Transforming Europe: the power of culture in shaping a stronger, safer, and more resilient future

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Abstract: This article explores the strategic role of culture in shaping a stronger, safer, and more resilient European Union. Moving beyond a narrow understanding of culture as tradition or heritage, it examines how cultural engagement fosters democratic values, social cohesion, and collective identity. The research aims to explore culture as a strategic asset, assess the impact of EU cultural programs on civic engagement and resilience, illustrate these dynamics through a case study of the Republic of Moldova, and provide actionable policy recommendations. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining analysis of EU policy documents, scholarly literature, and case study material. Programs such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and EU4Culture are examined as tools for promoting intercultural dialogue, countering disinformation, and preventing marginalization. The findings show that integrating culture into strategic planning enhances community mobilization and strengthens the EU's capacity to respond to crises.

Keywords: European Union, culture, resilience, cultural policy, social cohesion, Republic of Moldova

Introduction

Europe's contemporary landscape is marked by complex challenges: rising populism, economic disparities, climate change, and geopolitical tensions threaten the European project's stability and cohesion. Amid these pressures, culture emerges as a critical resource for transformation. Culture shapes collective identities, mediates social relations, and provides frameworks for democratic engagement and resilience In the context of increasing geopolitical tensions, democratic backsliding, and social fragmentation, the European Union (EU) is reevaluating the strategic dimensions of its foundational principles. While economic and political integration have historically dominated the EU's agenda, there is growing recognition that culture plays a vital role in shaping a cohesive, resilient, and inclusive European project.

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Culture, traditionally viewed as a symbolic or soft domain, is now acknowledged as a dynamic force with the power to connect societies, mobilize communities, and safeguard democratic values. The EU's motto, *„United in Diversity",* exemplifies the belief that respect for varied traditions, languages, and histories can serve as a foundation for unity. Cultural participation is not only a form of expression but also a driver of social capital, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement, which are key pillars of democratic resilience.

This article aims to examine the evolving role of culture in the EU's integration strategy, with a particular focus on how cultural policy contributes to security, resilience, and solidarity. In particular, the research seeks to answer the following guiding questions: How does culture operate as a strategic resource in European integration? In what ways do EU cultural programs and initiatives enhance resilience and security? And how does the case of the Republic of Moldova illustrate the transformative effects of cultural cooperation at the Union's external borders?

Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the study investigates the influence of cultural engagement on identity formation, value transmission, and crisis response. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, combining policy analysis, review of EU documents, scholarly literature, and case study materials. This methodological choice enables a critical synthesis of theory and practice, while highlighting the links between cultural policies and their concrete effects in Moldova.

Focusing on the Republic of Moldova, a key partner in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, the paper explores the transformative impact of cultural collaboration on regional cohesion and European integration. The objectives of this study are: to analyse the conceptual underpinnings of culture as a strategic asset in European integration; to assess the contribution of EU cultural programs to resilience and security; to illustrate these dynamics through a focused case study on the Republic of Moldova; and to formulate policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the cultural dimension of the European project.

1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Understanding the transformative power of culture in the European integration process necessitates an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that bridges cultural studies, political science, sociology, and policy analysis. Culture is not merely a reflection of identity or tradition, but an active, strategic force in shaping political and societal structures. In this context, three core conceptual pillars frame the present analysis: culture as soft power, culture as a vehicle for identity construction, and culture as a mechanism of societal resilience.

Joseph S. Nye's (2004) influential theory of soft power provides the foundational lens through which the strategic dimension of culture can be understood in global affairs. Soft power refers to the capacity of an actor, such as the European

Union (EU), to influence others not through coercion or payment, but through attraction, values, and legitimacy. Nye defines it as „the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction" (p. 5).

In the European context, culture is increasingly recognized as a tool of soft power that promotes democratic values and fosters mutual understanding. Cultural cooperation, exchange programs, and heritage initiatives contribute to building legitimacy through non-military means, aligning with the broader principles underlying the EU's external relations. As Gienow-Hecht and Donfried observe, states must „employ a diversity of different vehicles of cultural diplomacy" in order to effectively pursue both short- and long-term strategic objectives, which in turn can strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010, p. 4). This logic is reflected in the EU's neighbourhood strategies, which emphasize cultural diplomacy as a strategic instrument for promoting stability, fostering partnerships, and reinforcing shared values with neighbouring countries, particularly within the Eastern Partnership and Southern Neighbourhood regions.

Culture plays a central role in the construction, negotiation, and representation of collective identity. Stuart Hall argues that identity is not a static essence but a „production," continuously shaped through discursive practices and representational systems (Hall, 1990, p. 222). From this perspective, European identity is not given, but rather constructed through cultural narratives, shared heritage, and symbolic rituals such as European Capitals of Culture and cross-border cultural festivals.

Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory further deepens this view. Cultural memory involves the transmission of identity-shaping content including myths, values, symbols, and rituals through institutions and social practices. This memory provides temporal continuity and supports a shared sense of belonging that transcends national boundaries (Assmann, 2011, p. 6). In the EU context, policies promoting cultural heritage preservation and digital archives (e.g., Europeana) are tools through which this shared memory is curated and disseminated.

From a sociological perspective, cultural engagement is directly linked to the formation of social capital—the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate collective action and civic participation. Putnam argues that participation in cultural and civic life, such as attending local concerts, volunteering at cultural festivals, or engaging in artistic production, fosters trust and reciprocity essential to the health of democratic societies (Putnam, 2000, p. 290). These activities create informal spaces for intergroup dialogue, social bonding, and intercultural learning, which are critical elements in diverse, multi-ethnic European societies.

EU-funded initiatives that support community-based cultural programs (e.g., EU4Culture, CERV) enhance these networks at the grassroots level, particularly in marginalized or post-conflict regions, thereby contributing to more cohesive and inclusive European societies.

In recent years, scholarship in crisis management, disaster resilience, and public policy has begun to emphasize the role of cultural practices in enhancing

societal resilience. David Alexander broadens the concept of resilience beyond infrastructural or technical capacity, arguing that effective resilience also requires social adaptability, community cohesion, and psychological well-being (Alexander, 2013, p. 2712). Cultural engagement contributes to these non-material dimensions of resilience by fostering shared meaning, solidarity, and collective expression.

Gotthardt et al. underscore this role in their analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how cultural activities, both digital and physical, promoted empathy, emotional recovery, and social cohesion during periods of isolation and uncertainty (Gotthardt et al., 2022). Cultural institutions and creative practitioners thus emerge not merely as entertainers or heritage custodians, but as key actors in social recovery and crisis response.

By integrating insights from soft power theory, identity construction, sociology of culture, and resilience studies, this article conceptualizes culture as a multifaceted policy resource within the European integration process. Culture is not simply a decorative or symbolic layer, it actively shapes political legitimacy, nurtures democratic values, reinforces cohesion, and equips societies with the emotional and social tools to adapt in times of stress. In doing so, culture strengthens the EU's capacity to act as a coherent and resilient union in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

In addition, these theoretical perspectives directly inform the choice of the Republic of Moldova as a case study. The case of the Republic of Moldova was chosen to highlight the cultural impact at the European Union's external borders. Moldova's geopolitical position at the EU's eastern border makes it a critical site where culture functions simultaneously as soft power, as a tool of identity negotiation, and as a resilience-building mechanism. The combination of theories allows the study to analyse how EU cultural policies are translated into practice in Moldova and why a qualitative interpretive methodology is particularly suited for capturing these dynamics. By linking the theoretical framework to the case study design, the analysis demonstrates how abstract concepts of power, identity, and resilience acquire concrete meaning in a borderland context.

2. Methodology

This study employs a *qualitative and interpretive approach* to examine the strategic role of culture in European integration. The methodology is designed to capture both the conceptual dimensions of culture such as its contribution to identity formation and resilience and its practical application through EU cultural policies and programs, highlighting its relevance as an instrument of soft power.

The research is based on three main sources of evidence. First, EU policy documents and strategic frameworks, including the New European Agenda for Culture, as well as operational programmes such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and EU4Culture, are analysed to identify institutional objectives, policy instruments, and

programmatic orientations. Second, *scholarly literature* from cultural studies, sociology, political science, and European integration studies is reviewed to provide the theoretical foundations of the analysis. Third, *case study material from the Republic of Moldova* is examined to illustrate how EU cultural policies are implemented in practice and how they affect resilience, civic engagement, and identity construction in a borderland context.

The research proceeded in several stages. Initially, *conceptual mapping* was conducted to connect theoretical approaches such as soft power, cultural memory, social capital, and resilience studies with the European Union's policy framework. This was followed by a *document analysis* of EU cultural programs, focusing on their stated aims, implementation mechanisms, and reported outcomes. Finally, a *case study synthesis* of the Republic of Moldova was carried out, assessing the relevance, impact, and limitations of EU-funded cultural initiatives in this particular context.

The *selection of policies and programs* for analysis was guided by three criteria: their direct relevance to EU cultural strategies, their implementation in the Republic of Moldova or the wider Eastern Partnership region, and the availability of credible documentation, such as official reports, project evaluations, and academic assessments. By combining theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence, this methodology ensures both analytical depth and contextual specificity. It moves beyond a descriptive overview of cultural programs to provide a *critical interpretation* of how culture contributes to resilience, identity-building, and European integration.

3. The multifaceted role of culture in EU policies

The European Union (EU) has long recognized the importance of culture in promoting unity, democracy, and transnational cooperation. Although economic and political integration have traditionally taken priority, the cultural dimension has gradually gained recognition as an essential element of European identity and strategic resilience. Culture contributes to the European project through its symbolic, social, and political roles, particularly in promoting democratic values, strengthening cohesion, and shaping collective narratives.

The recognition of culture as a formal EU competence occurred with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which introduced Article 128 (now Article 167 TFEU), establishing the Union's role in supporting and complementing the cultural actions of Member States (European Union, 2012, Art. 167). This marked a major turning point, legitimizing cultural engagement as part of the EU's broader mission.

Over the following decades, the cultural sector became the focus of several EU-level initiatives such as the „Culture," „Europe for Citizens," and „MEDIA" programmes aimed at promoting cross-border collaboration, safeguarding cultural heritage, and strengthening a shared European identity. These initiatives marked a shift in perspective: from culture as national heritage to culture as a shared European

resource capable of supporting cohesion, inclusion, and democratic engagement within the Member States and neighbouring regions (European Commission, 2007).

Cultural participation plays a vital role in promoting democratic engagement, social cohesion, and mutual understanding. The arts and culture create inclusive spaces for dialogue, enabling citizens from diverse backgrounds to interact, express themselves, and create together. These interactions foster trust, tolerance, and civic responsibility (Culture Action Europe, 2018, pp. 7 - 8). In the EU's post-crisis agenda, particularly after the financial crisis, the refugee wave, and the COVID-19 pandemic culture has emerged as a powerful tool for combating fragmentation and rebuilding solidarity.

Research shows that cultural engagement enhances democratic resilience by encouraging civic participation and public discourse. Artistic and creative activities are also essential for avoiding and resolving conflicts, and enabling community reconciliation. Many conflict resolution and community reconstruction initiatives have built on arts and cultural activities. (European Commission, 2023a, p. 30). Cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, theatres, and public art projects serve as spaces for democratic learning and critical reflection, where contested histories and complex identities can be negotiated. Moreover, European programs such as Creative Europe, Erasmus+ and CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme not only promote mobility and artistic exchange but also reinforce fundamental values by supporting projects related to citizenship, remembrance, and intercultural dialogue.

The European Union is a multi-level political community that encompasses diverse national and regional identities. In this context, culture serves as a crucial space for mediation, enabling the reconciliation of distinct identities within a shared European framework. As Delanty (2010) argues, culture in Europe provides a space for symbolic integration, where different traditions can coexist and converge around shared narratives. He emphasizes that „with the enlargement of the EU there is clearly a need for a wider definition of the European heritage to include the various forms of Europe - central, eastern, [and] Balkan Europe." Moreover, the notion of unity in diversity, he notes, highlights „the regional plurality of Europe below the national level" (Delanty, 2010, p. 13). This perspective underpins initiatives such as the European Heritage Label, the European Capitals of Culture, and the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, which illustrate how cultural heritage can promote civic belonging and transnational solidarity.

By placing culture at the heart of the integration narrative, the EU proposes a form of belonging that is not based solely on ethnicity or language, but on participation in a shared civic and cultural project. This is particularly important for border regions, minority populations, and candidate countries aspiring to align with EU values and norms. For example, the European Heritage Label explicitly selects historical sites that „symbolize European ideals, values, history, and integration," with the goal of bringing citizens closer through shared heritage (European

Commission, n.d.c). These sites from the places where the Peace of Westphalia was signed to Robert Schuman's house are chosen for their role in the collective European narrative. EU policy thus seeks to strengthen European identity and mutual understanding among Member States. Similarly, the European Capitals of Culture initiative (e.g., Chemnitz 2025, Nova Gorica 2025) highlights Europe's cultural diversity while cultivating a sense of belonging to a shared cultural space visibility (European Commission, n.d.b). The Commission notes that these capitals „celebrate the cultural features Europeans share" and serve as an annual festival of European solidarity, also contributing to urban regeneration and international visibility (European Commission, n.d.c).

Beyond symbolic programs, the EU integrates culture into broader social and economic agendas. The New European Agenda for Culture (2018) and subsequent work plans emphasize the links between culture, education, digitization, the Green Deal, and social inclusion. For example, the cultural and creative industries are seen as drivers of the „European triple transition (green, social, and digital)" and the Creative Europe programme (2021-2027) explicitly funds green, inclusive, and gender-balanced projects. By supporting cross-border networks of artists and cultural professionals, Creative Europe seeks to strengthen the European community. Complementarily, Erasmus+ and other mobility schemes encourage students, teachers, and young creatives to live abroad; such exchanges foster intercultural dialogue and empathy among new generations of Europeans.

In the EU's eastern neighbourhood, these values are projected through dedicated programs. The EU4Culture initiative (2021–2024), within the Eastern Partnership, is a representative example. Funded by the European Union, EU4Culture supports the cultural and creative sector in the Eastern Partnership countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Among its objectives are strengthening the cultural sector as a driver of economic development and promoting peaceful dialogue among communities. For instance, EU4Culture offers grants for local cultural strategies (€30,000 - €300,000 per city) and funds festivals and artist mobility (EU Neighbours East). By supporting cultural institutions and local authorities in non-capital cities, the program aims to spread the benefits of „cultural citizenship" beyond the core of Europe.

Furthermore, EU foreign policy tools increasingly include culture: since 2021, new Council conclusions and initiatives by the European External Action Service (EEAS) have integrated heritage conservation into the EU's agenda for peace and security. Overall, the EU's cultural diplomacy (through United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], bilateral agreements, etc.) emphasizes that the heritage of different countries contributes to a shared cultural heritage.

Thus, the integration of the cultural dimension into European Union policies reflects a strategic vision of culture's role in strengthening social cohesion, democracy, and European identity. Beyond its symbolic value, culture is recognized

as a cross-cutting instrument with impact across multiple domains from education and innovation to social inclusion, sustainable development, and public diplomacy.

To illustrate this multidimensional contribution, the table below summarizes the main functions of culture in the European context and links these functions to relevant EU programs and initiatives, showing how culture supports the European project in an integrated and sustainable manner(see).

Table 1. Ways in which culture contributes to the european project

Function of Culture	Impact on the European Union	Example of EU Program/Initiative
Symbolic	Contributes to creating a shared European cultural identity and reinforcing EU values	Creative Europe, European Capitals of Culture, European Heritage Label, CERV, Erasmus+
Social	Fosters social inclusion, cohesion among states, and intercultural dialogue	European Capitals of Culture, Creative Europe, EU4Culture
Democratic	Supports civic participation, freedom of expression, historical memory, and cultural and media pluralism	CERV, Creative Europe
Economic	Supports cultural and creative industries, fosters innovation and job creation	Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, European Capitals of Culture
Diplomatic	Projects EU values in the Eastern Neighbourhood and globally through cultural cooperation	EU4Culture, Creative Europe
Educational	Encourages mobility, intercultural learning, and development of artistic and civic skills	Erasmus+, Creative Europe
Scientific/Innovative	Funds research and innovation in cultural heritage, digitization, social inclusion, collective memory, and European identity	Erasmus+, Horizon Europe – Cluster 2 „Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society"

Source: European Commission (n.d.a)

Through diverse programs like *Creative Europe, Erasmus+, CERV, and targeted regional initiatives such as EU4Culture,* the EU leverages culture to achieve multiple strategic objectives. Symbolically, culture helps forge a shared *European identity* and reinforces fundamental values. Socially, it builds *cohesion, encourages inclusion, and facilitates intercultural dialogue,* providing inclusive spaces for interaction and understanding, particularly crucial in a multi-level political community. Democratically, cultural engagement strengthens *civic participation, critical reflection, and public discourse,* making cultural institutions vital hubs for democratic learning. Economically, the cultural and creative industries are recognized as key drivers of *innovation, job creation, and sustainable development.* Furthermore, culture plays an increasingly important role in the EU's *diplomatic efforts,* projecting European values and fostering cooperation with neighboring regions.

The integrated approach, where cultural functions are supported by both dedicated cultural programs and transversal initiatives, underscores culture's pivotal role in the European project. It serves as a tool for *social cohesion, education, innovation, citizenship, and sustainable development,* ultimately contributing to a more resilient, inclusive, and unified Europe. The examples provided, from the European Heritage Label to the European Capitals of Culture and EU4Culture, illustrate how these policies translate into tangible outcomes, demonstrating culture's indispensable contribution to the continuous evolution and success of the European Union.

3. Culture and resilience in times of crisis

The role of culture in strengthening societal resilience has become increasingly evident in the face of recent European and global crises. From the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine, cultural actors and institutions have responded in ways that not only sustained public morale but also fostered solidarity, trust, and emotional recovery.

The COVID-19 crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of European societies, not only in health and economic systems, but also in terms of social disconnection and mental health deterioration. Cultural participation through online concerts, virtual museum tours, neighbourhood art projects, and creative digital campaigns proved essential in maintaining a sense of connection and shared experience during lockdowns (Lazarev, 2021, p. 116).

The European Commission (2023b) acknowledged that the cultural and creative sectors play a pivotal role in supporting economies, societies, and individual well-being and empowerment at national, regional, and local levels (p. 94). These cultural responses also demonstrated the adaptive capacity of institutions and artists to shift towards digital and community-based formats, thus broadening accessibility. They became, in essence, platforms of emotional solidarity and civic care, enabling

citizens to process collective trauma, express grief, and reaffirm social bonds. As Alexander (2013) notes, „the strength of a human society under stress is its ability to devise means of resisting disaster and maintaining its integrity (coherence), while the ductility lies in its ability to adapt to circumstances produced by the calamity in order to lessen their impact" (p. 2710). In this light, cultural initiatives during the pandemic can be seen as both resilient and flexible responses that mitigated social fragmentation while reinforcing shared values and human connection.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought another wave of disruption to European stability. Cultural institutions across Europe mobilized rapidly to express solidarity with Ukraine through public performances, exhibitions, and awareness campaigns. EU-funded initiatives supported displaced artists, protected cultural heritage, and facilitated intercultural dialogue across refugee-hosting societies. These efforts highlighted the role of culture as both a humanitarian response and a geopolitical act of resistance.

According to the European Parliament resolution (2022), culture enhances resilience by enabling societies to recover and maintain social coherence during times of conflict, while also serving as a vital vector for mutual understanding and peacebuilding among communities.

Beyond anecdotal evidence, empirical research substantiates the claim that cultural engagement fosters social cohesion and mitigates hostility. Notably, a 2022 study conducted in Italy found that a mere 1% increase in cultural consumption was associated with a 20% reduction in hate-motivated crimes (European Commission, 2023a, p. 5). These findings underscore the preventative dimension of culture, highlighting its potential as a protective factor against social fragmentation and radicalization, in addition to its expressive and symbolic functions.

These insights into the societal impact of cultural participation are further reinforced by the evolving role of digital technologies in the cultural sphere. Digital platforms have amplified the reach of cultural content during crises, enabling both continuity and innovation. While digitalization was initially a response to physical restrictions, it has evolved into a structural feature of cultural resilience. Platforms such as *Europeana*, virtual art residencies, and EU-supported digital festivals have created new spaces for intercultural engagement and knowledge exchange, particularly among the younger generation.

However, this digital expansion also underscores the importance of cultural policy frameworks that ensure inclusivity, digital literacy, and equitable access to online cultural resources-especially in marginalized communities.

4. Culture and security

In the contemporary European context, the concept of security extends beyond military defense to include social cohesion, psychological resilience, and ideological integrity. Culture contributes to this broader understanding of security by addressing

root causes of conflict, promoting democratic values, and offering non-coercive means of building trust and dialogue. This section explores how culture functions as a tool for *conflict prevention, democratic stabilization,* and *resistance to radicalization and disinformation.*

Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural initiatives and exchanges to foster mutual understanding, defuse tensions, and build long-term relationships between communities or states. In the European Union's external action, cultural diplomacy has gained increased visibility as a soft power strategy that complements traditional diplomacy, particularly in fragile or contested regions. As Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) explain, the „science" of cultural diplomacy involves „the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, and beliefs in all aspects of our societies, such as art, sports, science, literature, and music, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding" (p. 21). This definition underscores the multidimensional nature of cultural diplomacy and its capacity to bridge divides through non-coercive, culturally grounded engagement.

Through initiatives such as *EU4Culture, Creative Europe, **and the** European External Action Service's cultural diplomacy platform,* the EU promotes intercultural dialogue in the Eastern Partnership, the Western Balkans, and the Mediterranean. These programs aim to prevent radicalization by offering inclusive cultural narratives and collaborative spaces, particularly in areas marked by ethnic, religious, or political division (European Commission, 2016, p. 7).

Culture plays a pivotal role in transmitting and reinforcing core democratic norms, including freedom of expression, pluralism, and human dignity. Cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, theatres, and archives function as spaces for historical reflection and civic education, enabling citizens to engage with complex legacies and envision shared futures. Through participatory artistic practices, cultural programming fosters democratic agency and critical thinking, both of which are essential for the long-term consolidation of democracy. In doing so, these initiatives contribute to strengthening democratic citizenship and enhancing social cohesion (European Commission, 2023a, p. 106).

In post-conflict or transitional societies, culture is also used in reconciliation processes, helping to restore trust, acknowledge historical injustices, and facilitate restorative dialogue. For example, EU-funded initiatives in the Western Balkans have supported community theatre, documentary filmmaking, and heritage conservation as tools for intercultural healing and rights-based engagement. A similar approach has been implemented within the Republic of Moldova, including the Transnistrian region, where cultural cooperation projects have played a role in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding across divided communities. One notable example is the Confidence Building Measures Programme, supported by the European Union and implemented by UNDP Moldova, which includes joint cultural, educational, and historical heritage initiatives aimed at rebuilding trust between both banks of the Nistru River. These activities, such as common art exhibitions, youth

camps, and cultural heritage restoration projects, contribute to maintaining open channels of communication and to cultivating a shared cultural space despite political divisions (UNDP Moldova, n.d.).

The proliferation of disinformation and hybrid threats presents a significant challenge to democratic stability across Europe. Mass online disinformation campaigns are increasingly employed by both domestic and foreign actors to erode public trust and exacerbate societal divisions, with potentially severe implications for European security (European Commission, 2018). Cultural content, especially that produced locally and shared through trusted platforms, can help counter these threats by reinforcing credible narratives, fostering media literacy, and promoting critical engagement with information sources.

Cultural strategies are particularly effective when they operate at the intersection of *education, digital literacy, and creative innovation.* Arts-based approaches to counter-disinformation, such as satire, storytelling, and participatory media, enable engagement with vulnerable audiences in non-didactic ways, thereby strengthening cognitive resilience.

Radicalization often thrives in environments marked by *cultural exclusion, identity-based marginalization, and lack of social belonging.* Cultural inclusion through funding for minority-language media, intercultural education, and community-led cultural projects helps mitigate these risks. According to UNESCO, inclusive cultural programming reduces alienation and provides constructive outlets for identity expression, which are crucial in resisting extremist narratives (UNESCO, 2022, p. 12).

Furthermore, preserving and celebrating cultural diversity, both within and across national borders, supports the EU's broader objectives of *human rights, equality,* and *minority protection,* reinforcing its normative authority on the global stage.

5. Case study – the Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova occupies a complex geopolitical and cultural position on the eastern border of the European Union. As a candidate country and part of the EU's Eastern Partnership, the Republic of Moldova serves as a compelling example of how cultural cooperation can foster Europeanisation, resilience, and civic engagement.

Moldova's historical and cultural landscape reflects overlapping layers of Romanian, Russian, and Soviet influence, alongside distinct regional traditions. This hybrid identity generates both opportunities and challenges in the process of European integration. *From the perspective of identity theory, Moldova illustrates how cultural narratives are continuously negotiated, with EU programs offering tools for constructing a European civic identity while balancing local traditions.*

In recent years, Moldova has faced significant internal pressures, including political instability, information warfare, and external interference. In this context, culture has emerged as a source of soft power, enabling the development of local resilience and democratic values at both community and institutional levels.

The European Union contributes to Moldova's cultural resilience through funding and initiatives. Under the EU4Culture programme, Moldova shares regional funds with other Eastern Partnership countries: dozens of local festivals and cultural NGOs are eligible for EU grants, and small cities are supported in developing local cultural strategies. One of the most significant European initiatives implemented in Moldova during 2021–2024 was EU4Culture. This project played a key role in supporting the Moldovan cultural sector, especially in cities beyond the capital.

Funded by the European Union and implemented by the Goethe-Institut in partnership with other institutions, the programme aimed to promote cultural development as a driver of social and economic transformation in the Eastern Partnership region. In Moldova, EU4Culture supported artist mobility fellowships, capacity-building workshops, local cultural strategies, and infrastructure aid for creative spaces. These initiatives reached small cities such Cahul, Ungheni, and Căușeni, where cultural participation had previously been limited due to underfunding. As a result, cultural institutions became hubs of community cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and youth engagement, promoting grassroots adoption of European values (EU Neighbours East, n.d.). Such municipal projects aim to empower civil society through culture, enhancing community resilience. They demonstrate the EU's commitment to a bottom-up approach to integration, with culture as a unifying force in regions vulnerable to external influence and internal divisions. Beyond their symbolic value, these projects *demonstrate measurable impacts in terms of increased cultural participation, community trust, and local governance capacity. However, their sustainability is often limited by financial fragility and dependence on external funding.*

Another transformative element in Moldova's Europeanisation process is the Erasmus+ programme, which facilitates academic and artistic mobility for both students and educators. The programme supports not only higher education cooperation but also cultural festivals, artist residencies, and interdisciplinary workshops promoting European citizenship and intercultural learning. In the 30 years of Erasmus+ in Moldova, over 5,000 students and teachers have benefited from international academic mobility, and numerous educational projects have been implemented in universities, vocational institutions, and youth and sports organisations, bringing innovation and valuable resources. Thanks to Erasmus+ support in Moldova, 83 Tempus projects, 35 higher education capacity-building projects, 37 Jean Monnet projects, and 10 VET capacity-building initiatives, among others, have been carried out (National Erasmus+ Office in Moldova, 2024).

For students in the arts and humanities, especially those at the Academy of Music, Theatre and Fine Arts (AMTAP), Erasmus+ offers valuable opportunities to

integrate into transnational creative networks. Participation in academic and artistic mobility enables them to return with enhanced professional skills, intercultural perspectives, and a strengthened European orientation. These experiences help shape young artists into cultural ambassadors, capable of building connections between Moldova's internal development and the cultural directions promoted at the European level. *In theoretical terms, these exchanges illustrate the production of social capital and the transmission of cultural memory, strengthening European belonging through lived experiences rather than abstract policy discourse.*

In this spirit, the Jean Monnet Module project „The European Identity Development through Culture in the Process of European Integration" (2022–2025), implemented at AMTAP, introduced an innovative interdisciplinary module on European cultural identity into the Academy's curriculum. (Academy of Music, Theater and Fine Arts, n.d.). Through this module, students from various specialisations, including music, theatre, visual arts, and cultural management, explored European themes through artistic, critical, and interdisciplinary lenses, developing civic and cultural competences and cultivating a proactive engagement with the European space and its values. This approach represents *a novel contribution, linking cultural policy with arts-based pedagogy in a candidate country context, an aspect underexplored in existing literature.*

The research activities conducted under the project resulted in a series of studies, international conference presentations, and academic publications, reinforcing AMTAP's role as a space for reflection on the cultural dimension of European integration. Thematic workshops organised in partnership with decision-makers at local, regional, and national levels, as well as academic and civil society actors, created an intersectoral dialogue platform. These meetings encouraged the exchange of best practices in cultural education and supported the development of concrete proposals for advancing social cohesion and European values through culture. Students' active participation in these activities has helped shape a generation of young artists aware of their role in promoting European identity and cultural democracy in Moldova.

A representative example of EU–Moldova cooperation is the MoldArte project, implemented in 2022 with the support of the Creative Europe programme (Creative Europe Desk Moldova, 2022). MoldArte functioned as a platform for contemporary artistic expression, connecting Moldovan artists with their European counterparts and facilitating performances, installations, and cultural debates. The initiative focused on critical dialogue, inclusion, and experimentation, giving voice to marginalised groups and emerging creators. (MoldArte, n.d.). MoldArte significantly contributed to the development of a participatory cultural ecosystem. Its activities enhanced the engagement of cultural actors and fostered a more inclusive understanding of public culture, thus reinforcing local community resilience. The project promoted collaboration between institutions, artists, and citizens, stimulating active cultural participation and encouraging a more democratic

and inclusive approach to community cultural life, thereby supporting social cohesion and strengthening resilience in the face of socio-political challenges.

Complementing these initiatives are several notable *Twinning projects* in the area of cultural heritage, through which EU member states support institutional reforms and capacity building in Moldova. Twinning projects such as „Support to Promote Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Development" have focused on modernising heritage protection, training museum and archive professionals, and enhancing access to European best practices in conservation and cultural tourism. These projects serve both preservation goals and broader EU integration objectives, by aligning Moldova's cultural governance with European standards (Ministry of Culture, n.d.b)

In addition, a cross-border initiative between the Republic of Moldova, a candidate country, and Romania, an EU Member State, titled „History and Music – Values That Unite Us"*,* stands out as a model of cultural rapprochement and shared memory. Co-funded through EU Cross-Border Cooperation instruments, the project facilitated collaboration among musicians, historians, and young people from both sides of the Prut River through joint workshops, concerts, and documentary film screenings. The project created a space where national narratives converged around shared European values, enabling dialogue and emotional connection through artistic expression. It fostered mutual understanding, counteracted disinformation, and celebrated a common cultural heritage in a region marked by historical fragmentation. (Ministry of Culture, n.d.a)

The MoldArte initiative, the Twinning heritage projects, and cross-border cultural actions like „History and Music – Values That Unite Us" illustrate how artistic expression and heritage collaboration open inclusive spaces for democratic dialogue and foster a sense of European belonging among citizens and youth. Together, these initiatives reinforce Hall's argument that identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through cultural exchange.

Cultural collaboration between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, also is marked by numerous educational exchange programs and cultural initiatives. These exchanges of experience between representatives from Romania and the Republic of Moldova are a good way to exchange ideas, practices, which lead to new projects and successful collaborations. A great example being media collaboration, which includes joint television and radio programs that promote cultural ties and mutual understanding (Pîrlog, A., & Alexa, A., 2024, p.109).

Despite the progress enabled by EU-funded initiatives several challenges continue to limit the full alignment of Moldova's cultural sector with European standards and opportunities. These include structural underfunding of public cultural institutions, insufficient administrative capacity to manage European projects at local levels, and a lack of strategic coherence in national cultural policy. Additionally, cultural actors in rural and economically disadvantaged regions often face difficulties accessing EU grants due to limited project-writing expertise and

infrastructural barriers. This tension between potential and constraint reflects Alexander's notion of resilience: while cultural initiatives provide adaptive capacity, without systemic investment their transformative effects remain fragile.

Overall, the Moldovan case study illustrates the central thesis of this article: culture operates as a strategic asset that builds resilience, fosters pluralism, and strengthens European belonging in contexts of vulnerability. By explicitly linking local cultural experiences to theories of soft power, identity construction, and resilience, this analysis contributes a fresh perspective to the literature on EU cultural policy. It demonstrates that the cultural dimension of integration is not only symbolic but has measurable and context-specific effects in shaping democratic values at the Union's borders.

Conclusions and recommendations

Europe today faces multiple challenges from geopolitical crises to internal polarization, but culture remains a potent means to address them. This interdisciplinary analysis has shown that culture contributes to social cohesion, democratic engagement, and collective resilience. Cultural participation literally glues communities together by fostering trust, empathy and dialogue while anchoring democratic values in people's everyday lives. Recognizing these dynamics, the EU has integrated culture into its strategic vision: through funding programs, heritage networks, and policy frameworks it seeks to cultivate a shared European identity and solidarity across its member states and neighbours.

The case of Moldova underscores that cultural investments can yield tangible geopolitical effects. Supporting Moldovan traditions, festivals, and arts enables both external and local actors not only to preserve heritage but also to strengthen societal resilience against divisive forces, drawing the country closer to Europe's orbit. This example, alongside others across Eastern Europe, suggests a broader pattern: when culture is treated as an integral dimension of policy rather than a luxury, it reinforces democracy and peace. At the same time, the Moldovan case illustrates limitations: structural underfunding, uneven access to EU programmes, and dependence on external financing highlight the fragility of cultural resilience when not backed by long-term systemic support.

Maintaining and expanding support for culture is therefore crucial. EU policymakers increasingly advocate for a stronger cultural dimension in enlargement and neighbourhood strategies. Scholars and practitioners argue that policies should continue to link culture with education, social inclusion, and even climate action. By doing so, Europe can harness its rich cultural tapestry to guide its future: a Europe that places culture at its core will be stronger, safer, and more resilient.

The evidence presented in this study confirms that culture is not merely symbolic in European integration but a strategic instrument, aligning with theoretical insights from soft power, identity construction, and resilience studies. Culture

advances democratic values, fosters regional cohesion, and equips societies to adapt in times of crisis.

Methodological reflections highlight certain limitations of this research. Reliance on qualitative and interpretive synthesis, while valuable for depth and contextual richness, does not provide quantitative measures of cultural impact. Future research could complement this approach with mixed methods, including surveys, statistical indicators, or longitudinal analyses of cultural participation. Moreover, while Moldova provides a compelling case, comparative research across other Eastern Partnership countries would clarify the broader applicability of the findings.

In light of these findings, this section outlines key policy implications and proposes actionable recommendations to guide future EU cultural strategies, particularly regarding *enlargement, security,* and *external relations.* Cultural policy should be more explicitly integrated into the EU's strategic frameworks, including the *European Green Deal, Digital Europe, **and** Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.* Culture contributes to climate awareness (e.g., through green festivals), digital literacy (e.g., through digital storytelling), and conflict prevention (e.g., through cultural diplomacy). The European Commission and the European External Action Service should recognize culture as a *cross-cutting policy dimension* relevant to both internal cohesion and external engagement.

- *Recommendation 1:* Embed culture as a horizontal priority in major EU policy frameworks, including resilience, security, sustainability, and innovation strategies. Given the increasing geopolitical relevance of culture, the EU should expand the resources and scope of its *international cultural relations,* particularly in the Eastern Partnership and candidate countries. Programmes like *EU4Culture and Creative Europe* should be scaled up and institutionalized with long-term mandates.
- *Recommendation 2:* Develop a dedicated *EU Cultural Diplomacy Fund,* targeting cultural cooperation, heritage protection, and intercultural dialogue in the EU Neighbourhood.
- *Recommendation 3:* Integrate culture into *Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)* dialogues with priority regions. To maximize the social impact of culture, EU institutions must support *bottom-up cultural initiatives* that reflect local needs, languages, and identities. Emphasis should be placed on *non-capital cities,* underrepresented communities, and cross-border cultural regions.
- *Recommendation 4:* Expand place-based funding mechanisms through *INTERREG, CERV,* and the *European Social Fund+* to support inclusive cultural infrastructure at the local level.
- *Recommendation 5:* Encourage Member States to adopt *National Cultural Resilience Strategies* aligned with EU values and coordinated through open dialogue with civil society.

- *Recommendation 6:* Introduce targeted cultural mobility schemes for *young artists, students, and cultural workers* in candidate and partner countries.
- *Recommendation 7:* Incorporate cultural participation modules into *citizenship education and youth programmes* at EU and national levels..
- *Recommendation 8:* Include cultural and creative sectors in *EU civil protection and crisis preparedness mechanisms,* alongside mental health and social cohesion resources.
- *Recommendation 9:* Support the creation of *Cultural Emergency Task Forces* to protect heritage, sustain artistic production, and ensure continuity of cultural life in crisis zones.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the academic debate by explicitly linking EU cultural policies to the theoretical dimensions of soft power, identity construction, and resilience. While acknowledging its methodological limitations, the study opens new directions for future comparative and empirical work on culture's role in European integration.

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