

The cultural activity of communist Romania in New York after its admission to the UN

Gabriel Zvîncă*

Abstract: After its admission to the United Nations, Romania made use of the Permanent Mission in New York to promote a favourable image of the country through an effort specific to cultural diplomacy. The motivation behind these efforts were strictly related to the state's interests to assert itself on the international scene through soft-power instruments, but also to help develop the national economy, by promoting Romanian culture and tourism. Thus, art exhibitions, recitals and folklore tours, film evenings, publications and collaborations with other missions were organized, all to project an attractive image outside. The paper proposed an analysis of these practices as a form of foreign policy through culture, placing them at the intersection of pragmatism and international legitimacy.

From a methodological point of view, the paper aimed to answer the following questions: what were the reasons behind the cultural diplomatic activity? How were the state's promotion mechanisms put into operation? what role did the Permanent Mission play? What objectives did Romanian cultural diplomacy pursue at the UN in the first phase of multilateral integration? Were there any cooperation with other missions in cultural diplomacy efforts? To answer these questions, the paper used a complex methodology, derived from concepts specific to cultural and multilateral diplomacy combined with quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The paper made use of the information from the primary sources belonging to the Diplomatic Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, especially those that reflect the activity of the Permanent Mission. Secondary sources were considered to reflect the foreign policy objectives of communist Romania, but also how the economic targets were formulated in accordance with the state's development plans.

Keywords: *United Nations, cultural diplomacy, soft power, Cold War*

* Ph.D. Candidate, Doctoral School "History. Civilization. Culture", Babeş-Bolyai University, gabriel.zvinca7@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The end of the Second World War and the establishment of a new political regime in Bucharest fundamentally reshaped Romania's domestic and foreign policy orientation. The communist takeover marked a profound rupture with the interwar political system and initiated a process of rapid and coercive transformation of the state and society. On the domestic level, the new authorities systematically dismantled political pluralism through the prohibition of opposition parties, the arrest and imprisonment of former political leaders, and the repression of real or perceived opponents of the regime. These measures were accompanied by structural changes, most notably the collectivization of agriculture and the nationalization of industry, finance, and key economic sectors, which aimed to remodel the Romanian economy and social order according to Soviet-inspired socialist principles.

In the field of foreign policy, Romania's reorientation was equally radical. The postwar communist leadership pursued a policy of alignment with the East, driven by both ideological affinity and strategic dependence on the Soviet Union. During this early period, Romanian decision-makers were primarily concerned with demonstrating loyalty to Moscow and complying with the political and strategic expectations of the dominant power in the region. This attitude was clearly illustrated by Romania's reaction to the Tito–Stalin split, when the Romanian Workers' Party firmly endorsed Stalin's accusations against the Yugoslav leadership and unequivocally positioned itself within the Soviet camp². The episode underscored the absence of autonomous foreign-policy maneuvering and the priority given to ideological conformity and alliance discipline.

Within the broader international context shaped by the emerging bipolar division of the world, Romania sought to consolidate its ties with the Soviet Union and with the other socialist satellite states. Between 1948 and 1949, Bucharest concluded a series of treaties of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance that formalized its postwar alliance network and anchored the country firmly within the Eastern bloc. These arrangements were later institutionalized through Romania's inclusion in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and, subsequently, in the Warsaw Pact, which together structured the country's economic and security relations throughout much of the Cold War.

Parallel to these developments, a new framework of global governance was taking shape with the creation of the United Nations. Conceived as the successor to the League of Nations, the UN was established with the explicit aim, articulated in the preamble of its Charter, of saving future generations from the scourge of war. To this end, it was endowed with mechanisms for the maintenance of international peace and security, including the principles and procedures of collective security enshrined

² Avram 2021, pp. 207-212.

in Chapters VI and VII of the Charter. Beyond its security mandate, the United Nations also aspired to function as a comprehensive international machinery for the promotion of economic and social development, seeking to advance prosperity, social progress, and improved living standards for peoples across the world.

Considering the broader background, Romania's admission to the United Nations opened a new and distinct path for international engagement that complemented its rigid alliance commitments within the Eastern bloc. In the multilateral setting of the organization, cultural diplomacy emerged as a particularly suitable instrument, allowing Romanian authorities to project an image of normality, creativity, and openness without directly challenging the political constraints imposed by bloc discipline.

The establishment and consolidation of the Permanent Mission in New York became central to these efforts. Beyond its formal diplomatic functions, the Mission gradually evolved into a platform for the promotion of Romanian culture, traditions, and artistic production. Through exhibitions, concerts, film screenings, literary events, and thematic cultural programs, Romanian representatives sought to shape perceptions among diplomats, international civil servants, and broader audiences connected to the UN fora. These initiatives were not merely symbolic gestures, they reflected a calculated attempt to employ soft-power tools to enhance international visibility, cultivate goodwill, and counterbalance the predominantly ideological image associated with Eastern European socialist states during the early Cold War.

At the same time, cultural diplomacy at the UN was closely linked to pragmatic economic considerations. By highlighting national heritage, folklore, and contemporary cultural achievements, Romanian officials aimed to stimulate interest in tourism and to create favorable conditions for economic exchanges, particularly in sectors compatible with the country's development strategies. In this sense, cultural activities functioned as an indirect extension of economic diplomacy, aligned with broader state objectives of industrialization, foreign trade expansion, and international recognition of Romania as a sovereign and capable actor within the socialist camp.

The UN framework also facilitated interaction and cooperation with other permanent missions, offering opportunities for joint cultural initiatives and informal exchanges that would have been difficult to pursue in strictly bilateral contexts dominated by ideological divisions. Such cooperation contributed to Romania's gradual socialization into multilateral diplomatic practices and helped its representatives gain experience in operating within a complex international environment. Cultural diplomacy thus became a space where pragmatism and the search for international legitimacy intersected, allowing Romania to navigate between ideological constraints and the desire for broader engagement.

Previous analysis on the broad topic of Romania's early postwar foreign policy identified the ideological alignment and limited room for maneuver, while in

parallel the main objective of being admitted to the United Nations Organization was followed. In this respect, several authors have sought to understand why and how Romania has pursued a specific foreign policy during this period. For example, Gheorghe Ciobanu analyzed the main foreign policy events and explained the modality in which Romania positioned itself internationally, but his approach was more oriented to the decision mechanism, the reasons why the Communist Party decided to adopt certain decisions, and did not pay attention to the day-to-day diplomatic activity and importance of other processes.³ Cezar Stanciu, on the other hand, focused more on the steps needed for a diplomatic decision to be taken, and presented the main effects of such decision. In his analysis, he particularly was interested in the method in which the foreign policy of Romania aligned with the Soviet one. Moreover, the researcher also paid attention to the head of the Communist Party and the importance of the leaders in shaping the foreign orientation of Romania. However, Stanciu has left aside the importance of the other second-tier leaders, such as Ion Gheorghe Maurer, longest serving prime-minister of Romania, or Corneliu Mănescu, longest serving foreign affairs minister, in the foreign orientation of Romania.⁴ Thus, Stanciu, just as Ciobanu, had a larger-lens approach to foreign policy, and did not consider the importance of small steps taken into one direction or other in other for the bigger objective to be accomplished. Paul Nistor, focused on Romania's relations with the international organizations, analyzed in detail the efforts of the Romanian Communist diplomacy in this direction⁵, and concluded that it was one of the main objectives pursued by the Communist Party, given the legitimacy it would be gained. Therefore, the present article purpose is to shed a light on to the importance of daily diplomacy in shaping the heavily important decisions of a Communist state. By doing so, one could understand the small steps taken by Romania to develop an independent foreign policy by emphasizing cultural diplomacy as a vehicle for appropriation to states with different political regimes.

The paper situates Romanian cultural diplomacy at the UN within the early phase of the country's multilateral integration, highlighting how culture was instrumentalized as a foreign policy tool. The focus on the Permanent Mission's activity reveals the mechanisms through which state objectives were translated into concrete initiatives, as well as the limits and possibilities of cultural action in a highly polarized international system. In doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of communist Romania's external behavior, showing that even during periods of strict alignment, diplomacy through culture offered a degree of flexibility and strategic relevance within the multilateral arena.

³ Ciobanu 2006.

⁴ Stanciu 2008; *Idem* 2009a. *Idem* 2009b.

⁵ Nistor 2011, pp. 329-344; *Idem* 2013, pp. 207-220; *Idem* 2014.

2. The United Nations framework for cultural cooperation

The United Nations was conceived from the beginning as an organization with a broad mandate that extended well beyond the maintenance of international peace and security. According to Article 1, paragraph 3 of the UN Charter,⁶ one of its fundamental purposes was to “achieve international cooperation” in solving economic, social, and cultural problems. This formulation reflected the belief, widely shared among the founders, that durable peace could not be secured solely through political and military arrangements, but also required sustained cooperation in areas that shaped societies and human development more broadly, including culture and education. The line also reflects the lessons learned from the League of Nations experience.⁷

This commitment was further specified in several key provisions of the Charter. Article 13, paragraph 1(b), entrusted the General Assembly with the role of initiating studies and making recommendations for the purpose of promoting international cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields.⁸ Similarly, Article 55 stated that the United Nations should promote solutions to international economic, social, health, and related problems, as well as international cultural and educational cooperation. Article 57 extended this logic to the broader UN system, stipulating that the specialized agencies brought into relationship with the Organization were also expected to contribute to the realization of these objectives within their respective fields of competence.⁹

Within this institutional architecture, a particularly important role was assigned to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Composed, during the Cold War, of 54 member states, ECOSOC functioned as the central coordinating body for the UN’s economic, social, and cultural activities. Under Article 62 of the Charter, the Council was empowered to initiate studies and reports on international economic, social, cultural, educational, and health matters, and to make recommendations addressed both to the General Assembly and to the specialized agencies.¹⁰ Through these mechanisms, ECOSOC became a key forum for debating cultural issues and for translating abstract principles of cooperation into concrete policy discussions and institutional practices.

Taken together, these provisions allow us to argue that the United Nations, through its Charter and through bodies such as ECOSOC, aspired to play a central role in the discussion, facilitation, and coordination of cultural solutions at the level of humanity as a whole. Even in the context of the Cold War, when ideological polarization deeply affected international relations, the UN framework preserved a

⁶ *The United Nations Charter*. 1945. “Article 1, (3)”.

⁷ Alger 2006, p. 72.

⁸ *The United Nations Charter*. 1945. “Article 13, (1) b)”.

⁹ *Ibidem*, “Article 55” – “Article 57”.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, “Article 62”.

normative and institutional space in which culture and education could be approached as shared concerns rather than purely ideological instruments.

In order to ensure that these objectives could be effectively pursued, UN member states had already begun, during the final years of the Second World War, to discuss the creation of a dedicated international body responsible for cultural and educational matters. This initiative was explicitly conceived as a continuation and modernization of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation established under the League of Nations. The result of these discussions was the establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The Constitution of UNESCO was ratified on 4 November 1946,¹¹ and the organization was headquartered in Paris, symbolically linking cultural cooperation with the European intellectual traditions.

The preamble of the UNESCO Constitution famously proclaimed that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” This statement encapsulated a foundational assumption of postwar internationalism – that peace was not merely a matter of interstate agreements, but also of values, education, mutual understanding, and cultural exchange. Accordingly, Article 1 of the Constitution defined UNESCO’s mission as contributing to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, and culture, thereby reinforcing respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights.

Returning to the broader UN framework, it is also important to note the symbolic and practical significance of the relocation of the Organization’s headquarters to New York in 1951.¹² This move transformed Manhattan into one of the most important nodes of global diplomacy, alongside its already established role as a financial and commercial centre. The presence of the UN and of numerous permanent missions reshaped the city’s international profile, turning it into a hub of global governance, diplomatic exchange, and transnational interaction.

As a consequence, New York experienced a period of remarkable cultural and intellectual dynamism. The concentration of diplomats, international civil servants, journalists, artists, and intellectuals fostered an environment conducive to cultural experimentation and exchange. The UN system’s explicit interest in international cooperation created structural opportunities for cultural and technological collaboration, even against the backdrop of Cold War tensions. In particular, the 1950s and 1960s represented a flourishing period both for the Organization and for the city itself, with galleries, salons, exhibitions, and cultural events in Manhattan benefiting directly from the international presence generated by the UN.

¹¹ *Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. 1946.

¹² *History of United Nations Headquarters*.

In this sense, the UN framework for cultural cooperation functioned as both a normative and a practical platform that mitigated, to some extent, the rigidities of Cold War bipolarity. While political and security issues remained deeply polarized, culture and education offered relatively flexible channels for interaction, dialogue, and mutual visibility. The United Nations, together with its specialized agencies, thus laid the institutional foundations for sustained cultural cooperation, demonstrating that even in a divided world, shared cultural spaces could be created and maintained.

3. Romania's motives and benefits for joining the UN

Within this broader international and institutional context, the newly proclaimed Romanian People's Republic displayed a clear and consistent intention to accede to the United Nations. The process of Romania's admission has been thoroughly analyzed in the specialized literature, most notably in the work of Paul Nistor,¹³ and therefore does not require extensive reiteration. Nevertheless, several of the motivations behind accession deserve to be highlighted, particularly those connected to the cultural dimension of Romania's foreign policy and to the opportunities offered by the UN framework for international cooperation.

From a political and legal standpoint, accession to the United Nations represented an essential step in securing international recognition of Romania's status as an independent, sovereign, and territorially inviolable state. The principles enshrined in the UN Charter, especially those concerning sovereignty, non-intervention, and the equality of states, functioned as important normative guarantees for the young communist regime. In the early Cold War environment, membership in the UN provided Romania with a form of international legitimacy that went beyond bilateral relations and placed the state within a universally recognized system of international law and governance.

Beyond these political considerations, however, UN membership also offered a series of practical and strategic benefits. First, it enabled Romania to initiate contacts and establish channels of cooperation with states with which it had previously had little or no direct interaction. The high-level meetings and informal exchanges taking place on the margins of the General Assembly sessions created opportunities for Romanian diplomats and officials to build networks, explore avenues for cultural cooperation, and engage in technological and scientific exchanges. These interactions were closely connected to Romania's domestic development objectives, as cultural diplomacy and technology transfer were increasingly seen as instruments that could support economic modernization and international visibility.

Second, accession allowed Romania to position itself on major international issues and to participate actively in the drafting and negotiation of resolutions, recommendations, and policy initiatives advanced within the General Assembly, the

¹³ Nistor 2014.

Security Council, and the wider UN system. Through this involvement, Romania gained the opportunity to articulate and defend its interests in a multilateral setting, while simultaneously presenting itself as a constructive and responsible member of the international community.

Third, UN membership facilitated Romania's institutional and diplomatic presence in the United States. The establishment of a Permanent Mission to the United Nations effectively meant opening a second diplomatic representation in the United States, located in New York. This presence placed Romania at the center of global diplomacy, in what was widely perceived as the most important city in the world. From this point, Romanian representatives were able to promote the country internationally, not only through formal diplomatic channels but also through cultural initiatives, public events, and informal interactions within the cosmopolitan environment created by the UN.

Fourth, the United Nations provided Romania with a platform from which it could project an image of itself as a state aligned with the principles of the UN Charter, committed to international peace and security, and open to change and cooperation. In this sense, UN membership was instrumentalized as a means of symbolic repositioning. Romania sought to present itself not merely as a satellite within the socialist bloc, but as a full-fledged participant in the international system, capable of contributing to global discussions on peace, development, and cooperation.

This process of multilateral integration was further reinforced in July 1956, when Romania became a member of UNESCO.¹⁴ Accession to UNESCO significantly expanded Romania's possibilities for involvement in international cultural cooperation, education, and scientific exchange. Together, membership in the UN and UNESCO provided Romania with complementary institutional frameworks through which culture could be mobilized as a tool of foreign policy during the formative years of its multilateral presence in the Cold War international order.

4. Cultural diplomacy and its importance during the Cold War

The acceleration of globalization significantly increased the importance of cultural diplomacy in international relations. In the post-1945 international environment, marked by reconstruction, ideological confrontation, and growing interdependence, states increasingly sought instruments that could complement traditional political tools. Cultural exchange, education, and the circulation of ideas came to be viewed as essential means through which states could assert their presence, shape perceptions, and pursue long-term foreign policy objectives in a divided yet interconnected world. Technology and infrastructure further honed the

¹⁴ *Permanent Delegation of Romania to UNESCO. Short History.*

interdependencies, and states were interested to make themselves known to others, while also attracting benefits.

Diplomacy, in its classical understanding, refers to the conduct of relations between states and other entities by official agents and through peaceful means.¹⁵ More recent definitions have expanded this notion, emphasizing that diplomacy involves the management of relations not only between states, but also between states and a wider range of international actors.¹⁶ Within this broader conceptual framework, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a distinct dimension of diplomatic practice, centered on the mobilization of domestic cultural resources in support of foreign policy goals.

Cultural diplomacy is generally considered a component of public diplomacy and is closely linked to the concept of “soft power” developed by Joseph Nye. From this perspective, states seek to increase their influence and international standing through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Culture, values, and ideas thus become tools for shaping preferences and fostering favorable attitudes abroad.¹⁷ Over time, cultural diplomacy has evolved from the mere presentation of national specificities to a more complex effort aimed at expressing and sustaining a coherent national identity before international audiences.¹⁸

This form of diplomacy has been widely studied in the literature, although definitions vary. A comprehensive formulation is offered by Milton C. Cummings, who defines cultural diplomacy as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.”¹⁹ This definition highlights the relational dimension of cultural diplomacy, stressing its potential to create channels of communication even in politically sensitive or polarized contexts.

Other scholars have underlined the strategic functions of cultural diplomacy. Patricia Goff argues that cultural diplomacy can play an important role in managing or mitigating negative perceptions generated by state policies, offering alternative narratives that emphasize shared values, creativity, and openness.²⁰ In a similar vein, Simon Mark conceptualizes cultural diplomacy as a process through which cultural means are explicitly subordinated to the pursuit of foreign policy objectives, and therefore the potential to pursue other objectives.²¹

For the purposes of this analysis, these theoretical perspectives provide the basis for understanding the cultural diplomacy of communist Romania. Cultural

¹⁵ Robers (ed.) 2009, p. 3.

¹⁶ Hocking *et al.* 2012, p. 11.

¹⁷ Nye 2008, pp. 95-96.

¹⁸ Schneider 2006, pp. 191-203.

¹⁹ Cummings 2009, p. 1.

²⁰ Goff 2013, p. 433.

²¹ Mark 2009, pp. 1-13.

diplomacy is approached here as a modality through which the Romanian state mobilized cultural instruments, such as art, heritage, education, and cultural exchange, to promote itself on the international stage in pursuit of broader political objectives. These objectives included presenting Romania as an attractive market and destination, stimulating foreign interest and tourism, and fostering a positive international image of the country as one endowed with a rich history and vibrant culture, willing to engage constructively in the global debates of the postwar era.

At the same time, Romania's engagement in cultural diplomacy also aligned with the principles it promoted within the United Nations framework, particularly those related to mutual understanding, cooperation, and peace among nations. By participating in cultural initiatives and exchanges at the multilateral level, Romanian diplomats sought not only to advance national interests, but also to position the country as a responsible international actor committed to the ideals of dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

5. Romania's cultural activity throughout the modern period

Romania was familiar with modern forms of cultural activity and international cultural engagement prior to the communist takeover. During the interwar period, Greater Romania was actively involved in promoting culture, scholarship, and intellectual exchange abroad through a series of institutions and initiatives that reflected both national ambitions and broader European trends. Among the most significant was the Institute for South-East European Studies, founded in 1914, which aimed to foster research on the history, culture, and geopolitics of the Balkan and South-East European region.²² Cultural and academic presence was further consolidated through the establishment of permanent institutions abroad. For example, the Accademia di Romania in Rome (1920)²³ served as a hub for scholarly exchange, facilitating encounters between Romanian and foreign researchers, artists, and intellectuals. These types of institutions played an important role in integrating Romanian scholarship into European academic networks.

Cultural diplomacy was also pursued at the highest symbolic level through the personal diplomatic activity of Queen Marie of Romania, particularly during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and her highly visible visit to the United States in 1926.²⁴ Romania's participation with a national pavilion at the 1937 Paris Art Deco Exhibition further illustrated the country's efforts to project a modern cultural identity abroad.²⁵

The coming to power of the Romanian Workers' Party (PMR) constituted a major rupture with this interwar tradition of cultural engagement. In the immediate

²² *History of the Institute South-East European Studies.*

²³ *History of Accademia di Romania in Roma.*

²⁴ Pakula 1984, pp. 267-355.

²⁵ *Exposition internationale des art est des techniques dans la vie moderne 1937*, pp. 177-178.

postwar years, diplomatic activity was redirected primarily toward the East, in line with ideological alignment and political dependence on the Soviet Union. Cultural relations were initially subordinated to bloc discipline and limited largely to exchanges within the socialist camp. This reorientation reflected not only domestic political change, but also the broader international environment shaped by the Cold War.

The development of cultural diplomacy in the postwar period took place against the backdrop of systemic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which sought global supremacy not only through military power, but also through cultural influence. Culture became an arena of competition, comparable to the arms race, the space race, and the struggle for Olympic prestige. The United States emphasized the promotion of American values and lifestyle, relying on instruments such as broadcasting, Voice of America being a primary example, popular music, cinema, consumer goods, and everyday cultural symbols.²⁶ The Soviet Union, by contrast, focused on projecting cultural superiority in traditional European high culture, particularly in classical music, ballet, dance, and scientific research.²⁷ Within this polarized environment, culture became an integral component of international competition and ideological persuasion.²⁸

Communist Romania was likewise interested in promoting itself internationally through culture, aligning such efforts with its broader foreign policy objectives. Cultural activity was increasingly perceived as a legitimate and useful instrument for advancing state interests abroad. This orientation is reflected in the public discourse of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, whose speeches emphasized the importance of cultural relations as part of foreign policy. In a speech delivered in 1948, Gheorghiu-Dej underlined the development of relations with neighbouring socialist states, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, not only in commercial terms, but also through cultural cooperation, with the declared aim of fostering closeness and mutual understanding among socialist countries.²⁹ The long-term vision of this strategy reached other levels, and culture was used to open new doors of cooperation. For example, after the Communist takeover in China in 1949, the Army's Assembly of the Popular Republic of Romania, led by the soon-to-be Minister of Foreign Affairs, Corneliu Mănescu, was invited by Mao Zedong as an action of opening and strengthening the relations between the two countries.³⁰

While this regional and ideological focus characterized the early years of communist rule, Romania's accession to the United Nations marked a turning point.

²⁶ Cull 2008 [for details on the United States cultural activity during the Cold War, analysed from the perspective of propaganda and ideological confrontation].

²⁷ Roth-Ey 2011 [for more details about the USSR's cultural efforts, especially in movie industry].

²⁸ Caute 2003.

²⁹ Gheorghiu-Dej 1955, p. 116.

³⁰ Bura 2025, pp. 32-33.

From this moment onward, cultural diplomacy increasingly evolved toward the promotion of Romania's image on a global scale. A central role in this process was played by the Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (IRRCS), founded in 1947, which became the main coordinating institution for Romania's postwar cultural diplomacy. IRRCS was entrusted with the development and management of Romania's cultural relations with other states and organized a wide range of activities, including conferences, exhibitions, cultural evenings, publications, and the coordination of cultural delegations. Around IRRCS gravitated a broader network of institutions and instruments specific to cultural diplomacy. The Institute also played an important role in promoting Romanian literature abroad, overseeing the translation and dissemination of major literary works, while simultaneously providing information on socialist modernization and the industrial transformation of the country.³¹

Romania's cultural activity also expanded significantly in the multilateral sphere, especially following its accession to UNESCO in 1956.³² Membership in UNESCO allowed Romania to engage more actively in international cultural, educational, and intellectual cooperation. The Romanian authorities participated in General Conferences, enrolled specialists in international expert networks, and became involved in initiatives related to the protection of cultural heritage. This engagement reflected a growing interest in the intellectual and educational dimensions of multilateral diplomacy.

6. Cultural diplomacy in a multilateral context. Romania at the UN

Globalization and the bipolarization of the international system transformed culture in an important instrument through which states sought to articulate their identity, enhance their visibility, and pursue broader political and economic objectives. For Romania, this multidimensional approach to cultural activity was closely connected to its integration into the United Nations system and to the opportunities offered by the international environment.

Returning to the international framework provided by the United Nations, Romania actively engaged in this arena in order to promote the state and to make it attractive and relevant to external audiences. Membership in the UN created both a formal institutional setting and an informal social space in which cultural diplomacy could be practiced on a daily basis. Through its participation in UN bodies and through the activity of its Permanent Mission, Romania sought to present itself as a culturally rich and constructive member of the international community, capable of contributing to debates.

As already noted, New York occupied a central position in the postwar world. Beyond its economic significance, symbolized by Wall Street, multinational corporations, and global finance, the city was also a major cultural hub. American

³¹ Arhivele Naționale ale României inv. 1774, 1947-1969, pp. 1-4.

³² *65 years since Romanian joining to UNESCO, 27 July 1956.*

cultural life was deeply embedded in Manhattan through institutions and landmarks such as Broadway, the Museum of Modern Art, and large-scale events like the 1964 World's Fair.³³ This cultural ecosystem amplified the symbolic value of New York as a space where diplomacy, culture, and global visibility intersected. Within this context, the presence of the United Nations further reinforced Manhattan's role as a crossroads of international exchange.

Romania had a strong interest in sending cultural delegations to New York and in supporting initiatives aimed at promoting Romanian culture abroad. Concerts, exhibitions, film screenings, literary events, and academic encounters could all benefit from the city's international audience and media visibility. Following shortly after its accession to the UN in December 1955, *Scânteia*, the official journal of the Communist Party, stated that cultural relations with other states is expanding year by year, and that it is ready to develop relations, economically including, with other states³⁴.

The United Nations and Manhattan thus functioned together as a launching and dissemination platform for Romania's international image. Cultural initiatives organized in or around the UN framework gained legitimacy and resonance by their association with a multilateral institution devoted to peace, cooperation, and dialogue. Romanian diplomats accredited to the UN were not only involved in the formal work of the organization, but also actively contributed to cultural promotion, acting as intermediaries between state institutions, international bodies, and the broader cultural milieu of New York.

Cultural activity at the UN followed several clearly defined coordinates. Romania participated actively in the Third Committee of the General Assembly, which dealt with social, humanitarian, and cultural cooperation. Engagement with UNESCO represented another key dimension, as Romanian representatives took part in ongoing debates, programs, and institutional initiatives within this specialized agency. Romanian diplomats were also involved in the drafting and promotion of resolutions addressing cultural issues. In parallel, Romania engaged with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on matters related to culture, education, and social development, further embedding cultural diplomacy within the institutional structure of the UN.³⁵

Alongside this direct cultural activity within the UN, Romania's cultural diplomacy also extended into the wider cultural life of New York and Manhattan. Romanian representatives sought to engage with the city's artistic, academic, and

³³ Wallock (ed.), 1988 [for a comprehensive analysis of New York's cultural development throughout the 20th century].

³⁴ *Scânteia*, year XXIV (1955), nr. 3467, p. 1.

³⁵ Details on how Romania's activity was organized can be identified in the document: Arhivele Diplomatice ale Ministerului Afacerilor Externe [Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] (AMAE), Issue 241/UN, 1963-1965, ff. 2-4.

intellectual spaces, taking advantage of exhibitions, performances, and public events that could serve as venues for showcasing national culture. In this regard, worth mentioning is the intention of the Romanian Permanent Representative at the UN, Mihail Magheru, who, in a telegram from January 1958, informed the HQ in Bucharest of the intention of organizing a night movie at the premises of the Romanian Permanent Mission. Therefore, he was asking the HQ if it was possible to urgently send to New York a movie on 16 millimetres about Nicolae Grigorescu and, eventually, the movie 'Short History', so the Mission could send the invites just in time for the reception organized on the 18th of February 1958.³⁶ This effort, was, of course, aimed at showcasing and promoting the life of a prestigious Romanian, the painter Nicolae Grigorescu, amongst the ranks of the public of Manhattan, but also to work as an activity specific to public and cultural diplomacy. The eventuality to also present the movie 'Short History' is also an effort in this regard, the movie, heavily ideologized by the Communist Party, serving as a method of propaganda.

Specific to cultural diplomacy are also the cultural exchanges between various states, this could be serving as a method of promoting and strengthening relations. For this purpose, a freshly out of isolation state, like Romania, was more than interested in fostering relations, of any kind, cultural including, with states which could serve interests in other spheres, economically especially. In this regard, Silviu Brucan, detached from Romania's Embassy in Washington D.C. to the Permanent Mission at the UN in New York, was informing the Ministry regarding the important aspect of receiving the Philadelphia orchestra in Romania, in exchange of hoping that the Romanian folklore assembly will also be received in the United States. Moreover, Brucan was also pointing out that it would be better for Romania to host, in September 1958, the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra 'Michigan' than the American Ballet Assembly, because it would be more 'politically and propagandistically' important.³⁷

These observations illustrate that Romania's cultural diplomacy in New York functioned as a carefully process, in which cultural initiatives were evaluated not only for their artistic value, but also for their political, symbolic, and propagandistic utility. Cultural exchanges were perceived as reciprocal arrangements, meant to generate goodwill while, at the same time, advancing broader diplomatic and economic objectives.

In May 1958, for the Second World Commercial Fair, held in New York, the Romanian Permanent Mission to the UN was assigned the task of organizing a pavilion. Donat Hîncu, responsible for the pavilion, informed the Ministry that 'a lot of people showed interest in the objects displayed'. However, due to the packed schedule and traffic, intensive discussion could not be held nor could have been decided whether the visitors were interested in commercial operations. As a result,

³⁶ AMAE, Inventory nr. 132, 1958, f. 1.

³⁷ AMAE, Inventory nr. 128, 1957, f. 45.

in order to enter in contact with the commercial circles and to pursue detailed discussions, he was asking the Ministry for an extension of his stay in New York, with 10-15 more days, after the end of the Fair.³⁸ Therefore, one could argue that the Permanent Mission, was not only tasked with responsibilities at the UN, but, through cultural diplomacy, was also responsible to represent Romania at different events which could serve the broader interests of the state, in this regard, the development of commercial operations with businesses in New York.

On 5th of May 1959, Romania organized the exhibition 'Popular art in Romania' at the American Museum of Natural History, IRRCS being the organizing institution. The Communist Party's official journal, *Scântea*, reported that 'artistic exchanges constitute one of the best methods of realizing a better understanding between nations, more respect and rationality in international relations'.³⁹ The article also points out to the extensive cultural appropriation of Romania with the US, highlighting, through the speech of Silviu Brucan, at that time Ambassador of Romania to the US, the organization of the Walt Whitman exhibition in Bucharest, the visit of the 'Philadelphia' Orchestra Philharmonic in Romania, the presentation of some US movies, or the participation of American artists in the International Competition 'George Enescu'. The Permanent Mission reported that the official opening was well received, and that the speeches of representatives of State Department, New York City Hall, and the New York Museum, were, in general, positive. Over two hundred people were present, including officials, UN representatives, personalities, journalists, art critics, writers, and Romanians with American citizenship. The exhibition, the diplomat appreciated, made a strong impression, short articles being published in the *New York Times* and in *Herald Tribune*, while Silviu Brucan gave an interview for the United Press Agency.⁴⁰

This episode can be seen as a natural continuation of Romania's cultural activity in New York, illustrating the shift from isolated initiatives to more visible and structured forms of public diplomacy. By organizing an exhibition in a major American cultural institution, Romania moved beyond the limits of diplomatic and UN spaces and reached a broader cultural and opinion-shaping audience.

At the same time, the event reflects the growing institutionalization of cultural diplomacy, with coordinated involvement from IRRCS, the Permanent Mission, and the ambassador. The choice of popular art reinforced a non-ideological, accessible image of Romania and complemented earlier cultural actions. Taken together, such initiatives formed part of a cumulative strategy aimed at strengthening Romania's cultural presence, legitimacy, and international visibility in New York during the Cold War.

³⁸ AMAE, Inventory nr. 132, 1958, f. 56.

³⁹ *Scântea*, year XXXVIII (1959), nr. 4517, p.4.

⁴⁰ AMAE, Inventory nr. 82, 1959, f. 74.

7. Conclusions

Romania's cultural activity in New York during the late 1950s functioned as a multifaceted instrument of foreign policy, situated at the intersection of cultural promotion, political legitimation, and economic interest. By leveraging the symbolic capital of the United Nations and the cultural ecosystem of Manhattan, Romania wanted to project an image of normality, creativity, and openness that contrasted with prevailing Western perceptions of Eastern European socialist states. Cultural initiatives, ranging from film evenings, artistic exhibitions, cultural exchanges, and participation in international fairs, were carefully selected and assessed for their political and propagandistic relevance, rather than being driven solely by artistic considerations.

At the same time, Romania's cultural diplomacy was deeply pragmatic. Cultural exchanges and representations were designed to open channels for commercial contacts, tourism promotion, and longer-term economic cooperation. The Permanent Mission to the UN thus became an operational hub where multilateral diplomacy, public diplomacy, and economic outreach converged. Overall, the study argues that, even in a period of ideological rigidity, communist Romania was able to use culture within the UN framework as a flexible and effective tool to support its gradual reintegration into international society and to advance state interests beyond the confines of bloc politics.

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