CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, UNESCO AND THE BALKANS: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE PRESENT TIME

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In a world where political divisions, armed conflict, and global crises often dominate the headlines, culture remains one of humanity's most enduring sources of unity and resilience. Cultural diplomacy is deeply entangled with terms such as cultural relations, soft power and public diplomacy and has emerged as one of the most vital and constructive tools in the international arena. When pursued in the spirit of openness and respect, it has the capacity to transcend borders, foster trust, and reaffirm our shared humanity.

The publication of the proceeds of the International Conference "Cultural Diplomacy and the Balkans: Achievements and Challenges in the Present Time" held in Sofia in October 2024, makes an important contribution to the debate about the role of *soft powe*r in international relations within certain historical context in the 20th and 21st century – from World War I to the present time, with a focus on the Balkans. It makes also a step forward to the new understanding of cultural diplomacy and its deep entanglement with terms such as cultural relations, soft power and public diplomacy.

Although there is still no single accepted definition of the term *cultural diplomacy*, there is nowadays a lot of practice and important evolution in its implementation in two main areas. The first one is still the traditional, "classical" understanding of cultural relations, as displaying one's culture to the others, or the outwardly directed. This is essentially

interest-driven governmental practice, which aims at projecting a country's culture, history, and heritage as a statement about its place in the world. This type of cultural diplomacy is government driven, but takes expression in cultural relations, practiced largely by non-state actors.

And the second – cultural diplomacy as a codification of norms, defining common values, establishing a common space for interaction and cooperation with the aim of defining "a common good", mutual respect and understanding, preventing conflicts and promoting development and peace – both at the national as well as the international level within the UN context and other entities.

On one hand, national governments are increasingly establishing institutions, launching projects for cultural exchange and cooperation. Thus, they are using their country's cultural assets – such as art, music, language, education, literature, heritage, and values – to promote mutual understanding, build relationships, and influence foreign publics in a non-coercive, peaceful way. In this understanding, cultural diplomacy is a form of *soft power* where governments and organizations engage with other countries by sharing and promoting their culture to foster goodwill, enhance national image, and support foreign policy goals.

On the other, there is the broader understanding of cultural diplomacy, based on multilateralism. With the creation of UNESCO and other multilateral institutions, such as UNCTAD, WTO, EU, Council of Europe, African Union and others, countries have come together to adopt international agreements with legal frameworks and structures, including those related to culture, cultural relations, heritage protection and the development of cultural industries. This cross-section of interest-driven national practice and international codification in terms of conventions and legal instruments

in the areas of culture has brought the new phenomenon of cultural diplomacy "beyond national borders." This is where UNESCO is playing its unique and critical role.

UNESCO has long recognized that culture is not a luxury to be safeguarded in times of stability, but the very foundation of resilient, inclusive, and sustainable societies. Cultural diplomacy, in this light, is not merely an accessory to political engagement; it is a core mechanism, through which nations and peoples can find common ground, even amidst geopolitical tensions. By facilitating the exchange of ideas, heritage, knowledge, and creativity, it nurtures trust, fosters cooperation, and counters narratives of division.

From UNESCO's perspective, cultural diplomacy is inseparable from the concept of *soft power* – the capacity to influence and inspire through attraction rather than coercion. It is also deeply intertwined with public diplomacy, which seeks to engage not only governments but the hearts and minds of people. When grounded in authenticity, cultural diplomacy goes beyond image-building: it becomes a shared process of learning, dialogue, and co-creation.

This year, the international community celebrates the 80th Anniversary of the United Nations and of UNESCO, the first UN Agency to be created in 1945, with the idea, inscribed in its Constitution, that "Since wars start in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed." It went further on to state that "a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace, which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind."

For this to happen, UNESCO was called to promote cooperation in the area of education, culture and science. This

profound humanist conviction remains as salient today as it was in 1945.

At every crossroad of the human history in the last 80 years, UNESCO has served as a global platform for intellectual debate, fostering partnerships, encouraging the creation of knowledge and launching new ideas. This is how the concept of education for all, knowledge-based societies, expressions of cultural diversity, global citizenship education, ethics of science and ethics of climate change, as well as the world heritage and the whole range of cultural conventions, were born.

But what is unique to UNESCO, is that it created multilateral platform for cultural diplomacy, for intercultural dialogue, for exchange and knowledge about different cultures on the basis of recognition and respect of cultural diversity of humanity. One of the core principles in UNESCO's Constitution is fostering "the mutual appreciation of cultures." The Constitution promotes also the "preservation and enrichment of culture", affirming that every culture has value and should be protected, bringing thus brought into focus a vision of humanity standing united in all its diversity around shared values.

In recent years, we have broken new ground by advancing the notion that cultural and natural heritage, living expressions, languages and traditions are at once singular and universal. They are mirrors of our identity and history that must be safeguarded and widely shared.

Today, there is a comprehensive set of international conventions that protect every kind of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the diversity of cultural expressions, and serve as a credible platform for multilateral cooperation in the area of culture:

- 1954 Protection of Cultural Property in Event of Armed Conflict
- 1970 Fighting Against Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property
- 1972 Protection of World Cultural and Natural Property
- 2001 Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage
- 2003 Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage
- 2005 Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

These Conventions represent a solid basis for understanding the role of culture in the contemporary world from different perspectives.

There is no other concept that captures in such a powerful and lasting manner the universality of humanity's creativity in all its diversity as the world heritage.

The adoption of the concept of cultural heritage as having a "universal" value represented a monumental shift in the thinking about culture and arts as national identity expression only. It brought together the universal and the national, the global and the local, making a unique blend of values for cultural patrimony and visual arts all across time and space as heritage, belonging both to a unique culture as well as to all of humanity at the same time.

The rise of the importance of heritage protection revels also the role it plays in the *soft power* politics todays, exacerbated by the globalization and connectivity. It is more than obvious that cultural diplomacy is becoming ever more important in the spectrum of both traditional and new tools of diplomatic and political interaction between countries.

Globally, tensions over identity, cultural meaning, the boundaries of faith and ownership of heritage, between the

universality of patrimony and the identity of those who claim ownership over it, still stay high.

These occur increasingly inside and among states. There are many reasons for that. Globalization has opened unprecedented scope for contact and exchange. People are connected and countries are interdependent in ways unimaginable before. Ideas, identities and values are moving to the front of national and international politics.

On one hand, there is the fear of the loss of uniqueness of local culture, which in turn can lead to loss of identity, exclusion and even conflict. This is especially true for traditional societies and communities, which are exposed to rapid "modernisation" based on models imported from outside and not adapted to their context. On the other, there is the new search for identity roots and self-reaffirmation through ideas of cultural "exception" that leads to tensions in multicultural societies around the world.

Balancing the benefits of integrating into a globalized world against protecting the uniqueness of local culture requires a careful approach. Placing culture at the heart of development policies does not mean to confine and fix it in a conservative way, but on the contrary to invest in the potential of local resources, knowledge, skills and materials to foster creativity and sustainable progress. Recognition and respect for the diversity of cultures also creates the conditions for mutual understanding, dialogue and peace.

This is what UNESCO achieved in the development elaboration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, where, for the first time, the important role of culture and cultural heritage preservation were explicitly recognized as a key point. Target 11.4 explicitly points out the necessity of cultural heritage protection, as well as access to culture as an essential part of sustainable urban

development. Cultural heritage gives cities their soul and meaning, and historic buildings, squares, monuments, and traditions create a unique urban identity.

Apart from SDG Goal 11, culture and cultural approaches are recognised in many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In many ways, this was the culmination of decades of efforts and advocacy for the role of culture as one of the fundamental pillars of social inclusion, economic growth and sustainability.

UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted in 2005, plays a very particular role in these efforts.

The objectives of the Convention of 2005 lie in creating the conditions for cultures to flourish and to interact in a mutually beneficial way and to foster dialogue among cultures and wider cultural exchanges in the world, based on respect and a culture of peace, developing thus cultural interactions and building bridges among peoples.

The Convention states that "Cultural diversity is made manifest not only through the varied ways in which the cultural heritage of humanity is expressed, augmented and transmitted through the variety of cultural expressions, but also through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used."

The adoption of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions is considered today as a milestone in international cultural policy, recognizing at its heart the importance of the creative cultural economy. Through this historic agreement, UNESCO formally recognised the dual nature, both cultural and economic, of contemporary cultural expressions produced by artists and cultural professionals. It affirmed the sovereign

rights of States to maintain, adopt and implement policies and measures that they deem appropriate that support the creation, production, distribution of and access to cultural goods and services.

If we say that the Convention is a milestone in understanding the role of culture in contemporary world, it is because of three main and very innovative ideas that are the reasoning for the adoption of such a legal instrument:

- the recognition that cultural goods and services convey identity, values and meaning and consequently cannot be considered as mere commodities or consumer goods like any others,
- the need for States to take all appropriate measures to protect and promote diversity of cultural expressions while ensuring the free flow of ideas and works,
- the need to redefine international cooperation as each form of creation bears the seed of continued dialogue.

The Convention defined the term "cultural expressions" as resulting "from the creativity of individuals, groups and societies and that have cultural content", opening thus the space for supporting the development of a new type of economy – "the creative economy." One of the distinctive features of this fast-developing sector of the global economy is it being at the intersection of economics, by contributing to the GDP, innovation, by encouraging completion, and stimulation knowledge and talent, creating thus a social value.

According to UNESCO, creative economy today contributes just over 6.1% to the global GDP, averaging between 2% and 7% of national GDPs around the world. It generates annual revenues of over 2 trillion and account for 50 million jobs worldwide. About half of these workers are women and

these industries employ more people aged 15-29 than any other sector. Television and visual arts make up the largest industries of the creative economy in terms of revenue, while visual arts and music are the largest industries in terms of employment.

UNESCO's conventions remind us that culture cannot be reduced to a tool of influence or a commodity to be traded. It must remain a common good, managed in trust for the benefit of all humanity. In this light, cultural diplomacy becomes not only an exercise in *soft power*, but also an ethical responsibility: to represent one's culture truthfully, to listen to others with empathy, and to create space for new, shared narratives to emerge.

Coming back to the title of the conference and the edited volume, let me mention several examples of cultural diplomacy in the Balkans under the auspices of UNESCO that embody this same spirit of heritage conservation, reconciliation after conflict and multilateral cooperation.

No doubt, the most powerful among them is the fate of the Old Bridge of Mostar (Stari Most), Bosnia and Herzegovina and its inscription on the World Heritage List. Built in the 16th century during the Ottoman Empire, it stood for over 400 years as a symbol of connection between different communities, and sadly destroyed in 1993 during the Bosnian War, becoming an emblem of the cultural and human devastation of conflict. Its reconstruction (2001–2004), led by UNESCO and supported by many partners, was more than engineering – it was a peacebuilding exercise, bringing together local communities and international actors to restore a shared symbol of coexistence.

In the late 1980s, UNESCO experts noticed alarming trends. Vast amounts of unique documentary heritage were being lost to war, natural disasters, neglect, poor preser-

vation, and lack of resources. Even more worrying, some items were being deliberately destroyed for political or ideological reasons.

A particularly catalytic moment was the destruction of the National Library of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War in August 1992, when nearly 2 million books, manuscripts, and documents were lost. This became a vivid reminder of the fragility of recorded history. These tragic events led to the establishment in 1992 of the UNESCO Memory of the World Program with the aim of preserving documentary heritage of global significance and make it universally accessible.

The Memory of the World Program, as well as the Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has encouraged Balkan countries to cooperate in the submission of joint proposals for inscriptions.

The creation in Sofia in 2012 of the Regional Centre for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in South-Eastern Europe under the auspices of UNESCO reflected not only the need for more dialogue and cooperation among of the Balkan countries in an area close to issues of identity, traditions, and culture, but also showed how much their history and culture are often intertwined, shared and influence each other.

Cultural diplomacy is ever more important today against the background of increasing divisions and rising isolationism. Cultural diplomacy, both in its "classical" and in multilateral dimensions should become part and parcel of policies and practices of Governments that could add enormous positive value to politics globally. It now requires a more strategic, inclusive, and consultative approach, ensuring that initiatives are not only engaging but also ethically grounded and socially responsive. Cultural diplomacy is more than showcasing art or music – it is a strategic peacebuilding tool.

Rising nationalist and isolationist movements in some countries today emphasize national sovereignty and cultural uniqueness, which may lead to a reduction in the willingness to engage in cross-cultural exchanges. They often promote a narrow-minded view of national culture, making it difficult to carry out cultural diplomacy based on mutual understanding and respect.

It is a serious challenge as it may lead to entrenching stereotypes and neglecting or even disrupting intercultural exchanges at different levels. The consequences may be deep and serious, damaging trust among countries and peoples.

Cultural diplomacy can be a powerful tool in responding to the rise of nationalism by fostering mutual understanding, countering divisive narratives, and reinforcing shared values. By promoting shared humanity and narratives of common identity, cultural diplomacy can highlight universal values such as community, creativity, and justice across cultures, reinforcing the idea that different nations and peoples have more in common than they have differences. Through films, literature, exhibitions, and music, cultural diplomacy can humanize "the other" and dismantle stereotypes, which are often exploited by nationalist ideologies.

Multilateral cultural diplomacy, on the other side, encourages dialogue among governments, experts, cities and cultural institutions for the protection of the common heritage of humanity based on its "outstanding universal value."

While nationalism often thrives on division and exclusion, cultural diplomacy thrives on connection and inclusion. It provides a peaceful and persuasive counter-narrative that reaffirms global interdependence without undermining national identities.

Finally, cultural diplomacy can play a powerful role in lessening geopolitical tensions by humanizing international relationships, fostering empathy, and opening communication channels where formal politics may fail. It builds trust and helps bridging divides through cultural literacy and empathy. It helps reduce conflict and encourages dialogue where official diplomacy may be stalled. It promotes a sense of identity and self-confidence and promotes a positive image of a country to the world. It shapes global narratives and encourages collaboration in arts and culture broadly.

As the world grapples with multiple interconnected crises, such as widening gaps in peace, development, trust, and governance – humanity stands at a historic crossroads, facing increasing instability and transformation. By nurturing understanding, trust, and shared experiences, cultural diplomacy reduces friction, strengthens alliances, and keeps dialogue alive in a divided world.