



## Policy Brief

# Extending heritage diplomacy: a dialogic approach to cultural heritage

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Heritage diplomacy is a recent concept and a new area of interest in the expanding field of diplomacy. The EU has recently emphasized the role of cultural heritage in its external relations to respond to global challenges and crises within, at, and beyond its borders. This use of cultural heritage runs the risk of underlining Eurocentric notions of heritage and expertise. Principles of democracy, dialogue, and inclusion form the basis of building trust and long-term cultural relations through heritage diplomacy, in EU external and internal relations. These relations should be perceived as deeply entangled.

### INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, policymakers, heritage professionals, and scholars have become increasingly interested in the social value of cultural heritage. Its potential for initiating and strengthening cooperation between and within heritage communities has been recognized, as has its value for creating diplomatic relationships as part of international heritage governance and states' foreign policy and external relations.

In recent years, the EU has sought to develop its external relations through culture and cultural heritage in response to global challenges and crises within, at, and beyond its borders. New EU policies, projects, and networks have been established to promote the use of culture and cultural heritage in relations with non-EU communities and countries. These activities reflect different approaches to diplomacy. The use of cultural heritage for foreign policy and external

relations includes a risk of underlining Eurocentric world views, notions of heritage, and expertise in heritage care and conservation. Yet, international cultural relations can only work if all parties agree on common goals, values, and rules that underpin their commitment to collaboration.

The use of terms, such as 'cultural diplomacy,' 'public diplomacy,' 'new public diplomacy,' and '(international) cultural relations' in policy rhetoric and scholarship reflect the development of the notion of diplomacy. Heritage diplomacy is a recent concept and a new area of interest in the expanding scope of diplomatic relationships.

### EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Recommendations in this policy brief draw on our studies and recent special issue on heritage diplomacy (Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas 2023a). First, we explored the conceptualization of heritage diplomacy in scholarship by sampling 57 recent relevant scholarly publications (Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas 2022). While practices and policies of traditional cultural diplomacy may echo (cultural) imperialism and power relations stemming from colonialism, several recent studies link heritage diplomacy to attempts to develop reciprocal relations between countries, regions, and/or communities through cultural heritage based on dialogue. Our research shows that a dialogic approach to cultural heritage (see also Čeginskas and Kaasik-Krogerus 2022; ILUCIDARE 2022) provides a useful theoretical and practical framing for heritage diplomacy.

Second, we conducted broad field research including 44 interviews with EU officials and heritage professionals at sites awarded the European Heritage Label in 10 EU member states (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020). Analysis of the interviews shows that EU officials and heritage professionals see cultural heritage as an arena for practicing cultural diplomacy and intercultural dialogue. The interviewees saw



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these concepts as closely linked, overlapping, or – particularly in the case of the heritage professionals – having the same meaning. The more their understanding of both concepts was defined by people-to-people activities, the more their views on diplomacy and intercultural dialogue overlapped, (Lähdesmäki 2022). Moreover, our findings underline how external and internal cultural relations are blurred and deeply entangled in EU heritage policies and initiatives (Mäkinen et al. 2023). In today's globalized world, people, cultural practices, and ideas move quickly and facilitate exchange between European and non-European people in the EU (see also Trobbiani 2017), while the communication of European cultural heritage beyond it simultaneously contributes to notions of its meaning within the EU.

Third, we analyzed the reports of pilot projects jointly facilitated by the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) and EU Delegations in nine countries located in Europe, Africa, and South America. The study reveals that EU international cultural relations typically fund short-term and often small-scale cultural projects that emphasize dialogue and people-to-people relations (Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023b). Such an approach based on collaboration between local stakeholder organizations, diverse EU actors, and the cultural institutes of EU member states strengthens civil society from the bottom up. The challenge for the EU is, however, to balance member states' national and common EU interests, and short-term approaches (see ILUCIDARE 2022) designed to unilaterally communicate positive messages about the EU, against long-term dialogue and cooperation efforts that consider local contexts and needs (see Dâmaso 2021).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1.) Approach cultural heritage diplomacy through dialogue.** In heritage diplomacy, cultural heritage should be understood as a contact zone of people-to-people connectivity, reciprocal cooperation, and mutual trust. Both governmental and non-governmental actors can appropriate and use cultural heritage to enable encounters within and between heritage

communities. Meaningful encounters require dialogue between participants based on sensitivity towards difference, empathy, an appreciation of different types of knowledge, and active listening. Heritage diplomacy based on dialogue is not restricted to harmonious relations but may acknowledge controversies and dissonance in cultural heritage. Active listening to and involvement of less powerful actors has the potential to create social cohesion and cultural reconciliation on a European and global scale (Turunen and Kaasik-Krogerus 2023).

**2.) Emphasize democratic principles as key for heritage diplomacy.** A good prerequisite for heritage diplomacy is adherence to democratic principles that draw on the respect for fundamental freedoms and differing opinions, the rule of law, citizen participation, accountability, and transparency. Such principles facilitate non-hierarchical relationships between people and make dialogue work between states, entities, or communities in order to address global issues such as human rights, gender equality, social justice, sustainability, and the environment.

**3.) Recognize the link between EU external and internal relations in heritage diplomacy.** EU heritage initiatives, such as the European Heritage Label, provide a useful arena for dialogue, people-to-people connectivity, and reciprocal cooperation between and within heritage communities in Europe and beyond.

## AUTHORS

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