

# **CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN A CHANGING WORLD: HOW TO RESPOND TO THE CURRENT CHALLENGES**

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**Rapporteurs: Dorian Branea with Kathryn Tierney Moreadith**

## **I. Overview**

On June 28, the Belgrave Square headquarters of the Romanian Cultural Institute in London hosted the conference *Cultural Diplomacy in a Changing World: How to Respond to the Current Challenges*. The conference, intended as a forum for debate on cultural diplomacy and for development and validation of the standards of excellence in the field, is one of EUNIC London's permanent programmes. With support from the European Commission Representation in the United Kingdom, this conference has been an annual event since 2010. The 2012 conference was the second one to be held at 1 Belgrave Square and the first to be coordinated chiefly by the Romanian Cultural Institute.

The conference brought together specialists, practitioners, key decision makers and other experts in the field of cultural diplomacy from several European countries. These speakers included Delphine Borione-Pratesi, President of the EUNIC global network; Martin Eichtinger, Director General for Cultural Policy at the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Joanna Skoczek, Director General of the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Martin Davidson, Chief Executive of the British Council; Gottfried Wagner, former Director of the European Cultural Foundation and current adviser to the More Europe Campaign; Tunç Aybak, Professor at Middlesex University; Peter Mikl; Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum in London and President of EUNIC London; Jeremy O'Sullivan, Cultural Attaché for the European Commission Representation in the United Kingdom; Philippe Lane, Attaché for Academic Cooperation at the French Embassy in London; Fidel López Álvarez, Head of the Cultural Cooperation Department at the Spanish Embassy in London; and Dorian Branea, Director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in London and incoming president of EUNIC London.

The format of the conference consisted of consecutive plenary sessions in the following categories:

*Cultural Diplomacy or International Cultural Relations?*

*State Sponsored PR or Something More?*

*EUNIC: True Global Player?*

All of these sessions aimed to identify successful instances of and ongoing models for international cultural cooperation. Further, the conference sought to disseminate the most important objectives and directives of European cultural diplomacy and to assess the global impact of EUNIC. The event was introduced by Dorian Branea, Peter Mikl, and Jonathan Fryer, followed by remarks by Delphine Borione-Pratesi entitled *Moving EUNIC from Accidental to Strategic*. Ms. Borione-Pratesi's thought-

provoking introductory presentation highlighted the values of unity and peace as the basis for positive cultural relations globally. Further, Ms. Borione-Pratesi promoted the principles of mutual understanding between societies as the heart of the EUNIC project. “Culture is a basis for sustainable development,” Ms Borione-Pratesi stated. “These values are very important to make the institutes work together.” Concluding remarks for the conference, entitled *Cultural Diplomacy in an Age of Austerity*, were offered by Martin Davidson. Mr Davidson’s thorough and reflective conclusion invoked the audience to consider the paramount importance of cultural diplomacy, stating that “Cultural diplomacy has never been more important.” Mr Davidson called attention to the following five “critical things to remember” in effecting successful cultural relations:

- 1) Ethos and mission
- 2) Increased flexibility and responsiveness: Maintain awareness and capacity to see and respond to major changes around us
- 3) Openness and accountability: Be open to new ideas, while remaining clear about what we do and why
- 4) Entrepreneurship: Maintain capacity to grow, renew, and reinvent
- 5) Public Service: First and foremost, we must remember that what we do is all about people.

Mr. Davidson’s primary message for cultural relations in an age of austerity was an invocation to work more effectively together, finding solutions to common problems. Mr. Davidson emphasized that without sacrificing innovation, we must stay true to the mission of cultural diplomacy.

## **II. Detailed Review**

This conference confirmed that our common tendency to differentiate and invent numerous labels for international cultural activities—from ‘cultural diplomacy’ to ‘international cultural cooperation’ to ‘creative diplomacy’ to ‘public diplomacy’ and more—is perhaps cumbersome and unnecessary. What matters most, as speakers and audience members in this conference upheld, is that the importance of strong international cultural relations is agreed upon and that activities are undertaken to enhance international cultural relations. Some speakers and participants were reluctant to see culture as a tool to create a strong international reputation, instead considering culture as a value in itself, worthy of being promoted for what it represents beyond political and diplomatic objectives. Some viewed international cultural cooperation as a complex activity comprised jointly of diplomacy, public relations, and altruistic investment. In the panel entitled *State Sponsored PR or Something More?* it was generally agreed that cultural diplomacy, while it may include state-funded PR, is much more indeed than just that.

The participants largely agreed that the development of EUNIC as a network is positive and should continue, though the methods of EUNIC development were subject to healthy debate. Some views upheld the bureaucratic and institutional partnership model of development, citing organizations like the European External Action Service. Others held that what is needed is more concentrated programme planning, a greater prevalence of physical programmes, enhanced acuity in perceiving opportunities for improvement, and a stronger presence in susceptible regions where momentous changes are taking place. As most agreed, EUNIC is already excellently equipped to

support European values, but it has not yet reached a strategic global level. So, the answer to the question posed by the final panel *EUNIC: True Global Player?* may be, “Not yet.” EUNIC has the potential, resources, and expertise, however, to become a primary instrument of engaging cultural activity in the world. In partnership with other EU institutions and international organizations, EUNIC is uniquely positioned to provide much-needed promotion of cultural activities and to enhance cultural relations in significant ways beyond the borders of Europe.

In order to strengthen global strategy and become a true global player, some remarked that EUNIC must overcome two major threats, in addition to addressing its internal and institutional constraints: Firstly, EUNIC must work to neutralize the effects of the financial crisis while working to reverse the tendency to reduce budgets assigned to cultural activities. Conventional financial and management solutions may no longer be enough; perhaps, in Martin Davidson’s words, the "reinvention of public service" and a new institutional culture are needed. To ensure their survival and efficiency, the institutions involved in international cultural cooperation, including EUNIC, must adopt entrepreneurial virtues.

Some feel that the identity crisis in Europe presents an equally potent threat; confidence in the European project has waned, even among EU countries, and Europe’s international reputation is at risk. Culture, therefore, will play an even more significant role in reshaping and rebuilding European influence on the global stage. European cultural actions, and especially the activities of EUNIC, will play a crucial role in strengthening Europe’s reputation in the world.

In her presentation, Delphine Borione-Pratesi argued that EUNIC has four major functions:

- 1) Operational: Carrying out joint activities, both within local EUNIC clusters and at global levels, highlighting European values in Europe and abroad
- 2) Collaborative: Creating strong partnerships, especially with the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and the Council of Europe, but also with other European cultural networks
- 3) Networking: Reinvigorating international cultural bonds
- 4) Advocacy: Supporting the design and adoption of specific policies to turn the attention of European and national decision makers towards culture

Asked how she sees the institutionalization of EUNIC, Delphine Borione-Pratesi replied that since instruments of collaborative action are already in place, the solution is not greater institutional development, but rather the reproduction of EUNIC initiatives and partnerships worldwide. To Ms. Borione-Pratesi, EUNIC represents a cultural plurality that is the very essence of European culture, and this diversity places EUNIC in an advantageous position globally. In her opinion, EUNIC should not become a costly and bureaucratic structure, nor should it replace the European Union’s political formation. However, to Ms. Borione-Pratesi and others, it is conceivable that EUNIC will in the future integrate its structure and course of action within the European External Action Service. For now, priority is given to opening towards other organizations and institutions, establishing profitable partnerships and, from a geographical perspective, strengthening the network’s presence in China, North Africa and the Middle East. Ms. Borione-Pratesi acknowledged that EUNIC cannot operate worldwide in the same way but, even where its actions seem less promising, the promotion of the European values must remain an essential goal.

Ms. Borione-Pratesi argued that, since diplomacy signifies dialogue, communication and networking, the term “cultural diplomacy” retains a positive connotation, even if it means integrating within systems of public affairs and diplomacy. For Gottfried Wagner, in contrast, cultural action must remain independent of politics. In this respect, Mr Wagner suggested the Goethe Institute as a potential model for inspiration because, although publicly funded, it is not controlled by political interests and its staff is not part of the diplomatic corps. To Mr Wagner, “international cultural cooperation” upholds the promotion of culture as a value in itself rather than as an instrument, and is a more adequate term than “cultural diplomacy”, which suggests official political objectives. Mr. Wagner warned that contemporary international cultural relations could be affected by four potential threats:

- 1) A state that becomes increasingly aggressive and tries to subvert any external action
- 2) The economic crises and drastically reduced budgets, which affect cultural activities
- 3) The media revolution, which multiplies and democratizes communication channels
- 4) The sometimes destructive forces of the market, which may stifle cultural initiatives

Fidel López Álvarez, on the other hand, is not so keen to remove the state from cultural diplomacy. He argued that because trends incline towards cultural relations being dominated by non-governmental protagonists, the state should act as a moderator and a facilitator of international cultural projects. These distinct viewpoints provided stimulating discussion, including debate and questions from participants in the audience, during the conference. Pointing out to the French model, Philippe Lane argued that the role of state actors is still important in cultural cooperation. New international developments, like globalization and the emergence of new powers like China, India, and Brazil have created a very competitive space for cultural diplomacy. In order to remain relevant, European cultural diplomacy must undergo a process of reform. EUNIC, Mr Lane maintained, is well equipped for this competitive world as it practises an “open diplomacy”, which is characterized by variety and flexibility.

The question of EUNIC’s potential as a global player was addressed by Martin Eichtinger as well. According to Mr. Eichtinger, EUNIC has not yet become a global player because the network has not managed to define and assert itself internationally. To Mr Eichtinger, EUNIC does not have yet a clear strategy or a well-crafted plan; he cited what, in his opinion, should have been a simple task to establish an executive office in Brussels, which has taken far longer than expected. Yet, in the wake of European integration, EUNIC’s role may become more important. Its resources, expertise, and qualified personnel position the network as a strategic partner of EU institutions in external actions. To Mr Eichtinger and others, this may only be possible if EUNIC overcomes the financial crisis and diminishing budgets and addresses the danger of operational ambitions being disproportionate to network capacity. Further, EUNIC will need to confront competition from non-European cultural diplomacy, ideally viewing such challenges as potential opportunities for collaboration.

Gottfried Wagner also acknowledged that EUNIC has not yet reached a strategic global level. In fact, even if it would like to, the European External Action Service could not integrate easily with EUNIC, because the EUNIC network does not have a set structure. The EUNIC network is vital because smaller European cultures can successfully broaden their international exposure through EUNIC projects and initiatives. To achieve a strategic advantage, Mr Wagner claimed, EUNIC needs to strengthen the role of its CEO and lengthen the term of EUNIC presidency. Further, the network must be more active and effective in its programmes and projects.

Returning to the semantic debate on terminology for cultural activities, Joanna Skoczek upheld the view that “public diplomacy” best encompasses the inclusive notion of cultural diplomatic activity. Public diplomacy, she claimed, involves all actions of a state that seek to strengthen its international prestige, including both cultural and economic diplomacy, as well as assistance programmes for the development and promotion of tourism. Consequently, public diplomacy is an indispensable tool and the role of the state is pivotal. Although public funding is helpful, and despite the growth of non-governmental cultural diplomacy initiatives, cultural cooperation works best when a state acts as a neutral sponsor of cultural initiatives. The challenge in international cultural cooperation and therefore in the way EUNIC functions is often not money, but rather the lack of interesting ideas and initiatives, in Ms Skoczek’s opinion.

In contrast to other perspectives, Ms Skoczek rejected the idea that EUNIC should become part of the European External Action Service on the grounds that culture is not part of the Union Treaty. Even if it were, she warned, coordinating cultural projects would become too bureaucratic if entwined as part of the European institutional system. Culture has a strategic value within European external action and EUNIC does have a role to play, though, Ms Skoczek argued. Strongly affected by the financial crisis, Europe can now remain robust globally only as long as its cultural influence, its *soft power*, remains influential worldwide. In order for this to happen, Europe must address its identity dilemma in addition to necessarily focusing on financial issues.

Tunç Aybak agreed that European identity is under threat. The European identity crisis is therefore central to the debate about the future of European cultural diplomacy and no less so for the future of EUNIC. To Mr Aybak, Europe no longer believes in itself and cannot find the binding ingredient of its extraordinary cultural diversity. Moreover, in countries like Turkey, following the economic crisis and its social consequences, the influence of the European political and cultural model has weakened. Europe appears less interesting inside and outside the European Union and thus EUNIC action may become more difficult to sustain.

### **III. Conclusions**

In his closing address, tackling the effects of the economic crisis on cultural diplomacy, Martin Davidson referred to the British Council experience. The multifaceted crisis represents an opportunity for profound reform within British cultural diplomacy. Budget reductions are offset by measures such as reducing the cost of operations and programmes; the extension of actions across partnerships in order to distribute the financial burden among other institutions; maintaining strictly necessary programmes and projects that have proven efficacy; outsourcing activities that local collaborators can deliver more cost effectively. According to Mr. Davidson, these measures signify more than a new financial arrangement – they represent a redefinition of public service through the adoption of a set of entrepreneurial values. The incorporation of these values does not mean, however, abandoning the British Council ethos, characterized by flexibility, openness and humanism. Reform within the British Council may provide a model and opportunity for EUNIC as well, as Mr Davidson suggested, because the EUNIC network and its members face similar difficulties. EUNIC must be aware of opportunities to strengthen itself and must maintain an influential position on the international stage.

Overall, this conference showed that many practitioners of cultural diplomacy are not preoccupied with the various and often conflicting definitions of international cultural cooperation. Rather, they prefer a pragmatic approach, showing more interest in concrete aspects of cultural diplomacy and focusing on ways to improve cultural diplomatic activities across a wide spectrum. To many, public funding is essential but the state must refrain from dictating the form and substance of cultural cooperation. Many of the conference's speakers believe that cultural diplomacy is helpful in advancing national interests, but warn against the compartmentalization of culture as a peripheral tool. For most of the speakers and participants in the conference, culture constitutes a value in itself. Culture is a public good that deserves support even in times of severe financial constraints. Yet, although public investment seems unavoidable, institutions involved in international cultural cooperation must diversify their sources of financing and should adopt entrepreneurial approaches.

With respect to EUNIC, the general consensus during this conference upheld that despite major progress, the EUNIC network has not yet become as influential an international actor as it is hoped to be. Some speakers and participants disapprove of EUNIC's absence from key developments that have taken place on the international stage; others have pointed out the network's institutional and programme weaknesses. European financial and identity crises are taking a toll on international cultural cooperation as well. However, despite these challenges, conference attendees strongly agreed that EUNIC has the potential to increase its international profile and to become an international role model for cultural diplomacy.