

BORDER CITIES AS LABORATORIES OF EUROPEANIZATION: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND URBAN INCLUSION

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Abstract. *Border cities occupy a distinctive position in the European integration process. While they remain embedded within national political and administrative frameworks, they also function as spaces of cross-border cooperation, intercultural interaction, and local experimentation with European values. This article examines how the Romanian cities of Oradea and Timișoara use cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion to promote European identity at the local level. It addresses the following research question: how do different models of urban cultural diplomacy contribute to the Europeanization of border cities, and what factors affect their capacity to generate sustainable and socially inclusive outcomes?*

The study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design based on the analysis of municipal strategies, cultural programmes, European projects, institutional documents, and relevant academic literature. The comparison focuses on five dimensions: urban narratives of European identity, institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy, cross-border and transnational cooperation, the relationship between cultural initiatives and social inclusion, and the sustainability and limitations of each model.

The findings identify two distinct but complementary approaches. Oradea relies primarily on heritage-led regeneration and institutionalized Romanian–Hungarian cooperation, particularly through partnerships with Debrecen and projects supported by European territorial cooperation programmes. Timișoara places greater emphasis on multicultural civic identity, participatory cultural production, and transnational networking, especially through the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme and its legacy initiatives. The analysis shows that cultural diplomacy can contribute to European integration not only by improving the international visibility of cities, but also by reshaping local narratives, institutional relationships, and opportunities for participation.

The article contributes to the literature on urban paradiplomacy and Europeanization by arguing that border cities function as local laboratories of European integration. However, the sustainability of their contribution depends on their ability to move beyond project-based funding, tourism-oriented heritage promotion, and temporary cultural events, while ensuring the meaningful participation of socially and culturally underrepresented groups.

Keywords: *border cities; cultural diplomacy; urban paradiplomacy; Europeanization; European identity; urban inclusion; Oradea; Timișoara.*

1. INTRODUCTION

European integration has traditionally been understood as a process driven by supranational institutions, common policies, legal harmonisation, and economic

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cooperation. However, beyond treaties and formal governance structures, European integration is increasingly shaped through local initiatives that translate European values into everyday practices. In this context, cities have emerged as important actors in promoting intercultural dialogue, democratic participation, cross-border cooperation, and territorial cohesion. As places where local, national, and European dynamics intersect, cities contribute to the construction of European identity and to the implementation of European policies beyond the nation-state (Delanty, 2005; Acuto, 2013).

Among European cities, border cities occupy a particularly significant position. Historically located at the intersection of different political, cultural, and economic spaces, they have evolved from peripheral territories into strategic nodes of European cooperation. Supported by European Union policies and programmes, many border cities have transformed historical divisions into opportunities for institutional collaboration, cultural exchange, and regional development. Their multicultural heritage and proximity to neighbouring countries enable them to function as spaces where European integration is experienced through everyday interactions, cross-border partnerships, and shared cultural initiatives (Scott, 2006; Paasi, 1999).

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the international role of cities through the concepts of cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, and Europeanization. Existing studies demonstrate that municipalities are no longer passive implementers of national policies but active participants in international governance, city diplomacy, and European cooperation (Nye, 2004; Tavares, 2016). At the same time, research on urban inclusion has emphasised that successful cultural policies should be assessed not only through their international visibility or economic impact but also through their capacity to strengthen social cohesion, civic participation, and intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2021).

Despite these important contributions, relatively little attention has been devoted to the interaction between cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion in the context of Romanian border cities. Existing studies generally analyse cross-border cooperation, heritage regeneration, or major cultural programmes separately, while fewer studies investigate how these processes collectively contribute to Europeanization at the local level. Consequently, there remains a need for an analytical framework capable of integrating the external dimension of cultural diplomacy with the internal dimension of urban inclusion in order to explain how border cities contribute to European integration.

This article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara, two Romanian border cities that have developed distinct yet complementary models of cultural diplomacy. While Oradea has primarily relied on heritage-led urban regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation with neighbouring Hungarian cities, particularly Debrecen, Timișoara has built its European profile around multicultural civic identity, participatory cultural governance, and international cultural networks, especially through the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme. The comparison of these two cases provides an opportunity to examine how different governance models contribute to Europeanization while promoting urban inclusion.

Accordingly, the article seeks to answer the following research question:

How do different models of urban cultural diplomacy contribute to the Europeanization of Romanian border cities, and under what conditions do they strengthen urban inclusion and the European identity of local communities?

To answer this question, the study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design based on the analysis of municipal development strategies, European

programmes, institutional documents, policy reports, and relevant academic literature. The analytical framework developed in the following section integrates insights from cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, border studies, and urban inclusion, operationalising them through five comparative dimensions: European identity narratives, institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy, cross-border and transnational cooperation, urban inclusion mechanisms, and the sustainability of local governance models.

The article makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it conceptualises Romanian border cities as local laboratories of European integration, highlighting their role in translating European values into local governance practices. Second, it develops an integrated conceptual framework linking cultural diplomacy, urban inclusion, and Europeanization within a comparative perspective. Third, by examining Oradea and Timișoara, it demonstrates that the long-term effectiveness of urban cultural diplomacy depends not only on international visibility and access to European programmes but also on the institutional capacity to generate inclusive participation, durable partnerships, and sustainable cultural development.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical and conceptual framework by reviewing the relevant literature and presenting the analytical model that underpins the study. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Sections 4 and 5 examine the cases of Oradea and Timișoara, while Section 6 presents the comparative discussion. The final section summarises the main findings and discusses their implications for European integration, cultural diplomacy, and urban governance.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that cultural diplomacy, urban paradiplomacy, border governance, and urban inclusion have generally been examined as interconnected but analytically distinct fields. While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the growing international role of cities, they do not fully explain how these processes interact in the context of Romanian border cities. Building on these theoretical contributions, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework that links cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion as complementary dimensions of Europeanization. This framework provides the analytical basis for the comparative examination of Oradea and Timișoara presented in the following sections.

2.1. Literature Review

The increasing involvement of cities in international affairs has fundamentally reshaped contemporary debates on European integration and multi-level governance. While diplomacy has traditionally been regarded as the exclusive domain of sovereign states, recent scholarship argues that cities have become increasingly influential actors in international relations through cross-border cooperation, participation in transnational networks, and engagement in European governance processes (Acuto, 2013; Tavares, 2016). This evolution reflects the growing recognition that many contemporary challenges—including cultural exchange, sustainable development, migration, and territorial cohesion—are addressed not only by national governments but also by local authorities operating within complex systems of multi-level governance.

Within this broader context, cultural diplomacy has emerged as one of the principal instruments through which cities establish international partnerships and promote their identities abroad. Initially conceived as an instrument of state foreign

policy, cultural diplomacy has progressively evolved into a multidimensional governance practice involving municipalities, universities, museums, cultural institutions, foundations, and civil society organisations (Nye, 2004; Bound et al., 2007). Contemporary approaches no longer interpret cultural diplomacy exclusively as a branding strategy or a form of soft power, but rather as a long-term process of dialogue, trust-building, and intercultural cooperation capable of strengthening international relationships while simultaneously reinforcing local cultural development (Ang, Isar & Mar, 2015).

Closely related to cultural diplomacy is the concept of paradiplomacy, which explains the expanding international activities of subnational governments. Paradiplomacy refers to the capacity of regions and cities to establish direct relations with foreign partners independently of national diplomatic structures, particularly in areas such as economic development, environmental governance, innovation, education, and culture (Lecours, 2008; Tavares, 2016). Within the European Union, programmes such as Interreg, Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and the European Capital of Culture have considerably strengthened these forms of cooperation by providing institutional frameworks and financial resources that enable municipalities to develop long-term international partnerships and participate in European policy implementation.

Border regions occupy a particularly important place within this literature. Earlier studies frequently portrayed border areas as peripheral territories characterised by economic disadvantage, geopolitical fragmentation, and institutional discontinuity. More recent research, however, argues that European integration has progressively transformed many border regions into spaces of interaction, cooperation, and innovation (Paasi, 1999; Scott, 2006). The removal of physical and administrative barriers, together with the development of European Territorial Cooperation programmes, has enabled border cities to become important actors in regional development, cross-border governance, and European integration.

At the same time, an expanding body of scholarship has highlighted the importance of urban inclusion as an essential dimension of sustainable urban governance. Urban inclusion refers to the capacity of local institutions to ensure equitable participation in economic, social, political, and cultural life regardless of ethnicity, language, religion, age, gender, or socio-economic status. From this perspective, successful cultural policies should be evaluated not only through their contribution to international visibility or tourism development but also through their capacity to strengthen social cohesion, civic participation, intercultural dialogue, and equal access to cultural resources (Council of Europe, 2021).

Despite these significant advances, existing scholarship generally examines cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, border governance, and urban inclusion as relatively distinct research fields. Studies focusing on border cooperation often emphasise institutional partnerships and territorial development, while research on cultural diplomacy primarily examines international image-building and soft power. Likewise, studies addressing urban inclusion tend to concentrate on local governance and social cohesion without explicitly linking these processes to international cultural cooperation or Europeanization. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how these dimensions interact within Romanian border cities, where cross-border cooperation, multicultural heritage, and European policies converge.

This article addresses this gap by comparatively analysing Oradea and Timișoara as two representative Romanian border cities that have developed different yet

complementary models of cultural diplomacy. By integrating insights from cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, border studies, and urban inclusion into a common analytical perspective, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how local governments participate in European integration through culture.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

Building upon the literature discussed above, this study conceptualises border cities as local laboratories of European integration. Rather than understanding Europeanization exclusively as the implementation of European legislation or institutional reforms, the article approaches it as a broader process through which European values, governance practices, and patterns of cooperation become embedded within local institutions and everyday urban life.

Within this perspective, cultural diplomacy represents the external dimension of Europeanization. Through participation in international networks, European programmes, heritage initiatives, cultural exchanges, and cross-border partnerships, cities strengthen their international visibility while simultaneously contributing to the implementation of European objectives related to territorial cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and regional cooperation.

Urban inclusion constitutes the internal dimension of this process. International visibility alone cannot ensure the success of cultural diplomacy if local communities remain excluded from cultural participation or if the benefits of international cooperation are concentrated within a limited number of institutions. Consequently, sustainable Europeanization requires that cultural diplomacy be accompanied by inclusive governance capable of promoting participation, recognising cultural diversity, ensuring equal access to cultural resources, and strengthening social cohesion.

From this perspective, cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion should not be regarded as separate policy domains but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of local Europeanization. International cooperation creates opportunities for institutional learning, cultural exchange, and transnational networking, while inclusive local governance determines whether these opportunities generate durable forms of civic participation, intercultural dialogue, and European identity.

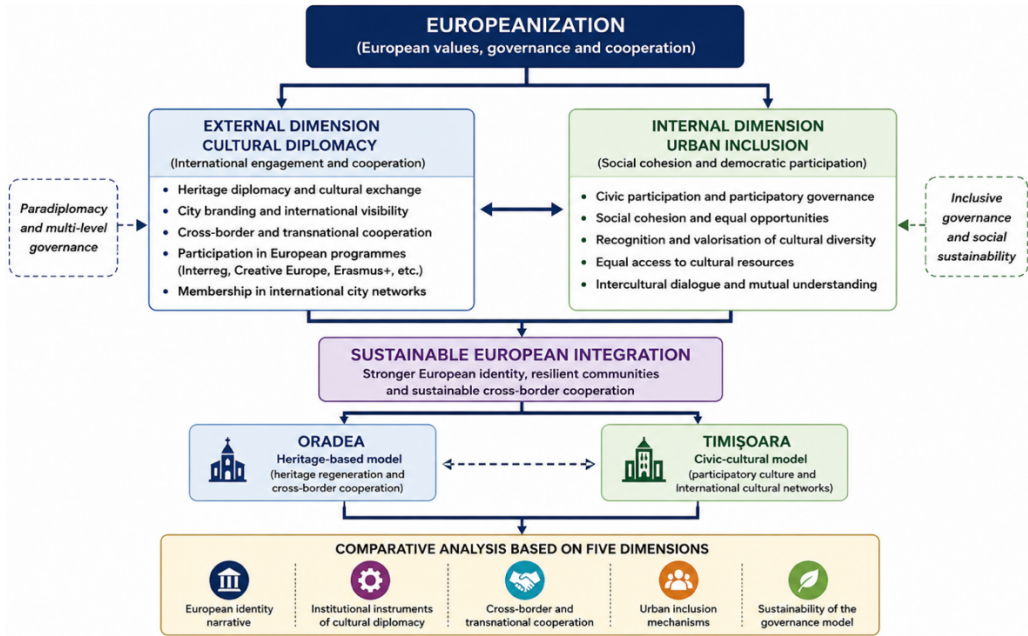
Based on this conceptual understanding, the comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara is organised around five analytical dimensions that emerge directly from the literature. The first examines the dominant urban narrative through which each city constructs its European identity. The second analyses the institutional instruments employed to implement cultural diplomacy. The third investigates patterns of cross-border and transnational cooperation. The fourth explores the relationship between cultural initiatives and urban inclusion. Finally, the fifth evaluates the long-term sustainability of each governance model, particularly regarding institutional capacity, continuity of partnerships, and the ability to extend the benefits of cultural diplomacy beyond individual projects or major cultural events.

This analytical framework provides the basis for the comparative examination developed in the following sections and enables a systematic assessment of how different models of cultural diplomacy contribute to European integration at the local level.

To operationalise the conceptual relationships identified in the literature, the study develops an analytical framework that integrates cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion as complementary dimensions of Europeanization. As illustrated in Figure 1,

the framework explains how the interaction between the external and internal dimensions of local governance contributes to sustainable European integration and provides the conceptual basis for the comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study



Source: Authors' own elaboration with the assistance of AI.

The conceptual framework is operationalised through five analytical dimensions that guide the comparative examination of the two case studies. These dimensions translate the theoretical concepts discussed above into observable analytical categories and ensure the consistency of the comparative analysis.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions and operational indicators of the comparative framework

Analytical dimension	Operational focus	Oradea	Timișoara
European identity narrative	How the city constructs and communicates its European identity	Heritage-led European identity based on multicultural legacy and Art Nouveau heritage	Civic and multicultural European identity based on democracy, diversity and the European Capital of Culture legacy
Institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy	Main instruments used to support international cultural engagement	Heritage regeneration, Oradea Heritage Foundation, Interreg projects, municipal cultural policies	European Capital of Culture 2023, TM2023 Association, international cultural networks, cultural governance

Analytical dimension	Operational focus	Oradea	Timișoara
Cross-border and transnational cooperation	Forms of international cooperation and institutional partnerships	Long-term cooperation with Debrecen and Romanian–Hungarian Interreg programmes	European cultural partnerships, international artistic collaborations, European institutional networks
Urban inclusion mechanisms	Policies and initiatives promoting participation and cultural diversity	Multicultural heritage, bilingual initiatives, educational programmes, university partnerships	Participatory governance, community-based cultural projects, diversity policies, minority inclusion
Sustainability of the governance model	Capacity to ensure long-term impact beyond individual projects	Institutional continuity through cross-border partnerships and heritage management	Legacy governance, institutional capacity building, long-term support for the cultural sector

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The analytical dimensions presented in Table 1 provide the methodological foundation for the comparative analysis developed in the following sections. Rather than evaluating the two cities according to a single performance indicator, the framework enables a multidimensional assessment of how different models of cultural diplomacy contribute to Europeanization, urban inclusion, and sustainable cross-border cooperation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodological approach adopted to investigate the relationship between cultural diplomacy, urban inclusion, and Europeanization in Romanian border cities. It outlines the research design, explains the rationale for selecting the case studies, describes the documentary sources analysed, and introduces the analytical framework guiding the comparative examination.

3.1. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine how different models of cultural diplomacy contribute to Europeanization and urban inclusion in Romanian border cities. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on institutional practices, governance models, and policy processes rather than on testing causal relationships through quantitative indicators. Comparative case studies enable a systematic examination of similarities and differences while preserving the complexity of local contexts (Yin, 2018).

The analysis follows the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 and the analytical dimensions operationalised in Table 1, which guided both the selection of documentary sources and the interpretation of the empirical evidence.

3.2. Case Selection and Data Collection

The research adopts a purposive case-selection strategy. Oradea and Timișoara were selected because they are two representative Romanian western border cities sharing several structural characteristics, including multicultural historical legacies,

active participation in European cooperation programmes, and strong engagement in cultural development. At the same time, they have developed distinct approaches to cultural diplomacy. Oradea has primarily relied on heritage-led regeneration and long-term Romanian–Hungarian cross-border cooperation, whereas Timișoara has promoted a civic-cultural model centred on participatory governance, multicultural identity, and the legacy of the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme. These similarities and differences provide an appropriate basis for comparative analysis.

The empirical research relies on qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The documentary corpus includes municipal development strategies, cultural policy documents, institutional reports, European project documentation, official websites of local authorities and cultural institutions, reports produced within European cooperation programmes, and relevant academic literature. These sources were selected because they provide consistent information regarding governance objectives, institutional arrangements, cultural initiatives, and mechanisms of international cooperation.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The documentary evidence was analysed through a structured comparative approach derived from the theoretical and conceptual framework developed in the previous chapter. The analysis is organised around five analytical dimensions: (1) European identity narratives, (2) institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy, (3) cross-border and transnational cooperation, (4) urban inclusion mechanisms, and (5) the sustainability of local governance models. Rather than ranking the two cities according to their performance, the analysis identifies different governance models and evaluates their contribution to Europeanization at the local level.

3.4. Limitations of the Study

The study presents several limitations. First, it relies primarily on documentary sources produced by public institutions, which generally emphasise policy objectives and achievements more than implementation challenges. Second, it does not include interviews with local stakeholders or quantitative indicators measuring the social impact of cultural initiatives. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect institutional approaches to cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion. Finally, although Oradea and Timișoara provide valuable insights into Romanian border cities, the results should be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable to other European urban contexts.

4. ORADEA: HERITAGE-BASED CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND CROSS-BORDER EUROPEANIZATION

Oradea represents one of Romania's most relevant examples of how cultural diplomacy can contribute to Europeanization through heritage-led urban regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation. Located only 13 kilometres from the Romanian–Hungarian border, the city has transformed its multicultural historical legacy into a strategic resource for urban development, international visibility, and regional cooperation. Rather than treating cultural heritage as a passive element of the past, local authorities have integrated it into a broader governance model linking heritage conservation, cultural diplomacy, tourism development, and European cooperation. Consequently, Oradea illustrates how local governments can translate European values

into concrete urban policies while strengthening both cross-border collaboration and local identity.

4.1. Heritage, European Identity and Cultural Diplomacy

Oradea's European identity is deeply rooted in its historical role as a gateway between Transylvania and the Pannonian region. Romanian, Hungarian, Jewish, German, Slovak and other communities have shaped the city's cultural landscape over centuries, while Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Jewish traditions have contributed to its religious diversity. This multicultural legacy is most visibly reflected in Oradea's architectural heritage, particularly its exceptional concentration of Art Nouveau buildings, which today constitute one of the city's most distinctive European symbols.

Over the last two decades, heritage-led regeneration has become the central pillar of Oradea's urban development strategy. The restoration of historical façades, public squares, synagogues, pedestrian areas and cultural monuments has substantially reshaped the city's image, positioning Oradea among the best-preserved Central European urban centres in Romania. This vision is reflected in the *Integrated Urban Development Strategy 2021–2027*, which links heritage preservation with accessibility, sustainable development, quality of life and cooperation between public authorities, universities, businesses and civil society (Municipality of Oradea, 2021). Within this strategic framework, heritage is understood not only as an economic resource supporting tourism and urban competitiveness, but also as an essential component of the city's multicultural and European identity.

An important institutional role is played by Oradea Heritage, the municipal foundation responsible for heritage conservation, cultural programming, tourism management and international promotion. Rather than limiting restoration to the physical conservation of monuments, the foundation has promoted the adaptive reuse of historical buildings as multifunctional cultural spaces capable of connecting historical memory with contemporary cultural life (Oradea Heritage, 2024).

The restoration of the Sion Neolog Synagogue represents one of the most representative examples of this approach. Implemented through cooperation with partners from Debrecen, the project transformed a former religious building into an active cultural venue hosting concert, exhibitions, conferences, book launches and intercultural events (Oradea Heritage, 2024). Beyond preserving Jewish heritage, the initiative illustrates how cultural diplomacy can simultaneously support historical recognition, intercultural dialogue and international cultural cooperation. The project also reinforces the visibility of Jewish heritage as an integral element of the city's European identity while creating a shared public space where memory and contemporary culture coexist.

Similarly, the international promotion of Oradea's Art Nouveau heritage extends beyond urban branding. Participation in European cultural networks has strengthened the city's visibility while encouraging a broader reinterpretation of its multicultural past. Heritage diplomacy, however, cannot rely exclusively on architectural restoration. Its long-term contribution to Europeanization depends equally on educational initiatives, multilingual communication and the active participation of minority communities capable of transforming restored heritage into living cultural spaces rather than symbolic tourist attractions.

4.2. Cross-Border Cooperation as Urban Paradiplomacy

If heritage provides the symbolic foundation of Oradea's cultural diplomacy, cross-border cooperation represents its institutional dimension. The long-standing partnership with Debrecen demonstrates how municipalities can establish stable international relationships independently of national diplomatic structures, illustrating the growing importance of urban paradiplomacy within European integration (Tavares, 2016).

Supported by successive European Territorial Cooperation programmes, Oradea has developed extensive partnerships involving local administrations, theatres, museums, libraries, universities, religious organisations and cultural institutions. Rather than consisting of isolated initiatives, these collaborations have gradually evolved into a permanent institutional network facilitating joint planning, cultural exchanges and integrated regional development (Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021).

Several projects illustrate this governance model. Interreg-funded initiatives have supported investments in cultural infrastructure, artistic exchanges and integrated tourism products connecting Oradea and Debrecen. The EduCultCentre project promoted the shared Romanian and Hungarian cultural heritage through educational and cultural activities, while partnerships involving the Szigligeti Theatre strengthened artistic cooperation through joint productions, professional workshops and investments in cultural infrastructure (Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate that cultural heritage within border regions can be understood as a common European resource rather than as an exclusively national legacy.

The institutional dimension of cooperation has recently been reinforced through the CBC OrDe Heritage project (2025–2028), implemented jointly by the Municipality of Oradea and the Méliusz Library of Debrecen. With a budget exceeding €2.8 million, the project combines the restoration and digitalisation of the Husarilor Barracks with exhibitions, conferences, educational activities, cultural tourism and the development of a joint cross-border cultural strategy (Municipality of Oradea, 2025). Similar objectives characterise initiatives dedicated to the Swabian heritage of the border region, including multilingual digital platforms, thematic cultural routes, festivals and joint promotion strategies addressed to Romanian, Hungarian and wider European audiences.

The representative projects supporting Oradea's model of cultural diplomacy are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Representative Cross-Border Cultural Projects Supporting Oradea's Cultural Diplomacy

Project	Programme	Main partners	Main objective	Contribution to cultural diplomacy
Restoration of the Sion Neolog Synagogue	Cross-border cultural cooperation	Municipality of Oradea, partners from Debrecen	Adaptive reuse of Jewish heritage	Preservation of multicultural heritage and intercultural dialogue
EduCultCentre	Interreg Romania–Hungary	Romanian and Hungarian cultural institutions	Promotion of shared Romanian–Hungarian cultural heritage	Educational cooperation and institutional networking

CBC OrDe Heritage (2025–2028)	Interreg Romania–Hungary	Municipality of Oradea – Méliusz Library Debrecen	Heritage restoration, digitalisation and cultural tourism	Joint heritage management and long-term cross-border cooperation
Swabian Heritage Project	Cross-border cooperation	Romanian and Hungarian local partners	Multilingual digital platform, cultural route and festivals	Promotion of multicultural heritage and European cultural visibility

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Municipality of Oradea (2021; 2025), Oradea Heritage (2024), Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme documentation and project documentation.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate that European integration in Oradea is embedded in institutional practice rather than limited to symbolic partnerships. Cross-border cooperation has evolved into a stable governance mechanism connecting heritage conservation, cultural production, tourism development and regional planning. At the same time, the model also reveals one of its principal vulnerabilities. The continuity of many initiatives remains closely linked to successive European funding cycles, making long-term sustainability dependent on the institutional capacity to diversify partnerships and financial resources beyond individual projects.

4.3. Urban Inclusion and the Sustainability of the Heritage Model

The effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on its capacity to strengthen international cooperation but also on its ability to generate inclusive forms of local development. In Oradea, urban inclusion is closely connected to the city's multicultural character, reflected in its bilingual cultural environment, religious diversity, Hungarian educational and cultural institutions, and long-standing cross-border interactions. These characteristics support an understanding of cultural diversity as a resource for local development rather than as a source of division, positioning Oradea within a broader European border region (Council of Europe, 2021).

This inclusive approach is also reflected in educational and academic initiatives that connect local governance with European debates on social cohesion and border cooperation. A representative example is the collaboration between the Municipality of Oradea and the University of Oradea through the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence EUROINCLUS, which promotes research, education and international cooperation in areas such as social resilience, participatory governance, multiculturalism, urban inclusion and cross-border development (University of Oradea, 2025). Such initiatives demonstrate that universities can act as important intermediaries between European policies and local communities by facilitating knowledge transfer and encouraging civic participation.

At the same time, the Oradea model illustrates the limitations of heritage-based cultural diplomacy. Although the regeneration of historic districts has considerably improved the city's attractiveness and international visibility, physical restoration alone cannot ensure inclusive participation. Heritage sites may remain primarily spaces for tourism and cultural consumption unless accompanied by educational programmes, community engagement and targeted policies addressing disadvantaged groups. Equal access to cultural life requires the active participation of young people, elderly citizens, persons with disabilities, Roma communities, minority organisations and independent

cultural actors, whose involvement extends the social impact of heritage beyond architectural conservation.

Similarly, multilingual communication, although essential in a multicultural border city, should be regarded as only one component of inclusion. Lasting Europeanization requires opportunities for intercultural dialogue, collaborative cultural production and civic participation capable of transforming cultural diversity into an everyday practice rather than a symbolic representation of European values.

From this perspective, Oradea's greatest contribution to Europeanization lies in its ability to transform a historically contested border into a space of institutionalised cooperation. Heritage regeneration has become more than an urban development strategy; it has evolved into an instrument of cultural diplomacy through which European values are translated into local governance. Stable partnerships with Debrecen, sustained participation in European Territorial Cooperation programmes and the adaptive reuse of multicultural heritage demonstrate how local governments can employ culture to strengthen trust, dialogue and regional cooperation.

Nevertheless, the sustainability of this governance model depends on two complementary conditions. First, institutional cooperation must continue beyond successive European funding cycles through diversified partnerships and long-term strategic planning. Second, heritage diplomacy should increasingly broaden its social reach by integrating community participation, inclusive cultural programming and educational initiatives into heritage management. Only by combining external cooperation with internal inclusion can cultural diplomacy generate durable forms of European identity and social cohesion.

Overall, Oradea illustrates a model of heritage-based Europeanization in which cultural diplomacy is institutionalised through cross-border cooperation and urban regeneration. Its experience demonstrates that European integration is not achieved solely through infrastructure investments or cultural events but through the gradual construction of institutional trust, shared historical narratives and participatory governance. At the same time, the case highlights that the long-term success of heritage diplomacy depends on its capacity to remain socially inclusive and institutionally sustainable. These characteristics provide an important point of comparison with Timișoara, whose model of cultural diplomacy is built less on heritage regeneration and more on civic participation, multicultural governance and international cultural networks.

While Oradea illustrates a model of heritage-based cultural diplomacy rooted in institutionalised cross-border cooperation, Timișoara represents a different trajectory of Europeanization, centred on multicultural civic identity, participatory governance and international cultural networks. Examining these two complementary models provides the basis for the comparative discussion developed later in the article.

5. TIMIȘOARA: CIVIC CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND EUROPEAN NETWORKS

Timișoara represents a complementary model of cultural diplomacy to that developed by Oradea. While Oradea has built its European profile primarily through heritage-led regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation, Timișoara has emphasised civic identity, multiculturalism and international cultural networking. Located in the historical region of Banat, close to both Serbia and Hungary, the city has long been characterised by ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Rather than placing historical heritage at the centre of its European narrative, Timișoara has increasingly

constructed its international identity around democratic values, civic participation and cultural innovation. This approach reached its highest expression through the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme, which transformed the city into an important platform for international cultural cooperation and urban diplomacy.

5.1. Civic Identity, European Values and Cultural Diplomacy

Timișoara's multicultural identity has historically been shaped by the coexistence of Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Jewish, Bulgarian, Roma and other communities. This diversity is reflected not only in the city's cultural heritage but also in its universities, multilingual theatres, cultural institutions and religious traditions. Unlike many European border cities, however, Timișoara has not based its European identity primarily on its geographical location or architectural heritage. Instead, it has developed a civic narrative rooted in the democratic values associated with the 1989 Romanian Revolution and in its image as an open, innovative and culturally diverse city.

This civic identity became the conceptual foundation of the European Capital of Culture programme. Rather than focusing exclusively on cultural events, the programme promoted diversity, innovation, participation, freedom of expression and critical thinking as long-term principles of urban development (TM2023 Association, 2023). Consequently, the title was conceived not merely as a one-year cultural celebration but as a catalyst for structural transformation within the city's cultural ecosystem.

This approach distinguishes Timișoara from the heritage-based model developed by Oradea. Cultural diplomacy was understood less as the international promotion of historical heritage and more as a process of creating opportunities for dialogue, artistic cooperation and civic participation. The opening programme in February 2023 illustrated this vision through exhibitions, performances, public debates, digital heritage projects and community events involving artists, cultural organisations and audiences from across Europe (TM2023 Association, 2023).

Consistent with contemporary approaches to cultural diplomacy (Nye, 2004; Ang, Isar & Mar, 2015), international cooperation extended beyond cultural representation. Co-productions, artist residencies, partnerships between local and international organisations and interventions in public spaces transformed Timișoara into a meeting point connecting local traditions with wider Central European and international cultural networks. Consequently, cultural diplomacy functioned not only as an instrument of international visibility but also as a mechanism for strengthening civic engagement and European identity.

5.2. The European Capital of Culture as a Platform for Urban Diplomacy

The designation of Timișoara as European Capital of Culture created an exceptional framework for urban paradplomacy by bringing together local authorities, the Timiș County Council, the Ministry of Culture, universities, cultural institutions, independent organisations, foreign cultural institutes, embassies, artists, donors and European institutions. This multi-actor governance structure considerably expanded the city's international visibility while creating new opportunities for cooperation across Europe.

One of the programme's most significant achievements was institutional learning. The preparation and implementation of the European Capital of Culture required new governance structures, funding mechanisms, communication strategies and partnerships between public institutions, civil society organisations and the private sector

(TM2023 Association, 2023). Rather than being coordinated exclusively through municipal administration, cultural diplomacy developed as a polycentric governance network in which responsibilities and decision-making were shared among multiple stakeholders. Although this governance model generated challenges related to coordination, accountability and financial sustainability, it also increased institutional flexibility and encouraged innovation.

The programme itself was organised around four interconnected pillars: *People*, *Places*, *Connections* and *Capacity Building*. Together, these dimensions linked local participation with broader European objectives. *People* emphasised civic engagement and active citizenship; *Places* focused on expanding the city's cultural infrastructure; *Connections* strengthened European and international partnerships; while *Capacity Building* aimed to consolidate the long-term resilience of Timișoara's cultural sector (TM2023 Association, 2023).

Official evaluations indicate that the programme substantially increased Timișoara's visibility at both national and international levels, positioning the city as a regional centre of cultural innovation (Ministry of Culture, 2024). Equally important, legacy initiatives developed under the TM2023+ framework seek to preserve cooperation networks, maintain support for cultural operators and avoid the common "event-year" phenomenon in which international visibility rapidly declines after the conclusion of a mega-event.

Beyond its promotional dimension, the European Capital of Culture enabled Timișoara to connect its multicultural history with contemporary European debates concerning democracy, migration, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, cultural memory and social resilience. In this sense, cultural diplomacy functioned not only as a branding strategy but also as a platform through which the city actively contributed to ongoing European cultural and intellectual debates.

The principal initiatives illustrating this model of cultural diplomacy are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Representative International Cultural Initiatives Supporting Timișoara's Cultural Diplomacy

Initiative	Institutional framework	Main objective	Contribution to cultural diplomacy
European Capital of Culture 2023	European Union / TM2023 Association	International cultural programme	Strengthened European visibility and international partnerships
Opening Programme 2023	TM2023 Association	Exhibitions, performances, debates and community events	Promotion of civic participation and intercultural dialogue
TM2023+ Legacy Programme	Municipality of Timișoara / Cultural operators	Continuation of cultural cooperation	Sustainability of international partnerships and cultural networks
Capacity Building Programme	TM2023 Association	Strengthening cultural organisations and governance	Institutional learning and long-term resilience of the cultural sector

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on TM2023 Association (2023), Ministry of Culture (2024) and official programme documentation.

Overall, Timișoara illustrates a model of civic cultural diplomacy in which international cooperation is generated primarily through cultural networks, participatory governance and institutional innovation rather than through heritage-led regeneration alone. The long-term significance of this model, however, depends on whether the institutional capacities and partnerships created during the European Capital of Culture programme continue to shape the city's cultural development beyond the event itself.

5.3. Urban Inclusion and the Sustainability of the Civic Model

Urban inclusion represents one of the defining characteristics of Timișoara's approach to cultural diplomacy. While the European Capital of Culture significantly increased the city's international visibility, its long-term relevance depends on the extent to which cultural initiatives contribute to civic participation, social cohesion and equal access to cultural life. In this respect, Timișoara has promoted a model in which cultural diversity is understood not merely as a symbolic representation of European values but as an active component of urban governance and community development.

The city's multicultural character provides an important foundation for this approach. Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Jewish, Bulgarian and Roma communities have long contributed to the cultural identity of Timișoara, while multilingual theatres, educational institutions, religious organisations and independent cultural operators create opportunities for continuous intercultural dialogue. According to the Council of Europe, Timișoara represents one of the most culturally diverse urban environments in Romania, where minority-language theatres, intercultural festivals and multicultural public initiatives have become integral elements of local cultural life (Council of Europe, 2021).

The European Capital of Culture programme further expanded these opportunities by extending cultural participation beyond traditional institutions. Community-based projects, interventions in public spaces, educational activities and partnerships with independent organisations sought to involve broader categories of citizens in cultural life. Practical measures, including the provision of free public transport during the opening weekend of the programme, reflected the understanding that participation depends not only on the availability of cultural events but also on reducing barriers to access (TM2023 Association, 2023).

The programme also encouraged new forms of collaboration between public authorities, universities, cultural institutions and civil society organisations, reinforcing participatory governance as an essential dimension of cultural diplomacy. In this sense, inclusion was approached not simply as cultural representation but as an ongoing process of strengthening relationships between institutions and local communities. Such initiatives demonstrate that international cultural programmes can generate lasting local benefits when they encourage civic engagement and institutional cooperation alongside artistic production.

Nevertheless, the Timișoara model also faces important challenges. The exceptional concentration of cultural activities during 2023 inevitably raises questions regarding the long-term sustainability of the programme's achievements. International visibility generated by a major cultural event does not automatically guarantee the continued development of the local cultural sector. Maintaining the networks established during the European Capital of Culture requires stable financial resources, transparent governance, continued support for independent cultural organisations and the permanent activation of cultural venues throughout the city.

Equally important is the extension of inclusion policies towards groups that remain underrepresented within cultural life. The adoption of strategies addressing the social inclusion of Roma communities illustrates an increasing awareness that multicultural branding alone cannot ensure equitable participation (Municipality of Timișoara, 2026). Sustainable cultural diplomacy therefore requires integrated policies connecting culture with education, employment, housing, anti-discrimination measures and social participation.

From this perspective, Timișoara's principal contribution to Europeanization lies in demonstrating that cultural diplomacy can function as a mechanism of civic transformation rather than solely as an instrument of international promotion. The European Capital of Culture programme generated new institutional partnerships, strengthened international cultural networks and encouraged broader civic participation while positioning the city within contemporary European debates on democracy, diversity, migration, sustainability and cultural memory.

The long-term success of this model, however, will depend on the capacity to transform the legacy of the European Capital of Culture into a permanent component of urban governance. Institutional learning, participatory decision-making, continued investment in the cultural sector and sustained cooperation with European partners will determine whether the achievements of 2023 evolve into durable forms of Europeanization or remain primarily associated with a successful cultural event.

Overall, Timișoara illustrates a model of civic cultural diplomacy in which European identity is constructed through democratic participation, multicultural governance and international cultural cooperation. Unlike Oradea, where Europeanization is primarily articulated through heritage-led regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation, Timișoara demonstrates how cultural diplomacy can emerge from civic engagement, international cultural networks and collaborative governance. Together, the two cities reveal complementary pathways through which Romanian border cities contribute to European integration. These similarities and differences constitute the basis for the comparative discussion presented in the following chapter.

6. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Oradea and Timișoara have developed two distinct yet complementary models of urban cultural diplomacy, both contributing to the broader process of Europeanization. Although the two cities share several structural characteristics—including multicultural historical legacies, strategic border locations and sustained participation in European cooperation programmes—they differ significantly in the ways cultural diplomacy is conceptualised, institutionalised and translated into local governance. Rather than representing competing approaches, the two models illustrate complementary pathways through which border cities strengthen European identity, cross-border cooperation and urban inclusion.

The first major difference concerns the construction of European identity. Oradea has developed a heritage-based narrative in which restored architectural heritage, multicultural memory and cross-border historical ties constitute the principal resources of cultural diplomacy (Municipality of Oradea, 2021; Oradea Heritage, 2024). Heritage regeneration functions not only as an urban development strategy but also as a diplomatic instrument through which the city promotes European values by preserving cultural diversity and reinterpreting shared historical memory. In contrast, Timișoara has

constructed its European identity around democratic values, civic participation and cultural innovation. Rather than emphasising the material dimension of heritage, the city presents Europe as a living civic project based on freedom, diversity, participation and intercultural dialogue (TM2023 Association, 2023). These findings support Delanty's (2005) argument that European identity is a dynamic social and cultural construction rather than a purely institutional process.

The analysis also reveals significant differences in the institutional organisation of cultural diplomacy. Oradea's governance model is characterised by relatively stable municipal leadership supported by specialised heritage institutions and long-term cross-border partnerships. Cultural diplomacy has gradually become institutionalised through successive European Territorial Cooperation programmes and sustained cooperation with Debrecen (Municipality of Oradea, 2021; Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021). By contrast, Timișoara illustrates a more networked governance model in which municipalities, universities, cultural organisations, foreign cultural institutes, artists and civil society jointly contribute to international cultural cooperation. The European Capital of Culture programme accelerated this process by creating new institutional partnerships and expanding opportunities for collaboration beyond traditional administrative structures (TM2023 Association, 2023). These findings confirm previous research emphasising the growing role of cities as autonomous actors within systems of multi-level governance and urban paradiplomacy (Acuto, 2013; Tavares, 2016).

Cross-border cooperation also assumes different functions within the two cities. In Oradea, cooperation with Debrecen has become an institutionalised component of local governance through shared cultural infrastructure, joint heritage projects and long-term European programmes (Municipality of Oradea, 2025; Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021). Cross-border cooperation therefore functions as a permanent mechanism of Europeanization embedded within everyday institutional practice. Timișoara also benefits from its geographical location near international borders; however, its international strategy extends beyond bilateral cooperation towards broader European and international cultural networks. The European Capital of Culture programme considerably expanded these connections by integrating the city into international artistic, cultural and institutional partnerships (TM2023 Association, 2023). Together, the two cases illustrate different territorial scales of cultural diplomacy: one centred on institutionalised cross-border cooperation, the other on wider European networking.

Urban inclusion constitutes a second major dimension through which the two models converge. In both cities, cultural diplomacy extends beyond external image-building and contributes to local social development. However, different mechanisms are employed to achieve this objective. Oradea promotes inclusion primarily through the adaptive reuse of multicultural heritage, bilingual initiatives, educational cooperation and the recognition of historical diversity (University of Oradea, 2025). Timișoara adopts a broader participatory approach based on community projects, independent cultural initiatives, multilingual cultural institutions and policies explicitly addressing social inclusion (Council of Europe, 2021; Municipality of Timișoara, 2026). These findings reinforce the argument that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on international visibility but also on its capacity to strengthen civic participation, intercultural dialogue and equal access to cultural life (Council of Europe, 2021).

Despite their different trajectories, both cities face similar challenges regarding the long-term sustainability of cultural diplomacy. European funding has played a

decisive role in supporting heritage regeneration, institutional cooperation and cultural programming. Nevertheless, maintaining these achievements requires governance structures capable of ensuring institutional continuity beyond individual funding cycles or flagship cultural events (Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021; TM2023 Association, 2023). Likewise, neither restored heritage nor internationally recognised cultural programmes automatically generate inclusive urban development. Sustainable Europeanization depends on the continuous interaction between external cooperation and internal inclusion, requiring diversified financial resources, long-term institutional commitment and active community participation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by distinguishing between two complementary pathways of local Europeanization. The Oradea case illustrates a heritage-based model, in which European identity is strengthened through heritage regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation. The Timișoara case demonstrates a civic model, centred on participatory governance, international cultural networks and cultural innovation. Rather than representing alternative approaches, these models complement one another by illustrating different mechanisms through which cities translate European values into local governance. In this respect, the findings extend previous research on cultural diplomacy and paradiplomacy by demonstrating that Europeanization is shaped not only by international cooperation but also by the interaction between cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion.

Overall, the comparative analysis confirms the conceptual framework proposed in this article. Europeanization at the local level emerges through the interaction of two complementary dimensions. The external dimension is represented by cultural diplomacy, international partnerships and cross-border cooperation, while the internal dimension is expressed through urban inclusion, participatory governance and social cohesion. Neither dimension alone is sufficient to generate durable forms of European integration. International cooperation without inclusive local governance risks remaining primarily symbolic, whereas local inclusion policies disconnected from transnational cooperation have a more limited European impact.

The findings therefore suggest that Romanian border cities should be understood not merely as beneficiaries of European policies but as active contributors to European integration. Through different governance models, Oradea and Timișoara translate European values into concrete institutional practices, cultural initiatives and forms of civic participation. Consequently, cultural diplomacy emerges not only as an instrument of international representation but also as a mechanism through which local governments strengthen European identity, promote inclusive urban development and reinforce the long-term sustainability of European integration.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined how different models of urban cultural diplomacy contribute to the Europeanization of Romanian border cities through a comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara. The findings demonstrate that cultural diplomacy has become an important instrument through which cities translate European values into local governance, cross-border cooperation and community development.

The comparative analysis identified two complementary pathways of Europeanization. Oradea illustrates a heritage-based model in which urban regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation reinforce European identity through the

preservation and promotion of multicultural heritage. Timișoara represents a civic model centred on participatory governance, international cultural networks and the legacy of the European Capital of Culture programme. Although based on different governance strategies, both models confirm that sustainable Europeanization depends on combining international cooperation with inclusive local policies.

The main theoretical contribution of the study is the development of an integrated framework linking cultural diplomacy, urban inclusion and Europeanization. By distinguishing between heritage-based and civic models of cultural diplomacy, the article demonstrates that border cities are not passive recipients of European policies but active actors shaping European integration through locally embedded governance practices.

The findings also have practical implications. They suggest that local authorities should integrate cultural diplomacy into broader urban development strategies, strengthen long-term institutional partnerships and promote inclusive cultural policies that ensure broad civic participation. European funding programmes can generate more sustainable outcomes when heritage conservation, cross-border cooperation and social inclusion are addressed as interconnected policy objectives.

The study is limited by its reliance on documentary sources and the analysis of only two case studies. Future research could expand the comparative framework by including additional border cities or incorporating interviews with local stakeholders to explore how cultural diplomacy is experienced by different social groups.

Overall, the article argues that border cities should be understood as laboratories of European integration where cultural diplomacy supports not only international visibility but also democratic participation, social cohesion and sustainable urban development. The experiences of Oradea and Timișoara demonstrate that different local governance models can make complementary contributions to the European project while reinforcing the role of cities as active actors in Europeanization.

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