

## **CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION AS A STRATEGY OF US FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE BALKAN REGION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the use of cultural heritage preservation as a strategy of US foreign relations in the Balkan region, and it attempts to provide perspective on both the historical and theoretical contexts that surround the practice of developing cultural relations. Using a methodological approach grounded in critical policy analysis, this paper explores the following questions: What impact has US cultural policy had on the Balkan region? What has the strategy been for assisting with cultural heritage preservation? What assumptions ground the belief that cultural heritage preservation can lead to peace, reconciliation, and social stability? What might be the limitations of a policy based on cultural heritage preservation? How might cultural heritage preservation reinforce nationalist narratives as a legitimating source of “symbolic stability” (Labadi, 2013, p. 63)?<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the paper concludes that when exercised as a function of US foreign relations, cultural heritage preservation may legitimate and reify ethnic division. Central to this paper’s aim is an examination of the US State Department’s Ambassador Fund, which in 2012 awarded a total amount of 5.6 million dollars to 46 countries (out of a total submission of 186 nominations) for cultural heritage projects abroad. The Ambassador’s Fund is administered by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which is overseen by the State Department’s Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs: The U.S. Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP), established in FY 2001 and funded through the Diplomatic and Consular Programs appropriation, awards grants for the preservation of cultural heritage in developing countries. Projects funded through the AFCP advance U.S. foreign policy objectives and demonstrate U.S. respect for other cultures.... Funded projects include technical support for the preservation of historic buildings and sites, museum collections, and forms of traditional cultural expression.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Heritage, Foreign Relations, Collective Identity, Nationalism, and U.S. Ambassador’s Fun*

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The Impact of US Policy in Promoting Democracy, Peace, State-Building, Economic Recovery, and the Protection of National, Religious, and Civic Values in the Countries of the Region – is about as comprehensive a theme as one can get. We could devote a conference to any one of these important areas. We could also devote a conference to understanding and debating the use of the word impact. By definition, impact is never without consequences, both intended and unintended, both positive and negative. Now, some of you may have heard that the United States recently had an election, the impact of which remains to be seen. Our president-elect will come into office without any prior experience in public service or government, with a leadership style shaped in the business world, and with a set of experiences and attitudes quite different from his predecessors.

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<sup>1</sup> Labadi, S. (2013). UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, and Outstanding Universal Value: Value-based Analyses of the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Relevant to today's conference, his nomination for Secretary of State (Rex Tillerson) is currently the CEO of ExxonMobil, one of the world's largest multi-national corporations, and also a man who has no experience working in government. How will American foreign policy be impacted by all of this? Hard to say; I believe some of our presenters today may take on the challenge of trying to assess this very thing. No doubt many things will change, but change is, after all, the heartbeat of democracy. And what keeps this heart beating is democratic education. Thomas Jefferson, one of the United States' first advocates of a state-supported system of free and public education, wrote, "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people...They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

This brings me to my own area of interest as a scholar, which has to do with the important role museums and other cultural institutions play in democracies. How does the kind of informal learning that takes place in museums contribute to democratic education? How can it prepare us to direct change toward ends formulated for the public good, how does it help us see, even when that although our politics may differ, we are still part of one public, one country, one people. How can we learn to work together across our many differences – political, religious, ethnic, racial, and geographic - in order to solve problems that we share in common? That is the ideal aim of democratic education, and I think museums and other cultural institutions can play an important role in furthering that aim, particularly as the preserve cultural memory. Because we know cultural heritage preservation is vitally important to democracies because the destruction of cultural heritage-the obliteration of cultural memory- is all too often used as a weapon of war and genocide. Quoting from the 2009 *Annual of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, "The destruction of the heritage [during the Bosnian war], which was carried out simultaneously with the forced expulsions and killings of the people, was a clear demonstration of the importance of the heritage as the focus of cultural memory in the process both of destroying and of sustaining a community" (Hadžimuhamedović, 2009, p. 37). Unfortunately, this is a tragedy that has been particularly felt in the Balkan Region, and it is a tragedy the United States has committed itself to redressing in the region through active support of cultural heritage protection and preservation. The mechanism for this support is, of course, the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs,<sup>2</sup> which is home to the Cultural Heritage Center, the umbrella for a number of programs and projects dedicated to the protection and preservation of the "patrimony of other countries." The key Cultural Heritage Center program for the Balkan region has been, I believe, the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. Established by Congress in 2000<sup>3</sup>, the purpose of the Ambassadors Fund is to support "preservation for historic buildings and sites, museum collections, and forms of traditional cultural expression" (US State Department, retrieved October 4, 2016, at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208971.pdf>) in developing countries around the world (U.S. State Department, AFCP One-pager, 2015). At the

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<sup>2</sup> ECA is overseen by the State Department's Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

time of the AFCPs creation, Congress noted, “Cultural preservation offers an opportunity to show a different American face to other countries, one that is non-commercial, non-political, and non-military. By taking a leading role in efforts to preserve cultural heritage, we show our respect for other cultures by protecting their traditions.” (U.S. State Department, AFCP One-pager, 2015). Another description of the program found on the State Department website states that “Projects funded through the AFCP advance U.S. foreign policy objectives and demonstrate U.S. respect for other cultures” (Ambassadors Fund PDF).

AFCP monies are awarded annually based on a review of proposals submitted by US Ambassadors “serving in eligible countries” in response to an invitation from the Cultural Heritage Center. Typically there are far more the proposals and awards. In 2013, 179 proposals were submitted total 33.7 million dollars in requested funding; 56 projects were actually funded at a total cost of 6 million dollars. In 2014, approximately 2.2 million dollars was dedicated to the Europe/Eurasia region, with about 38% of that total going to countries that were a part of the former Yugoslavia. Macedonia’s National Institution for the Protection of Monuments received \$97,720, for the Conservation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Zlatko Tower House in Kratovo. In 2015, approximately one million was spent in Europe/Eurasia, with approximately 72% of that total going to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which received over \$600,000 dollars for Preventive Conservation of the Collections of the State Museum in Sarajevo and \$120,000 for Phase 3 of the restoration of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Red Cross Society Building in Sarajevo. The AFCP was active in the 2000s, in funding preservation efforts of mosques in Foca and Banja Luka, and the Church of St Nicholas in Trijebanj near Stolac, the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka.

Typically, money flows directly to in-country governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions. In the case of Bosnia, for example, much of the funding has gone to the Commission to Preserve National Monuments, which has led the way in the rebuilding of mosques, churches, and other buildings. Although the Dayton Peace Accords made no provision for the establishment of a ministry of culture or similar mechanism for executive level administration of cultural institutions at the national level, the agreement did, in recognition of the importance of culture heritage, specify in Annex 8 the establishment of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments with the following mandate: “The Commission shall receive and decide on petitions for the designation of property having cultural, historic, religious or ethnic importance as National Monuments.” Annex 8 further stipulated that the Commission be funded by the entities for the first five years of its existence, with the possibility that funding then be turned over to the state government of BiH. This was achieved in 2002, when the Commission came under the fiduciary responsibility of the presidency of BiH.

As part of its cultural heritage initiatives in Bosnia, the US Embassy there worked closely with the Commission to Preserve National Monuments to develop an educational program called My Bosnia and Herzegovina—My Heritage, with the goal of raising “children’s and young people’s awareness of the importance of the heritage and to create a sense of ownership and responsibility for its preservation” (Buncic, p. 297). Through this appreciation, the hope was that children would

develop “values such as tolerance, understanding, dialogue, humanity, respect for others, [and] democratic values” (Buncic, p. 305).

Public diplomacy, of which cultural diplomacy is a variation, grew out of the need to exercise “soft power” to further diplomatic aims and broaden influence through image enhancement. As Shuster notes, the era of colonization necessitated to “rely more and more on cultural influence as an instrumentality of cooperation” (1963, p. 8). In the American context, scholars frequently ground the development of US cultural diplomacy in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America in the 1930s, as the US sought to extend its influence by more indirect means. This approach was institutionalized through the creation of the State department’s Division of Cultural Relations, which was focused primarily on educational exchanges, and, in 1944 the creation of the post of Assistant Secretary of State for Public and Cultural affairs (Hart, 2013). Hart (2013) notes that as the US’s approach to cultural and public diplomacy evolved, there were debates about this that “pitted purists, who viewed intellectual exchanges as an almost post-national exercise in reducing strife through a meeting of the minds, against policymakers, who sought to deploy ‘culture’ as a tool of U.S. foreign policy” (Hart, 24). Following the war, the US was a founding member of UNESCO (“building peace in the minds of men and women”) although it withdrew in 1984 and did not join again until to 2003. (In 2013 the US had its UNESCO voting rights rescinded following the cessation of dues payments. This was in response to Palestine being admitted as an associate member.)

But is simply preserving and protecting cultural heritage enough? It’s necessary, but is it sufficient? Are there limitations? How might the impulse to preserve patrimony in fact reinforce the very nationalist, ethnocentric narratives that cultural heritage preservation is intended to overcome? Labadi (2013) notes, “Traditions...help to associate the idea of the nation with that of symbolic stability....The relationship between symbolic stability and legitimacy is twofold. First, symbolic stability helps to legitimate the current geographical boundaries and civil organization of the nation. Second, symbolic stability helps to legitimate the political structures, the rulers in place and their authority by presenting them as direct inheritors of past regimes” (Labadi, p. 63). Labadi continues, “The process of defining this collective national identity involves the delimitation of both a set of shared characteristics that a community considers part of itself as well as a group of excluded qualities to which it defines itself in opposition.” (Labadi, p. 68). How do we make sure *that* is not the impact of cultural heritage policy?

In the late 1990s, Habermas addressed the controversy surrounding Germany’s Memorial of the Murdered Jews of Europe, which was dedicated in Berlin in 2005. “The goal of the memorial,” wrote Habermas, “explains why neither the authenticity of ruins or commemorative sites which document a past even, nor museum exhibits, collections or archives which are designed to inform, can serve as substitutes for a memorial. Only a memorial can attest to the will and the message of its sponsor” (p. 44). He goes on to distinguish this purpose from “the pointing finger of museum or heritage-site pedagogy” (p. 44). The danger is that it is far easier to repair or restore a mosque, orthodox, or Catholic Church, far easier to measure impact in terms of x dollars spent on the restoration of x number of buildings or museum collections, than it is to promote and

scaffold the kind of ethical-political process of self-understanding that Habermas is talking about. And yet, that is precisely what cultural heritage perseverance, at its best, should do. It should attempt to “bring about some clarity concerning the cultural matrix of a burdened inheritance, to recognize what [citizens] themselves are collectively liable for, and what is to be continued, and what revised, of those traditions that once had formed such a disastrous motivational background” (31).

Understood as sites for the kind of “symbolic expression of ethical-political self-understanding” that Habermas saw embodied by the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, museums and cultural heritage sites and initiatives can become the impetus for, to quote Habermas yet again, “a human rights discourse among participants of different cultures [that] draws our attention to normative contents that are present in the tacit presuppositions of any discourse whose goal is mutual understanding. That is, independently of their cultural backgrounds all the participants intuitively know quite well that a consensus based on conviction cannot come about as long as symmetrical relations do not exist among them—relations of mutual recognition, mutual role-taking, a shared willingness to consider one’s own tradition with the eyes of the stranger and to learn from one another, and so forth.” (p. 129). This is the potential of programs like My Bosnia and Herzegovina – My Heritage.

So, my questions: Can museums and cultural heritage sites, “supply” the normative contents for discourse communities devoted to working across ethnic division in a spirit of mutual regard and recognition to solve problems of peace, social instability, environmental degradation, inter-cultural communication? How do avoid making cultural heritage protection, influenced as it is by foreign policy imperatives, simply a reinforcement of existing ethnic-based, nationalist identities? How might the United States work together with its partners overseas make cultural heritage preservation an extension of democratic education? And are there clues here as to how we might measure impact beyond simply counting the number of buildings rebuilt and restored, or the number of objects collected, preserved, and displayed, or the number of performances recorded and books published?

I will conclude with another quote from Jefferson: “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.” Therein lies the power and promise of cultural heritage protection and preservation as it relates to democracy and civic value. When approached comprehensively, we aren’t simply building temples for honoring the past, but rather creating forums for dreaming about the future. Simply inheriting a past is not enough; it’s what we do with our inheritance that matters.

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