



Navigating Geopolitics through Culture: An Analysis of Ukraine's Strategic Communication and Cultural Diplomacy in its EU Accession Bid

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Abstract

In contemporary international relations, cultural diplomacy and strategic communication are pivotal instruments of foreign policy, particularly for nations undergoing significant geopolitical transitions. This paper examines the role of these soft power tools in Ukraine's ongoing pursuit of European Union membership. Using a qualitative comparative case study methodology, this study analyzes Ukraine's approach in the context of two distinct EU accession precedents: the successful integration of Croatia and the stalled candidacy of Turkey. The analysis reveals that while crisis-driven communication has generated short-term international support for Ukraine, long-term success hinges on adopting a process-oriented, institutionally embedded cultural diplomacy strategy, similar to Croatia's model. Key findings indicate that sporadic, event-focused initiatives are insufficient to overcome deep-seated political and cultural barriers, a lesson underscored by Turkey's experience. The paper concludes that for Ukraine, a sustained and strategic cultural engagement is fundamental to navigating the complexities of EU integration and solidifying its European identity.

Keywords: EU accession, soft power, cultural diplomacy, strategic communication, Ukraine, European integration, comparative case study

Introduction

Since the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine has unequivocally pursued a path toward European integration, a process that has been fraught with challenges and delays. The

full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 dramatically accelerated this trajectory, transforming Ukraine's EU candidacy from a distant aspiration into a geopolitical imperative for both Kyiv and Brussels. This new urgency, however, has also fostered overly optimistic timelines, creating a potential disconnect between public expectations and the procedural realities of accession. In the current geopolitical environment, characterized by blocization and protracted conflict, Ukraine's integration is as critical for the EU's strategic autonomy as it is for Ukraine's sovereignty and security.

Amidst the hard power realities of war, the instruments of soft power—namely strategic communication and cultural diplomacy—have emerged as crucial arenas for advancing Ukraine's European ambitions. These tools are essential for building and maintaining international coalitions, countering Russian disinformation, and demonstrating an intrinsic alignment with European values. However, the effectiveness of Ukraine's efforts in this domain remains a subject of critical inquiry. Early successes in mobilizing global support have been tempered by emerging challenges, including shifting public opinion in key partner countries and internal generational divides on the nation's future. This suggests potential shortcomings in the current strategy, which may stem from an insufficient analysis of past EU enlargements and a lack of depth in the practical application of cultural diplomacy.

This paper addresses this gap by critically analyzing the role and efficacy of strategic communication and cultural diplomacy in Ukraine's EU accession process. It posits that a deeper understanding of these instruments, informed by comparative historical precedents, is vital for developing a more robust and sustainable strategy. By examining the divergent accession paths of Croatia and Turkey, this study aims to extract actionable insights for Ukraine, moving the discourse from a descriptive account of activities to a critical analysis of strategy and impact.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study lies at the intersection of strategic communication, cultural diplomacy, and soft power. Strategic communication is broadly understood as the purposeful use of communication by an organization or state to fulfill its mission, focusing on the development and delivery of messages to achieve specific political goals (Bennett, 2020). Cultural diplomacy, a key component of public diplomacy, employs cultural exchanges, artistic endeavors, and educational programs to foster mutual understanding and build favorable foreign relations (Carta & Higgott, 2020). While distinct, the two concepts are deeply intertwined; cultural diplomacy often serves as the content and context for strategic communication, using cultural assets to create relationships and build resilience against hostile narratives.

The academic field of Cultural Diplomacy (CD) is relatively young, gaining prominence during the Cold War as a tool of ideological competition (Cull, 2019). Despite its widespread use, a universally accepted definition remains elusive. Scholarship often distinguishes between interest-driven governmental practice (cultural diplomacy)

and value-driven exchanges led by non-state actors (cultural relations) (Ang et al., 2015). Dragičević Šešić (2017) elaborates on this, noting that cultural relations are often based on principles of equality and solidarity, contrasting with official CD actions that align with geopolitical interests. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights the tension between genuine cultural exchange and the instrumentalization of culture for foreign policy objectives.

More recent critical scholarship has questioned the efficacy and inherent assumptions of soft power. Zanella et al. (2024) argue that soft power analysis must move beyond measuring activities to assessing outcomes, including the potential for ideological co-optation or cultural colonization. Their analysis of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) reveals the challenges of promoting a uniform cultural vision, which can lead to internal dissent from artists and external resistance in target countries (the "anti-Hallyu" phenomenon). This underscores a significant pitfall of nation-branding: an overly curated national image can appear inauthentic and generate backlash, undermining its strategic goals. Similarly, van Harm (2010) introduces the concept of "social power," the ability to shape behavior through norms and identities, highlighting that this power is wielded not only by states but also by a complex web of non-state actors, whose influence can either support or subvert official diplomatic efforts.

In the Ukrainian context, academic discourse on these topics intensified after 2014. Scholars like Poltoratska (2025) have examined the Ukrainian language as a tool of cultural diplomacy and symbolic resistance in the digital age. Others, such as Dubov and Dubova (2017), have analyzed cultural diplomacy as a mechanism for implementing the state's strategic narrative. However, much of the domestic scholarship, as Kubko (2022) implicitly notes, has remained descriptive rather than analytical, often failing to provide actionable recommendations. This gap between theoretical discussion and practical application has tangible consequences, as evidenced by polling data that reveals a weakening of support for Ukraine in key allied nations and a growing generational divide within Ukraine itself (Gonik & Ciaramella, 2024; Wike et al., 2024). These trends suggest that Ukraine's current strategic communication is not resonating as effectively as required for a long-term accession process, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and empirically grounded approach.

Methodology

To address the research question concerning the role and effectiveness of cultural diplomacy in Ukraine's EU accession, this study employs a qualitative comparative case study methodology. This approach is well-suited for in-depth, context-rich analysis of complex social and political phenomena, allowing for the exploration of causal mechanisms and the generation of transferable insights (Yin, 2018). The research design focuses on comparing Ukraine's ongoing efforts with the historical precedents of Croatia and Turkey, two countries whose EU accession paths offer valuable, contrasting lessons.

The selection of cases is purposive. Croatia represents a successful, albeit lengthy, accession by a post-conflict state, making it a highly relevant analogue for Ukraine. Its experience offers insights into navigating post-war reconstruction, democratic consolidation, and rigorous EU conditionality. Turkey, conversely, represents a case of stalled accession despite decades of formal candidacy and deep economic integration. Its struggles highlight the critical importance of cultural and political alignment, demonstrating that meeting technical criteria alone is insufficient to overcome perceived value gaps or political opposition within the EU. By juxtaposing these two cases, this study can identify the factors that differentiate successful integration from prolonged stalemate, providing a robust analytical framework for evaluating Ukraine's strategy.

Data for this study were drawn from a range of publicly available sources, spanning the period from 2004 to 2024. The primary data include:

1. **Official Policy Documents:** Strategy documents from Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture, EU Commission progress reports on candidate countries, and official communications related to the accession process.
2. **Scholarly Literature:** Peer-reviewed articles and books on cultural diplomacy, EU enlargement, and the specific political histories of Ukraine, Croatia, and Turkey.
3. **Public Opinion Data:** Reports and datasets from reputable polling organizations such as the Pew Research Center, Eurobarometer, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which provide empirical evidence of audience reception and shifting attitudes.
4. **Think Tank and Media Reports:** Analytical reports and high-quality journalism that offer contemporary analysis and context on the political dynamics of the accession processes.

The analytical process involved a narrative review and synthesis of these sources. For each case, the study identified the key cultural diplomacy and strategic communication initiatives undertaken, the stated objectives of these initiatives, and the documented outcomes and reception. The analysis focused on comparing the strategic logic of each country's approach—distinguishing between sustained, process-oriented strategies and sporadic, event-focused tactics. By systematically comparing these elements across the three cases, the study draws conclusions about the necessary conditions for using cultural diplomacy effectively as a tool for European integration.

Analysis of Case Studies

The analysis of Croatia's and Turkey's EU accession paths provides a critical lens through which to evaluate Ukraine's current strategy. These cases demonstrate that

while economic and legislative alignment are necessary, the success of an integration bid often hinges on the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy in building a shared sense of identity and political will.

Case 1: Croatia's Process-Oriented Success

Croatia's journey to EU membership, finalized in 2013, was the culmination of a decade-long process defined by rigorous conditionality and a concerted effort to realign its national identity with Europe. For a nation emerging from the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, EU membership was not merely a political or economic goal; it was a symbolic "return to Europe," a definitive break from a turbulent Balkan past and an affirmation of its Central European and Mediterranean heritage (Ognyanova, 2020). This powerful narrative of belonging became the cornerstone of its cultural diplomacy.

Crucially, Croatia's strategy was process-oriented and deeply institutionalized. The Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media implemented programs that prioritized long-term, bottom-up cultural cooperation over high-profile but ephemeral events. As noted in its official reports, funding was directed toward co-productions, transnational art projects, and cultural networks that placed Croatian artists and institutions within a broader European context (Ministarstvo kulture RH, 2019). This approach fostered genuine, lasting connections between Croatian civil society and its European counterparts. The focus was not on "promoting Croatia" in a superficial branding sense, but on embedding its cultural sector within European collaborative structures, thereby demonstrating its inherent "Europeanness" through action rather than rhetoric. Despite significant challenges, including the EU's perceived lack of support during the war and rising domestic Euroskepticism, this sustained, value-based strategy maintained broad political consensus and ultimately proved successful (Maldini, 2017).

Case 2: Turkey's Event-Focused Stalemate

Turkey's relationship with the EU presents a stark contrast. Despite being a NATO member, a key economic partner, and an official candidate since 1999, its accession process has been effectively frozen for years. While numerous factors contributed to this stalemate, including democratic backsliding and geopolitical disputes, the shortcomings of its cultural diplomacy played a significant role in its failure to build a compelling case for membership among the European public.

Unlike Croatia's institutionalized approach, Turkey's efforts were often event-focused and reactive, designed to counter negative perceptions rather than build a proactive narrative of shared identity. Initiatives like Turkish-German literature and film festivals were valuable but remained discrete events, failing to create a sustained, transformative dialogue (Können, 2009). They did not fundamentally alter the prevailing European narrative of Turkey as culturally "other," a perception that populist politicians frequently exploited. Many Turks came to view the EU as a

"Christian Club," believing that no amount of technical compliance could bridge this perceived cultural and civilizational divide (Terzioğlu, 2023). This highlights a critical lesson: when cultural diplomacy is not integrated into a broader, consistent strategy of political and social alignment, it is insufficient to overcome deep-seated skepticism. It becomes a series of public relations exercises rather than a genuine process of integration.

Case 3: Ukraine’s Current Trajectory and Challenges

Since 2022, Ukraine has executed a masterful campaign of crisis communication, successfully framing its defense as a fight for shared European values. This has generated unprecedented political support and fast-tracked its candidate status. However, emerging data indicates that this initial success may be fragile, and the country faces significant challenges in transitioning to a long-term integration strategy.

Polling data reveals two worrying trends. First, a generational divide is emerging within Ukraine regarding the war's objectives and outcomes. As a Carnegie Endowment poll shows, older Ukrainians remain highly optimistic and committed to total victory, while younger generations exhibit more pragmatism and weariness (Gonik & Ciaramella, 2024). This internal divergence complicates the formation of a unified national narrative required for the arduous accession process.

Figure 1. The Ukrainian Generational Divide in War Outcome Prospects

Indicator / Age Group	18-29 years	30-44 years	45-59 years	60+ years
Ukraine is winning	47%	56%	60%	73%
Neither side is winning	43%	33%	31%	19%
Fight until all territory is liberated	54%	61%	67%	74%
Open to negotiations with Russia	40%	33%	27%	20%

**Source: Adapted from Gonik & Ciaramella (2024), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

Second, public support in key partner countries is eroding. Pew Research Center data indicates that the percentage of Americans who believe the U.S. is providing "too much" support to Ukraine has quadrupled from 7% in March 2022 to 31% in April 2024 (Wike et al., 2024). Similarly, Eurobarometer data from shortly after the invasion already showed ambivalent support for Ukraine's membership in several EU countries, with significant opposition in nations like Germany, France, and Austria

(Johnson, 2022). This suggests that the initial wave of solidarity is giving way to war fatigue and domestic concerns, a vulnerability that hostile disinformation campaigns can exploit.

Figure 2. Support for Ukraine's EU Membership (Spring 2022)

Country / Bloc	In Favour	Against	Don't Know
EU Average	66%	25%	9%
Portugal	87%	7%	6%
Poland	84%	9%	7%
Germany	61%	32%	7%
France	62%	28%	10%
Austria	50%	39%	11%

**Source: Adapted from Johnson (2022), Eurobarometer.*

These data points underscore the limitations of a communication strategy heavily reliant on the urgencies of war. To secure its European future, Ukraine must complement its crisis communication with a long-term cultural diplomacy strategy modeled on Croatia's success: one that is institutional, collaborative, and focused on demonstrating shared values through sustained engagement, not just compelling wartime narratives.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of Croatia, Turkey, and Ukraine yields a crucial insight: for EU candidate countries, particularly those with complex geopolitical histories, cultural diplomacy is not an optional add-on but a strategic imperative. The divergent outcomes of Croatia and Turkey demonstrate that the **how** is as important as the **what**. Croatia's success was rooted in a process-oriented strategy that systematically embedded its cultural and civil society sectors into European networks. This approach built trust, demonstrated a deep and authentic commitment to European values, and created a powerful constituency for its membership both at home and across the EU. It was a long-term investment in building relationships, not just managing perceptions.

Turkey's experience, in contrast, serves as a cautionary tale. Its reliance on more sporadic, event-driven cultural initiatives failed to shift the deeply entrenched narrative of cultural difference. Without a consistent, overarching strategy to foster genuine integration and dialogue, these efforts were insufficient to counter political opposition and public skepticism. This confirms the arguments of critical scholars like

Zanella et al. (2024), who warn that nation-branding can backfire if it is perceived as inauthentic or fails to engage with the complexities of cultural identity. Turkey's case shows that soft power cannot be deployed like a tactical weapon; it must be cultivated like a long-term relationship.

For Ukraine, the implications are profound. The country's wartime strategic communication has been remarkably effective in the short term, creating a window of opportunity for accelerated integration. However, the data on waning international support and internal divisions signals that this window may be closing. The current strategy, born of crisis, must now evolve to meet the demands of a long, arduous accession process. Relying solely on the narrative of heroic defense is unsustainable. War fatigue is a real and growing threat, and the political attention of EU member states is notoriously fickle.

Therefore, Ukraine must pivot towards a dual-track approach. It must continue its effective crisis communication to maintain immediate support, but it must simultaneously build a long-term, Croatian-style cultural diplomacy framework. This involves empowering institutions like the Ukrainian Institute and civil society organizations to forge deep, collaborative partnerships across Europe. The focus should be on co-production, academic exchange, and joint projects that demonstrate Ukraine's role not just as a recipient of European aid, but as a vital contributor to Europe's cultural and intellectual life. Such a strategy would build the social and cultural capital needed to sustain political will within the EU through the inevitable challenges and delays of the accession process.

Conclusion

The path to European Union membership is a transformative process that extends far beyond legislative reform and economic alignment. It is fundamentally a project of identity, values, and mutual understanding. This paper has argued that strategic communication and cultural diplomacy are indispensable instruments for navigating this complex journey. By analyzing the successful accession of Croatia and the stalled candidacy of Turkey, we have highlighted the critical distinction between a sustained, process-oriented strategy of cultural integration and a reactive, event-focused approach to public relations.

While Ukraine has achieved remarkable success in mobilizing international support through its crisis communications, this momentum is not guaranteed to last. The challenges of war fatigue, shifting public opinion in the EU, and internal societal divisions require a more durable and proactive strategy. The primary contribution of this study is its clear recommendation for Ukrainian policymakers: to secure the nation's European future, it is essential to complement its immediate communication efforts with a long-term, institutionalized cultural diplomacy that fosters deep and lasting connections with European societies.

Ultimately, Ukraine's success will depend on its ability to convince 27 member states and their citizens that it is not just a strategic buffer zone, but an integral and indispensable part of the European family. This cannot be achieved through declarations alone. It must be demonstrated through sustained, collaborative, and authentic cultural engagement. By learning from the successes of Croatia and the shortcomings of Turkey, Ukraine can build a resilient and effective soft power strategy capable of weathering the political storms ahead and anchoring its place firmly within the European Union.

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