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Regional Public Diplomacy in Southeast Europe: Soft Power, Integration, and Institutional Cooperation

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Abstract
This study examines the challenges of constructing a coherent regional identity in Southeast Europe (SEE), a region rich in cultural heritage but marked by persistent fragmentation. Despite shared historical and cultural assets, ethnic divisions, post-1990s conflicts, external influences, and uneven economic development hinder the projection of a unified international image. Using a qualitative and comparative approach, the research explores how coordinated public diplomacy could strengthen regional cooperation and improve external perceptions. The analysis draws on soft power theory, comparative regional models, and interviews with foreign affairs officials, communication experts, and cultural practitioners. The findings reveal that fragmented historical narratives, weak coordination, and reliance on external actors constrain the development of a shared regional voice. In contrast, stronger regional ownership, coordinated cultural policies, and expanded cross-border initiatives could significantly enhance regional coherence, visibility, and cooperation.

Keywords
Southeast Europe; Regional Identity; International Affairs; Soft Power; Regional Cooperation; Cultural Policy; Cross-Border Initiatives

INTRODUCTION

Although Southeast Europe has a rich history, it lacks a coherent international identity. Its external image remains strongly influenced by the turbulent events of the post-1990s period, which continue to shape perceptions of the region.

The region reflects multiple interpretations of history and identity, making it a microcosm of Europe's diversity. Despite shared cultural and historical ties, the 13 Southeast European (SEE) countries are not perceived as a unified regional actor, unlike the Nordic countries (Bard, pers. comm., October 1, 2025) or the Visegrad Group. This absence of a shared identity has reinforced divisions between "self" and "other," sometimes exploited for political purposes, and has weakened cooperation in culture, tourism, and shared narratives. Addressing this challenge requires stronger communication strategies and cross-border cultural policies aimed at building trust and visibility.

According to Bard, a sustainable communication strategy must involve foreign ministries or central institutions and engage public diplomacy experts, civil society, academia, and business actors (Bard, pers. comm., October 1, 2025). Building on this perspective, this study explores how fragmentation in SEE could be transformed into a foundation for regional public diplomacy through digital tools and media, as well as influence in education, the arts, sports, and culture.

There is limited academic work focused on regional diplomatic cohesion in SEE. Most research emphasizes nationalist politics and internal fragmentation rather than collective

external positioning. As Mujanović, Vračić, and Armakolas note, "the collective marginal status of the Western Balkans presents relatively uniform problems for all regional capitals" (2021, 3). This study, therefore, situates the Western Balkans within a broader SEE framework, arguing that regional cooperation across SEE is more effective than fragmented subregional approaches, particularly for countries still outside full EU integration.

Diplomacy in the Western Balkans remains constrained by politicization and internal divisions. Mujanović, Vračić, and Armakolas (2021) highlight that diplomacy often cannot overcome entrenched political conflicts, while Pusić (2021, 10) notes that foreign policy remains highly centralized in the hands of political elites, limiting broader forms of diplomatic engagement. However, partial diplomatic progress indicates that change is possible, especially when driven by non-state actors. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, should shift away from nationalist narratives toward cooperation, creativity, and reform-oriented storytelling (Ćerimagić, pers. comm., June 12, 2025). As Pusić also argues, "What is missing is a livelier, more intense communication among the countries of the region, both those inside and outside of the EU" (2021, 11). Strengthening networks, joint projects, and coordinated leadership is essential for building a stronger regional image.

This study examines how SEE's fragmented public diplomacy narrative has been shaped by external dependence and weak coordination. It proposes flexible regional strategies based on comparative models such as the Nordic Council and the Visegrad Group, emphasizing the need for a unified but adaptable regional public diplomacy framework. Policy recommendations include joint external cultural policies, cross-cultural platforms, and decentralized cooperation structures supported by regional ownership and EU programs.

Initial findings suggest that fragmentation stems from competing historical narratives, inconsistent branding, and extensive external influence from various actors. However, existing EU-funded initiatives, digital platforms, and educational and cultural programs offer underutilized potential for cooperation. As Ćerimagić notes, shared post-conflict experiences and a common aspiration toward Europe provide a strong foundation for regional initiatives (Ćerimagić, pers. comm., June 12, 2025). By conceptualizing SEE as a potential collective actor, this study contributes to research on post-conflict regional diplomacy and advances the concept of regional public diplomacy (RPD). It argues that shifting from state-centered diplomacy toward more decentralized, networked public diplomacy can strengthen both regional cohesion and international visibility. Ultimately, the study provides a foundation for future policy development and empirical research on how SEE can more effectively project soft power in international affairs.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach to investigate the feasibility of developing a Common Regional Public Diplomacy (CRPD) strategy in Southeast Europe (SEE), drawing on foundational concepts and empirical examples. The research integrates conceptual inquiry, comparative case studies, and expert interviews to examine how smaller or fragmented states can collaborate to enhance their visibility and soft power. The primary objective is exploratory, aiming to develop theoretical frameworks rather than to validate existing hypotheses or recommend specific policies. As a fundamentally conceptual and exploratory

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inquiry, this study uses expert interviews to contextualize and illustrate proposed frameworks rather than to establish a primary empirical dataset.

The inquiry begins by examining Southeast Europe's vulnerable position as a recipient of soft power. It then compares two reference models: the Nordic Council and the Visegrad Group. This comparative analysis identifies transferable practices that may be adapted for joint regional diplomacy. These findings inform the development of CRPD as a theoretical framework for cooperative regional diplomacy.

To support the conceptual analysis and enrich the argument, seven semi-structured expert interviews were conducted between June and October 2025 (see Appendix A). Interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling method based on professional networks, institutional directories, and publicly available profiles. Selected participants held positions in diplomacy, communication, or regional cooperation. These areas of expertise reflect key dimensions of public diplomacy practice. This approach ensured a diversity of institutional roles while maintaining relevance to the study's objectives. While these interviews provide contextual and interpretive insights, they do not serve as the primary empirical foundation. Instead, they offer expert perspectives on regional dynamics, institutional challenges, and opportunities for cooperation, thereby enriching understanding, linking theory to practice, and clarifying issues within a relatively underexplored field.

The interviews emphasize informed observations rather than statistically representative data. Their integration serves three principal purposes:

- Contextualization, situating conceptual arguments within current regional realities.
- Illustration, providing expert support and detail for theoretical claims.
- Agenda-setting, identifying gaps, priorities, and directions for future empirical research and policy experimentation.

In addition to qualitative interviews and conceptual analysis, the study incorporates selected quantitative indicators to contextualize regional dynamics and assess the feasibility of a Common Regional Public Diplomacy (CRPD) framework. These indicators include EU participation levels in EU-funded cultural and educational exchange programs (such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and RYCO), as well as regional public opinion data related to European identity, trust in institutions, and regional cooperation. While these indicators are not used for causal inference, they provide complementary empirical evidence that strengthens the study's analytical foundation and helps illustrate broader regional trends. These data sources are compared with the Nordic and Visegrad models, with particular attention to institutional continuity, strategic vision, and participatory mechanisms.

Together, these methods form a clear qualitative and exploratory framework that connects conceptual analysis with practical insights. The approach recognizes that scholarship on regional public diplomacy in SEE remains in its early stages and aims to lay the groundwork for future empirical and policy-oriented research, thereby enhancing both theoretical understanding and practical avenues for cooperation.

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SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS, ADVANCES, AND STRATEGIC APPLICATIONS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Joseph S. Nye's (2004) theory of soft power underpins many studies that examine how culture, political values, and foreign policy can attract and influence others without coercion or payment. Nye (2011, 7) states that "power does not necessarily lead to influence, but outcomes are more important," highlighting the significance of strategy, credibility, and context. Jan Melissen (2005) describes public diplomacy as the way states engage with foreign publics to shape perceptions and build long-term relationships. This definition directly relates to Nye's concept of soft power as a practical means of generating attraction and influence. Melissen also notes that "public diplomacy is the instrument used by states to mobilize soft power resources" (2005, 11). Consequently, if countries in Southeast Europe do not cooperate in projecting and mobilizing such resources, they risk remaining vulnerable to external influences from actors such as China and Russia, which do not necessarily share the EU's objectives in the region.

Nicholas J. Cull and Jan Melissen have played a central role in shaping both theoretical and practical approaches to soft power and public engagement. Melissen's The New Public Diplomacy (2005) introduces the concept of "networked diplomacy," in which the distinction between foreign and domestic audiences becomes increasingly blurred and non-state actors assume a greater role. Cull (2019) builds on this perspective by conceptualizing public diplomacy as an interactive and complex process rather than a one-way instrument of persuasion. His model, "Five Core Components of Public Diplomacy" (2019), includes listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. These contributions shift public diplomacy away from persuasion alone toward mutual understanding and dialogue. Cull (2019) emphasizes credibility, authenticity, and narrative as essential to effective communication and recognizes that networks and individuals play a key role in shaping global narratives. He also highlights the growing importance of media, cinema, and popular culture in the digital age. Taken together, their work reflects a shift from hierarchical models of diplomacy toward more inclusive, horizontally structured approaches in a multipolar world, offering important frameworks for states and regions seeking to enhance their soft power.

Building on these frameworks, this paper proposes a Common Regional Public Diplomacy (CRPD) approach to examine how regional groupings of smaller states might collaborate to address challenges related to visibility, credibility, and resources. The volume Histories of Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Nordic and Baltic Countries (Clerc, Glover, and Jordan, 2015) provides empirical examples of similar cooperative identity-building. Browning (2015) notes that Nordic small-state identity has often depended on collaboration rather than purely national strategies. Meanwhile, Glover (2015) and Clerc (2015) describe Nordic institutional cooperation that has projected a unified external image, later reinforced by initiatives such as The Nordics (2016) and Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017). Although these examples are not explicitly labeled as CRPD, they demonstrate that coordinated regional identity-building functions as a form of joint public diplomacy (Bard, pers. comm., October 1, 2025).

The innovative aspect of this approach is the reconceptualization of public diplomacy not merely as an activity conducted by individual states or large entities, but as a coordinated effort among culturally and geographically proximate states that identify shared interests, pool

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resources, and promote a common identity. Unlike competitive national branding or EU-level diplomacy, CRPD is developed collaboratively, encouraging shared narratives, joint cultural diplomacy, and cross-border soft power synergies. Such strategies are evident in the Nordic Council, the Visegrad Group, EU cultural diplomacy, and various Asian regional initiatives, demonstrating that cooperative approaches are increasingly shaping contemporary soft power practices.

In this regard, these theoretical perspectives form the basis for the Common Regional Public Diplomacy (CRPD) framework proposed in this study. By positioning CRPD as a bridge between soft power theory and region-building practice, this paper organizes the fragmented discussions on small-state diplomacy, cooperative branding, and cultural networks. This approach clarifies that the primary objective is not to generate additional models, but to develop a specific form of regional public diplomacy tailored to Southeast Europe's post-conflict and post-integration context.

Anholt (2020) argues that a trustworthy national image emerges from consistent, principled, and cooperative action, with a nation behaving as a "good country." In Southeast Europe, collaboration in public and cultural diplomacy reflects the kind of principled cooperation that Anholt identifies as essential for building trust and credibility. CRPD embodies this idea by collectively framing culture, arts, and heritage as regional assets while translating shared values into consistent, meaningful action beyond mere messaging. This aligns with Anholt's concept of "Place Branding 2.0," or the "diplomacy of deeds," in which sustained cooperation enables a region to demonstrate its value externally and develop a more coherent image. Despite these conceptual overlaps, the existing literature lacks a clear theoretical definition of (common) regional public diplomacy appropriate to the Southeast European context and capable of contributing first to the "regional commons" and ultimately to the "global commons," ensuring that it responds to the "real needs of people and planet" (Anholt, 2020).

Many Southeast European societies are already interconnected through mobility, family ties, and cultural exchange; however, as one senior analyst notes, there remains a lack of political will to formalize these connections (Ćerimagić, pers. comm., June 12, 2025). Rather than relying on externally driven, donor-funded initiatives, the region requires locally owned efforts that highlight its shared cultural richness and resilience. Power derives from strong institutions and strategic partnerships. Anholt (2013) argues that responsible governments should monitor global perceptions and cultivate reputations that reflect the values of their societies—a governance capacity that is increasingly essential in the twenty-first century. Through such collaboration, Southeast European countries can strengthen their collective voice, promote domestic unity and reconciliation, and build a shared, forward-looking identity that supports long-term peace and European Union integration.

THE BALKANS AS A SOFT POWER BATTLEGROUND: BETWEEN RECEPTION AND ALIGNMENT

Existing literature suggests that Southeast Europe, particularly the Western Balkans, often receives soft power from external actors such as the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey rather than generating substantial soft power of its own (Rrustemi, de Wijk, Dunlop, Perovska, and Palushi, 2019; Polović, 2023; Vascotto, 2024).

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The European Union (EU) remains the primary influential actor in the region, with the greatest potential to engage effectively despite internal challenges (Nielsen, 2013). However, it is often perceived as "unappealing" (Leonard, 2022) and faces competition from other external actors (Juska, 2024). Several Southeast European countries are not yet EU members, but their cultural, historical, and political resources represent important soft power assets. For these states, alignment with the EU is strategic, as it serves as the main economic, political, and geographic anchor. Surveys indicate that young people, particularly in non-EU countries, tend to trust EU institutions more than their own national institutions (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024). However, in fragile democracies, European values are sometimes perceived as externally imposed. Scholars therefore emphasize the need for the EU to engage with diverse knowledge traditions, including perspectives from regions such as Southeast Europe, in order to revitalize Europe's democratic culture (Nicolaïdis and Youngs, 2023).

Since the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the United States has played a significant role in the region. However, it has largely positioned the EU as the leading actor, given its geographic proximity and enlargement agenda. As Dragaš (2021) notes, the European path has become excessively prolonged, linked to the broader goal of full Balkan integration into both the EU and NATO, longstanding priorities of U.S. foreign policy. The current U.S. administration places greater emphasis on hard power, economic pressure, and military strength rather than soft power (Shea, 2025), thereby shifting increasing responsibility for democratic promotion onto Europe. Nevertheless, the EU can still draw lessons from the U.S. model, particularly its emphasis on pluralism and civic engagement, as well as its integration of state and non-state actors. While the United States has historically promoted liberal democracy and innovation globally, its soft power influence varies considerably, especially amid renewed prioritization of hard power.

Other global actors also shape the region, contributing to a competitive soft power environment. China, Turkey, and Russia each apply distinct approaches to public diplomacy (Didović, 2024). Chinese influence is primarily exercised through infrastructure diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative, providing rapid capital and visibility that can generate long-term dependencies. Its engagement includes media partnerships, sister-city agreements, medical assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and investments in 5G and surveillance technologies, all of which have strengthened local relationships (Didović, 2024).

Turkey exerts influence through culture, religion, education, and economic engagement, framed by foreign policy concepts such as "Neo-Ottomanism" and "strategic depth" (Davutoğlu, 2001). It operates through a network of institutions, including Diyanet, TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, YTB, and the Maarif Foundation, which serve as important instruments of public diplomacy, cultural outreach, educational cooperation, and development assistance. Kirişçi and Dema (2005; 2009; 2023) examine the interplay of identity politics and geopolitics, while Güzeldere (2021) notes a shift toward economic and defense cooperation that fosters longer-term dependencies.

Russia's influence is more selective and identity-based. McBride (2023) cites EU security analyst Stanislav Secrieru, who argues that Putin views the Balkans as strategically important in opposing a U.S.-led unipolar order and promoting a multipolar global system. Russia seeks to limit NATO and EU expansion and maintain access to the Mediterranean. However, its soft power remains constrained and relies primarily on historical, religious, and linguistic ties rather

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than broad universal appeal. Kulalić (2021) argues that Russia's strategy in the former Yugoslav space leverages shared history and cultural affinity in the context of limited Western engagement, although its economic presence remains relatively weak.

These overlapping external influences create a fragmented soft power environment, positioning the Western Balkans as an arena of geopolitical competition and reducing opportunities for coordinated regional outreach (Aspen Institute, 2023, 3). PR expert Néveri Varagya argues that strategic communication, by emphasizing regional strengths and shared narratives, can foster unity while respecting diversity (pers. comm., June 17, 2025). Cross and Melissen (2013) find that effective multilateral diplomacy requires a shared goal and identity supported by both national and supranational narratives. Such coordinated projection by Southeast European countries, alongside EU alignment, can also enhance the EU's global image and internal legitimacy. The EU integration process thus provides tools for fostering sustainable cooperation in foreign policy and establishing a two-way, flexible, and enduring form of public diplomacy amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

UNMUTING THE PERIPHERY: PATHWAYS FROM MARGINALIZATION TO INFLUENCE

It is impossible to discuss the image of these states and of Southeast Europe without recognizing that they are part of a shared European space, community, and cultural mix. However, the European peace project, despite its theoretical and practical limitations, currently faces more challenges than ever. As Leonard (2022) notes, the war in Ukraine highlights internal contradictions within the EU. Its lack of strategic unity and military capacity exposes both security vulnerabilities and a deeper crisis of soft power.

Although Europe's collective identity remains underdeveloped and largely grounded in normative ideals, the EU is often hesitant in practice, oscillating between essentialist and constructivist understandings of identity. Critics have described the EU as "a power of the past" (Baumler, 2019, 5). One key challenge lies in its "open-door" approach, which has resulted in no substantial enlargement since Croatia's accession. Leonard (2022) further argues that the EU often universalizes its own historical experience, neglecting the political and social contexts of other societies. This disconnect is evident in Serbia, where EU efforts to support Pride events were perceived locally not as democratic progress but as an externally imposed agenda (Eror, 2022, 12). A similar disconnect emerged during the mass student protests and the largest demonstrations in Serbia's modern history following the November 1, 2024, Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse, which killed 16 people. Citizens demanded accountability and democratic standards that the EU itself promotes for candidate countries, yet their struggle received limited visible support from European institutions. Together, these cases reveal a broader contradiction in the EU's approach: promoting democratic standards as conditional requirements for governments while often failing to engage meaningfully with societies actively defending those same values.

The *acquis communautaire* is widely perceived in Southeast Europe more as a rigid constraint than as a pathway to prosperity. North Macedonia illustrates this frustration: despite resolving its name dispute with Greece, a Bulgarian veto has delayed accession talks, and public support for EU enlargement has declined. Disillusionment has become increasingly widespread (König, 2025, par. 5). For many, the EU's soft power lacks cultural sensitivity and is often

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perceived as operating from a "we know what is best for you" perspective that overlooks local identity and pride. Rather than addressing these complexities, Brussels is frequently seen as treating Balkan cultures as problems to be managed. König (2025) further argues that conditionality has not produced meaningful reform in vulnerable post-conflict contexts, thereby allowing anti-Western narratives to gain ground. To address this, the EU would need to adopt what Leonard (2022, par. 12) describes as a "sovereignty-friendly" model of soft power based on two-way communication.

EU programs such as Creative Europe (European Commission, 2023) support art, music, and film projects that promote a shared European identity while including Western Balkan countries. However, as Vos (2022) notes, disparities in social and financial conditions often limit meaningful participation, particularly in Southeast Europe, where many cultural organizations face instability. Similarly, Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe promote educational diplomacy, but structural barriers remain: students from wealthier backgrounds tend to benefit more, funding disbursements are often delayed, and students with disabilities remain underrepresented (Zuil, Ojeda, and Gjergji, 2022). Top EU member states alone account for approximately 1.5–2+ million mobilities, highlighting a significant participation gap compared to Western Balkan countries (European Union, Publications Office of the EU, 2026). Western Balkan countries participate as partner countries, with mobility largely dependent on project-based schemes rather than full system integration. Researchers from EU-13 countries are also less engaged in Horizon Europe and related research and development programs (Petri, 2024), reflecting broader structural inequalities in EU-funded initiatives.

Nevertheless, under the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 framework, the first two programming cycles alone generated more than 887 projects involving over 141 universities across the Western Balkans, enabling mobility opportunities for more than 20,000 students and staff (Western Balkans InfoHub, 2024). These developments suggest that cross-border educational and societal networks are already emerging as practical foundations for deeper regional cooperation.

An experienced diplomat has identified a regional gap: universities lack coordinated networks, student mobility remains limited, and joint scholarship schemes in Southeast Europe are rare. Similarly, cultural and tourism initiatives that promote shared heritage are insufficiently coordinated (Meksi, pers. comm., September 5, 2025). The aim of deeper regionalism is not to move away from EU frameworks but to strengthen regional understanding and connectivity within Southeast Europe.

Even official diplomacy reflects limited regional cooperation. Western Balkan diplomats often struggle to gain visibility and international support, which constrains their ability to act beyond narrowly defined national interests (Bushati, 2021, 5).

Despite these constraints, the 2024 Balkan Barometer survey indicates that trust in regional cooperation in the Western Balkans reached a record high of 82%, while 69% of respondents agreed that what unites the region is more important than what divides it (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024). These findings suggest growing public openness to regional connectivity and cooperation.

In a context of increasing skepticism toward EU accession, only about 20% of Western Balkan citizens expect EU membership by 2030, while 23% anticipate accession between 2030 and 2035 (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024). Respondents also perceive nationalist politics as

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a greater barrier to regional cooperation than historical or ethnic divisions. In addition, belief in the economic benefits of EU membership has declined for the second consecutive year, falling by 8 percentage points since 2021 (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024). These trends underscore the need to strengthen regional public diplomacy in order to rebuild trust and sustain support for integration processes.

In this context, the EU could strengthen both its narrative and presence while enabling Southeast European countries to develop culturally sensitive and context-appropriate policies. A senior Western Balkan diplomat confirmed that there is currently no joint regional public diplomacy framework. Activities remain largely limited to national "cultural weeks," with few collaborative initiatives (Anonymous, pers. comm., September 18, 2025).

A Strategic Communication Officer has noted that existing initiatives, such as WEBalkan, WE4Schools, WE4Culture, EU4Innovation, EU4Youth, the Western Balkans Fund, RYCO, and IPA III, provide a useful foundation for coordination (Nuri, pers. comm., June 13, 2025). However, meaningful change must begin internally: small states with limited resources cannot successfully navigate regional challenges in isolation. Another interviewee emphasized the need for formal coordination structures, shared funding mechanisms, flagship projects, and effective monitoring systems (Meksi, pers. comm., September 5, 2025).

Unified institutional platforms could move the region beyond fragmented, ad hoc diplomacy. Such a shift would also strengthen multilateralism, which, as Garčević (2021, 8) argues, represents "a great opportunity for less powerful actors, since in restrictive environments they have fewer foreign-policy options and less successful outcomes."

NORDIC–VISEGRAD LESSONS FOR REGIONAL PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Currently, external cultural cooperation in Southeast Europe (SEE) takes place through regional exchanges supported by EU programs, bilateral agreements, and cultural networks, despite the absence of a unified regional cultural strategy. As a foreign relations expert notes (Dervishi, pers. comm., June 6, 2025), countries in the region could strengthen both national branding and a shared regional narrative by developing joint initiatives that are locally and structurally grounded, regionally cohesive, and globally oriented.

To systematize the comparison with the Nordic and Visegrad models, this section adopts a structured analytical framework consisting of three dimensions: institutional continuity, funding mechanisms, and cultural branding and strategic communication capacity.

Public spending on culture in the Western Balkans is low and remains vulnerable to further reductions following the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there is strong interest among cultural actors in regional cooperation, limited support mechanisms, restricted mobility opportunities, and fragmented capacity-building efforts constrain collaboration. This is compounded by weak institutional and policy development in the cultural sector, including insufficient training and uneven implementation of integrated cultural policies (UNESCO, 2023). While examples of bilateral cultural cooperation agreements exist between Croatia and Slovenia, Albania and Montenegro, and Serbia and North Macedonia, important limitations remain. As one interviewee noted, EU-driven reforms in more critical sectors have absorbed most resources and expertise, leaving the cultural sector with limited funding and capacity. As a result, many countries in the region, particularly in the Western Balkans, have struggled to transform cultural

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sites and heritage into meaningful spaces for connection, transformation, and joint initiatives (Anonymous, pers. comm., September 18, 2025). This reflects weak institutional continuity, as cultural diplomacy initiatives remain project-based rather than embedded in permanent regional structures.

Compared with the Nordic and Visegrad models, developments in the Western Balkans reveal significant structural shortcomings when assessed across the framework's three dimensions (see Table 1). Initiatives such as the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport (European Commission, 2024), the Ministerial Platform on Culture (European Commission, 2022), the working meetings of the Ministers of Culture of the Western Balkans (Gov.si, 2025), the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), and other regional mechanisms demonstrate an openness to cooperation. However, these initiatives remain institutionally fragmented and heavily dependent on EU or donor funding, lacking the continuity of permanent intergovernmental structures such as the Nordic Council (1952), the Nordic Council of Ministers (1971), and the International Visegrad Fund (1999). As the Regional Cooperation Council's own strategic documents emphasize, its mandate is primarily coordination and facilitation, with activities largely financed through EU instruments and donors (e.g., IPA III), and without a permanent intergovernmental body or a consolidated regional budget comparable to the Nordic Council/Nordic Council of Ministers or the International Visegrad Fund (Regional Cooperation Council, Strategy and Work Programme 2023–2025; Regional Cooperation Council, SEE2030 Strategy).

The Western Balkans Fund (WBF) provides grants for culture, youth, and civil society; however, it still relies significantly on external co-financing, particularly through EU-supported actions and donor partnerships (Western Balkans Fund, EU–WBF Report, 2023; Western Balkans Fund website). In terms of funding mechanisms, this stands in sharp contrast to the Visegrad Fund's autonomous and predictable financing model, which is financed almost entirely by its member states through mandatory annual contributions (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), thereby ensuring long-term planning capacity and programmatic stability.

Agendas in the Western Balkans remain fragmented, and initiatives in culture, media, and youth operate in isolation without a unifying strategic framework. There is no coordinated narrative that links these sectoral initiatives into a coherent regional public diplomacy approach or embeds them within a shared foreign policy vision. The EU has developed an extensive policy toolbox for cooperation in the Western Balkans, covering innovation, research, education, culture, youth, and sport, with the aim of accelerating convergence and enabling full access to the European Research Area and the European Innovation Agenda (European Commission, 2024). In practice, these instruments constitute the primary financial backbone for regional initiatives through EU-led co-financing. At the same time, the region still lacks domestically anchored, permanent intergovernmental structures capable of sustaining a unified public diplomacy and cultural cooperation agenda across political cycles. In contrast, both the Nordic and Visegrad models demonstrate integrated branding systems that align cultural diplomacy with broader strategic communication objectives.

The Western Balkans is further constrained by persistent political disputes, such as those between Kosovo and Serbia, and between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, which weaken regional cohesion and hinder unified external positioning. Even citizen-centered initiatives such as RYCO or Culture Moves Europe remain limited in scale, preventing the emergence of a strong

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regional identity. However, as one interviewee observed (Meksi, pers. comm., September 5, 2025), given limited institutional capacity, progress requires starting with willing partners and gradually expanding cooperation.

In this regard, the European External Action Service (EEAS) or the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) could convene regional diplomatic services and relevant stakeholders to develop a unified vision for cultural cooperation and strategic image-building. As another interviewee notes, the RCC has both the capacity and legitimacy to coordinate such efforts, complemented by academia, civil society, public broadcasters, and diaspora networks (Ćerimagić, pers. comm., June 12, 2025). However, the RCC currently lacks a formal public diplomacy strategy; its communication activities are embedded within the SEE 2030 Strategy and the Work Programme 2023–2025, which focus primarily on economic growth, connectivity, and governance rather than structured cultural diplomacy (RCC, 2022; 2023).

The Visegrad Group (V4) and the Nordic countries offer contrasting models of flexible public diplomacy cooperation. When assessed through the proposed framework, the Nordic model scores highest in institutional continuity, funding autonomy, and branding integration, while the V4 demonstrates medium institutional continuity but strong flexibility and cultural cooperation capacity. As Strážay and Terem (2025, 45) note, "In more than 30 years of its existence, the V4 has proved its durability, flexibility, and versatility," which has also influenced public opinion. In addition, public awareness of the V4 increased across all member states between 2016 and 2021 (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2016).

The Visegrad Group (V4) is an informal cooperation framework among Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, grounded in shared historical experiences and cultural ties. It engages in joint public diplomacy and demonstrates that political diversity does not preclude coordinated external communication. The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) serves as its main instrument, financing cross-border cultural, educational, and youth initiatives while ensuring external visibility through coordinated messaging. The rotating presidency further contributes to policy continuity and institutional adaptability (Gov.pl, 2024). As noted, "Visegrad Cooperation has become a globally known brand" (Hungarian Presidency of the V4, 2021/22). Although it comprises only four countries, "the V4 helped amplify the region's voice in the EU, also through the V4+ format with third countries or even groups of countries" (Strážay and Terem, 2025, 41).

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) represent a more advanced model of institutionalized regional public diplomacy, coordinated through the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. Their model is characterized by strong institutional continuity, stable funding, and a unified branding strategy under "The Nordic Region – Together," which integrates diplomacy, communication, and sustainability objectives aligned with Agenda 2030 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). In addition, both the Nordic and Visegrad frameworks maintain joint educational and training platforms that strengthen cultural diplomacy ecosystems. Examples include the Visegrad School of Political Studies, the Visegrad Academy of Cultural Diplomacy, heritage-focused training programs, and Nordic educational and research cooperation structures that support capacity-building and policy dialogue.

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Table 1: Comparing Nordic and Visegrad Cooperation Models and SEE Gaps (Source: Author's elaboration)

CATEGORY	Western Balkans/SEE	Visegrad Group (V4)	Nordic Cooperation
MEMBERS	WB6 + broader SEE initiatives	Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden
INSTITUTIONALIZATION	Fragmented initiatives; mostly project-based	Informal political cooperation with one permanent instrument	Highly institutionalized regional governance
KEY INSTITUTIONS	RCC, RYCO, Western Balkans Fund, Ministerial Platforms	International Visegrad Fund (1999), rotating presidency	Nordic Council (1952), Nordic Council of Ministers (1971)
FUNDING MODEL	Strong reliance on EU or donor funding	Jointly funded regional fund with external partnerships	Stable intergovernmental budget funded by member states
PUBLIC / CULTURAL DIPLOMACY TOOLS	Cultural exchanges, youth programs, and ad-hoc initiatives	Cultural grants, scholarships, embassy cooperation, and joint events	Coordinated regional branding and cultural diplomacy networks
STRATEGIC NARRATIVE	No unified regional communication strategy	Flexible cooperation and shared Central European identity	Strong shared identity and strategic branding ("Nordic Region Together")
EDUCATION & TRAINING PLATFORMS	Limited regional capacity-building	Visegrad School of Political Studies, cultural diplomacy trainings	Extensive Nordic policy, education, and research networks
EXTERNAL VISIBILITY	Limited global branding	Growing "Visegrad" geopolitical and cultural brand	Strong international "Nordic model" brand
GOVERNANCE STYLE	Sectoral and fragmented	Flexible and politically driven	Institutionalized and policy-coordinated

As Bard (pers. comm., October 1, 2025) notes, Southeast European countries share commonalities that could support a joint communication platform or a regional branding strategy, beginning at the subregional level. Applying the comparative framework suggests that incremental institutionalization, starting with flexible cooperation and gradually developing funding stability and branding coherence, would be the most viable pathway toward a unified Southeast European public diplomacy model.

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CONCLUSION

The Southeast European region represents a unique crossroads of civilizations, shaped by a blend of cultures, religions, and historical experiences. This diversity can serve as a valuable resource for regional cooperation and broader European engagement when framed through shared narratives of mutual recognition and common interests. However, this study demonstrates that significant structural and communicative barriers continue to limit the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts by both the European Union and Southeast Europe (SEE). On the EU side, ongoing challenges in projecting a clear and unified external message undermine the credibility and consistency of its democratic communication. Divergent national interests within the Union often fragment strategic communication, reducing the EU's ability to effectively promote liberal democratic values and sustain engagement in its neighborhood.

At the same time, SEE states face limitations stemming from weak intra-regional coordination, even in areas such as strategic communication, the arts, youth engagement, and cultural diplomacy, where shared historical and social ties could otherwise foster cooperation and trust.

These limitations are becoming increasingly significant in a context of heightened geopolitical competition, in which external actors actively exploit informational and cultural spaces to expand their influence. The absence of coordinated soft power projection within the region not only reduces visibility but also undermines democratic resilience, institutional credibility, and the ability of SEE actors to define their own international positioning. A clearer, values-based model of Common Regional Public Diplomacy (CRPD) could strengthen regional cooperation and promote democracy-supporting norms, while enhancing the region's capacity for proactive engagement in international affairs.

Importantly, the study highlights that effective public diplomacy in SEE requires a more dialogical and participatory EU approach that engages with local identities rather than standardizing them. A rigid, universal framework risks undermining legitimacy and reinforcing perceptions of inequality. In contrast, an approach grounded in cultural diversity can better support democratic inclusion, soft power credibility, and long-term stability.

While this research conceptualizes CRPD as a meso-level analytical framework linking national and supranational diplomacy, it remains exploratory in nature. Key limitations include a relatively small sample size, a focus primarily on elite and expert interviews, and a lack of comprehensive regional data on cultural diplomacy outcomes, cooperation patterns, and identity formation processes. As a result, grassroots perceptions and broader societal dynamics in SEE are not fully captured.

Future research should address these gaps through more diverse methodological approaches, including larger and more representative regional surveys that incorporate civil society actors, cultural practitioners, local stakeholders, as well as diplomatic and institutional representatives. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for tracing changes in cooperation patterns and perceptions of public diplomacy over time. In addition, the development of standardized indicators for regional cooperation, cultural exchange intensity, and subregional image formation would enable more systematic comparative analysis. Mixed-method research designs combining qualitative fieldwork with quantitative regional data would further enhance analytical depth and policy relevance.

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In summary, CRPD has the potential to contribute to strengthening cooperation, governance quality, democratic resilience, and positive subregional engagement within the evolving European and international context.

Smaller states are encouraged to adopt a streamlined, professional, and strategically oriented approach to diplomacy, emphasizing decentralized and value-based models to enhance their international outreach and adaptability. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) should develop a Regional Strategy for Soft Power and Public Diplomacy for 2025–2035, aligned with the SEE 2030 Strategy, in order to strengthen cultural diplomacy, promote regional identity, counter external authoritarian narratives, and complement EU public diplomacy efforts. This initiative requires close cooperation between the ministries of foreign affairs and the ministries of culture, alongside capacity-building measures, youth engagement, and sustained EU support. In addition, governments in Southeast Europe should strengthen ties with diaspora communities as a key soft power resource, in order to cultivate positive narratives about the region, challenge existing stereotypes, and enhance international visibility through diaspora-led projects and cooperative initiatives.

To design an effective joint cultural strategy and communication plan, the process can be structured into three key steps: assessing the region's current profile, defining priorities and country readiness, and developing a shared communication platform. To ensure that the framework is operational and measurable, it is complemented by indicators for Common Regional Public Diplomacy, such as the number of joint initiatives, levels of participation, and international visibility outcomes.

Step 1 involves conducting a comprehensive analysis of how each country, as well as the region as a whole, is perceived internationally, alongside an assessment of its actual cultural and diplomatic strengths. If no shared strengths are identified across all 13 countries, subregional groupings may be considered. This step can be assessed through indicators such as the number of perception studies conducted, comparative regional analyses produced, and the identification of shared cultural assets.

Step 2 focuses on selecting which strengths and similarities should be emphasized externally and identifying the most relevant target audiences abroad. The number of joint measures can help to prioritize narratives or cultural themes, identify target groups, and establish a shared regional branding framework.

Step 3 involves the development of a joint platform and communication strategy. A key pillar focuses on shared cultural heritage and collective memory, including digital archives, cross-border restoration projects, and an annual "Shared Histories Week," aimed at strengthening regional identity and positioning Southeast Europe as a space of reconciliation. Progress can be measured through the number of joint heritage projects, the scale of digitized cultural materials, and participation rates in regional initiatives.

A second pillar focuses on youth engagement through exchanges, artist residencies, and collaborative creative initiatives such as Southeast Europe Youth Culture Labs, designed to foster long-term regional connections. Indicators include the number of exchanges and residencies, participation in joint cultural productions, and the sustainability of youth networks.

External visibility can be strengthened through a SEE House of Culture located in an EU capital, rotating SEE Culture Weeks, and coordinated participation in major international

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festivals. The number of international events organized can assess this dimension, the number of participating countries, and audience reach.

Capacity-building would be supported by a SEE Academy for Cultural Diplomacy and Management, developed in collaboration with EU partners, offering training in public diplomacy and cultural sector innovation. Its impact can be measured by the number of training sessions delivered, the number of professionals trained, and the number of institutional partnerships established.

Finally, a SEE Storytelling Hub would promote conflict-sensitive narratives through oral history projects, journalism, and creative productions addressing shared historical experiences. Relevant indicators include the number of co-produced outputs, oral history interviews conducted, and joint film or theatre projects developed.

CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

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APPENDIX A: EXPERT INTERVIEWS

As part of this study, seven semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with individuals with expertise in EU integration, regional governance, diplomatic relations, public diplomacy, and political developments in Southeast Europe, the Visegrad countries, and the Nordic region. The interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative insights and expert perspectives relevant to the research objectives.

Data collection took place between June and October 2025. Five interviews were conducted via written correspondence (email), one was conducted online via Zoom, and one was conducted in person. Where requested, the identities of the interviewees have been anonymized.

List of Interviewees

1. Adnan Ćerimagić
Position: Senior Analyst
Institution: European Stability Initiative (ESI)
Expertise: EU integration, Western Balkans, socioeconomic development, rule of law
Date of Interview: June 12, 2025
Mode of Interview: Written correspondence

2. Dr. Glevin Dervishi
Position: Chief, Department of International Relations and Communication Science
Institution: Albanian Armed Forces Academy
Expertise: International relations and diplomacy
Date of Interview: June 6, 2025
Mode of Interview: Written correspondence

3. Elvin Nuri
Position: Press, Information and Strategic Communication Officer
Institution: Delegation of the European Union in Albania
Expertise: Strategic communication and countering propaganda
Date of Interview: June 13, 2025
Mode of Interview: Zoom interview

4. Mgr. Szilvia Néveri Varagya, PhD
Position: Assistant Professor
Institution: Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Central European Studies
Expertise: Strategic communication and marketing
Date of Interview: June 17, 2025
Mode of Interview: Written correspondence

5. Marin Meksi, PhD
Position: Diplomat (First Secretary)
Institution: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Albania
Expertise: Regional relations, EU policy, and implementation
Date of Interview: September 5, 2025
Mode of Interview: Written correspondence

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6. Anonymous (at the request of the interviewee)
Position: Former diplomat in Bulgaria; later Head of Protocol, Ceremonial, and Public Relations
Institution: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Western Balkan country, anonymized)
Expertise: Diplomacy, protocol, ceremonial affairs, public relations, and regional cooperation practices
Date of Interview: September 18, 2025
Mode of Interview: Oral interview (questionnaire sent one week in advance)

7. Sofia Bard
Position: Head of Unit, Image of Sweden Analysis
Institution: Swedish Institute
Expertise: Image analysis and communication
Date of Interview: October 1, 2025
Mode of Interview: Written correspondence

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