CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE SOFT EDGES OF HARD POWER IN THE BALKANS

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The edited volume "Cultural Diplomacy and the Balkans: Achievements and Challenges in the Present Time" was being prepared at a time when significant armed conflicts were ongoing around the world, including the wars in Ukraine, Gaza and the civil war in Sudan. Simultaneously, the India-Pakistan crisis and the conflict between Israel and Iran were intensifying. Although some of these events developed far from the Balkans, in today's increasingly globalized and interrelated world, no country or region can remain isolated. Consequences for one nation are consequences for us all. In this context, engaging in culture may seem rather insignificant. In view of the current geopolitical situation and interconnected global challenges confronting modern societies, leading topics remain economy, climate change, Generative AI, security and defence. Undoubtedly, they are all very important and have to be addressed properly. However, first we have to know what we are defending – because our last common good is culture.

This collection explores multiple cultural diplomacy expressions in the Balkans in the 20th and 21st centuries. It contains most of the contributions to the International Conference "Cultural Diplomacy and the Balkans: Achievements and Challenges in the Present Time" held in Sofia in October

2024.[1] The scholarly event was organized by the Institute of Balkan Studies & 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. Distinguished speakers representing academia, the cultural sector, and international NGOs across four continents took part in the conference. Mr. Andrew Manning, Director of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), Prof. Maryam Majid Al Saad, Secretary General of the Global Public Diplomacy Network (GPDNet) and Dr. Kimberly Montgomery, Director of International Affairs and Science Diplomacy of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) shared their wealth of experience in engaging in international cultural relations. Mrs. Antonia Veleva, Minister Plenipotentiary and Director of the Bulgarian Cultural and Information Centre in Skopje, introduced the attendees of the international forum to specific initiatives and good practices from Bulgaria's cultural policy in the Republic of North Macedonia. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boris Stoyanov affiliated with Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" gave an insightful talk about cultural diplomacy and propaganda during the Cold War. Former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu, currently a professor in the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, University of Bucharest, NOVA University Lisbon, and the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM),

[1] 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

further developed this topic emphasizing the relation between cultural diplomacy and populist propaganda in Southeast Europe in the recent past. Finally, Prof. D.Sc. Nadia Boyadjieva from the Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Mr. Tony Nikolov, Editor-in-Chief of Web portal *Kultura* and *Kultura* magazine also made a valuable contribution to the conference with their expertise in the field of culture and international relations. For all of them, however, it was not possible to submit a piece for this volume before its publication.

Hence, the collection consists of a theoretical framework (Albena Taneva), contributions of scholars with diverse academic backgrounds and at different stages of their career (Roumiana Preshlenova, Gueorgui Peev, Charlotte Faucher, Fabien Bellat, Alexandra Milanova, Benjamin G. Martin, Victoria Lekova) and essays of high-ranking representatives of the cultural sector involved in the implementation of foreign cultural policies (Aisha Adamu Augie, Snezhana Yoveva-Dimitrova, Fredrick Simiyu). The authors themselves come from and represent a variety of cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, their understanding of culture may differ. Culture is not an innate attribute but rather something acquired and learned through socialization and experience.

The chapters included in this volume span a dynamic period of changes and turns, from World War I 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. Some of the authors chose topics that seemingly have little to do with the Balkans. This is only at first glance. A closer examination of their contributions reveals different approaches, methods, and insights into the

topic and the region, along with the outsider's perspective – an essential element in any research, especially in the field of cultural diplomacy.

The essays contribute to addressing important questions, primarily whether cultural diplomacy enables so-called small states (although 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 states – unable to achieve their own distinct legitimation in the field of cultural diplomacy – nevertheless recognized its power? Did they manage to find appropriate forms for its implementation in attempts at neutrality, seeking support, and participating in international organizations? 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 first chapter "Cultural diplomacy as a policy instrument" by Albena Taneva conceptualizes cultural diplomacy as an independent reality, which creates prerequisites for understanding and sustainability in the international environment, but also acts as a tool catalysing cooperation, overcoming faults and prejudices, and creating preconditions for social cohesion (Schneider, 1). Her analysis builds on conceptual exhibition as a case study to explore cultural diplomacy as a policy tool, focusing on specific historical episode involving the fate of Jews in Bulgaria during the Holocaust and its role in contemporary memory policies. The conclusions highlight the potential of cultural diplomacy to foster dialogue and understanding on complex historical issues and contentious present-day policies.

In the second chapter "Between partnership and influence: Austria-Hungary's cultural diplomacy in the Balkans during World War I", Roumiana Preshlenova raises the central question of whether cultural diplomacy at the beginning of the 20th century was comparable to today's practices. She proposes an answer reviewing Austria-Hungary's cultural diplomacy in the Balkans during World War I. The author examines several initiatives in the field of cultural diplomacy in the context of bilateral relations. Among the most notable are the founding of a dormitory for Bulgarian university students in Vienna, a school for Bulgarian children in Budapest, the accommodation of Bulgarian orphans in Temesvár/Timișoara, and a proposed Austrian and Hungarian palace of culture in Sofia, following the success of an art exhibition there.

The next chapter "Culture and propaganda: The French Army of the Orient in Thessaloniki during World War I", authored by Gueorgui Peev, explores the important topic of culture and propaganda. The author focuses on the Macedonian front, which was considered a secondary one during World War I, but it was here that the interests of many of the warring countries collided. He demonstrates how propaganda of the official French publications in Thessaloniki, which aims to win over Greek public opinion by highlighting the might of the French army and the superiority of French culture, achieved an ambiguous effect. On one hand, it undoubtedly succeeded among the many Francophiles in town. On the other hand, it painted an inaccurate picture of life in Thessaloniki among both French society and the soldiers on the Macedonian front.

In the study "European cultural diplomacy in the Balkans during the interwar period", Charlotte Faucher considers cultural diplomacy implemented by France, Britain and Germany, with additional references to Italy, in the Balkan states

between the two World Wars. She examines not only the strategies of cultural diplomacies of these Western countries but also the very reasons why French, British and German cultural diplomats invested time, money and energy in this part of Europe. In addition to the comparative framework, the author adopts a transnational approach to investigate the competition, and the rarer forms of cooperation, between France, Britain and Germany (Bayly et al.).

In "French architectural choices as cultural diplomatic tool in the Balkans between the two World Wars", Fabien Bellat reveals the political tensions of the interwar period in France, in which old diplomatic practices and new models clashed. He shows how architecture became part of this struggle, as French cultural diplomacy sought to use it to enhance its international image. As tradition prevailed in Sofia and modernity – at least partially – in Belgrade, the resulting inconsistency underscored how France's policy had yet to establish a coherent cultural diplomacy in the Balkans.

The study that follows, "From standing out to reaching out: Aspects of French cultural diplomacy in the Balkans after World War II" by Alexandra Milanova, demonstrates how, 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. 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 (Chaubet et al.). 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.

In the next chapter titled "Bulgarian cultural diplomacy through UNESCO's program on cultural policies, 1970-1983", Benjamin Martin explores several examples of how Bulgarian officials made use of the forums offered by UNESCO to present their country's cultural policy innovations to foreign audiences in a compelling and attractive manner in the 1970s and early 80s. The examples he presents contribute to the research on socialist Bulgaria's cultural diplomacy campaign of that period and introduce a case study by which to consider a broader historical phenomenon: how states used UNESCO's program on cultural policy to advance their own cultural diplomacy.

The following chapter "African cultural diplomacy: The FESTAC '77 perspective and Bulgaria's contribution" by Aisha Adamu Augie examines the role of African cultural diplomacy through the lens of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77). The author also highlights the role of Bulgaria in the organization of this landmark event that brought together tens of thousands participants from Black and African communities worldwide. Additionally, this chapter discusses contemporary challenges and opportunities in advancing cultural diplomacy as a soft power strategy for African nations. Using a qualitative approach that integrates historical analysis, policy review and case studies, the author argues that cultural diplomacy remains a vital tool for both African and Balkan states in reshaping the global narrative, fostering international partnerships and driving socio-economic development.

The main goal of Victoria Lekova's study "French diplomacy meets "disloyal" Bulgarian intelligentsia: Soft power in 1989" is to reconstruct, from a cultural and historical perspec-

tive, a key event in the history of Bulgarian-French relations: the meeting between newly elected French President François Mitterrand and Bulgarian intellectuals during his official visit to Sofia in early 1989. Grounded in Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (Nye, 1990, 2008), this chapter seeks to determine whether the breakfast with the French president served as an initiation into the quest for freedom for Bulgarian dissident circles and as official legitimization for domestic civil organizations. The case study is presented as an instrument of French cultural diplomacy in totalitarian Bulgaria.

The following text by Snezhana Yoveva-Dimitrova "State institute for culture to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria: Development and prospects" introduces the mission, experience and presence of this institution in the implementation of cultural diplomacy projects. The author proves the dual role of the State institute, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2025. On the one hand, it assist in the promotion of various areas of Bulgarian culture, art and traditions around the world as a key partner of Bulgarian diplomatic missions. On the other, the State institute builds and maintains sustainable relations and dialogue with national and international partners.

The collected volume concludes with Fredrick Simiyu's chapter "What best practices and lessons can Balkan states learn and adopt from Africa on matters of cultural diplomacy?" His study aims at investigating cultural diplomacy as a tool for enhancing foreign relations and economic development in Africa, with examples from Kenya. In addition, the chapter highlights the best practices and lessons that Balkan states can learn and adopt.

The authors' diverse views, theses, and assumptions add to the body of scholarship in foreign cultural policy and international relations, outlining perspectives for future dis-

cussions and further research on the topic. The focus is on the Balkans where cultural diplomacy still has a long way to go, and still has much to achieve.

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