

Strengthening Social Resilience Through Cultural Diplomacy at the Eastern European Union Border

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Abstract

This text is a discussion of the Inclusivity journal development project, a presentation of the institutional and academic frameworks in which it was created, and a concise justification of the main research directions that this editorial endeavor will address and promote. Inclusivity, which operates under the auspices of the EuroINCLUS Research Center, is dedicated to the advancement of knowledge in the field of EU studies and was established with the objective of disseminating information on EU-related topics to a broader audience. This initiative is poised to foster enhanced understanding and engagement between the EU and the general public, thereby strengthening the bond between the EU and its citizens. Concurrently, Inclusivity journal endeavors to adopt an analytical and synthetic approach in its pursuit to consider fundamental and specific concerns pertaining to the theorization, conceptualization, and operationalization of concepts related to identity management and minority issues, fundamental human rights, the promotion of integration processes, inclusion, intercultural education, societal security, and the societal resilience of minorities, immigrants, and refugees.

Keywords

Inclusivity, identity, minority, integration, culture, interculturalism

1. Introduction

The Romanian–Hungarian cross-border area is one of the most dynamic laboratories of intercultural cooperation in Central Europe, characterized by a shared history, mixed cultural influences, and diverse ethnic composition, particularly in Bihor County (Romania) and Hajdú-Bihar County (Hungary). This region is recognized for its model of intercultural coexistence and interethnic dialogue, shaped by centuries of cohabitation among Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Jews, Germans, and Roma (Țoca, 2013). At the same time, this border space provides a concrete context for analysing how European identity is manifested in practice,

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beyond institutional frameworks. The border is not merely a geographical line but a meeting space between multiple identities, where national, cultural, and increasingly European belonging overlap.

Following Romania's accession to the European Union, cross-border cooperation between the two states has gained institutional consolidation through joint programs such as Interreg Romania–Hungary, the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion, and the Carpathian Euroregion, which have stimulated economic, educational, and cultural exchanges (Polgár & Brie, 2025). This collaboration has been supported by local authorities and university institutions, which have become active actors in the development of regional public diplomacy. In this context, the distinction between physical and symbolic borders becomes relevant. Beyond the political and territorial Romanian–Hungarian border, the specialized literature draws attention to the existence of “invisible borders,” such as linguistic, cultural, religious, or ideological ones, which can either facilitate or hinder cooperation processes (Brie & Horga, 2014).

The Oradea–Debrecen border region represents a clear example of cultural and functional interdependence, where cooperation policies have gone beyond the formal level of partnerships and materialized in joint educational programs, cross-border infrastructure, social integration projects, and long-term cultural initiatives. In this context, cultural diplomacy does not manifest itself only through symbolic exchanges but through concrete initiatives that connect communities on both sides of the border, contributing to social cohesion and reducing local identity tensions (Stoica, 2010). Such forms of cooperation help articulate a “border European identity,” which does not exclude local identities but brings them into dialogue.

The University of Oradea, through its Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence and other academic structures, has established itself as a regional mediator and facilitator of cross-border academic cooperation, promoting educational and scientific projects focused on European identity, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue. At the same time, partnerships with institutions from Debrecen, Gyula, and Nyíregyháza demonstrate that academic diplomacy has become a central component of regional cultural diplomacy. Through these projects, universities contribute to overcoming mental and cultural borders, helping transform borders from areas of separation into areas of cooperation (Stoica & Chirodea, 2015).

This practical reality justifies the present study, in which cultural diplomacy is analyzed in action as an applied instrument in building social resilience based on proximity cooperation, cultural interdependence, and joint community projects. Ultimately, cultural diplomacy becomes a

mechanism for shaping European identity in border spaces, contributing to the reduction of tensions and the strengthening of regional cohesion.

2. Cultural diplomacy – A functional instrument in the field

Cultural diplomacy manifests itself in the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border space not merely as a theoretical concept, but as an active instrument of cohesion and collaboration between communities. It functions as a form of living dialogue, in which cultural events, educational exchanges, and institutional cooperation become channels through which European values are translated into concrete experiences. In border localities such as Oradea, Debrecen, or Gyula, cultural diplomacy represents a form of regional soft power, where culture, education, and shared traditions become bridges between groups with different identities.

A relevant example is the organization of intercultural events which, over the last decade, have moved beyond their festive dimension and gained a strategic role in strengthening mutual trust. Festivals such as the *Oradea Cultural Autumn* or the *Debrecen Flower Carnival* bring together artists, cultural organizations, and institutions from both countries every year, creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation (Stoica & Țoca, 2010). In these contexts, cultural diplomacy becomes a dual process: on the one hand, it affirms local identity, and on the other, it anchors it within a shared European framework, illustrating the concept of “identity through interaction” (Blumer, 1986).

Educational joint programs also play a significant role, developed through initiatives such as Erasmus+ or Interreg Romania–Hungary, which provide students, teachers, and young professionals with opportunities to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects. These programs not only facilitate academic mobility but also contribute to forming a generation capable of thinking and acting across borders. Thus, the University of Oradea and the University of Debrecen have become essential actors of cultural diplomacy, putting into practice a model of university cooperation based on knowledge and mutual respect (Stoica & Chirodea, 2015).

Traditional local festivals also function as spaces for intercultural encounters. Slovak communities in Șinteu, Hungarian communities in Tărian, or Romanian communities in Körösszegapáti transform these events into true laboratories of coexistence and mutual recognition, where cultural heritage becomes a vector of community diplomacy (Polgár & Brie, 2025). They illustrate how proximity-based cultural diplomacy relies on exchanging experiences and valuing diversity rather than uniformity.

Moreover, cross-border projects funded through European programs (RO-HU, Interreg) act as structural instruments for applying cultural

diplomacy. They support cultural, educational, and social activities that contribute to the sustainable development of border areas and the strengthening of community resilience. Recent examples include projects dedicated to shared heritage and social inclusion, in which local authorities, universities, and NGOs act as equal partners in building a shared European identity (European Commission, 2023). Such initiatives demonstrate that cultural diplomacy is not limited to classical diplomatic levels but is carried out "in the field," through daily cooperation and direct community involvement.

Therefore, cultural diplomacy in the Romanian–Hungarian space is shaped as a practical form of intercultural governance, capable of reducing symbolic distances and generating cross-border social capital. It transforms borders from barriers into resources and from lines of separation into axes of interaction. In a geopolitical context where identity fragmentation threatens European cohesion, these practices offer a sustainable model of social resilience through culture, in which dialogue, partnership, and trust become pillars of sustainable regional development (Tuşie, 2022).

3. The connection with social resilience

In border regions, cultural diplomacy is not limited to symbolic exchanges or the promotion of local identities in a European context; it plays an active role in strengthening the social resilience of communities. Social resilience can be understood as the capacity of a community to manage tensions, cooperate, and adapt to change while maintaining cohesion and the functioning of essential social systems (Adger, 2000). In the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border areas, where ethnic diversity and shared history can generate both opportunities for collaboration and identity-based tensions, cultural diplomacy serves as a concrete instrument for building trust and solidarity.

One of the main effects of cultural diplomacy is the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices between ethnic groups. Intercultural festivals and joint educational projects offer communities the opportunity to interact directly in a setting that values diversity and dialogue, uniting rather than dividing communities. For example, traditional events in Şinteu (the "Potato Festival"), Bihor County, allow Romanian, Hungarian, and Slovak participants to observe and appreciate each other's cultural heritage, leading to reduced negative perceptions and improved mutual understanding. Thus, culture becomes a vehicle of communication and a tool of informal education, where stereotypes are addressed through direct experience and social interaction. The active involvement of Slovak diplomacy in Şinteu for more than a decade, through the Honorary Consulate in Oradea and the Slovak ambassador in Bucharest, has led to the revival of Slovak culture by

rehabilitating an entirely Slovak village, supporting traditional Slovak activities, culinary arts, and customs in Bihor (Digi24, 2017).

A second mechanism through which cultural diplomacy contributes to social resilience is the strengthening of trust between groups. Joint activities such as Erasmus+ youth projects or university exchanges between Oradea and Debrecen create stable cross-border networks based on collaboration and reciprocity. In these contexts, participants learn to manage cultural and linguistic differences, communicate effectively, and make collective decisions, developing skills that extend to the local community level. The trust thus built between individuals and institutions becomes the foundation of social resilience, enabling communities to better face emerging crises or conflicts (Stoica & Chirodea, 2015).

Another important aspect is cross-border civic engagement. Local projects and community initiatives supported through European funding (RO-HU, Interreg) allow citizens to actively participate in community life and influence decisions related to heritage, education, or urban development (European Commission, 2023; Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme, 2023). In this way, cultural diplomacy is no longer merely a policy of symbolic exchanges but becomes a framework for social involvement, accountability, and civic participation. Communities thus gain the ability to self-govern flexibly, anticipate and manage social tensions, and build networks of mutual support.

At the same time, cultural diplomacy facilitates the preservation of identity without generating identity conflicts. Projects that promote traditional values and cultural heritage allow minorities to maintain their ethnic and linguistic identity while integrating into a wider European framework. In Oradea and Debrecen, multilingual educational programs and intercultural workshops provide clear examples of how local identity can coexist with European identity, without cultural differences becoming sources of tension. An illustrative example is the longstanding cooperation between the University of Oradea, specifically the Department of International Relations and European Studies, and the Consulate General of Romania in Gyula. These collaborations involved practical study visits for students taking courses in Foreign Policy and Diplomacy. In addition to activities at the Consulate, which took place every December before Christmas, students also joined the local Romanian community in Gyula for traditional Christmas carols, sharing Romanian culinary traditions brought from Romania.

Furthermore, the cumulative effects of these mechanisms create what the literature refers to as “social resilience through culture” (Adger, 2000; Turšić, 2022). Culture, education, and institutional cooperation form an

ecosystem that allows communities to respond quickly and effectively to socio-political and economic challenges, transform tensions into opportunities for dialogue, and build lasting bridges between ethnic groups. In this sense, cultural diplomacy is not merely a tool of symbolic representation but a real vector of development and social adaptation, capable of addressing the complexity of multiple borders—physical, symbolic, and ideological—present in the Romanian–Hungarian space.

4. Applied study: cultural diplomacy experiences observed in the EUROINCLUS project

The EUROINCLUS project offered a unique perspective on how culture, education, and the economy intersect to build bridges between communities and promote social inclusion. Through the visits and activities carried out, concrete forms of micro-cultural diplomacy were observed, where local interactions become instruments for strengthening social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. This chapter analyzes four distinct yet interconnected contexts: the Slovak community in Șinteu, the Criș Country Museum, Euro Business Park, and multilingual denominational schools.

4.1. Șinteu – Community-based cultural diplomacy

In the village of Șinteu, the event dedicated to the potato demonstrated how local traditions can function as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy. The festival was not only a culinary celebration but also a setting in which members of the community meet, share experiences, and value their cultural heritage. Participants had the opportunity to interact with visitors from other communities, building connections based on mutual respect and appreciation of cultural differences. Thus, the festival became an example of community micro-diplomacy, where local cultural identity serves as a bridge for communication and intercultural understanding (Digi24, 2017).

Șinteu village, located in Bihor County, is a remarkable example of cultural rehabilitation and preservation carried out by the Slovak community. Over the decades, Slovak inhabitants have preserved not only the traditional architecture of houses and churches but also their customs, cuisine, and language. This strong commitment to heritage has transformed the village into a living space of history and culture, where traditions are not only displayed but also practiced and passed on. The Potato Festival takes place in this context, and its organization highlights the importance of maintaining community cohesion and promoting Slovak identity within a multicultural territory (Radio România Cluj, 2024).

Events of this kind, held in a culturally active and rehabilitated village, show how both tangible and intangible heritage can become instruments of cultural diplomacy. Through active participation in the festival, visitors learn

to appreciate the community's efforts to preserve its identity, while local members reaffirm their traditions and values. Thus, Şinteu becomes not only a place of celebration but also a model of community micro-diplomacy, where local culture generates dialogue, cooperation, and intercultural respect.

4.2. The Criş Country Museum – Heritage as a space for dialogue

The next stage of the visits was the Criş Country Museum, where cultural heritage was perceived not only as historical legacy but also as a tool for education and social dialogue. The museum's exhibitions and interactive workshops offered participants the chance to experience the historical and cultural diversity of the region. In this context, heritage became a space of micro-cultural diplomacy: visitors had the opportunity to engage in dialogue about identity, values, and traditions, thus strengthening collective awareness and respect for diversity.

The Criş Country Museum in Oradea is a representative example of a cultural institution that promotes museum education and intercultural dialogue. Through the organization of permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as educational workshops, the museum facilitates public access to the history and culture of the Crişana region. These activities contribute to developing collective awareness and understanding of cultural diversity.

The museum also collaborates with educational institutions such as the University of Oradea and the Oradea School of Arts to organize events such as the "Images in Dialogue" exhibition, which promotes visual arts and dialogue between generations. In this way, the museum becomes an active space for cultural learning and exchange.

4.3. Euro Business Park – Economic cooperation supported by cultural trust

The experience at Euro Business Park highlighted how cultural relations can influence and strengthen cross-border economic cooperation. During the visits and discussions with representatives of local companies, it became clear that cultural trust is not just an abstract concept but a tangible factor that determines the success of negotiations and joint projects. Shared values, mutual respect, and an understanding of the cultural context are essential elements in building durable partnerships and reducing the risk of misunderstandings in business environments.

An important aspect of this experience was observing how economic micro-diplomacy manifests in practice. Personal relationships between entrepreneurs, park managers, and local authorities are often based on shared experiences and a high level of familiarity with the traditions, norms, and cultural customs of the partners. This intercultural awareness facilitates effective communication, increases decision-making

transparency, and generates a cooperative atmosphere in which conflicts can be prevented or resolved more easily.

Additionally, Euro Business Park serves as an example of integrating the cultural and economic dimensions of diplomacy. Joint projects are not limited to commercial exchanges but also include collaborations in vocational training, exchanges of good practices, and corporate social responsibility activities that involve the local community. Thus, culture and cultural trust become strategic resources that support sustainable development, enhance competitiveness, and consolidate social relations in the border region.

This intersection between economy and culture shows that micro-diplomacy is not limited to the symbolic or educational sphere but has concrete applications in business management and in promoting balanced regional development. Relationships based on an understanding of cultural values and practices strengthen cross-border economic networks and transform business parks into spaces of intercultural cooperation, demonstrating that economic success is closely linked to the social and cultural capital of the communities involved.

4.4. Multilingual denominational schools – Education and identity

Finally, the multilingual denominational schools visited as part of the EUROINCLUS project demonstrated how education can become a powerful tool for inclusion and educational micro-diplomacy. These institutions, present in ethnically diverse communities in Bihor and Crișana, combine the national curriculum with instruction in multiple languages—Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak, or German—while being rooted in religious values. Through this approach, the schools do not only transmit academic knowledge but also form intercultural competencies, promoting empathy, respect, and cooperation among students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The activities observed in these schools include local language and culture classes, group projects involving students of various denominations and native languages, as well as traditional celebrations adapted to community diversity. For example, students participate in culinary workshops, art exhibitions, and themed competitions that highlight the cultural heritage specific to each community. These practical experiences enable children to understand and appreciate cultural differences, develop intercultural communication skills, and learn to collaborate in a harmonious environment.

Multilingual education in these schools also has a significant impact on strengthening individual and community identity. Students learn to recognize and value their cultural roots, while daily interactions with classmates from

other communities cultivate tolerance and openness toward diversity. In this way, multilingual denominational schools become true spaces of educational micro-diplomacy, where education serves not only academic instruction but also the creation of lasting bridges of intercultural dialogue.

Therefore, these institutions demonstrate that education can function simultaneously as a tool for social inclusion, preservation of cultural identity, and promotion of community cohesion. Through programs adapted to linguistic and cultural diversity, multilingual denominational schools prepare students to live and contribute in a multicultural society, offering them essential skills for intercultural understanding and cooperation.

Conclusions

The analysis of cultural diplomacy in the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border space shows that it is not merely a symbolic practice but a concrete instrument for strengthening social resilience. Through joint educational projects, traditional festivals, economic cooperation, and cross-border civic initiatives, local communities develop the capacity to manage tensions, reduce stereotypes, and build mutual trust between ethnic groups.

Community events such as the “Potato Festival” in Șinteu demonstrate that local traditions are not only cultural expressions but also effective tools of micro-diplomacy. The festival enables community members to interact with visitors from other regions, strengthening community identity, transmitting local values and customs, and building relationships based on mutual respect. The involvement of Slovak authorities and the local community has led to the revitalization of the village and the promotion of cultural heritage as a resource for social cohesion, highlighting the role of traditions as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue.

The experiences from visits to the Criș Country Museum and Euro Business Park illustrate the complementarity between cultural heritage and economic cooperation. The museum serves as an active space for education and dialogue, contributing to the development of collective awareness and respect for diversity. In the economic environment, the success of cross-border projects depends not only on professional skills but also on cultural trust and shared values, demonstrating how economic micro-diplomacy supports sustainable relationships and intercultural cooperation.

At the same time, the multilingual denominational schools in Oradea show that education can function as a tool for social inclusion and educational micro-diplomacy. Programs tailored to linguistic and cultural diversity, combined with participation in European projects, enable students to strengthen their personal and community identity, develop intercultural skills, and build harmonious relationships between different cultures.

The experiences within the EUROINCLUS project confirm that integrating cultural, educational, and economic activities can stimulate intercultural dialogue at the local level and strengthen social cohesion. Micro-diplomacy expressed through local traditions, cultural heritage, economic cooperation, and multilingual education represents an effective tool for promoting inclusion, mutual respect, and understanding among diverse communities. In this way, communities become capable of managing tensions, valuing cultural diversity, and building a cohesive, open, and sustainable society.

Therefore, cultural diplomacy and community micro-diplomacy contribute to the creation of a replicable model of social resilience in border regions. These practices transform borders from barriers into spaces of cooperation, dialogue, and sustainable development, offering valuable lessons for other European regions characterized by ethnic diversity and cultural complexity.

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