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Cosmopolitan, Promotional, or Propagandistic? Cultural Diplomacy at a Time of War

Abstract

The objective of this study is to discuss developments in the cultural diplomacy (hereafter: CD) of Austria, Germany, Poland, and Ukraine in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014. While adopting a comparative approach, the study begins with a taxonomy of cultural diplomacy based on the objectives of the foreign policy it is intended to serve, followed by a discussion of the four cases. The hypothesis posits that models of cultural diplomacy in Europe have been influenced not only by the international environment – specifically the war in Ukraine as an external shock – but also by domestic factors. The study focused on the period 2014–2022 constitutes a meta-analysis, while the part covering 2022–2024 follows a cultural diplomacy analysis (CDA), beginning with an institutional approach and proceeding to an examination of discourses of cultural diplomacy in the selected countries. The findings indicate that the selected cases represent cosmopolitan and promotional models of cultural diplomacy. The war has contributed to the shrinking of spaces for dialogical forms and has altered the geography of cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, War in Ukraine, External Shock, Foreign Policy, Cultural Diplomacy

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Introduction

Cultural diplomacy has a long tradition and a strong reputation, as the use of culture in support of foreign policy objectives or for the promotion of national culture appears, at first glance, to be uncontroversial. In the cosmopolitan sense, the objective of cultural diplomacy is to foster greater understanding with international partners. In practice, many governments across the world implement it as an instrument of their foreign policy and as a sub-network of public diplomacy, constituting a relational form that supports dialogue between nations. The discussion of cultural diplomacy as a sub-network of public diplomacy requires clarification. Among the various schools of thought in the field, the author of the present study represents the approach that advocates the convergence of public and cultural diplomacy, and their merger with international broadcasting, within the framework of the New Public Diplomacy (hereafter: NPD). This latter concept emerged around 2005, when the increasing significance of non-state actors and new technologies – subsequently followed by the implementation of social media in public and cultural diplomacy – was recognised and accepted as marking a new stage in the development of public diplomacy, particularly among democratic states and in times of peace.

In line with this approach, cultural diplomacy facilitates the creation of an international public sphere, drawing both state and non-state actors within the realm of international relations into interactions centred on culture. The relationships that emerge from participation in international exchanges and cultural events foster a space for dialogue, with the potential to reduce tensions between states. Cultural diplomacy efforts in Europe have continued since 2014, grounded in the expectation that culture would remain one of the few open channels of communication during a period of conflict. Although culture has been also instrumentalised for the purposes of foreign propaganda, cultural diplomacy cannot be equated with propaganda, even when cultural events are framed within a political context. Finally, the promotion of national culture continues to hold relevance as one of the enduring objectives of cultural diplomacy.

The aim of this article is to examine the transformations in cultural diplomacy in Europe resulting from the war in Ukraine, with the assumption that the events of 2014 and, subsequently, 2022 constituted external shocks to European foreign policy. The study posits that developments in cultural diplomacy in Europe following 2014 can offer valuable insights into the evolving objectives of cultural diplomacy during a period of profound change in international relations. This article explores these transformations and raises questions concerning their causes, trajectories, and broader contexts.

Enabling cultural diplomacy to flourish as a tool for fostering understanding in international relations requires open political systems and freedom of expression. As such, it stands in stark contrast to cultural propaganda, which primarily serves the interests of international conflict or war. Cultural propaganda is asymmetric in nature, operating as a one-sided projection of a country's culture, often disregarding the needs or expectations of its intended audiences. Promotional cultural diplomacy, however, shares similarities with propaganda. The key distinction lies in the use of disinformation and manipulation, which characterise propaganda and serve the sender's interests (Jowett, O'Donnell, 2014). Nonetheless, when applying this taxonomy, scholars of cultural diplomacy risk categorising the activities of perceived (hostile) "others" as propaganda, while interpreting their own and their allies' efforts as legitimate cultural diplomacy. This tendency is particularly evident in the frequent classification of the cultural diplomacy of authoritarian regimes as propaganda (Anheier, Knudsen, Todd-Tombini, 2024; *Kein getrenntes*, 2020–2021). A further complexity arises in the case of states engaged in armed conflict, which may simultaneously target adversaries with war propaganda while presenting cosmopolitan or promotional cultural diplomacy to allies.

Some scholars have introduced the concept of New Cultural Diplomacy (NCD) as a practice within the field, developed in response to the challenges of globalisation, the "culturalisation of foreign policy", and identity politics (Rose, 2017). Around 2022, however, rising nationalism in Europe began to reverse this trend, in line with the observations of Anheier, Knudsen, and Todd-Tombini.

War in Ukraine as an External Shock in Cultural Diplomacy

The current study has concentrated on national-level determinants shaping cultural diplomacy while confronted with the already mentioned external shock,¹ and finds factors such as nationalism relevant for the

¹ This 2022–2024 Cultural Diplomacy Analysis is based on a study of the key governmental and parliamentary commission documents on cultural diplomacy (CD) as well as external cultural policy, reports, and other documents of the main partners of governmental CD. Governments shape models of cultural diplomacy while regulating the role of culture in foreign policy and its relation to internal cultural policy. The documents of the main establishments of cultural diplomacy provide content to elaborate upon the frameworks established by governments. In the German and Polish cases, discourse on CD was examined using samples consisting of media outlets focused on culture, such as *Politik und Kultur*, *Dziwutygodnik*, and *e-teatr*.

understanding of cultural diplomacy. It asks how the war contributed to the models of cultural diplomacy in Austria, Germany, Poland, and Ukraine. The territorial, political, and cultural proximity of these countries, the members of the EU or their neighbouring states, and the relevance of Ukraine for their foreign policy explains the choice.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many countries became open to cooperation with Russian cultural institutions. The successful French-Russian Year in 2010 contributed to the intensification of cultural exchanges with Russia. This situation changed in 2014. Previous studies (Ociepka, Arendarska, 2023) show that 2014 marked a turning point for Poland's cultural diplomacy with Russian Federation, as Poland cancelled preparations for the Polish-Russian Bilateral Year, initially planned with an extensive cultural programme for 2015. However, the elections in 2015 had a more profound effect on Poland's model than the war in the East. The new national-conservative government focused Poland's cultural diplomacy on the politics of memory, while *inter alia* establishing a new governmental agency, the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, in 2017, with a branch in Berlin operating since 2019.

The same war pushed the Ukrainian government to invest in cultural institutions that would not only represent Ukraine in its partner countries but also enhance its international security. After 2014, Ukrainian cultural diplomacy entered a stage of institutionalisation: the Ukrainian Institute was established in 2017, and the first national strategy for cultural diplomacy was published in 2020. That strategy responded to the war of narratives with Russia ongoing since 2014 (Ukrainian Institute, 2020).

In this context, the Austrian and German cases differ, as the most significant changes occurred in 2022. Furthermore, prior to 2022, cultural diplomacy in both countries – termed external cultural policy – was more cosmopolitan, and in Germany's case, more transnational than that of Poland and Ukraine. In 2014, as a response to the Russian occupation of Crimea and the attack on Eastern Ukraine, Germany launched a new project supporting civil society in Eastern Partnership countries and, subsequently, in Russia (Deutscher Bundestag, p. 24). Austria, meanwhile, maintained favourable relations with Russia despite sanctions, opening the Austria Institute (AI), in Moscow in 2018 – two years after opening one in Sarajevo (Austria Kultur International, 2024). Although Austria had no AI offices in Kyiv or Lviv, it celebrated a Bilateral Ukrainian-Austrian Year of Culture in 2019.

In the Austrian case, non-systematic analysis of media outlets was conducted for the same period using Google searches.

The dynamics of international cultural relations between 2014 and 2022 are illustrated by the fact that, only a year after Austria opened its institute in Moscow, the British Council was forced to leave Russia (Statement, 2018). Two years later, Ukraine withdrew from the CIS Council for Cultural Cooperation (Ukrinform, 2020). What these countries – Ukraine excepted – shared after 2014 was increased engagement with Ukraine (for example, via the House of Europe initiative), and, in some cases, continued engagement with Russia (although Poland was not involved in the latter).

The period between 2014 and 2022 was significant for the countries under consideration here, as well as for their cultural policies, for numerous internal reasons. All the countries experienced cuts in cultural diplomacy (CD) budgets, at least since the economic crisis of 2008. The COVID-19 pandemic substantially affected the operations of cultural institutions, prompting a reassessment of the effectiveness of online communication as a consequence. Parliamentary elections, the Maidan revolution, and the emergence of new ruling coalitions and parties introduced fresh ideas for cultural diplomacy. In Germany, the Goethe-Institut celebrated its seventieth anniversary; Austria marked fifty years of Austria Kultur; and Poland launched a multi-year campaign called Independent (*Niepodległa*) to commemorate eighty years since regaining national independence. In Ukraine, domestic dynamics remained highly significant despite the ongoing war. In all cases, structural and programmatic changes occurred in response to both external (war) and internal factors.

The Year 2022 as a Test of European Cultural Diplomacy

The prospects for cultural diplomacy's bright future in Russia were effectively destroyed after 24th February 2022, when many countries withdrew from agreements or ceased cooperation, and the Ukrainian government urged the EU to impose sanctions on Russian culture and to organise a boycott. In doing so, governments responded not only to military aggression but also to statements such as that of the director of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, who declared the museum's exhibitions in July 2022 to be a form of Russian "special operation" (Kishkovsky, 2022); the latter term began to be used in Russia from the end of February 2022 as a euphemism for "war" in relation to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The war itself generated unprecedented global interest in Ukrainian culture. However, some voices among Ukrainian artists highlight the controversies underlying these developments, indicating that cultural diplomacy will need to learn how to respond

during wartime, in order to avoid situations such as those described by Lia Dostlieva: “Ukrainian art should be part of the general circulation of contemporary art, and not part of the contingent of «miserable maltreated Ukrainians». Besides, it’s a constant problem that suddenly a new point of interest appears on the world map, which everyone discovers, and no one is interested in what was there before and what’s going on with a given country” (Zderzamy się z murem, 2024).

The diverse reactions to the war in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 may be explained by the specifics of the national models of cultural diplomacy and the role of the latter as an instrument of foreign policy. The characteristics of the German model were well illustrated in 2019 by the president of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IFA, in English: the Institute for Foreign Relations), who anticipated that German external cultural policy (Ausländische Kultur- und Bildungspolitik, AKBP) would undergo a reorientation towards a more “post-nationalist” and “Europeanised” model (Grätz, 2019). To some extent, these ideas were implemented in practice when Germany and France launched a new initiative in 2019 called Kultur Ensemble, establishing bi-national cultural institutions operating jointly in Palermo, Ramallah, and Atlanta (2022), with plans for 2025 in Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek), Argentina (Córdoba), and Scotland (Glasgow) (Deutscher Bundestag, 2023, p. 35). However, at the same time, the budget for the Goethe-Institut (GI), as the main partner of AKBP, was cut, and as a result, some reputable GIs in France and Italy were closed in 2023 in order to shift capacities towards Eastern Europe (Goethe-Institut, 2023–2024, pp. 5, 8). This was one of the visible effects of the second stage of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the *Zeitenwende* in German foreign policy. Consequently, suggestions for more discussion on “post-nation-state cultural policy” (Weigel, p. 9) appeared to lose ground.

The change was also reflected in the introduction of so-called “strategic communication”, intended to address disinformation, into the broad field of culture as the third pillar of German foreign policy. This is how cultural policy responded both to the war and to developments in communication technologies, including artificial intelligence. Thus, not only were structural and geographical changes announced regarding 2022, but also new instruments and issues that were to be incorporated into cultural diplomacy.

The Franco-German cooperation was not the only evidence of “Europeanisation” in the German case. Goethe Institutes have generally been very active members of European Union National Institutes of Culture (EUNIC) clusters, which operate both in Europe and globally. Such a cluster, involving the Goethe-Institut and Austria Kulturforum,

but without either Polish or Ukrainian establishments, continued to operate formally in Moscow (as of January 2025). While participating in the aforementioned Kultur Ensemble or creating EUNIC clusters, CD institutes have contributed to new transnational networks focused on specific issues.

The objective of Austrian external cultural policy, at least since 1973, has been defined as “international cultural cooperation and support for Austrian artists and scientists” (Bundesministerium, 2024). As such, it resembles the promotional model of cultural diplomacy, with potential for cosmopolitan understanding, should the term “international cultural cooperation” imply striving for greater understanding in international relations. *Auslandskultur*, as Austria’s external cultural policy and cultural diplomacy are termed, follows the principles of “effective multiculturalism, including active cooperation within the EU, and engagement for human rights”, which are seen as core values of Austrian foreign policy (Österreich Institut, 2016). Consequently, foreign cultural initiatives launched after 2014 have included or supported women, minors, and minority groups, in line with the principle of protecting their rights both internationally and domestically. According to the core objectives of the Austrian Institute, which has been operating abroad since 1997, Austria has invested primarily in “cultural neighbourhood” initiatives² (Österreich Institut, 2016, p. 30). Given the history of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the focus on the Balkan countries, Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland is evident. However, the absence of an Austrian Institute in Kyiv or Lviv – contrasted with the establishment of one in Moscow in 2018 – serves, on the one hand, as evidence of strong political and economic ties with Russia, which have influenced decisions regarding cultural diplomacy. On the other hand, despite the lack of Austrian Institutes in Ukraine, the war has nonetheless been one of the most significant factors shaping the structure and content of Austria’s external cultural policy.

Between 2022 and 2024, Austrian cultural establishments remained focused on women’s rights and democracy – both issues framed as responses to crises in Europe. From 2022 onwards, Austrian cultural diplomacy was required to address the consequences of war as well as the growing impact of artificial intelligence on democracy and human rights, along with climate change and concerns about sustainable development (Bundesministerium, 2020; Austria Kultur International, 2024). Last but not least, during wartime, the country continued the austerity measures

² Since 2016, the term “cultural neighbourhood” has no longer been used in official documents.

introduced at the beginning of the 21st century, which have significantly affected the operation of Austrian institutions abroad.

The concepts underpinning Polish cultural diplomacy have been articulated in programmatic documents produced by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (AMI), Poland's principal institution for cultural diplomacy since 2000. Polish governments introduced the idea of using culture as a platform for enhanced international understanding and dialogue around 2001, and AMI adopted this approach. Polish cultural diplomacy, as a subnetwork of public diplomacy, has periodically exhibited both asymmetrical and promotional characteristics. This was also reflected in the plans for a Polish Year in Russia in 2015 (cancelled in 2014), whose objective was, *inter alia*, to challenge Russians' outdated perceptions of Poland (Ociepka, 2017, p. 104). As in the cases of the Goethe-Institut and the Austrian Institute in Moscow, the Polish Institute remained operational in the Russian capital after 24th February 2022, although all these institutions reduced their activities to language teaching. In Poland, the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding was transformed in 2022 into an institution fostering dialogue with Belarusians, Moldovans, Georgians, Ukrainians, and Russians. Consequently, "the geography of operation" (Wysocka, 2024, p. 9) has changed significantly. Akin to Germany and Austria, Poland redirected its cultural diplomacy efforts from Russia to Ukraine, intensifying cooperation with Ukrainian artists and cultural institutions. Symbolically, after 2022, the documents of the main institutions involved in cultural diplomacy under study scarcely mention Russia and have largely silenced the once-prominent dialogue-building function of cultural diplomacy with that country.

In 2022, Ukraine was operating under the strategy of cultural diplomacy adopted in 2020. At the time, the country was in the midst of creating new institutions and initiating their operations. According to the Ukrainian model, cultural diplomacy was defined in the main strategic document as a component of the country's public diplomacy and one of the instruments for strengthening national security (Ukrainian Institute, 2020, p. 9). The same document, however, also situated cultural diplomacy within the framework of Ukrainian strategic communication, focusing it on the country's brand in light of its negative international perception, evident since at least 2015 (p. 16). After 2022, the role of the Ukrainian Institute (UI) increased significantly, as reflected in the establishment of two new offices in Paris and Berlin in 2023. UI redefined its mission post-2022 as "wartime cultural diplomacy" (Ukrainian Institute, 2022), which in 2023 – the second year of the war – was directed explicitly

against Russian propaganda and extended to new geographical regions: Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Ukrainian Institute, 2023, pp. 4, 6). Despite the war, Ukraine conducted a Ukrainian Seasons of Culture and became an associated partner of EUNIC. In 2022, UI continued its programme on decolonising discourse, which in some respects connects Ukrainian efforts with the German focus on post-colonial approaches in external cultural policy: “For several years now, we have been working on decolonising the discourse around the collections of European and North American museums, particularly concerning artists of Ukrainian origin who are identified as «Russian». Since the outbreak of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, the need for decolonisation has become even more urgent” (Ukrainian Institute, 2022, p. 16).

Still, the two cases differ, as German external cultural policy in recent years has focused on the outcomes of decolonisation, particularly the restitution of cultural artefacts, with debates centring on the fate of the Benin Bronzes. However, this focus has never extended to Eastern Europe or Russia in this context. The Ukrainian case presents the opposite trajectory, having drawn attention to Russia as a cultural coloniser – a perspective scarcely recognised by Western members of the EU.

The year 2022 saw the emergence of new forms of bottom-up initiatives by non-state actors in cultural diplomacy, supported by the state, aimed at assisting refugees from both Ukraine and Russia. The geography of operation also shifted due to the displacement of a large portion of cultural diplomacy stakeholders – primarily individuals, but also civil society institutions – from Ukraine and Russia to Western countries. Prior to 2022, similar processes had affected other countries such as Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Sudan (Goethe-Institut, 2024, p. 47). European countries responded to the large-scale migration flows and the closure of their cultural establishments in authoritarian regimes by developing institutions and programmes for diasporas. *Goethe-Institut in Exile* in Berlin, the *Artists’ Solidarity Programme Europe* in Austria (Bundesministerium, 2019, p. 48 ff.), and *Crisis Residencies* – a project for Ukrainian artists in exile in Poland (Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2020–2023, p. 92) – serve as illustrative examples. The majority of these initiatives are “excellence programmes”, aimed at professional support for artists in exile, rather than “social programmes” (Austria Kultur International, 2024, p. 49).

Nationalist and Promotional Versus Europeanised and Cosmopolitan

Nationalism was included in this study due to its anticipated influence on the preference for asymmetric models of cultural diplomacy – such as promotional and propagandistic approaches – which are primarily intended to present the country, its culture, and the nation’s values to foreign audiences. A recent study by the ifa on external cultural policy identifies nationalism as one of the key factors shaping what is referred to as cultural diplomacy in this article. Among the countries examined in their white paper, the authors (Anheier, Knudsen, Todd-Tombini, 2024) studied Germany and Poland and also considered Russia. The results of their analysis confirm the significance of national determinants – including nationalism – for understanding developments in cultural diplomacy.

As early as 2019, Weigel observed a “far-reaching scepticism towards cosmopolitan concepts” and “supra-national” initiatives, identifying opposition to cosmopolitanism not only in former colonies but also in Eastern Europe – two regions united by fears of Western domination (Weigel, p. 51). Preferences for cosmopolitan, Europeanised, or national/promotional models of cultural diplomacy can be discerned in the positions taken by political parties. The current study identified such preferences in the German and Polish cases. Representatives of German political parties generally supported the use of cultural diplomacy to foster international dialogue, with the exception of Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, hereafter: AfD), a far-right party that calls for cultural policy to focus exclusively on German cultural identity. The AfD questioned the emphasis on diversity and postcolonial perspectives in Germany’s cosmopolitan approach, criticising the country’s cultural policy as overly “leftist” and advocating for its “de-ideologisation” (Moosdorf, 2023). The year 2022 also saw the emergence of a group of critics of the so-called “post-nationalist” German model. One prominent voice in media outlets focused on culture argued that the “post-nationalist” approach to German cultural policy contributed to the lack of understanding of Ukraine (Moeller, 2022). What is perceived as “nationalist” in the German context, however, forms the core of Poland’s model, which is primarily oriented towards the promotion of Polish culture, artists, and history, resulting in the strong role of memory in its external policy. This divergence potentially contributes to misunderstandings between Poland and Germany, and to the incompatibility of Poland’s cultural diplomacy with Germany’s AKBP.

In Poland, the two main political parties – Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) – represent the primary social cleavages and have also differed in their approaches to cultural diplomacy. While governments led by Law and Justice were driven by national interests, Civic Platform aligned more closely with a cosmopolitan conception of cultural diplomacy. In the Polish context, the authors of a 2024 study on cultural policy and nationalism found that cultural institutions operating internationally tended to demonstrate resistance to nationalist tendencies. However, the evidence provided for these claims was limited. Between 2015 and 2023, the nationalist government in Poland established new institutions (such as the Pilecki Institute) or dismissed directors perceived as exhibiting such “resistance”.

Conclusions

Since 2022, the New Cultural Diplomacy in Europe has lost much of the space it once earmarked for further development. Both territorial and virtual or symbolic spaces for a cosmopolitan version of cultural diplomacy have contracted, and the trend towards the culturalisation of foreign policy tended towards bellicosity. Fostering dialogue and understanding has been, since 2022, as relevant as cultural diplomacy – understood as promotion – effectively serving the security interests of the states. The studied cases did not provide evidence for the use of a propagandistic model, but at the same time they present the ways governments sought to use cultural diplomacy against propaganda.

Among the chosen cases, the German external cultural policy became the subject of a lively debate on the role of culture in international relations, mainly thank to the operations of the ifa as one of the establishments of AKBP. In the other countries examined, similar debates took place in mainstream and cultural media outlets.

The security dimension of cultural diplomacy has been more prominent since 2022 than in the period following 2014. However, the war in Ukraine was only one of the factors that cultural diplomacy institutions cited as being most influential on their work. Other frequently mentioned factors were digitalisation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and migration, which led to the cultural diversification of societies (mainly Germany and Austria). Not all the institutions in this study reflected on broader contexts such as climate change.

Poland seems to approach cultural diplomacy as a tool for national image-building, and has hardly ascribed CD with any Europeanised or

“post-nationalist” objectives. In contrast, the Ukrainian case stands out because of its focus on decolonisation in cultural diplomacy, specifically as regards the issue of Russia as a cultural coloniser in Europe, an idea which has barely gained traction among the other countries covered by this study. While decolonisation also influenced German external cultural policy during the period under review, it was approached from the perspective of a former overseas coloniser, rather than from the position of the colonised, as in the Ukrainian case.³

Ultimately, the war following 2022 did not substantially alter the objectives of cultural diplomacy, but it did contribute to the shrinking of spaces for dialogical forms and significantly reshaped its geographical focus. As the aggressor, the Russian Federation was excluded by Ukraine’s allies from any cultural initiatives aimed at fostering mutual understanding. Consequently, no new models of cultural diplomacy have been developed; rather, it was the geography of operation that underwent change.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the European Commission’s Horizon Europe programme under the project “*United in Narrative Diversity? Cultural (Ex-)Change and Mutual Perceptions in Eastern and Western Europe at the Threshold of the Digital Age – NARDIV*”, grant agreement no. 101095171 (2023–2026).

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³ The focus on decolonisation has been a notable trend in cultural diplomacy since 2014. Due to space limitations, this topic could not be discussed in the current article, but will be explored in a forthcoming publication.

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