STATE INSTITUTE FOR CULTURE TO THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA: DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: This text aims to present the experience, presence in the public environment, and professional efforts of the State Institute for Culture to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria in the implementation of projects in the field of cultural diplomacy and foreign policy interactions through the toolkit of various cultural events, forums and projects. The role of the institution is not only to assist in the promotion of various areas of Bulgarian culture, art and traditions around the world as a key partner of Bulgarian diplomatic missions, but also to build and maintain sustainable relations and dialogue with national and international partners. In today's world, cultural diplomacy appears – and is being built as – a critically important tool for creating trust and strengthening relations in communities and in various institutions. It is also a possible tool for overcoming geopolitical tensions or conflicts. It is through successful cultural projects and cooperation that smaller countries like Bulgaria can play an important role in the global discourse, acting as a mediator for achieving peaceful goals and positive multicultural projects.

Keywords: State Institute for Culture, Cultural Diplomacy, Bulgaria, EUNIC

The State Institute for Culture to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2025 celebrates its 20 years of experience in the field of cultural diplomacy. This accumulated experience and expertise in the implementation of initiatives emphasizes not only the rich cultural, historical and literary heritage in Bulgaria, but also the unique national identity and contempo-

rary art. We are also convinced that cultural diplomacy is not expressed solely in the presentation of a rich and diverse cultural heritage, but also in building bridges and creative, sustainable, successful partnerships.

Thus, we look to the future. And this is achieved through the introduction of new approaches, innovations in creative collaboration, in dialogue, as well as tolerance and understanding of the other and their right to expression and identity.

The Mission of the State Institute for Culture

- To integrate cultural projects into the country's foreign policy toolkit.
- To assist the diplomatic service in implementing presentations of creative value.
- To expand ties with the national cultural sector.
- To work with other interested partners (including international ones) for the effective implementation of the country's cultural diplomacy.

The leading *strategic lines* of the Institute include both the expansion of international partnerships and our efforts to promote Bulgarian culture on the contemporary world stage.

The prospects that are emerging for the Institute, with a focus on cultural diplomacy, are real opportunities that are related both to the strengthening of regional cooperation in the Balkans (through various programs/projects) and emphasizing global dialogue between different cultures. The experience of the State Institute for Culture and our approach in cultural diplomacy contribute to a broader understanding of the importance and role of the so-called *smaller and/or medium-sized countries* in a global cultural exchange. Indeed,

the mediatory function, presence, and importance of these countries in inter-institutional interaction is often crucial.

The positioning of the Institute's activities, roles and functions – within the classical formula for cultural diplomacy – includes several main goals. Cultural diplomacy is understood as *soft power* in foreign policy and supports the development of the country's international relations. Included in this are the goals of promoting cultural and historical heritage, enhanced economic integration, and opportunities for economic development. In a favourable climate of international relations, cultural diplomacy is also used as a tool to address global challenges by promoting mutual understanding and preventing or resolving conflicts. However, this definition has been put to the test in recent years when the established rules of the international legal order have also been tested. Global crises have had an impact, a recent example being the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused catastrophic economic, social and health crises, as well as the reformulation of several policies, including cultural ones. Geopolitical confrontations, including the waging of aggressive wars on a regional and global scale, are also a prerequisite for redefining cultural diplomacy. Moreover, political instability and political crises are a factor. The growth of populist and nationalist discourse undoubtedly affects the focus and opportunities for culture to be a relevant and constructive tool in the development of societies, the promotion of universal human values, the advancement of education, and the enrichment of everyday life.

However, it is generally agreed that diplomacy remains the world's best hope for conflict resolution. Moreover, historically speaking, very few conflicts have been resolved solely on the battlefield. Discourse in diplomacy has its roots in ancient times and has proven to be a working and sustainable tool.

The State Institute for Culture is part of a widely branched system for the practical implementation of Bulgaria's cultural diplomacy. It should be noted that the Ministry of Culture is the key institution in determining the country's cultural policy. All structures under the Ministry of Culture – Cultural institutes under municipalities, national funds and structures – have their share and make important contributions to the overall cultural map of the country. Although it is not the largest or only player in the field of cultural promotion, the State Institute for Culture has a key advantage: the opportunity and capacity to work closely with the entire network of Bulgarian diplomatic missions around the world, as well as with other institutions in the country and abroad. The strategic partnership with the embassies and consulates of Bulgaria allows us to create projects that do not necessarily claim to be large-scale and comprehensive. However, they are targeted and geographically focused on emphasizing the unique aspects of Bulgarian culture and identity – both our cultural and historical heritage, unique nature, and contemporary creative capital. This long-standing joint work with diplomatic missions allows us to create specific cultural initiatives adapted to the local context, which highlight the values that build Bulgarian society, but also promotes dialogue with local communities, creating prerequisites for friendships and building trust. These projects draw attention to significant cultural topics – from our ancient traditions and historical heritage to contemporary cultural phenomena, including artists who connect us with the rest of the world.

In the face of dynamic geopolitical challenges and a changing communication environment – especially with the development of the digital world – we strive to maintain flexibility in our work. This allows us to respond to new realities by discovering and using the appropriate tools and methods

for cultural communication. The Institute aspires not only to preserve and promote cultural heritage, but also to present it in innovative ways, adapted to modern communication platforms. That is why in recent years the official YouTube channel has developed, publishing over fifty specialized videos, most of which are subtitled in English, presenting current virtual concerts, exhibitions, thematic interviews and more.

Active engagement with academic and research organizations, media and the non-governmental sector is also a very important part of the Institute's work. As a result, a few successful projects are being implemented: mobile and innovative virtual exhibitions, presentations in the field of literature, promotion of new Bulgarian films (both documentary and feature films), and many others. In this way, we create cultural initiatives that not only meet current needs but also fit into a broader vision of our cultural diplomacy.

The Institute works in close partnership with the Diplomatic Institute to the Minister of Foreign Affairs – the other important pillar in the diplomatic service system. In the programs for training future diplomats, as well as in the pre-mandate training of diplomatic officers, the Institute for Culture team participates with lectures, presentations and focuses on the contemporary challenges facing cultural diplomacy, as well as the unique roles and contributions within this discourse. Coordinated training ensures that culture will be promoted adequately and with the necessary flexibility in different international contexts on the ground. Important strategic and sustainable partners for the Institute are the Bulgarian Cultural Institutes Abroad, which are part of the structure of the Ministry of Culture and currently include eleven institutes: Paris, London, Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, Skopje and Moscow. These partners play a crucial role in promoting

cultural exchange and Bulgarian culture in these respective countries, building partnerships and trust. They expand our capabilities in practice through the toolkit of cultural diplomacy, while also allowing us to create projects that meet the specific needs and interests of different audiences.

Cultural Diversity and Identity

Attention to local cultural values is certainly the best way to highlight Bulgarian cultural diplomacy in a global field characterized by dynamic competition among established and debut participants. Therefore, the Institute focuses on emphasizing the authenticity that distinguishes our country on the international stage. Projects such as virtual exhibitions, online cultural events, and the use of social networks to promote cultural events allow Bulgaria to present itself on the international stage with flexibility and creativity, using the latest digital technologies. For example, the latest exhibition from our traveling exhibition program "Bulgaria and Mosaics" has a specially embedded QR code that takes the viewer to a bilingual website informing them about the individual mosaic, the restoration and conservation process, the location, the teams of archaeologists who carried out the research, and more. This approach enriches the exhibition and creates interactivity and popularity among a wide range of audiences, especially for younger viewers. Such projects not only expand the scope of cultural diplomacy but also provide us with the opportunity as an institution to be competitive in the world of global cultural exchange.

Of course, all this is possible only through close partnership with cultural institutions and artists. Their creative discoveries and ambitions are the best way to realize such goals.

The Art Fund

One of the main tasks in the portfolio of the State Institute for Culture is the rich collection of works of the Art Fund (under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and is among the main assets that legitimize the Institute as a significant participant in the Bulgarian creative community. With over 2,000 paintings and graphics, as well as a rich Sculpture Park created immediately before the establishment of the Institute, these two fields play a significant role in visual communication in diplomacy. The collection represents a treasury of Bulgarian plastic art and is an opportunity for the creation of individual projects, such as a traveling representative exhibition with selected paintings from the Art Fund called "Diplomacy and Art", which was successfully presented in a number of Balkan capitals: Skopje, Podgorica, Sarajevo, Tirana, and Cetinje. Another example of the diversity of the Art Fund was shown in an exhibition throughout regional museums and galleries in Bulgaria between 2019-2022, including Sofia, Ruse, Veliko Tarnovo, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, and Kyustendil.

The Sculpture Park, which includes selected works of the Bulgarian plastic tradition, combines classical and contemporary trends, showing the evolution of Bulgarian sculpture through different eras. This unique collection not only presents the best of Bulgarian art, but also serves as a platform for dialogue between traditional and contemporary forms of expression.

Through regular exhibitions, events and participation in international projects, the Institute uses this rich collection to strengthen its presence on the national and international stage. The presentation of these works in diplomatic spaces, cultural initiatives and international forums further establishes Bulgaria as a country with deep artistic traditions and significant creative potential.

International Partnerships

Our role as an Institute for Culture is not only to promote Bulgarian culture and traditions, but also to build and maintain cultural ties with partners from all over the world. In today's world, cultural diplomacy is a critical tool for building trust, strengthening relationships and overcoming geopolitical tensions. It is through cultural projects and collaborations that smaller countries like Bulgaria can contribute meaningfully to global dialogue.

The expansion of international partnerships with the State Institute for Culture is a key element in our efforts to establish Bulgaria on the world cultural scene and to encourage the development and potential of cultural diplomacy. These partnerships allow us to exchange ideas, create new opportunities for cooperation, and build sustainable ties with different cultural and diplomatic circles. Through them, the Institute affirms its role as an active mediator in the global cultural dialogue. Relations with foreign representatives in Bulgaria and foreign cultural institutes create a unique platform for the exchange not only of real international projects, but also of cultural values, ideas and professional experience. This joint work allows us to demonstrate the uniqueness of Bulgarian culture and strengthen our positions on the international cultural scene.

The Advantages of International Partnerships

Supporting Bulgarian artists and creators abroad: Partnerships with Bulgarian artists who work and create abroad are particularly important for promoting cultural exchange. Their success abroad contributes to building a positive image of Bulgaria as a country with rich creative potential. These

artists often act as cultural ambassadors, representing our country at various international forums and events.

Projects and exhibitions with Bulgarian and foreign artists: Joint projects that bring together Bulgarian and foreign artists are not only an important creative exchange, but also a means of building long-lasting cultural bridges. These initiatives broaden the understanding of cultural diversity, create new forms of expression and strengthen the global presence of Bulgarian contemporary art.

Supporting the international activity of Bulgarian organizations: The State Institute for Culture actively works with Bulgarian cultural organizations, supporting their efforts for international cooperation. Creating opportunities for their participation in international cultural platforms is essential for promoting cultural dialogue and exchange.

Expanding cultural dialogue: Encouraging cooperation between Bulgarian and foreign artists leads to the enrichment of cultural dialogue and the creation of new creative and diplomatic ties.

Strengthening the image of Bulgaria: International partnerships strengthen the image of Bulgaria as a country with an active cultural policy, flexible and modern in the presentation of its cultural heritage.

Enriching the local cultural scene: Relations with foreign representatives and organizations in Bulgaria provide an opportunity for access to new cultural practices, events and projects that enrich our own cultural scene.

The inclusion of the State Institute for Culture in international networks such as EUNIC, GPDNet and ASEF emphasizes the aspiration for active international cooperation and the strengthening of new global partnerships. These platforms not only expand the Institute’s network but also pro-

vide an opportunity for access to new expertise and the exchange of best practices in the field of cultural diplomacy.

GPDNet (Global Public Diplomacy Network) is distinguished by its efforts to unite countries from different regions that play a key role in building cultural bridges. This organization creates a space for cultural cooperation and dialogue, which contributes to peaceful coexistence on a global scale. The State Institute for Culture has been a full member of the network since 2021 and has already implemented a number of joint initiatives that illustrate great collaboration and promotion of cultural projects, participation in international forums, and presentation of exhibitions.

EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture) unites the Institutes for Cultures of the member states of the European Union. The network creates a platform for cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue, which strengthens ties both in Europe and beyond. Discussions within this network on the changing horizon of cultural diplomacy – amidst dynamic societal changes and geopolitical challenges – are extremely valuable. The State Institute for Culture has been a full member of the network since 2021 and, to date, 15 mandate letters have been provided which enable Bulgarian diplomatic missions to participate and implement cultural projects supported by the network.

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), established in 1997, also plays a significant role in promoting cultural and educational exchange between Asia and Europe. The organization works on intercultural dialogue and supports the establishment of lasting relations between the continents.

The Institute's participation in these networks is particularly valuable because it provides access to new forms of cooperation and affirms the values of Bulgaria's cultural diplomacy. This also supports efforts for greater recognition.

Bulgaria has been an active participant in multilateral organizations such as UNESCO, La Francophonie, and others for years. The Institute also contributes to national promotions within these organizations and seeks opportunities for new forms of cooperation and models of interaction, which opens new perspectives for innovation and experimentation in the cultural sphere.

Expanding cultural cooperation regionally is a key step in strengthening the contemporary cultural diplomacy of Bulgaria and the Institute. Participation in the work of international networks, which we have considered so far, gives us clear benefits for expanding our vision of cultural diplomacy. This experience can also be applied in our regional partnerships. First, do not underestimate the main goal: strengthening bilateral dialogue. Cultural diplomacy is sometimes mistakenly perceived as a one-sided process of "exporting" cultural products, without considering the importance of exchange. It is important to create platforms for real dialogue, where each country can present its culture, while at the same time accepting and respecting those of others. The Institute emphasizes cultural diplomacy as a two-way process, and we are looking for formats that include equal participation of regional partners. This concept corresponds to the broader goals of contemporary cultural diplomacy: promoting understanding and building sustainable ties through mutual cultural participation.

Promoting dialogue and understanding for the Institute is linked to the understanding that Bulgaria can play a significant role as a mediator of cultural dialogue in the region, using its cultural diplomacy to strengthen cooperation with countries in Southeast Europe, and be a catalyst for cultural projects of international importance.

Main conclusions

• The State Institute for Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria plays a key role in establishing cultural diplomacy as an important tool for international cooperation and promoting Bulgarian culture in a global context. Its mission is closely linked to the use of culture as a *soft power* to strengthen international relations, promote mutual understanding and overcome conflicts.

• The cultural diplomacy that the State Institute for Culture develops is strategically aimed at creating lasting connections and partnerships that contribute to expanding Bulgaria's presence on the world stage. Through a number of international initiatives and projects, the Institute not only presents the country's cultural heritage, but also helps contemporary Bulgarian artists find their place in the global cultural landscape.

• In the conditions of a rapidly developing digital world, the State Institute for Culture seeks flexibility and innovation, integrating new technologies into its work. Online exhibitions, virtual events and interactive platforms expand access to Bulgarian culture, allowing a global audience to experience the richness of Bulgarian art and traditions.

• Among the Institute's long-term goals is to strengthen cooperation with Bulgarian cultural institutes and organizations abroad and the country's diplomatic missions. These efforts focus on creating innovative and significant projects that present both traditional and contemporary dimensions of Bulgarian culture.

• In cooperation with global partners such as the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) and the Global Platform for Cultural Diplomacy (GPDNet), the State Institute for Culture continues to expand international cultural exchange and creates new opportunities for cooperation.

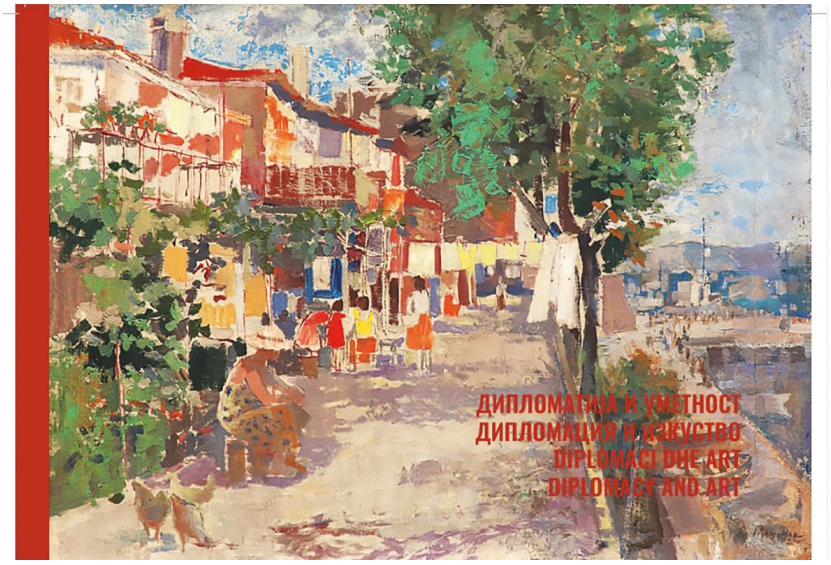
• As a guardian of cultural heritage and an initiator of innovative projects, the Institute contributes to the international recognition of Bulgaria as a country with a rich cultural heritage and significant contemporary creative potential.

• Thus, the State Institute for Culture affirms its role as the driving force of Bulgaria's cultural diplomacy, which plays a key role in building a positive image of the country and establishing it as a significant cultural and diplomatic partner on the global stage.

Appendices



Picture 1: *Title board of the exhibition "Bulgaria and Mosaics"*



Picture 2: *Cover of the catalog "Diplomacy and Art"*





Pictures 3 & 4: *Opening of the exhibition "National Dress: Source of Pride and Heritage" at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, Sofia, October 24, 2024*