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Dialogue in and as European Heritage

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Abstract

In this article, we scrutinize the use and institutionalization of the concept of ‘dialogue’ in the cultural politics of the European Union (EU). Our focus is on how dialogue is understood in the context of the EU’s flagship heritage action, the European Heritage Label (EHL), that aims to strengthen citizens’ sense of belonging to the Union. Since heritage has gained increasing prominence in the EU international relations, we also discuss how ‘dialogue’ is institutionalized in the EHL as part of the EU’s heritage diplomacy. We approach dialogue in the context of the EHL as a floating signifier; an ideal seldom explicitly defined and never fully achieved but actively used to organize society and power relations. The empirical data consists of official EHL reports and interviews conducted with EU officials and members of the EHL panel in charge of the selection and awarding of EHL sites.

Keywords: dialogue; EU; European Heritage Label, diplomacy; floating signifier

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Dialogue in and as European Heritage

Introduction

In the early 2000s, ‘intercultural dialogue’ emerged as a new paradigm in the policy of the European Union (EU) with the aim of promoting cultural diversity, fostering peaceful interaction and exchange based on ‘respectful dialogue’ among cultures. ‘Intercultural dialogue’ has since become a normatively charged and frequently used trope in EU documents, which is seldom defined explicitly but serves as a means, an objective, or an outcome, depending on the context (see Calligaro, 2014: 79; Lähdesmäki and Wagener, 2015; Galani et al., 2020: 112; Lähdesmäki et al., 2020b). The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2007) introduced the notion of an ‘active European citizenship’ based on ‘common values’ and open to ‘any individual living permanently or temporarily in the EU’, which framed intercultural dialogue in the scope of the EU’s integration policy (EU, 2006). The European Agenda on Culture (2007) confirmed the central role of intercultural dialogue for ‘contributing to European identity, citizenship and social cohesion’ (EU, 2007). In the Conclusion on Cultural Heritage as a Strategic Resource (2014), cultural heritage is perceived as ‘an important component of the European project’ that has the capacity to ‘promote diversity and intercultural dialogue by contributing to a stronger sense of “belonging” to a wider community and a better understanding and respect between peoples’ (EU, 2014).

In addition to promoting internal objectives of social cohesion and belonging, both cultural heritage and intercultural dialogue have become increasingly important in the EU policies as part of international relations with countries outside the community since the 1970s (Jehan, 2011; Calligaro, 2014; Lähdesmäki et al., 2019). The EU policy reflects the aim of creating and maintaining cultural relations through ‘dialogue’ as part of its foreign policy, which can be understood as cultural diplomacy (e.g. Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). As a ‘performative process of communication, narration, negotiation and debate, and contest’ (Lähdesmäki, forthcoming), cultural heritage is an attractive tool in cultural diplomacy because of the potential of the shared nature of heritage itself, as ‘a fluid set of ideas, narratives, motifs and traditions’ (Clarke, 2018: 424). In the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean relations or the Eastern Partnership with former Soviet countries, the EU calls upon common history, values and interest as the basis for building reliable partnerships and promoting capacity-building as well as showing commitment to specific norms and values (MacDonald and Vlaeminck, 2020: 42; Piros and Koops, 2020; Trobbiani and Kirjazovaitė, 2020; Calligaro, 2014). In this context, ‘dialogue’ is viewed as an essential objective and means of negotiating values and heritage that also serve to make the EU to a stronger regional and global actor (see Zamorano, 2016; Trobbiani, 2017).

Critical heritage studies have emphasized the dialogic nature of heritage in the form of negotiations about distinct values and narrations of the past in the present (e.g. Van Huis et al., 2019; Harrison, 2013). Cultural heritage includes the ‘political process of negotiation, mediation, and regulation of identities, conflicts and power relations’ (Kisić, 2016, 57; see also Mäkinen, 2019). In this context, heritage is understood as a form of spatial and social governance with the potential to advance strategic objectives and priorities based on ‘a set of processes whereby cultural and natural pasts shared between and across nations become subject to exchanges, collaborations and forms of cooperative governance’ (Winter, 2015: 1007). Heritage assigns values and meanings to specific narratives, cultural practices and the past, and therefore is both a resource with the capacity to accommodate diverse forms of identity and a source for (potential) social conflict. In the framework of cultural diplomacy, dialogue is framed in relation to social practices, participation, engagement

and intercultural exchange (see Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013; Galani et al., 2020; Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a).

The terms ‘dialogue’ and ‘intercultural dialogue’ are often used as synonyms in the EU policy documents, which deal with cultural diversity through promoting mutual understanding and common interests based on shared values and history (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a, 2020b). Intercultural dialogue can be seen as an example of the EU’s abstract ‘value mantras’ (Passerini, 2012, 124) that are much repeated in various contexts without further elaboration. We argue that in the framework of EU heritage policy, ‘dialogue’ can be studied as a floating signifier in terms of an ambiguous signifier without referents that can be attached to different signified content in various contexts (Laclau, 1996, 36; De Bono, 2019). As such, it has the capacity of absorbing meanings, which makes it susceptible to plural, sometimes contradictory, meanings (see Buchanan, 2016; Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn, 2019).

To analyse the meanings of dialogue in EU heritage policy, we focus on the European Heritage Label (EHL), the EU flagship heritage action, which was first introduced as an intergovernmental initiative in 2007 and then transformed into a key EU heritage action in 2011. The EHL was created as part of the EU heritage policy in order to respond to multiple, challenging crises of the past decades (e.g. Lähdesmäki, 2017; Lähdesmäki et al., 2019) through encouraging a transnational sense of Europeanness among EU citizens. Its core objectives are to strengthen European citizens’ sense of belonging to the EU, to increase the appreciation of national and regional diversity, and to strengthen ‘intercultural dialogue’. In the EHL discourse, ‘dialogue’ is often connected to ‘European’ heritage and as part of that becomes assigned with distinct meanings on different scales (EU, national, local) by various actors (EHL actors, site practitioners, citizens, states) and for processes that take place between these multiple actors in the context of the Label. We scrutinize how ‘dialogue’ is institutionalized and used in the EHL heritage action, and how its use relates to the objectives of the EU policies. We seek to draw conclusions about the dialogic potential of the action in facilitating the internal cohesion of the Union as well as for developing the EU’s cultural diplomacy. While ‘dialogue’ and ‘intercultural dialogue’ often appear as synonyms in the EHL, we use the notion of ‘dialogue’ as the main study object of our article.

Data and methods

The EHL seeks to ‘strengthen the sense of belonging to the Union and reinforce intercultural dialogue’ (EU, 2011). Both objectives are supposed to be attained by ‘stressing the symbolic value and raising the profile of the sites’ and ‘increasing European citizens’ understanding of the history of Europe and the building of the Union, and of their common yet diverse cultural heritage’ based on shared values and historical developments that ‘underpin the process of European integration’ (EU, 2011). Between 2013 and 2019, the Commission has awarded the Label to 48 sites for their European significance, the role they played in European history, and their commitment to implement activities that contribute to the EHL’s objective of bringing the EU and its citizens closer together (see Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a, 2021). Sites are pre-selected at national level every two years; a European panel of international experts, responsible to the Commission, then makes the final selection (EU, 2011; see also Čeginská, 2019).

We focus on the Label’s selection reports (EHL, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019) and monitoring report (EHL, 2016) written by members of the EHL panel. The panel assesses the application of candidate

sites at an EU level and is in charge of monitoring the awarded sites on a regular basis to ensure that they continue to meet the criteria and respect the plans to which they committed in their application (see EU 2011). The panel reports therefore offer an important source for analysing the interpretation and meaning given to (intercultural) dialogue in the EHL action. The panel consists of 13 independent heritage experts who are appointed for three years; four by the European Parliament, four by the Council, four by the European Commission, and one by the Committee of Regions (EU, 2011, Art. 8). In addition, we draw on qualitative interviews with six EU officials (EU1, EU2, EU4, EU5, EU6, EU7) and one member of the EHL panel (EU3), which were conducted in autumn 2017 within a larger research project (EUROHERIT, 2015–2020), in which both authors participated as researchers. The EU officials worked at different positions in the Directorate-General (DG) Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and DG Research and Innovation, ranking from policy officers (EU4–7) on cultural heritage, Creative Europe and EHL to Head of Unit (EU1) and Principal Advisor to the Director-General (EU2). All interviews were conducted in English and lasted an average of 1.5 hours. The interviews focused on four main themes: concepts and actors of European cultural heritage; European identity; challenges and opportunities of cultural heritage; and more specifically the EHL (on the project, including interview questions, see Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a introduction and appendix).

Our data analysis was guided by multiple readings of the EU reports and interview transcriptions. We first examined the explicit use of the concepts ‘intercultural dialogue’ or ‘dialogue’ in the data and then we focused on their implicit use, paying attention to the parts of the data to which the concepts were not applied. This way we could identify the varied and sometimes contradictory meanings that were absorbed into the concept of ‘dialogue’ as a floating signifier. Our analysis is divided into three tightly interrelated sections. First, we study ‘dialogue’ as a floating signifier based on the explicit and implicit references to dialogue in the EHL selection reports and discuss how these references help develop specific notions of Europe and the European. Second, using the interview data, we attempt to explore ‘heritage dialogue’ within the EHL action by identifying the actors in this dialogue and how they institutionalize dialogue. Third, we draw on the EHL reports to discuss the EHL’s potential in developing a heritage diplomacy strategy in EU internal and international relations. Our core findings are discussed in our conclusions.

Dialogue as a floating signifier in the EHL reports

In European and world collective memory, the city of The Hague has been associated for more than hundred years not only with the venue of the First World Peace Conference in 1899 and the sphere of peace dialogue but also with the subsequent peace conventions to which the city gave its name. (EHL, 2013: 5)

This quote from the EHL report (2013) elaborates the European significance of the Peace Palace in The Hague in the Netherlands. Taking into account the European significance of the site, its project and work plan, the panel recommends that the Peace Palace receive the Label. In the monitoring report of the EHL (2016: 22), the Peace Palace is expected ‘to further strengthen the important message of peace as a core value of the European Union’ (see also Mäkinen, 2019). The way the concept of dialogue is connected with peace as part of the European significance of the Peace Palace is also characteristic for the awarding of Mundaneum, situated in Mons, Belgium. In the latter case, the idea of peace is associated with dialogue for the purpose of enabling and sharing knowledge.

The term ‘dialogue’ was explicitly mentioned in the EHL reports only in relation to six sites: the Peace Palace (Netherlands, EHL, 2013), the Residencia de Estudiantes (Spain, EHL, 2014),

Mundaneum (Belgium, EHL, 2015), Hambach Castle (Germany, EHL, 2016), Dohány Street Synagogue Complex (Hungary, EHL, 2017), and Szentendre (Hungary, EHL, 2019). The reports frame dialogue at these sites in relation to Europe's cultural diversity and peace as a process that includes different cultures, transnational relations, and cross-border dissemination of ideas. For instance, the living heritage of Szentendre in Hungary is characterized as a 'place of tolerance and dialogue and co-development of different cultures, stemming from the cross-border relations and exchange' (EHL, 2019: 22). Similarly, the Dohány Street Synagogue Complex (EHL, 2017: 10) is described as 'a symbol of integration, remembrance and openness to dialogue' and a reminder of a lively Jewish past in Budapest, preserving the memory of peaceful intercultural relations between various religious, ethnic, linguistic, and social communities in Hungary. The monitoring report (EHL, 2016) refers to the role of Residencia de Estudiantes as a 'conference venue and a place for the exchange of ideas' where 'leading personalities of European interwar arts, philosophy, and science gathered' to have a debate and dialogue. At the same time, the report highlights the value of the site in contemporary Europe for promoting 'cosmopolitan and interdisciplinary dialogue' (EHL, 2016: 23).

In addition to those sites where 'dialogue' is explicitly mentioned in the EHL reports, there are sites where (intercultural) dialogue plays a key role in historical narratives on multicultural cohabitation, cross-border cooperation, exchange, and knowledge transfer between European regions and countries. However, the EHL reports do not necessarily use the concept of dialogue to describe the sites' European significance. The Historic Gdańsk Shipyard in Poland was awarded the EHL in 2015. While the site is dedicated to the role of the Solidarity movement in paving a way for a dialogue over various social issues and demands, a process that was central for the collapse of the socialist regime in Poland and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, there is no reference to the term 'dialogue' in the EHL report. In other EHL sites, the absence of (intercultural) dialogue and its immediate consequences of violent conflicts or war become thematized in narratives that commemorate historical events and people's perspectives on them. These sites, situated in West and East European countries alike, connect to the remembrance and the victims of distant and more recent military conflicts and atrocities in Europe's history, including the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the mass migrations after 1945. The European integration after the Second World War was launched as a 'peace project' that was carried by the principle of 'never again', with the aim to bind countries, most notably France and Germany, together to prevent wars in the future (Mäkinen, 2019). As Mäkinen (ibid.) writes, the idea that peace is at the core of European integration is central for heritagizing peace in the framework of the EHL. The legacy of 'difficult heritage' of these sites is constituted by a past that 'is recognized as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity', as Macdonald argues for the negotiation of the national-socialist past (Macdonald 2009, 1). Their narratives help to contrast the 'national' with the 'supranational/European' by showing how European integration has made it possible for European countries to overcome violent conflicts between nation states. The EHL sites are a reminder of what happens when 'European values', which are inherently linked to respect for human rights, dignity, the rule of law, democracy and peace, are revoked (see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a).

'Value' as a concept is frequently repeated in the EHL documents (Mäkinen, 2019; see also Turunen, 2019), and both peace and diversity stand for this kind of 'value mantras' (Passerini, 2012: 124) listed in the EHL documents, which are commonly depicted as 'positive, benign, or even universal' (Turunen, 2019). These values are simultaneously seen as becoming evident in Europe's cultural

heritage while *being* and *constituting* its heritage, and, accordingly, the promotion of cultural heritage stands for promoting these values (Lähdesmäki, 2019). The narratives of these sites contribute to highlighting the EU value discourse with their implicit emphasis on the necessity of establishing and maintaining intercultural and interreligious dialogue (see also Clarke, Cento Bull and Deganutti, 2017).

Connecting the term of dialogue explicitly to EU values in the framework of forming European heritage can be interpreted as simultaneously giving substance to and absorbing meanings of ‘dialogue’ as a floating signifier. As the EHL reports show, ‘dialogue’ is used as an instrument for the sake of overcoming (particularly national) conflicts, achieving peace, and promoting diversity in Europe. Diversity plays a prominent role both in the decision of the EHL (EU, 2011) as well as in the wider EU policies (Treaty on European Union 1992; Lähdesmäki, 2012; Kraus and Sciortino, 2014; see also Turunen, 2019). Additionally, in the framework of the EHL, ‘(intercultural) dialogue’ is given location by pinpointing it to certain places in Europe and through this also to different periods. While previous research shows that it is common for EU policy documents to list values, like peace, as a characteristic of the EU (Lähdesmäki, 2019; Mäkinen, 2019), these ‘European values’ also take on ambivalent meanings. This is especially the case when analysed from the perspective of the imperial and colonial heritage of Europe (Turunen, 2019; van Huis et al., 2019). Although the EHL reports highlight ‘intercultural dialogue’ as an integral feature of European history and values, they offer a limited discussion on what ‘dialogue’ and related values mean (see also Turunen, 2019). The reports do not show if and how ‘dialogue’ contributes to opening up these mantras or discussing heritage related dissonance. Similarly, not all dialogic processes are framed in the reports as dialogue. Thus, dialogue appears in the EHL documents as a floating signifier: its precise meaning, use, and the question of who participates in it remain ambiguous.

Institutionalizing dialogue by EU actors

In the EHL context, structural dialogue is shared between various stakeholders (e.g. citizens, heritage practitioners, decision-makers at various levels) as well as between the EHL sites and their diverse audiences, among which young people are highlighted as the intended audience. In this part, we seek to analyse the institutionalization of ‘heritage dialogue’ in the EHL context, i.e. we scrutinize how the EU actors understand the concept of dialogue in practice, which actors are involved, and what role they play in this process. This enables us to examine power relations, including who sets the rules of dialogue and who is expected to take part in the dialogue in the EHL framework. For this purpose, we first used the keyword ‘dialogue’ to select suitable parts from the interview data and then expanded the dataset by including other parts of the interviews that – without mentioning the term itself – dealt with the relations between the EU actors and the sites as well as with the citizens’ role in cultural heritage.

When we asked the EU actors about the use of cultural heritage in Europe for intercultural dialogue, some interviewees focused on the ‘intercultural’ aspect, whereas others emphasized the general meaning of ‘dialogue’ (see also Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). As an example of the former, an interviewee argued that ‘whatever you do, will become an intercultural dialogue. If you deal with another country and the culture, that’s a dialogue’ (EU 5). Our analysis of the interview data indicates that the EU actors create a correlation between ‘intercultural dialogue’ and cultural heritage. On the one hand, they elaborate on the use of cultural heritage as a means of establishing intercultural

dialogue between people, institutions, and countries. On the other hand, they see cultural heritage as the result of preceding interaction between various communities based on an ongoing dialogue and exchange between people, regions, and institutions. As one interviewee put it, ‘the stones of Venice are not stones from Venice, they come from Croatia. And the people that have worked there came from other countries’ (EU 3).

In the interviews, the EU actors explained that in an ideal case the construction and promotion of cultural heritage would be a collaborative and dialogic process, which involved actors at various levels, from the local to the European (EU 6). The EU actors also discussed the practice of institutionalizing dialogue between national and EU actors on the one hand, and between institutions and citizens on the other. According to the interviewees, the interaction between EHL sites and EU actors focused on communicating the European dimension of the sites’ narratives and promoting the heritage action to the citizens in the member countries. In this context, the interviewed EU actors perceived the EHL application as part of a dialogic process where the meanings and dimensions of heritage are constructed in an interplay between the local, national, and EU levels. The interview data indicates that (intercultural) dialogue as a floating signifier is predominantly conditioned by negotiating heritage between these different actors.

On the one hand, the EU actors emphasize the subsidiarity principle of the EU also in the context of the EHL, which reveals the importance of local and national actors in relation to the process of selecting and proposing the sites for the Label. One interviewee pointed out that raising issues from the local to the EU level makes it possible to see potential contradictions between these levels, which help to ‘open the discussion and to really trigger some new things’ (EU 2). As another interviewee explained, ‘We do not impose, we do not decide from the top down. Otherwise, it’s really propaganda’ (EU 3). Likewise, a third interviewee emphasized that

we leave to member states their own prerogative of choosing the way they want to do it, and I guess they have different reasons and different environment making, explaining their own choice, but I think that from the selection, from the European Commission point of view, it is really the good way. (EU 4)

On the other hand, the EU’s viewpoint on the narratives of the EHL is made explicit in the interviews. For instance, the applicant site is regarded as a ‘raw diamond that is not cut’ (EU 1). As several interviewees claim, to prevent presenting a ‘too specific’ narrative (EU 1), the applicants are expected to learn how to ‘think wider’ (EU 2) beyond local and national dimensions in order to ‘reach European level’ (EU 4). Thus, European heritage narratives are expected to substantially differ from local or national ones.

The EHL reports describe the sites as a whole as ‘gate ways [sic] for citizens’, aiming to improve ‘their understanding of Europe, its history and its culture, its unity and diversity’ and to ‘invite citizens to think about Europe, what Europe stands for, and what its core values are’ (e.g. EHL, 2016: 38). The EHL panel emphasizes the role of the heritage communities as custodians of diverse forms and expressions of cultural heritage in Europe, while at the same time promoting an understanding of a transnational ‘European’ cultural heritage as a joint responsibility of different heritage communities that necessitates a dialogue between them. In this process that we understand as ‘heritage dialogue’ between multiple actors within and across diverse (heritage) communities and countries, the task of the sites is to provide new perspectives on and historic context to current issues to citizens and

decision-makers alike (EHL, 2016: 39), which underpins the potential of heritage dialogue to engage with a wide range of contemporary social issues.

Our interviewees regarded dialogue with citizens as predominantly achieved through an intertwined educative and participative approach that implies giving ‘instructive guidance’ on the one hand and creating ‘participative experience’ on the other. The key idea of ‘instructive guidance’ is to foster citizens’ sense of belonging to Europe by providing them information about the history of the EU and its values, so they recognize the added value of the Union in their lives. For example, one interviewee argued that ‘a lot of people are considering now that it’s normal to be in peace and whatever. But it [sic! we] should be reminded more often how the European, you know, the European project was born and what was Europe in the Second World War or soon after – to understand, to give value to the European project’ (EU 2). As the EHL action addresses young people in particular and, as some interviewees suggested, also people who have migrated into Europe, culture is deliberately utilized in this approach as a means ‘to integrate the newly arriving population’ (EU 5) and to ensure that they ‘share the basic European values’ (EU 2).

The ‘participatory experience’ approach is based on the idea that cultural activities allow citizens to participate in the process of heritage-making at all levels, although our interviewees were generally sceptical about the possibility of organizing a ‘European consultation where EU citizens will give their opinion’ (EU 7) on topical issues, especially with the ‘younger generations’ (EU 3). The interviewees described ‘dialogue’ with citizens as engaging people in activities and providing valuable experiences through communicating stories of various societal groups, e.g. ‘people coming from other cultures’ (EU 3). As one interviewee (EU 7) puts it: ‘So we had [...] research projects that are exploring how communities can be involved and how they can express themselves through their cultural heritage, how they can appropriate it. So, I think, this is very important.’ According to several interviewees, the EHL allegedly enables a form of participative heritage dialogue, which is about giving ‘access and [creating] the little spaces or territories of freedom where citizens can – and have the tools to – deal with their cultural heritage’ (EU 7). At the same time, this form of dialogue avoids the situation in which local communities try to adapt to an external interpretation of their cultural heritage (EU 7).

This interrelated educative and participative approach towards ‘heritage dialogue’ with citizens, as proposed by the interviewees, is somewhat controversial. It no longer resembles a dialogue in the sense of ‘an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect’, as defined in the White Paper of the Council of Europe (CoE, 2008: 10) to which EU heritage policy documents refer. Instead, the interview data suggest that dialogue between the EU and its citizens in the context of cultural heritage is part of a top-down and educational approach towards citizens, in which their possibilities of becoming involved in the conversation is somewhat restricted. Despite the emphasis on dialogue, the communication process is rather unidirectional with the representatives of the EU dispatching the message and citizens receiving them as the selected ‘addressees’. While citizens are expected to familiarize themselves with the heritagized past of Europe, they are not asked to interpret heritage narratives similarly or engage with the sites in a homogenous way. However, in our data, we found only limited evidence for the citizens’ potential to make change, since their possibly critical attitude towards the heritage narratives or their contestations of these do not necessarily have an impact on the normative interpretation of ‘European heritage’ through EU actors.

Contrary to the EHL reports, the EU actors did not associate the concept of (intercultural) dialogue with ‘positive mantras’ but referred to it as part of an everyday process in the framework of the EU integration. As the action involves actors from various levels and as it aims at constructing and promoting cultural heritage with a ‘European dimension’, the EHL makes explicit various power relations related to dialogue. Although power relations between national and EU actors as well as between institutions and citizens emerge in the data, the interviewees refer neither to them nor to the meanings, boundaries, and controversies of dialogue. This way the potential and challenges of dialogue in relation to cultural heritage are not addressed. In the following section, we draw on EHL reports to scrutinize how (intercultural) dialogue is perceived in the EU’s international relations.

EHL: dialogue in the service of international relations

The alleged international attractiveness of Europe’s cultural diversity and its value discourse is an important diplomatic means in EU international relations. A study on the external perceptions of the EU and its policies in ten strategic partner countries in 2015 revealed that the international image of the EU is strongly associated with the norms of human rights, equality between women and men, gay rights, good governance, and sustainable development and technology (FPI, 2015: 19). The EU explicitly uses the alleged attraction of its cultural heritage and values (FPI, 2015: 6, 10, 18) as a diplomatic means to build relations with third countries and increase its image and reputation in the European and international contexts (Winter, 2015; Zamorano, 2016: 166; Clarke and Duber, 2020; Trobbiani and Pavón-Guinea, 2020: 221, 225). At the same time, this approach helps the EU to credibly promote its values and itself as a normative power with substantial integrative expertise in its diplomatic relations (Manners, 2002; Proud, 2020). Cultural programmes are seen as an important means to negotiate shared values and identities between the EU and partner countries for building trust and social resilience, in particular in regions with great cultural diversity and a legacy of unresolved disputes (Trobbiani and Kirjazovaitė, 2020: 91). The concept of intercultural dialogue in these policy documents is often limited to interaction and international cooperation involving various people, civil, national, and supranational organizations or entities, while its contribution to managing cultural diversity in Europe is confined to conflict prevention (see also García Agustín, 2012). However, the EU’s role in shaping relations with foreign states and controlling power over image and information is increasingly challenged by rising nationalist politics and the development of digital communication technology (see Trobbiani and Pavón-Guinea, 2020: 224). Hence, the Union needs and continuously attempts to create its own narrative that underpins its credibility and legitimation as a global player and simultaneously illustrates the validity and success of its policies and values to international partners (see also Nye, 2011, 83).

The narratives of the EHL sites provide the EU precisely with such a narrative based on universal values that are conceptualized as ‘European’ (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a) and through which the Union can improve its image, credibility, and notion of expertise, and thereby exert influence and soft power (Nye, 2011). The EHL discourse serves both internal and international strategic priorities of the Union by highlighting common ‘European values’ as a means to ‘build understanding and solidarity while respecting diversity’ (EHL, 2019: 51) and identifying intercultural dialogue as both a means and an outcome of Europe’s cultural diversity (EU, 2011). By extension, through conceptualizing ‘intercultural dialogue’ as a value, the EHL narratives help underpin intercultural dialogue practice

as a historical competence of the EU that supports its interests in third countries as a ‘byproduct of the trust, understanding, and relationship developed through cultural relations’ (Riviera, 2015: 11).

According to Clopot (2020), heritage diplomacy assists in the proliferation of an authorized heritage discourse (Smith, 2006) at the international level and naturalizes an understanding that in particular Western and Northern states are the main actors in this international collaboration. In the EHL, the network of EHL sites and their practitioners are the main actors for pursuing cultural relationships in bilateral and international relations. Although the Label is a political instrument of the EU cultural policy, the network of EHL heritage sites receives no EU funding (EU, 2011, Art. 20). The EHL network is a membership organization that is open to all awarded sites. It is considered as a ‘very distinctive’ element of the Label (EU, 2011) and the sites are required to strengthen partnerships and cooperative activities through it (EHL, 2017: 26–27; Čeginskas, 2019). The emphasis on a transnational and transcultural perspective of European heritage in the EHL offers the opportunity to question the national interpretations of the past in European countries. Therefore, the emphasis on the EHL sites as main actors in heritage diplomacy underlines their alleged independence from both the EU and the member states in which they are located, which assigns them the less controversial role as non-state actors for building relationships and intercultural understanding in international cultural relations (see Riviera, 2015: 11). Instead of a simple top-down approach, heritage diplomacy in the context of the EHL takes place in ‘a messy combination of official and unofficial engagements’ (Clarke, 2018: 430) between various state and non-state actors at the national and European level, including institutions, heritage professionals and practitioners, national policymakers and the European Commission (Lähdesmäki, forthcoming; see also Winter, 2015).

The EHL reports present the sites as ‘ambassadors and mirrors of European significance and of our shared European history’ (EHL, 2017: 8), which makes them part of a broader strategy that enables the EU to position itself as ‘a soft power and norm entrepreneur’ (Groth and Bendix, 2017: 328) in and beyond Europe. The EHL engages in the cultural showcasing of Europe to international audiences to strengthen the EU’s brand in the framework of its international heritage diplomacy and to create stable foundations of cooperation in international relations (see Trobbiani and Pavón-Guinea, 2020; Lähdesmäki, forthcoming). The EHL selection reports recognize the potential of the sites to establish heritage dialogue with audiences in countries in the Mediterranean region and eastern neighbourhood of the EU, where the EU is interested in expanding and deepening its relations. For instance, the EHL Monitoring Report of 2016 asks in the case of the Union of Lublin, which received the Label in 2014, how ‘can audiences in the former territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania [that used to encompass territories from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea] be reached effectively?’ The report calls on the EHL site to focus in its activities on ‘communicating the relevance of the Union of Lublin to local and European audiences, and in particular to investigating links with Lithuania and if possible, Belarus and Ukraine’ (EHL, 2016: 17). Other sites also act as gateways to interconnect Europe’s history with regions outside the EU for creating a sense of communal spirit. While the EHL report first presents the Archive of the Crown of Aragon in Spain (awarded in 2014) as a centralized archival institution of the Crown of Aragon, it continues to describe the relevance of the Crown to the history of its former territories on both sides of the Mediterranean, including ‘even Muslim realms and Emirates’ (EHL, 2016: 14).

The EHL narratives help to shape a normative discourse about Europe and the EU in which the selective remembering of Europe’s past produces specific images and narratives of Europe (see Lähdesmäki et al., 2020a) that affect the EU’s position, image, and influence abroad (see Trobbiani

and Pavón-Guinea, 2020: 231). According to previous research, the notion of a common heritage can be invoked to strengthen both the European integration process and multilateral cooperation in relations with countries outside the community but may contribute to defining a European identity against other countries (see Calligaro, 2014: 72). Our data shows that the narratives of the EHL sites help to project the EU in terms of openness, liberal values, and individual freedoms – based on human rights, peace, security, prosperity, democracy, and the rule of law – which are perceived as an attractive means for increasing the EU’s significance within and beyond its borders (Carta, 2020: 25). The Label also enables the EU to reframe Europe’s ‘difficult heritage’ and colonial history into a positive interpretation of ‘learning from the past’, which helps to emphasize the EU value discourse and to ensure its vital interests in its international relations (see also Clarke and Duber, 2020; Clopot, 2020; Clarke, Cento Bull and Deganutti, 2017; Winter, 2015). However, the use of the EHL narratives with their emphasis on European significance depicts a hierarchical system where Europeanness becomes measurable on the basis of adapting to these values and norms (Turunen, 2019). This leaves us with a question: what kind of dialogue will be built in this setting?

Conclusions

The EHL discourse serves both internal and international strategic objectives and priorities of the Union by highlighting European values as a means to ‘build understanding and solidarity while respecting diversity’ (EHL, 2019: 51). The EHL reports make the concept of (intercultural) dialogue more concrete by explicitly and implicitly associating it with narratives of the EHL sites and identifying it as both a vehicle and an outcome of increasing the appreciation of cultural diversity in Europe (EU, 2011). Our analysis shows a rather widespread understanding in the EHL documents and among the interviewed EU officials and EHL panel members that ‘dialogue’ is necessary to construct (European) cultural heritage and that cultural heritage can be used to facilitate ‘dialogue’. By assigning distinct meanings to intercultural dialogue in terms of (i) a value and part of European heritage, (ii) a functional tool in communication activities, and (iii) an objective that helps to promote the EU’s policy priorities, however, the term intercultural dialogue becomes reduced to a floating signifier in the EHL discourse.

In the EHL reports, not all dialogic processes are framed as a ‘dialogue’, although they would substantially broaden and diversify the scope of the notion of dialogue by including controversies and dissonance. Indeed, heritage dissonance can be seen as a resource for strengthening intercultural dialogue, whereas dialogue in practice enables us to open up dissonance and use it to ‘do’ inclusive heritage (see Mäkinen, 2019). This reveals the potential of heritage dialogue to create dialogue *through* heritage and heritage *through* dialogue by conceiving a transcultural space, in which dialogic activities and practices around cultural heritage can develop ideally on equal terms between all participants. It is a transcultural space that enables people to engage in multifarious ways with diverse cultural forms of expressions, practices, values, and ideas. In this, heritage dialogue goes beyond the politicization of heritage for domestic priorities of integration and identity building or the use of cultural heritage in allegedly less controversial fields of heritage diplomacy in international cultural relations, i.e. heritage conservation, protection, and expertise transfer (Winter, 2015; Clarke, 2018).

The EHL action promotes a new approach to Europe’s heritage and past that highlights historical and cultural connections and similarities between European states and people based on sharing common historical processes, memories, and events. As our analysis shows, heritage dialogue in the EHL context is conceived primarily to encourage notions of a transnational Europeanness, operating at the

local, national, and European level and aiming to promote mutual understanding among citizens and to strengthen shared values and fundamental rights in European and neighbouring states. However, the EHL reports refer to the potential of heritage dialogue in international relations to respond to, prevent, or overcome conflicts through cultural connections and activities with citizens of non-EU countries. In doing so, the EHL implies the ability of cultural heritage to bring multiple actors into dialogue, while at the same time questioning national interpretations of the past as a means of exclusion and differentiation.

While ‘dialogue’ is presented as one of the central aims of the EHL action, we argue that the substantial discussion concerning its notion, meanings, and controversies remains modest, in both the EHL reports and the interview data. The added value of the EHL action for the EU lies in the institutionalization of intercultural dialogue in various contexts, as part of the EU’s integration politics, branding, and international cultural relations. The panel reports conceive intercultural dialogue as a European value and describe the EHL sites as gateways to Europe’s cultural diversity that communicate knowledge of European values, history, and heritage. Instead of conceiving the potential of heritage dialogue in the EHL, the Label serves the EU for spreading a unifying EU discourse and, at the same time, helps to bypass dissonances included in the concepts of Europe, heritage, and ‘European’ values (see also van Huis et al., 2019). In this context, the EHL panel is perceived as a gatekeeper with a mandate to decide upon and open new ‘gates’, which are believed to produce mutual understanding and strengthen belonging to the EU as well as to serve the Union’s international relations.

The EHL action can be a useful resource for facilitating a common European heritage diplomacy within and across Europe. The narratives of a common European cultural heritage and history enable the EU to engage with its own diversity from within, while acting as a norm entrepreneur and speaking with one voice in international relations (see Macaj and Nicolaidis, 2014). The EHL sites contribute to construct meanings of Europe, the European, and the EU but, equally, they serve as illustrations of intercultural dialogue as a historical and contemporary ‘reality’ and as a strategic means and priority in Europe’s past and present politics. The EU uses the EHL narratives to refer to its supposedly historical experience in applying and creating intercultural dialogue, which, together with Europe’s cultural diversity, contributes to showcase and brand Europe to European and international audiences alike, and assists building relationships with third countries within the framework of heritage diplomacy. Although the EHL documents fail to dismantle the baggage left by difficult history (Turunen, 2019), the narratives of the EHL sites can help to highlight multi-directional cultural flows and exchanges in the governance of diversity based on the entangled nature of relationships and their potential for identity constructions, including in colonial and post-colonial contexts (see Winter, 2015: 998; Clopot, 2020). The EHL narratives may thus result in processes of dialogue (as well as strengthen intercultural dialogue as a diplomatic instrument) by increasing the credibility of European values and shaping intercultural dialogue as a historical competence of the EU.

Although the data shows how a certain understanding of dialogue is and has been used for political purposes, like negotiating peace or promoting integration, dialogue itself is considered in the EHL context as an unproblematic instrument rather than a contested and ambiguous political process. In the reports and interviews, the concept of dialogue is understood primarily as something peaceful, shared, and having a positive bias in the EU context. While the EHL narratives clearly show that significant conflicts are the severe consequence of a lack of dialogue, any reference to potential conflict and disagreement (see Mouffe 2005) as contributing positively to the development of

productive dialogue tends to be dismissed from and juxtaposed with the concept of dialogue found in the data. As power relations between national and EU actors on the one hand and institutions and citizens on the other are not sufficiently acknowledged in the EHL reports and by the EU actors, the heritage dialogue remains in the background, its potential untapped.

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