

BRIDGING BORDERS: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND EU INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract:

In recent years, cultural diplomacy became a key tool in international relations, crisis resolution and nation branding. It also proved to be one of the most effective ways to build meaningful connections between states and peoples. A strong cultural presence abroad allowed countries to assert their distinctive identity, improve their public image, share ideas, models and values, increase or maintain their influence, make allies and open new avenues for dialogue with conflicting states when other means have become impossible. Cultural diplomacy initiatives have been implemented by individual countries and national governments as well as by supranational political and economic organisations such as the European Union. EU has been using cultural instruments to its advantage for many years, especially in times when it has not been sure of its other sources of power. Moreover, the European Union pursued its foreign cultural policy towards non-member states, and all the more important, towards the Western Balkans, aiming to facilitate and accelerate their EU integration.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Western Balkans, EU integration.

At the occasion of the European Culture Forum, held in Brussels in April 2016, Federica Mogherini, who at the time was serving as Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, gave a powerful and compelling speech. The core message of her statement centred on placing culture at the heart of Europe's external action. She insisted that it was paramount for culture to underlay foreign relations within European countries, but also between the European Union and the rest of the world. Mogherini concluded her captivating speech by stating, 'Probably

no other place in the world has the same cultural „density“ as Europe. So much history, so many stories and cultures. We preserve millennial traditions, and we are among the engines of global innovation. We should not be afraid to say we are a cultural super-power.’¹

Indeed, an immensely powerful and fascinating statement that introduced a new cultural diplomacy model embraced by the European Union. The model incorporated elements of the numerous definitions of this concept with blurred boundaries, which already became *un mot valise* in international relations². In the years to come, the EU focused its cultural diplomacy on building meaningful connections with countries outside its 27 member states, and all the more important, with the Western Balkans, aiming to facilitate and accelerate their integration. The EU accession process is central in the relations between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries, which share a history, deep cultural roots, values and a common future. Moreover, EU Member States geographically surround this region in Southeast Europe.

As stated in the *EU-Western Balkans Strategy* - ‘*A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*’, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are essential for the region’s respective European path³. The EU’s enlargement policy aims at exporting stability and hence, an important emphasis is placed on reconciliation and restoring trust among Western Balkans societies in view of firmly anchoring peace, ensuring lasting stability and socio-economic development in the region. The need to overcome the legacy of the past and rebuilding the social fabric is all the more important in a context where increased radicalism and hate speech are spreading in Europe, including the Balkans and the Western Balkans region. In this context, cultural diplomacy is an indispensable instrument in EU foreign policy. Unlike traditional forms of diplomacy, which often rely on military or economic might, cultural diplomacy utilizes shared cultural experiences to build relationships between nations. Its ability to transcend political boundaries and foster mutual understanding among people from diverse backgrounds make it a crucial tool in the modern world. As global political tensions continue to rise and conflicts seem unending, cultural diplomacy offers a peaceful and constructive approach to building bridges between societies. In regions such as the Balkans, where cultural, ethnic, and historical divisions run deep, cultural diplomacy takes on an even greater significance.

¹ *Speech of the HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the Culture Forum in Brussels*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-hrvp-federica-mogherini-culture-forum-brussels_en - Accessed 19.06.2025.

² Isar, Y.R. (2014). „*Culture in External Relations*“: *The EU in Cultural Diplomacy*, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), p. 2.

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (2018). *EU-Western Balkans Strategy* - ‘*A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*’, Brussels, pp. 6-7.

The initiatives of EU cultural diplomacy towards the Western Balkans are more numerous than could be listed here. *Creative Europe*, the European Commission's flagship programme to support the culture and audio-visual sectors, provided funding for most of them. A few examples include *The Balkan Trafik Festival* (an annual event held in Brussels that brings together artists from all Balkan countries, thus promoting cultural diversity and shared heritage, and raising awareness of Balkan cultures), *Sarajevo Film Festival*, EU-Western Balkan cooperation through *Erasmus+*, etc. In addition, the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), founded in 2006, evolved over time into a strong network delivering transnational collaborative projects worldwide through its 36 members and 103 clusters. At present, members of EUNIC from the Western Balkan are Albania, Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia⁴.

One of the milestones of EU cultural diplomacy came in 2019, when the European Commission decided to reinforce cultural cooperation in the Western Balkans as an engine for reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. A specific call built on the Creative Europe Programme and funded by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) was launched. Applicants were encouraged to propose a consortium with a majority of partners coming from the Western Balkans region. The aim was to strengthen the ties between the 27 EU member states and the Western Balkan countries as well as to maximise local impact. Such a large initiative required mobilisation of services and funding programmes across the board, including the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)⁵. This innovative cooperation demonstrated the benefit of mobilising different programmes to sustain the EU cultural diplomacy.

EACEA received 350 proposals, which testified to the importance of such initiatives for both the European Union and the Western Balkan countries. The Agency funded 13 of these projects with 91 partners. Selected projects covered a diverse range of sectors, including music, arts, literature, cultural heritage preservation, historical comics, and many more, which contributed to the crosscutting objectives of the European Commission. Below are few examples that illustrate the multifaceted scope of funded cultural initiatives.

ReCulture: Re-branding of Cultural Institutions in Western Balkans. The overall aim of this project was to improve visibility and modernise the image of Western Balkan cultural institutions by supporting the inter-sectoral linking

⁴ European Union National Institutes for Culture, <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/about> - Accessed 29.06.2025.

⁵ Zampieri, W., H. Skikos et al. (eds.) (2022). *European cultural cooperation projects in the Western Balkans. 13 projects that strengthen cultural cooperation and improve the cultural and creative industries in the region*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p. 3.

and cooperation between cultural and creative industries within the Western Balkans and the EU Member States. This project also contributed to the capacity building in cultural institutions from Western Balkans through reconstructing their visual identities and developing new skills in strategic approach towards audience development and communication practices. The consortium of project partners consisted of seven organisations from five countries. These were the Project Leader *Cultural Center Trebinje* and Museum of Contemporary Art of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Ink fest organisation* and Faculty of Dramatic Arts from Serbia, *Art Colony Danilovgrad* from Montenegro, Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (MUCEM) from France and Institute for Cultural Policy (iCP) from Austria⁶.

RE: PLAY (Redesigning playscapes with children in Western Balkans). The project was engaged in rethinking play as a distinctly human capacity, which has been underrated by urban design, as well as in redesigning playgrounds for children in Western Balkan countries. It highlighted the significance of creating spaces with kids and pioneered a co-creative design process, involving children as its primary collaborators. In the long term, the project aimed to provide significantly improved spatial conditions for enriching natural and unstructured play for all kids living in urban environments. The consortium implementing this project included *Društvo Pazi!park* from Slovenia, *Kreativni Krajobrazi* from Croatia, *Udruženje Škogled* from Serbia, *Qendra Marrëdhënie* from Albania, and *Gradionica* from Montenegro⁷.

The Ways of the Heroes. This project putted the spotlight on positive role models for environmental change and created contemporary art that addressed prominent issues in today's societies. Social apathy and absence of agency, especially in the Western Balkans, was a shared problem that all partners of *The Ways of the Heroes* have recognised. Inspired by Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*, which questions the impact of the individual on the community and vice versa, the project focused on making visible the stories of the everyday heroes through theatre, public space performances, exhibitions, illustrated book for children, and online campaigns. Consortium partners were *Association for Promotion and Development of Cultural Activities - Studio Teatar* from Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Eho Animato* from Serbia, *La Dramaturgie* from Italy, *LOOP - Astiki mi Kerdoskopiki Etaireia* from Greece, *Publishing House Gavroche Dooel Skopje* from North Macedonia, and *Studio za Raziskavo Umetnosti Igre, Zavod za Kulturno Dejavnost* from Slovenia⁸.

Arguably, one of the latest EU cultural diplomacy initiatives in the Western Balkans took place in early May 2025. It was implemented not by the European Union itself but by an individual member state. A Street in Cetinje, the historic

⁶ *Reculture | Reculture Project*, <https://www.recultureproject.eu/> - Accessed 29.06.2025.

⁷ *RE:PLAY*, <https://kreativnikrajobrazi.hr/en/replay/> - Accessed 29.06.2025.

⁸ Zampieri, W., H. Skikos et al. (eds.) (2022). *European cultural cooperation projects in the Western Balkans*, pp. 26-27.

capital of Montenegro, was officially named after the prominent Bulgarian writer Ivan Vazov and a memorial plaque in his name was unveiled. The Vice President of Bulgaria Iliana Yotova and the Minister of Culture Marian Bachev attended the ceremony together with the Mayor of Cetinje Nikola Djuraskovic. They all highlighted that this act was a proof of mutual respect and shared values between the two countries. The Vice President used the occasion to congratulate Montenegrin officials for their progress in the negotiations for EU accession. She expressed hope that Montenegro would become a full member of the European Union in 2028. As diplomacy is based on reciprocity, a street in the Bulgarian city of Veliko Tarnovo, the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, will be named after Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, a Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, poet and philosopher whose works are widely considered some of the most important in Montenegrin and Serbian literature⁹.

All these initiatives demonstrate a balanced approach in EU cultural diplomacy between seeking influence (ultimately, when it comes to cultural diplomacy, it is about influence) and engaging in respectful and equal dialogue with Western Balkan countries. In this regard, one of the main strengths of the European Union is the development of cultural diplomacy as both a soft and smart power tool, proving that it was not just a hobby for intellectuals. Thus, the EU distinguished itself from many modern great powers that tend to see international cultural relations as a zero-sum game of cultural power¹⁰.

Finally, successful EU cultural diplomacy initiatives in the Western Balkans augured well for an endeavour whose purposes resonate with Jacques Delors' vision. The French politician, who served as the eighth president of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, stated, 'we all need to learn how to live together in a new spirit'. This new spirit, 'guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common project in an intelligent and peaceful way.'¹¹

It was not isolation, but openness what made Europe such an incredible place and project. A project of integration that the world still considers as a model¹². Because cultural exchanges made us richer, not weaker. Because our last common good is culture.

⁹ *A Street named after Ivan Vazov in Cetinje*, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/102153448/a-street-named-after-ivan-vazov-in-cetinje> - Accessed 29.06.2025.

¹⁰ Triandafyllidou, A., T. Szűcs (2017). *EU Cultural Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities*, Policy Brief, Issue 2017/13, European University Institute, Fiesole, Robert Schuman Center for Advance Studies, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Isar, Y.R. (2014). „Culture in External Relations“: *The EU in Cultural Diplomacy*, pp. 13-14.

¹² Speech of the HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the Culture Forum in Brussels, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-hrvp-federica-mogherini-culture-forum-brussels_en

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