

THE GERMAN MINORITY AND THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN ROMANIAN-GERMAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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Abstract. *This article examines the role of the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany in shaping Romanian–German cultural diplomacy. It integrates the analysis of these two communities within a common framework of societal cultural diplomacy, emphasizing the contribution of non-state actors to the consolidation of bilateral dialogue. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that combines documentary analysis with cultural discourse analysis, the study explores how transnational cultural capital, collective memory, and civic networks are mobilized within the relationship between the two national contexts. The comparative findings indicate that the German minority operates primarily through institutional continuity, heritage preservation, and educational infrastructure, whereas the Romanian diaspora acts through mobility, associative structures, and contextual adaptability. The article advances the concept of “community soft power” to capture forms of symbolic influence generated at the societal level and underscores the complementarity of these modes of action in sustaining the stability of Romanian–German cultural relations.*

Keywords: *Cultural diplomacy, community soft power, transnational cultural capital, Romanian–German relations*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

21st-century international relations are marked by a progressively expanding diplomatic arena beyond the traditional frameworks of the nation-state (Buzan, 2004: 98-101). In a context characterized by globalization, interdependence, and increased mobility, diplomacy is no longer the exclusive purview of official institutions, but has become a diffuse process in which non-state actors (civil society organizations, ethnic minority communities, diaspora networks, and cultural institutions) are gaining increasing relevance (Andrew, 2015: 33-36). Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a key area of analysis, as it operates at the intersection of identity, memory, and symbolic power.

In the case of Romanian-German relations, this dynamic is particularly visible. The historical, cultural, and social ties between the two nations are not limited to governmental interactions, but are supported by a dense layer of transnational relations built over time by the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany (Koranyi, 2021: 1-10; Gabriela, 2016: 1-10). These communities have consistently functioned as cultural intermediaries, helping to maintain bilateral dialogue even in periods of political discontinuity or ideological tension (Loreng, 2025: 5-10).

The German minority in Romania is distinguished by its ability to secure cultural and institutional continuity in an era marked by successive changes of political and social

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order. Over time, this community has undergone distinct stages: from the autonomous forms of organization of medieval Saxon settlement, to the constraints imposed by the communist regime and later to the processes of identity redefinition in the post-1989 period, without losing its internal coherence and function of public representation (Ursprung, 2015: 3-6). Along the way, practices of collective memory preservation and intercultural interaction have been articulated that transcend the strictly ethnic dimension, integrating into a broader European framework of dialogue, cooperation, and cultural coexistence (Nicolaescu, 2024: 93-110).

Complementarily, the Romanian diaspora in Germany, mainly formed in recent decades, (OECD, 2019: 26-51) has established itself as a mobile and adaptive cultural actor, capable of projecting Romanian identity in a pluralistic Western space (Anghel, 2014: 112-136). Through cultural initiatives and civic networks, this community facilitates both the maintenance of links with its place of origin (Vochin, 2023: 158-175) and the intensified bilateral cultural exchanges, (Forumul de cooperare Bilaterală Româno-German, n.d.) contributing to the configuration and preservation of Romanian-German cultural dialogue from a transnational perspective.

Although recent research on non-state actors has increasingly emphasized the role of civil society in international relations, many of these analyses continue to be marked by a state-centric perspective. Historical minorities and diaspora communities are frequently mentioned, but rarely analyzed as structural factors that directly shape bilateral relations. In most cases, they are viewed as cultural extensions of the states involved, rather than actors exercising their own autonomous influence (Stengel, 2018: 2-4).

Starting from the premise that the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany are not peripheral entities in Romania-Germany bilateral relations, but active participants in shaping this relationship on a cultural level, it is assumed that, by mobilizing cultural capital, collective memory, and transnational networks, the two communities generate distinct but complementary forms of intercultural mediation that complement official diplomacy and contribute to the stability of the dialogue between the two nations.

The core issue of the study is formulated around the following research question: *To what extent and through what mechanisms contribute the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany to the establishment of a stable bilateral cultural dialogue and to the consolidation of Romanian-German relations through cultural diplomacy?*

This article starts from the idea that cultural relations between Romania and Germany cannot be understood solely through the prism of official diplomacy. We propose an analysis that brings together two categories of actors often discussed separately: the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany. Although the literature frequently treats historical minorities in the context of identity politics and the diaspora in the context of migration or transnationalism, this study focuses precisely on this intersection, showing that both communities contribute, through different means, to maintaining and strengthening Romanian-German dialogue. We propose extending the discussion on soft power to the community level in order to capture forms that are not initiated by the state but have visible effects on bilateral relations.

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodological framework designed to capture the symbolic and relational dimensions of cultural diplomacy exercised by societal actors. Given that the phenomena under investigation

involve processes of identity construction, collective memory articulation, and the mobilization of cultural capital within transnational networks, quantitative measurement alone would be insufficient to grasp the complex mechanisms through which these dynamics operate. Consequently, the research prioritizes analytical tools capable of elucidating meanings, discursive strategies, and institutional practices that shape intercultural mediation between Romania and Germany.

Methodologically, the research combines several complementary analytical strategies. First, a documentary analysis was conducted on a heterogeneous corpus of sources, including programmatic documents, institutional publications issued by organizations representing the German minority in Romania, materials produced by Romanian diaspora associations in Germany, as well as relevant academic literature addressing cultural diplomacy, diaspora studies, and minority politics. This documentary corpus allows the reconstruction of the institutional and discursive frameworks through which these communities articulate their cultural presence and participate in bilateral dialogue.

Second, the study employs cultural discourse analysis, focusing on the narratives through which societal actors represent identity, heritage, and historical memory. This method makes it possible to identify the symbolic repertoires and legitimacy claims mobilized by minority and diaspora organizations in order to position themselves as credible intermediaries within Romanian–German cultural relations.

Finally, the empirical dimension of the research is structured around a comparative case study design. The German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany are examined as two distinct but interconnected configurations of societal cultural diplomacy. The comparative perspective facilitates the identification of both convergences and divergences in their modes of action, particularly with regard to levels of institutionalization, forms of cultural capital mobilized, and the nature of their interactions with the state of origin and the host state. Through this analytical strategy, the article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how community-based actors contribute to the consolidation of Romanian–German cultural dialogue within the broader European diplomatic landscape.

Given these methodological considerations, it is necessary to clarify the main concepts underlying this approach. Therefore, the following section is dedicated to the theoretical delimitation of cultural diplomacy and the examination of the process through which societal actors gain relevance in the architecture of contemporary international relations. The analysis starts from an approach to cultural diplomacy that goes beyond the state-centric paradigm, seeking to highlight different entities as active participants in the configuration of international cultural relations.

2. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY BEYOND THE STATE

In order to fully understand the significance and applicability of cultural diplomacy, a solid conceptual foundation is necessary, starting with the definition of the central concepts: culture and diplomacy.

In a broad sense, culture can be understood as the set of values, norms, traditions, languages, beliefs, representations, and symbolic expressions through which a social group or community builds its identity, regulates its internal life, and establishes relationships with other communities (Geertz, 1973: 89). This holistic view of culture is supported by anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor, who defined it as early as 1871 as "the whole complex that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and

all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Taylor, 1871: 1). Later, Clifford Geertz conceptualized culture as a "system of shared meanings," (Geertz, 1973: 5) emphasizing its symbolic and intersubjective nature. Culture is not just a sum of external manifestations, but a code for interpreting reality and a way of giving meaning to the world (Geertz, 1973: 3-30), thus becoming a medium for articulating collective identity, but also, at the same time, a dynamic space for negotiation, representation, and influence in transnational interactions.

In literature, "diplomacy" is often defined as the art and practice of negotiation between states, with the aim of promoting national interests, maintaining peace, and establishing international relations based on mutual respect and cooperation (Satow, 1932: 1-4). In the contemporary sense, diplomacy extends beyond formal negotiations and involves a complex set of activities through which states communicate, cooperate, and promote their values and interests on the international stage. This includes traditional dialogue between governments, as well as interaction with civil societies, international organizations, the media, and other non-state entities (Hocking, 2006: 13-25).

Throughout history, the practice of diplomacy has undergone multiple transformations, adapting to the political, economic, social, and cultural developments of each era (Berridge, 2010: 1-3). The expansion of the spectrum of diplomatic actions has led to the emergence of specialized sub-branches: public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (Berridge, 2010: 191-195).

Cultural diplomacy has traditionally been conceptualized as an instrument of state foreign policy, used to promote a positive image and cultivate respect and intercultural cooperation between states (Nye, 2004: 5-7). In this classical paradigm, the state appears as the main producer and distributor of cultural meanings on the international stage, and culture is instrumentalized as a resource of symbolic power (Cull, 2019: 138-140).

This interpretation of cultural diplomacy as an exclusively state instrument is increasingly difficult to sustain in the current context (Carbó-Catalan & Roig-Sanz, 2022: 1-21). The mobility of populations, the interconnection of societies, and the development of transnational civic networks show that the production and circulation of cultural meanings can no longer be attributed solely to official institutions (Tsuyrykova, 2020: 29-31).

Scholarly debates on cultural diplomacy have progressively moved beyond the traditional state-centric paradigm, emphasizing the multiplicity of actors involved in the circulation of cultural meanings in international relations. Early theoretical approaches conceptualized cultural diplomacy primarily as an instrument of foreign policy through which states promote their cultural identity abroad. Milton Cummings defined cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural aspects among nations with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation (Cummings, 2003: 1-4). Similarly, Richard T. Arndt argued that cultural diplomacy functions through long-term processes of communication between societies, often extending beyond governmental institutions and involving educational networks, cultural organizations, and intellectual communities (Arndt, 2005: 3-10). These perspectives already suggested that cultural diplomacy cannot be reduced solely to official diplomatic initiatives, but rather unfolds through a broader ecosystem of cultural interactions.

The emergence of Joseph S. Nye's concept of **soft power** further expanded this analytical perspective. Nye emphasized that the ability of an actor to influence others increasingly depends on the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and institutional

credibility rather than on coercive resources (Nye, 2004: 5-11). Cultural diplomacy therefore operates as one of the main mechanisms through which symbolic resources are converted into international influence. Building on this theoretical foundation, later studies in public diplomacy—particularly those developed by scholars such as Jan Melissen and Nicholas Cull—have highlighted the growing importance of societal actors in the production and diffusion of cultural influence (Melissen, 2009: 12-18). Universities, civil society organizations, minority communities, and diaspora networks participate in the creation of transnational cultural spaces in which dialogue, cooperation, and mutual recognition can emerge independently of formal diplomatic structures.

Recent research conducted within the field of European studies illustrates how these dynamics operate particularly clearly in regions characterized by historical multicultural interaction. Studies focusing on cross-border cooperation emphasize that cultural diplomacy often manifests itself through local initiatives, educational exchanges, and community-based cultural projects that connect societies across political borders. In this sense, cultural diplomacy becomes not only a symbolic instrument of international representation but also a mechanism for strengthening intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. Research on the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border area, for example, demonstrates that cultural events, educational programs, and academic cooperation can function as practical forms of cultural diplomacy that facilitate dialogue between communities and contribute to the development of shared European identities beyond national frameworks (Stoica, 2025: 34–36).

This evolution requires a reconsideration of the relationship between the state and society in the sphere of international relations. Far from replacing official diplomacy, societal actors complement and nuance it, acting in areas where state intervention is limited or ineffective (Michael, 2024: 3-7). Through their organizational flexibility and proximity to communities, these entities are able to build relationships of trust and facilitate intercultural dialogue at the micro and meso-social levels (Putnam, 2014: 19-30).

The concept of societal diplomacy, a branch of public diplomacy, provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. Societal diplomacy refers to the set of practices through which non-state actors participate in processes of representation, mediation, and international cooperation, using symbolic, cultural, and social resources (Melissen, 2008: 28-43). Unlike classical diplomacy, which is oriented towards the negotiation of political interests, societal diplomacy operates through the accumulation and conversion of cultural and symbolic capital (Melissen, 2008: 3-15).

Once these concepts have been clarified, it becomes necessary to define transnational cultural capital, which can be understood as the totality of skills, values, memories, and symbolic repertoires that flow between different national spaces and facilitate intercultural communication (Erel, 2010: 642–660). Minorities and diasporas are in a position to produce this type of capital, as they structurally integrate elements of both cultural spaces (Hack-Polay & Rahman & Bal, 2023: 3–5).

In this analytical framework, in which transnational cultural capital and societal diplomacy practices are recognized as components of intercultural mediation, (Cull, 2019: 45-52) it is necessary to further explore the forms of symbolic influence generated on a community level. The use of the concept of *soft power* allows us to capture how cultural resources, collective memory, and the relationships cultivated by minorities and

the diaspora are transformed into mechanisms of symbolic influence and recognition in the sphere of international relations (Gevorgyan, 2023: 66-70).

Cultural diplomacy is often associated with the concepts of public diplomacy and *soft power*. Although interconnected, these concepts are not synonymous (Lepădatu, 2020: 2). The conceptualization of cultural diplomacy cannot be dissociated from Joseph S. Nye's theory of non-coercive influence, known as *soft power* (Anghel, 2020: 59-61). The concept established in international relations literature to describe an actor's ability to influence through attraction and persuasion, (Nye, 2004: 5-11) rather than coercion undergoes a significant reformulation when applied to non-state actors (Nye, 1990: 153-156).

In the case of minority and diaspora communities, cultural influence is not manifested through formal strategies, but through recurring activities: cultural events, educational initiatives, professional networks, and local partnerships (Nye, 2004: 5-11). Their effect does not derive from political authority, but from credibility built over time and the ability to generate trust in the environments in which they operate (Melisen, 2009: 3-10). Minorities and the diaspora thus become bearers of an authority that cannot be replicated by state institutions (Shain& Barth, 2003: 450-453).

In conclusion, it can be said that, beyond the simple promotion of national values or the representation of identity in the external space, cultural diplomacy should be understood as a refined form of international communication, which functions through symbols, meanings, and cultural affinities, contributing to the construction of a global climate conducive to dialogue, cooperation, and mutual legitimacy (Ang&Isar&Mar, 2015: 365-381).

This dimension of diplomacy transcends the classic framework of formal negotiations and asserts itself as an institutionalised expression of non-coercive influence, in full accordance with the theoretical paradigm of soft power. Culture becomes a strategic tool for asserting identity, capable of shaping perceptions, generating convergence of values and mitigating ideological or civilisational differences (Nye, 2004: 99-120).

Through its plurality of manifestations, from educational exchanges and artistic collaborations to the promotion of language and intangible heritage,(Zanella&Neves Junior& Silva, 2024: 2-4) cultural diplomacy contributes to the articulation of a coherent international presence, sustained not by coercion but by attraction and mutual trust (And, 2005: 12-25). In this logic, it can no longer be conceived as a marginal or decorative field, but as an integral component of contemporary diplomatic strategies, capable of producing lasting effects in the global equation of symbolic power (Ang&Isar&Mar, 2015: 370-380). After clarifying the theoretical framework, the article cannot remain anchored exclusively in the sphere of theorising, but must be complemented by an empirical perspective that allows direct observation of the societal actors relevant to Romanian-German cultural diplomacy: the German minority in Romania and the Romanian community in the German constituency. The choice of the first case study is justified by its historical density, high degree of institutionalization, and the community's ability to transform cultural continuity into a resource for transnational dialogue. The German minority, therefore, provides an appropriate experimental framework for examining how the concepts discussed above are articulated in concrete practices open to contemporary dynamics.

3. SOCIETAL ACTORS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE CASE OF THE GERMAN MINORITY IN ROMANIA

The German minority in Romania is one of the most consistent examples of a historical European community (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013) that has managed to transform cultural and institutional continuity into a resource of transnational relevance (Koranyi, 2021: 63-66). The presence of German communities, especially the Transylvanian Saxons, has been marked since the Middle Ages by a high degree of legal, administrative, and religious organization, which has generated stable forms of local autonomy and community cohesion (Evans, 2008: 212-216). The privileges granted to German settlers, the structures of self-government, and the central role of the church contributed to the early institutionalization of a community capable of long-term social and cultural reproduction (Gündisch & Beer, 2005: 45-78).

This early structuring allowed for the development of a collective identity, articulated not only around ethnic belonging, but also around civic values such as community responsibility, institutional discipline, work ethic, and constant reference to Central Europe (Alnæs, 2014: 21-46). The identity of the Saxon community took shape as a complex historical construct, in which cultural, religious, and civic dimensions overlapped, generating a model of belonging distinct from existing ethnic forms (Cercel, 2012: 83-86). Moreover, the German identity in Transylvania functioned more as an "institutionalized" identity, based on social practices, norms, and stable symbolic frameworks, rather than as an identity defined by strictly genealogical criteria (Gündisch & Beer, 2005: 100-115).

Over the centuries, this identity was built in constant interaction with the Romanian majority and other ethnic groups in the region. Daily coexistence, economic and cultural exchanges, and the joint management of urban and rural space have fostered the emergence of mechanisms of intercultural mediation, which have allowed the German community to adapt to successive political transformations without losing its internal coherence (Verdery, 1991: 201-2115). The Saxon identity thus remained a dynamic construct, capable of integrating structural changes, but also of functioning as a bridge between different cultural spaces.

The 20th century, and in particular the period of communist rule, represented a major discontinuity in this historical trajectory. Policies of nationalization, ideological control, (Locota, 2024: 99-100) and restriction of community autonomy, as well as the mass emigration of the German population, (Beer & Radu & Kühner-Wielach, 2020: 47-50) affected the social and institutional structures of the minority (Deletant, 1999: 126-130). While in 1930 the German minority numbered over 745,000 people, (Mărculeț & Mărculeț, 2009: 146-151) the 1992 census indicated less than 120,000, (Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2019) and the 2021 census approximately 36,000 (UN, 2025). However, the fundamental elements of collective identity were not completely destroyed. They survived in a latent form, preserved in particular through religious institutions, built heritage, and collective memory passed down from generation to generation (Verdery, 1991: 208-212).

After 1989, these resources were reactivated in a favorable political and cultural context, becoming central landmarks in the reconstruction of identity and the redefinition of the German community's position in Romanian society. The process of identity rearticulation was not purely restorative, but reflexive, oriented towards integrating historical experience into a discourse compatible with the European values of pluralism,

diversity and intercultural dialogue (Assmann, 2013: 98-115). Historical continuity was thus reinterpreted not as a form of cultural isolation, but as a resource for legitimacy and transnational mediation (Beer & Radu & Kühner-Wielach, 2020: 17-23).

In this context, the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (FDGR) has established itself as the main civic actor through which community identity has been projected into the post-communist public sphere. The FDGR can be understood as a modern expression of an older tradition of community self-government, adapted to the new political and social realities of post-1989 Romania (Dragoman, 2015: 136-142).

Since its inception, the FDGR has not limited itself to the political representation of the German minority, but has evolved into a civic actor with a multidimensional profile, situated at the intersection of culture, education, and foreign relations (Dragoman, 2015: 142-148). Through its network of local organizations, the forum currently supports over 50 German-language educational institutions, attended not only by ethnic German students, but also by the majority population, which strengthens the intercultural dimension of its action (Iunesch, 2025: 48-49). This orientation has made it possible to move beyond a strictly ethno-political logic and integrate German identity into a broader discourse on democratic coexistence (Anghel & Olteanu & Schuster, 2017: 75-98). At the same time, the forum has developed sustainable partnerships with institutions in Germany, cultural foundations, and European organizations, facilitating the circulation of ideas, good practices, and symbolic resources between the two national spaces (Fuen.org, n.d.). These initiatives had an impact that went beyond the community sphere, contributing to the shaping of an image of Romania as a space of cultural diversity and European intercultural dialogue (Cercel, 2021: 80-84).

From the perspective of cultural diplomacy, the FDGR operates in an informal manner, but with significant efficiency, which is specific to entities involved in societal diplomacy. Its legitimacy does not derive exclusively from the legal framework for representing minorities, but from the historical continuity of the community it represents and its ability to transform this continuity into a resource for intercultural communication and mediation (Cercel, 2021: 83-87).

More than just a representative, the FDGR acts as a mediator between the German community, Romanian society, and the European space, operating in a symbolic framework that complements and often precedes state initiatives (*Forumul Democrat Al Germanilor Din România*, n.d.). This capacity for mediation is part of a broader logic of societal cultural diplomacy, in which non-state actors become bearers of credible identity narratives and values compatible with contemporary European discourse (EUNIC, 2016: 3-11).

Complementary to this civic function, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession provides the symbolic infrastructure that has made the community's identity continuity possible. In this complementary relationship, the two institutions can be understood as distinct but interdependent pillars of societal cultural diplomacy: one oriented towards civic representation and mediation, the other anchored in memory, heritage, and tradition.

Beyond its religious function, the Evangelical Church has played an important role over time in preserving the language, cultural practices, and community norms of the Transylvanian Saxons (*Evangelical church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania*, n.d.). Parish structures, educational networks, and church archives provide a stable institutional framework for transmitting collective memory and community identity, even in hostile political contexts. This function as an "institution of memory" became all the

more relevant during the communist regime, when public space was subject to ideological control and the cultural autonomy of minorities was severely limited. Thus, we can say that the church operated as a space of discreet symbolic resistance, maintaining community cohesion and the continuity of identity repertoires (Assmann, 2007: 34-42).

After 1989, the church's involvement in the restoration of architectural heritage, especially fortified churches and historic Saxon ensembles, transformed material memory into an active resource for cultural communication (Buchholz, 2018: 73-87). The relationships developed with churches, foundations, and cultural institutions in Germany facilitated the reintegration of the German community in Romania into a circuit of European values and the consolidation of Romania's image as a space of cultural pluralism and historical continuity (Beer & Radu & Kühner-Wielach, 2020: 201-205).

These heritage-related activities go beyond the logic of conservation, becoming an active instrument of community soft power. Through transnational projects, cooperation with German foundations, and the involvement of local communities, heritage is transformed into an opportunity for dialogue, symbolic reconciliation, and mutual recognition, especially in relation to the historical traumas of the 20th century (Anghel, 2014: 140-148).

The relevance of the German community is not limited to its status as a beneficiary of cultural policies, but acts as an active producer of cultural meaning and as a mediator between two national spaces, indispensable to the sustainable functioning of international relations (EUNIC, 2016: 3-5).

4. SOCIETAL ACTORS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE CASE OF THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN GERMANY

The analysis of the German minority in Romania highlighted how an institutionalized historical community can function in the field of societal cultural diplomacy through continuity, collective memory and symbolic infrastructure. Complementarily, the study of the Romanian diaspora in Germany allows us to explore a different configuration, marked by recent mobility, plurality of identities, and flexible organizational structures (Schiller, 1998: 13-17). If the German minority represents a model of cultural diplomacy based on historical permanence, the Romanian diaspora illustrates an emerging form of transnational cultural diplomacy, built around circulation, adaptation, and intercultural mediation (Melisen, 2009: 91-110).

In this sense, the Romanian diaspora in Germany becomes a relevant case study for understanding how contemporary societal actors contribute to shaping bilateral cultural relations, not through nation-state institutions, but through cultural practices, civic networks, and informal soft power mechanisms.

The Romanian diaspora in Germany is one of the largest and most dynamic Romanian communities in Western Europe, being the result of post-communist mobility and Romania's integration into the European Union (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021: 118-119). According to official data provided by the German authorities, the number of Romanian citizens residing in Germany has exceeded 850,000, registering a steady increase over the last decade and placing the Romanian community among the largest groups of citizens from EU member states (OECD, 2019). This quantitative evolution reflects the progressive diversification of the socio-demographic profile of the diaspora, increasingly including family and educational migration (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021: 98-101).

From a structural point of view, the Romanian diaspora in Germany differs from historical minority communities in its relatively recent nature and lack of long-term traditional institutionalisation. However, it is precisely this condition of being a "community in formation" that gives the diaspora a high degree of flexibility and adaptability (Nicolăescu, 2011: 113-123). The literature describes the Romanian diaspora as a transnational community, defined by a dual anchorage: progressive integration into German society and the maintenance of cultural, symbolic, and emotional ties with the place of origin (Levitt, 2001: 4-8&195-201). This positioning generates an open identity framework, in which national belonging is negotiated and reinterpreted according to variable social, educational, and professional contexts (Brah, 1996: 181-188).

Family migration plays a major role in stabilizing the Romanian community in Germany. Family reunification, kids getting into the German education system, and having generations born or raised in Germany are helping to change the diaspora from a mostly temporary community into one with long-term goals (Chauvin&Garcés-Mascareñas&Kraler, 2011: 120-123). In this context, culture becomes an instrument for the intergenerational transmission of identity through language, cultural practices, and participation in community life (Assmann, 2013: 56-58). Educational migration, especially to university cities such as Berlin and Munich, bolsters this dimension, favoring the emergence of cultural and professional elites capable of operating simultaneously in both cultural spaces (Marin, 2014: 4884-4888).

From a geographical perspective, Berlin and Munich are emerging as major hubs of the Romanian diaspora (Departamentul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni, n.d.). Berlin, with its cosmopolitan character and dense cultural scene, offers a favorable environment for the expression of identity and cultural initiatives of the diaspora, while Munich, with its strong economic and educational profile, attracts a diaspora with a high level of educational and professional capital (OECD, n.d.; Vertovec, 2007: 1024-1030). In both cases, the Romanian community integrates into the German urban dynamic, actively participating in local cultural life and developing forms of cultural expression adapted to the host context (Wissenschaft weltoffen, n.d.).

Recent studies on the Romanian diaspora's access to culture indicate that cultural participation plays a role in maintaining community cohesion and collective identity, but also in the relationship with the local society. According to the CulturConect report, cultural events, educational activities, and artistic initiatives are the main channels through which the Romanian diaspora asserts its visibility and contributes to intercultural dialogue. Culture thus becomes a space for interaction and mutual recognition, where differences in identity are negotiated in a non-conflictual manner (Code for Romania, n.d.). From a diplomatic perspective, the Romanian diaspora does not act solely as a bearer of an "exported" identity. On the contrary, it acts as an active producer of contextualized cultural meanings, capable of translating elements of Romanian culture into a language that is intelligible and relevant to the German public (Zaharna, 2012: 10-40). This capacity transforms the diaspora into an actor of transnational cultural diplomacy, for which culture represents not only a repertoire of traditions, but also an instrument of dialogue, adaptation, and bridge-building between the two national spaces (Leonard et al., 2002: 8-14, 54).

If we have previously highlighted the transnational and hybrid nature of the identity of the Romanian diaspora in Germany, the role of cultural associations and civic networks can be understood as the main mechanism through which this identity is organized, articulated, and projected into the public space. In the absence of consolidated

historical institutional structures, the Romanian diaspora has developed flexible forms of association, which function simultaneously as spaces for community cohesion and as interfaces for dialogue with German society (Anghel et al., 2017: 34–56, 121–146).

According to data from the Department for Români de Pretutindeni, there are dozens of active Romanian associations in Germany, with cultural, educational, or civic profiles, distributed in major urban centers such as Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, and Stuttgart (Departamentul pentru Români de Pretutindeni, n.d.). These organizations constitute an essential community infrastructure for the identity aggregation of the diaspora and for transforming cultural belonging into a resource for visibility and public recognition (Koopmans & Statham, 2023: 84–90, 102–106). Unlike traditional associative structures, they are characterized by a high degree of adaptability, responding quickly to the needs of the community and the German socio-cultural context (Kuznetsov, 2006: 151–170).

Diaspora associations serve a dual function. On the one hand, they act as spaces for internal socialization and cultural reproduction, facilitating the transmission of the Romanian language, cultural repertoires, and collective memory, including to generations born in Germany. Educational activities—language courses, workshops for children and young people, extracurricular cultural programs—help maintain a link between generations (Asociația Româno-Germană din Niedersachsen, n.d.; Assmann, 2013: 36–45; Fishman, 1991: 355–380; Klein und frei, n.d.; LCCR, n.d.; Levitt, 2001: 151–172; Vertovec, 2011: 244–250). On the other hand, by organizing festivals, literary events, film screenings, exhibitions, and conferences, associations contribute to the visibility of Romanian culture. The emphasis is not exclusively on preserving traditions, but on integrating modern cultural expressions—contemporary literature, cinema, visual arts, civic themes—into a framework compatible with the sensibilities of the German public (Consulatul General al României la München, 2025; Departamentul pentru Români de Pretutindeni, 2024; Fu et al., 2015: 202).

At the same time, associations contribute to the social integration of Romanians in Germany. They offer spaces for informal support, information, and cultural orientation, facilitating adaptation to the social and institutional norms of the host society (Tittel-Mosser, 2024: 7–8). Studies on the civic organization of migrants emphasize that these forms of association increase the social capital of diaspora communities and reduce the social vulnerability of newcomers (Kindler et al., 2025: 7–10, 13–15). Cultural action intersects with the social and educational dimensions, giving associations a broader role than the strictly cultural one: diaspora civic networks amplify this impact by connecting Romanian associations in different regions with local cultural institutions, civil society organizations, and municipal authorities (Ong'ayo, 2019: 152–163). They function as informal infrastructures of cultural diplomacy, enabling the circulation of good practices, the coordination of initiatives, and the increased visibility of Romanian cultural actions at the regional and national levels (Venté et al., 2025).

If the cultural associations and civic networks of the Romanian diaspora in Germany can be understood as informal infrastructures of transnational cultural diplomacy, the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) represents the level of institutional articulation through which these initiatives can be connected to the strategic framework of the Romanian state's foreign cultural policy (Dâmaso, 2021: 8). The relationship between the ICR and the diaspora is not one of substituting civic action, but rather a functional interface in which the institutional logic of the state and the dynamics of civil

society meet, negotiate, and influence each other (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 7–8).

In its post-1989 evolution, the ICR has moved from a predominantly centralized model of cultural promotion to a more open approach that recognizes the role of non-state actors in shaping Romania's external cultural image (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 3–5). In Germany, this change was reflected in a focus on projects carried out in partnership with artists, intellectuals, and diaspora organizations, as well as in an openness to local cultural spaces and German professional networks (Institutul Cultural Român, n.d.). Thus, ICR representations functioned not only as promoters of Romanian culture, but also as institutional mediators in a competitive and dense European cultural field.

The relationship between the ICR and the Romanian diaspora in Germany can be described as one of asymmetrical complementarity. The institution provides the material and symbolic framework for external cultural action, offering logistical and financial resources, official legitimacy, visibility in the German institutional space, and access to European cultural networks (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 2). In return, the diaspora contributes contextual expertise, local social capital, and the ability to calibrate cultural content in relation to the sensibilities and expectations of the German public (Ong'ayo, 2019: 154–157). This differentiated articulation of roles mitigates the risk of a normative or rigid cultural discourse and favors the configuration of a more nuanced, credible, and context-appropriate representation of identity (Cull, 2019: 84–90).

Concrete examples of collaboration between the ICR and diaspora representatives in cities such as Berlin and Munich illustrate this dynamic. Cultural projects carried out in partnership with local associations, Romanian artists based in Germany, or the academic community have allowed Romanian culture to be integrated into local cultural circuits, avoiding isolation in an exclusively national framework. In these cases, the diaspora was not treated as a mere target audience, but as a co-producer of cultural content, actively involved in defining themes, formats, and target audiences (Cooperation Agreement, 2013; Institutul Cultural Român, 2024; Institutul Cultural Român, n.d.; *On the Move*, 2023).

However, analysis of the relationship between the ICR and the diaspora also reveals structural limitations of this institutional interface. The persistence of centralized selection mechanisms, the rigidity of administrative procedures, and differences in pace between civic initiative and institutional logic can sometimes reduce the institution's ability to respond to the real dynamics of diaspora communities (Cull, 2019: 62–70). In certain contexts, this gap has led to a perceived distance between institutional priorities and the concrete needs of local culture, affecting the potential for long-term mobilization (Cull, 2019: 130–135).

Despite these limitations, the ICR's role as an institutional interface remains essential for integrating diaspora initiatives into a coherent framework of cultural diplomacy. The participation of the diaspora in defining and implementing cultural projects contributes to the democratization of cultural representation and the diversification of narratives about Romanian identity in the European space. From this point of view, the ICR does not function exclusively as an instrument of the state, but as a space for negotiation between official representation and emerging cultural expressions of Romanian society outside the country's borders (Ho & McConnell, 2017: 235–255).

The relationship of institutional complementarity creates the conditions for a higher stage of transnational cultural action, in which civic initiative and social capital

accumulated at the local level are converted into lasting symbolic influence (Nye, 1990: 94–100). Consequently, the diaspora fulfills the role of a partner in foreign cultural policy and, at the same time, acts autonomously as an intercultural mediator, capable of generating specific forms of soft power (Bourdieu, 1992: 117–121).

The soft power produced by the Romanian diaspora in Germany is distinguished by its decentralized and relational character (Gamlen, 2014: 180–217).

Unlike classic state instruments, it is not the result of formal strategies or unidirectional messages. It is gradually built up through social interactions, everyday cultural practices, and civic participation in the German public sphere (Moise, 2022: 10–14). The cultural, educational, and social activities of the diaspora create contexts for encounter and dialogue that foster mutual understanding and reduce the symbolic distances between communities (Hannerz, 1996: 103–108).

The diaspora demonstrates that it can translate the values, sensibilities, and symbolic codes of the two national spaces. The mediating function is manifested concretely in the way Romanian identity is presented and reinterpreted in German cultural contexts: not as a monolithic or exclusively ethnic identity, but as a plural, European expression open to dialogue (Diaspora2030, n.d.). Through its active participation in German cultural life, the Romanian diaspora contributes to the construction of alternative narratives about Romania, which go beyond stereotypical frameworks and emphasize its contemporary cultural dimensions (Kurvjet-Käosaar et al., 2019: 125–143).

At the same time, the literature draws attention to the limits and vulnerabilities of diasporic soft power. Organizational fragmentation, dependence on volunteerism and limited resources, as well as differences in vision within the community can reduce the long-term impact of cultural initiatives (Putnam, 2014: 48–64). In addition, there is a risk that the cultural action of the diaspora will be symbolically overburdened in the absence of a coherent framework of institutional support, or, conversely, excessively instrumentalized in official representation logics that diminish its autonomy (Délano & Gamlen, 2014: 43–53).

However, it is precisely its hybrid nature, situated between integration into German society and maintaining ties with Romania, that gives the Romanian diaspora a strategic position in the architecture of European cultural diplomacy. The community soft power generated in this way is not spectacular or immediately quantifiable, but it has structural durability, as it is based on stable social relations, symbolic capital accumulated over time, and mutual recognition.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The comparative analysis of the two entities is designed as a methodological approach aimed at highlighting the role of societal actors in shaping contemporary bilateral relations. The choice of the comparative method is not determined by a presumed symmetry between the two communities analyzed, but rather by their structural differences. These differences allow us to observe how similar diplomatic functions can be performed through distinct mechanisms, adapted to different contexts and resources. As a result, the comparison provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining contemporary forms of societal cultural diplomacy and how they contribute to the stability and depth of Romanian-German bilateral relations.

The comparison of the two case studies highlights, first of all, significant structural differences. The German minority in Romania is a historical indigenous

community, with centuries of continuity and an established legal status (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013), while the Romanian diaspora in Germany is a relatively recent transnational community, formed as a result of post-communist mobility and European integration (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, n.d.).

However, from the perspective of cultural diplomacy, the two communities perform convergent functions. Both operate in an intermediate space between the state of origin and the state of residence and transform this positioning into an informal diplomatic resource. While the German minority acts as a bearer of historical continuity and cultural memory, the Romanian diaspora asserts itself as a mediator of mobility, adaptation, and identity renewal. Their complementarity contributes to the densification of Romanian-German cultural relations (Anghel, 2014: 373–378) along different temporal and symbolic axes.

A major structural difference between the two case studies analyzed concerns the degree and type of institutionalization, elements that directly influence the nature of symbolic legitimacy and the capacity for external cultural projection. The German minority in Romania benefits from dense and stratified institutionalisation, built over time and supported by a coherent set of civic, religious, educational and heritage structures (Institutul pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, n.d.: 6–36). Organizations such as the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, German-language school networks, and the heritage infrastructure associated with Saxon communities give this minority a legitimacy that is simultaneously historical, legal, and symbolic (Constituția României, 2003, art. 6, art. 62(2); Philippi, 1991: 15–35, 210–225; Verdery, 1991: 302–315). This institutional architecture allows for the exercise of community soft power with a high degree of continuity, predictability, and public recognition, both in Romania and in Germany.

Solid institutionalization (Smith, 2006: 82–89) also facilitates the German minority's ability to support long-term cultural projects and transform historical memory and heritage into a stable diplomatic resource. Initiatives such as the restoration of fortified churches in Transylvania (EEA Grants, n.d.) or the consolidation of bilingual education (Iunesch & Pfützner, 2025) are mechanisms of symbolic communication and European legitimization, integrated into transnational networks of cultural cooperation, not just simple instruments of cultural preservation. The literature on the subject emphasizes that such institutionalization contributes to the accumulation of symbolic capital that is difficult to replicate in more recent community contexts (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 168–178).

In contrast, the Romanian diaspora in Germany is characterized by fragmented and polycentric institutionalization (Pries, 2008: 268–273), based on cultural associations, civic initiatives, and informal networks with varying degrees of stability and visibility (Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration, n.d.). Its symbolic legitimacy derives from its capacity for cultural adaptation, the relevance of the themes it addresses, and its active insertion into the German public sphere (Bourdieu, 1986: 21–26). Urban cultural projects, film festivals, contemporary literature, and civic debates function as platforms for the production of cultural meaning, oriented towards dialogue and current events (Bourdieu & Johnson, 2011: 29–44). However, this legitimacy is more volatile and dependent on relational resources and cooperation with institutions such as the Romanian Cultural Institute or local cultural partners (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 39–46). Although flexibility favors innovation and the ability to respond to social dynamics, it also implies structural

vulnerabilities, such as project discontinuity, dependence on ad hoc funding, or the difficulty of long-term symbolic capitalization (Ashton, 2022: 388–407). Critics of diasporic cultural diplomacy point to the risk that the lack of stable institutionalization may limit the lasting impact of cultural initiatives, despite their creativity and immediate relevance (Dolea, 2024: 9–10).

This formalized relationship gives the actions of the German minority stability and visibility, which facilitates the exercise of coherent and predictable community soft power. At the same time, the literature warns of the risk that excessive proximity to state structures could lead to a certain instiAlthough the two communities analyzed mobilize distinct forms of transnational cultural capital, these differences do not reflect a value hierarchy, but result from different structural and temporal positions within Romanian-German relations. In the case of the German minority, cultural capital is articulated predominantly through a logic of symbolic sustainability, anchored in the continuity of tangible and intangible heritage and in the sedimentation of collective memory. Elements such as ecclesiastical architecture, community practices, and the tradition of education in German function as forms of cultural communication, generating recognition and legitimacy in the German space, beyond the strictly ethnic dimension (Bourdieu & Johnson, 2011: 29–50).

The Romanian diaspora in Germany, on the other hand, activates a cultural capital shaped around contemporary creativity, mobility, and urban intercultural interaction. Current artistic production becomes a space for identity negotiation, in which Romanian belonging is reinterpreted in relation to the cultural sensibilities of the host society (Viola, 2015: 29–39).

Overall, the difference between the two types of cultural capital highlights the fact that Romanian-German cultural diplomacy is built through the coexistence and interaction of multiple symbolic registers, which are not mutually exclusive but rather reinforce each other.

The relationship between the societal actors analysed and their country of origin is characterised by a balance between autonomy and cooperation. Both the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany develop forms of engagement with state institutions that do not negate community autonomy, but rather integrate it into a framework of selective collaboration oriented towards common goals (Beer et al., 2020: 56–59).

In the case of the German minority in Romania, this relationship is part of a structural partnership with the Romanian state, based on the constitutional recognition of national minorities (Constituția României, 2003, art. 6, art. 62(2)) and the existence of formal mechanisms for political and cultural representation (Ciobanu & Radu, 2008: 60–80). The Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania functions, in this sense, as a legitimate institutional intermediary, capable of articulating the interests of the community in relation to state authorities and participating in the definition and implementation of relevant cultural policies (Forumul Democrat al Germanilor din România, n.d.). Collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, local authorities, and other public institutions has enabled the integration of the heritage and memory of the German community into national and European cultural strategies, thus strengthening the diplomatic dimension of these efforts (Ministerul Culturii, 2025, Annex 1, no. 4).

This formalized relationship gives the actions of the German minority stability and visibility, which facilitates the exercise of coherent and predictable community soft

power. At the same time, the literature warns of the risk that excessive proximity to state structures could lead to a certain institutional rigidity or limit the capacity for cultural innovation, especially in contexts marked by rapid social change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 150–157). Therefore, the relative autonomy of community actors remains an essential condition for maintaining their symbolic credibility.

The relationship between the Romanian diaspora in Germany and the German state is predominantly functional and indirect, mediated by civil society structures, local integration policies, and the federal architecture of cultural governance (Bendel, 2014: 20–27). Unlike the German minority in Romania, the Romanian diaspora does not enjoy a distinct collective status or formal mechanisms of representation in relation to the host state, but interacts with it mainly through general instruments designed to integrate migrants and promote cultural diversity (Bundesregierung Deutschland, 2021: 6–8, 20–21). At the same time, access to the German public space is conditioned by the ability of diaspora actors to fit into existing normative and institutional frameworks—municipal integration programs, local cultural funding, intercultural initiatives, or partnerships with German educational and cultural institutions (Huning&Droste&Gliemann, 2021: 127–130).

The comparative analysis indicates that societal cultural diplomacy works most effectively when it complements, rather than substitutes, state diplomacy. Societal actors contribute to deepening bilateral relations by creating a climate of trust, acting in areas where state intervention is limited or less effective (Rana, 2011: 89–92).

The complementarity between the institutional stability of the German minority and the associative flexibility of the Romanian diaspora highlights the fact that cultural relations are based on a hybrid architecture, in which civic initiative and official action support each other without negating their specificity.

Despite structural differences, the two communities show significant strategic convergence in the way they contribute to the architecture of Romanian-German cultural diplomacy. This convergence is not expressed through the standardization of cultural repertoires or forms of organization, but through the assumption of compatible diplomatic functions aimed at facilitating the circulation of European values, promoting cultural pluralism, and consolidating a space for symbolic dialogue between the two societies (Melisen, 2009: 99–103). Both actors act as cultural interfaces, capable of translating meanings, memories, and practices between two distinct national frameworks, thus contributing to the densification of bilateral relations beyond the official channels of state diplomacy (Riordan, 2005: 1–15).

A relevant example of this convergence is the activity of the Romanian-German Bilateral Cooperation Forum, an association based in Romania, which functions as a platform for dialogue and cooperation between institutional, societal, and economic actors from the two spaces (Forumul de cooperare Bilaterală Româno-German, n.d.; Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, n.d.). Through projects dedicated to cultural, educational, and civic cooperation, the forum capitalizes on the expertise of minority communities and diaspora networks, integrating them into a structured but flexible framework of cooperation (European Union, 2016: 6–8).

However, this convergence should not be idealized. Comparative analysis also reveals structural limitations to societal cooperation, generated by resource asymmetries, differences in public visibility, and sometimes excessive dependence on state institutional agendas (Lewis&Kanji, 2009: 75–82). In the case of the Romanian diaspora, participation in such cooperation frameworks often remains fragmented and concentrated around

cultural or associative elites, which can reduce the capacity to represent the internal diversity of the community (Marinescu, 2019: 145–167). Similarly, the German minority in Romania risks, in certain contexts, being perceived primarily through the prism of its patrimonial and historical role, which may limit the recognition of its contemporary and dynamic dimension as a European societal actor (Ziegler, 2017).

The German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany cannot be reduced to marginal or auxiliary actors, but must be understood as structuring elements of this diplomatic ecosystem, contributing, through different registers, to the stability, social legitimacy, and sustainability of bilateral relations (Assmann, 2013: 36–54). It is precisely this complementarity—between memory and mobility, continuity and innovation—that gives Romanian-German cultural diplomacy the ability to adapt to contemporary European transformations without losing its normative coherence (Risse, 2015: 65–78).

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis carried out in this article sought to go beyond the state-centric explanatory frameworks established in the study of cultural diplomacy, proposing a reading focused on the role of societal actors in shaping and maintaining the bilateral relationship between Romania and Germany. Following the analysis, the research question formulated in the introduction receives an affirmative and differentiated answer. Through the comparative investigation of two distinct types of communities, the article highlights how different forms of belonging, mobility, and institutionalization can generate convergent diplomatic functions relevant to the architecture of bilateral relations.

A first conclusion of the analytical approach is that Romanian-German cultural diplomacy cannot be understood exclusively as a product of public policies or official institutional initiatives. On the contrary, it constitutes a distributed process, the result of interaction between the state and society, between formal structures and informal networks, between historical continuity and contemporary mobility. The German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany function as relational nodes in this process, producing and circulating symbolic capital in a way that complements and deepens official diplomatic action.

The comparison of the two case studies reflects complementary registers of cultural action without the differences representing an obstacle to diplomatic relevance. The German minority in Romania mobilizes cultural capital anchored in heritage, collective memory, and institutional continuity, while the Romanian diaspora in Germany operates primarily through contemporary cultural production, contextual adaptation, and fluid transnational networks.

A significant contribution of the analysis is to highlight symbolic legitimacy as a central resource for societal actors. Unlike the formal political legitimacy of the state, the legitimacy of minorities and the diaspora is built through cultural credibility, narrative continuity, and the ability to generate trust in different social contexts (Bourdieu, 1992: 107–116).

This legitimacy is fragile and constantly negotiated, but it is precisely its relational nature that makes it effective in cultural diplomacy, where persuasion and recognition are more relevant than coercion.

The analysis also shows that the relationship between societal actors and the state is not one of subordination, but of selective complementarity. Both the German minority

and the Romanian diaspora retain significant functional autonomy, interacting with the state through different mechanisms and in distinct registers. This autonomy makes it possible to avoid the instrumentalisation of culture for strictly political purposes and favours the emergence of flexible forms of cooperation, adapted to local and transnational contexts (Council of Europe, 2008: 39–42). At the same time, the comparative approach also highlights the limitations of societal cultural diplomacy. Organizational fragmentation, dependence on external resources, and the risk of selective representation are recurring challenges, especially in the case of the diaspora. In the absence of coordination mechanisms and critical reflection, these limitations can reduce the long-term impact of cultural initiatives. However, the analysis suggests that it is precisely the plurality of forms of organization and the diversity of cultural repertoires that can serve as sources of resilience if they are integrated into an open and inclusive framework of cooperation (Council of Europe, 2008: 16–22).

From a broader perspective, the findings of this article contribute to expanding the theoretical debate on the concept of soft power beyond state borders. Both actors exercise forms of influence that cannot be reduced to mere extensions of foreign policy, but must be understood as expressions of a communal cultural power. This finding confirms the relevance of societal actors for understanding contemporary international relations, especially in bilateral contexts characterized by historical density and cultural interdependence.

In conclusion, the article demonstrates that maintaining and deepening the cultural dialogue between Romania and Germany does not depend exclusively on the continuity of political or economic relations, but also on the ability of minority and diaspora communities to function as credible mediators. By positioning themselves between national spaces, these communities contribute to the stability, social legitimacy, and sustainability of bilateral relations, confirming the pivotal role of societal cultural diplomacy in a Europe characterized by mobility, diversity, and interconnection.

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