FROM STANDING OUT TO REACHING OUT: ASPECTS OF FRENCH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE BALKANS AFTER WORLD WAR II[1]

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Abstract: Cultural relations have long played an important role in French diplomacy. This was largely explained by the determination of France to develop cultural ties with other countries and peoples to allow them to learn about and appreciate the French language, culture and messages intended to benefit all humanity. In the aftermath of World War II, despite the rise of the two global superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – France was able to maintain a significant presence in all Balkan countries (however tentative the latter definition may be). This was largely due to both the growing influence of Francophonie and a major shift in the model of French cultural diplomacy at the time. While France's main objective remained the pursuit of national interests and enhancement of its prestige, there occurred a gradual transformation from Franco-centric foreign cultural initiatives towards mutually beneficial practices. These practices sought to build trust, long-term collaboration and a sharing of common values. Ultimately, they paved the way for cooperation in various other areas, such as politics, economics and social development.

Keywords: France, Balkans, Cultural Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Influence

Culture is a powerful tool that many states deploy outside the confines of their national borders and use in international relations, both bilateral and multilateral. A strong cultural presence abroad allows countries to assert their distinctive identity, improve their public image, share ideas, ideologies,

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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.

France has been using cultural instruments to its advantage for many years, especially since it has not always been confident in its other sources of power – even when it was one of the world's leading actors. In this respect, cultural diplomacy – understood as an "exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 1) – was first introduced by France in order to consolidate and preserve its areas of influence and its empire. French rulers were the ones to realise there was more to the influence of a state than the strength of its economy, its strategic and military power, and its standing in global institutions. It also had to consider how seductive its ideas, knowledge and culture were, as well as how they related to the other factors of power (Lane, 2013, XVI). Hence, over time, cultural diplomacy, this specific type of soft power, became a critically important tool in addressing French foreign discourse.

In the aftermath of World War II, France suffered material destruction far beyond that of the Great War. Its infrastructure and economy were ruined, its cities destroyed and the French that had survived the German occupation lived in dire poverty. France lost its status of a great power. Against this background, culture seemed to be almost its last remaining means of exerting a certain influence, promoting its image and defending its interests, whether economic, cultural or linguistic. In the post-World War II period, French foreign cultural policy, including in the Balkans, became part of a global competition to increase attractiveness. All countries, both established and emerging powers, appreciated the strategic nature of culture, science and education for their devel-

opment. From an economic perspective, these elements had their attraction; politically, they were means to exert influence (*Ibid.*, XI). In this global rivalry, France was determined to promote its strengths. It therefore had to develop and exploit a variety of tools to reinforce its positions in the Balkans.

While French presence in this part of Europe often evoked *prima facie* associations with Romania, it is worth remembering that the entire region had certain Francophone traditions and, more broadly, a Francophile orientation. Even Turkey, a non-French-speaking country in the institutional sense of this concept, was at the heart of the so-called "other Francophonie", mainly because of the heritage of French educational and cultural activities in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans once dominated most of the French-speaking regions of the Maghreb and Mashreq, hence the geohistorical weight of the importance of French presence in Turkey (Chaubet et al., 393–394).[2]

Therefore, despite the rise of the two global superpowers in the aftermath of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union, France was able to maintain a significant influence in all Balkan states. This was largely due to its cultural and artistic vibrancy in a wide array of fields, its leading role in scientific collaboration based on partnerships with national academies, universities and research centres, its educational cooperation supported by a large international school network, and its efforts to promote the French language. It was from 1945 onwards that cultural diplomacy took on a much

[2] The idea of the "other Francophonie" goes beyond the limits of the sole institutional Francophonie represented by the International Organisation of La Francophonie. Instead, it relies on civil society or the Francophone community. This concept and its various aspects are thoroughly developed in Nowicki, Joanna et Catherine Mayaux (dir.) *L'autre Francophonie*. Paris : Honoré Champion (Littérature de notre siècle, t. 46), 2012.

more prominent role in the French diplomatic machine in the Balkans.

The term "diplomatic machine" (*« machine diplomatique »*), coined by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle in his work "La décadence, 1932–1939", refers to a system made up of diverse components, in which there is a specific concordance between what is done by different institutions upstream and downstream. In other words, the concept of a diplomatic machine designates the use of all the political and administrative structures in the service of a country's foreign policy. In the case of France, this applies primarily to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (under its different names over the years), both the central services at the Quai d'Orsay in Paris and French diplomatic missions abroad, as well as the Ministry of Culture (also under different names over the years), cultural and scientific organisations.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, foreign policy expanded its scope, and diplomacy increasingly required specialists in different fields. However, it was not until the major reforms of 1945 in the French diplomatic service that the positions of "Cultural attaché" and "Cultural advisor" were officially introduced. This was not to say that culture had been neglected in the diplomatic missions before then. After all, French diplomats invented much of the practice of cultural relations abroad, but these posts did not appear in the foreign structures of their country until 1945. Culture was considered a natural asset for France, easy enough to develop abroad, that the ambassador did not need a dedicated expert to work alongside him in this field. However, France did not wait until the end of World War II to exercise cultural diplomacy. On the contrary, French cultural diplomacy had its origins in the *Ancien régime*, since which time the links between literature and diplomacy have been

extremely strong. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, many diplomats were also men of letters (Raymond, 2000). However, it was only after World War II when France felt the need to arrange its diplomatic machinery more solidly in the cultural domain.

In fact, during World War I in Spain, Pierre Paris, a professor of archaeology and art history, played a role very similar to that of the future cultural attachés, without having the title. Later, Maurice Legendre, a great French hispanist and deputy director of the *Casa de Velasquez*, exercised the same type of influence in terms of cultural propaganda. At the end of the Civil War, Marshal Pétain, the new ambassador to Spain, appointed him as his "Cultural attaché". However, this was an individual initiative of Ambassador Pétain and no decree gave it legal existence. Legendre remained "Cultural attaché" to Pétain's successor in Madrid and held this position during the Vichy regime until May 1943, when he joined the Resistance. The Vichy government did not follow up, and it was not until the reforms of 1945 that such posts were created not only in Madrid, but also in other French embassies (Delaunay, 330-332).

After the Liberation of France in 1945, the Provisional Government of the French Republic carried out a major reform of the diplomatic system. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reverted to the distinction between a Directorate of Political Affairs and a Directorate of Economic Affairs (merged at the beginning of the twentieth century into a Directorate of Political and Commercial Affairs with geographical divisions). The Ministry also added a third major directorate to its structures, which was responsible for culture. Following the ordinance of April 13 that reformed the central administration of this ministry, the decree of July 17 established the Directorate-General for Cultural Relations (*Direction générale*

des Relations culturelles – DGRC). This new directorate employed 54 people by the early 1950s. In addition, the Association for the Dissemination of French Thought (*L'Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française – ADPF*) was set up in 1946. Its main objective was to provide foreign audiences with access to the most recent French intellectual production. The ADPF later became the book and letters operator of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, posts of cultural advisors created after World War II in the major French embassies reached 18 in 1947 (Frank, 326–331). In September 1956, the directorate took the name of Directorate-General of Cultural and Technical Affairs (DGACT), adding the international cooperation services. These developments marked the emergence of culture as a central component of France's post-war diplomatic strategy.

The Fifth Republic (*La Cinquième République*), established on October 4, 1958, exemplified the way in which French cultural diplomacy was structured following World War II, and Charles de Gaulle largely contributed to its development. In 1959, he instigated the creation of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and appointed the French novelist and art theorist André Malraux to head this first post. De Gaulle's decision initiated a movement that other countries followed. This new ministry, officially named the Ministry of Culture and Communication, brought together departments that had previously been attached to the Ministry of National Education (General Directorate of Arts and Letters, Directorate of Architecture, Directorate of French Archives) and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce (National Centre for Cinematography), along with the High Commission for Youth and Sport.

Cultural policy during this period coincided with a desire to "democratise" culture. The new ministry's remit was to

make the most important cultural works of humanity, and first and foremost of France, accessible to the greatest possible number of French people; to ensure the widest possible audience for the cultural heritage of France; to encourage the creation of art and the spirit that enriches it (Decree no. 59-889 of July 24, 1959). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, retained its monopoly on "cultural action abroad" (*« action culturelle extérieure »*).[3] The primary role of the state in cultural relations, as well as its direct intervention in this field, stood out for its stability. Its official and decisive character was not called into question, which gave the government significant room to manoeuvre in foreign policy. The main strategy continued to be the dissemination and promotion of the French language, which had been the language of diplomacy and international relations for centuries, as well as a driving force of French soft power, including in non-French-speaking countries.

[3] In his path-breaking dissertation, published under the same title making it widely accessible, cited by Robert Frank and other authors, Albert Salon drew a valuable distinction between "cultural policy" and "cultural action". The former is the sole responsibility of the state; the latter is the work of the entire nation, covering past and present interventions of all public and private organisations and individuals. In this sense, "cultural diplomacy", that is, cultural policy abroad, refers in principle exclusively to state intervention to ensure the national cultural presence abroad. "Cultural action abroad" is a broader concept, encompassing actors other than the state. In various capacities they express French culture, act through culture and for culture – French and non-French – to achieve in some cases non-purely cultural objectives throughout the world, including in France. (Salon, 10). Where does the cultural "diplomatic machine" fit into this framework? By definition, it acts primarily in the service of state cultural policy. However, since the latter cannot neglect the role of actors other than the state, the "machine" also serves as an intermediary between cultural "policy" and "action", to the point that the distinction between the two notions sometimes blurs. On behalf of the state, it plays, or attempts to play, the role of coordinator between all cultural actors abroad. In other words, cultural diplomacy and the "machine" that serves it directly implement foreign cultural policy and indirectly manage or try to manage that part of cultural activities that is not under the country's jurisdiction (Frank, 326–327).

From the 1960s onwards, the government devoted a large part of its budget to promoting French culture and works of art throughout the world, including in the Balkans. Between 1960 and 1980, cultural diplomacy accounted for more than half of the budget of the Quai d'Orsay. The largest part of the budget of the General Directorate for Cultural and Technical Affairs (DGRC) was intended for activities in the Maghreb, which became independent after a long French presence that was asserted and then delegitimised to varying degrees (Gueldyeva, 16). This was also during a period when the state accorded the highest priority to cultural diplomacy.

There were three important milestones in French cultural diplomacy of the time. The first happened between 1959 and 1969, when two five-year plans were implemented, leading to a significant increase in funding for cultural activities abroad. The second occurred in October 1983, when the Council of Ministers approved the French foreign cultural project. Finally, between 1988 and 1991, a Secretary of State for International Cultural Relations was appointed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Haize, 2).

In parallel, the Conference of French-speaking Ministers of National Education (*Conférence des ministres de l'Éducation des États et gouvernements de la Francophonie – CONFEMEN*) followed by the Conference of French-speaking Ministers of Youth and Sports (*Conférence des Ministres de la jeunesse et des sports de la Francophonie – CONFEJES*) also played a major role in expanding French cultural diplomacy and promoting the French language. Created in 1960 as the Conference of Ministers of National Education of the French-speaking African and Malagasy countries, CONFEMEN expanded rapidly in the following decades. At present, the oldest French-speaking institution provides a framework for exchange and consulta-

tion to 44 member states and governments, including Bulgaria, Romania and the Republic of North Macedonia. As for CONFEJES, founded in 1969, it currently involves 43 member states and governments, among them Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and the Republic of North Macedonia.

In addition, the International Association of Francophone Parliamentarians (*Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie – AIPLF*) was established in 1967. At present, this international organisation brings together 95 members from parliaments and inter-parliamentary organisations dedicated to contributing to the development and reciprocal understanding of cultures and civilizations, further the influence of the French language, promote democracy, the rule of law and individual rights, foster cooperation, and reinforce solidarity. Greece and Romania are full members of the AIPLF in the Europe Region. Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and the Republic of North Macedonia are associate members, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia hold observer status (Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie Région Europe, 1).

Alongside these political initiatives, the Francophone University Agency (*Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie – AUF*) was founded in 1961 as a global network of French-speaking higher education and research institutions. This multilateral organisation operated and supported cooperation and solidarity among both French-speaking and non-speaking countries. Today, the AUF brings together more than 1,000 universities and scientific research centres in nearly 120 countries. All Balkan states are part of this global network.

The creation of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (*Organisation internationale de la Francophonie – OIF*) was of utmost importance for the advancement

of French cultural diplomacy throughout the world, including the Balkans. Initially started as the Cultural and Technical Cooperation Agency in 1970, it was founded by the representatives of 21 states and governments under the influence of former Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor, former Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, former Nigerian President Hamani Diori, and former Prime Minister of Cambodia Norodom Sihanouk. In 1998, this legal entity of public international law was renamed the Intergovernmental Agency of La Francophonie and in 2005, it became the OIF. According to its charter, the aim was to promote the French language and common values, including cultural and linguistic diversity; to encourage peace, democracy and human rights; to support culture, education, training, and research; and to foster economic cooperation to bolster sustainable development (The Charter of the Francophonie, 749–750).

Despite the founding role of African Heads of State in the establishment of the OIF, one of the main criticisms from the outset was that France became a dominant player in the organisation. It was true that French as a world language has traditionally been at the heart of France's claims to global significance. Notwithstanding the fluctuations in the policies of the presidents of the Fifth Republic, they all have shown varying degrees of commitment to the projection of the French language and culture. Already General de Gaulle vigorously defended a world profile for the language, though understood as an attribute of the French nation itself and contributor to its *grandeur*. After his initial hopes for a Francophone bloc in Africa (organized around the leadership of France) were dashed in the early 1960s, he gave little support to the multilateral proposals for Francophone unification put forward by a number of African leaders. He accepted them only insofar as they were a necessary concession

to the realization of his overall political ambitions for France's role in Francophone Africa and for Quebec. Pompidou was more invested in the promotion of the French language itself. He firmly believed that of all countries, France was the one that was most committed to exporting the French language and Francophone values. In his view, the cooperation France provided to other countries was undeniably oriented towards the expansion of its language and culture. By the end of his presidency, George Pompidou began to develop this "expansionist" program in a multilateral direction for the French-speaking world, but his efforts thwarted by his technocratic successor Valery Giscard d'Estaing, who did not see significant potential for alliances around the French language and culture in his plans to reorient France as an international economic and political power. For his part, the reputedly "literary" François Mitterrand repositioned language as a central component of both France's international presence and French cultural diplomacy, although decisively inflecting the rhetoric of Francophonie in an anti-hegemonic direction. He took France's francophone commitment beyond the cultural and technical enclaves to which previous leaders had confined it, presenting it as an explicitly political project. Beginning in 1986, he introduced biennial head-of-state summits that brought together the leaders of the francophone world in a single forum (Ahearne, 258–259). Mitterrand's successor Jacques Chirac built on that programme and created the OIF, as it is known today. Owing to his actions, Francophonie was consolidated as a fully-fledged "policy in its own right, going beyond even the question of Franco-African relations, and within the framework of an increasing multilateralization of French foreign policy" (Turpin, 102).

Presently, the OIF unites 93 states or governments. Among the Balkan countries, current members are Albania

(since 1999), Bulgaria (1993), Greece (2004), the Republic of North Macedonia (2006), and Romania (1993). Consistent in its policy of support for the countries of the Western Balkans, Bulgaria backed the applications of Serbia and Kosovo for associate members of the IOF. The latter two, which maintained traditionally good diplomatic, military, commercial and cultural ties with France as well as with other Francophone countries, became associate states in 2006 and 2014 respectively. Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010), Croatia (2004), Montenegro (2010), and Slovenia (1999) hold observer status. So far, the highest decision-making body of the OIF that convenes biennially has been held in the Balkans only once. It was the XI Summit, which took place in Bucharest on 28 and 29 September 2006.

All this demonstrates the political expansion of the French language and its institutions, including in Balkan countries where the Francophonie has not always had a recognized cultural and linguistic influence. The Western Balkans have been largely part of this trend. They have faced development, cooperation and integration issues that Francophonie played an important role in addressing.

Another major event in the development of French cultural diplomacy in the post-World War II period was the creation of the Agency for French Education Abroad (*Agence pour l'enseignement français à l'étranger – AEFE*) in 1990. This public institution was responsible for the management of French establishments abroad and the running of the school network. France has always had a large number of educational establishments abroad that provided teaching in French. Public schools under the auspices of private associations such as *Mission laïque française* (founded in 1902) or *Alliance israélite universelle* (created in 1860) worked alongside the network of Quai d'Orsay. The fact that AEFE was

subordinate to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not to the Ministry of National Education and Youth revealed its essential role in the implementation of France's foreign policy. As of September 2023, the network coordinated by this institution comprised 600 establishments welcoming nearly 398,000 students in 138 countries and involving all Balkan states (Un réseau unique au monde, 1). There was no equivalent in the world. Although this agency focused mainly on French teaching, it was one of the most important and successful actors in promoting the French language, values and culture abroad. Often, its impact has been significantly stronger and broader than that of cultural activities, as the cultural sector was frequently subject to criticism, conflict and budget cuts.

The accession of an increasing number of Balkan states to the plethora of Francophone organisations, in which France played a pivotal role, was essential to strengthening the French presence in this region. It has become clear that French cultural diplomacy unfolded in conjunction with the International Organisation of La Francophonie. It relied on the OIF to develop a policy of cultural and linguistic advantage necessary to counter the dominance of the English language and the loss of influence of the French – the only two languages used on every continent. Recently, eager to reframe the importance of French language and culture, President Emmanuel Macron brought this policy to the highest level. In a number of public speeches, he insisted that French language and culture were no longer simply French. The novelty here lies not in the statement itself but in its high-level performance mode. Previous presidents had insisted on the status of French as an international language, but Macron asserted that it represented a nation larger than France, further including the Balkans. In other

words, the French language and culture were emancipated from France and their future no longer belongs to that nation alone (Ahearne, 262).

Besides geographical reframing and metaphorical re-imagining of the French language and culture, France fostered its bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Balkan countries by adopting a thousand and one ways to act through culture (Chaubet et al., 29). First, there were Cultural Cooperation and Action Services placed under the direct supervision of the ambassadors. These services oversaw and coordinated all cultural activities and organisations. They implemented the cultural policy defined by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and allocated the resources necessary to carry out respective activities.

The universalist solidarity that France used in defending humanity's common goods depended mainly on one condition: France itself had to set a good example for the world. This was why influence could not be achieved without attractiveness (Discours du président de la République française, Emmanuel Macron, 2017). Here, the large network of *Institut français* and *Alliance française* – veritable agents for the promotion of the French language and culture – continued to play a leading role. In support of their active work in modern French cultural diplomacy, new cultural centres were opened. One of the latest examples included the French Institute of Albania *KubFrance-Tirana*, which welcomed its first visitors in October 2023. The primary objective of these institutes and cultural centres was to teach French. However, they were also responsible for the organisation of cultural events (exhibitions, book presentations, concerts, theatre pays, film screenings, etc.).

Finally, they offered literature and information about France and French culture.

The change in the model of French cultural diplomacy proved to be very important in enhancing France's position in the Balkans. Following the appalling loss of political, economic and even moral power caused by World War II, what is known as "French messianism" was gradually changing. It evolved from "irradiation to influence" (*« du rayonnement à l'influence »*) and then to reaching out to the countries in this part of Europe. While the main objective of France remained the pursuit of national interests and the enhancement of its prestige – it had to stand out – a major shift from Franco-centric foreign cultural initiatives towards mutual benefit practices occurred. Those practices sought to build trust, long-term cooperation and the sharing of common values.

A turning point came under the presidency of François Mitterrand who gave a European dimension to French cultural diplomacy. At a time when an increasing number of politicians and organisations were calling for the inclusion of cultural products in the traditional area of trade, the French president introduced the principle of cultural exception, in particular to exclude the cinema and audio-visual sectors from international trade agreements. Successive French presidents continued this policy and engaged in diplomacy that promoted French but also Balkan cultures. Sharing the belief that preserving the cultural identity of their peoples was essential for the consolidation of European identity, the states strengthened their collaboration aiming to promote cultural heritage and achievements of contemporary culture, as well as language learning. In other words, France and the Balkan countries committed to "a shared diplomacy of influence".[4]

[4] This definition was given by His Excellency Joël Meyer, Ambassador of France to Bulgaria (2022-2025), during his opening speech at the event "Cultivating

The shift in French cultural diplomacy to cooperation – based more on exchange and no longer solely on unilateral contribution – was illustrated, for instance, by organising the Abu Dhabi International Conference on Endangered Heritage, as well as the fight against climate change with the presidency of the Paris Conference and the agreement that followed (COP21). Other examples include sending French scientists and scholars to foreign research institutes, partnerships with these institutions, regional cooperation, particularly scientific cooperation, and agreements between universities. Thus, making French expertise available to the Balkan states in various fields became an important part of France's cultural diplomacy. France also supported different projects and initiatives in the region related to gender equality, reconciliation, and support of civil society and youth.

Conclusion

Manifestations of French cultural diplomacy in the Balkans following World War II were more numerous than could be listed. All of them, however, followed the same two-way process of communication that involved not only constructing the image and importance of France to Balkan countries and peoples, but also seeking to understand their culture, values and identities. The ambition of France was to emphasise its significance in a multilaterally regulated world system, its commitment to a "diplomacy of common goods", and its desire to engage other nations' civil societies beyond established institutional and political interlocutors. Another major goal was to project the image of the French language and culture not as fixed and frozen in an immutable classical

influence: Cultural diplomacy between France and Bulgaria", held on February 7, 2025 at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

essence, overtaken by the movement of history. Instead, they should be seen as transnationally developed resources whose dizzying variety served as an active contributor to that very history (Ahearne, 265). Thus, by moving from "standing out" to "reaching out", French cultural diplomacy paved the way for cooperation with the Balkan states in different areas, such as politics, economics and social development.

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