educational television as an "invasion of their territory," it refused to provide *English by Television* with technical advice and assistance.[26]

The British Council in Iran accordingly relied on their own staff and contacts, most of whom possessed next-to-no experience of working in television. *English by Television*, crucially, suffered from a shortage of scriptwriters and backstage personnel, with Council officials forced to take on these roles. The agency could also not justify a budget to hire extras, resulting in the same figures fronting weekly episodes. The part one elementary segments, of course, relied on direct teaching to viewers, meaning that both Grant and Mills, academics by training, fronted and presented these sections.[27] The initial reliance on British Council documentary videos for the second part of episodes posed no issues for the agency in this regard. As time progressed, however, and with *English by Television* renewed after its second run for a further three years, forced the agency to employ several actors to play roles in segments targeted at viewers with intermediate or advanced English language comprehension.

4 Gauging Reception; Garnering Feedback

Governmental restrictions on the monitoring and surveying of Iranians by foreign states meant it was impossible for the British Council to gauge popular views and impressions of *English by Television.* In this vein, TVI refused to disclose any of their viewer research to the agency, with the British Council forced to rely on uncorroborated claims that around 500,000 viewers regularly watched.[28] Remarks from later annual reports into the agency's Iran operations surmised that the broadcaster more than likely over-estimated the show's popularity. Council officials speculated that, considering the late-afternoon broadcast timeslots, and with TVI's availability only in Tehran and its vicinity by the mid-1960s, perhaps only 50,000–100,000 Iranians watched an *English by Television* episode at any given time.[29] That the programme could only reach a small cross-section of Tehranis underlined an issue which blighted most British Council endeavours in the country.

[25] Derek Traversi (British Council Representative, Iran) to the British Council's Education Department, 25 May 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[26] Richard Highwood (British Council, Director of Middle East) to Charles Wilmott (British Council, Iran), 31 August 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[27] Simon Stevens (*English by Radio* producer, BBC) to David Speares (British Embassy, Tehran), 5 June 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15; George Biddulph (Director of Studies for British Council in Iran) to the British Council Middle East Department (London), 30 October 1958, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[28] Report on *English by Television*, 17 March 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[29] British Council Representative in Iran's Annual Report, 1964–1965, March 1965, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/19.

As the agency only had funding to run offices in major Iranian cities—as well as Tehran, the organisation maintained a presence in Esfahan, Shiraz, and Mashhad—officials could only engage with people residing in major urban areas. Their focus on English language teaching further narrowed officials' scope of engagement to middle and upper-class educated elites.[30]

Regardless, given the broadcaster relied on advertising revenue, it was unlikely they would continue to broadcast unprofitable, unpopular programmes. From discussions with TVI officials, the agency presumed many viewers, particularly schoolteachers and high school students, viewed *English by Television* in groups.[31] In the absence of accurate viewer perspectives, British Council officials relied on their own intuition when evaluating the programme. Inspectors from the London office claimed in November 1959 that *English by Television* bolstered the prestige of Britain in Iran. The programme was "a valuable medium from which to exploit English superseding French as the country's second language." They deemed the show's first half as well-devised and presented; the formal lessons in grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary here could be used as a model if a similar initiative were implemented in another country. The second part of the programme, however, which aimed to promote British culture, history, or geography, required considerable improvement. Such showcases "varied in quality and needed fuller direction and supervision." They suffered from poor camera work and no rehearsals, as the final product usually demonstrated. The inspectors cited *English by Television*'s "shoestring budget" as the primary driver underlying these issues. Giving the programme more money would improve the second half of the show for two reasons. First, it would enable the agency to recruit extra staff. Second, more money would enable extra investment in a greater number of scriptwriters and appropriate apparatus such as tele-coders and autocues. These additions would make *English by Television* programmes appear much more professional, reducing the number of errors on screen. They would, moreover, make the delivery of content on screen much more professionalised. As officials fronting *English by Television* episodes were not trained actors—with presenting responsibilities a comparably small aspect of their wider teaching and research work—they read their lines directly from scripts.[32]

Charles Wilmot, heading the British Council's operations in Iran during the early 1960s, sought to meet the inspectors' recommendations. To professionalise *English by Television*'s production and resolve its budgetary issues, he requested for more films, photos, and auto prompts from London, as well as extra staff.[33]

[30] John Hanson (British Council Representative, Iran) to Derek Sharp (Overseas Controller, British Council), 25 October 1978, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/27.
[31] Report on *English by Television*, 17 March 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.
[32] Report on a visit to Tehran to study the British Council's *English by Television* programme, 28 November 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15; Iran: Representative's Handing-Over Notes 1963, undated, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/34.
[33] Charles Wilmot (Controller, British Council Iran) to the British Council (London), 29 July 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

Formerly the British Council representative for Australia, he praised *English by Television* in a memo to the institution's Education Division in London. Despite its low budget, first-year teething problems and inexperienced staff, the programme should be viewed as a success. The enterprise would only get stronger provided it could be more professionalised. The current reliance on volunteers and a small, under-paid team would not work long term. The British Council needed to formally appoint someone to oversee *English by Television*'s activities. The role would require someone to write, direct, and act, as well as liaise, with the head office in London.[34]

The British Council in London, however, dismissed Wilmot's requests. Senior figures argued that they could not justify spending the money required for Wilmot's proposals. They were also convinced that such initiatives should be in the BBC's remit, as they produced similar programmes for East Asian and South American audiences. As the broadcaster had already informed the British Council, they were much more adept and efficient at producing these shows. The agency in Iran should instead focus on its strength, English language teaching.[35] The tensions between Wilmot and his superiors in London surrounding this issue came to a head in 1963 when TVI decided to exercise greater editorial influence over *English by Television.* As the broadcaster developed, its producers became eager to have a greater influence over programme content, and asked the Council to confine itself to scriptwriting and the management of actors.[36]

5 Conclusion

Under greater TVI scrutiny, *English by Television* continued until 1968. The British Council, thanks to its more limited involvement, was able to focus more on the show's content. In the programme's final five years on air, officials successfully expanded the scope and content of the part-two segments, moving beyond stock Council films. They successfully produced and wrote scripts for a series of excerpts. These included a regular multi-lingual news discussion—"Walter and Connie Reporting"—as well as a series titled "The Wilsons." The latter, catering for advanced speakers, focused on the adventures of a British family residing in Tehran, with a Persian-speaking narrator informing viewers of the wider context.[37] TVI's takeover, however, during the late 1960s by its arch-competitor NITV

[34] Charles Wilmot (Controller, British Council Iran) to the British Council's Education Division (London), 13 July 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15; Charles Wilmot (Controller, British Council Iran) to the British Council (London), 29 July 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[35] Victor Bloomfield (Middle East Department Controller, British Council) to Charles Wilmot (Controller, British Council Iran), 7 September 1959, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/15.

[36] British Council Representative in Iran's Annual Report, 1960–1961, 8 May 1961, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/17.

[37] British Council Representative in Iran's Annual Report, 1964–1965, March 1965, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/19.

heralded *English by Television*'s cancellation. Opposed to the concept of pedagogical television, the broadcaster's executives removed the programme from TVI's schedules.[38]

Despite the British Council's short-lived dalliance with *English by Television*, the analysis reveals the agency's passivity towards the Iranian people. Officials refrained from cultural chauvinism, imposing norms and ideas based on supposed Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority. Yet they displayed a general disinterest towards using a primetime television programme to build a tangible connection with the wider populace. Rather than educate Iranians about life in the UK *English by Television* confined itself to peddling well-worn tropes about British society. Even the programme's underpinning rationales overlooked the fostering of Anglo-Iranian mutual understanding, notable in the MI6-sanctioned August 1953 coup's aftermath. British Council officials viewed *English by Television* as an opportunity to carve out a unique space in an area the United States Information Agency had not involved themselves, as well as to resolve the minor issue of rising Iranian demand for UK private schooling. Perhaps the framing of Anglo-Iranian relations in purely transactional terms marks a continuation of Britain's approach, despite its diminished post-1953 status in the country. The only change, seemingly, comes with the financial constraints which limited *English by Television*'s reach, and the institutional reluctance to invest in the show.

Still, when taking this analysis into its wider context, it will be interesting to see if these are Iran-specific issues and/or lessons learned for future endeavours. *English by Television*, notably, inspired the BBC's *Slim John* English language teaching serial broadcast to Eastern Europe in the 1960s.[39] Further research would therefore provide the means to chart the development of this hitherto overlooked aspect of Cold War-era cultural diplomacy, and reveal whether the British Council, or the BBC, amended and reshaped educational television in other cultural, geographic, and temporal contexts. Examining, moreover, the development from, and links between, *English by Television* and the BBC's current Persian-language televisual output would highlight both its significance and importance as a medium for Anglo-Iranian cultural interactions. More broadly, the chapter demonstrates how an examination of these efforts is essential to understanding the use of audio-visual tools to foster cultural relations, providing policymakers, and European cultural institutions, with lessons on how to best use these instruments as education tools in the social media age. The British Council's recently published report on education and soft power illustrates that the agency is already reflecting on these issues (The British Council, 2026).

[38] British Council Representative in Iran's Annual Report, 1971–1972, undated, TNA, BC Records, BW 49/31.
[39] Ibid.

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National and Regional Practices: Comparative Perspectives on Cultural Diplomacy

France-Romania Cultural Season 2018–2019

Mădălina-Liana Iacob and Marius-Mircea Mitrache

1 Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The cultural diplomacy of the twenty-first century has become increasingly visible in a wide range of diplomatic and cultural practices across the globe. This study examines the France–Romania Cultural Season 2018–2019, an initiative implemented in both Romania and France, whose structure and outcomes illustrate how culture operates as a strategic resource in international relations.

For this analysis, cultural diplomacy is understood as the strategic use of culture—values, practices, traditions, artistic expressions—by public institutions to build or strengthen international relations, shape perceptions, and attract (Nye, 2009) attention through cultural appeal.

Cultural legitimacy and attractiveness can be as influential as military or economic power by shaping perceptions, trust, and long-term political alignment through what Joseph Nye conceptualizes as soft power—the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. Historically, France exemplified this form of influence: its language, Enlightenment philosophy, artistic prestige, and legal models conferred symbolic authority across Europe, encouraging voluntary adoption of French institutional frameworks such as the Napoleonic legal tradition (Lyon, 1994).

The Franco-Romanian relationship illustrates these dynamics vividly. During the nineteenth century, Romanian elites, educated in Paris and immersed in French

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intellectual culture, embraced French administrative, legal, and educational models, aligning the emerging Romanian state with Western European norms not through coercion but through cultural prestige and perceived modernity (Hitchins, 2014). French diplomatic support for the 1859 union of the Romanian principalities under Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza and the broader European principle of national self-determination enhanced France's legitimacy and symbolic authority. This cultural affinity later translated into strategic trust, reinforced during the First World War by the French military mission led by Henri Mathias Berthelot, which rested on decades of cultural alignment rather than purely strategic calculation (Torrey, 2001).

In the contemporary era, Romania's engagement in the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) and bilateral initiatives such as the France–Romania Cultural Season (2018–2019) continue to mobilize shared linguistic and cultural capital to enhance visibility, mutual trust, and European solidarity. Together, theoretical scholarship and the Franco-Romanian case demonstrate that cultural attractiveness and legitimacy foster voluntary alignment, diffuse norms, and build durable partnerships, confirming that symbolic and cultural power can be as consequential as material force in international relations.

Cultural diplomacy includes bilateral cultural seasons, academic exchanges, artistic exhibitions, and international festivals. Institutions such as the Romanian Cultural Institute, the British Council, or UNESCO act as platforms for intercultural dialogue and cultural projection. Nevertheless, as Simon Mark observes (2010), cultural diplomacy raises conceptual challenges. The literature highlights the fluidity of its conceptual boundaries and the difficulty of establishing strict operational definitions that distinguish it from public diplomacy, cultural policy, or international cultural relations. This ambiguity reveals a fundamental tension: cultural diplomacy oscillates between attraction and cooperation on one side, and the representation of national interests on the other. As the case study demonstrates, bilateral cultural programs become strategic arenas in which culture acts simultaneously as a resource, a message, and a tool of influence. J.M. Mitchell highlights this dynamic, arguing that the "purpose is to foster mutual understanding between national societies" (1986, 5). According to the definition formulated by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD), cultural diplomacy can be conceptualized as a set of actions grounded in the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other dimensions of cultural identity, designed to strengthen relations between societies, stimulate socio-cultural cooperation, and contribute to the advancement of national interests (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2025). Owing to its cross-sectoral nature, cultural diplomacy may be carried out by public institutions, private actors, and civil society alike, reflecting the diverse ways in which it manifests within the international arena. It thus functions as a permanent mechanism of intercultural dialogue through which diversity is reinterpreted and communicated in contact with other cultures.

A central dimension closely tied to cultural diplomacy is cultural heritage. Heritage—material, intangible, or digital—functions as a privileged instrument

through which states express uniqueness and project identity internationally. Heritage should not be viewed as a static object but as a social and political construct shaped by institutional and discursive processes. Laurajane Smith emphasizes this by defining heritage as a cultural and social process concerned with regulating, legitimizing, and negotiating cultural identity, articulated by actors participating in an *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (Smith, 2006). In this sense, the France–Romania Cultural Season can be interpreted as a performative space in which shared identity is renegotiated and historical ties are reaffirmed.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett advances this perspective by conceptualizing heritage as a "metacultural production" (1995, 369), shaped through selection, organization, and reinterpretation. Exhibitions, festivals, and bilateral cultural projects thus become "heritage performances", making cultural narratives accessible and meaningful to international audiences. In the field of international relations, Joseph Nye's framework of soft power—"the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2009, 5)—clarifies why cultural resources are central to shaping preferences and enhancing mutual attractiveness (Nye, 2009). Jan Melissen similarly argues that contemporary cultural diplomacy functions less as a one-way projection of national identity and more as a mechanism for cultivating long-term relationships through sustained intercultural dialogue (Melissen, 2005). Milton Cummings (2003, 1) reinforces this view, describing cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, arts, and values that contribute to deeper mutual understanding. At a global level, Arjun Appadurai's concept of cultural "scapes" (Appadurai, 1996, 33) draws attention to transnational flows of ideas, images, and practices that generate hybrid identities—dynamics clearly visible in the Franco-Romanian context through the interplay of artistic innovation, heritage reinterpretation, and academic collaboration.

2 Study Case

Applying this theoretical framework, the France-Romania Cultural Season (2018–2019) emerges as a strategically designed form of cultural diplomacy rather than a simple sequence of artistic events. Structured in a mirrored format—France (November 2018–April 2019) followed by Romania (April–July 2019)—the season included major exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, the Louvre, and MuCEM, as well as presentations of Romanian art and heritage in Bucharest, Sibiu, and Iași. It also incorporated music festivals, film screenings, university exchanges, and economic initiatives. Public reception was particularly strong: media reports and institutional assessments indicate that exhibitions attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors, while concerts and festivals enjoyed significant visibility in both countries. French cultural media such as *Le Monde* and *Libération* highlighted the rediscovery of Romanian heritage, from Victor Brauner's avant-garde legacy to traditional craftsmanship, while Romanian coverage emphasized the visibility of French institutions and the opportunities for economic and educational cooperation. The impact of the season extended beyond participation rates. It reinforced

a sense of shared belonging to the European cultural space and demonstrated that cultural diplomacy produces tangible effects such as increased recognition, visibility, and trust. The Franco-Romanian season illustrates how heritage and culture—conceptualized as social processes and soft-power instruments—interact to shape public perceptions and contribute to international partnerships. The initiative functioned simultaneously as a platform for expressing identity, a channel for the transnational circulation of symbols, and a strategic instrument for consolidating bilateral relations. The impact of the Season extended beyond participation rates. In this article, impact is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing symbolic, perceptual, institutional, and relational effects. Quantitatively, it can be observed through participation figures, the scale of events, institutional partnerships, and media visibility. Qualitatively, impact is reflected in shifts in public discourse, representations of Romania in the French and European cultural space, and the durability of transnational collaborations initiated during the Season. The Franco-Romanian Season thus illustrates how heritage and culture, conceptualized as social processes and instruments of soft power, contribute to shaping public perceptions and consolidating bilateral relations over time.

A comparative analysis of the events reveals notable diversity. Both countries structured their programs around similar themes, with strong emphasis on art exhibitions, followed by music and theatre. France hosted a larger number of major festivals, such as the Angers Festival and Travelling Rennes. According to the Romanian Ministry of Culture (RMC), more than 300 events were organized across four thematic pillars: (1) two countries with plural cultures and shared Latinity; (2) a century of exchanges, encounters, and cooperation; (3) recurrent mirrored transformations throughout a century (1918–2018); and (4) cities of tomorrow and new territories, highlighting the role of culture, science, creativity, and civil society (Table 1).

The selection of exhibitions, as shown in the comparative table, reflected negotiations of identity and heritage. Romania focused on figures such as Victor Brauner and on ethnographic heritage (e.g., the Astra Museum), while France emphasized internationally renowned institutions such as the Pompidou and the Louvre. These curatorial choices embody what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms heritage performances, through which culture is recontextualized and transformed into a diplomatic resource. At the same time, the complementarity of the programs demonstrates the mechanisms of soft power. As Nye (2009) argues, cultural attractiveness becomes a strategic resource; through major festivals—such as Electric Castle, the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, as well as Paris Musique and the Travelling Rennes Festival –both states sought to attract and shape public preferences. Within the logic of modern public diplomacy (Michalski, 2005), these events were not merely instruments of unilateral projection, but platforms for intercultural dialogue, reinforced by economic forums, university exchanges, and sports activities. These dimensions broadened the reach and impact of the season, confirming Cummings's view that cultural diplomacy involves complex exchanges that extend beyond the artistic sphere to include educational and economic components.

Table 1 Comparative overview of the events of the French–Romanian Season in Romania and France

Romania (18 April–14 July 2019)	France (28 November 2018–5 April 2019)
Exhibitions: Victor Brauner (MNAR), colecția Renault (MNAC), Asterix, Eli Lotar, Muzeul Astra (Sibiu), Palatul Culturii (Iași)	Exhibitions: Pompidou (6 expoziții), louvre (broderii bizantine), MuCEM (Marsilia), Avignon, Grenoble, Paris art Design
Spotlight (București), Electric Castle (Cluj), Rokolectiv (București), Festivalul Internațional de Teatru Sibiu	Orchestra Română de Tineret (concert Paris), weekend România la Pompidou, concert la Villette
Festival Filmului Francez (10 orașe), TIFF (Cluj), cinema francez la București	Cinemateca Toulouse, festival Angers, festival travelling Rennes, festival Créteil (film de femei), Paris Musique
Camera de Comerț FR-RO, evenimente dedicate jocurilor video	Forum economic Paris (Bercy), Salonul Turismului Paris, accelerator de start-up-Uri Toulouse
Ziua Franței/României în școli, promovarea studiilor în Franța	Schimburi universitare, întâlniri ale Colegiului juridic FR-RO
Rugby, handbal, scrimă	Sports events

The impact on the public was evident both in the high participation rates at exhibitions and festivals and in the significant media visibility generated in the press of both states. This dynamic illustrates the cultural "scapes" described by Appadurai: transnational flows of ideas, images, and practices through which a hybrid Franco-Romanian cultural identity emerged. In this regard, the comparative table reflects the ways in which heritage and culture functioned simultaneously as soft-power resources and as instruments of identity negotiation, confirming the hypothesis that cultural diplomacy not only promotes relations between states but also transforms them. In this regard, the comparative table highlights the ways in which heritage and culture operated simultaneously as soft power resources and as instruments of identity negotiation. The transformations referred to here are primarily discursive, relational, and institutional: shifts in public narratives, the consolidation of long-term cultural partnerships, and the reconfiguration of mutual perceptions within the European cultural space. Rather than cosmetic effects limited to symbolic visibility, these transformations produced durable patterns of cooperation and trust, supporting the hypothesis that cultural diplomacy not only promotes but also reshapes inter-state relations over time.

The Cultural Season France-Romania 2018–2019 constituted a major bilateral cultural initiative, unfolding across more than 300 events in France and Romania and involving a wide array of institutional actors, cultural producers, and political authorities. Conceived to coincide with the centenary of the Great Union of 1918 and Romania's first Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Season was framed as both a commemorative and forward-looking project. Official discourse presented it as a reaffirmation of a long-standing Franco-Romanian cultural partnership, while media narratives and critical commentary revealed more complex negotiations over representation, recognition, and symbolic power.

This contribution offers a qualitative and discourse-based analysis of the Cultural Season, focusing on how it was framed, legitimized, and contested through official primary sources and secondary media discourse. Rather than assessing artistic outputs per se, the analysis examines the *discursive architecture* of the Season: how culture was mobilized as a diplomatic instrument, how national identity was articulated, and how European belonging was performed and negotiated.

The study employs qualitative content analysis combined with critical discourse analysis. This approach allows for an examination of both thematic patterns and the underlying power relations embedded in language, framing, and representation. The analysis is informed by cultural diplomacy scholarship, particularly work on soft power, symbolic capital, and European cultural governance (Cummings, 2003, 1).

The corpus of analysed materials consists of primary sources: official programs, institutional websites, opening speeches, curatorial statements, and policy documents issued by the French Institute, the Romanian Ministry of Culture, and the Season's organizing committees and secondary sources: French and Romanian press coverage, cultural reviews, opinion pieces, and analytical essays published between 2017 and 2019.

The central finding of the analysis is the strong political and institutional framing of the Cultural Season. Official documents consistently presented the initiative as a state-level partnership, emphasizing continuity, friendship, and shared values. The language of bilateral cooperation dominated opening speeches and institutional communications, situating the Season within a diplomatic rather than purely cultural register (Institut Français, 2009).

The centenary of 1918 was mobilized as a key symbolic anchor. Romanian official discourse framed the Season as a celebration of national unity and historical continuity, while French institutional actors emphasized shared moments of intellectual and cultural exchange dating back to the nineteenth century. This asymmetry reflects differing stakes: for Romania, the centenary functioned as a moment of national reaffirmation; for France, it served as a gesture of recognition and solidarity.

The Cultural Season functioned as a deliberate nation-rebranding exercise through which Romania sought to reshape its international image and assert a renewed cultural identity within the European space. Framed as a bilateral cultural diplomacy initiative coordinated by the Institut Français and Romanian cultural institutions, the Season encompassed hundreds of exhibitions, performances, and cross-border artistic collaborations that foregrounded contemporary creativity and innovation rather than folkloric stereotypes. Usually, such initiatives operate by enhancing symbolic capital and legitimacy rather than through coercive means, thereby fostering attraction, trust, and voluntary alignment with broader geopolitical partners (Anholt, 2007, 25–29).

In the Romanian case, the Season was explicitly timed to coincide with Romania's Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the centenary of the Great Union (1918), magnifying its symbolic resonance and enabling Romanian

cultural production to be represented to French and European audiences in ways that emphasize shared values, historical affinities, and creative dynamism.

3 Aesthetic Discourse and Visual Identity of the Cultural Season

In both countries, official discourse consistently emphasized bilateral partnership, historical continuity, and shared values. Cultural programming was rarely presented as autonomous; rather, it was embedded within narratives of diplomatic cooperation and European integration.

In Romanian institutional discourse, the Season was frequently framed as a moment of symbolic affirmation and international recognition. References to the centenary of 1918 and to Romania's EU Council Presidency positioned the initiative as a marker of historical maturity and European legitimacy. French institutional discourse, by contrast, emphasized continuity and partnership, often portraying France as a cultural mediator facilitating Romanian visibility.

This asymmetry reflects broader patterns identified in the literature on cultural diplomacy, where symbolic recognition often flows unevenly between centre and periphery (Ang et al., 2015).

Notably, institutional discourse often blurred the boundaries between culture and policy. References to European integration, democratic values, and international cooperation positioned the Season as a contribution to broader geopolitical narratives, particularly in the context of Romania's EU Council Presidency (MAE), with culture thus operated as a legitimizing resource within political discourse.

In this sense, the Cultural Season exemplifies what Joseph Nye conceptualizes as soft power: the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2009). Romanian official sources frequently articulated the initiative as an opportunity to enhance international visibility and correct negative or reductive perceptions. Terms such as modernity, creativity, and innovation recur across institutional texts, indicating a strategic effort to reposition Romania within European cultural hierarchies.

The official and media discourse focused on several major themes: the intention to overcome clichés and stereotypes, the Franco-Romanian cultural dialogue as a symbol of a historical friendship, the importance of cultural cooperation as a tool of public diplomacy, and the renewal of Romania's image in France and, respectively, of France's image in Romania.

Romanian discourse repeatedly framed the Season as an opportunity to counter negative stereotypes and to project an image of creativity, modernity, and cultural sophistication. Contemporary art, experimental performance, and new media featured prominently, signalling a deliberate departure from folkloric representations. One of the most striking discursive motives is that of "forgetting clichés", presented by the Romanian Commissioner of the Season, Andrei Țărnea, as a strategy of communication and representation: "The Franco-Romanian Season, under the

slogan 'Forget the clichés' […] in the Year of the Centenary, aims to demonstrate that Francophonie is a space of ideas, debates, and creativity" (Cîrnu, 2018).

The initial poster for the Season featuring iconic characters like Edith Piaf and Maria Tănase was critically discussed in the interview with Țărnea, as a symbolic gesture meant to capture the audience's curiosity and questions, rather than to reproduce naive clichés (Martin, 2018). This intervention was revealing of how official discourse reshaped the national image not just by proclaiming "non-clichés", but through a creative embrace of artistically reinterpreted clichés. The essential idea was that the collective image cannot be changed through denial, but through artistic recontextualization and cultural dialogue.

An article in *Le Monde* explicitly emphasizes this idea of "rediscovery" but contextualized in a way that highlights the necessity of a French cultural reconnection with Romania, vividly captured in the words of Michèle Ramis, French ambassador to Romania at that time: "*Nos relations avaient besoin d'une bouffée d'air frais. Nos deux pays ont un patrimoine commun, il est temps de le transmettre à la jeunesse, et aussi de redécouvrir qui est l'autre*" (Jardonnet, 2018). This approach shows how the French press addressed the French public about the issue of incomplete knowledge of Romania: it is not just about image, but about an underexplored artistic relationship. In comparison, the Romanian press talked about the Season as an opportunity for mutual rediscovery in terms of visibility and overcoming already established clichés (Murgu, 2019).

Another recurring element in the discourse was the theme of privileged historical relations between Romania and France—both culturally and diplomatically. According to Țărnea, in an interview for *Observator Cultural*, Romania is presented as a "cultural power" in French intellectual circles, generating a mutual recognition effect: "Romania is known in literary circles […] as a cultural power […] and continues to contribute to French cultural diversity French cultural diversity" (Șimonca, 2018). The discourse about the Romania-France Cultural Season reveals an explicit awareness that culture functions as a diplomatic tool. The Romanian commissioner emphasized that the real stake is not just the event itself, but "what will remain afterwards": "not a change of image […] but a rediscovery and reinvention of each other's image […] without it being an exercise in propaganda" (Șimonca, 2018).

4 French and Romanian Media Reception

The French media coverage was generally appreciative but often framed Romanian culture as a "discovery," implicitly reproducing hierarchical structures of cultural recognition. Such narratives, while positive, underscore the persistence of asymmetrical power relations within European cultural exchange. The French institutional discourse, while generally supportive, implicitly reaffirmed France's role as a cultural gatekeeper with media narratives framing Romanian culture as a "discovery," in a formulation that simultaneously expressed curiosity but also reinforced asymmetrical relations of recognition (Globe Reporters, 2019).

This dynamic aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, whereby recognition is unevenly distributed and mediated by dominant cultural actors (Bourdieu, 1991, 60–62). In the French press, the France–Romania Cultural Season was predominantly framed within the logic of French cultural diplomacy, rather than as a symmetric bilateral project. Articles in *Le Monde*, *La Croix*, and *Le Point* place the Season within a broader reflection on France's role as a global cultural actor and on the need to renew instruments of symbolic influence in a geopolitical context marked by competition and European fragmentation. Thus, Romania appeared less as an autonomous subject and more as a privileged partner in an exercise of reaffirming French cultural centrality. This positioning was evident in the way the French press talks about France's "investment" in cultural diplomacy and about the role of French institutions as mediators of artistic circulation.

A recurring discursive element in the French press is the presentation of Romanian culture as an object of discovery. *Le Monde* described the Franco-Romanian artistic relationship as "avant-garde," highlighting the historical contributions of Romanian artists to French modernity, but situating them within a cultural genealogy dominated by France (Jardonnet, 2018). This rhetoric of discovery is ambivalent: on the one hand, it acknowledges the value and originality of Romanian culture; on the other hand, it reproduces a symbolic asymmetry, in which France appears as the authority of validation. Romanian culture is legitimized to the extent that it is recognized and contextualized by French institutions and discourses.

In terms of Bourdieusian theory, the French press exercises a form of symbolic power through its ability to confer visibility and cultural capital: "'The crossed Season […] gives pride of place to visual artists […] our two countries share a common heritage […] with an emphasis on the emerging generation" (Jardonnet, 2018). This use of rhetoric emphasized not only the bilateral cultural relationship but also artistic innovation and modernity—an aspect that the Romanian press recognizes as a key aim of the Season, but framed in the context of the "contemporary representation of Romanian identity," without however highlighting as explicitly the French role in validating this art (Observatorul cultural, 2018). An analysis in *Le Point* magazine coupled various communications on the subject from the French Ministry of Culture placed the Season within a broader strategy of reinvesting the French state in cultural diplomacy. The article "Comment la France réinvestit dans sa diplomatie culturelle" explicitly emphasized that cultural seasons are key instruments for reaffirming French influence in a multipolar world (Eschapasse, 2019).

Within this framework, Romania is described as: a legitimate European partner, a fertile cultural space, an example of East–West cooperation within the EU. This is why the Season was constructed as an exercise of mutual cultural diplomacy between the two countries, as rightfully noticed by Jean-Jacques Garnier, the French Commissionaire of the Season, who pointed out the necessity of the two countries to refresh and update their perception of one another: "Le principal objectif de la saison est de changer la perception que les deux peuples ont l'un de

l'autre". This official recognition clearly confirmed what the French press also suggested that the Season is not just an art festival, but a strategic project anchored in the European values of cooperation and cultural exchange. Again, in the words of Garnier: "Dans l'ADN de la saison France-Roumanie, il y a trois choses: l'Europe, la francophonie, et le regard vers le futur (Ministère de la Culture, 2018).

The discursive contrast appears when compared to the Romanian press, where the Season was often presented as an action of identity rebranding for Romania in Europe, whereas in France, it mainly belonged to a strategy of soft power and international cultural dialogue. The analysis shows that cultural diplomacy operated not as a neutral exchange but as a structured field in which actors negotiated visibility, legitimacy, and authority. Questions of national identity occupied a prominent place in both official and media discourse. Negotiations over national representation constituted one of the central discursive dynamics of the Season. The avoidance of traditionalist or folkloric imagery reflected a strategic attempt to redefine Romanian identity in contemporary and transnational terms.

Romanian curatorial statements emphasized the plurality and contemporaneity of national culture, deliberately distancing the Season from folkloric representations. This strategy sought to challenge entrenched stereotypes and align Romanian cultural production with transnational artistic trends" (Șimonca, 2018). Both Romanian and French publication like *Observator Cultural* or *Le Monde* highlighted that the program includes visual arts, music, dance, and contemporary performance, as well as dialogues between tradition and contemporaneity (Jardonnet, 2018). This discursive strategy contributed to shaping an image of Romania as a modern cultural entity, eager to position itself as an equal to France on the contemporary art scene. The emphasis on artistic collaborations, world premieres, and innovative projects (jazz performances, installations, multimedia projects) reflected an effort to propose a narrative of contemporaneity, not just tradition or heritage. Therefore, national identity emerges not as a fixed essence but as a negotiated construct shaped by institutional agendas, artistic strategies, and audience expectations. These findings align with scholarship emphasizing that cultural diplomacy is not merely outward facing but also involves internal struggles over identity and representation (Clarke, 2016).

5 A European Framework for a Post-National Identity

Europeanization constituted a key discursive layer of the Cultural Season. European identity emerged as a transversal theme, intersecting with national narratives. Although the main discourse remained focused on bilateralism, an emerging European narrative slipped through the official statements, from both countries (including presidential and commissioner statements) suggesting that the Season contributed to "building a Europe of tomorrow" (Macron, 2018) and forming a shared perspective on their societies and relations in Europe. This way of integrating cultural discourse into the European discourse indicates that the Season was not just a bilateral exchange, but also a symbolic exercise in shaping European

identities, at a time (2018) when the theme of European unity and transnational cooperation was particularly important.

The Romanian official discourse consistently framed the initiative as evidence of the country's European maturity and cultural parity with references to European values and mobility positioning culture as a vehicle for asserting belonging within the EU. Therefore, the Romanian discourse strongly emphasized Europe as a space of belonging and validation, reflecting post-accession dynamics in which cultural production serves as a marker of European normality. By contrast, the French discourse tended to frame Europe as a space of diversity, with Romania contributing to a broader cultural mosaic. While inclusive, this framing also subtly reinforced centre–periphery dynamics by positioning diversity as something hosted or curated. For example, articles in the French journals *La Croix* and *Le Monde* integrated the Season into a discourse about cultural Europe, using a vocabulary of diversity, dialogue, and pluralism. Romania is included in this narrative as part of an "expanded" cultural Europe, whose richness comes from historical and aesthetic differences (Maurot, 2018). This formulation, although inclusive, had a paradoxical effect: it recognized Romania's cultural otherness, but kept it in a position of managed difference. Diversity was celebrated, but within a normative framework established by the French cultural centre. Several French news outlets (for example, *Le Petit Journal*) explicitly discussed Romania's visibility in France and the fact that many French people are not aware of Romanian cultural contributions (Popov, 2018). This French observation contrasted with Romanian discourses, which more often emphasize the need for international visibility and "overcoming stereotypes" (Șimonca, 2018).

This raised the significant importance of discursive difference: the French emphasized mutual illustration and the need to understand the other's culture, while Romanians emphasize redefining their own cultural image externally. Both Romanian and French discourses invoked Europe as a legitimizing horizon, but in different ways. Thus, the European discourse functioned simultaneously as a mechanism of symbolic integration, and an instrument for maintaining internal EU cultural hierarchies. It was mostly the French discourse that framed the Season within a formulation that celebrates plurality while implicitly maintaining hierarchical distinctions with the European framework functioning both as an integrative and a stratifying device.

Historical memory played a significant role, particularly in Romanian discourse. The centenary of 1918 was invoked as a narrative of continuity, resilience, and national fulfilment. Exhibitions and events addressing history were framed as dialogues between past and present, linking memory to contemporary creativity. French media coverage treated the centenary more selectively, often emphasizing its symbolic value without engaging deeply with Romanian historical narratives. This selective engagement underscores how historical memory circulates unevenly across national contexts, shaped by differing degrees of familiarity and relevance. The dominant narrative across both media spaces can be summarized as follows: culture is framed as a key instrument of diplomacy and international cooperation, with contemporary art privileged as a universal language of legitimacy. Regarding

the historical ties between the two nations, they provide symbolic grounding for the present collaboration. Nonetheless, these shared elements are articulated differently: while the Romanian press emphasized recognition, image correction, and European validation, the French press emphasized mediation, institutional authority, and cultural leadership. The Cultural Season thus emerged not as a symmetrical dialogue, but as a structured exchange shaped by unequal symbolic positions.

6 Conclusions

The Romania–France Cultural Season (2018–2019) can be understood as a complex, multi-layered dispositive where culture operates simultaneously as a symbolic language, a diplomatic instrument, an economic catalyst, and a geopolitical mediator. Far from being a simple series of artistic events, the Season functioned as a structured framework for rearticulating bilateral relations within a broader European and transnational context.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Season exemplifies the contemporary evolution of cultural diplomacy as soft power, operating through attraction, visibility, and symbolic legitimacy rather than coercion. Its programming, institutional architecture, and communication strategies demonstrate how culture is mobilized today not only to represent national identities but to produce relations. In this sense, the Season aligns with theories of public diplomacy, where publics—rather than states alone—become central actors in international relations.

A key contribution of this analysis lies in the role of visual identity as a strategic mediator. Drawing on the concept of post-national visual discourse, the Season's graphic system deliberately avoided folkloric or nationalistic representation. Instead, it deployed abstraction, modularity, and chromatic references that were simultaneously recognizable and de-territorialized. This visual strategy constructed a shared symbolic space in which Romanian and French cultural narratives could coexist without hierarchy. The identity visual thus did not merely accompany the Season; it performed its political and cultural objectives by embodying dialogue, symmetry, and co-presence.

This post-national aesthetic was crucial to the Season's geopolitical positioning. Within the European Union, cultural seasons serve as platforms for renegotiating symbolic power and visibility. For Romania, the Season functioned as a moment of symbolic re-centring, countering persistent peripheral or post-transition narratives by highlighting contemporary creation, innovation, and European embeddedness. For France, it reaffirmed its role as a central cultural mediator in Europe, capable of facilitating horizontal partnerships rather than unilateral cultural projection. In this regard, the Season contributed to the rebalancing of symbolic capital within the European cultural field.

In conclusion, the Romania-France Cultural Season stands as a paradigmatic case of contemporary cultural diplomacy, where visual communication, artistic programming, and geopolitical strategy converge. It demonstrates how culture can operate as a relational infrastructure—capable of producing shared imaginaries,

reinforcing economic and institutional networks, and repositioning actors within the European symbolic order. By articulating a post–national visual and cultural discourse, the Season did not simply reflect bilateral relations; it actively shaped them.

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Aspects of French Cultural Diplomacy in Romania, 1989–1991

Cătălina Bălan

1 Between Pre—and Post-1989: A New Context for Deploying French Diplomacy in Romania

Since 1990, the world has found itself between two eras, in a constant dynamic of anticipating reconfigured spheres of influence and power relations.[1] This period overlaps with Romania's three and a half decades of democracy, following a controversial revolution that overthrew the former communist regime, and paved the way for Western-style development. To better understand the complex roles and effects of diplomacy today, it is imperative to look back at the beginnings of what is still a climate of perpetual change, after Fukuyama's predicted end of history failed to materialise. In light of global political events, cultural policies within the broader framework of soft power tools are playing an increasingly important and visible role (Cooper et al., 2013), hence our focus on the specificities of French cultural diplomacy in Romania, in the context of the social and political upheaval brought about by the Romanian Revolution of December 1989. Theorised as a practice that produces, secures, and transforms international systems and world

[1] This article is based on documentation collected in connection with the NARDIV project (Horizon Europe Grant No. 101095171). It draws on archival materials recently made accessible at the French Diplomatic Archive centres in Nantes and La Courneuve (Paris), which hold the complete archives of the Institut français de Roumanie (transferred after 1990), along with extensive documentation from the French Embassy. These include the repatriated archives of the French Embassy in Bucharest (1970–1996; FR MAE 124PO/4/1–198, file reference 124PO/4/32), which were consulted during research visits, or kindly provided by Cristian Preda and Iulia Armencea. All translations from the French are mine.

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orders, French-Romanian diplomatic relations during the 1990s were all the more important given the emergence of new states following the dismantling of the USSR and other communist regimes. The reinvention of the Romanian state stands out within this context.

Our subject primarily concerns diplomacy as both a practice of international relations and an instrument for expressing the foreign policy of states in the field of culture, while also touching on other areas of political science, such as post-communist transition and democratisation. This article also argues that French cultural diplomacy played a decisive role in shaping Romania's symbolic reintegration into Europe after 1989. Romania's transition from communism to an open society highlights the ability of French diplomacy to transform and reinvent itself in the extremely rich context of the 1990s (Bozo, 2012), which also marked a new stage in bilateral relations between the two countries. This stage was initiated by the Romanian choice for democracy in 1989. The Revolution is a key moment for observing the reinvention of French cultural diplomacy in Romania, as well as its role in managing bilateral relations and maintaining order at the regional level. Going beyond the logic of the resident embassy's functionality, French diplomacy in the newly democratic Romania developed new actors and processes for multi-level interaction. We therefore approach Franco-Romanian interaction by firstly underscoring that these two actors were at extremely different stages politically and socially, as well as in terms of cultural policy. Our approach highlights what, for France, was the final segment of an era of foreign policy inaugurated by the Fifth Republic (Lane, 2016). For Romania, it marks a phase of discovery and harmonisation with the free world.

The article proceeds with a chronological analysis of diplomatic exchanges between the French Embassy in Romania and what was then known as *the Centre*, the various institutional, political, and diplomatic structures responsible for designing and implementing France's foreign policy and cultural diplomacy in Eastern Europe, including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Culture, and the Interior, as well as the presidential administration.

Of particular interest is the file relating to President Mitterrand's state visit to Romania in April 1991, which was one of the first French projects and actions devoted to Romanian domestic policy, and appears in the archives under the title "Visite d'État de François Mitterrand: dossier de préparation, dossier de presse."[2] It provides a better grasp of Romanian domestic policy at the beginning of the transition, along with the regional socio-political context. Above all, it highlights the position of France, which in this new historical phase sought to reaffirm and consolidate its role in Romania within the framework of a privileged bilateral relationship, as well as in Eastern Europe in the context of the Cold War.

A key player in the reinvention of relations between France and Romania between 1990 and 1993 was the French Ambassador to Romania, Mr. Renaud Vignal. Signing simply "Vignal," the ambassador wrote numerous analyses of

[2] François Mitterrand's state visit: preparation file, press file. CADN 124PO/4/32.

Romanian society, economy, and political life, with a critical eye and a constant focus on opportunities for developing relations between the two countries. Objective and rigorous, Vignal provided the Centre with a true picture of Romanian reality in the early years of democratic transition, without embellishing or exaggerating the flaws of a freshly post-communist society.

According to him, Romanian society in 1991 enjoyed general freedom of expression, including within Parliament and among the 100 political parties that emerged after the Revolution. The 1500 newspapers published without censorship were proof of this freedom, despite printing challenges due to paper shortages and distribution problems. Vignal reported to Paris that Romania's main opposition newspaper, *Romania liberă* [Free Romania], had a circulation of 350,000 copies, and that while television was controlled by the government, it still gave the opposition a right of expression. He also reported that given the highly divided opposition, the FSN (National Salvation Front, the ruling political party that emerged after the December 1989 revolution) remained a significant force, garnering over 30% of votes despite a considerable drop in popularity.[3] The FSN became the dominant governing party in the early post-communist period, and was led by Ion Iliescu, the first Romanian president after the communist dictatorship (Gussi, 2011, 45–93). Vignal was not surprised by the majority support for the government, which enjoyed a popularity rating of approximately 55%, compared to a dissatisfaction rate of 35%.[4] Vignal spoke of *a society reconciled* with itself, as well as the path that remained to be travelled in order to achieve this. He stressed that "the success of what is happening here, as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, is indeed decisive for Western nations."[5]

On 12 April 1991, in a summary note sent from Paris to the Embassy in Bucharest concerning Mitterrand's state visit,[6] the author highlighted France's "decisive role" in the union of the Romanian principalities in addition to the country's subsequent independence. It was in the wake of this historical shift that France intended to reaffirm its willingness to help Romania once again, this time to consolidate the rule of law, and once again become a privileged partner: "Summary: as the first head of state to visit Romania since the collapse of the communist regime, the President of the Republic is eagerly awaited, especially as France remains the benchmark, even the model, in this country. The government hopes that this state

[3] Diplomatic telegram (hereafter TD) Bucharest 1406, signed "Vignal" and sent on 13 April 1991, Tableau des principaux partis politiques roumains (Overview of primary Romanian political parties 1/2), file *Visite d'Etat du président de la République en Roumanie (18–19 avril)* [State visit of the President of the Republic to Romania (18–19 April)] CADN 124PO/4/32.

[4] Information from an undated document, which is part of the documentation prior to the state visit. CADN 124PO/4/32.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Excerpts from a summary drafted by J. Faure and M. Aubry, and signed by Jacques Faure on behalf of the Sub-Directorate for Eastern and Central Europe, Directorate for Europe, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Document dated 12 April 1991, Paris. CADN 124PO/4/32, 1.

visit will reinforce its legitimacy, while the opposition hopes not to be excluded from it."[7]

The fact that Mitterrand was the first Western president to visit newly post-communist Romania stemmed from the privileged legacy of the bilateral relationship between the two countries, which needed to reaffirm their strong bilateral commitment to achieve their respective objectives in a new global context (Védrine, 1996). Between 1979 and February 1990, the French team responsible for preparing the visit identified nine official bilateral visits between France and Romania,[8] demonstrating the importance that both countries ascribed to their collaboration, even during the last decade of Ceausescu's regime, and especially after he was overthrown.

2 Tensions within Romanian Society

During the first fifteen months following the Romanian Revolution, the shock experienced by civil society and the political vacuum that ensued led to struggles for power. Mitterrand's visit marked a first point of maturity for democratic Romania, which in order to sustain an effective pace of reforms needed both international recognition and concrete support, in the form of loans and capital injections from international banking and financial institutions. After the Romanian Revolution, 1990 was marked by the presidential elections in March, as well as intensified struggle for power among neo-communists, which culminated in the first three Mineriads—the violent repression of peaceful student demonstrations against Iliescu and his regime, carried out with the help of 4000 miners mobilised to intimidate the population.

The early years of the post-communist transition in Romania were marked by significant social divisions. The vast majority of the population supported Iliescu. Society also included sympathisers of the monarchy, opponents of the National Socialist Forces (FSN), and the disruptive miners' movement (estimated at 4000 members), who were ready to attack anyone suspected of opposing the new regime. A segment of Romanian society was also disengaged from politics, preoccupied by shortages affecting all aspects of daily life. Political disagreements existed, including tensions between President Iliescu and his Prime Minister, Petre Roman. In an undated document, in which Vignal analyses the state of Romanian politics, we can see that the French side was well aware of this. Romanian society is portrayed as being highly fragmented, particularly due to social divisions. According to the French Embassy in Romania, the prime minister was well-regarded by intellectuals and international public opinion, while the president enjoyed strong support

[7] Ibid.

[8] *Fiche signalétique Roumanie* [Romania Fact Sheet], dated March 1991. CADN 124PO/4/32.

among workers and peasants, which he leveraged to further legitimise his political position. Romanians were torn between their critical feelings towards France, which supported the Iliescu regime, and their affection for a sister nation.

During its first year of post-communism, Romania had not yet managed to assert itself as a sufficiently mature state able to begin integrating international economic and political systems. Initially scheduled for early 1991, the French president's visit to Bucharest had to be postponed because of the Gulf War.

The French side did not intervene in Romania's internal politics connected to Iliescu's legitimacy, or the demands of certain segments of the population, which became visible through open letters published by newspapers opposing the Iliescu regime, such as those drafted by the League of Students and that of the newly founded Civic Alliance.

An excellent article by Pierre Haski in *Libération* on 19 April 1991, entitled "Romanian Contradictions for Mitterrand," described the tensions within Romanian society, in which intellectuals, students, and newly created civic organisations condemned Mitterrand's apparent support for the neo-communists, who had seized power through his visit.

There was nevertheless an important nuance in the testimonies of figures such as Doina Cornea, a well-known anti-communist dissident, and Gabriel Andreescu, a founding member of the Group for Social Dialogue. According to Haski, they saw the advantage of Romania's emergence from its political and diplomatic isolation, something considered necessary for the country's new path towards democracy.

The Romanian Students' League also mobilised to bring Iliescu's deception to the French President's attention in the form of an open letter. A telegram recounts how Romania's Minister of Foreign Affairs Adrian Năstase—who was trying to retrieve his car after meeting with the extra-parliamentary opposition at the French Embassy—had to walk through a crowd of students chanting against Iliescu and the government: "François Mitterrand is a friend of the murderer!" The writer notes that this event unfolded without incident.

The Civic Alliance denounced the rejection of all opposition demonstrations by Romanian authorities, "either by brute force, as in June 1990, or by simplistic clichés." It also drew attention to the "virtually one-party" parliament, which played into the president's plans for "the re-establishment of a totalitarian regime." In its open letter, the Civic Alliance also mentioned the impossibility of implementing genuine reforms in Romania, due to the monopoly of the old structures, and the "corruption inherited from the previous regime."[9]

[9] Open letter published in *Romania liberă* [Free Romania] newspaper, 17 avril 1991, French translation of the text included in the press review section. CADN 124PO/4/32.

3 A Strategic State Visit

According to a report by Vignal, who served as French Ambassador to Romania between 1900 and 1993,[10] only 6% of the Romanian population had a favourable view of France in December 1990. This made it impossible to organise a state visit by François Mitterrand.

While the French president's visit was a first for Romania in many respects, for Mitterrand it was to one of the last countries of the former Warsaw Pact that he had not previously visited, having systematically refused to meet Ceausescu since 1981, at the beginning of Mitterrand's first seven-year term.

On 22 March 1991, Adrian Năstase, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, initialled a treaty of friendship and good-neighbourliness in Moscow, which was signed on 5 April during the Romanian president's visit to the USSR. Romania was the first former socialist state to sign such a document with the USSR, signalling the country's clear positioning on the international stage. This is why the French side initially questioned the possibility of signing such a document with Romania—a French-Romanian treaty appearing shortly after the one signed between Romania and the USSR could suggest a particular commitment by France to the East, a diplomatic weakness. While remaining cautious about establishing agreements between the two countries, the French side was nevertheless open to ratifying such a document, provided that developments in Romania were favourable.

A telegram sent on 10 April 1991 summarises a dialogue between Vignal and Romanian Prime Minister Petre Roman concerning the Treaty of Understanding, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness, which the latter wished to establish between Romania and France during Mitterrand's visit. Several French diplomatic documents mention "Ion Iliescu's cherished idea of a treaty of friendship and cooperation between France and Romania," despite the relations that the Romanian president had established in the East with the USSR. In an interview with the French daily *Le Figaro*, Prime Minister Roman mentioned his disappointment "at seeing France choose Poland for its first friendship treaty in the East."[11] However, France did not envisage finalising such an agreement during the state visit, instead preparing cooperation in the areas of executive training and communication.[12] As Cristian Preda has pointed out (Preda, 2025, 274), the impossibility of a more substantial political commitment during Mitterrand's visit led to renewed emphasis on its cultural and scientific aspects.

Between 18 and 19 April 1991, Romania became the focus of international media attention, when a Western head of state visited the country for the first time

[10] TD Bucharest 2079, signed "Vignal" and sent to Paris on 27 May 1991, with the subject "Impact de la visite d'Etat du président de la République en Roumanie" [Impact of the President of the Republic's state visit to Romania]. CADN 124PO/4/32, file FR II 1.1.2.
[11] AFP 180633 APR 91, file *Agency dispatches*. CADN 124PO/4/32.
[12] AFP 171508 APR 91, file *Agency dispatches*. CADN 124PO/4/32.

since the December 1989 Revolution. As we will demonstrate, this visit was significant in many respects for Romania—which just 15 months earlier had embarked on the transition to democracy and a market economy—and for France as well. On 18 April 1991, the French president arrived in Romania, which was seeking international legitimacy and recognition as a genuine partner in dialogue with other European countries, a prerequisite for the transition to democracy and a market economy, and the establishment of the rule of law.

The visit encompassed all sectors of life and the economy, including the humanitarian reality that made headlines in foreign newspapers, the harsh reality of the health system and Romanian orphanages, and the need for cultural development as well as economic, industrial, and diplomatic support. What stood out in our analysis of this major diplomatic event was the awareness, on both the French and Romanian side, that despite meticulous planning of every element of Mitterrand's programme and the preparatory stages of his visit, there was still fear that the slightest event could be over-interpreted, with a risk of fuelling existing internal tensions within Romanian civil society.

According to Hubert Védrine, who at the time was spokesperson for the French Presidency, France viewed the regime in Bucharest as stable, with internal tensions seen as part of a pattern similar to that observed in all countries returning to democracy. However, during his short visit to Romania, the French president included two events dedicated to opponents of Romania's new leader and his political party, the FSN. Mitterrand's programme included a meeting with intellectuals, and a dinner with the parliamentary opposition. Védrine is quoted in this document as saying that "strengthening relations between France and Romania is part of a general framework [...] methodically implemented since François Mitterrand's re-election in 1988, and the changes of 1988–1989."[13]

4 Specific Features of French Cultural Diplomacy in Romania

Well before the American researcher and political scientist Joseph Nye theorised the concept of soft power in the 1990s, the foreign policy of the French Fifth Republic was already pursuing clear objectives related to cultural diplomacy (Nye, 2004). France had also begun to build a complex network of domestic and international institutions to manage this policy and calibrate issues according to the target territory, whether they were former colonies or Eastern European countries. The return of France's cultural presence in Romania after 1989 was based on the Romanian intellectual elite's traditional attachment to French culture, as well as on the excellent knowledge of the French language on the part of Romanians, who remained widely Francophone even after four and a half decades of communism. Increased openness during the democratic transition provided France with

[13] Ibid.

the opportunity to deploy its foreign policy and diplomatic actions in Romania, focusing on three main areas: French language instruction, audiovisual presence, and training for establishing the rule of law and a market economy.[14]

This triad was complemented by a presentation of the main areas of French cultural action in Romania, as defined by Ambassador Vignal in an analysis sent to the Centre.[15] These included strengthening cultural facilities through the opening of new cultural centres in several university cities, transforming the French Library in Bucharest into a French Institute, extending the Alliance Française network, and developing French language instruction. Emphasis was also placed on linguistic action, especially through the creation of bilingual secondary schools in Bucharest, Cluj, Iasi, and Timisoara; on support for French language teaching in primary schools (over 350,000 eight-year-olds began learning French in the fall of 1990); on cooperation regarding school textbooks; and on the establishment of French-language university courses (at the Polytechnic Institute and the University of Bucharest). Finally, there was also the development of the French audiovisual presence, made possible by agreements with Romanian authorities, as well as expanded cooperation in the field of youth activities, formalised by a bilateral agreement on exchanges.

Archival documents concerning cultural, scientific, and technical relations mention expanding initiatives between France and Romania after December 1989,[16] with French investment growing from five million francs in December 1989 to 40 million francs in January 1990, and 70 million francs in 1991.

Admittedly, this spectacular development can be explained primarily by the high level of Francophonie in Romania, with 25% of the population fluent in the language. It is interesting to note that in 1990, French was the first choice for learning a foreign language from the age of 8. It was chosen by 38% of pupils, English by 26%, and German by 20%.[17] The priority teaching of French in primary schools was accompanied by the opening of bilingual sections in Romanian secondary schools, as well as the admission of approximately 100 Romanian pupils at the French School in Bucharest.[18] Key achievements in cultural, scientific and

[14] Information from the document entitled "Les établissements culturels français en Roumanie" [French cultural institutions in Romania], file *Relations culturelles, scientifiques et techniques* [Cultural, scientific and technical relations]. CADN 124PO/4/32.

[15] CADN 124PO/4/32.

[16] Information from note no. 222 DG/EU, signed by Bernard Lallement on 11 April 1991, sent by the Directorate-General for Cultural, Scientific and Technical Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the subject "Préparation de la visite d'Etat en Roumanie de M. le Président de la République. Volet culturel" [Preparation for the State visit to Romania by the President of the Republic. Cultural aspects]. CADN 124PO/4/32.

[17] CADN 124PO/4/32.

[18] Information from note numbered 222 DG/EU, signed by Bernard Lallement on 11 April 1991, sent by the Directorate-General for Cultural, Scientific and Technical Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the subject "Préparation de la visite d'Etat en Roumanie de M. le Président de la République. Volet culturel" [Preparation for the State visit to Romania by the President of the Republic. Cultural aspects]. CADN 124PO/4/32.

technical fields in 1990, as presented in the archive documents, also resulted from the creation of a network of Alliances Françaises (Pitesti, Ploiesti, Craiova, Brasov, Braila); the invitation of 100 Romanian French teachers for summer courses at French universities; and the awarding of 250 scholarships (rare until 1990, as Romanian beneficiaries were seldom allowed to leave their country).

This testimony gives us a better understanding of the context in which French cultural influence was deployed in Romania, with the authorities first consolidating a regional institutional network that could support the implementation of cultural, scientific, and technical programmes, accompanied by a significant injection of capital and resources. The French presence in Romania from 1990 onwards was marked by a redefined and diversified status for cultural institutions. French diplomacy considered Romania's cultural dynamic in 1990 to be "positive," marked by a desire to discover previously banned authors and publications, in addition to demand for clarification of the past.

A telegram from Bucharest to Paris on 16 April 1991, the last in a series of four detailing the internal situation in Romania, opens with an interesting summary of the place of literary, artistic, and cinematographic exchange, which at the time constituted a "particularly lively sector of our cooperation with Romania." With respect to books, French diplomacy deployed "missions, invitations, symposiums, invitations to intellectuals, and book donations." The document illustrates a significant number of cultural events scheduled between March 1990 and September 1991, such as the Spring of Freedom (March 1990), the Film Festival (October 1990), Contemporary Music Week in Bucharest (25–30 May 1991), and the George Enesco Festival (September 1990), in addition to the staging in Paris of Andrei Șerban's trilogy and *Hamlet* with Ion Caramitru (at the Théâtre de l'Europe), along with the inauguration of the French-Romanian Theatre in Bucharest.

Given the central role reserved for culture in relations between France and Romania, it is not surprising that the French delegation accompanying Mitterrand on his visit also included the Minister Delegate for Francophonie, Alain Decaux. He had numerous meetings with Romanian figures, notably with Minister of Culture Andrei Pleșu—who was accompanied by Deputy Ministers of Culture Horvath and Babeti—and Minister of Education Gheorghe Ștefan. Decaux also met with leading figures in Romanian culture, such as Lucian Pintilie, Andrei Șerban, Gabriel Liiceanu, and Dan Hăulică.[19]

[19] TD from Bucharest, no. 1548, sent on 24 April 1991.

5 Conclusion

With a strong historical and political relationship, France and Romania remain partners today in a constantly changing international context. Thanks to recently accessible archival collections, we now have sources that allow us to better understand the political mechanisms of this strategic relationship, and to explore new aspects of French diplomacy in Romania. This diplomacy has a specific character, shaped by the geographical, social, and cultural context; it is the product of its environment, and a contributing factor to building post-communist Romanian society, and by extension Western influence in Eastern Europe.

The file dedicated to Mitterrand's state visit to Romania in April 1991 offers a rich French perspective on the bilateral relationship with Romania, 15 months after the 1989 Revolution. The detailed and frequent exchanges between the central institutions of French diplomacy and foreign policy, and the diplomatic mission in Bucharest reveal the decision-making processes between French government structures, ranging from departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and presidential administration to the French Embassy in Romania. This common thread demonstrates that these structures were central to the internal reality of Romania, as well as to shaping and implementing French strategy there.

Our analysis of official exchanges between the diplomatic apparatus in France and Romania traces a rapidly developing bilateral relationship entering a new historical phase. France was already present in Romania, and benefited from the population's attachment to symbolic resistance during the communist period, in the name of former political and cultural relations. It then intensified financial, humanitarian, political, and cultural initiatives, strengthening its position in Romania and Eastern Europe.

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Non-state Actors in Promoting Polish Culture in Canada, Ireland, Switzerland

Bożena Gierat-Bieroń

1 Introduction

According to scholars of public diplomacy (Cull, 2020, 30–38; Snow & Cull, 2020; Ociepka, 2008; Snow, 2020; Surmacz, 2015), non-governmental organisations play a significant role in contemporary diplomacy. These include foundations and associations, corporations, transnational institutions, advocacy groups, and international networks. Owing to their involvement, diplomacy becomes "transparent and socialised" (Ziętek, 2014, 60) and its audience may be both broad and selectively targeted (Ziętek, 2014, 60). The growing participation of NGOs in international relations has been a consequence of globalisation processes, the emergence of global television networks, changes in the nature of democracy, and the increasing importance of civil society, which often feels insufficiently represented by political elites and seeks alternative ways of managing the public interest (Gienow-Hecht & Donfired, 2010; Morphet, 1996, 114–146). As representatives of the so-called third sector, NGOs are at times treated dismissively by state actors. Nevertheless, over the years they have established a strong position as non-state actors playing an important role in the defence of human rights, climate change advocacy, as well as in the fields of culture and cultural heritage, in other words, within the realm of so-called low politics (Wouters & Rossi, 2001).

For this reason, the literature frequently refers to the diplomatic activity of NGOs as operating at a transnational level of diplomacy (Goff, 2020; Cull, 2020; Surmacz, 2015). NGOs have acquired political and international agency, recognition, and global relevance, and they pursue autonomously defined public missions (Betsill & Corell, 2001, 65–85; 2008, 1–17; Morphet, 1996, 116–46). They have

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N. Colin and G. H. Decuble (eds.), *Reimagining European Cultural Diplomacy*,
The Future of Europe, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-32360-6_20

also become lobbying institutions, acting as "advocates" of particular causes and conducting large-scale international campaigns. Given their operational flexibility and non-hierarchical decision-making structures (Fisher, 1997; Pehn, 1999), they appear particularly effective in a world of political overload and increasing public pressure, and consequently within the area of cultural marketing. NGOs play a crucial role in the promotion of culture and the arts, as well as in fostering intercultural dialogue. Such organisations operate within the domain of public diplomacy, participate in professional networks and contribute to what is described as "new diplomacy" or the "network model of diplomacy", in which society itself is both the subject and object of influence (people-to-people, P2P) (Hocking, 2007). The essence of their international activity lies in direct contacts, the establishment of cooperation, and the exchange of ideas, people, and goods. Even the Amnesty International (often subject to criticism) is regarded today as an important international partner, what was noted by Rane Kishan (Kishan, 2004). One of the greatest diplomatic successes of NGO networks was their influence on the content of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty, signed in Ottawa in 1997 (Hocking, 2007, 29).

The present analysis aims to highlight the growing importance of foreign non-governmental organisations promoting Polish culture (Florek & Jankowska, 2012), despite the limited financial support provided by the Polish state. It is also important to note the distinction made by researchers between NGOs and immigrant organisations, which, although formally NGOs, possess certain distinctive characteristics. A definition of such organisations was formulated, inter alia, by Cordero-Guzmán:

> […] an immigrant organisation is an organisation created by members of a specific ethnic or national group in order to provide social services primarily to immigrants from the same ethnic or national group. Immigrant organisations differ from other social service providers in that their missions, practices, services and programmes explicitly draw upon cultural components and a sense of ethnic or national identity. (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005, 894)

This article analyses the process through which immigrant organisations move away from their original mission towards intercultural and integrative activities. Accordingly, it formulates the following research hypothesis: Contemporary NGOs, as promotional and marketing actors, are becoming powerful carriers of soft power, replacing traditional state-led diplomatic activities and creating conditions for egalitarian and partnership-based intercultural dialogue. The hypothesis is examined in the light of the relevant literature and on the basis of the author's own pilot qualitative research. The discourse analysis applies a political science research methodology grounded in comparative studies, as well as systemic and institutional analysis. The primary material for analysis consists of legal Polish documents, while the secondary material includes academic literature. With regard to the typology of non-governmental organisations, which helps to define

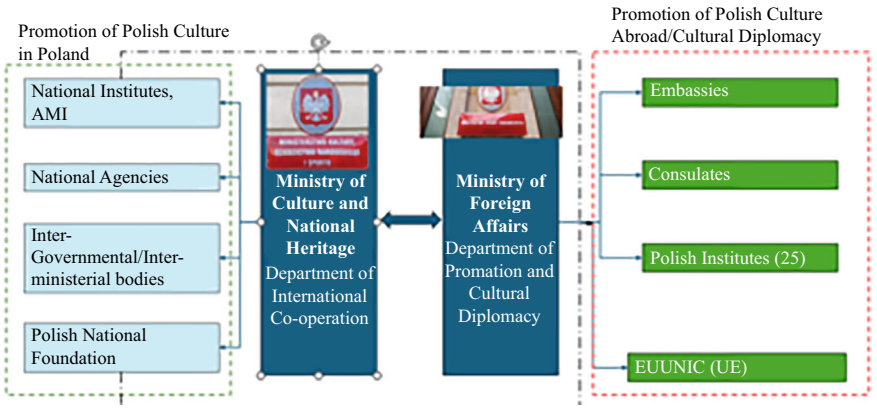

Fig. 1 The promotion of polish culture abroad: the State Organisational System. *Source* Author's own concept

both the scope and limitations of the analysis, the article focuses on Community-Based Organisations,[1] that is, social organisations operating on a non-profit basis in pursuit of shared values (Fig. 1).

The governance and financing of the process of promoting Polish culture abroad remain within the exclusive competence of the Polish state, pursuant to the Act on the Foreign Service,[2] and are exercised primarily by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The Ministry entrusts the execution of public tasks in the field of cultural diplomacy to the Department of Promotion and Cultural Diplomacy of the MFA, which exercises institutional supervision over the Polish Institutes (PI) as state entities, expressly designated to shape and project a favourable international image of Polish culture as an instrument of soft power. In accordance with the provisions of the Organisational Regulations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, constituting an annex to Order No. 42 of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of 17 December 2010,[3] the Polish Institute (PI) constitutes an organisational unit, subordinate to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (paragraph 77). Furthermore, pursuant to the Act on the Foreign Service[4] and Article 78 of the aforementioned Regulations,[5]

[1] The typology of NGOs is presented by Peter Willetts (2012) in the entry "What is a Non-Governmental Organization?", prepared for the UNESCO Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems He identifies, among others, the following types: community-based organisations (CBOs); city-wide organisations; state NGOs; national NGOs; and international NGOs (INGOs).

[2] Act of 21 January 2021 on the Foreign Service (Journal of Laws 2024, item 1691, consolidated text).

[3] Ordinance No. 42 of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of 17 December 2010 on the adoption of the organisational regulations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Journal of Laws of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011, No. 1, item 1).

[4] Act of 21 January 2021 on the Foreign Service.

[5] Ordinance No. 42, 17 December 2010.

the Polish Institutes are mandated to implement the foreign policy objectives of the Polish state and to ensure the sustained presence of Polish culture within the principal opinion-forming centres of the host state. The PI operate within the territories of their respective host countries, create institutional conditions conducive to the promotion of Poland, and employ personnel recruited both from Poland and from the host state. Selected Institutes additionally provide instruction in the Polish language.

As observed by Anna Umińska-Woroniecka, "the Institutes, similarly to other public administration bodies, finance their activities from allocations derived from the state budget" (Anna Umińska-Woroniecka, 2011, 93). This arrangement is, however, not without its operational constraints, insofar as—as the author further notes—

> the obligation to comply with public finance regulations results in the Institutes operating, during the first quarter of each calendar year, on the basis of a so-called budgetary proviso, which constitutes a tangible impediment to their effective functioning. Moreover, this situation adversely affects cooperation with foreign partners, given that the organisation of a substantial proportion of cultural initiatives necessarily commences many months in advance. (Anna Umińska-Woroniecka, 2011, 93)

Consequently, the Polish Institutes are operating within a markedly constrained financial framework and do not dispose of extensive resources for promotional activities, particularly when measured against the scale of their fixed operating expenditures.

Polish Institutes are established within the territory of a given state on the basis of bilateral agreements concluded between the Republic of Poland and the host country.[6] The legal instrument directly governing the establishment and operation of a Polish Institute (PI) is the Agreement on the Establishment and Operation of Institutes.[7] In the execution of their statutory mandate, the Polish Institutes cooperate closely with Polish diplomatic missions (Embassies and Consulates), the EUNIC network,[8] as well as with national cultural institutions and executive agencies headquartered in Warsaw.

[6] An example of such an agreement is the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Kingdom of Spain on the Establishment and Operation of Cultural Institutes, signed in Warsaw on 30 September 2005 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Poland*, Monitor Polski, No. 59, items 623–624).

[7] An example of such an arrangement is the Agreement between the Government of the Polish People's Republic and the Government of the French Republic on Polish Institutes and French Institutes, 9 May 2025. http://www.traktaty.msz.gov.pl/fdaspx?f=P0000008862.pdf. Accessed 2 December 2025.

[8] An association of cultural institutes of the Member States, which has evolved into EUNIC Global and has established cooperation clusters (within the network of institutes) operating to promote European culture. It is precisely the EUNIC Clusters that have begun to play the role of key partners of EU Delegations in partner countries, enabling the Delegations to initiate recurring cultural events promoting Europe, such as the European Day of Languages and the European Month of Culture.

At present, Poland maintains a network of 25 Polish Institutes, which operate under the authority of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the following locations: Belgrade, Berlin, Bratislava, Budapest, Bucharest, Brussels, Kyiv, London, Madrid, Minsk, Moscow, New York (the Polish Cultural Centre), New Delhi, Paris, Beijing, Prague, Rome, Sofia, Stockholm, Tel Aviv–Jaffa, Tbilisi, Tokyo, Vienna and Vilnius. It should additionally be noted that, within the Federal Republic of Germany, an extra Polish Institute operates in Düsseldorf, as well as a branch unit. In Germany, in addition to the Polish Institute in Berlin, a branch of the Polish Institute operates in Leipzig. In the Russian Federation, an additional branch operates in Saint Petersburg. As it has been noted, "Polish Institutes abroad formally […] cooperate with the Ministry of Culture, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and other domestic cultural institutions, as well as with local partners, think tanks, universities, research and development centres, Polish diaspora organisations, etc." (Aleksandra Żelazińska, 2018). Consequently, their activities are characterised by a multi-actor and multi-sectoral mode of operation.

The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage constitutes the second governmental authority responsible for the promotion of Polish culture abroad. Pursuant to the regulations set out in the Order of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 31 March 2021,[9] responsibility for organising international and bilateral cultural cooperation, as well as for preparing opinions and official positions of the Government of the Republic of Poland for external audiences, lies with the Department of International Cooperation (paragraph 34). The Ministry represents the Polish government within the United Nations, UNESCO, and regional international organisations, supervises international cultural exchange, and oversees the protection of cultural property arising from international agreements.

The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage exercises oversight over national cultural institutions and agencies which (although not all are required to do so) may engage in international cultural activities (for example, The Fryderyk Chopin Institute, the International Cultural Centre, and the National Institute of Music and Dance). Substantive and financial support for the promotion of Polish culture abroad is also provided within Poland by other ministries (including the Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the Ministry of Health), as well as through the Pilecki Institute, the Institute of National Remembrance, and dedicated governmental and intersectoral programmes. Both ministries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage) jointly administer the "Inspiring Poland" programme (*Polska Inspirująca*), which enables Polish cultural operators acting in cooperation with foreign partners, to obtain funding for the preparation and implementation of joint international projects. Examples include *Chopin Inspires. The Space Concert*; as well as *The Birth of National Painting: Poland–Scandinavia*; the organisation of a study visit

[9] Order of the Minister of Culture, National Heritage and Sports dated 31 March 2021.

to Vienna focused on research on architecture and housing policy; and *Historic Houses: Herbst Palace—Das Rote Haus. Shared Heritage.*[10]

The most significant national institution established specifically for the international promotion of Polish culture, both in Europe and globally, is the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (AMI) in Warsaw. The Institute was founded pursuant to an agreement between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage on 1 March 2000, and its status was subsequently confirmed through the granting of its Statute in 2006.[11] The AMI's core mandate is the promotion of Polish art and Polish artists abroad. To this aim, it cooperates with a wide range of domestic and foreign entities, including the Polish Institutes, which contribute to shaping a positive international image of Poland. According to the most recent Ministerial Order defining the AMI's tasks (2024),[12] its principal activities include the presentation of Polish culture, the dissemination of knowledge, participation in strategically significant cultural events, active engagement in global cultural life, the strengthening of Poland's international presence, the building of long-term relationships, and the initiation and organisation of artistic events. In addition, the Institute administers grant and residency programmes. The AMI develops Poland's international cultural presence through thematic Polish Seasons and bilateral Cultural Seasons, such as the Poland–Romania Cultural Season 2024–2025. The Adam Mickiewicz Institute was responsible for the artistic programme of Poland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union from January to

[10] The project "Chopin Inspires: The Space Concert" was prepared by the Polish agency the National Institute of Music and Dance in cooperation with AFI—Alliance for Innovation. The Birth of National Painting: Poland–Scandinavia was organised by the National Museum in Warsaw in collaboration with institutions in Copenhagen, The David Collection (Davids Samling) in Copenhagen, Aarhus, and ARoS Kunstmuseum. The project Organisation of a Study Visit to Vienna—Research on Architecture and Housing Policy was implemented by the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning in cooperation with PUSH Consulting. Finally, Historic Houses: Herbst Palace—Das Rote Haus. Shared Heritage was carried out by the Museum of Art in Łódź together with the Stiftung Scheibler—Museum Rotes Haus in Monschau. Data source: file:///C:/Users/Bo%C5%BCena/Downloads/LISTA_DOFINANSOWANYCH_PROJEKT%C3%93W_FORMAT_PDF_do_publikacji.pdf. Accessed 3 December 2025.

[11] The statute of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (AMI) has undergone numerous amendments and revisions, reflecting both the evolving character of the institution and its organisational separation from the National Centre for Culture. The most significant statutory documents include: The Statute of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, annexed to Order No. 9 of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 15 March 2006; Order No. 19 of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 1 June 2008 on granting a statute to the state cultural institution the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (Official Journal of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, 2008, No. 3, item 29); and the Order of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 24 April 2024 on granting a statute to the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (Official Journal of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, 2024, item 48). The Institute also operates pursuant to Article 13(1) of the Act of 25 October 1991 on the Organisation and Conduct of Cultural Activity (Journal of Laws 2001, No. 13, item 123, as amended).

[12] Order of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage dated 24 April 2024.

June 2026, as well as for the presentation of Polish culture at the World Expo in Osaka in 2025. The earlier Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2011 it was marked by an extensive programme of cultural presentations held in leading galleries, theatres, clubs and festivals, including BOZAR and La Monnaie in Brussels, the National Theatre and Southbank Centre in London, the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, the Teatro Real in Madrid, and the Forbidden City Concert Hall in China. The core of this programme, conducted under the slogan "I, Culture. Made in the EU. Powered by Poland", consisted of so-called flagship projects bearing the names of iconic figures of contemporary Polish culture: Stanisław Lem, Czesław Miłosz, and Karol Szymanowski (Smoleń, 2016).

In summary, Poland has a substantial and diversified group of institutions supporting the international promotion of culture. The distinction indicated in the Graph 1 between domestic and foreign promotion of Polish culture should not be regarded as impermeable. Rather, the activities and objectives of the respective institutions intersect and mutually reinforce one another, which on the one hand enhances the overall branding effect, but on the other—leads to the multiplication of activities, the duplication of initiatives, and an excessive dispersion of image-building efforts.[13] The fragmented nature of activities related to the promotion of Polish culture abroad was explicitly identified in the conclusions of the 2019 report of the Supreme Audit Office.[14] The report examined the state of Polish cultural promotion abroad in the period 2013–2017, analysing both the substantive and financial dimensions of the operations of selected cultural institutions. It pointed to an overabundance of domestic agencies which, although primarily responsible for the protection and promotion of national culture, were simultaneously engaged in tasks related to international cultural promotion. The Supreme Audit Office consequently called for the development of a long-term governmental strategy for the promotion of Polish culture abroad which could be coherent with the key strategic frameworks of the Polish state. It further recommended increased financial support for this sector, particularly with regard to strengthening the financial capacity and operational sustainability of the Polish Institutes.

2 Financing the Promotion of Polish Culture Abroad: Legal Frameworks

An additional governmental body, supporting the promotion of Polish culture abroad is the Senate of the Republic of Poland, which annually administers the "Senat–Polonia" programme and competition (Competition Senat-Polonia 2025). "Proposals submitted to the 'Senat–Polonia' competition are directed at the Polish

[13] This fact was inderline in: Alojzy Nowak, Krzysztof Opolski, Jarosław Górski. eds. (2010). *Promocja Polski. Narzędzie wspierania konkurencyjności?* Warszawa: Faculty of Management, Warsaw University Press.

[14] Supreme Audit Office (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli). Promotion of Polish Culture Abroad, Audit No. KNO.430.014.2018, Registry No. 193/2018/P/18/025/KNO, Warszawa 2019.

diaspora and Poles living abroad. The ultimate beneficiaries include, among others, Polish diaspora organisations operating outside the national territory" (Competition Senat-Polonia 2025). In 2025, the competition selected 341 beneficiaries and co-financed cultural projects to the total value of PLN 75.5 million.[15] Grants for soft initiatives ranged from PLN 30,000 to PLN 500,000.[16]

The programme defined seven priority areas:

1. activation of the younger generation of Poles residing abroad;
2. strengthening Polish and Polish-diaspora communities in their countries of residence;
3. development of existing and creation of new diaspora structures;
4. promotion of Poland and Polish culture, as well as preservation of cultural and historical heritage abroad;
5. support for and development of Polish-diaspora media;
6. initiatives in the field of Polish-language education;
7. activities in support of Poles in the East.

In 2025, the highest levels of funding were allocated to priorities 1 and 4, and 3. According to the competition regulations, "…in accordance with Polish law, eligible applicants included non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other authorised entities, provided that they were registered in Poland, listed in the Act on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism,[17] and possessed experience in working for the Polish diaspora and Poles living abroad" (Competition Senat-Polonia, 2025). This provision represents both the most crucial and simultaneously the most contentious aspect of the regulation. It restricts access to Polish financial resources exclusively to Polish organisations, thereby excluding other entities, including diaspora organisations registered as NGOs under the law of their country of registration—that is, non-Polish organisations. Although the provision is directly derived from Polish legislation, it results in marginalisation of institutions that have historically contributed, and continue to contribute, to the promotion of Polish culture abroad. An exception to this rule applies in a single specific case. The competition regulations also stipulate that a task entrusted by the Polish state to an NGO may be executed in partnership, with part of the project's responsibilities—and a "corresponding portion of funds—delegated to the partner" (Article 3, Sect. 4). However, the project cannot be entrusted to the partner in its entirety. The partner may be either domestic or foreign. Consequently, the regulations permit a foreign partner to access "Senate funds" through collaboration with a Polish project operator, provided that the partner does not assume full responsibility for the implementation of the project.

[15] It is 17 mln euro converted from PLN into euros. EUR 1 = PLN 4.2225 −0.0045(−0.1%).
[16] Grants ranged from 7 000 euro to 120 000 euro. EUR 1 = PLN 4.2225 −0.0045(−0.1%).
[17] Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteer Work, Journal of Laws 2003, No. 96, item 873.

While this mechanism facilitates funding for diaspora organisations, it is not an ideal solution. Firstly, a diaspora organisation is not permitted to propose its own cultural project; it may only execute the segment of a project assigned for international activities by its Polish partner. Secondly, it does not act as the main implementer or manager of the project and assumes only minimal responsibility, which does not support team building. Third, Polish-diaspora communities are aware—and interpret the situation accordingly—that this is a temporary and unsatisfactory measure requiring reform. In such circumstances, Polish communities abroad often feel marginalised or undervalued within the framework of Poland's international cultural promotion, perceiving these "partial" solutions as insufficient and inadequate.

According to data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) for 2025 (Central Statistical Office 2024), there are 8,878 Polish and Polish-diaspora organisations operating abroad. These include associations and foundations, religious unions and organisations, publishing houses, and commercial representative offices. The geographical distribution of Polish organisations abroad is illustrated in the following chart (Fig. 2).

The chart indicates that the largest concentrations of Polish NGOs are located in Europe (56.1%), followed by North America (22.6%), which corresponds with the historical migration patterns of the first half of the nineteenth century. The next region of Polish diaspora activity is Asia (4.1%), followed by Australia and Oceania (3.65%), South America (3.1%), and, finally, Africa (1.4%).

Within Europe, the highest number of organisations actively supporting Poland is found in neighbouring countries: Ukraine (1,137), Germany (569), Lithuania (556), the Czech Republic (313), and Belarus (308). Among European countries of

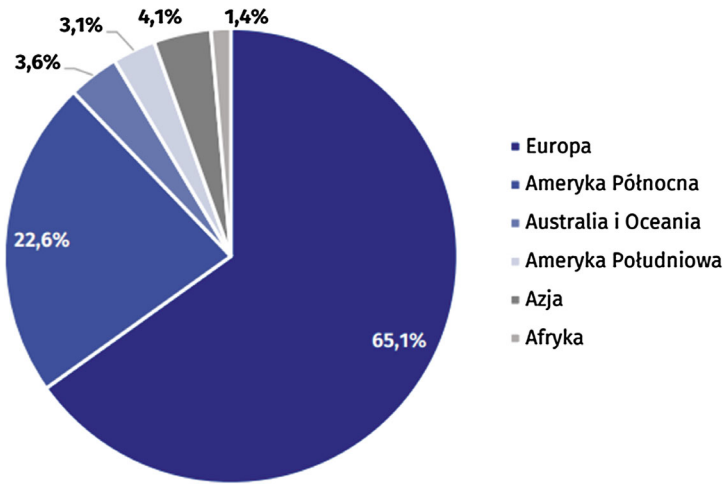

Fig. 2 Polish and Polish-Diaspora Organisations Abroad Classified as Active (by Continent). *Source* GUS. 30.12.2024. *Rozmieszczenie organizacji polskich i polonijnych za granicą*, 4

traditional Polish emigration, the largest number of organisations is located in the United Kingdom (945), France (410), and Belgium (170) (Central Statistical Office 2024). Regrettably, the scholarly literature lacks comparable quantitative data concerning diaspora organisations specifically engaged in the promotion of culture. Data from the Central Statistical Office (Central Statistical Office 2024) only allow for the determination of the total number of socio-cultural institutions within each country. Accordingly, with reference to the countries under consideration in this article, it is estimated that Canada hosts 122 socio-cultural organisations, Ireland 93, and Switzerland 19.

The term "socio-cultural organisations", as defined by the authors of the Statistics above, encompasses, among others:

> cultural centres/houses/clubs, scientific institutes, museum institutions, libraries, archives, theatres (including ensembles and theatre groups), cinemas, art galleries, care homes (including hospices and community centres), cemeteries and burial sites. Additionally, the classification includes "educational institutions," such as schools, kindergartens, and University of the Third Age facilities, as well as "media," comprising press titles and other periodical publications, radio, electronic media, and also bookstores and publishing houses. (Central Statistical Office 2024, 5)

3 Canada, Ireland, Switzerland—Case Studies

As case studies in this article, the activities of Polish communities located in three countries were selected: Canada, Ireland, and Switzerland. The primary criterion for the comparative analysis of Polish cultural promotion in these countries was the absence of a Polish Institute in each of them, which significantly complicates marketing activities and the development of Poland's cultural brand. The second criterion was geographical: one country supposed to be a strategic/transatlantic partner of the EU (but not an EU member), the second—a member of the EU, and the third—a non-EU country not covered by the EU's neighbourhood and partnership policies, operating on the basis of bilateral agreements with the EU and maintaining a neutral status (within the Schengen Area). The third criterion concerned the size and generational structure of the Polish diaspora.

Canada hosts one of the oldest and largest Polish diasporas, dating back to the first half of the nineteenth century, and also includes emigrants from the period of martial law in the 1980s and political activists of the Solidarity Movement. Polish emigration to Ireland is largely post-accession (after 2004) and economically motivated, composed predominantly of working-age individuals fluent in English who have emigrated voluntarily. Polish emigration to Switzerland dates back to the aftermath of the November Uprising of 1830 and is characterised by a high degree of historical continuity, affluence, and individualisation. Numerically, it is the smallest of the diasporas discussed and it has never had a mass character. In each of these mentioned countries, the author conducted qualitative interviews, specifically pilot interviews, with representatives of non-governmental

organisations supporting the cultural development of Poles and the promotion of Polish-origin artists.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs report *Strategy 2025*,[18] there are currently 20 million Poles living worldwide. This group includes not only Polish citizens residing permanently or temporarily abroad but also persons of Polish origin wishing to maintain connections with Poland. In Canada, approximately 1.3 million Poles reside, making it one of the largest Polish diaspora communities. Cultural cooperation between Poland and Canada is facilitated by the *Protocol of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of Canada in the Field of Culture, Academic Relations, and Sport* (Memorandum of Understanding), signed in 1990. Due to the autonomy of Canadian Provinces, the involvement of Polish organisations in the cultural life of individual Provinces is dispersed and diversified. Some of them receive financial support from the budgets of Polish diplomatic and consular missions operating in Canada, yet most rely on their own resources, sponsorship from companies, and support from local parishes. They operate as public-benefit organisations, engaging in various forms of fundraising and receiving additional support from provincial, municipal, and local authorities. The Polish-Canadian community is regarded as a diasporic community with conservative and often Eurosceptic views. It has evolved from communities affected by war and martial law to contemporary economic migration of younger generations, who have "strengthened existing Polish diaspora organisations, enhanced the prestige of the Polish community […] and initiated numerous significant changes within the Polish community" (Reczyńska, 2018, 74).

A key organisation supporting Polish diaspora events is the *Polish Congress of Canada* (established in 1944), which seeks to promote Polish culture, traditions, and language. This umbrella organisation oversees Polish Houses, which provide commercial services to Polish communities in Canada and occasionally organise traditional events. Canadian NGOs engaged in the promotion of Polish culture focus largely on preserving historical memory, commemorating the first founders of the Polish diaspora in Canada, and promoting Polish folkloric and musical traditions from various regions of Poland. At the same time, there is a growing demand among emigrants for engagement with more contemporary forms of art, such as Polish film festivals (in Toronto, Montreal, Sherbrooke, Vancouver, and Halifax), piano concerts by Chopin Competition laureates, and jazz performances.

NGOs promoting Polish culture in Canada do not receive financial support from the Polish state budget, except for limited funding from the Embassy of the Republic of Poland. For example, the *Polish Heritage Foundation* operates as a charitable organisation, receiving grants from donors who are eligible for tax deductions. Beneficiaries may include individuals. In addition to raising funds for scholarships for students attending Polish schools, the Foundation organises two annual Polish

[18] Government Strategy for Cooperation with the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad for 2025–2030, 2025.

events: the *Ottawa Polish Fest* and the *Autumn Bead (Jesienny Koralik).* The former combines artistic performances with a market of Polish products and culinary tastings, held outdoors in a popular area of Ottawa. The latter is a ball for approximately 400 attendees featuring folk dance performances and culinary diplomacy. The activities of the Foundation are regularly supported by the Polish Embassy. As the president of a Canadian foundation for Polish heritage notes, funds for its activities come from the organisation's budget as well as from fundraising campaigns and donors.[19]

In Halifax, the *Nova Scotia Society of Polish Artists* operates as a public-benefit organisation, supporting initiatives that commemorate Polish war veterans, particularly Stanisław Swianiewicz and Stanisław Bóbr-Tylingo. Through its activities, a monument was erected in Halifax to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Polish emigration to Canada and the centenary of Polish independence. The unveiling ceremony was attended by the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to Canada, Andrzej Kurnicki. This organisation does not receive direct financial support from Poland and cannot participate directly in the Senate of the Republic of Poland's competitions:

> We are quite distant from the Polish provinces in Canada, but I must admit that the Polish Embassy sometimes helps us. Otherwise, we apply for financial support from other organisations in Canada, in the provinces of Alberta or Ontario, and we cooperate with Polish veterans' organisations. We also submit applications to the Canadian government and local authorities.[20]

Although nine Polish cultural institutions operate in Halifax, according to the Consul, their activities are often ephemeral due to limited financial resources. While these NGOs have adapted to the Canadian financial environment and operate within a commercial-charitable system, they clearly lack financial support from the Polish state, despite their extensive efforts on behalf of the Polish community.[21]

The Polish community in Ireland is estimated at around 93,000 people. According to Nowosielski and Dzięglewski: "[…] just ten years after accession, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' *Atlas of Polish Presence Abroad* lists 20 Polish organisations: four cultural-artistic, six educational, and ten of other profiles. These organisations are based in major urban centres with Polish populations, including Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Portlaoise, and Cavan" (Nowosielski, 2020, 60).

The Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Dublin plays a crucial role in promoting Polish culture, closely cooperating with the Irish Ministry of Culture, Communications and Sport, the Polish Socio-Cultural Centre (the oldest post-war

[19] Information obtained through personal communication.
[20] Jan Skóra, Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland in Halifax, Interview 2025.
[21] Ibid.

Polish diaspora organisation in Ireland, established in 1977)[22] as well as NGOs and foundations dedicated to cultural promotion. Among the Polish community in Ireland, 162 NGOs operate in the field of diaspora affairs. Polish emigration to Ireland, largely post-accession, began in 2006, with a significant influx between 2006 and 2008, primarily men with secondary or vocational education. The Irish Polish community is relatively young (ages 21–45), highly entrepreneurial, mobile, and well-integrated into Irish society, with a strong command of English. As noted by Weronika Kloc-Nowak:

> …by 2018, 110 Polish and Polish-diaspora organisations had been established in Ireland, of which 106 remained active. Unfortunately, they operate through the efforts of a small number of active individuals, as evidenced by the fact that only 5.4 % of surveyed Poles in Ireland were involved in any club or association (including both Polish and Irish organisations). (Weronika Kloc-Nowak, 2019, 46)

Due to limited support from the Polish government and local authorities, these organisations operate below their creative potential, adjusting to the financial requirements of the local market. Nevertheless, most are run by ambitious, educated individuals with a strong civic spirit, often graduates of local universities, and their work is well-received by Irish audiences. Their activities are frequently innovative, contemporary, and free from the historical burden of patriotic duty, often structured in formats of international collaboration and market-oriented cultural production. As one representative of a Polish cultural organisation in Ireland observes:

> We want to collaborate with Irish institutions, to produce something together, something contemporary that will reach a wide audience. At the same time, we aim to collaborate with Polish artists and bring their work to this context. Thinking like producers comes naturally to us, as we've been working this way for a long time.[23]

The Polish Art Festival (PAF) in Limerick, the largest recurring Polish-diaspora cultural event in Ireland, received funding from the Senate in 2025. Its Polish partner was the *Fundacja Folkovisko*. In 2025, the Festival introduced two new events: the *Festival Folkovisko* and the *Etnopolska 2025* edition. The *Festival Folkovisko* (Senate grant: PLN 106,000[24]) featured concerts by Leszek Możdżer and Gordiy Starukh—master of the hurdy-gurdy—as well as a panel discussion with Andrzej Stasiuk and Marcin Piotrowski. Polish artists collaborated and performed alongside Irish artists. The *Etnopolska* edition offered workshops in traditional paper-cutting,

[22] More on this topic can be found in: Kloc-Nowak Weronika. 2019. Polacy w Republice Irlandii. Historia, atualna sytuacja i wyzwania. *Studia BAS,* 4: 31–50, http://studiabas.sejm.gov.pl/ Accessed 14 November 2025.

[23] Interview with a representative of a Polish cultural organisation in Ireland, MS Teams, November 2025.

[24] It is 25 000 euro per whole project. EUR 1 = PLN 4.2225 −0.0045(−0.1%).

folk singing, and other interactive cultural activities. As one representative of a Polish cultural organisation abroad notes:

> We secure local and regional funds, adapt to municipal strategies, and also receive support from the Polish Embassy. Senate funds are often crucial, but they are limited. Nevertheless, I feel that our diasporic activity for Polish culture is perceived in Poland as less important or even irrelevant.[25]

In Switzerland, the Polish diaspora is small, comprising 73 organisations. Among these are historically significant institutions for Polish cultural promotion, such as the *Polish Museum in Rapperswil*, the *Kościelski Foundation*, and the *Jan Michalski Foundation*, as well as newer organisations focused on contemporary art and culture, including the *Club of the Lovers of the Living Word* in Brugg, the *Museum in Susch* (Grażyna Kulczyk), and *Literacki Przystanek Polska* Festival (2020). Additionally, a Polish school operates in Basel. These institutions have permanent sponsors and occasionally receive financial support from the Polish Embassy in Bern.

The *Club of the Lovers of the Living Word*, founded in 1986 by Barbara Młynarska-Ahrens, sister of the renowned Polish singer and satirist Wojciech Młynarski, provides a space for reciting Polish poetry, reading Polish prose, and hosting meetings with prominent performing artists. As a well-connected figure in the acting community, she invited major performers of Słowacki's and Mickiewicz's dramas to Switzerland (including Jan Holoubek and Tadeusz Łomnicki), whose readings metaphorically transported the audience to Warsaw's theatre stages. As one representative of a Polish cultural initiative in Switzerland notes: "I manage to survive thanks to the Polish Embassy in Bern, of course with the help of many people of goodwill, but above all I have a strategic sponsor—the company Amcor from Łódź. They love what I do. I can count on them."[26]

The *Museum Susch* constitutes a fully commercial, private initiative of one of Poland's most renowned entrepreneurs, who decided to establish a personal art museum encompassing her private collection while also presenting female artists from Central and Eastern Europe. It is a highly specialised institution, staffed by an international curatorial team, and it hosts solo exhibitions of highly esteemed, though not widely known, artists. As one curator at a Swiss contemporary art museum observes:

> I can say that Ms. Kulczyk considers herself a patriot and feels very strongly connected to Poland. That is why this exhibition of Jadwiga Maziarska was held now. We managed to open it still at the end of the Polish Presidency at the Council. Nevertheless, our exhibitions are always intended to feature a diverse range of female artists. The next exhibition after

[25] Interview with a representative of a Polish cultural organisation abroad. MS Teams, December 2025.

[26] Interview with a representative of a Polish cultural initiative in Switzerland. Conversation in Switzerland, July 2025.

the Maziarska show will be by a Croatian artist, followed by an Italian artist, and then an Austrian one.[27]

Literacki Przystanek Polska Festival organises biannual meetings in Zurich that bring Poles together with Polish literature. These meetings with writers, poets, journalists, columnists, and other authors provide an excellent platform for international "conversation" on the intellectual condition of Polish literature, its position within contemporary European intellectual discourse, and its role in the lives of present-day Poles. Authors of the most recent publications, representing a wide range of literary genres, including recipients of major contemporary Polish literary awards, are invited to Zurich. The events constitute a genuine intercultural dialogue, involving the authors themselves, Polish audiences, and invited Swiss participants. The Festival is not a nostalgic event evoking homesickness; rather, it represents a contemporary artistic production designed to foster open, multidimensional discussions among Poles about global issues through the written word. It is not merely a "Polonia" gathering, but a high-quality, professionally managed project with an integrative function. Previous participants in the festival have included: Joanna Bator, Mikołaj Grynberg, Magdalena Grzebałkowska, Eliza Kącka, Dorota Masłowska, Cezary Łazarewicz, Małgorzata Szejnert, and Michał Witkowski.

All of the aforementioned events and activities, representing the core work of diaspora organisations, face limited access to Polish funding, despite their principal aim of promoting Polish culture abroad and facilitating dialogue with the surrounding cultural environment. In response to these challenges, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in 2025 the *Government Strategy for Cooperation with Polonia and Poles Abroad for 2025–2030*,[28] which aims to address structural support and strategic funding for such initiatives.

4 Government Strategy for Cooperation with Polonia and Poles Abroad for 2025–2030

The *Government Strategy for Cooperation with Polonia and Poles Abroad for 2025–2030* was announced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, on 30 January 2025. Prior to its publication, the Strategy underwent consultations during inter-ministerial meetings and was reviewed by the Polonia Consultative Council attached to the Marshal of the Senate of the Republic of Poland (Opinion of the Polish Advisory Council 2025). The Council of Ministers formally adopted the strategy during a session of the Sejm on 1 April 2025 (The Council of Ministers adopted a resolution 2025). The Strategy remains in force until 2030 and

[27] Interview with a curator at a Swiss contemporary art museum. MS Teams, August 2025.

[28] See Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2025. https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/institutions-managing-funds-for-cooperation-with-the-polish-community-abroad-and-support-for-poles-abroada-guide. Accessed 28 March 2026.

is overseen in its implementation and monitoring by the Inter-Ministerial Team for Polonia and Poles Abroad. Although the strategy does not possess legislative status and functions as a programmatic document, it introduces a significant shift in the perception of the role and function of Polish diaspora organisations in national branding and the promotion of Polish culture. The document asserts that "the Polish community abroad must not only be the subject of the state's Polonia policy but also an integral element of Polish public and economic diplomacy" (Government Strategy 2025). Accordingly, the State intends to support bidirectional integration of Poles abroad, which represents a breakthrough relative to previous approaches. This entails both supporting the social activity of Poles abroad and reinforcing their ties with the homeland. The Strategy emphasises the development of civic and patriotic attitudes through the activities of Polish diaspora organisations, associations, foundations, and federations. The strategy defines seven principal objectives:

Teaching the Polish language abroad, with the development of both traditional and technologically enhanced methods, including online courses and digital self-learning tools. A programme for professional development of Polish language instructors working abroad is also envisaged.

1. Return policy, aimed at facilitating the reintegration of Poles returning to the country.
2. Civic, patriotic, and identity education, designed to strengthen civic engagement and self-organisation among Poles abroad, as well as to maintain cultural and national identity.
3. Financing Polonia activities, which stipulates that local diaspora communities should be supported in seeking local funding opportunities, forming partnerships, utilising private sponsorship instruments, and promoting volunteerism, while Polish state funding should serve as a supplementary resource (Strategy, 12). This approach encourages NGOs abroad to develop independent funding capacities while allowing Polish public funds to complement such activities.
4. Actions aimed at preserving identity, homeland connections, and cultural heritage, including protection of memory sites.
5. Social and humanitarian support for Poles abroad.
6. Promotion of tourism among Polonia and Poles abroad, to increase visits to Poland.

The strategy also envisages state support for educational programmes abroad, internships, employment opportunities for foreigners in Poland, and reforms concerning the granting of the *Karta Polaka* (Pole's Card), repatriation status, and Polish citizenship. Consequently, the strategy requires a review of financial instruments and relevant legislation, including:

– The Act of 7 September 2007 on the *Karta Polaka* (Journal of Laws 2023, item 192)

- The Act of 9 November 2000 on Repatriation (Journal of Laws 2022, item 1105)
- The Act of 2 April 2009 on Polish Citizenship (Journal of Laws 2023, item 1989)
- The Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteer Work (Journal of Laws 2024, item 1491, consolidated text)

In terms of language promotion, the Strategy envisages the creation of a structured framework for teaching Polish abroad and the preparation of educational materials tailored to the needs of learners. Document also highlights the importance of civic education, strengthening civic attitudes and self-organisation among Polonia and Poles abroad, and measures to maintain identity and homeland ties, including the preservation of cultural heritage. A particularly significant innovation is the financing mechanism for diaspora organisations, outlined in Point 4 of the Strategy. It recommends "mobilising and supporting Polish communities in securing local funding, partnerships, and private sponsorship, while positioning Polish public funds as complementary to these sources" (Government Strategy 2025, 2). The strategy thereby enables NGOs abroad to access Polish funding as supplementary support, while emphasising the importance of developing local funding independence. It also calls for the creation of guidelines for diaspora organisation financing, the establishment of a database of potential foreign partners, and simplification of application procedures. The implementation of this component is expected to strengthen the operations of diaspora organisations, allowing them to engage in partnerships and access Polish state resources as an additional source of funding.

The strategy also emphasises the promotion of return policies, including administrative simplifications, support for the recognition of professional qualifications, and special internship and entrepreneurship programmes for returning Poles. The document has been widely discussed and commented upon in Poland. For example, one representative of a Polish language development institution described it as "the first document of such scope, prepared to genuinely support teachers and students. We approach the framework pragmatically—it is meant to assist, not to serve as a step-by-step instruction" (Anonym, 2025). Similarly, the strategy has been framed at the governmental level as an effort to "integrate Polonia funding with broader state policies, modernise cooperation instruments with the diaspora, and align them with the developmental needs of the Polish economy and demographic projections?".[29]

[29] The Council of Ministers adopted a resolution on the approval of the document Government Strategy for Cooperation with the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad for 2025–2030, submitted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. 1 April 2025. https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/uchwala-w-sprawie-przyjecia-dokumentu-rzadowa-strategia-wspolpracy-z-polonia-i-polakami-za-granica-na-lata-2025--2032. Accessed 18 November 2025.

5 Conclusions

Third-sector organisations operating outside Poland in the promotion of Polish culture perform, as Michał Nowosielski observes (Nowosielski, 2020, 87), a mediating function between three spheres of influence: the state of origin of the emigrants, the host state of their current residence, and the Polish community itself. With respect to the state of origin, NGOs assist in promoting national culture, expanding its reach, and lobbying for cooperative international relations. In the context of the host state, they contribute to the integration of migrant communities and facilitate the building of relationships with the local society. Regarding the Polish community, they undoubtedly foster internal cohesion and act as advocates for its interests externally. Based on the analysis of the presented material, it appears that third-sector organisations are undergoing a clear evolution on the international stage. They are moving away from their original role as typical immigrant organisations, which primarily represented Polish culture, and are assuming the role of advocates for Polish artists within intercultural and transnational dialogue in their host countries (Nowosielski & Dzięglewski, 2021). This trend is particularly evident in the activities of organisations in Switzerland, where the numerically small Polish diaspora communicates its values in interaction with the surrounding cultural, ethnic, and artistic environment. Institutions such as the Museum in Susch and *Literacki Przystanek Polska* Festival do not confine their operations to Zurich or the St. Moritz area merely to be recognised as Polish diaspora organisations. Their mission is to position Polish culture and literature within the broader context of contemporary artistic and cultural transformations in Europe. The objectives and ethos of the Museum in Susch clearly extend beyond the promotion of the interests of Polish creators. Similarly, the goals of the Polish Arts Festival (PAF) in Limerick focus on presenting Polish art and culture in dialogue with the cultural transformations of the host country or region and in cooperation with local artists. This observation supports the concluding element of the article's research hypothesis, which posited that contemporary NGOs, as promotional and marketing entities, are becoming significant carriers of soft power. They increasingly substitute traditional state diplomatic activities and create conditions for egalitarian and partnership-based intercultural dialogue.

The hypothesis is positively verified, as the analysis demonstrates that state-led promotion of Polish culture abroad is progressing at a slower pace compared to the increasingly dynamic initiatives led by NGOs. Consequently, there is a mismatch between state actions and the activities of NGOs promoting Polish artists in the Americas and Europe. The high effectiveness of NGO initiatives is largely attributable to their organisational features, including flexibility, partnership, team building, and dialogical engagement. Unfortunately, these characteristics have not been fully recognised by the Polish state, as noted by Przemysław Kieliszewski and Marcin Poprawski (Kieliszewski & Poprawski, 2009) as early as 2008 and Grażyna and Michałowska in 2010 (Michałowska, 2010). The announcement and implementation of the 2025–2030 Strategy, combined with ongoing monitoring, may

potentially rebalance the respective contributions of state institutions and NGOs in this domain.

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The Role of Literature and Translation in Shaping Poland's Cultural Diplomacy in Romania After 1989

Cristina Godun

1 Introduction

The year 1989 marked a turning point in Poland's modern history, initiating a process of democratic renewal and cultural redefinition. As the country transitioned from decades of communist rule to a pluralistic society, culture assumed a strategic role in shaping its international image. Since the early 2000s, this cultural evolution has matured into a nuanced form of diplomacy, one that recognises literature and translation not only as expressions of national identity, but also as instruments for fostering dialogue across borders. Dorota Jurkiewicz-Eckert, a researcher in Polish cultural diplomacy, observes that the two decades following 1989 brought major democratic consolidation across all areas of public life. During this period, new priorities and challenges appeared, and Poland's cultural diplomacy was directed towards advancing the strategic objectives of foreign policy by presenting national culture internationally" (Jurkiewicz-Eckert, 2014, 260).

This evolving approach to cultural diplomacy occurred in a larger geopolitical context that was impacted by the changes in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The collapse of authoritarian regimes opened up new doors for cultural exchange between countries undergoing parallel transitions to democracy. Poland and Romania, despite their distinct linguistic and cultural traditions, found themselves on similar paths towards EU accession, market liberalisation, and the reconstruction of civil society. Their shared history, which goes back to the Middle Ages and was strengthened by common experiences under communism, made it easy for them to find common ground for ongoing cultural dialogue.

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The Polish model of cultural diplomacy, systematically developed through institutions such as the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (established in 2000), the Polish Institute network, and the Book Institute (2004), reflects a comprehensive approach to international cultural engagement. The main idea behind this framework is the belief that literature, particularly when it is translated well, can be an effective ambassador for Polish culture, values, and contemporary realities. Unlike other forms of cultural expression, literature and literary translation have a unique ability to convey complex narratives about national identity, historical memory, and individual aspirations, while promoting intellectual exchange and cross-cultural understanding. According to André Lefevere in his influential work *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but also a form of cultural rewriting that shapes how people see, understand, and integrated foreign literatures into their own cultures. This view is echoed by later scholars such as Lawrence Venuti (*The Translator's Invisibility*, 1995), Susan Bassnett (*Translation Studies*, 2002), and Polish Poet and scholar Jerzy Jarniewicz (*Tłumacz między innymi. Szkice o przekładach, językach i literaturze*, 2018), who all emphasise the translators' role in mediating cultural narratives.[1]

The selection of Polish-Romanian literary relations as a focal point for this study is motivated by several converging factors. First, both countries experienced similar trajectories of democratic transition and European integration, joining NATO (Poland in 1999, Romania in 2004) and the European Union (Poland in 2004, Romania in 2007). This temporal proximity, in addition to similar experiences prior to 1989, created a natural framework for mutual learning and cultural exchange. Second, the author's position as a Romanian Polish scholar and translator of Polish literature provides unique insider access to both the institutional mechanism supporting these translations and the practical challenges involved in cultural mediation. This dual perspective—academic and practitioner—enables a more nuanced understanding of how cultural diplomacy operates at the intersection of policy and practice. Third, in recent years, Poland and Romania have stepped into more visible roles within the European Union with Poland holding the rotating Presidency of the Council in early 2025, and Romania shaping key aspects of the EU's eastern policy, especially in response to the war in Ukraine. Against this backdrop, their cultural ties have gained a new dimension. The Polish-Romanian Cultural Season, the first initiative of its kind between the two countries, is a

[1] Applied to the Polish-Romanian context, these frameworks highlight how translation operates as cultural rewriting, visible in Romanian paratexts that situate Polish literature within shared post-communist or European narratives. They also underscore the visibility of translators who act as cultural mediators through essays, interviews, and public events, shaping Romanian readers' interpretative expectations. At the institutional level, mechanisms of cultural diplomacy (funding schemes, editorial agendas, and cultural programmes) guide the selection, presentation, and circulation of Polish authors. Together, these perspectives show how mediation, rewriting, and cultural positioning inform about the diplomatic significance of Polish literature in Romania and the role of translation in broader soft-power dynamics.

big step forward in bilateral cultural exchange. For 18 months, the season brings together artists, writers, and institutions from both sides to talk about heritage, creativity, and finding mutual ground.

In terms of objectives and methodology, this paper seeks to examine the role of literary translation in Poland's cultural diplomacy strategy, emphasising the impact of Polish literature translated into Romanian on bilateral cultural relations. The main goals are: (1) to measure the extent and evolution of Polish literature translations into Romanian since 1989; (2) to analyse the institutional framework that supports and guides these translation activities; (3) to evaluate the impact of specific authors and works on Romanian perceptions of contemporary Poland; and (4) to assess the effectiveness of literature as an instrument of cultural diplomacy.

This study operates under several interconnected hypotheses. First, that the volume and diversity of Polish literary translations into Romanian have increased significantly since Poland's EU accession in 2004, reflecting both enhanced institutional support and growing Romanian interest in Polish culture as a model of successful democratic transition. Second, that Polish cultural institutions have strategically prioritised the translation of contemporary authors (Nobel Prize winners like Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, and Olga Tokarczuk, but also young contemporary writers such as Szczepan Twardoch, Wojciech Kuczok, Andrzej Stasiuk, Dorota Masłowska), to project an image of Poland as a modern, intellectually vibrant European nation rather than merely a post-communist country. Third, it stands to reason that these translation activities have contributed measurably to improved cultural relations between Poland and Romania, as evidenced by increased academic exchanges, and shared positions on European policy issues.

The methodology combines quantitative analysis of translation patterns with qualitative assessment of cultural impact. Quantitative data includes bibliographic analysis of Polish-Romanian translations from 1989 to 2025 (drawing on bibliographic sources such as *Bibliografia traducerilor din literatura polonă (1945–2011)*, *O istorie a traducerilor în limba română*, and the Book Institute's official database), examining publication frequencies, genre distribution, author selection patterns, and editorial practices. To contextualise these findings, the study also draws on qualitative materials gathered from reception studies and critical reviews published in Romanian literary journals, interviews and public discussions with translators and authors, as well as from paratextual elements such as prefaces, afterwords, and editorial notes. These sources were analysed to identify recurring interpretative patterns, thematic emphases, and the discursive positioning of Polish literature within Romanian cultural debates. Institutional mediation (book launches, author visits, cultural events, and academic syllabi) was likewise considered as an indicator of reception and cultural impact. Interpretative claims based on quantitative data are therefore supported by the incorporation of bibliographic evidence, critical discourse, and institutional practices, providing a solid foundation for the following examination of the institutional structures that form Poland's cultural diplomacy.

2 The Institutional Framework of Polish Cultural Diplomacy

Poland's transformation from a communist state to a cultural stronghold in the region is one of the best examples of strategic cultural diplomacy in post-communist Europe. This change did not happen by accident; it was the result of a carefully planned institutional framework designed to show off Poland's soft power through cultural engagement, with literature and translation playing a central role in this comprehensive strategy.

At the core of Poland's cultural diplomacy structure stands the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, a government organisation financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, responsible for promoting Polish culture abroad. Named after Poland's national poet, the Institute shows how serious the country is about using literature as a diplomatic tool. Far from being merely a cultural organisation, the Institute functions as Poland's main cultural diplomacy agency, with remarkable reach and impact. It organises over 6,000 cultural events annually, attracting almost 55 million people worldwide. This scale of cultural involvement represents a major investment in Poland's international image and influence. The Institute's strategic framework for 2010–2016 made it clear that one of its goals was to use culture to create a recognisable "Polska" brand. Literature was regarded not only as artistic heritage but also as a diplomatic asset capable of promoting intercultural dialogue, influencing perceptions, and furthering Poland's foreign policy goals. The 2017–2025 period marked a significant expansion of IAM's international reach. Under subsequent leadership of directors, the Institute placed literature within broader interdisciplinary frameworks, linking it to theatre, visual arts, and cultural criticism. The 2025 cultural program accompanying Poland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union includes 200 events in 30 countries and over 1200 artists, proving that Polish cultural diplomacy has matured into a strategic instrument for international engagement.[2]

Assisting the Adam Mickiewicz Institute's work, the network of Polish Institutes disseminates information about Poland and promotes cooperation in various cultural and scientific fields at the bilateral level. The Polish Institute in Bucharest is a great example of this kind of approach. It is a key link between Polish and Romanian culture. Rather than working in isolation, the Institute acts as a cultural mediator, facilitating academic exchanges and organising cultural events that bring Polish writers and artists directly into dialogue with Romanian audiences.

The Book Institute with its ©POLAND Translation Programme,[3] designed to promote Polish literature worldwide, is probably the most important component

[2] Adam Mickiewicz Institute. "6 months, 30 countries, 200 events and 1,200 artists. The international cultural programme of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2025 has come to an end." https://iam.pl/en/dla-mediow/6-months-30-countries-200-events-and-1200-artists-the-international-cultural-programme-of.

[3] Instytut Książki. The ©POLAND Translation Programme. https://www.bookinstitute.pl/programy/the-poland-translation-programme/.

of Poland's literary diplomacy. This program represents more than just financial support; it is a carefully planned instrument of cultural influence. By funding translations of fiction, children's literature, and cultural non-fiction, Poland makes sure that its cultural message reaches different audiences and age groups. The Ministry of Culture allocated the Book Institute nearly 5 million PLN in 2023 alone, to support translations, resulting in almost 4,000 Polish books published abroad so far. These numbers prove not only how serious Poland is about literary diplomacy but also reflect a deep understanding of how cultural influence works in the contemporary world. Other programs, such as the Sample Translations POLAND and translation residencies further demonstrate strategic thinking by supporting translators directly, recognising them as essential cultural mediators in the international circulation of literature. For Romanian readers, Polish literature offers familiar themes of democratic transition, European integration, and the formation of a post-communist identity. It also gives them new perspectives on these shared experiences, creating emotional connections that political discourse alone cannot achieve.

To understand the range and impact of Poland's literary diplomacy in Romania, it is necessary to carefully examine the translation patterns and publishing trends over the past three decades. While existing databases for Polish-Romanian literary translations remain fragmented, available evidence reveals the overall evolution of Central European relations in the post-communist era. The quantitative analysis of Polish literature translations into Romanian reveals three distinct phases that correspond closely to major political and cultural shifts in both countries: 1989–2004, 2004–2015, and 2015–2025. Each period demonstrates distinct characteristics in terms of volume, genre preferences, and institutional support mechanisms.

The immediate post-communist period witnessed what might be characterised as a "cultural awakening" in Romanian publishing markets. According to a 2012 report by Literature Across Frontiers, general translations grew by 53% between 1990 and 2012, with literary translations increasing by 66%. This shows that Europeans are becoming more open to other cultures and international literary exchange (Büchler, 2012). During this initial phase, translations of Polish literature into Romanian averaged about 8–12 titles per year, representing a small but significant presence in a publishing market still adjusting to new freedoms of expression. In the early 1990s, publishers were particularly interested in Polish canonical authors such as Henryk Sienkiewicz, Władysław Reymont, Bruno Schulz, Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, and Ryszard Kapuściński. The selection patterns during this period reflected both real literary merit and symbolic political meaning, but also a desire to recover voices previously marginalised under communist censorship.

The reopening of the Polish Institute in Bucharest (2001), the establishment of the Book Institute, and the launch of the ©POLAND Translation Programme (2000) marked a significant turning point in the early 2000s. This institutional framework gave Polish literature structured financial and strategic support for its

international dissemination. Official data from the Book Institute shows that Romania has consistently received direct support since the program's inception.[4] It was estimated that, out of approximately 4,000 titles supported globally, 110 Polish works have been translated into Romanian between 2001 and 2024 (Book Institute 2025). These numbers prove that translation is not a secondary activity but a central mechanism, as it allows Polish literature to cross language barriers and reinforce Poland's image as a modern and culturally developed country.

This period also saw the first coordinated efforts to diversify genre representation in translation. While literary fiction continued to dominate, the years 2004–2015 brought increased attention to Polish contemporary poetry (notable authors such as Jan Kochanowski, Kazimiera Iłłakowiczówna, Zbigniew Herbert, Bolesław Leśmian, Tadeusz Różewicz, Wisława Szymborska, but also contemporary poets like Ryszard Krynicki, Wojciech Bonowicz, Piotr Sommer), children's literature, literary reportage, cultural essays, dramatic texts, and contemporary prose. The strategic selection of authors, often aligned with Poland's soft power objectives, has helped shape Romanian perceptions of Poland as an appealing country.

An important part of this strategy is the World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature (Światowy Kongres Tłumaczy Literatury Polskiej), organised by the Book Institute in Kraków. Since its start in 2005, the Congress has convened five editions, bringing together translators, authors, publishers, and cultural mediators from over 50 countries.[5] Its main goals are to strengthen the global community of Polish literature translators, facilitate the exchange of experiences, and build lasting networks between translators and Polish cultural institutions. Through panel discussions, workshops, literary showcases, and the prestigious Transatlantyk Prize, the Congress emphasises the role of translators as cultural ambassadors and makes sure that current trends in Polish literature and language are promoted across borders.

The current phase represents the maturation of Poland's cultural diplomacy strategy and its most intensive period of literary engagement with Romania. Annual translations numbers have risen, although they are not constant, reflecting both enhanced institutional support and growing market confidence among Romanian publishers in the cultural and commercial value of Polish literary works.

The period has been shaped by several catalysing events, like Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Prize in Literature (2018), which generated unprecedented international

[4] According to the results of the September 2025 selection round of the ©POLAND Translation Programme, Romania ranked first in the number of accepted proposals, with 7 supported translations, surpassing France and the United Kingdom (5 each), Bulgaria and Croatia (4 each), and Italy and Greece (3 each). These figures confirm Romanian publishers' sustained engagement with Polish literature.

[5] The inaugural edition in 2005 gathered 174 participants from 50 countries, including both seasoned translators and emerging voices, while the last, in 2022, had 250 translators from more than 50 countries on all the continents. Romanian translators have been active participants in all editions of the Congresses.

attention for contemporary Polish writing. Romanian publishers responded quickly to this recognition, releasing multiple titles in translation, although Tokarczuk's work had already gained traction in Romania prior to her international acclaim: seven novels were published between 2001 and 2019, followed by three additional titles between 2020 and 2024.

To properly evaluate the importance of Polish literary presence in Romania, it is essential to understand how these translations compare with other foreign literatures in the Romanian market. Within the larger translation landscape, Polish literature occupies a distinctive niche. Unlike translations from major Western European languages, which often benefit from larger commercial markets and established distribution networks, Polish literature relies more on cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Comparative analysis suggests that translations of Polish literature into Romanian exceed similar initiatives from other EU Slavic languages. Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, Slovakian, and Slovenian, but also Serbian and Ukrainian literature have lower translation numbers into Romanian.[6] This disparity shows that Poland has an effective institutional support system for translation activities and a comprehensive cultural diplomacy strategy.

The demographic profile of Polish literature readers in Romania reveals distinctive patterns. Unlike translations from English or French, which often target wider commercial audiences, Polish literature translations attract educated, culturally engaged readers who see these works as windows into Central European intellectual life. Romuald Cudak's recent study on the international reception of Polish literature suggests that university literature programs and cultural institutions play an important role in maintaining demand for Polish translations, acting as essential mediators between institutional initiatives and public readership (Cudak, 2024, 13–36). Cudak offers a strong theoretical framework for understanding the transnational circulation of Polish texts. He conceptualises the "worldliness" of Polish literature as a multidimensional phenomenon: its participation in the global literary

[6] This comparative statement is based on data compiled in *Bibliografia traducerilor din literaturile slave 1945–2011* and in Sorin Paliga's *Literatura cehă în limba română* (Eikon, Bucharest, 2025), a bibliography prepared using catalogues from the Library of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Bucharest as well as from the Library of the Romanian Academy. The database has been periodically updated, most recently in June 2025 by Sorin Paliga, Helliana Ianculescu, and Anca Irina Ionescu (Paliga, 2025, 3). According to these sources, between 1989 and 2025, 220 single-author volumes and 10 anthologies of Polish literature were published in Romanian translation, compared with 126 single-author volumes and 10 anthologies from Czech literature. Discussions with colleagues from the Department of Russian and Slavic Philology—many of whom are both scholars and active literary translators—further confirm that translations from Bulgarian, Croatian, Serbian, Slovak, and Ukrainian literature are significantly fewer. This disparity is partly explained by the absence, in several cases, of sustained institutional support comparable to that offered by the Polish Institute, the Book Institute or the Czech Centre. Translations from these languages often depend on individual editorial policies, occasional grants such as Traduki, or financial support from minority unions (e.g. the Union of Serbs in Romania, the Union of Ukrainians in Romania).

system, the presence of world literature within Polish texts, and its creation abroad through translation and diasporic writing. Using polysystem theory (Even-Zohar) and Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, Cudak stresses that Polish literature is often received in peripheral literary systems (like Romania) not through commercial channels but through academic, cultural, and institutional mediation (Cudak, 2024, 13–14). Interpretive communities, such as university departments, literary journals, and cultural societies, shape this reception by acting as gatekeepers and facilitators of meaning. In this context, translation becomes a form of cultural transfer rather than just linguistic conversion, enabling Polish literature to function as a dialogic and diplomatic force. Cudak's analysis confirms that Polish literary translations in Romania attract educated, culturally engaged readers who view these texts as windows into Central European intellectual life, rather than entertainment for the masses.

The evolution of translation numbers over three decades reveals several trends that illustrate the broader dynamics of cultural diplomacy. Most striking is the acceleration pattern: while growth was modest during the 1990s and steady during the 2000s, the current decade has witnessed exponential expansion that suggests cultural momentum building itself. This acceleration reflects several converging factors. Enhanced institutional support from Polish cultural organisations has reduced financial barriers for Romanian publishers. Simultaneously, growing Romanian confidence in European literary markets has encouraged publishers to take risks with lesser-known authors (i.e. Grzegorz Musiał, *În porumbar*, trad. Carmen Nicolaescu with a foreword by Romanian poet Simona Popescu, Paralela 45, 2004) and experimental works (i.e. the translation of Dorota Masłowska's novel *Alba ca zăpada și roșu bolșevic*, transl. and foreword by C. Geambașu, Trei, 2008). Furthermore, many of these lesser-known authors were strategically introduced to Romanian audiences through prefaces written by prominent Romanian critics, writers, or translators, often affiliated with academic institutions. These paratextual interventions, along with reviews in literary publications and book promotions (often held in the presence of the authors themselves), not only legitimised the translated works but also framed them within familiar intellectual contexts, which made their reception easier among culturally engaged readers. In addition, the development of a dedicated community of Polish-Romanian literary translators has led to a level of cultural expertise that makes it possible to choose more complex works and produce better translations. This evolution has not occurred in isolation; Poland has actively supported the professionalisation of literary translators not only through funding schemes such as the previously mentioned ©POLAND Translation Programme, but also through a broader system of recognition and engagement. Prestigious awards like the Transatlantyk Prize,[7] translation-focused festivals such as "Lost in Translation" in Gdańsk, and targeted events like the

[7] In 2016, the Transatlantyk Prize was awarded to Constantin Geambașu, a distinguished Romanian translator and scholar. His decades-long contribution, including over a hundred translations from Polish into Romanian has significantly shaped the Romanian reception of Polish literature.

World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature organised by the Book Institute in Kraków have all contributed to building a well-connected translator network that serves as ambassadors for Polish culture. Moreover, Poland has pioneered a unique model of author-specific translator congresses, such as the Congress of Stanisław Lem's Translators, the Congress of Witold Gombrowicz's Translators, and the Congress of Olga Tokarczuk's Translators. All these events are meant to encourage deeper interpretative dialogue and build a community of people who mediate Polish literature abroad. Complementing these initiatives, the Book Institute in Kraków offers annual literary residencies for translators, providing selected participants with accommodation, a stipend, and access to Polish literary resources and experts. These residencies aim to support translators working on specific Polish texts, giving them time and space to refine their projects while engaging with the cultural and linguistic environment of the source literature. Together, these mechanisms show that translation is not only a technical act, but also a form of cultural diplomacy that needs constant investment, intellectual exchange, and symbolic recognition. The steadily growing number of translations from Polish literature, along with the sustained interest shown by prestigious Romanian publishing houses such as Polirom, Humanitas, Casa Cărții de Știință, Ratio&Revelatio, Trei, Art, Prut, Tracus Arte, prove that Poland and Romania are engaged in a continuous cultural dialogue rather than in sporadic cultural exchange.

As previously stated, the current phase represents the peak of Poland's cultural diplomacy strategy in terms of literary engagement with Romania. Recent translation patterns reflect a nuanced understanding of market dynamics and cultural timing. The war in Ukraine has lent particular urgency to literature's role as a mirror of societal disruption and geopolitical tension, with Polish texts increasingly addressing themes relevant to European identity and democratic resilience.[8]

3 Mapping Literary Preferences and Cultural Priorities: Chronology and Genre Distribution

The chronology and genre distribution of Polish literature translations in the Romanian market since 1990 offers valuable insight into reader preferences, translators' choices as cultural mediators, and strategic decisions influenced by cultural

[8] Notable examples include Piotr Pogorzelski's essays on Ukraine (*Borș ucrainean. De la statul sovietic la revoluția demnității*, transl. C. Godun, Meteor Press, Bucharest, 2015), the poetry anthology *Întâlniri. Poezii din Ucraina și Polonia* (transl. C. Geambașu, Luiza Săvescu, Vasile Moga, Ioana Diaconu-Mureșan, Marina Ilie, Maria Hoșciuc; foreword by Ewa Goczal, afterword by Camelia Dinu, Tracus Arte, 2022), and five novels by Józef Mackiewicz's novels (*Drumul spre nicăieri 2019*; *Cazul masacrului de la Katyń*, 2020; *Kontra,* 2021; *Nu trebuie să vorbești cu voce tare*, 2022; *Vaticanul în umbra stelei roșii*, 2023—all translated by C. Geambașu, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca). Additional contributions include Jan Polkowski's *Pandemia și alte dezastre* (Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021) and Bronislaw Wildstein's *Revoltă și acceptare* (Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2022), both of which engage directly with contemporary crises and ideological fault lines.

diplomacy. Far from being random, the genre distribution reflects a deliberate balance between market appeal, cultural significance, and diplomatic goals. Looking at these genre patterns over the years reveals how cultural diplomacy works through targeted literary selection and how Romanian audiences have responded to different forms of Polish cultural expression.

3.1 Chronological Table of Polish Literary Translations into Romanian (1989–2024)

The table below shows this evolution.[9] Before 1989, Romanians did not know much about Poland because their knowledge was largely shaped by limited historical knowledge, ideological filters, and cultural isolation that created oversimplified and often inaccurate representations of Polish society. These stereotypes, while not necessarily negative, portrayed Poland as a nation defined by suffering, religious conservatism, and political victimisation, rather than by progress and innovation. Post-1989 literary translation has systematically challenged these oversimplified views. The first decade was dominated by classical authors, reflecting thus the publishers' caution and reluctance to take risks on lesser-known contemporary voices. However, in the following decades, the editorial offer steadily diversified, becoming more open to contemporary authors whose works engage with modern themes, such as urban alienation, gender politics, historical memory, and philosophical inquiry. This shift signals not only a change in publishing strategies, but also a wider cultural reorientation: Polish literature is increasingly perceived as a valuable contributor to European intellectual life, capable of resonating with Romania's evolving cultural and political landscape (Table 1).

The table above shows that the 1990s were a time of restoration, with Romanian publishers prioritising canonical and historical authors such as H. Sienkiewicz, W. Reymont, and W. Gombrowicz, whose works served to reintroduce Polish literary heritage in the post-communist context, despite the fact that even prior to 1989 Polish literature was constantly present in Romania. This phase reflects not only a cultural reorientation, but also a pronounced editorial and translational prudence. The choices made by Romanian translators and publishers during the 1990s reveal a preference for consolidating the presence of Polish literature through established, canonical voices—authors already integrated into the broader European literary circuit, often realist in style and thematically anchored in historical or moral narratives. There was limited openness towards avant-garde experimentation or emerging contemporary authors, suggesting a strategic emphasis on literary legitimacy and cultural continuity rather than risk-taking or innovation.

From the early 2000s onward, the genre landscape diversified significantly. Contemporary fiction, philosophical essays, and literary reportage gained prominence,

[9] This synthesis is based on the author's professional expertise and a comparative analysis of key bibliographic sources on Polish-Romanian literary translation, detailed in the reference list.

Table 1 Polish literary translations in Romania by period, genre, and institutional context

Year Range	Titles Translated	Dominant Genres	Key Authors	Main Publishers[10]	Key Translators	Institutional Context	Target Audience
1990–1999	>50	Historical fiction, romance, crime fiction, classical authors, realist prose	Bieńkowska, Choromański, Sienkiewicz, Reymont, Żeromski, Krasiński, Dołęga-Mostowicz, Gombrowicz, Schulz, Kuśniewicz, Konwicki, Zaniewski, Miłosz, Lem	Univers, Junimea, Humanitas, Polirom, Nemira	Olga Zaicik, Stan Velea, Ion Petrică, Mihai Mitu, N. Mareș, C. Geambașu	Post-communist recovery	Academic, cultural elite, and general readers
2000–2004	~20	Contemporary prose, essays, poetry	Myśliwski, Miłosz, Szczypiorski, Chwin, Tokarczuk, Huelle, Kołakowski Szymborska Herbert Schulz Stasiuk, Andruhovîci	Saeculum I.O., Humanitas, Polirom, Univers, Paralela 45, Allfa, Paideia, Cronica, Curtea Veche Timpul	Olga Zaicik, Stan Velea, Ion Petrică, Mihai Mitu, C. Geambașu, R. Janowska-Lascăr, M. C. Fiscutean Emil Iordache	Launch of ©POLAND Translation Programme	Cultural elite, literary critics, and readers with a taste for stylistically refined prose

(continued)

[10] Several Romanian publishers that once actively translated Polish literature are no longer present in the market, reflecting broader shifts in post-1989 publishing dynamics. A few remain formally registered but have reduced or redirected their activity.

Table 1 (continued)

Year Range	Titles Translated	Dominant Genres	Key Authors	Main Publishers	Key Translators	Institutional Context	Target Audience
2005–2009	~25	Literary reportage, poetry, theatre, essays, contemporary prose (young authors)	Bednarski, Miłosz, Fiut, Gombrowicz, Herbert, Kuczok, Kapuściński, Masłowska, Stasiuk, Słowacki Wyspiański, Wosińska	Humanitas, Polirom, RAO, Art, Paralela 45, Paideia, Tracus Arte, Curtea Veche, Domino, Trei	M. Mitu S. Velea C. Geambașu, C. Godun, L. Săvescu	Prefaces by Romanian intellectuals, author events, festival circuits, institutional support	Mature, culturally engaged readers
2010–2014	~30	Memoirs, literary reportage, essays, fiction, theatre, classics, poetry, SF	Bonowicz, Fiut, Gombrowicz, Kołakowski, Krasiński, Krynicki, Lem, Ostałowska, Pilch, Rejmer, Reymont, Różewicz, Stasiuk, Szczygieł, Szymborska, Tokarczuk, Wałęsa, Wałęsa, Wat, Wiśniewski, Żukowski	Casa Cărții de Știință, Art, RAO, Polirom, Paideia, Lider, EUB, Arc, Curtea Veche, Paladin, Ratio & Revelatio	C. Godun, C. Geambașu, A. M. Luft, L. Săvescu, O. Zaicik, G. Rostaș, M. Ilie, I. Diaconu-Mureșanu, S. Daici	Translator residencies, ©POLAND Translation Programme	Academics, translators, and literary enthusiasts

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Year Range	Titles Translated	Dominant Genres	Key Authors	Main Publishers	Key Translators	Institutional Context	Target Audience
2015–2019	~35	Contemporary fiction, children's literature, literary reportage, essays, poetry, historical novels, crime fiction	Augustyniak, Krajewski, Kraszewski, Korczak, Legutko, Leśmian, Mackiewicz Miłosz, Ostałowska, Pogorzelski, Tokarczuk, Twardoch, Stempowski, Szczygieł, Wojtyła	Casa Cărții de Știință, Humanitas, Meteor Press, EUB, Ratio&Revelatio, Eikon, Curtea Veche, Excelsior Art	C. Geambașu, C. Godun, V. Moga, A. I. Ionescu	©POLAND Translation Programme	Intergenerational readership, educators, literary enthusiasts
2020–2024	~25	Contemporary prose, essays	Bolecki, Herling-Grudziński, Mackiewicz, Ruszar, Schulz, Tokarczuk, Wildstein	Humanitas, Casa Cărții de Știință, Polirom, Trei	V. Moga, C. Geambașu, C. Godun, I. Diaconu-Mureșanu, M. Ilie	©POLAND Translation Programme; Polish-Romanian Cultural Season, EU Presidency	Mixed readership, including specialised audiences

Source Author's synthesis based on bibliographic date and institutional records

indicating a shift towards more intellectually demanding and thematically nuanced texts. The inclusion of young authors such as Dorota Masłowska, Wojciech Kuczok, Andrzej Stasiuk, and Olga Tokarczuk (her first Romanian translation appeared in 2001) suggests growing editorial confidence and a readership incrementally receptive to stylistic innovation.

The consistent presence of translators affiliated with academic institutions—often contributing prefaces or critical commentary—highlights the mediating role of scholarly expertise in shaping reception and perception. These paratextual interventions helped legitimised new authors and framed their work within intellectual discourses.

The growing popularity of children's literature and fantasy between 2015 and 2024, two genres still strongly underrepresented, indicates a strategic expansion of target audiences, probably influenced by institutional support and evolving market dynamics (Table 2).

Contemporary Polish prose has stated its dominance, making up about 45–50% of all Polish titles since 1989. This supremacy reflects both commercial viability and cultural accessibility, as novels and literary journalism offer Romanian readers deep insight into contemporary Polish sense of identity and social realities. Thematic trends in translated Polish prose have evolved significantly across the last three decades. The early post-communist period (1989–2004) showed a strong preference for works addressing themes of political transformation, historical memory, and the individual's relationship with authoritarian systems. Authors like Czesław Miłosz (*Gândirea captivă*, transl. C. Geambașu, Humanitas, 1999; *Europa natală*, transl. C. Geambașu, Univers, 1999), Leszek Kołakowski (*Conferințe mici pe teme mari*, transl. C. Geambașu, Paideia, 2003), and Andrzej Stasiuk (*Europa mea*, transl. C. Geambașu, Paralela 45, 2004) found Romanian audiences receptive to narratives that resonated with their own experiences of political transition.

The European integration phase (2004–2015) witnessed a shift towards more cosmopolitan themes with translated prose increasingly addressing questions of European identity, migration, and cultural globalisation. This period saw the emergence of what might be termed "European literature", works that spoke of shared experiences rather than narrowly national concerns. Polish authors (like Andrzej Stasiuk) writing about such themes found particularly receptive Romanian audiences during this period of intense EU integration.

The current phase (2015–2025) has been characterised by diversification in thematic selection. Contemporary translated prose addresses everything from climate change (reflected in both prose and poetry) and technological transformation to gender relations, generational tensions, and political conflict. Although poetry translations often receive disproportionate critical attention relative to their market visibility, Polish poetry in Romanian translation has nevertheless maintained a steady presence, marked by both quality selection and representation. The distribution between individual collections (approximately 50 volumes) and anthologies (around 10) suggests thematic and generational breadth. It also demonstrates that Polish poetry in Romanian translation after 2000 is not marginal, but methodically

Table 2 Genre breakdown of Polish literary translations in Romania (2000–2024)

Genre	Approx. Number of Titles	Percentage	Notes
Prose (novels, short stories, memoirs)	~280	≈ 58%	Includes historical fiction, realist novels, contemporary fiction, memoirs, fantasy, and science fiction - limited but growing interest. Lem remains a cult figure among Romanian sci-fi readers and academics. Still underrepresented in current publishing priorities
Poetry	~110	≈ 23%	Includes individual volumes, bilingual editions, and anthologies. Poetry has gained momentum post-2000, with numerous bilingual anthologies and curated selections, often supported by institutional programs
Cultural Essays and Reportage	~45	≈ 9%	Includes cultural essays, philosophical reflections, and literary reportage. These texts reflect Poland's soft power strategy, engaging Romanian readers with sociopolitical and cultural themes
Drama/Theatre	~15	≈ 3%	Includes individual volumes, curated anthologies, and standalone plays translated in response to the specific demands of theatre productions and theatre festivals. Just like sci-fi and children's literature, drama remains underrepresented, though recent years show modest growth in these areas
Philosophical essays	~20	≈ 4%	Includes works by Karol Wojtyła, Leszek Kołakowski, Ryszard Legutko

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Genre	Approx. Number of Titles	Percentage	Notes
Children's Literature	~10	≈ 2%	Mostly classic and some contemporary works. Growing interest post-2015, but still a neglected genre, often in bilingual editions. Translations often depend on individual publisher initiative
Other (biographies, monographs, literary studies)	~10	≈ 2%	Includes literary criticism, historical studies, and monographs

Source compiled by the author

cultivated, institutionally supported, and increasingly dialogic. While its readership may be more specialised than that of prose, its symbolic and cultural capital is considerable.

A corpus of 10 anthologies published between 2003 and 2022 reflects a deliberate effort to balance historical recovery with contemporary relevance and gender representation. The chronological range of these anthologies—as illustrated in the table below—is striking: from pre-modern Slavic verse (*Antologia poeziei slave premoderne. Secolele IX-XVIII* 2003) to Romantic messianism (*Romantismul mesianic polonez* 2022) offering Romanian readers access to foundational poetic traditions and ideological frameworks that deepen their understanding of the Polish ethos. Thematic anthologies such as *Lirică feminină poloneză* (2014, 2016) and regional selection like *10 poeți cracovieni* (2012) diversify the poetic landscape, while dialogic formats such as *PODURI. MOSTY* (2018) and *ÎNTÂLNIRI* (2022) cultivate intercultural exchange and solidarity, particularly in response to geopolitical tensions such as the war in Ukraine. Building on this trajectory, *Amprente. O antologie a poetelor poloneze* (Tracus Arte 2025) represents a significant addition to the corpus of Polish poetry in Romanian translation, with a distinct focus on gendered voice and emotional resilience. Curated and introduced by scholar Marina Ilie, with translations by Ilie and Ioana Diaconu-Mureșanu, and prefaced by poet Alina Purcaru, the volume gathers a century's worth of poetry written by Polish women. It offers not only a literary mirror for Romanian readers but also a space of solidarity and healing, foregrounding themes of mourning, resistance, and everyday transformation. As Romanian poet Radu Vancu notes in his endorsement, the anthology succeeds in "speaking redemptively about mutilated worlds," reaffirming poetry's promise in times of rupture. In this sense, *Amprente* continues the broader editorial and institutional effort to foster intercultural dialogue and gender representation within Romanian-Polish literary exchange. Polish poetry translations have also benefited from a solid network of Romanian literary

journals (*Poesis International*, *Observator Cultural*, *România literară*), independent platforms (*LiterOmania*), and festivals (FILIT Iași, "Poetry is in Bistrița", The Bucharest International Poetry Festival, and the Timișoara International Literature Festival) which have amplified their visibility and critical reception. These venues have played a major role in hosting Polish poets and cultivating a readership attuned to both aesthetic nuance and cultural dialogue.[11]

About 10–15% of Polish translations into Romanian are non-fiction, such as essays, cultural criticism, and historical works. While their numbers are modest, these works often have a significant impact on intellectual circles, making them particularly valuable for cultural diplomacy. They reveal Polish experience with democratisation, European integration, and economic transformation, giving Romanian readers comparative perspectives on their own national development. Cultural essays and criticism are also significant, because they introduce Romanian intellectuals to Polish perspectives on art, literature, and social issues. Although this corpus is relatively small in quantitative terms, it has had a disproportionately strong impact on Romanian intellectual life. This is partly because of the authors' reputation and symbolic authority. For example, works by Leszek Kołakowski, Czesław Miłosz, or Adam Michnik circulated in Romania during the transition period as intellectual references that expressed democratic values, civil society debates, and post-communist reform stories. Their ideas circulated not only in the literary world but also in academic papers, journalism, and public debates. A similar dynamic is evident in genres with modest numerical representation but high international popularity. Polish science fiction and fantasy are not widely translated, but the fact that Stanisław Lem and Andrzej Sapkowski, two renowned authors whose works have even reached Romanian readers through intermediary translations from English, show that they are much more well-known than their number would suggest. Their works have influenced how Romanians see Polish cultural production and have contributed to the international reception of Polish literature. These examples suggest that cultural impact is not always correlated with volume, because works that are carefully chosen or have historical relevance can have a big impact even if they are only a small portion of the overall translation landscape.

The most underrepresented categories remain children's and young adult literature as well as dramaturgy, making up no more than 5% of total translations. This modest representation reflects structural challenges in the Romanian book market rather than lack of quality in Polish genre literature. However, despite these limitations, Polish drama and children's literature have achieved considerable cultural resonance in Romania through selective, impactful productions. Illustrative examples include Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Clasa noastră*, staged multiple times in Romania; Sławomir Mrożek's popular plays; and, most recently,

[11] For further details, see Instytut Książki. 2025. Copyright Poland Translation Programme Results. file:///D:/Pobrane/copyright_poland_translation_programme_2025.pdf; Instytut Książki. Historia Instytutu Książki. https://www.instytutksiazki.pl/historia-instytutu/.

Dorota Masłowska's *Ceilalți*, adapted into a multimedia performance at FILIT Iași 2025, blending spoken word and music in a format that highlights contemporary Polish urban poetics and social critique.

4 Translators as Linguistic Mediators and Cultural Ambassadors

Any discussion of literature and translation as instruments of Polish cultural diplomacy must consider the essential role of translators who mediate between Polish and Romanian literary cultures and act as cultural diplomats in their own right. Their work shapes how Romanians understand Polish culture not only through linguistic mastery but also through a panoramic cultural, political, and societal knowledge. Leading translators have become esteemed cultural figures, with their names prominently displayed on book covers and their translation choices tuning into subjects of critical debate. This visibility reflects a growing appreciation for translation as cultural mediation and creative activity, rather than mechanical linguistic transfer. The translator community has also formed institutional relationships with Polish cultural organisations, actively participating in residencies, workshops, conferences, and exchange programs that encourage constant intercultural dialogue.

Many of the most accomplished Romanian translators of Polish literature are also scholars of Polish culture, which only accentuates their authority and impact. Their dual role as translators and academics enables them not only to render texts with linguistic precision and cultural sensitivity, but also to validate and contextualise the works they translate. Through paratextual contributions such as critical reviews, prefaces, annotations, public lectures, and participation in literary debates, they help create a Romanian framework for understanding Polish literature, effectively curating a canon of representative works. This academic engagement guarantees that Polish literature is not merely translated, but meaningfully interpreted and integrated into Romanian cultural discourse.

Their contributions have not gone unnoticed by Polish institutions. Many Romanian translators have formally been recognised as key promoters of Polish culture abroad, receiving prestigious awards such as the Transatlantyk Prize (2016),[12] the *Polonicum* Award from the University in Warsaw for outstanding achievements in promoting Polish language and culture (2013), and the honorary title of Doctor Honoris Causa from the Jagiellonian University (2022), all awarded to Constantin Geambașu. Other translators (such as Olga Zaicik, Ion Petrică, Stan Velea, Mihai Mitu, Cristina Godun, Marina Ilie, and Vasile Moga) have received state medals, accolades from cultural foundations, and have been featured in Polish literary and

[12] See https://lls.unibuc.ro/2016/domnul-prof-dr-constantin-geambasu-laureat-al-marelui-premiu-transatlantic-din-polonia/; https://instytutpolski.pl/bucuresti/2016/06/24/premiul-transatlantyk-pentru-constantin-geambasu/.

cultural journals, a sign of the esteem in which they are held within Poland's intellectual and diplomatic circles. These awards show how important the translators are not only as language mediators, but also as cultural ambassadors who connect Polish and Romanian societies.

This translator-driven cultural diplomacy operates within a larger framework of literary engagement. Poland's continued literary presence on Romania's major cultural platforms is a clear example of how translation can be used as soft power in many ways. Participation in high-profile events such as FILIT Iași, the Sibiu International Theatre Festival (FITS), the International Poetry Festivals in Bistrița and Bucharest, and the broader Poland-Romania Cultural Season (2024–2025) illustrates how literature can be used as a diplomatic tool. These platforms not only showcase Polish literature and performance, but they also demonstrate how individual translations contribute to national strategies of soft power.

5 Conclusions

The evolution of Romanian-Polish cultural relations through literary translation provides a valid case study in how sustained cultural engagement can overcome historical limitations, geographical distance, and linguistic barriers to create strong bilateral relationships. Polish literature in Romanian translation has not only added to the local literary scene, but it has also been a useful instrument of cultural diplomacy, encouraging mutual understanding and long-term cooperation.

This study has shown that translation is far more than a linguistic exercise; it is a form of cultural authorship and diplomatic agency. Romanian translators of Polish literature, many of whom are also scholars and public intellectuals, have played a big role in how Romanians see Polish culture. Their curatorial decisions, critical interventions, and institutional collaborations have helped create a Romanian canon of Polish literature that is both relevant and valuable. The visibility and recognition of these translators, even on a national level, awards from Polish institutions, and participation in cultural events, highlight their role as cultural ambassadors whose work brings people together and deepens intercultural dialogue.

The genre and thematic distribution of translated works indicate a deliberate strategy: Polish cultural institutions have supported the promotion of contemporary voices alongside canonical authors, portraying Poland as a modern, intellectually attractive European nation. Thematically, the translated corpus emphasises common Central European experiences, democratic resilience, and the formation of European identity, which aligns with Poland's larger diplomatic goals of becoming a regional leader. The use of literary figures such as Olga Tokarczuk, Andrzej Stasiuk, Szczepan Twardoch, and Ryszard Krynicki, as well as public intellectuals like Adam Michnik as moral authorities during international crises, particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine, shows how cultural diplomacy can complement the

traditional approach. Institutionally, translation has contributed to building a solid infrastructure for constant cultural exchange, anchored in strong networks that link publishers, translators, cultural foundations, and academic institutions.

Methodologically, the combination of quantitative translation data and qualitative cultural analysis offers a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of Polish cultural diplomacy in Romania. By integrating statistical trends, institutional mapping, and reception studies, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how literature and translation contribute to Poland's soft power in Romania.

At the same time, the study has implicitly worked across several distinct analytical layers, which together explain the complexity of Polish literature's presence in Romania. Market dynamics were examined through publication frequencies, genre distribution, and editorial strategies. Cultural diplomacy was analysed through the programmes and priorities of institutions such as the Polish Institute in Bucharest and the Book Institute in Krakow. Translation practices were assessed through the mediating work of Romanian translators, their paratexts, and their interpretative choices. Critical reviews, public debates, and the integration of Polish authors into Romanian intellectual life served to appraise the reception processes. Making these distinctions clear shows how different mechanisms (commercial, institutional, translational, and interpretative) interact to shape the cultural and diplomatic visibility of Polish literature in Romania.

The success of Polish literary translations in Romania demonstrates that literature, when strategically supported and mediated, can serve as a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy. It not only builds cultural ties but also symbolic solidarity, helping people face geopolitical challenges through shared stories and empathy.

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Sites of Franco-Russian Intellectual and Cultural Encounter in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Exchanges, Transfers, and Position-Takings Considering the Experience of Exile

Dimitri Tokarev

1 Introduction

The large-scale emigration triggered by the war of Putin's Russia against Ukraine has reshaped the intellectual and cultural geography of Europe. Since 2022, thousands of scholars, artists, journalists, and cultural workers have left Russia, forming new communities abroad and reconstituting professional and civic networks across borders. Often framed as a "fifth wave" of Russian emigration, a phenomenon that became visible after the annexation of Crimea, this movement cannot be reduced to a demographic or humanitarian process; it also entails the formation of new institutional structures and epistemic communities.[1] Like earlier generations of émigrés, contemporary exiles seek not only refuge but also the preservation of critical thought, cultural production, and academic freedom under conditions in which such activities have become increasingly constrained at home.

This situation invites a historical comparison. The first wave of Russian emigration after 1917 generated a dense ecosystem of journals, schools, philosophical circles, and cultural platforms that enabled displaced intellectuals to participate

[1] A literary journal entitled *The Fifth Wave* was founded by opponents of the war in Ukraine, see https://www.5wave-ru.com/about. The first wave considered the anti-Bolshevik émigrés. The second wave consisted of persons displaced during World War II. The third corresponded to departures between the 1960s and the 1980s, very often linked to the large-scale emigration of Soviet Jews. Finally, the fourth wave, primarily economic in nature, dated from the period of perestroika and the years that followed.

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actively in European debates rather than remain confined to marginal diasporic spaces.[2] Far from constituting an isolated or nostalgic milieu, interwar émigré communities in cities such as Paris and Berlin functioned as laboratories of cross-cultural exchange and intellectual innovation. Their experience suggests that exile can operate not only as a condition of loss but also as a productive site of institutional experimentation and transnational circulation.

From this perspective, the current diaspora appears less as an unprecedented rupture than as a reactivation of earlier patterns. Like the first-wave émigrés, many contemporary intellectuals, scholars, and artists seek to reconstruct the institutional and symbolic conditions of critical thought outside Russia. They establish research networks, independent journals, translation projects, and multilingual seminars, thereby sustaining forms of intellectual exchange that are increasingly constrained at home. Initiatives such as Programme PAUSE or UXIL, Universités en exil, as well as exile-led projects like the Institut de philosophie indépendant, exemplify this effort to institutionalise displacement and transform exile into a productive intellectual position. The question, therefore, is not only how these actors survive professionally, but how they reformulate cultural identity, multilingual practice, and transnational belonging under conditions of forced mobility.

The present article examines how contemporary Russian exiles reactivate and transform the earlier institutional repertoires. It analyses the creation of educational initiatives, research networks, cultural forums, and public support programmes that collectively structure what may be described as an emergent transnational civic space. At the same time, it highlights the structural constraints that shape this process: uneven professional integration, dependence on external funding, linguistic enclosure, and persistent political vulnerability. By situating present-day initiatives within a longer genealogy of émigré practices, the article argues that contemporary Russian exile should be understood not as a temporary humanitarian episode, but as a durable form of cross-border intellectual organisation—one that simultaneously preserves critical knowledge, fosters new modes of collaboration, and redefines the relationship between diaspora, Europe, and democratic public life.

[2] Since France was regarded in 1924 as the principal host country for Russian exiles in Europe, estimates vary widely: figures range from approximately 400,000 Russians present on the territory to between 60,000 and 80,000 according to contemporary counts. The total number of Russian émigrés worldwide is no less uncertain, fluctuating between one and two million people. This lack of reliable data can be explained both by the multiplicity of migratory routes taken by the Russian diaspora in Europe, via Turkey on the one hand, and Poland and then Germany on the other, as well as by migrations towards the Far East, where Harbin became a veritable capital of eastern Russia. It is also due to the presence of "local" refugees, Russians who were already residing in territories that had belonged to the Empire prior to 1917 (see Gousseff, 2008).

2 Exile as Intellectual Infrastructure: Sociability, Mediation, and Cultural Transfer in the Franco-Russian Space

A comparison with the first emigration clarifies these dynamics. Cultural contacts between Russian exiles and French intellectuals were already intense in the 1920s and reached a peak at the turn of the 1930s, as documented by the historian of emigration Leonid Livak (Livak, 2010; see also Livak, 2003, 2022; Ливак & Устинов, 2014). Translations, journal collaborations, and editorial participation integrated Russian writers into the French public sphere through periodicals such as *Comoedia*, *Le Figaro*, *L'Intransigeant*, and *Mercure de France.* Significantly, these exchanges were not structured primarily by solely ideological alignment. As Livak noted (Livak, 2007, 27), Russian contributors were valued less as political exiles than as mediators of knowledge about a rapidly transforming society. Emigration thus functioned as a vector of cultural transfer, inserting Russian perspectives into French debates while simultaneously reshaping émigré self-understandings.

Even after the recognition of the Soviet Union by the government of Édouard Herriot in 1924, these contacts did not diminish; instead, they crystallised around specific intellectual milieus. The traumatic experience of exile itself became an object of interest for French interlocutors concerned about the fate of European civilisation in the face of totalitarianism and fascism. Figures such as Ivan Bunin, Lev Shestov, and Nikolai Berdyaev participated in elite forums like the gatherings at the Abbaye de Pontigny (Chaubet, 2000), while connections with Catholic personalists including Jacques Maritain, Charles du Bos, and Emmanuel Mounier fostered further cross-fertilisation. These sites demonstrate that exile did not necessarily entail marginality; rather, it could enable strategic insertion into influential intellectual networks.

The same dynamic is evident in the activities of the younger émigré generation at the end of the 1920s. Their condition of linguistic and cultural "alienation" was not simply experienced as loss but mobilised as a resource that facilitated mediation between traditions. Institutions such as the *Franco-Russian Studio* (1929–1931) and the celebrated seminar on *Phenomenology of Spirit* led by Alexandre Kojève in 1933–1939 functioned as laboratories of intellectual translation, where philosophical and literary paradigms circulated across languages and disciplines. In this sense, exile operated less as withdrawal from European culture than as one of its engines.

Paradoxically, however, these dense interactions are frequently effaced in émigré memoirs. Nina Berberova's *Kursiv moj* (*The Italics Are Mine*), for instance, omits her participation in the Franco-Russian Studio, while Kojève's seminar is scarcely mentioned by contemporaries such as Berdyaev. Such silences suggest not oversight but narrative construction. By emphasising exclusion and indifference, memoirists helped sustain what might be termed a "myth of marginality", according to which émigrés remained peripheral to French intellectual life. As Livak has argued (Livak, 2002, 475), this rhetoric transforms dispossession, loss

of language, homeland, and material security, into a marker of moral and aesthetic authenticity.[3] Marginality thus becomes symbolic capital.

Even in the noisy, cosmopolitan world of Montparnasse, Russians knew how to carve out a space of their own (Rubins, 2015). This is how Vladimir Varshavsky, one of the leading figures of the younger generation of Russian émigrés, recalls the atmosphere:

> It seemed that our tables, pushed together, formed an invisible Brunhild's line separating us from the other tables, from Paris, from the hostile outside world in which there was no place for us. It was like a fragment of another planet transported across an unimaginable distance: a temple of Orphic initiations, an Ultima Thule, a private kingdom of shadows. (Варшавский, 2010, 151–152)[4]

Thus, Vladimir Varchavsky insists that the "unnoticed" younger generation of émigrés was consciously ignored both by their Russian elders and by the French, regardless of generation. Berberova does the same when she writes:

> Nous avons reçu nos passeports d''apatrides'. Ce document … ne donnait pas le droit de travailler comme salarié, ni comme employé […] Nous avons appris à partager la feuille d'artichaut, chaque sou gagné, nos humiliations et nos insomnies. En réalité il n'y avait pas d'artichauts … parce que nous n'avions pas de moyen de les faire cuire. (Berberova, 1998, 259)

Yet almost everything in this claim belongs more to mythology than to reality. Quite apart from the rather ill-suited metaphors that structure such accounts, it must be emphasised that Russians in fact enjoyed an exceptional status among foreigners in France, a status formally recognised by the Haut Commissariat aux réfugiés russes. Admittedly, the best-paid positions were rarely accessible to them. At the same time, however, a significant number found employment in public education (for example, the sociologist Georges Gurvitch), as well as in medicine and the legal professions.

France was not the only country to receive Russian refugees, but it did offer them a particularly wide range of opportunities for social and professional integration, opportunities that many other host countries struggled to provide, with the notable exceptions of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the United States. As Catherine Gousseff aptly observes,

> face à la représentation dominante de la déchéance sociale des élites ce qui surprend c'est justement leur visibilité dans la population active des années 1920. Il importe donc de distinguer les formes de déclassements liés à la perte des biens matériels, des modalités de maintien ou de repositionnement professionnel des élites. De nombreux parcours d'hommes

[3] In doing so, the exiles "authenticated the motifs of suffering, solitude, and despair in their works, conflating and capitalizing on the model of the Russian writer as an ascetic prophet and on the French 'modernist' rejection of literary recognition and success" (Livak, 2003, 42–43).

[4] The translation is mine.

> de lettres, d'administrateurs, d'artistes et autres, témoignent d'une forte continuité. (Goussseff, 2008, 124)

Some émigrés even succeeded in becoming major actors in French cultural life and, ultimately, in becoming French themselves, to the point that their foreign origins often went unnoticed by the broader public. This was the case for writers such as Henri Troyat (born Lev Tarassov), later elected to the Académie française; Elsa Triolet (born Ella Kagan), writer and partner of Louis Aragon; and Romain Gary (born Roman Kacew), the only author in history to have received the Prix Goncourt twice, under two different pseudonyms. Their trajectories complicate the narrative of exile as marginalisation and instead point to processes of cultural integration, professional recognition, and even symbolic centrality within French literary institutions.

The activities of the Franco-Russian Studio and Alexandre Kojève's Hegelian seminar further attest to the intensity of these intellectual and cultural exchanges. The Franco-Russian Studio was founded by the young French poet and novelist Robert Sébastien, associated with the circle of Jacques Maritain, together with the young Russian émigré Vsevolod de Vogt (also known as Vsevolod Fokht), a former White Army officer who had become a journalist for *L'Intransigeant*. They conceived the Studio as a forum for public debates intended to foster sustained contact between the Russian emigration and the French intellectual community.

These monthly debates were held regularly over the course of two seasons—from November 1929 to May 1930, and again from November 1930 to April 1931—and attracted large audiences. The 300 seats of the Musée social, located at 5 rue Las Cases in Paris, often proved insufficient to accommodate the public.

The meetings themselves followed a deliberately simple and dialogic format (see Livak & Tassis, 2005; Tokarev, 2017a, 109–130). Two papers, one delivered by a French participant and the other by a Russian, "so as to allow discussion from two points of view", were followed by debates open to the entire audience. The topics reveal both the breadth of the exchange and the effort to construct a shared intellectual space across traditions: anxiety in literature; mutual influences between French and Russian literatures; the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, and André Gide; the French and Russian novel since 1918; Soviet literature; Paul Valéry; French and Russian symbolism; René Descartes; Charles Péguy; and spiritual renewal in France and Russia.

The list of speakers further illustrates the Studio's role as a genuine site of Franco-Russian intellectual mediation. On the French side were figures such as René Lalou, Stanislas Fumet, Benjamin Crémieux, and Jacques Maritain; on the Russian side, the older generation was represented by Nikolai Berdyaev, Georgy Adamovich, Vladimir Weidlé, and the younger émigrés by Nina Berberova, Iulia Sazonova, Kirill Zaïtsev, and others. Among those attending and occasionally intervening in the discussions were Russians such as Ivan Bunin, Georges Gurvitch, Lev Shestov, Marina Tsvetaeva, Irina Odoevtseva, Boris Poplavsky, and Serge Charchoune, as well as French writers including Emmanuel Bove, Georges

Bernanos, Charles du Bos, Daniel Halévy, Luc Durtain, and Paul Valéry himself, who spoke at the close of the session devoted to his work.

Such gatherings enabled the principal representatives of two generations of Russian writers displaced by the Revolution to address their French counterparts directly and, in many cases, to establish durable personal and professional relationships. The stenographic records of these evenings were published by Marcel Péguy in the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, further extending their circulation within the French intellectual sphere.

Alongside this highly visible forum, another, more discreet but equally significant site of encounter was Alexandre Kojève's seminar at the École pratique des hautes études, held from January 1933 to May 1939. Whereas the Studio operated as a public arena of debate, Kojève's seminar functioned as a more specialised and less conspicuous space of philosophical formation, yet one whose long-term influence on French intellectual life would prove decisive.

After Raymond Queneau published his notes from the seminar in 1947 (Kojève, 1947), the episode was rapidly canonised as a decisive moment in the pedagogical and intellectual history of interwar France. Its significance rests less on anecdotal prestige than on its demonstrable impact: the seminar became a matrix for much of the philosophical, social, and political thinking that shaped the second half of the twentieth century. This influence is best explained by the composition of its audience, which functioned as a relay into postwar intellectual life, bringing together future central figures such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Aron, Jacques Lacan, André Breton, and Queneau himself.

The subsequent mythologisation of Alexandre Kojève stemmed not simply from personal charisma but from the structural contradictions of his trajectory. His biography juxtaposed positions that ordinarily appear incompatible: anti-Bolshevik exile and declared sympathy for Joseph Stalin, specialist in religious philosophy and advocate of atheism, theorist of the "end of history" and later civil servant involved in the institutional construction of the European Economic Community. Rather than eccentricities, these dissonances constituted the conditions of his intellectual authority.

Accordingly, these tensions should be read not as biographical curiosities but as symptomatic of the political and symbolic logic of exile itself. Kojève's hybrid position, at once Russian and French, revolutionary and conservative, theoretical and administrative, condensed the structural ambivalence of the émigré intellectual, who operated simultaneously inside and outside national and institutional frameworks. Yet this configuration was not unique to Alexandre Kojève. Other intellectuals connected to the same Franco-Russian milieu occupied similarly intermediary positions. The sociologist Georges Gurvitch, trained in Russian intellectual traditions but active within French academic institutions, developed a sociological project explicitly aimed at reconciling philosophical speculation with empirical social theory. Likewise, the historian of science and philosopher Alexandre Koyré moved between Russian religious philosophy, German phenomenology, and French epistemology, ultimately becoming a central figure in the reconfiguration of the history of science in France.

A comparable mediating role can be observed in the trajectory of Emmanuel Levinas, who sometimes attended Kojève's seminar and whose own philosophical formation unfolded at the intersection of several intellectual worlds: Lithuanian Jewish culture, German phenomenology (especially Husserl and Heidegger), and the French philosophical tradition in which he later became a major voice. Levinas's presence among the seminar's auditors illustrates how the Kojève circle functioned as a point of convergence for thinkers negotiating multiple cultural and philosophical affiliations.

Seen from this broader perspective, the significance of Kojève's seminar lies less in the singularity of its interpretation of Hegel than in the intellectual configuration it made possible. The seminar brought together figures whose trajectories already crossed linguistic, national, and disciplinary boundaries, thereby transforming exile and displacement into conditions for new forms of dialogue. The later legend surrounding the seminar thus reflects the productive instability generated by these crossings, through which exile became a site of mediation, critique, and institutional influence within French intellectual life.

In contrast to the Franco-Russian Studio, the Russian presence at Alexandre Kojève's seminar initially appears relatively limited. Among the few Russian participants were the philosopher Jacob Gordin, the journalist Raïssa Tatarinova (who published under the pen name Tarr), and the poet Boris Poplavsky (Tokarev, 2017b, 495–514). At first glance, this modest representation might suggest that the Russian émigré milieu played only a marginal role in the seminar's intellectual life. Yet such an impression is somewhat misleading. The Russian dimension of the seminar was embodied above all by Kojève himself, whose interpretation of Hegel was shaped in part by his sustained engagement with Russian religious philosophy and by the broader intellectual trajectories characteristic of the émigré milieu (Jacobs & Wilson, 2024).

His Russian auditors, present primarily during the seminar's early years, when the audience numbered only ten to twelve participants, also functioned as mediators, transmitting ideas between young French intellectuals and the younger émigrés belonging to what Vladimir Varshavsky would later call the "unnoticed generation". Thus, rather than marginal, their presence played a discreet but structurally significant role within a network of intellectual circulation that linked exile culture to the French philosophical milieu.

Jacob Gordin exemplifies the role of the émigré intellectual as a mediator across Russian, Jewish, French, and German scholarly circles. Trained in Oriental languages and German philosophy at the University of Petrograd, he leveraged his expertise to link multiple intellectual networks: in Berlin, through his contributions to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* and affiliation with the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*; and later in Paris, where he published on Spinoza, Maimonides, and Semen Dubnov, taught at the Rabbinical School, and connected with figures such as Berdyaev, Koyré, Georges Gurvitch, Emmanuel Levinas, and Kojève. Participation in the Hegel Congresses in Berlin (1931) and Rome (1933) further positioned him as an intermediary facilitating cross-border intellectual exchange. Gordin's trajectory illustrates how émigrés could translate personal scholarly expertise into

broader networks of dialogue and mediation across multiple cultural and national contexts.

Raissa Tatarinova, while less prominent, played a complementary role in sustaining these networks. Emigrating first to Germany and later to Paris, she and her husband Vladimir Tatarinov maintained literary circles and ties with influential figures such as the Nabokovs. Through these activities, Tatarinova contributed to the dense web of personal and professional relationships that underpinned the Franco-Russian intellectual milieu. Together, Gordin and Tatarinova exemplify how both highly visible and less prominent émigrés shaped transnational channels of knowledge and cultural exchange, demonstrating that the vitality of émigré intellectual life relied not solely on individual renown, but on the ability to connect diverse communities across borders.

In this intercultural perspective, Poplavsky's case is particularly emblematic. A poet, prose writer, and amateur philosopher who was already something of a celebrity within the younger émigré literary scene, he shared the benches of the École pratique des hautes études in 1934–1935, while working on his second novel *Homeward from Heaven*, alongside Bataille, Lacan, and Queneau. The novel, which recounts the life of a young émigré, bears the clear imprint of his participation in the seminar (Tokarev, 2018, 181–207).

Yet such engagements ran directly counter to the cultural mythology then taking shape. Within that narrative, Poplavsky's French connections, despite his being regarded as "the most émigré of émigré writers", were deemed negligible, if not nonexistent. Varshavsky, for example, claimed that Poplavsky "knew no contemporary French writers and was received by no editorial board or literary circle" (Варшавский, 2010, 150). Poplavsky's documented participation in Dadaist evenings in 1921 and 1923, as well as his intervention in the debate on Fyodor Dostoevsky during a Franco-Russian Studio session (18 December 1929), clearly contradicts such an excessively rigid assessment of his supposed isolation. Far from being cut off from French intellectual life, he was actively involved in some of its most experimental and dialogic milieus. As Isabel Jacobs insists, the dialogue between Poplavsky and Bataille, his classmate on Kojève's seminar, "is a missing piece in the entangled history of Russian and French philosophy, as well as an original contribution to discourses on friendship in twentieth-century continental thought" (Jacobs, 2025, 204).

If Poplavsky was often perceived as a typical figure of the international Montparnasse bohemia, a milieu in which, according to Varshavsky, Russians nonetheless remained symbolically separated from others, this affiliation tended to be interpreted less as an advantage than as a liability. Recalling Poplavsky years later, Berberova argued that to be a Russo-Montparnassian poet meant to remain suspended between two languages and two cultures, incapable of forging a fully autonomous poetic idiom (Berberova, 1998, 312). Such a judgment reflects the broader émigré narrative of dispossession: bilingualism and cultural hybridity were framed not as creative resources but as signs of fracture and loss.

Yet this retrospective diagnosis risks obscuring what was, in fact, historically innovative about this generation. In practice, young émigrés such as Boris

Poplavsky, Vassily Yanovsky, and Serge Charchoune were already laying the groundwork for a form of writing that exceeded national and linguistic boundaries. What Berberova interpreted as an impasse may instead be understood as an early experiment in what would later be theorised as transnational literature. Their position "in between" did not simply signal deprivation; it enabled new modes of circulation, translation, and aesthetic cross-fertilisation that challenged the very premise of literature as a nationally bounded practice.

As Maria Rubins rightly puts it,

> Russian Montparnasse output generally transcended the national parameters outlined by mainstream emigre discourse and fed into a range of contemporary transnational aesthetic trends. Whereas the older representatives of the Russian diaspora focused on their 'mission' as the self-proclaimed guardians of 'classical' Russian culture, producing texts punctuated by *passéisme* and rendered in an ostensibly 'pure' idiom (i.e., unpolluted by Soviet neologisms or foreign borrowings), the younger writers' identity was hybrid, bicultural, and bilingual, with only vague memories of Russia and a greater intellectual and emotional engagement with their host country. (Rubins, 2014, 66; see also Platt, 2019)

These interwar experiences demonstrate that exile could function simultaneously as displacement and as opportunity: a constraint that paradoxically enabled new forms of dialogue, experimentation, and cross-cultural mediation. Far from being isolated from their host societies, many émigrés acted as intermediaries, translators, and institutional entrepreneurs, shaping intellectual life on both sides of national boundaries.

3 From Historical Diaspora to Contemporary Exile: Continuities and Ruptures

The current wave of emigration is still too recent to be the subject of fully reliable and comprehensive scholarly analysis. In the absence of major figures comparable to those of the first wave, although this does not in any way diminish the importance of writers such as Dmitry Bykov, Maria Stepanova, or Dmitry Glukhovsky, and given a much greater geographical dispersion (most anti-war émigrés are concentrated in post-Soviet countries, with the exception of Germany and, to a lesser extent, France), Russian exiles today no longer seek to create diasporic communities strongly rooted in a particular national context. Instead, they tend to adopt an operational model that is explicitly transnational and increasingly digital.

Although precise figures remain difficult to establish, available estimates suggest that the scale of the post-2022 exodus is considerable. Various migration datasets indicate that between 500,000 and 900,000 Russian citizens left the country during the first year of the war, with some estimates placing the cumulative number of departures since February 2022 at around one million people, even if a portion of these migrants later returned. Independent analyses based on migration statistics from receiving countries suggest that approximately 650,000 Russians

remain abroad on a long-term basis, forming the core of the contemporary wartime diaspora (Anonym, 2024).

What distinguishes this migration from several earlier waves is not only its scale but also its sociological profile. A significant proportion of those who left are urban, highly educated professionals, especially from sectors such as information technology, academia, media, and the cultural industries, whose departure has often been described as a form of political and intellectual "brain drain." The geographical distribution of this diaspora also differs from earlier patterns: large concentrations have emerged in post-Soviet countries such as Georgia, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, while major European hubs, particularly Germany, Serbia, and, to a lesser extent, France, have become important centres for the institutional and cultural initiatives developed by exiled intellectuals.

As Margarita Zavadskaya mentions,

> Firstly, this wave of migrants differs dramatically from the average Russian citizens: they are more educated, wealthier, and share at least a strong anti-war and often also anti-Putin stance. Secondly, these people are politically active and continue to participate in civic initiatives in countries where they settle, even if these activities mostly target Russian society; importantly, they are not yet inclined to engage with host states' domestic politics. Thirdly, escaping the Russian political and legal system allows these individuals to communicate freely without exercising excessive caution and self-censorship, as well as transmit alternative media narratives back to Russia in the same way that USSR dissidents were able to disseminate forbidden literature and news from abroad. (Zavadskaya, 2023, 8)

At the same time, the means and scales of action have changed profoundly. Digital infrastructures, rapid mobility, and European-level cooperation now enable forms of coordination that were impossible for the interwar diaspora. Contemporary exile thus combines recognisable institutional reflexes with new, flexible, and transnational modes of organisation.

Whereas meeting places such as the Studio franco-russe or the seminar of Alexandre Kojève largely emerged from personal initiatives tied to the professional interests of their organisers, whether the search for spiritual rapprochement between Russians and French intellectuals or the philosophical interpretation of Hegel, the emphasis today has shifted towards institutional projects designed to establish durable networks of cultural and scholarly mediation. This shift also entails the need to develop cross-border initiatives rather than limiting such efforts to a single national context.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning European-oriented structures such as Smolny Beyond Borders, founded in Berlin in 2022, as well as the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (FLAS) in Montenegro.

Thus, Smolny Beyond Borders, created by former faculty members of Smolny College (Faculty) of Liberal Arts and Sciences in Saint Petersburg (where the

author of this article also taught), offer courses, lectures, and interdisciplinary programmes that are widely accessible remotely.[5] This logic of "pedagogy in exile" not only sustains an independent academic life but also reaches dispersed audiences across Europe and beyond. Its aim is to preserve a liberal educational model and a Russian-speaking academic community operating outside state control.

Another major difference from the first wave lies in the existence today of a structured institutional support ecosystem. In France, the Programme d'accueil en urgence des scientifiques et des artistes en exil (PAUSE), administered by the Collège de France, enables threatened scholars and artists to be hosted by universities, laboratories, or cultural institutions, while also receiving administrative and financial assistance.[6] The Universités en exil (UXIL) network complements this support by integrating displaced teachers into seminar programmes and public courses, allowing them to continue their professional activities.[7]

Such mechanisms, which did not exist a century ago, facilitate rapid academic reintegration and significantly reduce the isolation of newly arrived exiles.

At the same time, the exiles themselves are multiplying initiatives aimed at structuring their intellectual presence. In Paris, the Institut de philosophie indépendant, founded by recently arrived Russian philosophers, organises seminars, research groups, and collaborations with French institutions.[8] This type of institute illustrates the exiles' capacity to create autonomous sites of intellectual production that actively sustain a democratic agenda.

Elsewhere in Europe, Russian-speaking artists are establishing residencies, workshops, and politically engaged festivals, particularly in Berlin, Tbilissi, and Belgrade, thus transforming exile into a space for collective creation and civic reflection.

A key component of the cultural and educational landscape of Russian exiles is SlovoNovo, Forum of Free Culture, held in Monténégro since 2018.[9] The forum brings together Russian-speaking artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals from around the world for debates, readings, exhibitions, and concerts. SlovoNovo plays both a symbolic and a strategic role: it provides a space for free expression and networking for émigré Russian culture beyond the reach of censorship, while promoting an engaged political and artistic discourse centred on freedom, peace, and humanist values.

Concurrently, the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (FLAS) has established itself in Budva, founded by Russian academics in exile.[10] This institution is particularly significant, as it is the first liberal arts-type faculty in the Western Balkans to receive official accreditation from the Montenegrin state.

[5] Smolny Beyond Borders. A Liberal Arts Initiative. https://smolny.org/.
[6] PAUSE, https://www.programmepause.fr/en/.
[7] UXIL, Universités en exil, https://www.campus-condorcet.fr/fr/pour-la-recherche/uxil.
[8] Institut de philosophie indépendant, https://independentphilosophers.com/.
[9] SlovoNovo, Forum of Free Culture, https://www.slovonovo.me/en/.
[10] FLAS, Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences, https://www.liberalarts.me/.

FLAS offers three-year undergraduate programmes in a range of fields, including art history, intercultural linguistics, digital humanities, journalism and media studies, political science, and social theory, with instruction delivered primarily in English, thereby reinforcing its international orientation. Its faculty consists largely of scholars in exile, notably former professors from the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences ("Shaninka"), several of whose master's programmes were dismantled by the Russian authorities. Under the leadership of Dean Marina Kalashnikova, the institution ensures the continuity of a liberal intellectual project that has come under increasing pressure in Russia.

The creation of FLAS in Budva should therefore be understood not merely as an academic refuge but as a deliberate political response. Its founders explicitly present liberal arts education, grounded in critical inquiry, interdisciplinarity, and academic freedom, as a model directly targeted by the tightening constraints of the Russian regime. By relocating this model abroad, persecuted scholars are able not only to preserve their professional activity but also to sustain research, teaching, and the formation of a new generation within an autonomous institutional framework.

In this respect, SlovoNovo, Forum of Free Culture, and FLAS, together with Smolny Beyond Borders and the Institut de philosophie indépendant, represent two complementary dimensions of contemporary Russian exile. The former operates as a cultural, artistic, and civic platform; the three latter as a structured educational institutions dedicated to the reproduction and transmission of critical knowledge. Together, they extend the cross-border reach of the Russian-speaking diaspora and contribute to the articulation of a democratic agenda grounded in culture, debate, and education.

More broadly, these initiatives reveal a coherent twofold strategy: first, to safeguard and reproduce critical intellectual practices threatened in the country of origin; second, to disseminate these practices to dispersed European and Russian-speaking audiences through teaching, public events, and media networks. Public support mechanisms such as the PAUSE Programme and exile-led initiatives thus function as complementary components of a transborder infrastructure which, if adequately sustained, can foster a durable democratic agenda.

Contemporary Russian emigration therefore combines memory and innovation. It situates itself within the historical continuity of a cultivated diaspora committed to critiquing political power, while simultaneously adapting to the conditions of a more mobile and interconnected world. Supported by institutional programmes and energised by the self-organisation of exiles, it contributes to the emergence of a Russian civic space in Europe—one that is more open, collaborative, and networked.

As Nika Kostenko, Margarita Zavadskaya, Emil Kamalov and Ivetta Sergeeva observe,

> New émigrés also tend to prefer grassroots initiatives to hierarchical structures and are far more inclined toward self-organization and the creation of horizontal networks. As a rule, they show less interest in debates about the organization of the Russian opposition abroad

> or about questions of leadership within it. Another important distinguishing feature of this new wave of emigrants is a higher level of generalized trust, including trust toward other emigrants as well as toward those who remain in Russia.
>
> Because of their preference for horizontal structures and the translocal character of these new Russian émigré communities, they are likely to develop networked and decentralized forms of organization rather than rallying around a single leader or a single institution intended to hold the community together. (Костенко et al., 2023)

Yet despite the diversity and creativity of the initiatives developed by Russian exiles, their momentum remains constrained by several structural limitations that condition the long-term sustainability of these projects. The first concerns the social heterogeneity of this emigration. It includes established scholars who are often able to secure host positions relatively quickly, but also younger academics, artists, and professionals living in precarious circumstances. This uneven integration produces inequalities in access to resources, public visibility, and professional stability, thereby weakening the cohesion of the exile milieu. From this perspective, the current situation partly echoes that of a century ago, when prominent intellectual figures likewise enjoyed privileged access to institutional resources. At the same time, the dynamics of intellectual exchange were then often driven by less established actors. These "young unknowns" played a crucial role in initiating personal contacts and informal networks, which subsequently crystallised into more structured arenas of debate such as the Studio franco-russe or the seminar of Kojève.

Today, however, the configuration appears largely inverted. Rather than emerging primarily from informal networks, many initiatives are launched by already established figures within the intellectual field. Actors such as Marina Kalashnikova or Yulia Sineokaya, founder of the Institut de philosophie indépendant, are able to mobilise institutional resources in order to create platforms aimed at preserving and disseminating knowledge in the humanities. This shift reflects a broader transformation in the organisational logic of exile: whereas earlier networks often evolved from informal sociability towards institutionalisation, contemporary initiatives tend to be institutional from the outset.

This disparity is compounded by a significant dependence on public, philanthropic, or university funding. Although support programmes are essential for stabilising individual trajectories, they remain vulnerable to the budgetary and political fluctuations of host countries. Institutions created in exile, independent schools, research centres, and cultural platforms, often rely on uncertain annual or multi-year funding, which makes it difficult to build genuinely autonomous and sustainable structures.

Another risk lies in linguistic and symbolic fragmentation. Many initiatives continue to operate primarily in Russian or within Russian-speaking networks, whether out of cultural reflex or in response to the expectations of an already sympathetic audience. Without deliberate strategies of openness, systematic translation, local partnerships, and engagement in the languages of the host countries,

such projects may remain confined to a relatively narrow circle and struggle to integrate fully into broader European intellectual ecosystems.

The risks associated with remaining confined within a purely émigré cultural framework can be illustrated by two examples. The first concerns a project led by Roman Liberov, who produced an album in which poems by representatives of the first wave of Russian emigration are set to music and performed by artists belonging to the current émigré milieu. The album deliberately borrows its title—*After Russia*—from the 1928 poetry collection by Marina Tsvetaeva, making explicit the desire of contemporary exiles to situate their own experience within a longer historical trajectory. At the same time, such initiatives risk reinforcing a cultural mythology centred on alienation and exclusion, an interpretive framework that, as previously noted, was already central to the self-representation of the first wave of émigrés.

A second example can be found in the recent novel *The Magic Trick* (2024) by the émigré writer Maria Stepanova, whose earlier work *In Memory of Memory* (2017) situated her family history within the broader context of twentieth-century collective traumas, revolution, the Siege of Leningrad, and the Gulag, while also engaging with the present. In this new novel, whose Russian title may also be translated as *Focus* in the optical sense, Stepanova recounts the story of a writer invited to a cultural event in a European city who becomes stranded on her journey because of a railway strike. This spatial interruption, affecting someone who has already lost her country of origin, symbolically mirrors another form of blockage: the difficulty of constructing a coherent narrative of exile itself. The catastrophe of war already resists comprehension; exile adds a further dimension, namely the fragility of new social and intellectual ties in a world perceived as increasingly unstable. After failing to meet her readers as planned, the protagonist joins a traveling circus and participates in a sawing illusion, a performance that metaphorically reflects her condition of being divided between two countries and two languages. When the circus abruptly leaves the place where it had been installed, the writer is left behind in a state of radical uncertainty.

These examples highlight an important tension within contemporary exile culture. On the one hand, the desire to situate present-day displacement within the symbolic framework of earlier emigration may produce a powerful narrative of historical continuity. On the other hand, if exile becomes primarily a space of self-referential reflection, its capacity to generate new forms of intellectual mediation and cultural exchange may be limited. The challenge facing contemporary émigré communities, therefore, lies in moving beyond a closed narrative of loss towards more outward-oriented forms of engagement capable of connecting the experience of exile to broader transnational intellectual and civic spaces.

Finally, exiles must contend with a persistent climate of political vulnerability. Threats, transnational pressure, online harassment campaigns, and attempts at discreditation orchestrated from abroad weigh heavily on their capacity to intervene publicly. This hostile environment complicates the organisation of events, the publication of sensitive research, and the development of international collaborations.

These limitations do not negate the positive momentum of contemporary Russian emigration; rather, they constitute the very conditions under which it operates. Russian emigration of the fifth wave should be understood as a laboratory of transnational civic practice: a space where memory and innovation intersect, and where the defence of academic freedom, cultural production, and democratic values is collectively reimagined beyond the confines of the nation-state.

4 Conclusion

The historian of the first wave of Russian emigration, Marc Raeff, observed that emigration gradually ceased to be merely a strategy of physical survival and came to assume the character of a "spiritual mission", aimed at preserving the values of Russian culture while sustaining a creative life oriented towards the homeland's future (Raeff, 1990). This understanding was shared by many émigrés, including Roman Gul, who, in his *I Carried Russia Away: An Apology of Emigration* (1981–1989), echoed Zinaida Gippius and Nina Berberova's well-known formula: "we are not in exile, we are on a mission".

Yet this "mission" should not be reduced to a conservative project of cultural preservation. For Gul, emigration also constituted a space for affirming and defending freedom, most notably the freedom to exist without a homeland. In this sense, the émigré "message" is not only cultural but ontological: it articulates freedom as a fundamental condition of existence rather than as a merely political claim.

The experience of the contemporary "fifth wave" both confirms and transforms this earlier intuition. While committed to preserving a non-censored Russian culture, recent émigré communities place equal emphasis on openness, linguistic hybridity, and transcultural exchange. In doing so, they shift the meaning of exile from the preservation of a bounded cultural identity to the production of new, transboundary forms of intellectual and cultural life.

Taken together, these historical configurations invite a reconsideration of exile not as a condition of isolation but as a mode of transnational agency. Both the first emigration and the contemporary diaspora reveal how displacement can generate new institutional forms, new cultural codes, and new networks of exchange. Rather than existing outside European intellectual history, émigré communities have repeatedly acted as its intermediaries and catalysts. Exile thus emerges not as a marginal condition but as a historically recurring site of intellectual mediation, where displacement becomes a resource for connecting otherwise separate cultural and political worlds.

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Cultural Diplomacy: The Case of Yugoslavia 1948–1984

Veronika Vasilić

1 Institutional Framework of Yugoslav Cultural Diplomacy and Intellectual Elites as Political-Cultural Mediators

This article[1] examines how socialist Yugoslavia institutionalised and deployed cultural diplomacy as a strategic instrument of foreign policy between 1948 and 1984, and the extent to which this strategy enhanced the country's international autonomy and geopolitical positioning between East, West, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The central argument is that Yugoslavia developed a highly institutionalised system of cultural diplomacy that functioned as one of the central pillars of its foreign policy. Through a dense institutional network, the incorporation of intellectual elites into political structures, and active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia developed a model of soft power that allowed it to transcend bipolar constraints. In doing so, Yugoslavia positioned itself as an open, modern, and progressive socialist state. Another argument is that participation in the NAM expanded Yugoslavia's cultural market and diplomatic leverage, which balanced its relations with the Eastern and Western Bloc. The principal methodological approach is archival analysis,[2] combined with institutional analysis based on official correspondence, policy reports, and selected case studies.

[1] This paper was written in connection with the research activity of the Institute for Political Studies, which is funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

[2] All archival documents are from the Archives of Yugoslavia.

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The institutionalisation of cultural diplomacy began immediately after World War II, and evolved significantly following the 1948 break with the Soviet Union. The Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with its cultural departments, oversaw cultural initiatives as part of a broader foreign-policy framework. During the initial phase, responsibilities for international cultural affairs were distributed across multiple state institutions, including the Ministry of Education (1945–1946), the Committee for Culture and Arts, the Committee for Schools and Science (1946–1948), the Ministry of Science and Culture (1949), and the Council for Science and Culture (1950–1953).[3] In 1953, this gradual institutional evolution culminated with the establishment of the Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which became the central coordinating body for promoting Yugoslav artistic production abroad, and for student and researcher exchanges with foreign countries. The Federal Commission simultaneously operated as an administrative body and an organ of socialist self-management.[4] It was tasked with promoting Yugoslav history and socialist development abroad, organising exchanges of students and researchers, and establishing cooperation with foreign institutions engaged in cultural exchange and propaganda. Its mandate extended beyond cultural representation to include systematic reporting to the Federal Executive Council, along with coordination with domestic and international institutions. In addition to its external orientation, the Commission was responsible for regularly informing the Federal Executive Council, the domestic public, as well as interested institutions and individuals about its activities and initiatives.[5] This dual function—external projection and internal ideological consolidation—shows that cultural diplomacy was conceived as both a foreign policy instrument and a mechanism for domestic legitimacy. The Commission operated until 1971, when its duties were transferred to the Federal Institute for International Scientific, Educational, Cultural, and Technical Cooperation.[6]

A complementary role was played by the Yugoslav Commission for UNESCO. Yugoslavia became a full member of the organisation in 1950, received a seat on its Executive Council, and founded the Yugoslav National Commission for UNESCO in 1953. The latter functioned as an advisory body and intermediary between international cultural governance and federal institutions. Its responsibilities included scholarship distribution, documentation, coordination with ministries, and collaboration with international cultural centres (Andonov, 2025, 437). The density of these institutional arrangements shows a highly organised approach to embedding Yugoslavia within global cultural networks. This institutional configuration shows that cultural diplomacy was structurally embedded within the federal

[3] Arhiv Jugoslavije, Inventar: Savezna komisija za kulturne veze sa inostranstvom 1953–1971 (1946–1971), VIII.

[4] For more regarding self-management and cultural policy, see Majstorović (1972, 22–28).

[5] Arhiv Jugoslavije, Inventar: Savezna komisija za kulturne veze sa inostranstvom 1953–1971 (1946–1971), VIII–IX.

[6] Arhiv Jugoslavije, Inventar: Savezna komisija za kulturne veze sa inostranstvom 1953–1971 (1946–1971), IX.

administrative apparatus, rather than operating as an ad hoc supplement to foreign policy.

Beyond formal institutions, Yugoslavia integrated prominent intellectuals into its political framework, doing so in structural rather than instrumental fashion. Figures such as Ivo Andrić, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who combined diplomatic experience with literary prestige, exemplify the fusion of cultural authority and state representation. Although Andrić's diplomatic career began during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia,[7] his post-war roles as president of the Writers' Union and a member of the Communist Party illustrate continuity in the political deployment of intellectual capital. Andrić's international reputation enhanced Yugoslavia's symbolic capital abroad. Similarly, the writer Miroslav Krleža, who was also the Yugoslav nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature at the same time as Andrić, served on the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. He was also a co-founder and director of the Yugoslav Lexicographical Institute (now called Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography). His proximity to Josip Broz Tito reflects the regime's deliberate incorporation of high cultural authority within its political leadership. The appointment of the poet Marko Ristić as Ambassador to France from 1945 to 1951, despite not being a communist (Selinić, 2012, 136), further demonstrates the strategic use of intellectuals in diplomatic representation. Even figures such as the writer Milovan Đilas, a highly influential Yugoslav politician and one of Tito's closest associates, illustrates the permeability between literary production and political power. This shows that although Yugoslavia functioned as a one-party system under a long-standing leader, the regime systematically incorporated educated elites, intellectuals, writers, and artists within state structures, valuing cultural prestige and academic achievement as sources of political legitimacy. As Dragović-Soso has argued, intellectuals played a key role in establishing a political framework, including with respect to cultural policy (Dragović-Soso, 2004, 176). The structural integration of intellectual elites enhanced Yugoslavia's symbolic legitimacy abroad. Cultural capital functioned as a form of diplomatic currency, lending support to the argument that the inclusion of intellectuals enhanced international credibility.

2 Cultural Diplomacy and the Non-Aligned Movement

Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948 necessitated strategic repositioning in the world. Cultural diplomacy thus became central to securing international recognition and preventing isolation. The establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a political union in which Yugoslavia had one of the most important roles, marked a decisive geopolitical turn. Participation in the NAM started Yugoslavia's politics of openness towards the West. On 30 January 1950,

[7] For biographical information, see the Zadužbina Ive Andrića's official website: https://www.ivoandric.org.rs/latinica/biografija

Belgrade hosted an official conference on cultural and artistic propaganda abroad, following the Third Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party. The gathering emphasised that cultural outreach was vital to securing Yugoslavia's international recognition, especially amid efforts by Cominform states to isolate Belgrade (Perišić, 2017, 291). At the same time, the Council for Science and Culture of the Government of the Federal National Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRY), in its letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia, proposed appointing cultural attachés to some diplomatic missions abroad, and defined the tasks falling under cultural propaganda, such as organising exhibitions and visits by artists, art groups, and collectives; proceeding with the exchange of scientists and educators; translating domestic literature abroad; developing contacts with Slavic institutes; and finding scholarship sources.[8] The NAM provided Yugoslavia with a geopolitical platform that transcended bipolar alignment. The 1950s therefore marked a significant shift in Yugoslav foreign policy, driven in part by the country's economic constraints. This new policy of neutralism was accompanied by economic and military support from Western states (chief among them the United States), in addition to cultural cooperation and acceptance of Western influences, which set Yugoslavia apart from other Eastern Bloc countries.

A crucial component of neutral politics, which balanced between East and West, was participation in the NAM. Preparations for establishing the NAM began in the 1950s with the Bandung conference, leading to its formal creation in 1961, when the first official Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries was held in Belgrade. Founding leaders included Josip Broz Tito, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sukarno.

Cultural cooperation with non-aligned states grew out of their political cooperation. Beginning in the 1960s, and even more so in the 1970s and 1980s, Yugoslavia welcomed foreign cultures and initiated the practice of promoting them in Yugoslavia. This new platform for cultural exchange helped strengthen diplomatic relations and develop economic ties extremely beneficial for Yugoslavia.

Cultural cooperation followed political alignment. For the preparation of the 1961 Conference in the National Museum in Belgrade, an exhibition created by the Egyptians themselves was held to showcase 5,000 years of Egyptian art (Radonjić, 2021, 141). At the same time, another exhibition was set up at Pionirski Park and in Aleja Nacija in Belgrade, representing the countries participating in the conference. With this gesture, Yugoslavia strategically employed cultural initiatives to signal its willingness to collaborate with NAM states, and to assert itself as a key player and leader. Projects such as the Library of the Non-Aligned—initiated by the Institute for Africa in Zagreb and the literary club "Bagdala" in Kruševac—led to more than eighty published titles, expanding Yugoslavia's cultural outreach (Radonjić, 2021, 144). These initiatives strengthened diplomatic and economic ties, while creating alternative networks of cultural production.

[8] Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ). Savet za nauku i kulturu vlade FNRJ. 317-4-8, Opšti poverljivi materijali o vezama sa inostranstvom (1950–1953), pismo JAZU od Saveta za nauku i kulturu Vlade FNRJ.

As Videkanić has argued, such networks anticipated elements of contemporary global culture by reshaping discourses of representation and emphasising political liberation through cultural expression (Videkanić, 2021, 505). They changed the discourse of cultural representation and regarded culture as an essential dimension of political liberation, by determining who was represented and how. The cultural production of these countries was not only cultural but also political, carrying explicit anti-colonial and anti-neo-colonial messages in keeping with Non-Aligned ideology. Non-aligned states used culture as a way of liberating themselves from Western supremacy. Yugoslavia thus diversified its cultural diplomacy portfolio, reducing dependence on either power bloc. Participation in the NAM expanded Yugoslavia's diplomatic manoeuvrability and cultural markets.

3 Balancing Cultural Relations with East and West: Soft Power Strategy

By 1968, Yugoslavia's international presence had grown, including 65 embassies and 99 diplomatic and consular missions. Some diplomats from the NAM pointed out that this compelled both Washington and Moscow to accord President Tito a degree of geopolitical significance that arguably exceeded the country's demographic weight (Rubinstein, 1970, 186). The Yugoslav leadership recognised the strategic importance of diplomacy in multiple domains, particularly through cultural engagement.

Following the re-establishment of relations with Eastern Europe in the mid-1950s, Yugoslavia renewed cultural exchange based on Western models, especially the export of its cultural products (Vuletic, 2012, 116). By accepting Western cultural influences and then exporting those models to the Eastern Bloc and NAM countries, Yugoslavia positioned itself as a unique ideological and cultural mediator. As Vuletić has pointed out, popular music was a central driver of soft power, with its distribution via radio stations accessible from many parts of Eastern Europe (Vuletic, 2012, 116). In addition, numerous Yugoslav performers and ensembles, such as jazz orchestras, were sent on state-organised tours to Eastern Bloc countries and the United States. Yugoslavia acted as a pioneer in this respect, preceding comparable initiatives by the United States, whose State Department began sending American performers to Yugoslavia only later (Vuletic, 2012, 116). Popular music, and jazz in particular, functioned as an instrument of soft power. Yugoslav jazz orchestras toured abroad, including the United States in 1957, preceding reciprocal tours by American musicians in 1958 (Vuletic, 2012, 119). Erdeljac has argued that jazz was used as a method of diplomacy, part of the broader "bran strategies" employed by both Yugoslavia and the United States to sustain the image of an "independent Yugoslavia" on the international stage (Erdeljac, 2024, 308). A letter that same year stated that in the field of cultural cooperation between the FNRY and the USA, Americans could be expected to

provide greater assistance than they had done so far.[9] By the late 1950s, US policymakers increasingly viewed Yugoslavia as a strategic mediator between East and West, and as a showcase for a more open, alternative form of socialism. Cultural exchange was therefore seen as a low-risk, high-impact tool for strengthening bilateral relations, fostering mutual understanding, and subtly promoting liberal values without direct political confrontation. Moreover, Yugoslavia's increasing openness to Western cultural influences created favourable conditions for bilateral cooperation.

This cooperation between Yugoslavia and United States continued in the 1960s. When the Federal Council for Education and Culture gave an overview of the cultural and educational cooperation between the two countries between 1965 and 1967, it mentioned that the US program with Yugoslavia at the time was the most extensive among all other Eastern European countries. The year 1965 saw an exhibition of contemporary Yugoslav painting and sculpture organised by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in addition to guest appearances by Yugoslav art ensembles and soloists, and the founding of a mixed Yugoslav-American educational commission. In 1967, the New York Adria Art Gallery was opened, a sales gallery for works by Yugoslav artists.[10]

Art exhibitions further consolidated Western ties. Apart from popular culture, Yugoslavia was also willing to promote more classical forms. Notable exhibitions of West European modernism exhibited in Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s included *A Selection of Dutch Paintings* (1953), *Le Corbusier* (1953), *Henry Moore: Sculpture and Drawings* (1955), *Contemporary German Graphics and Drawings* (1955), and *Contemporary Italian Art* (1956). There were also public exhibitions of US prints, photography, and painting, together with European art exhibition (Djokic, 2022, 37).

Cultural exchange between the West and Yugoslavia was a two-way street. Beginning in 1948, Yugoslavia invested considerable effort in securing representation at major international venues, including the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo and Tokyo Biennials, documenta in Kassel, EXPO 58 in Brussels, and the Guggenheim International Award in New York. Not only were US and European exhibitions and other cultural products shown in Yugoslavia, but Yugoslav art also experienced a breakthrough on the Western scene. Examples include *New Painting from Yugoslavia*, the first exhibition (1959–1962) of modern Yugoslav art to tour the United States; it was a joint effort between the Yugoslav Commission and the American Federation of Arts, and part of a broader program to foster international cultural exchange (Djokic, 2022, 135–138).

While the United States seemingly held a dominant position in Yugoslav-American relations, driven largely by its expanding cultural hegemony and financial patronage, Yugoslavia demonstrated a capacity to reciprocate through its own strategic policies. By selectively adopting Western cultural products and

[9] Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ). Savezni savet za obrazovanje i kulturu, 319-61-77, 29.10.1967.
[10] Ibid.

practices, Yugoslavia subsequently mediated their circulation to Eastern Bloc and Non-Aligned countries, effectively positioning itself as a cultural intermediary. In this way, it positioned itself as a leader, balancing between East and West, and benefiting from both sides, especially financially. Culture proved to be a crucial instrument in achieving such goals.

In 1958, the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, which included the party's highest-ranking leaders and an ideological commission dedicated to cultural affairs, asserted that cultural propaganda held greater significance than economic or socio-political propaganda; it also acknowledged the need to look at how other states were promoting themselves.[11] This policy of cultural exchange with East and West was carefully planned quite early on, and implemented later with success. By studying foreign methods of cultural promotion, Yugoslavia sought to enhance its own soft power and to strengthen its diplomatic position, especially within the context of the Cold War and the NAM. Nye has defined soft power as a fundamental element of democratic politics, rooted in the capacity to shape preferences through intangible resources such as personal charisma, culture, political values, institutions, and policies perceived as legitimate or morally authoritative (Nye, 2004, 6). Although Nye attributes soft power to democratic states, Yugoslavia essentially possessed all of the characteristics and elements falling within his definition, thereby complicating the liberal-democratic bias in soft power theory, and challenging democratic exclusivity over soft power.

This shift in politics with a focus on soft power highlights the strategic integration of culture within the state's ideological framework and foreign policy objectives. According to Vuletić, this politics of balance between East and West peaked between 1956 until 1961, when other Eastern bloc countries opened up to Western influences, especially Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union (Vuletic, 2012, 130). In 1961, Yugoslavia gained a new market, that of non-aligned states. This strategic balancing reflects a form of soft power typically associated with liberal democracies. The case of Yugoslavia nevertheless shows that soft power resources, culture, prestige, and institutional legitimacy can be mobilised within non-democratic systems when strategically organised.

4 Case Studies of Operationalisation

The Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF), which emerged in 1967 as a key cultural event, is considered by some to be the most important modernist project in the region. BITEF exemplifies the translation of foreign policy principles into cultural practice. Closely connected to the avant-garde theatre Atelje 212 and the 20-year leadership of Mira Trailović, BITEF reflected Yugoslavia's non-aligned orientation by incorporating avant-garde works from both Western

[11] Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ). Savez komunista Jugoslavije. 507, A-CK SKJ, VIII, II/2-b-108, Ideološka komisija, 'Zapisnik sa sastanka Komisije za ideološki rad pri CK SKJ održanog 16.10.1958.

and non-Western contexts (Radulović, 2017, 145–146). Trailović has argued that it would be inappropriate to lack an international cultural festival for the capital of a nation actively opening up to the global community and enjoying a significant position within the Non-Aligned Movement (Radulović, 2017, 149). BITEF's program reflected Yugoslav foreign policy on a small scale, functioning as a cultural extension of the country's diplomatic framework, and transcending a Eurocentric perspective by incorporating a broader, more inclusive worldview (Radulović, 2017, 150). The principles of non-alignment were thus translated into the cultural sphere, enabling the participation of "smaller players." Other festivals, such as Belgrade Music Fest (BEMUS), Belgrade International Film Festival, Pula Film Festival, and Zagreb Music Biennale further institutionalised festival diplomacy.

While festivals and institutional frameworks created spaces for international cultural exchange, Yugoslav cinema translated these diplomatic ambitions into globally visible cultural products. One of the most prominent examples of Yugoslav cinematic success is the film *Battle of Neretva*. It took four years to shoot, was declared the largest Yugoslav project, and was also the largest film project in Europe at the time. The Association of Yugoslav Producers, the Yugoslav Army, Commonwealth United Entertainment London-New York, the IFC (Rome), and the Eichberg Film (Munich) all had a role in its production, as did 42 business organisations whose primary activity was not film. It was distributed in 73 countries across Europe, America, Africa, Australia, and Asia. In a 1970 letter, the Business Association of Film Producers reported that Jugoslavija Film had sold it to almost every country in the world. Approximately 300 prominent cultural and public figures from Yugoslavia and abroad (especially Europe) were also invited to the film premiere.[12] Its scale of production, international premiere attendance, and worldwide distribution showed Yugoslavia's capacity for global cultural export and reflects the material dimension of cultural diplomacy.

Another notable example of cultural cooperation in Yugoslavia was the Korčula Summer School, whose participants became known as the Praxis students. The school was founded by two Yugoslav philosophers, Rudi Supek and Milan Kangrga, who were members of the philosophical journal *Praxis*, which gave the school's students their name. From 1963 to 1974, the school became a space for intellectual exchange that attracted philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Henri Lefebvre, and Alfred J. Ayer (Anđelković, 2022). Zvonko Posavec, a philosopher and member of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, noted that the school attracted leading intellectuals from both East and West, bringing together some of the most prominent thinkers (Anđelković, 2022). It became a meeting point for Yugoslav and international intellectual elites, placing Yugoslavia at the top of the European and global cultural and scientific scene. Kanzleiter has claimed that the magazine *Praxis* quickly became one of the most influential Marxist publications; it also had an international edition, and

[12] Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ). Savezna komisija za kulturne veze s inostranstvom, AJ-559-143-305, Film *Bitka na Neretvi*.

was published in German, French, and English (Kanzleiter, 2009, 1). In a letter to Rudi Supek in 1973, Kurt H. Wolff, a professor at Brandeis University in Massachusetts and one of the participants in the summer school, wrote that the institution's distinctiveness resided in the open circulation of ideas within a socialist setting. He highlighted how intellectually diverse participants were connected by a shared commitment to critically reassessing their visions for a better society via dialogue. According to Wolff, Korčula fostered the emergence of a genuine scholarly community devoted to rigorous thinking and the advancement of humane social conditions, both globally and within socialist Yugoslavia (Lešaja, 2014, 96). Wolff's assessment reflects the understanding of the Korčula Summer School as an exceptional space of intellectual freedom within a socialist context. His emphasis on dialogue, pluralism, and collective reflection underscores the school's symbolic importance as a bridge between East and West during the Cold War. However, it is important to remember that while the Korčula summer school fostered critical exchange, its findings and critical insights were largely confined to a narrow circle of intellectuals, raising questions about the extent to which its emancipatory aspirations translated into broader social or political transformation. When President Tito accused Praxis professors from Belgrade and Zagreb of initiating large student protest across Yugoslavia in 1968, the magazine sharpened its criticism of socialist self-management (Kanzleiter, 2009, 2). This demonstrates that while Yugoslavia was not a democratic state, freedom of thought did exist for some time, before the school closed in 1974 due to pressure.

The 1984 Winter Olympics represented the culmination of Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy. As the first Winter Olympics held in a socialist country and the Balkans, the event showcased Yugoslavia's modern infrastructure, multicultural identity, and geopolitical neutrality. With approximately 640,000 visitors and extensive global media coverage, the Olympics functioned as a large-scale projection of Yugoslavia's international image. The event was part of a broader strategy of cultural diplomacy in which the state used sport, art, architecture, and media to project an image of openness, modernity, and independence, one that set it apart from other Eastern Bloc countries. The cultural dimension of the Olympics was expressed through carefully designed ceremonies, festivals, and artistic programs that accompanied the sporting events. International media coverage emphasised the host city's hospitality and cosmopolitan atmosphere, reinforcing the image of Sarajevo and Yugoslavia as a crossroads of cultures and traditions welcoming both East and West, aligning with the country's foreign policy of neutrality. The 1984 Winter Olympics functioned not only as an instrument of international image-building for socialist Yugoslavia, but also as a mechanism for domestic legitimacy. The event was used to reinforce political authority, social cohesion, and the ideological narrative of the Yugoslav socialist system. Preparations for the Olympics were presented as a collective national project, consistent with the ideology of Yugoslav self-management.

5 Conclusion

Yugoslavia's model of cultural diplomacy illustrates how a mid-sized socialist state transformed cultural production into a strategic resource of geopolitical autonomy, and it demonstrates that diverse forms of cultural activity and production can be effectively mobilised for diplomatic purposes. By institutionalising cultural exchange, incorporating intellectual elites into governance structures, and leveraging the Non-Aligned Movement as an alternative diplomatic arena, which further reinforced this balancing strategy and expanded its diplomatic reach, Yugoslavia constructed a form of soft power that mitigated the constraints of bipolarity. Throughout much of its existence, Yugoslavia pursued a strategy of cultural diplomacy that was characterised by a high degree of openness to influences from both the West and the East. This approach enabled it to navigate between competing geopolitical blocs and to maintain a position of relative neutrality. Its experience complicates the assumption that soft power is exclusive to liberal democracies and demonstrates that cultural diplomacy can function as a structural instrument of foreign policy in ideologically hybrid regimes.

For this reason, the Yugoslav model of cultural diplomacy, together with its broader foreign-policy framework, merits closer examination. Its most effective elements may be adapted to a variety of political systems. Its selective adaptation may prove particularly instructive in the context of an increasingly polarised world, where diplomatic engagement is often constrained by ideological divisions and a diminishing commitment to dialogue. Therefore, the Yugoslav case offers contemporary middle powers an instructive example of how cultural capacity can be mobilised as a strategic diplomatic resource.

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Cultural Diplomacy and Academia: The Case of Bulgaria

Alexandra Milanova

1 Introduction

Over the past years, universities and research organisations have had to navigate a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape (Marginson, 2025; Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023), in which cultural diplomacy, as discourse and practice, plays a central and increasingly influential role. Culture has become a powerful tool that many countries deploy outside the confines of their national borders and use in international relations, both bilateral and multilateral. At the same time, the view of the state as main actor in foreign policy and architect of public and cultural diplomacy is dwindling. In recent years, the proliferation of non-state actors is transforming international relations, including the circulation of ideas. Some consequences of globalisation, such as the "crisis of the state" or the impact of new technologies, or the emergence of a powerful civil society, have multiplied the players. Non-state actors are assuming roles that previously belonged to states. In particular, new technologies have made it possible to have a global reach and to contact individuals and other organisations, weaving a broad net that allows non-state players to share knowledge and to develop joint actions. Thus, non-governmental stakeholders are increasing their autonomy and have started to define new rules, acting more effectively than the states. NGOs, transnational companies, religious groups, think tanks, social movements, or university experts have a say on most of the global issues affecting civil society (Jora, 2013, 44). This phenomenon is particularly apparent in the field of cultural diplomacy, where non-state actors often complement—and sometimes even substitute for—state-led

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efforts. The strength of non-governmental players lies in flexibility, credibility, and long-term relationship-building rather than formal political power.

Among the reasons for this evolution, most often are quoted the general consequences of globalisation, or the crises of the state. The impact of new technologies and the emergence of a powerful civil society as a cause and effect of it are perhaps responsible for the biggest share of recent changes (La Porte, 2012). Owing to advancements in technology over the past decade, non-state actors often have the financial or technical resources available until recently only to the states. The former are more flexible, more responsible to emergencies and often more effective than the governments (Langhorne, 2005, 335). In this way, non-governmental players are actively involved in "the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture between nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Schneider, 2023, 1).

2 The Soft Power of Culture: Theoretical Debates and Academic Perspectives

A quick glance at the geopolitical manifestations, which have marked the past decades, reveals the central role of the soft power of culture, its interpretation and use by an increasing number of states in world affairs. A defining feature of soft power is that it is non-coercive. This is the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Olivares & Zafirova, 2019, 18). The concept of soft power was most systematically articulated by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who argued that a state's influence increasingly derives from the appeal of its culture, political values, and foreign policies rather than its military or economic might. In this context, cultural diplomacy emerges as a deliberate instrument to shape international perceptions, cultivate trust, and sustain long-term relationships between societies (Nye, 2004, 5–10). Academia plays a pivotal role in theorising these processes, analysing their mechanisms, and evaluating their outcomes, providing the intellectual foundation for both understanding and implementing cultural strategies.

Scholarly approaches often situate cultural diplomacy within the broader context of public diplomacy. Academics, such as the historian Nicholas J. Cull, highlight the importance of cultural exchanges, educational programs, and artistic cooperation as mechanisms through which countries communicate with foreign publics. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which targets primarily state elites, cultural diplomacy engages wider audiences via language promotion, academic exchange, and cultural programming (Cull, 2009, 22–25). Universities and research institutions are central actors in these initiatives, facilitating student and faculty exchanges, joint research projects, and international conferences that extend a state's cultural and intellectual reach. Through these scholarly networks, literature, film, music, and academic outputs circulate globally, shaping perceptions, building trust, and indirectly influencing political and societal attitudes toward states.

From a different theoretical angle, cultural diplomacy is understood within the framework of constructivist international relations theory. Constructivist scholars, most notably the American political scientist Alexander Wendt, argue that international politics is shaped not only by material capabilities but also by shared ideas, identities, and social norms. From this standpoint, cultural diplomacy functions as a strategic mechanism in the construction and negotiation of international identities, mediating how states and societies perceive one another. Through structured initiatives such as cultural exchanges, curated museum exhibitions, and sustained academic collaboration, it exerts influence over the interpretation of foreign values, norms, and political practices. Over time, these interactions contribute to the gradual reconfiguration of expectations, trust, and social understandings within the international system, highlighting the capacity of non-coercive cultural engagement to shape both state behaviour and transnational perceptions or intentions (Wendt, 1999, 139–145). In this sense, academia functions both as a producer and disseminator of the knowledge and cultural capital that underpin soft power.

Institutional approaches to cultural diplomacy underscore the significance of specialised cultural organisations in the projection and management of national image on the global stage. Entities such as the *British Council*, *Institut Français*, and *Goethe-Institut* exemplify the systematic institutionalisation of cultural outreach as a strategic component of foreign policy. These organisations facilitate language promotion, artistic collaboration, and educational exchange across transnational networks, thereby extending the reach and consistency of a state's cultural presence. From a theoretical standpoint, their sustained engagement illustrates how deliberate cultural programming can enhance a nation's reputation as innovative, open, and culturally sophisticated, reinforcing its soft power capabilities. Academic institutions often collaborate with these entities, providing expertise, research, and evaluation that enhance the effectiveness and credibility of cultural programming. The engagement of universities and research networks ensures that cultural diplomacy is informed by rigorous scholarship, demonstrating how knowledge production intersects with national strategy to bolster soft power.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises the transformative role of networked and digital cultural diplomacy, highlighting not only the contributions of state actors but also the pivotal role of academic institutions and research networks. In an era characterised by globalisation and pervasive digital connectivity, cultural influence circulates through a complex interplay of state-directed initiatives, transnational networks, media industries, diaspora communities, digital platforms, and scholarly exchange. Universities and research institutions act as critical conduits for knowledge production and cross-cultural dialogue, facilitating educational exchanges, joint research projects, and international conferences that extend the reach of a country's cultural and intellectual influence. This broader diffusion of culture and knowledge blurs the traditional boundaries between official policy and organic cultural flows, suggesting that contemporary cultural diplomacy operates as a hybrid form of soft power in which governmental initiatives intertwine with decentralised, socially and academically mediated networks.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives indicate that cultural diplomacy functions at the intersection of culture, communication, international relations, and academia. Unlike coercive instruments of power, its effectiveness is grounded in long-term processes of attraction, legitimacy, and mutual understanding rather than in immediate policy outcomes. Academic institutions—through teaching, research, and transnational collaboration—are indispensable participants in these processes, shaping the narratives, identities, and intellectual networks that constitute contemporary soft power. In a world where influence increasingly stems from ideas and cultural capital, the role of academia in sustaining and guiding cultural diplomacy is both strategic and irreplaceable.

3 The Case of Bulgaria

As already mentioned, academic institutions and international scholarly programs, increasingly function as key instruments of cultural diplomacy—promoting intercultural dialogue, intellectual exchange, and the projection of soft power through collaborative research and education. In Bulgaria, a number of prominent initiatives have contributed to international academic cooperation and cultural engagement. This section examines and compares five such endeavours: the Fulbright Specialist Program, the Balkan Heritage Field School (BHFS), the ENGAGE.EU Summer School at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), the American Research Centre in Sofia fellowship program, and academic initiatives organised by Central European University in cooperation with Bulgarian institutions. Each initiative reflects a distinct model of academic cultural diplomacy, ranging from bilateral scholarly exchange to heritage-based experimental learning and transnational research collaboration. By analysing their structure, objectives, and impact, this section highlights the diverse ways in which academic initiatives function as agents of cultural diplomacy shaping Bulgaria's international presence while fostering intercultural understanding and scholarly collaboration.

One of the most established frameworks for academic exchange operating in Bulgaria is the Fulbright Specialist Program. It is part of the larger Fulbright educational exchange framework established by the U.S. Congress in 1946 to support mutual understanding between the United States and other nations through academic and cultural exchange. The Specialist Program, introduced in 2001 by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, awards short-term grants (two to six weeks) to American academics and professionals who collaborate on defined projects with host institutions abroad. The main objective is to strengthen institutional linkages by matching foreign academic priorities with U.S. specialist expertise, often in areas such as curriculum development, faculty training, and consulting on strategic planning.[1]

[1] U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. *Fulbright Program Overview*. 2020.

The program facilitates workshops, joint research, and public lectures, thus creating opportunities for Bulgarian faculty and students to interact with international experts. Recent initiatives have included projects in STEM education, public administration, social sciences, and humanities, reflecting Bulgaria's priorities in strengthening academic capacity and promoting international best practices. By embedding visiting specialists within Bulgarian institutions, the program fosters a two-way exchange: American scholars gain insights into Bulgaria's academic and cultural context, while local participants benefit from exposure to new methodologies, research networks, and pedagogical approaches.[2]

As a form of cultural diplomacy, the Fulbright Specialist Program demonstrates the potential of academic exchange to advance soft power objectives. It projects a positive image of the United States while simultaneously reinforcing Bulgaria's academic infrastructure. The program's impact is not limited to formal teaching and research; informal interactions, mentorship, and participation in local academic communities also strengthen bilateral ties. By facilitating professional networks, shared research outputs, and institutional partnerships, this initiative exemplifies how scholarly engagement serves as both educational and diplomatic practice. Moreover, the program's focus on collaboration rather than competition underscores a fundamental principle of soft power: influence derived from attraction and legitimacy, rather than coercion. This positions Bulgarian institutions within a global academic ecosystem and enhances their visibility and credibility in international higher education circles.

The other academic initiative that contributed to international cooperation and cultural engagement is the Balkan Heritage Field School (BHFS), managed by the Balkan Heritage Foundation. It offers a contrasting model of research engagement grounded in experiential learning and heritage research. Established in 2008, BHFS conducts international field school programs in archaeology, heritage documentation, and conservation, oriented toward both academic participants and practitioners seeking hands-on training. Courses are taught in English and integrated with ongoing research projects and conservation initiatives across Bulgaria and other countries in the region.[3]

Participants, typically drawn from universities worldwide and from a range of age groups and professional backgrounds, engage in excavation, laboratory work, lectures, and field trips. The Field school's structure combines formal academic instruction with immersive participation in cultural heritage projects. This way, it provides an intercultural environment where participants collaborate with local experts and communities. Over the years, BHFS has conducted more than 100 field schools, welcoming participants from approximately 70 countries, and its field projects have been accredited through partnerships with both Bulgarian and international universities. In 2018, the program received a Special Mention

[2] More information about this initiative is available at: https://www.fulbright.bg/en/fulbright-specialist-program/.

[3] See Balkan Heritage Field School: https://balkanheritage.org/education/balkan-heritage-field-school/.

from the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards for its contribution to multinational collaboration in archaeological education and conservation.[4]

BHFS exemplifies cultural diplomacy in practice by creating embodied spaces of shared scholarly endeavour and heritage engagement. Participants not only acquire technical competencies but also build sustained relationships with Bulgarian colleagues and local communities. This collaboration fosters mutual understanding and transnational networks of knowledge exchange, reinforcing Bulgaria's reputation as a centre for heritage education and cross-cultural academic interaction. Through its immersive model, BHFS highlights how engagement with cultural heritage can serve as a diplomatic bridge, connecting global learners with local histories and cultural landscapes.

The ENGAGE.EU Summer School, hosted by the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) in Sofia, illustrates another dimension of academic cultural diplomacy: institutional cooperation within a transnational European research alliance. ENGAGE.EU is a consortium of European universities that promotes interdisciplinary education focusing on contemporary challenges, including sustainability, inclusion, and organisational innovation.[5]

The 2025 Summer School program, held in June 2025 at UNWE, brought together students from partner institutions across Europe for a series of thematic workshops, lectures, and collaborative projects focused on issues such as equality, diversity, decarbonisation strategies, and sustainable futures. Interaction with faculty from different countries, expert presentations, and a mix of cultural and educational activities enabled students to broaden their interdisciplinary competencies while building international academic networks.[6]

Although not explicitly framed as a cultural diplomacy program, the ENGAGE.EU Summer School contributes to strengthen Bulgaria's soft power capacities by positioning its capital as a site of transnational academic exchange and cooperation. Hosting an interdisciplinary Europe-wide cohort enhances academic visibility of the country within broader European networks and conveys an image of openness, educational innovation, and collaborative engagement. Social and cultural components—such as excursions to museums, historic sites, and local cultural landmarks—complement the academic curriculum, further facilitating intercultural understanding among participating students.

Another significant example of academic diplomacy is the fellowship program of the American Research Centre in Sofia (ARCS). The centre supports international and Bulgarian scholars conducting research on topics related to Bulgaria and Southeast Europe, including archaeology, anthropology, history, and cultural studies. ARCS fellows typically conduct archival research, fieldwork, and collaborative

[4] More information about this initiative is available at https://www.bhfieldschool.org/.

[5] See *ENGAGE.EU Summer School 2025—ENGAGE.EU*: https://www.engageuniversity.eu/engage-eu-summer-school-2025/.

[6] For more information, see UNWE's website: https://www.engageuniversity.eu/2025/06/30/unwe-hosted-this-years-engage-eu-summer-school/.

projects in Bulgaria while participating in seminars and public lectures organised by the centre. This framework fosters intellectual exchange between local scholars and international researchers and promotes interdisciplinary dialogue on regional issues.[7]

From a cultural diplomacy perspective, ARCS functions as a long-term research platform that integrates foreign scholars into Bulgarian academic life. The centre's activities contribute to the international dissemination of research on Bulgarian history and culture, strengthening the country's academic reputation and expanding scholarly networks focused on Southeast European studies.

Finally, academic programs organised by Central European University (CEU) in collaboration with Bulgarian institutions provide an additional model of cultural diplomacy grounded in regional academic cooperation. CEU's workshops, conferences, and summer courses often bring together graduate students, scholars, and policy practitioners to examine issues such as democratic governance, cultural heritage, and social transformation in Central and Southeast Europe.

These initiatives create spaces for dialogue among participants from diverse national backgrounds and disciplinary perspectives. By convening international academic communities in Bulgaria, they contribute to the exchange of ideas and the development of collaborative research agendas addressing regional challenges.[8] In this sense, CEU programs demonstrate how universities can act as transnational platforms for intellectual diplomacy, fostering shared academic discourse that transcends national boundaries.

The diversity of these initiatives demonstrates that academia plays a multifaceted role in cultural diplomacy. Through bilateral exchanges, collaborative research, heritage engagement, and transnational academic alliances, universities and research institutions create spaces where knowledge production and intercultural dialogue intersect. In the Bulgarian context, programs such as the Fulbright Specialist Program, the Balkan Heritage Field School, the ENGAGE.EU Summer School, the American Research Centre in Sofia fellowship program, and Central European University initiatives illustrate how academic institutions can operate as influential actors in international relations. By fostering intellectual collaboration and promoting mutual understanding, these initiatives reinforce the importance of academic cultural diplomacy as a key dimension of contemporary soft power.

A prime example of the growing role of academia in present-day cultural diplomacy is the project *Cultural diplomacy in the Balkans in the 20th and 21st centuries: Achievements, challenges, and the way forward*. It is funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science and implemented by the Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The project launched in December 2023 and is still ongoing.

[7] See American Research Center in Sofia Fellowships: https://arcsofia.org/fellowships/.

[8] More information about CEU's academic programs is available at: https://www.ceu.edu/academics and https://summeruniversity.ceu.edu/.

Its international team brings together professionals in history, international relations, cultural studies, anthropology, and political sciences from Austria, Bulgaria, France, Romania, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These are scholars with diverse academic backgrounds and at different stages of their career; some of them are established scholars, others—early to mid-career researchers, PhD students, and students. Their research contributes to addressing important questions, primarily whether cultural diplomacy enables so-called *small states* (although in my understanding, there are no small states in the field of culture) to compensate for the lack of resources, opportunities, and methods of traditional diplomacy, and thus to create a better image for themselves and a more significant presence on the international scene. Alternatively, is it to be assumed that over the past century, Balkan countries—unable to achieve their own distinct legitimation in the field of cultural diplomacy—nevertheless recognised its power? Did they manage to find appropriate forms for its implementation in attempts at neutrality, seeking support, and participating in international organisations? A related issue concerns the extent to which European leading powers exerted significant influence in the Balkan region through a combination of economic, military, and cultural power.

The project *Cultural diplomacy in the Balkans* spans a dynamic period of changes and turns, from the First World War to the present time. In this way, contemporary narratives—often partial, incomplete, and at times even misleading—are complemented by the study of the past, which, though it seldom truly repeats itself, can offer valuable insights and meaningful parallels for the future (Milanova, 2025, 25).

As part of this project, the course *Cultural Diplomacy in Contemporary Europe* was developed for the master's program *Crises, Conflicts, and Diplomacy in World Politics* at the Faculty of History of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. The main objective of this specialised class is to examine the role of culture as a unique instrument of soft power for building a common European identity and promoting global peace processes. On the one hand, the course focuses on theories of culture and diplomacy, and their interrelationship. On the other hand, the curriculum concentrates on the study of key elements and resources of cultural diplomacy as well as the factors determining its importance in foreign policy. Special attention is given to the role of cultural diplomacy in overcoming the contemporary challenges facing Europe.

After successfully completing this specialised course, students become familiar with the main concepts, elements, and principles of public and cultural diplomacy. They learn to explain the connections between them and justify the role of culture in achieving the foreign policy goals of European states. Students completing the program have the necessary knowledge and skills to distinguish cultural diplomacy from related activities, such as nation branding, cultural relations, propaganda, lobbying, etc. These young people are also able to analyse contemporary techniques used to conduct cultural diplomacy as both a soft and a smart power tool (O'Brien, 2011).

The first lectures were held during the summer term of the 2024/2025 academic year. Following positive feedback from students and faculty members in the pilot program, the project leader received an invitation from the head of the master's program to continue the course throughout the 2025/2026 academic year and beyond. Thus, existing practices of teaching and transmitting cultural diplomacy continue in the oldest, largest, and most prestigious university in Bulgaria.

In addition to research and teaching work, a number of public events were organised under the project, which proved to be successful instances of collaboration between the Bulgarian government and the academia at national and international levels. Arguably, the most significant example was the International conference *Cultural Diplomacy and the Balkans: Achievements and Challenges in the Present Time* held in Sofia in October 2024.[9] This scholarly event was organised by the Institute of Balkan Studies and Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with the support of the Ministry of Culture and in partnership with the State Institute for Culture to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria and the National Gallery.[10]

Most of the papers presented at the conference are compiled into a prime edited volume in English entitled *Cultural Diplomacy and the Balkans: Achievements and Challenges in the Present Time* (2025). The collection includes contributions by both scholars and high-ranking representatives of the cultural sector involved in the implementation of foreign cultural policies from Bulgaria, France, Sweden, Kenya, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The authors themselves come from and represent a variety of cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, their understanding of culture may differ. This is only natural, as culture is not an innate attribute but rather something acquired and learned through socialisation and experience. The contributors' diverse views, theses, and assumptions add to the body of scholarship in foreign cultural policy and international relations, outlining perspectives for future discussions and further research on the topic as cultural diplomacy still has a long way to go, and still has much to achieve (Milanova, 2025, 23–31).

[9] Further information about the conference, including its program, is available at: https://balkanstudies.bg/en/novini/1037-международната-конференция-„културната-дипломация-и-балканите-постижения-и-предизвикателства-в-съвременната-епоха“,-организирана-от-ибцт–бан,-събра-изтъкнати-лектори-от-четири-континента.html and https://balkanstudies.bg/images/Program_Cultural_Diplomacy_and_the_Balkans_Achievements_and_challenges_in_the_present_time.pdf.

[10] Distinguished speakers representing academia, the cultural sector, and international NGOs across four continents took part in the conference. Among them were Andrew Manning, Director of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), Maryam Majid Al Saad, Secretary General of the Global Public Diplomacy Network (GPDNet), Kimberly Montgomery, Director of International Affairs and Science Diplomacy of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), Aisha Adamu Augie, Director-General of the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and others. They all shared with the attendees their wealth of experience in engaging in international cultural relations.

Another successful example of collaboration between Bulgarian state institutions and the academia is the series of lecture-discussions dedicated to cultural diplomacy in Bulgaria and the Balkans. This initiative started in the beginning of 2025, resulting from the partnership between the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the State Institute for Culture to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria. The ambassadors and the directors of foreign cultural institutes participate as lecturers in these public events. So far, Embassies of France, Croatia, Albania, Slovenia, Poland, Greece, and Germany, as well as the French Institute and the Polish Institute in Bulgaria took part in this enterprise. All lecture-discussions attracted a great interest, especially from young people, and sparked lively discussions. In addition, this new and innovative initiative proved to be a platform to promote and sustain intercultural dialogue between the diplomatic corps, state institutions, academia, young people, and the public.

4 Instead of a Conclusion

Using several compelling academic initiatives that took place in Bulgaria in the past years, this article illustrates how state institutions, cultural organisations, diplomatic corps, and academia can intersect to advance both national interests and global engagement. Bulgarian research institutions and cultural organisations play a pivotal role in fostering international collaboration, promoting the country's cultural heritage, and building long-term relationships that transcend formal diplomacy. By leveraging academic networks, cross-border research partnerships, and cultural initiatives, Bulgaria demonstrates that soft power is not only an instrument of statecraft but also a shared responsibility between public and non-state actors.

Additionally, this essay underscores that cultural diplomacy in the academic context is most effective when it integrates knowledge production, mobility, and intercultural exchange, positioning the academia as an engine of innovation, dialogue, and mutual understanding. As global challenges become increasingly complex and interconnected, Bulgaria's experience highlights the potential of academia to serve as both a bridge and a platform for sustained international cooperation. Ultimately, the Bulgarian case reinforces the broader notion that cultural diplomacy, when closely aligned with academic engagement, strengthens not only national identity and prestige but also the collaborative capacity of societies in a rapidly globalising world.

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