

Bridging Diversity: A Roadmap for Cultural Preservation and Sharing in Southeast Europe

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Abstract: This article delves into the potential pathways and emerging trends for preserving cultural values in Southeast Europe, specifically focusing on the development of bridges that foster heritage, acceptance, and sharing. Recognizing the significance of valuing and safeguarding cultural traditions, customs, and practices, this study aims to address the unique challenges faced by countries in Southeast Europe, stemming from historical divisions, barriers, exclusion, and disinformation. To tackle these challenges, collaborative and participatory approaches in narrative development surrounding heritage and cultural diversity are essential. By involving local and international communities, experts, stakeholders, and civil society in decision-making processes and joint initiatives, positive transformations can be achieved, nurturing enhanced cooperation and understanding. This analysis emphasizes the importance of adopting a forward-thinking perspective that accounts for future developments within the region. By considering these trends, strategic frameworks can be formulated to promote acceptance and facilitate cultural exchange among Southeast European communities. The ensuing discussion explores three key future-oriented scenarios that hold immense relevance in cultivating an inclusive and mutually appreciative environment: “Digital Preservation and Accessibility”, “Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage”, and “Collaborative and Participatory Approaches”. In conclusion, the integration of these scenarios within various programs and activities presents a significant opportunity for Southeast Europe to foster greater interactivity, mutual respect, and harmonious coexistence. The recommendations put forth in this study offer valuable insights for future regional endeavours, harnessing the power of cultural diplomacy and “circular culture framework” to cultivate a more prosperous and harmonized society centered in Southeast Europe.

Key words: Southeast Europe, cultural heritage, preservation, sharing, participatory approaches, future scenarios

JEL codes: Z11, Z19, N34

1. Introduction

In the diverse and historically significant region of Southeastern Europe, the safeguarding and dissemination of cultural values play a pivotal role in nurturing acceptance, comprehension, and unity among nations. This article not only examines the deficiencies in preserving cultural values but also investigates the joint endeavors

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that countries in the region can pursue to bridge these gaps and advocate for the acceptance and dissemination of their distinct cultural heritage.

South-eastern Europe encompasses a wealth of cultural traditions, languages, and artistic expressions that have evolved throughout centuries. However, numerous obstacles impede the effective preservation and sharing of these cultural values. Economic volatility, political transitions, and armed conflicts have left enduring marks on the region's cultural fabric, rendering cultural heritage an urgent concern.

The region has served as a meeting point for diverse civilizations, leading to intricate and deeply entrenched historical frictions. Throughout its history, South-eastern Europe has experienced the ascendancy and decline of empires, including the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Soviet Union. These imperial powers frequently clashed with local ethnic groups, precipitating struggles for independence and territorial disagreements.

Nationalism and ethnic rivalries have played a significant role in shaping the region's history. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s resulted in a series of devastating wars, such as the Croatian War of Independence, the Bosnian War, and the Kosovo War. These conflicts were characterized by ethnic cleansing, mass displacement, and atrocities committed against civilians. Moreover, the region is still vulnerable to incidents and politicised events due to an unfinished reconciliation process and the antagonistic approach of accepting others in historical, cultural and religious terms.

Religious divisions have their part in the region's troubled history. The tension between Eastern Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims has fueled conflicts and contributed to mistrust and animosity.

Political transitions in the aftermath of communism have further strained relationships among Southeastern European countries. Transitioning from totalitarian regimes to democratic systems has been challenging, often marred by corruption, economic instability, power politics, and political rivalries.

"The ethnic and therefore the national composition of Southeastern Europe is the result of a long historical evolution having a number of common traits, but at the same time a series of specific features as compared to ethnic and political developments in other parts of Europe" (Zbucka, 2001, p. 232).

However, since closing the chapter of negative peace (a decade of bloody conflicts), a new perspective was launched for these countries towards the EU membership, implementing democracy, the rule of law, building peaceful relations and interactivity of mutual benefits, and working for sustainable development.

Since the chapter on positive peace opened, it is essential to note that Southeastern European countries have also made strides towards reconciliation and cooperation. Efforts have been made to promote regional stability, foster economic integration, and promote dialogue among countries to overcome past hostilities and build a brighter future.

Despite the challenges and troubled history, the actual stalemate between Serbia and Kosovo, the region continues to work towards peaceful coexistence and the pursuit of stability, acknowledging the importance of addressing historical grievances, fostering dialogue, and promoting cooperation for the mutual benefit of all nations involved.

Despite the EU's numerous integrative initiatives and development programs with neighboring regions, such as the Western Balkans, there are still challenges in constructing these countries according to the model the EU applies. "Some Europeans certainly do enjoy the benefits of their share of Europe: through travels, studies, through the Schengen Area for those who benefit from it, through participation in cultural life" (Saez, 2021, p. 12). In the non-integrated regions, these benefits are still in the realm of possible dreams for citizens of countries in the

process of EU membership. Some Western Balkan countries (e.g., Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) have yet to reach the point of visa regime liberalization. Although EU countries “often practice interculturality easily, both with its neighborhood and on a European scale”, “the other party” (the neighboring regions) often “chooses withdrawal, not only for fear or rejection of the other but also for fear of information of the world today, of changes” most of the time they cannot catch the pace and “understand”, and “...are poorly prepared for” (Saez, 2021, p. 12). Consequently, despite the EU’s progress in engaging with neighboring regions, there is still a lack of complete and organic connection based on cultural acceptance and sharing with the broader Southeastern Europe, particularly the Western Balkans.

In the post-modernist period, the information flow is free; individuals in democratic countries enjoy the right to freedom of thought/speech, participation, and sharing. They have the right to observe government behavior, claim accountability and transparency, and quest for a prosperous future that would be away from conflicts and able to step out from old narratives and hostile political and nationalistic dictates. Most importantly, relations and exchanges between individuals and societies are more fluid and vital than ever through massive communication, travel, and a quest and desire to know other cultures.

It is time to “bring the citizens in” (Adebhar, 2017), the moving agents in spaces with no real boundaries but political ones in some countries. Societies need to “cooperate through solidarity, a spirit of responsibility, a concern for efficiency because it is often the best way to go further, where a personal interest is subsumed by a common interest.” (Saez, 2021, p. 10) Culture sharing and acknowledgment can play a significant role in healing the troubled history and relations between Southeastern European countries. Culture can promote understanding and empathy, help citizens find common ground, preserve and rediscover shared heritage, and acknowledge past wrongs, fostering collaboration and nurturing a sense of collective identity. Culture sharing needs more interconnectivity and joint projects because “cooperation” can raise the “awareness of our interdependencies”. (ibid, 10)

This research aims to underscore the significance of adopting a forward-looking perspective that considers future scenarios for the region. By considering these scenarios, strategies and policies can be developed to promote acceptance and encourage cultural sharing among Southeast European communities.

The paper emphasizes the intrinsic value of cultural heritage and its profound impact on social cohesion, peaceful relations, understanding, and cooperation. It advocates for preserving cultural values to create bridges between different cultures and cultivating mutual respect following cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy venues.

In line with the research objective, the elaboration focuses on three main future trends and scenarios that are vital in creating an inclusive and mutually appreciative environment: “Digital Preservation and Access”, “Intangible Cultural Heritage Initiatives”, and “Collaborative and Participatory Approaches”.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the necessity of prioritizing cultural values in Southeast Europe and integrating them into strategies that foster acceptance, sharing, and intercultural dialogue through policy recommendations. By doing so, the region can establish connections, strengthen cultural bonds, and promote a more harmonious and prosperous Southeast Europe (Figure 1).

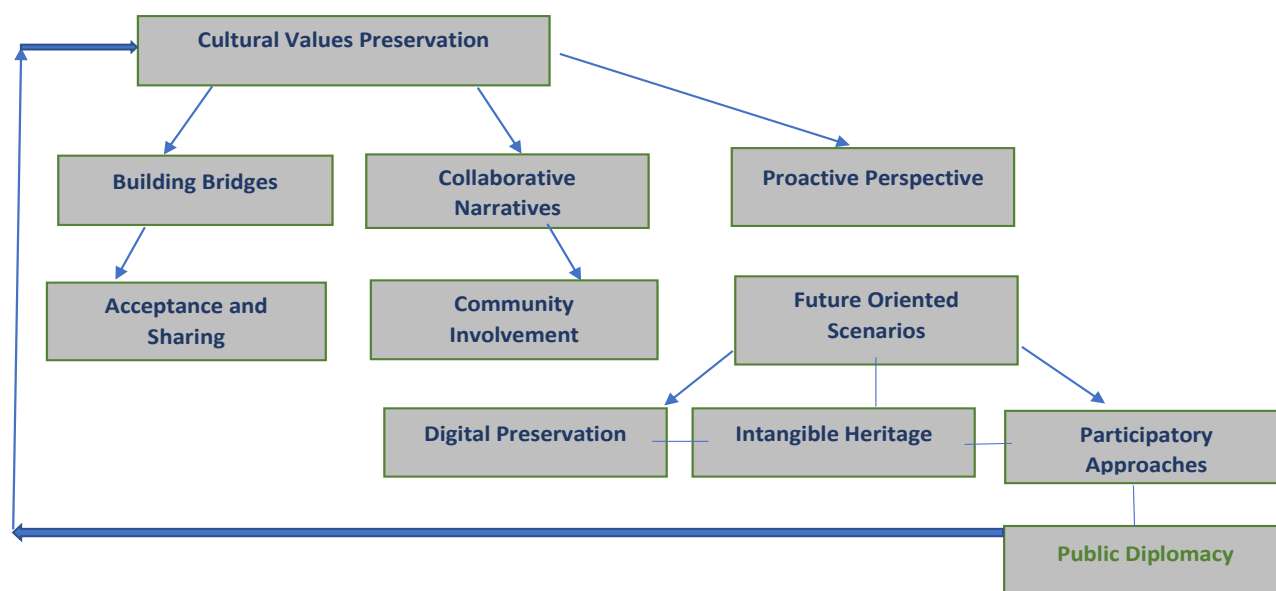


Figure 1 The Research Goals in Exploring the “Digital Preservation and Access”, “Intangible Cultural Heritage Initiatives”, and “Collaborative And Participatory Approaches” to Overcome Past Challenges Through Culture Diplomacy (Cultural Values) Under the “Future Trends and Scenarios” Node.

2. Methodology

The research¹ is based on a qualitative methodology that examines existing literature on cultural preservation, heritage, and the significance of cultural values in Southeast Europe. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of preservation efforts and challenges. In addition to primary literature data, secondary sources such as agreements, EU directives/documents, and media articles will supplement the research.

While an extensive literature review and data analysis will be conducted, there are limitations when it comes to utilizing qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to gather insights and perspectives from various stakeholders involved in cultural diversity preservation. These stakeholders may include local communities, experts, policymakers, and cultural institutions. Nonetheless, the analysis of this topic holds significant scientific importance, surpassing its practical implications. The outcomes of such a study not only contribute to further research and policy solutions but also pave the way for more focused and specific investigations with practical and applicable orientations in cultural diplomacy with focus on culture preservation and sharing. Additionally, this study introduces the concept of “circulative culture” for the first time in the field of SEE socio-cultural studies, presenting extraordinary significance beyond what has been previously explored. This concept pertains to the circulation of cultural events of various kinds, from one country to another in SEE region, emphasizing the transmission of knowledge and skills beyond national boundaries. This process enriches the culturally diverse regional sphere and fosters intercultural dialogue as an integral component of a broader harmonious regional society. In this regard, this type of study plays a fundamental role in motivating research that

¹ This study comes as an extensive and improved elaboration of the research titled 'Preserving Cultural Values: Building Bridges of Heritage, Culture for Acceptance, and Sharing in Southeast Europe', “originally presented at the 8th UNICART Interdisciplinary International Conference and featured in the proceedings book of the conference 'Human Heritage, Innovation and Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Basin’ held on 23-25 October 2023 at the Great Hall, University of Bari, Aldo Moro, Italy.

aims to achieve practical outcomes in the field of cultural exchange, utilizing all possible means available and scenarios explored in this research. It establishes the groundwork for strategies and policies, serving as a starting point not only for future extensive research through comparative cases, study cases, and theoretical exploration for scenario planning but also applicable projects and programs in this field.

3. Literature Review

Culture is a broad concept that encompasses various complex theoretical frameworks. “Both classical and contemporary social theory have explored the relationships between culture and society, leading to a diverse range of cultural studies.” (Kellner, n.d.). Prominent scholars in this field include (Hoggart, 1972; Williams, 1981; Hoggart et al., 1987; Stuart et al., 1997; Stuart, 2016; 2021; Bhaba, 1998; 2004; McRobbie et al., 2005), who have provided their definitions and perspectives on culture. However, since this study focuses on the cultural diversity in the SEE (Southeast Europe) region, culture will be approached as a system of characteristics, knowledge, customs, and specific activities practiced by certain societies within a shared region — including language, religion, customs, folklore, and other traditions. Regardless of the size or scale of communities, they are closely connected to these elements, which should not be subject to differences or prejudices. Therefore, this study does not theorize how they are constructed, manifested, or their origins but serves another purpose.

Bhabha (2006) stresses that the revision of critical theory’s history is centered around the concept of cultural difference rather than cultural diversity. Bhabha argues that cultural difference involves the enunciation of culture as authoritative and capable of constructing cultural identification and differentiation systems, emphasizing its significance in understanding culture within critical theory (par. 1). Earlier in 1999, Balinger argued that categorizing Southeastern European spaces into existing rubrics like the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean can create problems when identifying cultural unities. Essentialist interpretations of these categories lead to contradictions and difficulties in situating Southeastern Europe. Simkus (2012), on the other side, examines cultural differences in Southeast Europe, focusing more intensely on divisions of ethnic identities, causes of cultural differences between and within ethnic groups, and variations in attitudes and values related to religiosity, moral values, gender roles, and attitudes towards ethnic relations. As Balinger (1999) notes, the naming and boundary issues surrounding Southeastern Europe have become contentious political topics in the societies under study (par. 33).

Following Bhabha’s (2006) elaboration, this research aims to give particular importance to cultural diversity in the SEE region, recognizing “pre-given cultural” contents and customs, held in a time frame of relativism” (Bhabha, 2006, par. 1) In frames of a consensual approach between cultures of this region, the aim is to explore benefits of cultural exchange, interculturalism values, removing boundaries and barriers within a specific region through the soft power of culture. After the enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria, Europe has been questioning “how to accommodate culture diversity in Europe.” (Triandafyllidou, 2011, p. 12). The author has explored diversity challenges in Europe and highlights similarities and differences among countries, suggesting the need for a common European approach to migrant and minority integration, considering the specificities of each country while promoting EU legislation, best practices, and cooperation. Special attention is given to the Roma and Muslim populations. Although this question arose two decades ago, the EU is still dealing with it and working on policies and strategies to improve cultural ties and cooperation among countries in the EU and neighboring regions. Cvjetičanin & Švob-Đokić (2021) stress that the EU plays a pivotal role in fostering cultural relations

between countries. It supports cultural exchange within its member states and beyond, promoting global connections (p. 3). This is a role in the making as it builds on exploring the best ideas of cooperation and diversity sharing. “It is to do together in a fair relationship” (Saez, 2021, p. 9) and still explore the best ways to develop and advance on “Politics of Relations” (Saez, 2021, p. 9).

Although strategies are in place and promoted by the EU, diversity sharing, cooperation, reconciliation, cultural exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy on win-win results are keywords and concepts that require further elaboration from various scholars for discovering and creating new bridges of acceptance and peaceful relations since “Europe had failed to avoid deadly conflicts on European soil” (Saez, 2021, 12) and antagonisms and severe incidents are still present in the region.

As Švob-Đokić (2021) notes, digital technologies have significantly shaped the global reach of public and cultural policies. They facilitate diverse aspects of cultural production, consumption, value formation, heritage preservation, communication, and management (p. 19). Continuing in this track, this study aims to explore three main future trends and scenarios that are vital in creating an inclusive and mutually appreciative environment, namely: “Digital Preservation and Access” (including exploring the opportunities and challenges they present for cultural expression, cultural preservation, and the formation of virtual communities); “Intangible Cultural Heritage,” (cultural expression that are deeply rooted in a community’s identity) and “Collaborative and Participatory Approaches” (exploring effective practices and policies in the SEE region can contribute to building inclusive and harmonious societies).

4. Empowering Cultural Heritage Preservation! Advancing Inclusivity via Digital Initiatives

The growing influence of digital technologies prompts a critical examination of how digital platforms, social media, and virtual spaces implicate cultural diversity within the SEE region.

Historical grievances and antagonistic discourses at the political level have dampened the curiosity of diverse societies and communities to engage in reciprocal visits to the countries in question. Visits and frequent travels have traditionally facilitated encounters with cultural sites, museums, and archaeological sites, allowing individuals to acquaint themselves with local traditions, customs, and the historical narratives of the destination. However, due to the infrequency of such visits, technology can serve as an avenue to invigorate the curiosity of these societies. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the urgency to “foster the digital transformation of the heritage sector”, recognizing its potential to both accentuate and alleviate existing disparities and inequalities. (Europa Nostra, 2020, p. 7).

This field unquestionably presents its challenges since it is not easy to create access to heritage and cultural artifacts in many constituent countries of this region due to its lack of economic potential. The existence of shared political will is crucial. In the absence or hesitance of politics, support should be provided by civil society, philanthropists, and international partners interested in seeing the region prosper. Although everything starts with the willingness to bring this heritage closer to the region’s citizens, appropriate policies are needed to avoid past misunderstandings and prejudices and to ensure that such platforms have a more inclusive approach. Another crucial element is also financial funds and technological development because “the digitalization gap between smaller and bigger heritage organizations can lead to a worrying lack of diversity in cultural and heritage content (for example, crafts museums tend to be smaller and have less budget for digital tools)” (Europa Nostra, 2020, p. 8).

Acknowledging the presence of various marginalized areas in the SEE region, particularly within the Western Balkans, which unfortunately lack technological development, is crucial. When discussing digital preservation and cultural heritage access, ensuring inclusivity and equal opportunities for all is essential.

This digital accessibility provides numerous benefits. Firstly, it allows students to engage in virtual visits within their schools, expanding their knowledge and understanding of different cultural heritage sites. Secondly, it serves as a cultural inclusion for communities residing in marginalized areas. Through digital platforms, individuals in these areas can actively participate in and connect with the region's cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and integration.

Moreover, digital preservation and access allow individuals from other regions to explore and learn about the cultural heritage of the specific countries within the region. This access becomes especially valuable when it is not feasible for them to engage in live experiences due to logistical or other constraints.

By ensuring widespread digital access to cultural heritage, the region can overcome geographical limitations and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and appreciation among its diverse inhabitants. Furthermore, it enhances regional integration and fosters a sense of interconnectedness among SEE citizens.

It is vital to address the primary challenges faced by these countries, namely the “main issues facing the preservation of cultural heritage”, specifically the lack of funding (Anasgainutdin, 2023, para. 2). While it may appear premature to discuss digital advancements in this field, it is essential to recognize the urgent need for financial resources to prevent the deterioration or destruction of historical sites, buildings, and artifacts. “Many historical sites, buildings, and artifacts are in danger of deterioration or destruction due to a lack of financial resources” (Anasgainutdin, 2023, para. 2).

However, efforts to protect these valuable resources can be concurrent with implementing digitization programs. “Governments and organizations need to prioritize funding for cultural preservation projects and allocate sufficient resources to protect these treasures” (Anasgainutdin, 2023, para. 2). Simultaneously, it is crucial to take ground-breaking initiatives by embracing digital platforms to preserve and provide access to heritage and cultural artifacts.

This innovative approach can be realized through the establishment of virtual museums, online archives, and interactive experiences. These platforms offer individuals the opportunity to explore and engage with cultural heritage remotely, thereby enhancing accessibility and ensuring immersive experiences for those unable to visit these sites physically.

By merging financial support for cultural preservation with digital initiatives, these countries can foster an inclusive and sustainable means of safeguarding their cultural heritage for future generations.

5. Preserving Traditions and Nurturing Intangible Heritage in Southeastern Europe

Intangible cultural heritage is unique and precious and very much related to a nation's identity. “It includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.” (UNESCO, para. 1). UNESCO has undertaken initiatives to promote and protect intangible cultural heritage worldwide, including in Southeastern Europe. Until now, the sharing and accepting advancement between countries in the region relies on various projects led by the EU or UNESCO, who foster participation in such projects aiming to promote cooperation and

sharing of data on cultural heritage.

From the time when the “World Heritage List”, the most recognizable model of UNESCO activity, came into being, the process of creating knowledge resources about the most significant historical monuments of world heritage has commenced (Konach, 2015, p. 2).

In promoting cultural heritage in the Southeastern Europe region, these countries mainly implement individual strategies and policies through cultural and public diplomacy to effectively promote their cultural identities. This can be attributed to historical events and a desire to open their countries to the region and the global community. These strategies demonstrate a well-considered and implemented approach on an individual level, surpassing the regional level in terms of effectiveness.

Collaborative projects recognize cultural heritage as inter-exchangeable elements, but cohesive and unified regional policies are needed to promote intangible cultural heritage beyond national borders effectively.

This absence of a unifying framework results in occasional rivalries among states, each striving to promote distinct characteristics tied to national pride within this domain.

This, “unfortunately”, has been observed “from the very beginning of the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage functioning”, highlighting tendencies of constant rivalry between states within the framework of the created description of historical monuments under UNESCO protection (Konach, 2015, p. 2). This implies that instead of focusing on “the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage”, which is “in need of urgent safeguarding”, policies could be devised on how these elements of each country can be advanced in the direction of the promotion of cultural heritage from one country to another reciprocally. By presenting these elements related to intangible cultural heritage, each country can choose what it wishes to promote beyond its borders (which requires bilateral, trilateral, or multiparty-level policies). These are precisely the elements that can strengthen societal relations and interactivity in the regional space.

These elements “also contain an interpretation of representing people and places and an understanding of space and time” (Konach, 2015, p. 2) of the country they belong to. Regardless of how connected each country may be to these elements and how they may explore the possibility of promoting them within the country’s tourism industry or through specialized agencies, it is still not sufficient to increase sensitivity at a regional level in terms of inclusiveness and diversity sharing concerning regional intangible cultural heritage results. Therefore, it is necessary to have as many projects or initiatives as possible with reciprocal benefits, which are agreed upon in advance by the countries in the region, who see this cultural wealth as a sphere of movement from one country to another.

To contextualize this with an example, festive events can serve as a concrete case. Albania annually celebrates “Dita e Verës” (The Summer Day - National Celebration) on March 14. This longstanding Albanian fest incorporates various traditional elements, such as gastronomy, attire, rituals, and nature, centered with celebrations mainly in Elbasan and celebrated throughout Albania as a national holiday. The festivities on this day, beyond Elbasan and across the country, can extend to another receptive host in the region who may be interested in hosting the celebration. Drawing inspiration from the same ethos of national festivity, this host could reciprocally organize any national celebration in an Albanian city on the corresponding date of the celebration. Over time, these festivities could be circulated across various host countries within the region. Such exchanges facilitate improved interaction and understanding of the distinct cultural heritages within the region and present a viable strategy for cultural diversity and enhancing tourism.

Consequently, these events may attract domestic visitors who travel to the host country to participate in the celebrations, thereby becoming a significant tourist attraction for international visitors. Moreover, these initiatives can extend beyond national celebrations to include other events that advance circulating cultural practices. Through these promotional endeavors, which encompass regional “circulating culture” strategies, reciprocal programs can be developed within the festival domain, as it is a well-established practice, along with activities related to arts, crafts, folklore, dance, and national celebrations. Emphasizing the importance of circulating such events, it is crucial to note that “is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills” (UNESCO, n.d, para. 3) that is transmitted beyond national borders, enriching the culturally diverse regional sphere and fostering intercultural dialogue as part of a broader regional society.

6. Forging Unity Through Strategies for Inclusive Societies in the SEE Region

In the contemporary era of globalization, which exerts profound influence across various domains of human existence, it is widely acknowledged that “the world is more interconnected than ever before. Indeed, the pace of change will accelerate as political, economic, and social networks become increasingly intertwined and interdependent” (Cantle, 2013, p. 1).

The diverse cultures found in South-eastern Europe (SEE) exhibit a rich array of ethnic groups, resulting in a plethora of linguistic, religious, traditional, and festive elements. Consequently, the intricate fabric of cultural variations in the region has prompted complex reactions from governments. “In the face of this broader diversity and changing patterns of identity, governmental responses have been ambivalent.” (Cantle, 2013, p. 5).

There is a prevailing tendency, particularly at the national level, where issues concerning interculturalism are not adequately addressed, leading to persisting and anticipated challenges in embracing diversity. Furthermore, these challenges are expected to be even more pressing at the regional level. It has become evident that, for the most part, national efforts tend to “reinforce” the political and social “view of national identity through such measures as the teaching of national history and promoting national citizenship and identity” (Cantle, 2013, p. 5).

Nevertheless, it is possible to educate and promote national citizenship while acknowledging and respecting diversity and other cultural identities within the society. However, the inclination to rigidly uphold the concept of the integrity of national borders and governance while rejecting “the interdependence brought about by globalization” (Cantle, 2013, p. 5) perpetuates a sense of fear towards the “other”.

It is crucial to build a sense of understanding and a culture of inclusion to develop a collective notion of civic citizenship that respects diverse cultural identities, particularly in societies with a predominantly heterogeneous composition. Therefore, it is necessary to initiate efforts at the national level in order to advance them more broadly at the regional level. It is evident that globalization has a somewhat homogenizing influence on diverse cultures, “and the idea of mindless homogenization greatly underestimates the capacity of human beings to be creative and innovative in the face of cultural challenges” (Berger & Huntington, 2002, p. 11). In this regard, interculturalism is essential for the cultural wealth it represents. Not only at the local level but also at the regional level, leadership and visionary guidance are indispensable for the successful implementation and realization of interculturalism. This necessitates formulating a novel meta-narrative that supplants the outdated ideals and divisive aspects associated with multiculturalism that SEE societies still witness. The adoption of a fresh perspective requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach. By embracing interculturalism through collaborative and participatory approaches, societies can harness the manifold benefits arising from diverse

cultural backgrounds, fostering meaningful dialogue, reciprocal respect, and inclusive acknowledgment. This transformative process mandates leaders exhibit forward-thinking mindsets, active engagement, and group collaborative efforts. Consequently, intercultural leadership is pivotal in establishing inclusive societies that prioritize equity, inclusivity, and mutual understanding. Civil society and other actors/stakeholders can assume initiatives that counter “identity politics” (Cantle, 2013, p. 15) and need “a new vision of a future society in which people collaborate across boundaries on a shared agenda” (ibid, 15), overcoming the obstacles created by traditional diplomacy and egocentric politics.

Cultural and public diplomacy can significantly contribute to advancing intercultural understanding and promote collaborative and participatory initiatives for inclusive societies at the regional level. These diplomatic efforts aim to build bridges between cultures, fostering dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation. By employing cultural diplomacy through governments, non-governmental organizations, and cultural institutions, the main activities could be concentrated as a start in facilitating intercultural education programs and experiential learning opportunities equally at SEE countries. Parallely, other initiatives and activities in other fields can help develop cultural navigational skills and enhance individuals' competence and confidence to engage with those with different backgrounds and perspectives.

7. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article highlights the significance of cultural diversity, preservation, and cooperation in Southeast Europe. The region's rich cultural heritage has the potential to bridge acceptance, understanding, and collaboration among nations if used with goodwill and strategic care to earn benefits. Despite historical tensions, conflicts, and political transitions, there is a growing recognition of the need to prioritize cultural values and promote cultural sharing and acknowledgment through key initiatives, strategies, and policies, as mentioned earlier. Such initiatives through public diplomacy are essential in fostering social cohesion, peaceful relations, understanding, and cooperation. By emphasizing a forward-looking perspective that considers future scenarios for the region, strategies and policies can be developed to promote acceptance, inclusivity, and cultural sharing among Southeast European communities.

Future trends and scenarios, such as digital preservation and access, intangible cultural heritage, and collaborative, participatory approaches, offer opportunities to enhance intercultural expression, preserve heritage, and foster virtual communities. They also underscore the importance of acknowledging historical grievances, addressing past wrongs, and promoting reconciliation. To advance the integration of cultural values into strategies and policies that prioritize acceptance, sharing, and future scenarios, collaborative efforts, inclusive approaches, and the involvement of local communities, international community, experts, policymakers, and cultural institutions are necessary. Southeast European countries can bridge cultural gaps, promote understanding, and cultivate a sense of collective identity only through collective effort and regional leadership.

Cultural and public diplomacy are essential in building and fostering dialogue between different cultural societies. These diplomatic efforts facilitate cultural interactivity and mutual respect and can be realized through cultural exchange, joint artistic performances, cultural festivals, and academic collaborations. As previously mentioned, the concept of “circulating culture” explores how cultural elements can move and be promoted between countries through various programs for mutual benefits. Promoting cultural diversity and cooperation is also vital in education. A more inclusive and interconnected society can be created by incorporating cultural

education and intercultural programs into the curriculum through joint initiatives. This approach allows younger generations to develop a sense of belonging, respect, shared identity, and openness to different perspectives and to “the other”.

Culture is a 'keyword' for further improvement, considering the geopolitical conflict, inter-ethnic grievances, and an unfinished reconciliation process in the SEE region. Adopting a forward-looking perspective, integrating cultural values into strategies and policies, and engaging in collaborative efforts can build a safer future for the next generations, a more harmonious, sustainable, and prosperous region - placing its SEE citizens at the center.

8. Recommendations

Promoting understanding and empathy and finding common ground is imperative for the societies of the SEE region. Culturally shared activities, such as music, art, literature, and cuisine, can serve as a common ground where people from different countries in the European Southeastern region can connect and find shared experiences. It highlights the similarities rather than focusing on the differences, encouraging dialogue, appreciation, and mutual respect.

Recognizing and acknowledging the shared cultural heritage of these countries can foster a sense of shared history and identity. This can be achieved by protecting and preserving shared historical sites, monuments, and artifacts while encouraging joint research and educational programs to promote a comprehensive understanding of the region's past.

Cultural diplomacy and collaboration can facilitate such goals. Engaging in public and cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as joint artistic performances, cultural festivals, and academic collaborations, can facilitate constructive dialogue and relationships between Southeastern European countries. Cultural institutions and artists can promote peace, reconciliation, and understanding by encouraging cross-border cultural projects and collaborations.

“Culture Circulation” can serve as a concept to ideate moving platforms from one country to another to promote cultural elements from intangible cultural heritage. Celebrations, festivals, art events, excursions, and folklore events can be promoted through culture circulation platforms.

Education and Intercultural Programs: Integrating cultural education and intercultural programs into the curriculum through joint initiatives can help create a more inclusive and interconnected society. Through these initiatives, young generations can learn about the region's shared history and diverse cultures, fostering a sense of belonging, respect, and openness to different perspectives.

Acknowledgment of past wrongs is an immediate necessity. Addressing past injustices and acknowledging historical grievances is crucial for healing and reconciliation. By openly acknowledging the wrongs committed during conflicts and working towards reconciliation, Southeastern European countries can promote a climate of forgiveness, understanding, and resilience for a better future.

Future research should focus on case studies and comparative analysis because it is crucial to compare and analyze the cultural preservation initiatives and strategies implemented in different countries within Southeast Europe. This comparative analysis will help identify successful approaches and lessons learned and provide a broader understanding of the cultural dynamics and differences within the region.

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