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UK Cultural Diplomacy in Europe 1989-2025: Lessons and Implications for Future UK Soft Power Strategy

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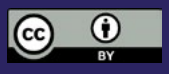

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The interpretations offered in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Bristol, the British Council, government departments and those individuals who contributed to the research. The author takes full responsibility for any errors.

London, August 2025

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Glossary of acronyms

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CRD	Cultural Relations Department
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media & Sport
DfE	Department for Education
EC	European Commission
EUNIC	European Union National Institutes for Culture
FCDO, FCO and FO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) since 2020; Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) from 1968 until 2020; the Foreign Office (FO) formed in 1782. *The author has aimed to use the acronyms appropriate to the historical period discussed at specific points in the report.*
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TNA	The National Archives

Executive summary

This report examines UK cultural diplomacy in Europe and seeks to identify long-term patterns and trends; what has worked and what hasn't. Assessing persisting policy challenges and opportunities in light of the past offers evidence-based domestic and international policy recommendations with the aim of providing practically applicable insights for policymakers. It is also a way to measure the impact of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations beyond metrics that sometimes fail to capture markers of success.

The report opens in 1989 with the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern bloc at the end of the Cold War. It was a time of intense and varied activity for UK cultural diplomacy in Eastern and Central Europe which witnessed an explosion of demand for English language teaching, support for developing management and business skills, and an appetite for the arts. The UK was able to cater for this extraordinary need thanks to the FCO's programme of technical assistance (the Know How Fund), the creation of scholarships and additional funding bestowed by the government to organisations in charge of cultural relations such as the British Council. British cultural diplomacy was sustained in Eastern and Central Europe throughout the early 2000s as it supported many nations' accessions to the European Union.

The European Union and its programmes were elements that supported British cultural diplomacy in the late twentieth and early twenty first century. While many in the UK were keen to engage with the EU for matters of cultural relations and the creatives industries, the report also identifies an attitude of complacency from certain pockets of leaders in governments and cultural organisations, and that was ultimately detrimental to the UK's reputation in the EU. This complacency was accompanied by a lack of interest in many countries in Western and Southern Europe in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, the UK identified the Middle East, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific as strategic priorities, a designation that granted UK cultural strategies in these regions substantial funding, part of which had been redirected from Europe. The report argues that the active choice made by many in the UK government to follow priorities in other regions of the world has been detrimental to the UK's influence in Western Europe in the twenty first century. It offers suggestions, grounded in past experiences, to help redress the situation and give concrete form to the current government's priority of resetting relationships with Europe.

This report presents answers to the following major research questions:

Question 1: How have UK cultural relations and cultural diplomacy responded to major geopolitical shifts?

Question 2: How important have Europe and the European Community (and its successors) been for UK cultural relations and cultural diplomacy?

Question 3: What has been the impact of UK cultural strategies towards Europe? Has engagement or lack of engagement made a substantial impact on the image of the UK in Europe?

Key findings

Successes

Finding 1: Non-governmental practitioners of cultural relations add a high value to UK cultural diplomacy due to their ability to straddle the political sphere and spaces of cultural policy (often perceived as politically neutral by foreign and domestic audiences). From the point of view of the FCDO, these cultural relations practitioners can be a conduit to valued and respected intelligence about a country while retaining their independence from the UK government. It is therefore easier for these practitioners to gain the trust of local actors and to engage with all levels of a society.

Finding 2: Large-scale schemes such as the Know How Fund or bilateral programmes such as Cultural Seasons have a positive impact on the UK's reputation and economy that can be well evidenced through surveys with partners and through comparative analysis.

Finding 3: Practitioners at the British Council and in non-governmental cultural organisations working in European countries value guidance from the FCDO about what foreign policy objectives they should prioritise and enjoy working closely with UK missions and representations overseas.

Challenges

Finding 4: The cuts to funding streams related to cultural relations and cultural diplomacy have detrimental consequences on the UK's ability to coordinate and mobilise some of its key soft power assets and to maintain a presence overseas among different communities, including at grassroots level.

Finding 5: The decrease in the budget for UK cultural relations in Europe before the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has weakened partnerships with Europe and the reputation of Britain in Europe and the world.

Finding 6: In the 1990s and early 2000s, including in the lead up to Brexit, there was a discrepancy between official HMG policy lines about putting Europe at the centre of UK foreign policy, and a form of complacency about Western Europe that prevailed among some units of government departments. This contrasted with the ambitions of practitioners of UK cultural relations (British Council staff based overseas, university staff engaged in transnational education and research, artists etc.) who valued close cooperation with the EU and EU member states, including in Western Europe. These practitioners felt that their job was guided by several often conflicting HMG policy lines about Western Europe.

Finding 7: Ignorance of foreign languages in the UK has been negatively impacting British business and the reputation of Britain in Europe and in the world. A strong soft power, and the economic and political influence it supports, can only be sustained through investment in foreign language skills.

Finding 8: The enhanced focus on revenue generating activities since the early 2000s and the danger of a top-down model with 'producers' on one side and, on the other, 'consumers' of cultural products, risks alienating foreign audiences and rendering them less receptive to British values and culture.

Finding 9: There is a mismatch between the long-term nature of soft power and aid strategies and the (often short-term) way an elected government approaches its term in office.

Recommendations

The recommendations aim to address issues identified during the research and data analysis phases and are intended for the UK government, the British Council and other stakeholders involved in cultural diplomacy and soft power.

Recommendation 1: The effort to centralise and coordinate effort among UK organisations that further cultural diplomacy needs to be sustained through a clear soft power strategy and a body such as the Soft Power Council.

Recommendation 2: FCDO, the Soft Power Council and the British Council should articulate well-defined UK soft power and cultural diplomacy objectives for Europe, in particular Western Europe (as these are currently less clear than in Eastern and Central Europe) ensuring alignment with broader UK foreign policy goals while also considering the region-specific context.

Recommendation 3: The UK Soft Power strategy should account for the temporality of soft power. Trust is acquired slowly but can be lost quickly. It is hard to build and easy to lose.

Recommendation 4: The UK and EU must agree new arrangements for creative workers, who are at the heart of UK soft power, and youth mobility in the upcoming implementation review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

Recommendation 5: The UK government should take steps for UK arts, cultural and educational organisations to have the possibility to participate in a much broader range of EU programmes, including Erasmus + and Creative Europe. Collaborations across Europe are key to mobilising UK soft power to ensure that the UK remains attractive to and trusted by Europeans.

Recommendation 6: Cultural diplomacy should continue to support the UK's defence agenda and the Ministry of Defence should continue to acknowledge its soft power needs. If soft power is understood as a diplomatic tool to help fight against disinformation and undemocratic attitudes, and if we take the view that the line between soft and hard power is porous, agencies such as the British Council should benefit from increased funding in line with recent increases to the defence budget.

Recommendation 7: In a context where populism is rising and media literacy is weak among groups that fall prey to disinformation throughout the world, UK soft power must continue to connect with these transnational disenchanted groups. This ambition should build on trusted, long-standing relationships and an established in-country and digital presence, such as that of the British Council. The British Council is particularly well-placed to lead this work due to its arm's-length status, which enables it to build trust more effectively than official UK government representatives, who may be perceived as engaging in propaganda.

Recommendation 8: The UK government needs to cooperate with other like-minded European nations to address disinformation and promote democratic values. The current siloed approach amongst other European nations is ineffective and unsustainable for addressing current and future threats to global security. Existing networks such as EUNIC – European Union National Institutes for Culture – might provide relevant avenues for cooperation.

Recommendation 9: The UK government must acknowledge that foreign languages capability (including among the government and in the business sector) is an important element of the UK's soft power. The government must therefore act to support the learning of foreign languages in the UK, which has been declining over the period under study.

Background and vocabulary

Soft power refers to the processes through which persuasion and the search for influence and power help attain foreign policy objectives. The American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, who coined the phrase in 1990, stressed that soft power relied on attraction rather than coercion or payment. It rests on setting out political, cultural or social values, outlooks and agenda that others admire and want to emulate. A country's foreign policy success partly depends on its ability to influence other governments and foreign public opinion. Soft power policies are key to achieving this all the more as they target both high political spheres and members of civil society. In Nye's conceptual framework soft power constitutes the counterpart of the more familiar 'hard power', although scholars, diplomats and practitioners increasingly agree that both soft and hard power work hand in hand.

As Joseph Nye notes (1990, p.96) 'The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)'. But other forms of tangible resources also matter for soft power, (including infrastructure and communication technologies), which rely on economic power and even on the coercive use of international communication channels. For this reason, the historian Ludovic Tournès (2020) has argued there is nothing 'soft' about soft power.

Cultural diplomacy is one of the central pillars of soft power. It relies on the promotion of languages and cultural relations among nations to further a country's soft power. This is undertaken by foreign ministries and other government departments that have an international strategy (culture, trade etc.). It is also supported by non-state actors and arm's-length bodies in so far as some of their programmes align with government strategy. In the UK context, such bodies include the BBC World Service and the British Council (created in 1934).[1] In so far as it fosters intercultural dialogue and emphasises mutuality, the British Council defines its activity as cultural relations. The cultural relations framework relates to the efforts of individuals and institutions from different countries that seek to build credible, long-term relationships in the cultural and educational sphere for mutual benefit. Cultural relations include educational programmes and scholarship schemes as well as events that promote UK arts (from bestselling exhibitions and Shakespeare tours through to single-performer theatre shows in small festivals). Beyond the arts, cultural diplomacy and cultural relations in the period post-1989 drew on themes as varied and universal as human rights, sustainability and youth education. It is on culture and the arts as elements of soft power that this report focuses. Throughout, the report will use the phrase 'cultural diplomacy' with some exceptions such as when referring specifically to British Council activities when it will use the phrase 'cultural relations', a phrase that the British Council favours to define its activities.

1 The focus for this paper is primarily the British Council, though a separate study focusing on the BBC World Service would no doubt be very complementary.

Policy context

UK soft power strategy is being developed by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), supported by its Soft Power Hub. This team also supports the UK Soft Power Council and liaises with the UK's independent soft power assets, including the British Council and the BBC World Service. Other government departments also have influence in soft power matters, in particular the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport ([DCMS] which engages closely with the cultural sector on international cultural exchanges and raises awareness of the UK through international events) and the Department for Education ([DfE] which has a dedicated international education strategy that supports the growth of British education overseas and increasing access to British education on UK soil).

The UK soft power strategies and programmes engineered by government departments and arm's-length organisations (in so far as they are in receipt of public money) must support the new UK government strategies for foreign policy. These include: growth; enhancing the UK's security; restoring UK leadership on climate change; modernising the UK's approach to development; rebuilding the UK's relationship with Europe.

Soft power is high on the government's agenda and that of the Foreign Secretary David Lammy, as is evidenced with the launch of the UK Soft Power Council in January 2025 and the making of a new Soft Power strategy, to be launched by the end of 2025. The Soft Power Council is an advisory board to the UK government. It is co-chaired by the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, David Lammy and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Lisa Nandy. The inaugural membership is eclectic and speaks to the variety of stakeholders in soft power matters. It includes Sir Peter Bazalgette, Chair and Pro-Chancellor, Royal College of Art; General Sir Nick Carter, Former Chief of the Defence Staff; Francesca Hegyi, Executive Director, Edinburgh International Festival; and Scott McDonald, Chief Executive, British Council.

The Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee has also launched an inquiry into the extent and effectiveness of the UK's soft power. Its chair, Dame Emily Thornberry, has pointed out that competitors such as China, Russia and India are investing increasingly in soft power tools including educational and cultural exchanges and that the UK cannot afford to be complacent if it wants to maintain its leadership in this domain. In Wales, issues of soft power were raised by a Senedd Committee inquiry on Culture and the new relationship with the EU. It explored, amongst other topics, the impact of the new relationship with the European Union on artists and creative workers touring and working cross-border (including touring and working in Wales), and on access to EU-funded programmes and networks.

Sources and methods

The report draws from international relations theory, literature and history while also engaging with research from cultural policy studies in order to capture a wide range of perspectives that are shaping the debate on cultural diplomacy and cultural relations. The work is based on an in-depth qualitative study. At the first stage, I conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify key gaps and shape research questions concerning key geopolitical moments. I also read the British Council archives deposited at The National Archives (TNA), Kew, and at the British Council (Manchester Office); documents included annual reports, minutes of Board meetings, and the oral history interviews conducted as part of the 75th and 90th anniversaries of the British Council.[2] The material of government departments whose work connects to soft power, such as the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) was also consulted, where possible. Both departments have had a small team in charge of cultural relations, cultural diplomacy or soft power for most of the period under study. At TNA, I have been able to read their internal documents, letters and, for the early 2000s, emails too. However, accessing this material was sometimes difficult because cultural relations are designated 'low priority' by TNA, echoing the relatively low level of priority accorded to it by the government throughout the twentieth century. As the FCDO archive is dealing with a huge backlog, only the priority areas are being transferred roughly on schedule. While some material pertaining to soft power and cultural relations was simply not accessible, other FCDO folders that landed on my desk at Kew were completely empty. It is worrying that researchers do not know the state current record keeping is in; this raises issues for accessing more recent policy and decision-making history (once the standard 25- or 30-year embargo has been lifted), but also about ensuring future policymakers have access to resources.

To collect further information, I interviewed just over 30 individuals online and in-person, primarily current and former members of staff of the British Council, but also current and former members of DMCS, FCDO and DfE. These discussions are important to understand the mentalities, emotions and beliefs of cultural diplomats at the time, which, realist approaches indicate, are significant motors of policy making (Tang 2008). The below report shows how the individuals who designed and supported cultural relations programmes were also often driven by a belief that the UK had much to contribute to the world and to Europe, while remaining critical of accusations of cultural imperialism (much diluted, in their views, by a strong belief in mutuality). Certainly, the use of interviews and focus groups for studies of international relations does not go without challenges. I took care to crosscheck interviews with available written material to help verify the information gathered through interviews, identify inconsistencies, and provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the past.

2 Both collections are being archived at the British Library.

Literature review

Long ignored by diplomatic historians of Europe, cultural diplomacy was initially given scholarly relevance in historical accounts penned by career diplomats in the context of the Cold War. Their works often assume that British cultural diplomacy as an instrument of state policy only really began in 1934 with the opening of the British Council (Donaldson 1984). A second bulk of scholarship has focused on the development of UK cultural diplomacy during the Cold War building upon Joseph Nye's work on soft power (Potts 2014; Zhu 2017; Goncalves 2019; Waldron 2022; Simony 2024). There is still very little historical and scholarly work that looks at UK cultural relations post-1989 with a handful of exceptions such as Pamment (2016) which argues that the digital revolution expanded the boundaries of UK public diplomacy over the period between 1995 and 2015.

In an examination of the rise of the phrase 'soft power' to the detriment of cultural diplomacy in the international and British contexts, Nisbett (2016) has highlighted that the field of cultural policy had, for a long time, focused on domestic concerns. Following her lead, scholars in the field and in sociology have advanced the research agenda on British cultural diplomacy, offering critical analysis of concepts such as instrumentalisation (Nisbett 2012), diffusion and network (Zhu and Li, 2024; Aslan Ozgul et al 2021). Other scholars of cultural studies and international cultural relations have researched specific themes that have been at the forefront of contemporary cultural diplomacy such as peace (British Council 2018), sciences (Copeland 2022; Naisbitt 2023), and sustainability (Faucher and Zhu 2024). There is also a long history of examining the economics of the creative industries, including in their international outlook such as the *Culture Means Business* report (British Council 2013). The field has also benefited immensely from the research of Stuart MacDonald, founder of ICR Ltd, who has written insightfully on a variety of topics ranging from knowledge diplomacy to the Soft Power Council while raising awareness among civil servants of the challenges facing UK cultural diplomacy.

The present report also draws on the Select Committee inquiries and parliamentary reports on soft power that have taken place over the past decades. This includes Lord Carter's Report on Public Diplomacy (December 2005). This paper highlighted the need for greater co-ordination and transparency in public diplomacy as well the need to measure the impact and effectiveness of the British Council's, the BBC World Service's and the FCO's public diplomacy work to account for the public funding they receive (Select Committee on Foreign Affairs 2006). Following the Carter Review, the British Council, FCO and BBC World Service established a new overarching framework under the Public Diplomacy Board and a new Public Diplomacy Unit within the FCO (directed by a member of the British Council, on secondment) to support the new Board, but it is unclear what the impact of the Board actually was and for how long it actually existed.

More recently, in 2014, the House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence alerted the government that it had neglected soft power within its foreign policy. It highlighted 'the growing role of global protest networks and non-governmental organisations' and 'the rising power, economic and political, of non-Western countries (the so-called 'rise of the rest')' which were both disrupting the global balance of influence. It called for a radical change in how the UK was conducting its foreign policy and concluded that soft power was 'essential for protecting the UK's interests' (House of Lords 2014). This was shortly followed by *The Art of Attraction: Soft*

Power and the UK's Role in the World published by the British Academy (Hill and Beadle 2014) that stressed the role of ordinary citizens in soft power. Finally, any scholars of cultural diplomacy ought to engage with numerous studies on soft power produced by the British Council's research and insight team (which has existed since at least the early 2000s). These reports go well beyond the activities of the British Council and examine topics such as transnational education; English language education and policy; and gender equality.[3]

3 British Council Research and Insight, https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/research-topics, last accessed on 4 July 2025.

1. Actors of cultural relations

Cultural diplomacy is a policy domain that goes beyond specific ministries. In the UK it is made of multiple government departments and non-state actors, as well as non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) such as the British Council. Given their distinct remit and workings, these organisations cooperate, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes heatedly, in the process of policymaking. The following pages consider key actors of UK cultural relations.

1.1 British Council

In the late 1980s, when this report begins, the British Council was Britain's principal agency for the conduct of cultural relations overseas. At the time, it worked on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) to support government-funded scholarship schemes and Britain's aid programme. The British Council was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1940 – a date and document that many of its former and current staff mention proudly. Under George V the British Council was given the task of 'promoting a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries.' By 1989 there was a clear sense that the promotion of Britain abroad ought to be conducted increasingly through collaboration with British government departments, multilateral agencies, commercial sponsors, host governments and fee-paying clients. In particular in the late 1980s, in the context of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Director-General of the British Council, Sir Richard Francis KCMG, stressed the organisation's stability and its wide remit, from the arts to science and technology:

> In this shifting pattern of international relations, the role of the British Council remains constant. Our aim is to further the cause of international understanding through the medium of English, and to increase the appreciation of what Britain has to offer. We do so by providing access to British expertise and achievement right across the cultural spectrum - not only in education, science and the arts but also in fields which are important in technical co-operation.[4]

In 1990, with the reorganisation of Europe well underway (discussed in detail below), the British Council was represented overseas by 145 offices in 90 countries.

The relationship between the FCO and the British Council is the frequent subject of internal and external discussion and reviews. Overall British Council members of staff commented on harmonious relationships with Posts (UK missions and representations overseas such as embassies). Some stressed how useful being seconded to the FCO for short periods of time had been to their

4 TNA BW 151/51, British Council annual report 1989-1989.

understanding of government workings. Others highlighted the benefits of being both the cultural attaché and the country director for the British Council: the diplomatic status gave them visibility and access to the ambassador. A former British Council director in France remembers that one-to-one meetings with the then ambassador Lord Ricketts took place almost weekly and that Lord Ricketts took a keen interest in cultural events and partnerships. Other ambassadors were much less interested. The same interviewee noted that he never had a private meeting with some of the ambassadors he worked with, even when he had diplomatic status (being both British Council country director and cultural attaché). Yet being British Council director and cultural attaché allowed him to raise the profile of British culture in his countries through the well-connected and far-reaching embassy channels, despite having an ambassador who did not seem to value the role of the arts for diplomacy.

There were certainly a few instances when the relationships between Posts and British Council offices in country were strained. For example, in the early 1990s in the Soviet Union / Russian Federation when the Embassy Cultural Section developed into the British Council Section of the Embassy (and then with premises of its own) as part of a path to independence, strategies were originally not aligned. In that occasion, the high profile achieved by the British Council did arouse jealousies within the embassy.

At the same time, many highlighted how the arm's-length position of the British Council granted its staff independence – a precious soft power asset, particularly in the eyes of local partners and audiences. In Eastern and Central European countries with tight domestic regulations in the late 1980s and early 1990s it was also easier for staff who did not have diplomatic status to travel. This meant that they gained a different knowledge of the region where they worked, that was less centred on the capital or large regional cities, which was often the key focus of embassies. Independence came also in the guise of the freedom to curate festivals or organize events, sometimes going against an ambassador's request, such as performances of Mark Ravenhill's 1996 play *Shopping and Fucking*. The title of this play caused many ambassadors and high commissioners to beg the British Council in their country to reconsider, in vain.

The arm's-length position also gave British Council members of staff the confidence that they were not conducting public diplomacy: 'If traditional diplomacy is the government of one country trying to benignly influence on its own behalf the government of another country, then public diplomacy is the government of one country trying to benignly influence the people of another country, and that is, that's a slippery slope to propaganda.'[5] Archives and interviews support this claim. For example, campaigns explicitly associated with HMG, such as the GREAT campaign (launched in 2012 during the premiership of David Cameron), raised some concern among foreign interlocutors who were uneasy at the thought of being too closely associated with a strategy led by the UK government rather than by a non-state organisation.

Ambassadors and foreign governments, meanwhile, have remained very aware of the power of the British Council's network among the groups that they are keen to engage with and support. From local and UK businesses, science and technology organisations, and education and the arts, the British Council has carved a space among communities at different levels, engaging with international thought leaders as well as communities in rural areas. Posts have expressed their awareness that the British Council is precisely able to maintain such a diverse network of support because it does not appear political; rather, it

5 Paul Smith interviewed by Anna Duenbier on 3 June 2024, British Council 90th anniversary Oral History Collection. Abstracts of the interviews are accessible here: https://www.britishcouncil.org/oral-histories?shpath=/the-interviews/stories-from-our-colleagues/paul-smith

tries to bring individuals together through mutual partnership.

1.2 FCDO

There has been a Cultural Relations Department (CRD) at the Foreign Office since 1943. It has evolved over the period under study. Originally created to give political guidance to the British Council, it was mostly active in the field of youth and student movement in Europe. In the 1980s and 1990s, the department had various components including overseeing the government's scholarship programme and managing a small fund for arts projects. The CRD was the FCO department in charge of the British Council with which it had a non-interventionist approach as noted by a former head of the CRD in the 1990s. They explained to me that they nonetheless agreed on priority regions and general programmes, thinking about how it linked up Foreign Office objectives. Geographical desks at the FCO have also been key interlocutors and supporters of projects of cultural relations.

The FCO has put a mark on the UK cultural relations through other bodies such as Visiting Arts, which was a joint venture of the Arts Council of Great Britain, the FCO, the British Council and the Gulbenkian Foundation set up in 1979. It was governed by a Chair appointed by the FCO and worked primarily as a funding and facilitating agency. The main purpose of Visiting Arts was to help promote foreign arts and culture in the UK and address the fear that countries where the UK was keen to promote its arts and artists were not able to in turn send artists and artwork to the UK. Thus, Visiting Arts was a soft power asset that helped build strategic international partnerships and helped counter British insularity with regard to the arts. Later in the century, Visiting Arts was primarily an information and advocacy agency for artists. As will be discussed below there were other discreet schemes that led to intense cooperation between the FCO and the British Council over the period studied.

1.3 The rise of New Soft Power Actors in the late 1990s and 2000s

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Whitehall departments, such as the Department for Education and Employment (1995-2001), the Department for Education and Skills (2001-2007) and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (created in 1997 and renamed Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in 2017) which historically had tended to have an overwhelmingly domestic focus, started to develop international agendas. The process was not without challenges. In 1999 a civil servant at DCMS highlighted both a lack of resources within the department and a 'widespread perception in this Department that international work is pretty peripheral to our main agenda'. They hoped this would change, at least in part, with the development of a departmental international strategy.[6]

That same year, in 1999, the Department for Education and Employment also took on additional international duties. Together with the British Council, it launched and implemented the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) which set to increase the number of international students studying in the UK by 75,000 by 2005 and to encourage collaboration between universities, colleges, government and other bodies to promote UK education abroad. A second phase of the PMI was launched in 2008. In parallel, under Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the department created the first international strategy (2002-2004) that sought, among other things 'to encourage education and training providers to work internationally in partnership with business' (Department for Education and Skills 2004). At the time, the Department for International Development (DFID) was also funding education projects in particular linked to the United Nation's millennium development goals and later the sustainable development goals, an area in which the British Council had been deeply involved since the end of the Second World War.

6 TNA PF 307/15, International issues, Arts division's international work, 12 November 1999.

There began to emerge an overlap between the agendas and the interests of Whitehall departments and the British Council. This created demarcation issues given that the British Council was active in the field of cultural relations and supporting UK soft power, not only before the more domestic-focused Whitehall departments such as DfE and DCMS began to take an interest in these questions, but in some cases before they even existed.

1.4 Non-State Actors

Actors operating on the margins or separate from foreign ministries are central to soft power. Because of their status as 'non-state' or semi-public actors, they have not traditionally occupied a central place in the scholarship of international relations that has overwhelmingly focused on diplomats and government departments. In putting 'the public into diplomacy', scholars such as Snow (2020) have stressed the role of non-state actors in shaping and executing soft power and cultural relations in foreign affairs. This report acknowledges the role of universities and artists in the inception of practices of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations already in the modern period (European theatre companies performing abroad or Voltaire's literary relationship with Empress Catherine the Great are often cast as typical examples of early soft power practices).

Artists and non-state organisations that engage in international cultural relations do not always align with government priorities and strategy. However, governments would be unable to achieve their soft power and cultural diplomacy ambitions without relying on non-state actors; for their part, artists justify working with governments (including those whose politics they do not share) because arts schemes and campaigns help promote the arts sector:

> I'm not always a fan of this government in our country, but it doesn't mean that I don't work and … promote the arts sector here. So I think that there is a separation between political ideology and the work on the ground.[7]

1.5 'It is the people'

Whether British ambassadors or High Commissioners, British Council country directors, heads of public diplomacy in British embassies, artists or scientists, it is the people who make UK soft power. Interviewees stressed how individuals and personalities and their interest in the promotion of the UK through the arts was a central element of UK soft power, regardless of the strategies that may have been emanating from the FCO or Posts. After 35 years working mostly within the UK diplomatic apparatus, one interviewee reflected, '[Cultural relations] is much more about people. Visionary people who create policy and translate it into action.'[8]

7 Jo Verrent interviewed by Ian Thomas, 5 June 2024, British Council 90th anniversary Oral History Collection. Abstracts of the interviews are accessible here: https://www.britishcouncil.org/oral-histories?shpath=/the-interviews/stories-from-the-uk/jo-verrent

8 Participant A, interviewed by Charlotte Faucher in 2025.

2. UK Cultural relations with Europe in the 1970s and 1980s: a brief overview

In a Europe divided by the Iron Curtain, the UK's official cultural ties with Eastern Europe were largely severed. In Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the British Council offices were shut down by Soviet authorities in 1950. Five years later, the FCO established the British Council's Soviet Relations Committee (SRC), which was responsible for conducting Britain's clandestine cultural activities in the USSR. Its aim was to keep cultural channels open. The arts (seen by some segments of Soviet and British society as being beyond politics) proved to be an effective means of doing so.[9]

The SRC organised visits by UK artists and scholars to the USSR and supported programmes such as the 1955 Moscow performance of *Hamlet*, directed by Peter Brook (Watanabe, 2006). The SRC, along with the Foreign Office's Cultural Relations Department, also led on the signing of cultural agreements. The first such agreement during the Cold War period was signed with the USSR in 1959 and aimed to promote scholarly and artistic exchange. For example, in the mid-1980s, over forty Russian teachers of English went annually to the University of Surrey where they were hosted in the dynamic Russian department. In 1985, there was a wealth of cultural activities between Britain and Czechoslovakia, including a Czechoslovak festival in Bristol, a Czechoslovak graphic art exhibition at the British Museum in exchange for an exhibition of graphic art on show at the National Gallery in Prague, together with youth and academic exchanges.[10] The Museum of Modern Art in Oxford curated 'Current Affairs: British Painting and Sculpture of the 1980s' which toured in Warsaw, Prague and Budapest in 1987 under the official cultural exchange agreements the UK had signed with the countries in question.

These cultural events and exhibitions were often partly funded by private sponsors such as Barclays and Rank Xerox and their opening nights attracted high ranking political figures. In the eyes of the FCO, they were clear political and commercial assets to Britain's reputation in the world. Following performances of the Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet in Czechoslovakia in May 1987, the British embassy in Prague concluded its report of the visit by remarking that 'a major British success of this sort increases the attractiveness of our society, its ideals and its methods of achieving them. That this process has an important role to play in our general policy cannot seriously be doubted.'[11]

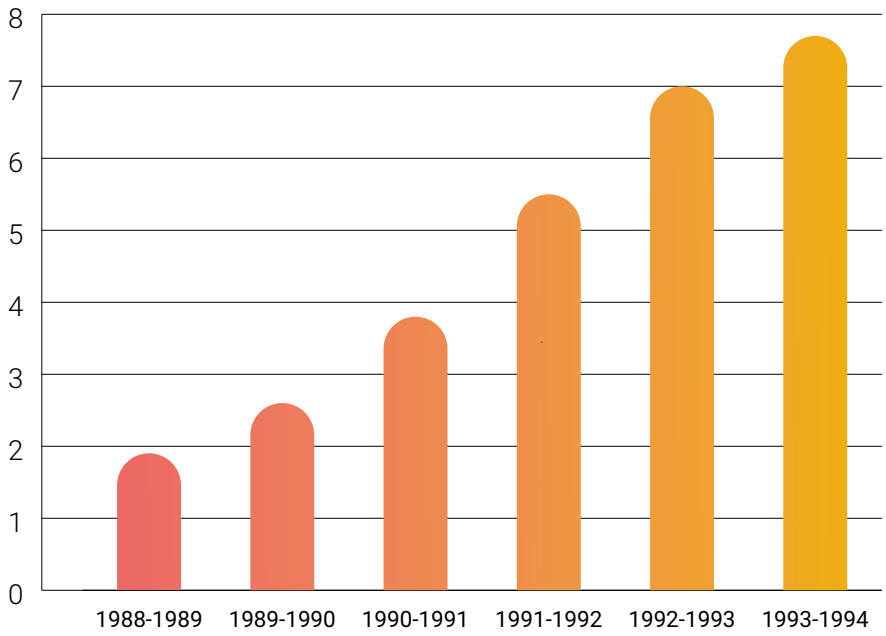
9 For a poetic and rather comic insight into the British Council in Prague in the 1980s, see Ian Whitwham, *Prague, 1987, 1989 and 2006*. With thanks to Jim Potts for sharing this text with me.

10 James Potts, 'Cultural relations between Great Britain and Czechoslovakia', *L'Amitié / Friendship*, 3, November 1986.

11 S. J. Barrett (British embassy Prague) to Anthony St John Howard Figgis, Eastern Europe Division FCO, 21 May 1987. With thanks to Jim Potts who kindly shared this archive with me.

By the late 1980s the British Council's strategy in Europe was shaped by the acceleration of European integration but also by growing concern among HMG regarding international cultural policies' value for money and benefit to Britain. The question of 'value for money' continued to be at the forefront of cultural diplomacy in the 1990s and 2000s and is certainly a recurrent theme in the archives of the FCO, DCMS and the British Council. There has been a marked emphasis on commercialisation and sponsorship to support the transition away from governmental subsidy throughout the period examined in this report (see Figure One). In 1989, the Arts Division (Europe) at the British Council expressed the need to shift towards a sponsorship-dependent profile, prioritising this over what it referred to as 'traditional activity' (such as libraries or literary events that often did not generate a revenue – quite the opposite).[12] This was a view shared by some on the ground. In 1991, the British Council director in Germany considered that arts officers should act as brokers, facilitating business contracts for UK artists. He noted that more ought to be done to encourage his British Council colleagues to be 'entrepreneurial and hard-nosed in their approach'.[13] It's also an approach that many have opposed, particularly around the 2000s, a period marked by the closure of numerous British Council libraries across Northern, Western, and Southern Europe. Critics argued that the increased emphasis on revenue-generating activities (at the expense of an "art for art's sake" philosophy) risked alienating foreign audiences and diminishing their receptiveness to British values and culture.

Figure One: Sponsorship trend (in £ millions), annual total income of the British Council



Source: TNA, BW 151 *Annual Reports and accounts* for the period 1988-1994.

12 TNA BW 209/27, Europe: the arts, December 1989. Report produced by the Arts Division.

13 TNA BW 209/26, Michael Ward, director Germany to Keith Dobson, director Europe 5 August 1991. This passage is framed by three marginal strikes and is also underlined in the original document. In 1988, the British Council's Director-General, Richard Francis, also used the term 'broker' when defining the organisation's activities; however, in the same piece he also acknowledged that 'it would be quite wrong if commercial considerations were to dictate the entire range of the British display'. 'The culture that can conquer the world', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 1988. With thanks to Dick Alford who shared this news item with me.

3. The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the End of the Cold War

3.1 Immediate Reactions

The agents of cultural relations and cultural diplomacy who were in post as the Communist world crumbled had grown up and worked in a bipolar world, with very limited contact with Eastern Europe. Their cultural imagination and professional life had been shaped by this divided world. As the Welsh Labour MP and former British Council director of the St. Petersburg office (until 2008), Stephen Kinnock remembers,

> I just never imagined that in my lifetime, the borders would open, that people's minds and hearts would open to this new, almost utopia of a post-communist world that had always been out there as a mystery and a threat to the West, so to speak. And now suddenly, it was our chance to build bridges, build relationships. And I was so excited to be a part of that.[14]

The world and work of individuals engaged in UK cultural diplomacy in Europe changed overnight on 9 November 1989 as East Berliners stepped into West Berlin for the first time since 1961. It provoked an intense reaction among the staff of the British Council:

> Our work changed overnight... of course, we all know what the news was that night. And I was upstairs and I just sat down. Stock-still on the bed and couldn't move for about 15 minutes. Literally. And then I thought, hang on, this is being blanket covered on the radio, it must be on the telly as well. And I went back downstairs and put the telly on. And I was there until about 4 o'clock in the morning. Just watching Berlin and looking for people I knew because I knew quite a few East Germans who I thought might be up there. ...it was this mixture of the personal and the professional coming together.

14 British Council 90th anniversary Oral History Collection, Stephen Kinnock interviewed by Anuja Desai, 29 May 2024. Abstracts are available here: https://www.britishcouncil.org/oral-histories?shpath=/the-interviews/stories-from-the-uk/stephen-kinnock

The interviewee revealed the extent to which that event had immediately raised questions about how UK cultural diplomacy might respond to such a transformative moment:

> The following morning, we all came in with matchsticks under our eyes because everybody had been up half the night. We knew that coming into work was going to be, you know, a totally different world. And all of a sudden, we were having to think, OK, So what happens now? And what is this going to mean? ... for anybody who had any kind of societal or governance related work with Europe, it was just huge.[15]

Across the FCO and the British Council there was a strong belief that the UK had a value-added role to play in terms of supporting countries that were coming out of highly centralized authoritarian rule. Their mission was to guide the governments, elites, and businesses of these countries toward establishing what they called a 'well-regulated market economy.'[16]

This tied in with the two key aims of the FCO at the time:

a. to enhance the security and prosperity of the United Kingdom and the Dependent Territories

b. to promote and protect British interests overseas, including the welfare of British citizens

These were coupled with long-term objectives:

1. promoting the influence, prestige and standing of the United Kingdom worldwide, putting across a positive image of British society and values;
2. upholding the rule of law in international affairs;
3. fostering good government and respect for human rights throughout the world;
4. maintaining a strong and united NATO, the cornerstone of Britain's security; achieving balanced and verifiable arms control;
5. upholding British interests in the European Community;
6. promoting the peaceful settlement of regional conflicts;
7. developing sustainable global policies for protecting the environment;
8. maintaining an open international trading system;
9. promoting British exports overseas;
10. combatting international terrorism and drugs trafficking;
11. operating immigration controls overseas and providing consular assistance for British citizens abroad.[17]

The British Council clearly thought it could support these objectives given a member of staff highlighted points 1, 3, 5 and 9 on the above list. The following pages explore how the British Council and other agents of cultural diplomacy aligned, in practice, with the Foreign Office's aims in Europe.

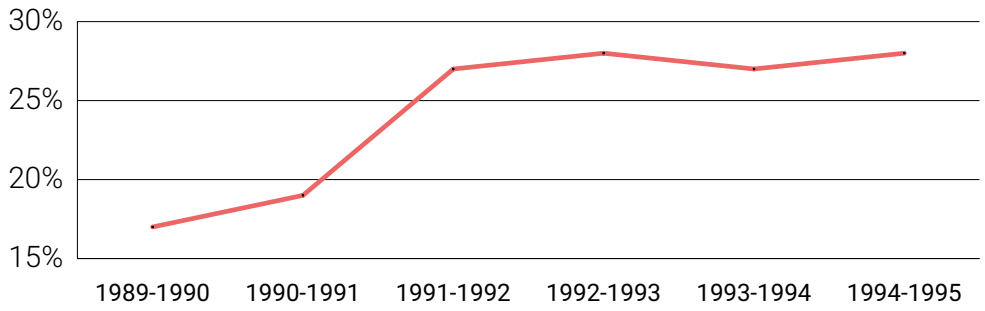
3.2 A New Priority Area

The break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (1990-1992) presented the Foreign Office with its biggest challenge since the Second World War. In the wake of their disintegration, and within a short period, these two countries fragmented into twenty-one. Central and Eastern Europe immediately became a priority area for the FCO and the British Council. In Eastern and Central Europe, the UK government aimed to support the development of open governments.

15 Participant B, interviewed by Charlotte Faucher in 2025.
16 Stephen Kinnock, ibid.
17 BW 209/28/1, FCO's departmental report February 1991.

The British Council, with its staff in proximity of local leaders in charge of political and economy reforms, considered itself to be a central player for UK foreign policy. The UK government acknowledged the British Council's role in supporting its foreign policy objectives and its expertise in the region. Between 1988 and July 1990, the total mixed money budget from government departments that was allocated to the British Council for its work in the region rose by £3m.[18] In 1991-1992 the British Council received an additional £5 million for English language teaching to help match the demands from local audiences. Overall activities in Eastern and Central Europe drove the increase in Europe's share of overall expenditure in the British Council budget (see Figure Two).

Figure Two: Proportion of Spending Directed to Europe (British Council)



Source: TNA, BW 151 Annual Reports and Accounts for the period 1989-1995.

For many FCO and British Council staff members, this was a 'golden age' of UK cultural relations. Interviewees recall an explosion of demand for English language teaching, with the substitution of English for Russian as the main foreign language. Almost overnight and throughout Eastern and Central Europe, thousands of teachers of Russian wanted to (or were forced to) train as teachers of English. They turned to the British Council, requesting access to resources in English. Local ministries of education who pushed for this transition from Russian to English also sought the support of the UK government and the British Council to offer training.[19] As Anne Wiseman, who worked in Bulgaria for the British Council in the early 1990s, recalls:

> The whole linguistic geography changed. It's linked to the politics, obviously, as Russian was out, you know, Russian teachers became persona *non grata* virtually. And English became so important, not only from a political standpoint, sociological standpoint, but also an administrative and practical standpoint because managers and businesspeople needed English for work now... Don't forget English was subversive, the BBC was banned in Bulgaria .... The role of English was so political in those days.[20]

18 TNA BW 209/28/2, Note by Keith Dobson; controller; Europe division 31 July 1990.

19 TNA BW 209/28/1, Geographical Priorities for British Council Programmes (1993/94 - 1995/96).

20 British Council archives, Anne Wiseman interviewed by Charlotte Faucher 23 January 2025.

HMG and British Council saw their number of interlocutors in the region grow. Newly created ministries of education in Eastern and Central Europe turned to the UK government and the British Council for help with training and curriculum reform.[21] The British Council was also involved in the development of English Language Teaching strategy in Hungary and Poland. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, newly elected governments acknowledged the impact of the UK's assistance. For example, during the inauguration of the British Council's office in Prague, President Václav Havel commented that 'the development of the British Council's ELT work in the country was making an important contribution to bringing Czechoslovakia closer into democratic Europe'. In Bulgaria the three new resource centres attracted strong support at highest government levels.[22] In this country as well as in the Transcaucasian Republics the FCO was clear that cultural relations were to support where the UK's commercial interests lay as well as its ambition in oil and gas.[23]

In the arts too the British Council and HMG supported a policy of 'firework display' justified by the fact that after decades of isolation there was a huge appetite on the part of audiences for the British arts.[24] Most notably the National Theatre performed in Leipzig, Dresden and East Berlin as well as Prague and Bucharest in early 1991 (Rogers 2012).[25] By the mid-1990s, British arts, culture and sciences were making themselves visible and accessible through the creation of centres and learning resources that were separated from diplomatic missions.[26]

However, while the UK was pushing for the promotion of the English language in Eastern Europe, MPs expressed rising concern about ignorance of foreign languages in the UK and how this negatively impacted British business.[27] A few years later, in 1993, the economic advisor at the British embassy in Germany also lamented his fellow FCO colleagues' lack of linguistic skills. Here too trade was key in his argument:

> Willy Brandt is reputed to have remarked once that if one wanted to discuss the international situation with him, one could perfectly well do so in English, but that if one wanted to sell him something, one must do it in German. That might be a good motto for us to adopt in considering whether we need a Whitehall cadre of German speakers.[28]

A strong soft power, and the economic and political influence it supports, can only be sustained through investment in foreign language skills.

3.3 Know How Fund

The growth of UK soft power in the early 1990s benefitted immensely from additional funding and projects connected to the Know How Fund (KHF). This programme of technical assistance conceived by the FCO and encouraged by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher aimed to support the transformation of countries of the former USSR into free market economies with liberal-democratic political institutions (Hamilton 2013). Initially launched in the spring of 1989 to encourage Poland's transition from communism,

21 TNA BW 209/28/2, Note by Keith Dobson; controller; Europe division, 31 July 1990. In the early 1990s, the British Council opened offices in Bratislava and Prague, and had a smaller presence in Moravia, in Brno. The British Council had had offices in Bratislava and Brno before the Communist take-over in 1948.

22 TNA BW 68/57, British Council Board meeting, 2 June 1992.

23 TNA BW 209/10, B.J. Fall (British Embassy Moscow) to D. B. C. Logan, FCO, 16 July 1992.

24 TNA BW 209/26, Michael Ward, director Germany to Keith Dobson, director Europe division, 5 August 1991.

25 National Theatre Archives RNT/SM/2/3/93; RNT/PP/1/6/235.

26 TNA BW 68/56, British Council Board, 25 September 1990.

27 See the point made by the Labour MP George Robertson, TNA BW 68/55 British Council Board, 3 April 1990.

28 TNA FCO 33/13062, letter from the counsellor (economic department) British embassy to Michael Jay FCO, 18 June 1993.

it was then expanded to other countries of central and eastern Europe, including the Russian Federation. In some of the new republics, in particular in Kazakhstan, where there was evidence that privatisation was very unpopular with the broader population, KHF projects focused on educating both wider society and the government about the potential benefits of privatisation by means of a short TV (soap) series, a phone-in and help line.[29]

> The central objective of the Know How Fund (KHF) is to provide advice and expertise to assist countries in Eastern and Central Europe, the Baltic States and the former Soviet Union to move towards democracy and a free market economy. The first Fund, for Poland and valued at £25 million, was established in June 1989, and was doubled to £50 million in November 1989. (A further £15 million has been pledged for an Agricultural Development Fund in Poland.) The extension of the Fund to the rest of Eastern and Central Europe was announced in January 1990 but funds have only been allocated once each country has demonstrated that it is fully committed to reform. A £25 million Fund for Hungary was announced in November 1989 and commenced in April 1990. Overall financial ceilings for countries other than Poland and Hungary have not been set. A Fund for Czechoslovakia was announced during President Havel's visit to Britain in March 1990, for Bulgaria during President Zhelev's visit in February 1991, and for Romania during Foreign Minister Nastase's visit in May 1991. The extension of the KHF to the former Soviet Union (and the now independent states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) was announced by the Foreign Secretary in November 1990.
>
> **Source: FCO Know How Fund, 1 February 1992, TNA BW 36/61.**

The launch of the KHF in Poland gave the British Council a strong advantage, as its history in the country was unique compared to other Eastern and Central European nations. Unlike elsewhere, the British Council returned to Poland after World War II as an independent organisation and maintained that independence. It established its own centre and office, which included a library and later a cinema. This long-standing presence helped build a wide network of academic and business contacts, which the KHF projects were able to leverage.

The British Council's relationship with the Fund was formalised in October 1989, which dramatically expanded the remit of UK cultural diplomacy and the work of the British Council. The British Council assumed responsibility for implementing a list of projects focused on management, ELT for businessmen and civil servants, working with professional bodies, management schools and banking firms initially in Poland, and later in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.[30] It managed £1.5 million of the KHF in 1989, a sum which doubled by the following year.[31]

> Example: University of Miskolc / University of Bradford Management Centre
>
> The project aimed to establish Hungary's first regional MBA (launched in September 1992). In the first year, academics at Bradford worked with colleagues at Miskolc to develop the components of the MBA syllabus. Given the international remit of the MBA, the programme was envisaged to be taught principally in English, although, as the British Council noted 'the English competence of the Miskolc staff remains a problem to be resolved'. Thus the British Council also provided ELT support.

29 TNA BW 209/9, Report by JP Eyres, 16 November 1992.

30 TNA BW 68/50, Board meeting, 3 October 1989.

31 TNA BW 209/28/2, Note by Keith Dobson (controller Europe), 31 July 1990.

Within the Foreign Office, it was clear Britain could not expect 'any short-term economic pay-off' from their assistance to Eastern European nations. In 1989, the consensus was that Eastern economies would deteriorate before Britain could see some long-term returns and that it was important to concentrate on sustained support to nurture a strong private sector over several years. Planning in 1989, the Foreign Office and the British Council were looking ahead to 1995 when they expected that, thanks to the KHF, Hungary would be self-sufficient in training its own teachers of English.[32] The collapse of Eastern markets in 1991 caused real GDP to fall even more than had been projected in 1989. This deeper-than-planned recession, in turn, led to a shortfall in tax revenues. However, there were some immediate successes that would also bear the fruit over the long term: Hungary's exports to countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development had grown by around 30% in a year and GDP was expected to level out in 1992.[33]

This discussion highlights the long-term nature of soft power and aid strategies and demonstrates how the government long-term focus was positive for policy making. However, beyond the Know-How-Fund 'moment', civil servants from the FCDO and DCMS consulted for this report expressed frustration that successive governments—regardless of political affiliation—have struggled to maintain consistent long-term strategies, even at the beginning of a parliamentary term when they have five years ahead of them.

The history and evaluation of the role of cultural relations in the KHF has yet to be fully written. However, some comparative analysis already points to the scheme's impact. For example, British Council country directors who have worked in both KHF-recipient countries and regions that did not receive funding are well placed to assess the difference the KHF made. A staff member who has worked in Poland and Ukraine notes that the quality of ELT and English in Poland, which was boosted by the KHF, is much higher than in Ukraine. English teaching is now a key area of the work the British Council is doing in Ukraine, although it will take a school cycle for progress to be visible given that large scale interventions take time.

In addition to the KHF, the Government launched the Chancellor's Financial Sector Scheme in January 1992. This scheme was administered by the British Council and placed 1,000 candidates on secondment from the former Soviet Union with British financial insurance and legal firms. Overall, British cultural diplomacy in Eastern and Central Europe was extremely active and successful. What began as a modest mechanism, largely governed by Cultural Exchange Conventions, evolved into a professionalised and more responsive operation. These efforts, closely coordinated with embassies and the FCO, played a key role in advancing the UK's political, diplomatic, and economic interests in the region.

32 TNA BW 68/55, The British Council Board meeting, 5 December 1989.

33 TNA BW 36/61, The Know How Fund Hungary: Country Strategy Paper 1992-93.

12. The Changing Prioritisation of Western Europe

The money allocated to Eastern Europe and the buzz created by the seemingly endless opportunities for Britain in that region contrasted with the mood around Western Europe. The stark discrepancy between the objectives and needs in Eastern and Western Europe were felt at the British Council conference of European representatives in Brighton in early 1990:

> The excitement of the Eastern Europeans as the adrenalin raced at the prospect of the great ideological barriers crumbling, and the opportunities that opened for the Council, was in stark contrast to the defensiveness of the Westerners as they scratched around for a coherent rationale for their expensive programmes.[34]

Similarly, only a year later in 1990, the head of the Education and Science division at the British Council remarked that that there seemed to be 'a vacuum in the [British government's] thinking as to what Britain does in the developed world...'[35] Even today, this remains a point of contention for some current staff at the British Council and the FCDO, who believe that the UK's cultural diplomacy model (largely, although not exclusively, centered on development goals in line with ODA funding) often fails to articulate a coherent strategy that would resonate with audiences in Western Europe.

In spite of the questioning about the role of the British Council in Western Europe at the end of the Cold War, there was a clear UK foreign policy strategy in this region (see the aforementioned FCO objective 5 about consolidating Britain as a significant force in Europe).

The official line about the significance of Europe in British foreign policy was sustained throughout the late twentieth and early twenty first century. Almost twenty years after Britain joined the European Community in 1973, the conservative Prime Minister John Major asserted his ambition to put the U.K. at the 'heart of Europe' (Blomeier 2015), a position also significant in the foreign policy of the Labour government under Tony Blair (1997-2001). And certainly, these foreign policy ambitions were reflected with government initiatives for international cultural relations. In October 1989, the British Council launched "Britain in Europe" with the support of the Conservative Foreign Secretaries John Major then Douglas Hurd.[36] This cultural initiative aimed to encourage businesses in sponsoring arts and other events in Europe so as to raise Britain's profile in Europe with a view towards the single European market

34 TNA BW 209/26, Michael Ward, director Germany to Keith Dobson, director Europe 5 August 1991.

35 TNA BW 209/26, DR J. C Blackwell, director Education and science division, to Ian Baker, 17 September 1991.

36 TNA BW 68/50, Board meeting, 8 November 1989.

in 1992. £600,000 was allocated to the arts component of the Britain in Europe initiative. The programme had two objectives: first, to present a handful of flagship-arts tours in the countries of the EC, providing high profile sponsorship opportunities for British business; second, to stimulate and participate in European cooperative ventures and give evidence of Britain's *esprit Communautaire*.[37] The programme continued in the 1990s and it was judged by the British Council and FCO to be a success marked by increased sponsorship and the 'wide recognition that Britain means business'.[38]

4.1 Britain and the European Community

Showcasing the UK's *esprit communautaire* was the central aim of UK cultural diplomacy in Western Europe as a note from the British Council suggests: 'The advent of the Single Market at the end of 1992, coupled with longer-term and wider-ranging questions of European unity, puts the region at the forefront of HMGs foreign policy'.[39]

There was much to be done regarding the UK's place in Europe: by the late 1980s, many in the European Community considered Britain was insular and was reluctant to engage in European multilateralism.[40] The British Council itself found it difficult to navigate the promotion of British interests, in line with the FCO, and the multilateralism of the European Commission (EC). It worked hard to avoid Britain being seen as an 'outsider' in Europe, a position that would hinder the government's ability to influence the political and economic discussion taking place within the EC.[41] But it was also aware that Britain had some further drawbacks that meant that its engagement in European cooperation ought to be undertaken with tact. In particular, the British Council noted that countries such as France perceived the English language as a threat. Testament to the excellence of British higher education institutes and the research laboratories, UK academic institutions' success at winning EC money also triggered some jealousy among other members of the EC.[42]

4.2 Germany in the Spotlight: A Top Priority in the Early 1990s

Of particular significance for UK soft power in Western Europe was unified Germany, which became 'a new and urgent priority'[43] as HMG, alongside other Western powers sought to support 'its role as a respected partner in the West and a powerful source of knowledge and skills in the East'.[44] There was much work to be done in Germany to uphold the reputation of Britain. Thatcher's well-known opposition to a unified Germany (not shared by the Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd) and her scepticism regarding Chancellor Helmut Kohl's focus on unification and European integration soured relationships between the two countries. Even under John Major, who had a very good relationship with Kohl and who shared his optimism for Europe, euroscepticism grew within Parliament and British society, which impeded the Anglo-German relationship (Crawford 2010).

Nonetheless, with a population of over 80 million and the strongest economy in Europe, Britain had much to gain by working closely with Germany. Aware that British 'rancour' over Germany ought to be resolved, especially given Germany's growing

37 TNA BW 209/28/2, Draft PESC bid: Arts Activity in Western Europe, no date (c. 1989-1990).

38 Ibid.

39 TNA BW 209/26, Regional Policy Statement for West Europe, West Europe Department 28 October 1991.

40 TNA BW 209/26, EC Business strategy for the British Council, March 1991, draft.

41 TNA BW 209/27, Europe: the arts, December 1989. Report produced by the Arts Division.

42 TNA BW 209/25, Science and Technology meeting; notes on the talk by Keith Dobson 'BC strategy in Europe', 6 March 1991; BW 209/25, Report by David Sanderson, Senior Science Officer, 25 June 1990.

43 TNA BW 209/28/2, Note by Keith Dobson, controller Europe, 31 July 1990.

44 Ibid.

significance in the West and in NATO too, the British Council made it a priority to restore the UK's relations with Germany. Cultural relations, the British Council believed, could be used 'to break in on the cozy partnership between Germany and France which has dominated the Community for so long'.[45] Cultural diplomacy proved a particularly helpful means to further positive relationships and paper over tensions between Britain and Germany. For example, in 1990, Margaret Thatcher announced an important initiative for the promotion of the English language in the former German Democratic Republic (with the support of the Know How Fund), a programme which was welcomed by Federal Chancellor Kohl.[46]

To improve the Anglo-German relationship, the British Council tapped into the UK's reputation as Germany's most important collaborative partner in the fields of academic research.[47] Here too, investments in forms of academic diplomacy, through collaborations and the exchange of scholars, were boosted by a competitive outlook and a belief that the educated youth was a prime audience and actor of cultural diplomacy:

> If we did not support these initiatives and provide the services we do, the risk is that the vacuum would be filled in schools as well as universities [...] by our chief competitors, the Americans, the Canadians (not to mention the French). This would result in the loss of market share of students and scholars with a serious interest in the Anglo-Saxon world. But the potential loss of opportunity is greater than that. On the Jesuitical principle that to catch people for life you have to catch them young, it seems to me right to spread our net of influence to catch more than just those who go on to study English as a main subject.[48]

4.3 European Competition in the EU Context

At the same time, Germany was a country that the FCO considered both a collaborator and a rival whose soft power was to yield significant commercial and political influence:

> Although the Germans neither see nor describe their present cultural policy as an aggressive effort to expand German influence (would you expect them to?), that does not mean that it is purely altruistic. They are promoting German culture, German language and therefore Germany, in all areas where they have always had a powerful influence. This will have a long-run political and commercial effect. This is a competitive business and the Germans, for all the packaging, are doing exactly what we do.[49]

The context of European institutions differed from that of the UN, NATO and the OECD where the UK government felt that the Anglophone countries' majority gave a clear advantage to the UK. Within the EC however, Germany, as well as France was identified as a significant competitor, with staff at DCMS seizing every opportunity to celebrate even minor victories over their French counterparts. One such instance was being invited to speak before the French representative at a conference organised in Finland by the ministers of cultural and audiovisual affairs (Finland held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union during part of 1999). Echoing the rival relationship between the UK and France, this opportunity was described in an email by a UK official as 'a great compliment to the UK, and a chance to set out our vision before the French jump in with their dirigiste and protectionist boots on'.[50] British officials often

45 TNA BW 209/26, Regional Policy Statement for West Europe, West Europe department 28 October 1991.

46 TNA BW 209/7, German reunification: German-British Summit, London 30 March 1990, English Language Teaching in the GDR.

47 On academic relations between the UK and Germany pre-1989 see 'Visitors to Britain: Improving benefits and procedures', Report to the Director-General by Jim Whittell, A British Council scrutiny, March 1989, section 3.

48 TNA BW 209/26 Michael Ward, director Germany to Keith Dobson, director Europe 5 August 1991.

49 TNA FCO 33/13062 Cultural relations between Germany and the UK British embassy (Joan I Link, First secretary, Press and Information) to Ann Lewis 13 July 1993.

50 TNA PF 307/34 Email exchange between DCMS staff members commenting on the Savonlinna Meeting of ministers of cultural and audiovisual affairs (anonymised for privacy purposes), 16 July 1999.

commented on the difficulty to impact European policies owing to the weight of France, and on France's 'old axis with Germany' and its influence in Europe and over the 'Latin States' of Spain, Portugal and Italy too.[51]

Certainly, the question of the languages used in the EC mattered to Britain's understanding of its place in Europe. When in 1993 the question emerged that German may become a working language in the EC, British officials at the FCO expressed their reluctance clearly, but diplomatically:

> The European Community is different because the Germans see themselves as its paymasters, because the Americans are not involved... If we accept German, I dare say we shall also have to accept Spanish and possibly Italian... But I wonder whether there are not some gestures we could make to the Germans short of a formal understanding that German would become an EC working language. I am looking forward, for example, to the first occasion when a British official delegation comes to Bonn ready to operate in the German language instead of blithely assuming that the Germans will speak English (which of course they do, often very well). Leon Brittan went down very well when he addressed the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung in fluent German recently. ... The advantages would not be all one way. While one can perfectly well do business with the Germans in English, one gets a lot more out of them in German.[52]

4.4 Budget Cuts

While British involvement in European scientific partnership continued throughout the 1990s and beyond, largely thanks to funding from the European Commission, UK cultural diplomacy disinvested from Western Europe from the mid-1990s and later in the early twenty first century. Already in the early 1990s, significant cuts were made to the budget of British Council operations in the part of Europe that had not been in the Eastern bloc, particularly in Stockholm, Helsinki and Oslo in order to fund UK soft power in Eastern and Central Europe. This expanded to the whole of Western Europe over the following two decades and redeployments from Western Europe was explicitly undertaken in order to fund East European priorities.[53] In 1992-1993, most proposals for new British Council activities in Western Europe were rejected on the ground of lack of available funding.[54]

While the UK government was keen to meet the demands for English in the European countries that had been most affected by the Iron Curtain, it could not quite accommodate requests for British participation in so-called 'prestige' cultural and educational festivals, celebrations and conferences that continued to grow throughout the 1990s.[55] The decline in the funding for Western and Southern Europe continued in the 2000s and 2010s through the reduction of the sum of money allocated by the British government (grant-in-aid) to the British Council, which affected Western Europe more starkly than other European areas. This led to a reduction of Posts across the British Council European network (from approximately 500 in 2002 to under 300 in 2007), and the withdrawal from all traditional grant-funded activity aimed at 'changing perceptions of the

51 TNA PF 307/34, letter between DCMS staff members (anonymised for privacy purposes), 16 March 1999.

52 TNA FCO 33/13062, letter from the counsellor (economic department) British embassy to Michael Jay FCO, 18 June 1993.

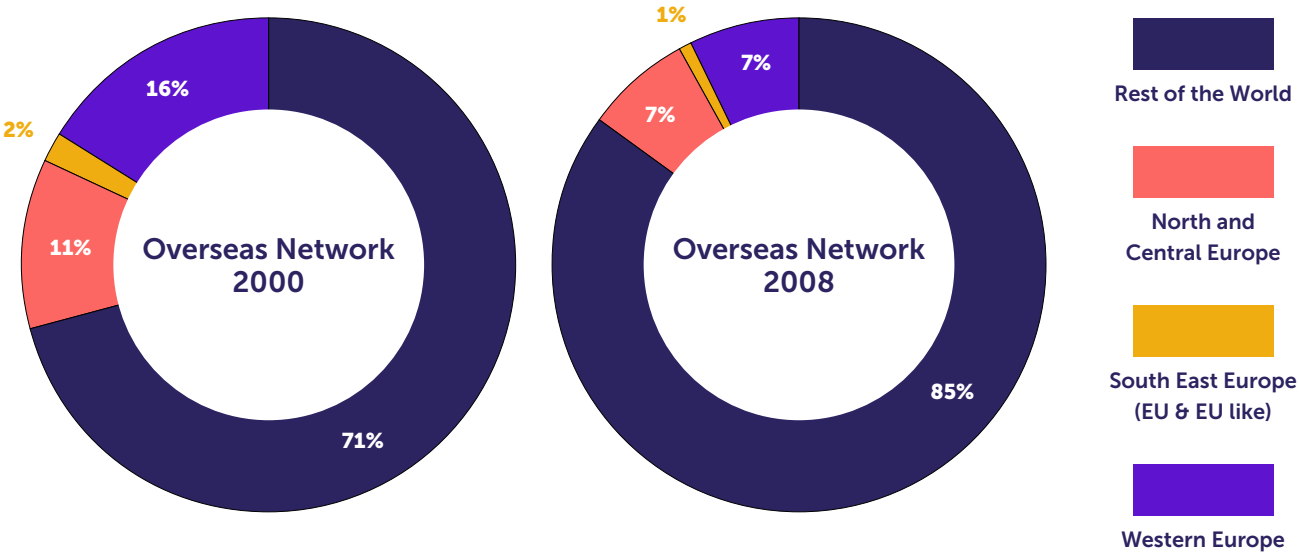
53 TNA BW 209/10, 9 Sept 1992 from Keith Dobson, director Europe division to DG Manning Counsellor (political), British embassy Moscow. See also BW 209/28/1 Minutes: Europe Division, 6 August 1991

54 TNA BW 209/28/2, Note by Keith Dobson; controller; Europe division 31 July 1990.

55 Ibid. On cuts to the Arts division in the late 1990s see also John Tod, Memoir of my British Council Life, October 2024, deposited at the archives of the British Council.

UK' (which included stand-alone local events organised by the British Council as well as travel grants and walk-in library/information centres). Regional offices were closed down (for example in 2002, the British Council closed its network of regional offices in Germany, working only from a head office in Berlin).[56] Large scale training programmes for teachers of English were gradually replaced by the development of networks of English teachers while web-based services replaced face-to-face information provision, including education enquiries. These savings allowed the organisation to respond to funding cuts, but they also reflected the funding structure of the British Council. In the 2000s, its grant-in-aid largely came from the ODA and therefore had to be spent on development activities, which meant that European countries were often deemed ineligible (Figure Three). Europe was the region that suffered the most from the reduction in grant-in-aid over the period 2000-2005 (Figure Four). As well as development objectives shaping British cultural diplomacy, this policy domain was also influenced by new FCO geopolitical priorities, including the Middle East in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. This context signalled that Britain was withdrawing from Europe, by organising fewer arts events and losing significant physical presence. As the Board of the British Council noted in 2007 'the UK is increasingly marginalising itself by not participating fully in debate about the kind of Europe we wish to build; and the global issues in which Europe wishes to participate and influence'.

Figure Three: Distribution of Grant in Aid[57]

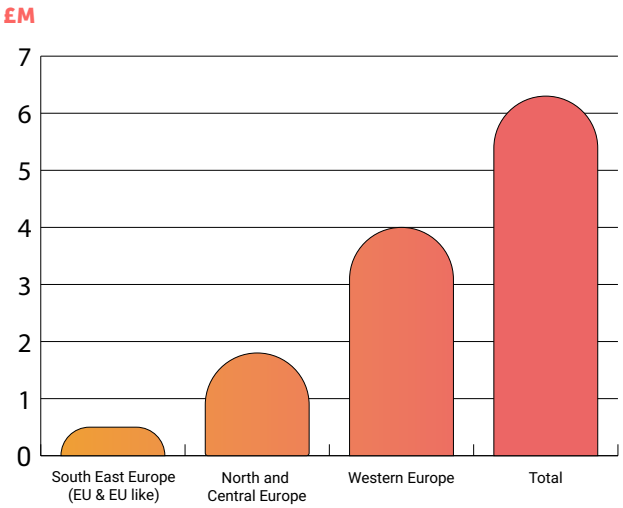


56 Tod, Ibid.

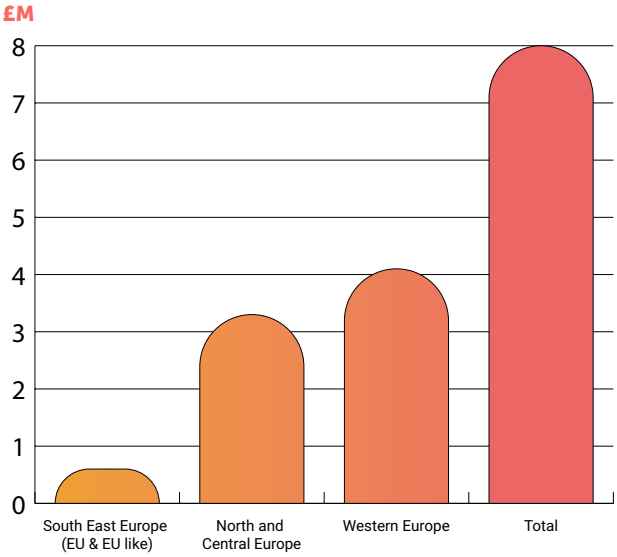
57 Europe Strategy: Board Paper, The British Council in Europe March 2007. Note: Rest of World includes pre-accession and EU neighbourhood countries.

Figures Four and Five: Movement of Grant in Aid funds (British Council)

Reductions in Grant in Aid from Europe 2000-2005



Reductions in Grant in Aid from Europe 2005-2008



The lack of a bespoke and generous budget for cultural diplomacy also impacted the work of DCMS in this domain, according to a report:

> - we generally need to sacrifice depth of knowledge in order to achieve breadth of operation;
> - our workload is dominated by reactive, rather than proactive work;
> - and we need to be ruthlessly selective in the issues to which we address ourselves.[58]

The report also lamented how other European nations' cultural diplomacy efforts were relatively better funded and staffed than that of the UK.

4.5 Questioning British Cultural Diplomacy in Europe

The budget cuts outlined above were accompanied by a sense of loss and uncertainty about what precisely UK cultural diplomacy was trying to achieve in Western Europe. While in the early 2000s it played a major role in supporting the accession of Eastern and Central European countries, in particular with the training of civil servants and managers, the role of cultural diplomacy in Western Europe was less clear. This was partly because, among the FCO and the leadership of the British Council, there was a feeling that Britain's job in Europe 'was done' and that any further cooperation at the European level might be too European, and not sufficiently British.

58 TNA PF 307/15, International issues, Arts division's international work, 12 November 1999.

Interviewees working for the British Council in Western Europe in the early twenty-first century expressed their frustration that clearly, Europe did not feel like it was a priority for the British Council or the FCO. At a time when the Directorate-General (DG) for Education and Culture at the European Commission in Brussels (DG-EC for Culture) considered that bilateral cultural organisations such as the British Council, the Goethe-Institut or the Alliance Française were only promoting their own country's interests, DG-EC for Culture was keen to support more collaboration among European cultural agencies both in Europe and outside Europe. The idea was difficult to sell in certain parts of the British Council, as a former member of the British Council working in Brussels at the time explained. This episode reveals well the complacency that existed at the time among some members of the FCO and the British Council:

> There was a view among certain elements of senior management in the Council that the project of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) network was not worth supporting. 'Oh, God. All this money we're wasting in Europe' sort of attitude! 'Isn't our work in Europe done now?' I'd say, 'look, the work in Europe is never done' and it was before Brexit. For a number of senior managers it was done because we were in the European Union, there was free movement... I said, 'OK, But misunderstandings can still occur'. ... They accepted this approach but did not want to put extra money into EUNIC. There was a steer from the government which was then very cautious about Europe. They wanted to work with Europe on British terms. ... There was the fear that we would lose influence. I kept saying 'you don't lose influence by working with partners. You gain it'. That argument was never really won; there was always a sort of slight suspicion that if we share things, we lose influence.[59]

The discrepancy between ideas of Europe at the top (in government departments and within the leadership team of the British Council) and on the ground constituted a challenge to cultural relations. Many felt that leaders within the government and in the British Council failed to view the value of projects such as EUNIC or fully engage with activities in Europe. Nonetheless, many projects continued to develop and had clear benefits to UK soft power. Evaluations of projects such as Scotland in Sweden (2002-2003) supported by the Scottish Executive, the British government and the British Council, among other stakeholders, showed that this programme of cultural events that took place in the wake of Devolution had a very positive impact on Scottish economy and the creative industries, as well as on the image of Scotland in Sweden.[60]

4.6 Brexit

There had been some disengagement on the part of the UK cultural sector towards Europe prior to the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum (Faucher 2022). This view was shared by many interviewees I met who were working in Europe in the 2000s and 2010s: 'the reflex from the UK side was rather like it was to the rest of the EU: "why do we need this? It's expensive. It's a talking shop. It doesn't really achieve anything". And I think that spread over into the cultural areas as well. And to be fair, I think some of it was a bit arrogant on our part.'[61] The vote in favour of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union in 2016 marked a further blow to British cultural diplomacy in Europe, and in the world. The UK's departure from the European Union (EU) had a tremendous negative impact on the creative industries and science affecting funding, mobility, and partnerships in particular (MacDonald 2016; Faucher 2022).

59 Participant C, interviewed by Charlotte Faucher in 2025.

60 'Scotland in Sweden 2002-2003, Evaluation Report', compiled by Anna Moll for the British Council Sweden 2003. With thanks to Jim Potts for sharing this report with me.

61 Participant D, interviewed by Charlotte Faucher in 2025.

Despite the referendum result, the world of the arts and culture, driven by an overwhelmingly pro-Remain stance, worked strenuously to maintain co-production and collaboration. Many institutions that had furthered UK cultural diplomacy, from universities to arts galleries and the British Council expressed their sadness of the referendum results and sought to appease European partners who thought that 'Brexit was just an insult'.[62] Many have also been very critical of the lack of clarity and guidance on the part of DCMS and FCDO about cross-border creative work between the UK and EU member states (including the circulation of people and goods) (Faucher 2022). At the same time, the institutions sustaining international cultural relations judged that it was essential to refocus their efforts on the region and to rebuild trust (an endeavour made all the more challenging by new, post-Brexit funding constraints).

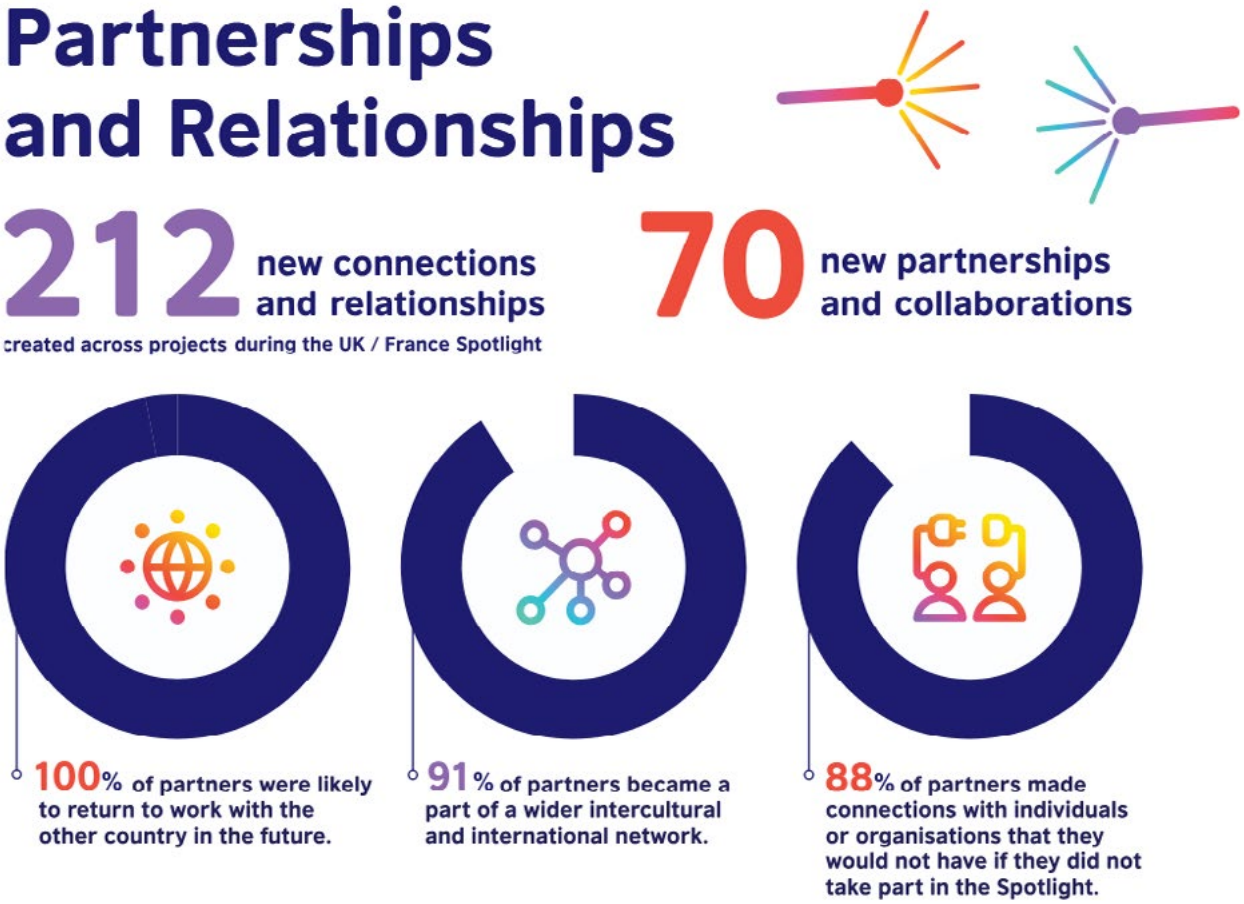
Combined with the Covid pandemic where many cultural organisations took out loans and suspended their in-person activities, the main challenge to respond to the seismic impact of Brexit was the lack of funding. The British Council had decreased its budget for Europe over the years and following Brexit, UK institutions were excluded, and still are, from the largest EU cultural programme, Creative Europe. The former British Council director in Germany revealed that, in the early 2020s, his total yearly budget after staff and buildings, in his first 12 months, for anything to do with programmes across education, English, social programmes, and arts was 1,000 pounds. And yet he set up a bilateral programme called Cultural Bridge with German partners who ran an arts and social welfare programme with German government money. The contribution of German partners in turn convinced the British Council to invest an additional £20,000 towards the programme, which over three years has supported over 44 projects.[63]

Excluded from multilateral European wide projects supported by Creative Europe, UK cultural relations have focused on bilateral programmes such as cultural seasons and participation in major prestige events such as the Venice Biennale. An evaluation of the UK/France cultural season *Spotlight on Culture 2024 Together We Imagine* conducted by the Audience Agency and Praxis & Culture found that the season strengthened UK-French cultural ties, facilitated new artistic exchanges and expanded international networks (Figure Six). The 67 projects reached 997,105 live audience members and over 22 million people through media coverage from March to November 2024. For each pound received in grant support the project received over £3.30 of further income or funding. The Spotlight gave way to new connections and partnerships that enhanced the reputation of the UK in France (Findings Report - UK/France Spotlight 2024). Investing in cultural relations has clear economic and political repercussions, as this evaluation shows. This supports the findings of other studies that have showed that 'cultural relations initiatives – especially those curated by the British Council – are linked with higher levels of trust in government' (Desai, Duenbier, & MacDonald 2023, p.60).

62 Paul Smith, ibid.

63 Paul Smith, ibid.

Figure Six: Findings Report - UK/France Spotlight 2024.



The UK's involvement in EUNIC has also been an important way to demonstrate that Britain is still keen to participate in multilateral activities with likeminded European partners. As interviewees have suggested, Brexit has made these collaborations even more important. Cooperation is also something that distinguishes the soft power of the UK from that of other leading soft power nations. For example, in the experience of several interviewees, Confucius Institutes or the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, being chiefly focused on the promotion of their respective countries, rarely collaborate with other cultural agencies.

Evaluation of the impact of Brexit in UK soft power is still ongoing but the cultural sector is overall calling for more support and guidance to operate in Europe and set up partnerships with EU member countries. The upcoming review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement represents a significant opportunity to allow new arrangements for creative workers. At the same time, the government must continue working towards associating the UK with Erasmus+ and Creative Europe.

13. Change in Ideas and Practices of Cultural Diplomacy

This section takes a thematic approach to identify some long-term trends that have shaped ideas and practices of UK cultural diplomacy. As discussed in the introduction, UK cultural diplomacy draws on the arts, the English language and wider elements of culture including sport, human rights and sustainability. Throughout the period under study, UK soft power relied gradually less on the arts. This was in response to funding becoming ODA-led and because the general opinion was that arts events would happen anyway without the support of the FCO or related organisations. As the British Council director in Spain noted in the early 1990s, 'If this means less sponsorship of symphony orchestras - who will perform here anyway - so be it'.[64] This departure from high arts was not without criticism. Already in 1989 the British Council director of literature had alerted that:

> it is incomprehensible to most of the European countries in which we work that we make so little capital out of our literary heritage. When one considers how economically literature can serve our PR work in Europe, it seems suicidal that we place so little emphasis on it.[65]

Changes in the content of cultural diplomacy have also emerged in response to rising nationalism (Anheier, Knudsen & Todd-Tombini, 2024), which means that strategies of soft power have broadened from the traditionally educated audiences and thought leaders of the twentieth century[66] to include socially and culturally disadvantaged groups. Major powers such as Russia and China have recognized the strategic value of these audiences, investing heavily in soft power initiatives aimed at influencing them. Within these nations, certain groups have been key targets of disinformation campaigns that challenge core UK values, including democracy and the legitimacy of supranational institutions like the United Nations. This shift raises critical questions about the role of disinformation in global influence. In the context of rising tensions with Russia with events such as the closure of the British Council offices in 2008, followed by a marked improvement until 2014 (Russia-Ukraine war) and 2022 (Russian invasion of Ukraine), culture has the potential to play an even more strategic importance in British defence.

64 TNA BW 209/26, Patrick Spaven director Barcelona to John Edmundson; Head Western Europe, 24 March 1992.
65 TNA BW 209/27, Director literature to controller arts, 7 December 1989.
66 TNA BW 209/26, Regional Policy Statement for West Europe, West Europe department 28 October 1991.

5.1 Countering Disinformation

With the growing significance of public opinion in foreign affairs, soft power and cultural diplomacy are precious tools for a nation to shape opinion of itself abroad. And yet there are groups that fall well beyond the reach of cultural diplomacy. An interviewee who has spent many years working on cultural relations in Russia (with both the British Council and with the British Embassy) reflected:

> A regular subject of discussion was that we were very good at connecting with people who wanted to connect with us – so in Russia, we were very good at connecting with young Russians whose cultural orientation was basically European, who spoke foreign languages, who saw advantage in participating in our programmes – but we regularly reflected on the fact that we were not reaching other young Russians, those who bought into Russian government propaganda, who saw the West as a threat, who did not see diversity as a strength. And we never found the answer to this question. What were we going to do about that very large section of the population?[67]

When asked about countering disinformation, most of the interviewees who were active in the early 2000s in Europe considered that this was not part of the remit of British cultural diplomacy. More recently a shift seems to have occurred as current members of staff at the British Council as well as diplomats working in countries close to Russia, including Ukraine and the Baltic states, take a different view. Today, embassy staff, in collaboration with the British Council, see countering disinformation and the improvement of media literacy in Europe as a key task. This is reflected in bilateral partnerships and the elaboration of joint declarations of cooperation. In Latvia, which has the largest population of native Russian speakers in the EU, countering disinformation is very important to the work of the British embassy. The embassy supports the programme People to People, which is being delivered by the British Council for the FCDO in the three Baltic states. Examples of action include the development of teacher networks and community-led social projects with evidence of positive impact in so-called 'harder to reach' groups (British Council 2021).

Within the FCDO and the British Council an influential opinion is that the British government ought to play a role in the fight against disinformation given that so much of global media is in English. Many recently launched British Council and FCDO programmes have focused on young people's literacy skills, with the aim of helping them be critical about how they think about the world they live in. These include Youth Connect which, in Poland, brings young people together in so-called 'forgotten' parts such as rural parts of Poland with large communities of displaced Ukrainians. Within Youth Connect, the programme Stronger Together (that is co-funded by the EU) gives opportunities to young community leaders to learn how to be discerning about what they are reading (British Council 2023). However, this is not without challenge and participants are not always fully receptive to discussion. Interviewees who have run the EU-funded programme G-LENS (Gender-inclusive, Long-lasting and Empowered Networks and Societies), which aims to safeguard 'democracy, human rights and social cohesion' through thinking about the internet in relation with democratic processes (British Council 2022), report that they have seen attendees walking out of sessions organised as part of this scheme in protest.

The fight against disinformation and against the undermining of democracy is not a UK-specific problem but an issue that many other nations in the world are tackling. The UK is adopting a stance similar to that of other European nations regarding its attitude toward Chinese and Russian

67 Participant E, interviewed by Charlotte Faucher in 2025.

soft power; it shares comparable approaches with Germany and France in this regard. The UK is also working with the Nordic Council of Ministers, which brings together the governments of the Nordic states to support Russian language independent media in the Baltic states. Many of the aforementioned programmes are funded by the EU and are also often implanted in cooperation with other likeminded nations or groups such as the European Movement International. This is an encouraging and positive attitude the success of which signals that the UK must not feel reluctant to engage in multilateral and European efforts.

5.2 Defence and cultural diplomacy

The distinction between hard and soft power is often unhelpful. The very success of soft power depends on the resources deployed in support of hard power, which rely on economic power and even on the (sometimes coercive) use of international communication channels. UK soft power complements and supports UK's foreign policy's top priority on security. It sustains long-term peace and contributes to reducing risks of conflict by promoting values such as freedom of speech, trust, and democracy. Even at a time when so called 'hard power' is at the forefront, the UK has made a point to stress how cultural engagement can counter disinformation, strengthen communities, and support post-conflict recovery. This was most recently the case at the Munich Security Conference, a 'hard power' event *par excellence*, in February 2024 and again in 2025 when British Council CEO Scott McDonald joined the Goethe-Institut in the context of discussion about alliances and resilience in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Western Balkans. For the people involved in organising this meeting it represented an important step towards showcasing the role and value of cultural relations to the security and defence community.

The British Council has a long history of supporting UK, allied and international 'hard power' and defence systems. In the mid-2000s, the British Council provided contracted English language services to the Ukrainian military which was funded in part by the Hungarian government. The British Council has also won competitive tenders within the FCDO's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund thanks to which it ran the Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum (2016-2019). The project was managed by the British Embassy in Sarajevo and implemented out of the British Council office in Belgrade. It aimed to 'strengthen understanding and raise awareness of extremism threats to the UK and ultimately remove the Western Balkans as a region of threat from the UK Counter-Extremism Strategy.' To obtain the contract, the British Council stressed the value of its pre-existing presence through a fully functioning network of offices in fragile and conflict-affected countries that would allow it to conduct the work. It also highlighted deep local knowledge, in part because many staff are locally appointed, which also allows them to leverage long-term relations with the government, international organisations and civil society. Overall, UK cultural diplomacy enhances trust from the local population, which not only benefits the UK economy (British Council 2012) but its defence too.

In the future and given that countering disinformation is rising high on the UK's agenda, cultural diplomacy should tap into its expertise and its well-established networks to connect with defence priorities. A cultural shift must also happen within the Ministry of Defence, which should maximise the soft power value of its assets, as recommended by the Defence Committee (House of Commons 2023). The deployment of soft power has an impact on security and defence; it is a powerful tool for Britain to strengthen international friendship and it supports the UK and its allies against malign influences in Europe.

Conclusion

In the context of UK-EU relations today, the post-pandemic world, and the increased focus on security, the UK Government must continue to build a resilient and sustainable relationship with European states both within and outside the European Union. Soft power is central to achieving the UK's key foreign policy objectives, in particular on the economy and the reset with Europe; but as I've shown elsewhere, cultural diplomacy can also serve as a conduit to support the government's objectives of sustainability (Faucher and Zhu 2024). There is a clear political will on the part of the government to capitalize on the country's soft power assets. However, given the significance of Europe in the UK's current foreign policy, it is difficult to reconcile this with the drastic decline in the budget supporting UK cultural diplomacy in Europe, including the disinvestment in the British Council. If the Soft Power Council is to support the UK's efforts to reset relations with Europe, its approach must be properly funded. The new Soft Power strategy, and the Soft Power Council, must also be supportive of additional funding for UK soft power actors and their impactful work in Europe.

Our current world is fragmented by wars and conflicts, including in Europe, that bring in very high levels of uncertainty. UK cultural diplomacy can support and improve the reputation of the UK in the world and emphasise the stability of the British democratic system. Importantly, British cultural diplomacy can help to maintain and grow the level of trust that foreign societies have in the UK. Fostering trust is a central objective of British foreign policy. Individuals interviewed for this report consider that UK soft power, beyond specific strategies or programmes, is about establishing a dialogue with the rest of the world. As the Human Rights barrister and former chair of the British Council (1998-2004) Baroness Helena Kennedy summarised, 'if the British Council's about anything it is about having that great conversation with the rest of the world.'[68]

In Europe, the UK government must now decisively adapt to a transformed geopolitical and cultural landscape. For decades, British culture, science, and the arts enjoyed strong demand and admiration, particularly following the collapse of the USSR and the UK's pivotal role in supporting the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the EU. British cultural diplomacy was instrumental in positioning the UK as a leading European voice within both the European Community and the European Union, with diplomats working strategically to embed mutuality and collaboration in their engagements.

68 British Council 90th anniversary Oral History Collection, Helena Kennedy interviewed by Christine Wilson, 12 July 2024. Abstracts of the interview are available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/oral-histories?shpath=/the-interviews/stories-from-the-uk/helena-kennedy

However, this progress coincided with a steady decline in public funding for key institutions driving cultural diplomacy, most notably the British Council. Today, with budgets for aid and cultural diplomacy continuing to shrink, and in the wake of Brexit, the UK government must not allow cultural disengagement to take root. The renewed threat of Russia on European soil and in European minds, combined with the UK's ambition to reset its relationship with European governments and societies, demands a bold elevation of cultural relations with Europe on the national agenda. In this context, cultural diplomacy is not a luxury; it is a strategic necessity. The UK must reinvigorate its cultural presence across Europe, ensuring it remains a trusted and influential partner in shaping the continent's future.

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