



# The post-Brexit narrative of the British Council, re-engagement through culture

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## Abstract

Brexit represents a constantly evolving and complex process. To explore it, this paper proposes a new perspective by applying reputation concept arguments in order to observe the general evolution of the EU-UK relationships investigated it from the cultural policy case and with a study of the British Council. It argues that the UK agency responsible for educational exchanges and cultural relations with international influence can be an example of re engagement. As soon as the referendum was announced, the British Council tried to capitalise on Brexit to strengthen its bilateral ties with the European cultural and educational institutions. The UK and the British Council do not have any motive to withdraw from interstitial spaces like European networks for example. The British Council thus reengages under a new status of third country in some European cultural networks or in some programs like Creative Europe or Erasmus+. The analysis of the British Council’s reputation and soft power provides insights into its capacity to share and implement its post-Brexit story about European integration but also the tensions engendered by the specificity of the cultural field. Focusing first on the British Council’s history and its links with the FCO, this article examines then the “audience networks” that the British Council has developed. Finally, the rupture created by Brexit brings to strengthen its cooperation with its European counterparts and to re-enforce the post-Brexit EU-UK cultural cooperation.

**Keywords** Soft power · Reputation · Culture · European public policies

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The British Council is the UK agency responsible for educational exchanges and cultural relations with international influence and the operator of the British soft power.<sup>1</sup> According to the Soft Power 30 index, “[t]he British Council in particular has been instrumental in spreading British influence and cultivating soft power, through cultural and educational engagement.”<sup>2</sup> As such it has evolved in parallel to the EU–UK “special relationship”: it had legitimised itself in relation to the European Union (EU) during the negotiations for the entry of the United Kingdom (UK) in the early 1970s, and it must legitimise itself nowadays now that the UK has left the EU. Indeed, even if, since the 1980s, the British Council activities have been mostly focused on Asian, South American, or Eastern European audiences, Brexit could damage the reputation of the institution to those foreign and European audiences.

Reputation is “made up of symbolic beliefs about [this] organisation—its capabilities, intentions, history, mission—and these images are embedded in a network of multiple audiences” (Carpenter 2010, p. 33). To gain legitimacy—or to not lose it—“organisations invent myths about themselves, engage in symbolic activities and create stories” (Huault 2009, p. 4), engaging not only the members of the organisation, but also its different audiences. This is because organisations depend on audiences supporting them and contributing to their continuity, validating part of their activities through their material or symbolic support. Consequently, the existing literature has demonstrated that institutions create a sort of “collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking and a mean to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory” (Boje 1991, p. 106, 2008). As the organisation’s leadership has to contend with the symbols, rituals, and rhetoric associated with its organisational reputation, the story highlighted by the organisations can help their reputation. A narrative “reflects, encodes and simplifies complicated stories [...] feeds and shapes the organisation they represent” (Carpenter 2010, p. 16) and this narrative internalised by the staff—in their speech and actions—“can be a resource used by actors as much as it provides the structure where action is circumscribed” (Radaelli 2000, p. 256). It makes complex issues understandable and accessible “to human action”, suggesting “specific sorts of actions over another” (Roe 1994).

Brexit represents a constantly evolving and complex process. In this special issue, new concepts have been identified towards exiting to think about the influence of the EU on British public policies and politics: re-engagement and continued engagement (Piquet, Wolff, editorial). Following what has been said, we argue that the British Council case can be an example of re-engagement. As soon as the referendum was announced the British Council tried to capitalise on Brexit to strengthen its bilateral ties with the European cultural and educational institutions. As part of

<sup>1</sup> Defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment, [soft power] arises from the attraction of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies” (Nye 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Since 2015, the Portland firm, a strategic consultancy firm, assisted by the Centre for Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, has carried out the Soft Power 30 index <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2018.pdf> p. 44 (03/03/2022).



the organisation's narrative, they perceived and declared that the British Council was a source of soft power and a real business that Brexit should affect only marginally. Thereby, the non-dismantling of what has been previously Europeanized and the continuation of active but limited Europeanisation will be our main criteria throughout this demonstration, as presented in the editorial of this special issue. Moreover, the British Council evolves in a specific field, the cultural one, explaining partly the possibility of a re-engagement. Even if Brexit's consequences for compulsory or shared competences of the EU have been studied (for example Copeland 2016; Burns et al. 2019), less attention has been devoted to subsidiary competences. The UK, no longer a Member State, reengages, partly through the British Council, in cultural and educational policies. It does so under a new status of third country in some European cultural networks or in some programs like Creative Europe and Erasmus ones. Without easing the hard impact it could have had on the Arts (Faucher 2020), this singular operator in the UK is undertaking a process of re-commitment in EU–UK relations through a constant dialogue between its audiences and itself.

This paper proposes a new perspective by applying reputation concept and soft power arguments to observe the general evolution of the EU–UK relationships investigated from the cultural policy case. It examines therefore the British Council narrative as a framework for its members' actions and focuses on different variables which could influence the British Council trajectory. This paper explores so the long history of the institution and its organisation but also the structuration of the cultural field and its politicisation. In order to do so, this paper will first look back on the long history of the organisation and its narrative. Its characteristics and plasticity can represent possible factors of adaptation and re-engagement. This initial insight will then be complemented by an examination of the institution's activities and its interactions with its audiences. Embedded in "audience networks", the British Council has to encourage its different audiences, and most precisely the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) and other European cultural operators, to cooperate in order to reassure its partners and prepare for the future. Finally, this paper challenges the post-Brexit EU–UK policy co-operation in a particular category of European public policy ruled by subsidiarity culture.

The demonstration is based on an empirical survey composed of six interviews conducted between September 2018 and March 2021 with staff of the British Council, as well as interviews from other European cultural institutions members. It is supplemented by the British Council's activity reports, press releases, studies as well as its archives, highlighting their strategy and rhetoric.

### **The British Council "stable and long-term" narrative as a framework inside and outside the UK**

A detour through history provides insights into understanding the uniqueness and difficulties faced by the British Council. The Council developed its scope from its inception in 1934 and was formalised in the award of a Royal Charter in 1940. Since then, the relationship between the British Council and the government has



been dynamic, depending on the political and economic context. Yet, a key moment for the institution in British and European landscapes was the entry of the UK in 1975 with the UK European Communities membership referendum. This moment has allowed the British Council to reinforce its autonomy from the Government in the 1980s and to build its “myth” which enabled the organisation to create its own momentum in a turbulent time.

### **A singular «mythologised» institution**

In the 1970s, the British Council was part of the UK government’s strategy for its entry into the Common Market. This increase of British cultural efforts followed the recommendations of the Duncan Report: “[I]n view of the importance of that area in British foreign landscape” and given their economic importance, “[t]here [was] a strong case for shifting the balance of British Council activities towards Western Europe.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, “cultural competition”, as it was called at that time, could have been a potential source of conflict between the UK and France, one of the most vivid vetoes to its entry to the European Economic Community (EEC) (Aqui 2020). The institution’s soft power had already been put forward to avoid a potential conflict. From the UK perspective, the situation was as follows: “Owing to the growing predominance of the English language, French fears of “cultural extinction” were a major psychological obstacle to improvement in their relations with Britain” (Donaldson 1984, p. 260). A working group was then set up to study Franco-English cultural relations. Its aim was to extend collaboration in this sphere. The British Council and the British government, therefore, joined forces with French cultural institutions. The British Institute, located in Paris, was so created.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to the Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Sir Christopher Soames, Ambassador to France from 1968 to 1972, underlines that “With the imminent prospect of Britain becoming a member of the European Economic Community the threadbare nature of the Council’s presence in Paris will become increasingly evident” (Donaldson 1984, p. 261). This key moment of the entry of the UK in the Community had a double result: it allowed the British Council to make a place for itself in the British landscape first of all by showing its negotiating and its diplomatic force, but also improved its presence in Europe. The British Council was fully recognised as an arm of British diplomacy and as an “organ of educational aid” by the British government. Government thus did not hesitate to use the institution in delicate contexts like in the episode described above. Members of the House of Commons pointed out in the First Report of Select Committee on Expenditure, Session 1970–1971, and in the Report on the British Council<sup>5</sup> that the value and the potential of the institution were well understood.

<sup>3</sup> Review Committee on Overseas Representation, 1968–1969 (Cmnd 4107, 1969) known as the Duncan Report, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> It no longer exists nowadays.

<sup>5</sup> First Report from the House of Commons Expenditure Committee, 1970–1971, The British Council, Q. 2337 et <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1972/feb/09/british-council> (03/08/2021).



However, debates around these reports also highlighted the vague position of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) at the time regarding the independence of the British Council,<sup>6</sup> between total independence of this body and intervention from the Department. This “institutional vagueness” would later be invested by members of the British Council to reinforce their image of an independent institution, of an arm length body.<sup>7</sup> The symbolism around this organisational model allowed the institution to strengthen its narrative around its capabilities. The concept of the arm’s length principle was frequently “used rhetorically by politicians and cultural workers to reinforce the legitimacy of national cultural policy” (Mangset 2009). Although British cultural policy is “generally regarded as the prototype of an independent cultural policy” (Chartrand and McCaughey 1989; Mangset 2009), in the case of the British Council, this concept was used as a rhetorical and normative tool. The goal was to reinforce the “myth” surrounding its relationship with its parent ministry even if it did not always cover the same political reality.

Consequently, the British Council was a singular institution within the British landscape. The Achieving Impact of the National Audit Office recognised its particular legal status and underlines in 2008 that “the British Council has no direct international peers.”<sup>8</sup> The fact that official documents underlined the uniqueness of the British Council consolidates its narrative and acts as a “centering force of control and order” (Boje 1991) of the image and reputation of the institution. Although other European cultural institutions have thereafter modelled themselves on the British Council, such as the Goethe Institute, and share common objectives—following their countries’ foreign and domestic cultural policies—the organisational and reputational singularity of the British Council allowed it to play a part in this field, thus reinforcing its “myth”.

### **Narrative as a cognitive framework for British Council actions and reforms**

Like many cultural institutions in recent years, grants from the Department have been falling for the British Council. Several reflections were engaged within the British Council concerning the future reductions of endowments of the FCDO. In order to compensate, the British Council has aimed to transform the attraction of the English language into an attractiveness for the UK, to capitalise on the English language attraction to finance the rest of the activities of the institution by fulfilling a double objective. First of all, the objective has been financial, to allow the British Council to continue to finance its core business because people have to pay to take classes and examinations. Second, the objective has been reputational, to allow the institution to appear essential both to the FCDO, despite its financial disengagement, and in the European landscape.

<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 09 February 1972 vol 830 cc1351-432.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tailored-review-of-the-british-council-terms-of-reference/tailored-review-of-the-british-council-terms-of-reference> (03/03/2022).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/0708625.pdf> p. 7 (03/08/2020).



As a consequence, a semantic change appeared in the institution's activity reports from the 2010s and more particularly in 2012.<sup>9</sup> The British Council qualified itself as an *entrepreneurial public service*, that is to say a more dynamic public service animated by a spirit of initiative based on the performance techniques of large companies. It was set out by Sir Vernon Ellis, British Council Chair from May 2010 to May 2016, in the 2012–2013 Annual Report: “We have recommitted to being an entrepreneurial public service which will grow faster and create more value for the UK and for everyone who uses our services.”<sup>10</sup> This term, also used four times in the institution's two-pages introduction, was hammered throughout the 2012–2013 annual report and in posterior ones. Since this new narrative arrived several months before the management statement<sup>11</sup> and financial memorandum<sup>12</sup> released in July 2013, the operator's goal was to legitimise its organisational and strategic change for its institutional audiences, the FCDO, and the Parliament while coping with their grants' reductions. These two documents set out the terms and conditions according to which the FCDO provides grants-in-aid funding to the British Council and officialised this reduction. This shift was made possible because demand in English language skills is large and lasting. Its financial strategy was based on an increase in resources drawn from English teaching, contractual partnerships with international organisations and local governments in the area of educational cooperation and patronage. The demand in English was the main resource of the British Council and this is confirmed over the period studied. Due to the strong performance of its English teaching and exam activities, it achieved almost 9% growth in total income that year.

Their narrative allowed the institution to consolidate its myth of an independent institution, simplifying the economic reality behind that shift. The institution had to go for a real reorganisation of its strategy towards an entrepreneurial model because it finally relied more on private than public funding. In addition, this change was understood by its European partners, well aware of this new organisation. The reputation of entrepreneurial public service is also recognised by the pairs of the British Council as this member of the Goethe Institute in Paris underlines:

The British Council is well established and has no shortage of money. We are not funded in the same way, their language courses work well that even in case of a budget decrease, because no cultural institution gets out of it, they do not have to worry.<sup>13</sup>

The Goethe Institute, funded by the German federal government, also issues language diplomas, such as *Zertifikat Deutsch*, but this is not their main activity and does not allow them an organisational or budgetary autonomy. The British Council

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual-report-2012-13.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual-report-2012-13.pdf> p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/2013-07-management-statement.pdf> (09/09/2021).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/2013-07-financial-memorandum.pdf> (09/09/2021).

<sup>13</sup> Interview #1, Member of Goethe-Institut in Paris, 11.01.2019.



therefore has specific structural characteristics which allow it to distinguish itself from its European peers.

This organisational shift also occurred within a broader dynamic surrounding the concept of creative industries and dating back to 1997 with the British Labour party's arrival in power. While "creative industries policy is not an absolute novelty" in the UK (Schlesinger 2012), this concept of creativity "has been politically reconceptualized as a means of addressing broader socio-political and economic agendas" (Neelands and Boyun 2010). The conception of culture under New Labour's social market political paradigm made it "an issue primarily determined by competitiveness within the global economy" (Schlesinger 2012). To this end, the British Council shared "the UK's great cultural assets – the English language, educational opportunities, [the] arts and arts industries of scale and [their] openness and pluralism as a society."<sup>14</sup> This production "of a cognitive matrix is therefore not a simple discursive process but a dynamic intimately linked to the interactions and power relations that crystallize little by little in a given sector and/or sub-system. It feeds both a process of speaking (production of meaning) and a process of taking power (structuring a camp of forces)" (Muller and Surel 1998, pp. 51–52).

The British Council has therefore gradually built up its reputation within the UK with the FCDO as well as with parliamentarians. The demand for English represents therefore a structural resource, allowing the British Council, among other things, to establish a different organisational model from these European partners (Riotte 2021). However, this demand also allows the British Council to develop the loyalty of its international and European audiences. A sort of cognitive confidence develops around the institution that plays on its reputation to better highlight its resources. Yet, Brexit could have changed the situation. We will thus focus on the dismantling—or not—of cultural cooperation and policies following Brexit.

## The British Council and the European cultural cooperation: assets and narrative

Before Brexit, Europe was not a "priority area", to use the institution's vocabulary, in terms of actions and interactions in the educational and cultural sector. Incomes in this geographic area were not the most important for the institution which preferred to focus on South Asia or the Middle East for example. However, Europe had become an increasingly important region according to the annual reports of 2017–2018,<sup>15</sup> 2018–2019<sup>16</sup>, and 2019–2020.<sup>17</sup> Even if the British Council was singular, its history and narrative were related to the EU, and Brexit might have damaged that story of the EU–UK relationships. In order to avoid it, the operator gets its post-Brexit story from its history and from its activities. As demand for the English

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual-report-2012-13.pdf> p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/2017-18-annual-report.pdf> (09/09/2021).

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/2018-2019-annual-report-final.pdf> (09/09/2021).

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual\\_report\\_2019-20.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual_report_2019-20.pdf) (09/09/2021).



language was a structural resource, it allowed the British Council to gain autonomy in relation to its institutional audiences. Thus, the institution's uniqueness and reputation enabled the institution to play a dual game of enhancing the attractiveness of the UK and of the institution itself thereby participating in British soft power. With Brexit, the institution disengages from EU policies. However, it reengages them as a third country or at a lesser extent (Piquet, Wolff, editorial). The British Council (re) engages itself in a multitude of events to strengthen ties with European counterparts. Brexit can slightly turn the EU into a multiplier of actions and bilateral cooperation as the narrative emerging from it represents a frame of action in a post-Brexit context.

### Cognitive confidence as a base to discuss the future

Following the 2016 referendum, the British Council quickly sought to understand what impact Brexit had on its work and its audiences. In a strategy of “dynamic resilience” (Ansell et al. 2017, p. 83), the institution focused on three domains—arts, science, education—and on a specific audience—young people. To do that, the British Council commissioned a study in 2016 called *From the outside in G20, views of the UK before and after the EU referendum*, by Ipsos Mori. Its goal was to measure the impact of Brexit on the vision that members of the G20 countries have of the UK before Brexit, in May and June 2016, and just after Brexit at fall 2016.<sup>18</sup> It concerns the degree of confidence and trust of young people from G20 member countries, including Great Britain, towards the British government or institutions. Trust commits not only the public or audience that gives it but also the person or persons “who benefit from it: the one who gives his trust, based on a judgment of reliability and loyalty, expects that his commitment will not be disappointed; and the one who benefits from the trust is ‘almost committed by a judgment made about him in advance’, which he must not disappoint [...]” (Quéré 2001). The British Council's organisational reputation both enables and depends on trust. The results show that the pre- and post-Brexit perceptions are not so different, “surveys conducted before and after the EU referendum show that on average the UK maintained its status as an attractive country in the eyes of young people in the months following the vote. Indeed, it appears to have experienced a slight increase in its position as a world power during this period, at least as shown in the results for 18- to 34-year-olds educated in these countries.”<sup>19</sup>

The organisational reputation allows the British Council to invest in long-term strategies. The institution can then count on this audience base acquired for its cause from a very young age, and strengthen their ties in the case of turbulent times to enlist their support. Asked about the subject, a member of the British Council in Paris corroborates these words:

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/from\\_the\\_outside\\_in.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/from_the_outside_in.pdf) p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/from\\_the\\_outside\\_in.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/from_the_outside_in.pdf) p. 30 (11/12/2018).





With my team in Paris but like all British [Council] members, we are interested in young people, the Erasmus generation, this generation with an open mind to understand all the issues around which we work.<sup>20</sup>

The English language represents a flagship resource, especially for young people or working people wishing to improve their English to enter the job market. Giving language lessons has important consequences for the institution in the short term with an inflow of money and people potentially ready to enter the British economy, but also in the long term. Audiences taking English lessons or who have passed IELTS type exams represent a mobile and anglophile base. This audience may have a better understanding of British culture and institutions. By working with young audiences, the British Council wants to encourage a form of cognitive confidence nourished by common symbols and rituals generating a dependence on the history of the British Council. This stability and the linearity of its history, being part of its “myth”, therefore contrast with the uncertainty of Brexit.

A large number of studies were released in 2016 trying to “contain” Brexit inside an acceptable narrative for the British Council. A focus was made on the Erasmus program. As a matter of fact, 2016 was the most successful year for this program for the UK “with an estimated 47,000 UK people taking part in activities. [...] The British Council currently holds a number of contracts with the European Commission and does not consider that the cancellation or changes to these contracts will have a material impact on its ability to act as a going concern.”<sup>21</sup> Members of the British Council wanted to reassure their different audiences and explicitly expressed their point of view on the continuation of the events, giving a framework for possible actions.

However, Brexit is not the only crisis facing the British Council in this sector. Some studies have demonstrated that Brexit, and more recently the COVID-19 crisis, have had an impact on study intentions of foreign students. The UK was seen to have a higher COVID-19 risk compared to other EU countries which was not a reassuring point for students.<sup>22</sup> Still, Brexit remains one of the reasons for rejecting the UK when considering studying abroad. In the report *Considering study research findings*, released in Spring 2021, the foundation for rejection is most commonly the tuition fees, the UK no longer being in the Erasmus program, but also the living costs in the UK. Moreover, it is more difficult to travel to and from the UK while compromises are not found.<sup>23</sup> COVID-19 has also impacted this domain. It represents a negative evolution compared to the British Council’s narrative. Furthermore, in the context of the financial crisis caused by COVID-19, the British Council will close some of its offices, including some in Europe. The British government then provided an emergency grant on top of the annual grant to cover its funding gap and the FCDO. The reputation and issues surrounding the institution are well known to

<sup>20</sup> Interview #2, Member of the British Council in Paris, 03.04.2019.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/annual-report-2016-17.pdf> p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/brexit\\_temp\\_check\\_report\\_external.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/brexit_temp_check_report_external.pdf) p. 22 (09/09/2021).



the government, which has emphasised the British Council's contribution to promoting its values abroad. Nonetheless, this is offset by the fact that the amount of government support received has been reduced by £18 million.<sup>24</sup>

But the “myth” and narrative have also been incorporated by the members of the institution, who see themselves as agents of British soft power. For instance, the term ‘Brexit’ is used only twice in the reports following the Brexit referendum in the 2017–2018 report.<sup>25</sup> “UK’s departure from the European Union” or “the UK leaving the European Union” were preferred in the rest of the reports. The image and “myth” of a stable institution are important for its members. In addition, they tend to minimize the impact of Brexit on their work:

I do not worry about the impact of Brexit on my work. First of all, it can be personal because in France, this will have no impact on the British in Paris: relations with the authorities, the [French] Institute, the *Alliance française* and the government are good. It will also have no impact on the rest of Europe, as far as cultural relations are concerned. We have strong ties with the leaders of institutes or cultural networks or others. Field work will not be affected.<sup>26</sup>

Educational and cultural cooperation is seen, or rather wanted to be perceived, as an area potentially less affected by Brexit by members of the institution. The British Council uses studies commissioned from different organisations to “verify” and consolidate its strategies with its audiences. The institution thus justifies itself to its national audiences, which despite a drop in funding endorse them, but also to its target audiences who feel heard, and read through these studies the story gradually built by the British Council.

Members of the British Council try to take advantage of their institution reputation to implement their own post-Brexit narrative. Another study by the British Council from 2018 *Powers of attraction Young people’s views on the soft power of the G20 group of nations* starts with these words “Perceptions matter.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, the British Council can try to control or influence its perceptions through studies or commitments. This operator performs a certain kind of story to reassure and prepare the post-Brexit era (Boje 1991). Moreover, the word “brand” to speak about the British Council is used in this study—underlining the entrepreneurial vision of the institution: “Future success depends on perceptions of the UK as a stable, trustworthy and responsible international partner, committed to pursuing the common good rather than narrow self-interest. [...] That is the UK’s brand its USP [*Unique Selling Proposition*] to the use the jargon. In an increasingly volatile world where the forces of nationalism and authoritarianism appear to be on the march, that brand will become ever more valuable to the UK. It needs to be protected if the UK is to

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/british-council-to-reduce-its-presence-in-europe-and-beyond-to-tackle-financial-crisis/> and <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/sep/09/british-council-to-close-20-offices-across-globe-after-cuts-and-lost-income> (11/01/2022).

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/2017-18-annual-report.pdf> pp. 2 and 25.

<sup>26</sup> Interview #2, Member of the British Council in Paris, 03.04.2019.

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j136\\_thought\\_leadership\\_g20\\_perceptions\\_196x284mm\\_final\\_web\\_v3.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j136_thought_leadership_g20_perceptions_196x284mm_final_web_v3.pdf) p. 3 (15/03/2021).



thrive post-Brexit.”<sup>28</sup> This “myth” internalised by the staff is both a resource and a constraint. Resource, because the long history and the reputation of the British Council could help to fuel the stability of the institution through turbulent times and to distinguish it from other institutions. However, it could also be a constraint because members have to be equal to it and always have to be one step ahead in order to anticipate dynamically any sources of turbulence, such as COVID-19 for example. Basing themselves on countable and tangible studies or actions, British Council members could so impose their narrative of Brexit.

### **Culture reinforcing multi and bilateral cooperation for the UK inside the EU**

The actions made possible by the British Council’s narrative also include the investment of interstitial spaces like European networks. As a result of Brexit, bilateral connections have been strengthened through the networks of European institutions, investing Europe as a multiplier of actions and possibilities in times of turbulence. This investment thus contributes to a mobility that is “often bilateral and relatively flexible that community programs are not able to support” (Autissier 2016, p. 194).

EUNIC was created in 2006. It is a network of cultural and promotion institutes of the national languages of the European Union. It is a partner of the European Commission and other European institutions and helps to define and implement a European cultural public action<sup>29</sup> and is co-financed by the *Europe Creative* program.<sup>30</sup> In times of turbulence for the British Council and the UK, the defence of the European project of diversity and cultural cooperation represents both an objective in itself for a part of its strategy and an instrument making it possible to consolidate its reputation and its legitimacy at a European scale. A member of the network describes the relationships between the British Council and EUNIC<sup>31</sup>:

They have really deepened their engagement after the Brexit. [...] Their engagement was strong at the beginning of EUNIC, then they became a bit less engaged. And then they came back after Brexit and now they continue to engage with the network, in terms of content, more than anyone else.

Until 2020, Ciaràn Devane, Director General of the British Council, had been a member of the Board of Directors of EUNIC. In 2021, the British Council changed from member to third country status. The institution was and is still involved in some actions of EUNIC. For the member of the network “I see that it’s also strategic for them, because it helps them to show their partners, both in the UK and abroad, that they still believe in the European Union and in bilateral and multilateral engagement.”<sup>32</sup> With the Center des Beaux-Arts/BOZAR, EUNIC Global, the European Culture Foundation, and the French Institute, the British Council is part of

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/contacts>.

<sup>30</sup> [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/cebooklet2016\\_web.pdf](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/cebooklet2016_web.pdf) p. 35 (15/03/2020).

<sup>31</sup> Interview #3, Member of EUNIC Network, Zoom interview, 27.03.2021.

<sup>32</sup> Interview #3, Member of EUNIC Network, Zoom interview, 27.03.2021.



a consortium, led by the Goethe-Institut, to support the implementation of the cultural diplomacy platform of the EU.<sup>33</sup> This consortium was selected via tender. The cultural diplomacy platform was launched in 2016 by the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI),<sup>34</sup> in order to support the EU institutions in the implementation of a new “EU Strategy for international cultural relations”. This platform brings together governments, regions, cities, cultural institutes, civil society organisations, artists, and scientists. The British Council then consolidated its place on a European scale through its involvement in various projects. At the local level, it is also present through the EUNIC clusters.

These are platforms for collaboration between member organisations. A minimum of three EUNIC members is required to formally create a cluster.<sup>35</sup> Assuming that clusters in the same region face similar needs and challenges, the program consists of a series of regional meetings of EUNIC clusters and members operating in a region in order to develop a strategic approach to their work. Andrew Chadwick, Director of Programs and Partnerships since August 2016 at the British Council of Paris, is still, for example, Vice-President of the EUNIC Paris cluster. According to a member of the British Council, his involvement is essential in view of his duties:

Andrew is director of programs and partnerships, his role in the cluster is essential. We are for a peer-to-peer cooperation, we share the same problems or the same ambitions as our partners from other institutions, we must pool our know-how and our strength.<sup>36</sup>

The European cluster’s space, restricted and codified, allows this peer-to-peer cooperation, this connection of equals between institutions of the same level sharing the same ambitions. These clusters are then an area invested in by the British Council which can thus consolidate both its presence at the European level and its presence at the national level while extending its main educational and cultural activities.

Bilateral actions are part of a strategy of re-engagement in the European zone, which was not a priority for the British Council. As explained in the 2018–2019 annual reports, “[a]s the UK prepares to leave the European Union, it needs to strengthen bilateral ties with individual member states. The approach [they] have adopted across Europe will help to meet this need. [They] have a brokering and convening role to link institutional partners in the European Union with their counterpart organisations in the UK. This work through institutions, combined with [their] English language teaching, delivery of UK exams and our digital offer, enables us to connect increasing numbers of young people with the UK.”<sup>37</sup> More recently, the British Council has worked on behalf of EUNIC and the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IFA) for a report by Jordi Baltà entitled *Cultural relations. Key approaches*

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/>.

<sup>34</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/foreign-policy-instruments\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/foreign-policy-instruments_en).

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/clusters#cluster-what-is>.

<sup>36</sup> Interview #2, Member of the British Council, Paris, 03.04.2019.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/2018-2019-annual-report-final.pdf> p. 20.



*in fragile contexts*.<sup>38</sup> The expertise of the institution on this question was sought. In 2019, a British Council Security and Stability expert wrote a report on *the Art of Peace, the value of culture in post-conflict recovery*.<sup>39</sup>

Members of the institution want Brexit to be seen as a shared challenge for actors in European cultural institutions and closer cooperation is and will continue to be topical. Its action in the European field of culture, a double instrument for its internal policy and for its reputation, strengthens bilateral ties through the networks of European institutions investing Europe as a multiplier of actions and possibilities. The British Council performs stories to make sense of the Brexit turbulence. Investing in a European subsidiarity competence and interstitial networks allows the institution to cement its presence in European politics and to not dismantle what has been previously done. In this case, Europeanized *acquis* stays in place and the UK is also pursuing intensive exchanges with the EU through interstitial space. However, due to changes of legal status, the British Council influence on the EU level and the EU one on the institution are more limited than what they used to be. Yet, the structuration of the cultural European field and its very subject make Brexit a shared challenge for both parts.

### **Culture as new territory for European public action? The shared challenge of Brexit**

Several authors underline the fact that the EU has no cultural policy. Its action in the cultural sector “has a modest budget, is strictly subordinated to the principle of subsidiarity and fragmented across many areas of intervention and funding systems” (Calligaro 2017, p. 10). However, this ambiguity and the flexibility of the category of public action have allowed the British Council to develop its own soft power. The latter can be mobilised when a country’s hard power has some difficulties, such as during Brexit. For the institution’s members, if the British Council makes a success of its Brexit’s management, this turbulent event can strengthen the institution even more. The strategy was therefore to include culture as part of the collective bargaining to turn Brexit into the institution’s set of actions.

### **Soft power as a tool for re-engagement**

Continuing to explore the post-Brexit narrative of the British Council, the institution takes advantage of its soft power. The British Council tries to lay out some studies to emphasise their strategies. This conceptual effort is a strategy for strengthening the reputation of the institution and legitimising it in turbulent times.

The British Council sought to conceptualise soft power to understand its consequences on the cultural relations of the UK with the rest of Europe and the

<sup>38</sup> [https://eunic.eu/media/site/2033514160-1632226636/eunic\\_cultural-relations-key-approaches-in-fragile-contexts\\_report\\_spread.pdf](https://eunic.eu/media/site/2033514160-1632226636/eunic_cultural-relations-key-approaches-in-fragile-contexts_report_spread.pdf) (12/09/2021).

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the\\_art\\_of\\_peace\\_0419.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_art_of_peace_0419.pdf) (09/09/2021).



world, but also to justify its actions and strategies with these audiences. A study was commissioned by the British Council at the University of Edinburgh,<sup>40</sup> entitled *Soft Power Today, measuring the Influences and Effects*. Published in 2017, it was carried out using data from 2000 to 2012, a period marked by decreases in FCDO grants and a switch to a public service entrepreneur. Cultural institutions, such as the British Council, have been found to be influential enough to attract international students, tourists, and foreign direct investment (FDI). The study concludes that the more a cultural institute is present abroad, the better the consequences will be for the country from which the institute comes: “each 1% increase in the number of countries covered by cultural institutions results in an increase almost 0.66% of FDI for this country.”<sup>41</sup> In 2016, such an increase would have represented £ 1.3 billion for the UK, which recorded foreign investments of £ 197 billion. This conceptualisation attempt remains quite unprecedented on the part of an institution and despite the possible perfectibility of the variables, their narrative is thus supported by “scientific resources”. It is another way for the British Council to justify itself and its actions to its different audiences thanks to a relatively well-known concept in international relations and taken up by several politicians around the world. The British Council members also legitimise its organisational shift towards a more entrepreneurial model by highlighting the economic attractions the UK can benefit from it.

In a way, we are agent of the British soft power. Culture influences economy and vice versa. It is in our interest to understand how and to emphasise this dynamic. If culture can reassure and increase our institution, we have to follow this way.<sup>42</sup>

However, the limits of soft power “[depend] on the context, who is connected to whom and under what circumstances—but soft power depends more than hard power on the existence of interpreters and receivers’ volunteers. [...] For this to happen, the objective measurement of soft power potential must be attractive to a specific audience, and this attraction must influence policy outcomes” (Nye 2004, p. 16). It is, therefore, necessary to target one or more audiences; “soft power is more difficult to handle than hard power because many of its crucial resources are beyond the control of governments and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audience” (Nye 2004). For example, the English language, the structural resource of the British Council, then becomes a generator of cultural capital giving access to British ideas, values and culture. The long-term construction of a committed public, of potential tourists or students, has many consequences for the British market and economy. Soft power is difficult to deploy or use at a given moment, so it is much more of a resource than an instrument, a tool for institutions or government to create a sort of momentum. This soft power, established over the long term, in the field with specific audiences, can then be mobilised and activated in situations

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/3418\\_bc\\_edinburgh\\_university\\_soft\\_power\\_report\\_03b.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/3418_bc_edinburgh_university_soft_power_report_03b.pdf) (03/03/2022).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> Interview #4, Member of the British Council, London, 05.12.2019.



of turbulence like Brexit by favouring the influence of the UK and by sharing know-how and British knowledge. It consolidates the links between the institution and its audiences while keeping a large repertoire of possible actions (Ansell et al. 2017) in response to this situation—language courses, exhibitions, conferences with other institutions, integration of networks, etc. ... Although less palpable and mobilizable, soft power can prove useful when hard power is damaged by turbulences.

The symbols and rhetoric of the British Council, linked to its organisational and political reputation are incorporated by audiences, often young, and thus allow a common cognitive confidence that has been studied in a previous part of this paper. By capitalising on these audiences acquired for its cause, the institution was able to adapt, in the sense of Carpenter (2010, p. 33), and make soft power a resource to legitimise and consolidate its reputation. By doing so, it also underlines the narrative of a cultural Europe. This image is difficult to mobilise in direct political terms, culture not being a compulsory competence of the EU, but the British Council tries to transform culture into a political issue for Brexit and European integration.

Without accelerating or deepening European integration without the UK, Brexit underlines the need for reinforcement in the cultural field, both for British and European actors. Their experience, soft power, and financial weight allow the British Council to remain a privileged partner for other European institutions or programs. In doing so, alliances and equilibrium between member states, or ex member states, remain the same, thus, once again, reassuring all partners.

### **Creating a momentum for the post-Brexit British Council**

With Brexit seen as a shared challenge, European cultural institutions and EU members have acknowledged this status and their goal is to avoid a “lose-lose scenario”. The UK has played a key role in European supranational cultural organizations, taking “lead responsibility for cultural cooperation within the EU and cultural policy issues in the Council of Europe” since joining UNESCO in 1997 under New Labour. Since the late 1990s, political leaders have been seeking “to define a specific policy that corresponds to [the UK’s] identity at national, regional and sub-regional levels” (Stevenson et al. 2010). The British Council, with its strong British institutional position, has also followed this leadership role.

After the 2016 referendum, the goal was to maintain this standing and mitigate the impact of Brexit on its work and partnerships. In January 2017, it initiated the EU–UK Culture and Education Series, which brought together more than 500 personalities from all European countries and from the different sectors of education, culture, science, or research. According to the institution, “[t]he series is a way to listen to the sector and the EU’s other 27 nations.”<sup>43</sup> The goal was to underline the benefits of including the arts in the Brexit negotiations. In this example, all the European participants and experts, have stressed the importance of close collaboration to accompany policies and networks after Brexit. British and

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/art-brexit> (09/09/2021).





European actors sometimes repeated that Brexit would have no impact on the British Council, as a well-oiled cog in their story telling: “I am not worried about the impact of the Brexit on my work,”<sup>44</sup> “It is important for us to be on the ground, to show that apart from the consequences of Brexit for our own country, we also care about the consequences for our partner countries, for our friends. We have to do a pedagogical job. Everything will be fine. Our links and partnerships cannot end like this,”<sup>45</sup> “We will continue to work with [the British Council], whatever happens,”<sup>46</sup> “[The British Council] will remain a potential partner, Brexit or not.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, their former studies feed their arguments and help justify their actions in their research policy insights. For example, for the one on *The art of Brexit*, they use the *From the outside in G20, views of the UK before and after the EU referendum*, by Ipsos Mori, thus consolidating their narrative frame and actions.

The institution was at the origin, alone or in partnership, of numerous meetings between European actors. As explained in the press release preceding the series, the vision of the British Council and its partners, often its European peers, was to encourage “a European open zone,”<sup>48</sup> promoting culture as a key economic sector and cultural exchanges as a European network. They take over here a classic narrative of European cultural policies. Brexit risks breaking this vision, especially with the introduction of economic barriers between these different sectors, and therefore undermining the policies and strategies of the British Council, threatening its legitimacy and reputation.

With the European Culture Foundation and the British Council, the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles (BOZAR) hosted another workshop entitled *Moving Beyond Brexit: Uniting the Cultural and Creative Sectors* on September 24, 2018, with experts from creative and cultural circles from all over Europe. One of the participants insisted on one point: “The United Kingdom has an essential place. [Brexit] forces us to rethink models. It is not just an economic argument. The European Union was a cultural project to ensure peace in Europe. This must be reaffirmed. It’s not all about making deals.”<sup>49</sup>

Another vision of Europe is emerging both for the British Council and for its partners. The institution is trying to adapt to this situation through a “dynamic resilience” strategy (Ansell et al. 2017). Once again, this long-term, hybrid strategy is based on the institution’s multiple resources and reputation. By mobilising its networks of experts and directly involving them in Brexit issues, the British Council brought together nearly 600 players from different sectors. They showed their support for the initiative of these series in a press release called “Our Shared European

<sup>44</sup> Interview #2, Member of the British Council in Paris, 03.04.2019.

<sup>45</sup> Interview #5, Member of British Council, London, 03.04.2019.

<sup>46</sup> Interview #1, Member of Goethe-Institut in Paris, 11.01.2019.

<sup>47</sup> Interview #6, Member of Institut Français, 25.10.2018.

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/our\\_shared\\_european\\_future\\_-\\_03\\_july\\_0.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/our_shared_european_future_-_03_july_0.pdf). [23/06/2020].

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/moving-beyond-brexit-recommendations.pdf> p. 1 (23/06/2020).





Future,”<sup>50</sup> again piloted by the British Council. The “dynamic resilience” strategy is possible for the institution because it has the reputational and financial resources to do so. The latter has a special place in the European cultural scene because it very often responds to calls for tenders and is the leader of many events taking place within the European Union at risk of sometimes irritating certain actors within cultural institutions including a member of the French Institute:

Yes, we are happy to work with the British, of course! It is an important player with significant resources. [...] But it’s a business! Despite Brexit or I don’t know what can happen, we must continue to work with them and do everything to keep them within different networks.<sup>51</sup>

Despite some disagreements, the importance of the cooperative work between the different institutions and the links built up over the years are recognised by all. The leadership that the British Council can sometimes take is also welcome. These meetings and seminars held at the European level are a platform for the British Council which, while reassuring both its partners, is part of a binational context between the British Council representing the UK and its European peers, representing their country of origin. In this case, Europeanisation seems active but limited. However, the British Council can play on two levels, investing a subsidiary competence of the EU to fulfil its original goal and to reinforce its business.

## Conclusion

The existing scholarship has demonstrated that policy domains which have been marginally influenced by the EU could be more easily de-Europeanized (Burns et al. 2019). Yet, for the cultural example, Europeanization has not only been top-down, but also bottom-up as has been demonstrated in this article. The UK and the British Council thus do not have any motive to withdraw from interstitial spaces like European networks, especially because it can still be part of them and influence them and so the EU. As a consequence, the institution represents an interesting case of re-engagement in EU–UK relations.

The British Council is a singular institution in the cultural field inside the UK and the EU, and Brexit does not constitute a complete threat to its future. The institution does not depend only on Europe either for its resources or its reputation. However, this turbulence could damage its reputation at the European and global scale. The British Council has thus shaped its narrative and its actions based on its fundamentals—its activities and history—so that the organisation has been able to create conditions for itself to gain legitimacy and stability since the UK’s entry into the EU in the 1970s until today. This framework creates a kind of mutual allegiance and cognitive confidence between European cultural institutions and audiences that the British

<sup>50</sup> [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/appendix\\_1\\_\\_endorsements\\_of\\_our\\_shared\\_european\\_future\\_\\_updated\\_29\\_may\\_2018.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/appendix_1__endorsements_of_our_shared_european_future__updated_29_may_2018.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Interview #6, Member of Institut Français, 25.10.2018.



Council can use to face turbulences like Brexit. The EU is here playing the role of action multiplier for the British Council, which will ultimately use its networks during this period of turbulence to better invest in bilateral policies with each audience and each partner institution. Moreover, culture can be seen as an interesting and peculiar field in which to deploy soft power to reassure internal and European partners when hard power goes through a turbulent time. Furthermore, acting and working in a European subsidiary competence field allows it to adopt a more flexible and resilient strategy.

However, the loss of influence at the European or domestic scale, combined with turbulence of a different nature can weaken the British Council's position in Europe. Its flexibility, activities, or narrative can't cover up all consequences of Brexit. The COVID-19 crisis and the departure from the Creative Europe and Erasmus programs enfeeble not only the institution but also artists, cultural professionals or associations, and students.

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