

# The Romanian Cultural Institute

## A Need for Consistency

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## **I. Introduction**

Cultural expressions are strong bearers of messages about and significant reflections of how a society and its people are. Artistic representations are embedded with the cultural code of societies. Therefore, people have always used culture, intentionally or not, to decode themselves in front of other people and to decipher other people who were unfamiliar to them. Sometimes, this process, also known as cultural diplomacy, is actually an instrument used to reach other, hidden or evident, positive or negative, selfless or selfish, goals and ambitions.

Cultural diplomacy, perfect example of soft power and key component of public diplomacy, has been defined as “a course of actions, which are based on and utilise the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance sociocultural cooperation or promote national interest”<sup>1</sup>. Cultural diplomacy can be practiced by the public sector, the private sector or civil society. It can be positive or negative.

In this paper I will refer to an example of positive cultural diplomacy practiced by the public sector: the Romanian Cultural Institute. I believe this case is illustrative for how sensitive an issue it is for a state to try to employ cultural diplomacy, for the complexity of how difficult it is to be neutral (if not plain impossible), how hard it is not to raise questions about hidden motives (hidden propaganda), how controversial it can get when cultural products are involved (given the subjectivity of culture), how important it is to be creative, current, and consistent.

## **II. Historical context and evolution**

The Romanian Cultural Institute was founded in 2003 by restructuring the Romanian Cultural Foundation and the Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, which, in turn were established in 1990 by the reorganisation of the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.

### **1. The Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries**

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural diplomacy was defined by many politicians and scholars but this definition given by dr. Emil Constantinescu, former Romanian president, best reflects my opinion about what cultural diplomacy is. ([http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/culturaldiplomacynews/content/pdf/Cultural\\_Diplomacy\\_Dictionary.pdf](http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/culturaldiplomacynews/content/pdf/Cultural_Diplomacy_Dictionary.pdf)).

The Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries was established in 1962 by decision of the Council of Ministers<sup>2</sup>, as a public/community organisation.

After the period of 1948-1953, when the foreign relations of the Romanian “popular democracy” had been perfectly synchronised with the guidelines sent out from Moscow to its satellites in the communist bloc, the Soviet troops were retreated from Bucharest in July 1958 - the moment that marked the beginning of the internal and external reorientation of the regime in Bucharest that followed throughout the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The situation developed in *crescendo* until 1964 when Romania declared its independency from Moscow and its nearness to the West in the *Declaration of April*.<sup>4</sup> Later on, in a speech delivered by Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1971, the Romanian leader indorsed a return to the strict ideological conformity of the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> Although friendly relations to Western nations were not abandoned, the last two decades of the communist regime were characterised by rigorous implementation of harsh and austere conceptual, moral and socio-political communist guidelines regarding culture.

This was the political context of the establishment and functioning of the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries – a propaganda tool meant to show the richness, the diversity and equally the uniqueness of the Romanian values, culture and civilisation. The goal of the regime was to promote Romanian cultural products in order to show the creativity of the people, its artistic potential, which in turn would demonstrate that Romania is a strong economic and political partner for the other members of the Warsaw Treaty and especially for Western nations.

Thus, the Institute was very active and together with other state bodies led a very strong propaganda campaign by participating in hundreds of regional and international fairs, theatre

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<sup>2</sup> HCM nr. 474/1962 for the authorization of the establishment of the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, as public organisation and HCM nr. 600/1962 regarding the guidelines for ensuring the functioning of the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, as public organisation.

<sup>3</sup> Georgescu, Vlad, *Istoria românilor de la origini până în zilele noastre*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1995, pp. 269-272.

<sup>4</sup> Boia, Lucian, *România. Țară de frontieră a Europei*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2005, pp. 120-121.

<sup>5</sup> The speech, commonly known as the *July Theses*, was given before the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), after Ceaușescu had visited the People’s Republic of China, North Korea, North Vietnam and Mongolia. Its official title is rather self-explanatory as regards its content: *Exposition regarding the RCP programme for improving ideological activity, raising the general level of knowledge and the socialist education of the masses, in order to arrange relations in our society on the basis of the principles of socialist and communist ethics and equity*.

and film festivals, art exhibitions, by printing albums, brochures and other advertising materials, by intensifying bilateral cultural diplomatic relations with countries all around the world.<sup>6</sup>

The communist regime had identified, from the very beginning to the very end, the key role art and culture play in any ideology and therefore, had always employed artistic products and tools to better illustrate and carry out internal indoctrination and external propaganda. Hence, building a functional, non-propagandistic cultural institution adapted to the new realities after the fall of the regime was a very demanding task to fulfil because, as Lucian Boia said when referring to the Romanian communism, “it is far more difficult to walk out from communism than from any other type of dictatorship: the normal world needs to be redone, reinvented, all the way down to the cellular level. Several generations had paid and several more will still pay for communism and for its consequences.”<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Romanian Cultural Foundation and the Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House

In 1990, Romania began the challenging process of reconstruction, of changing not only the political regime and the economic system, but of transforming the nation’s social structure and its ideological values. In this historic effervescing context, the Romanian Cultural Foundation (RCF) and the Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House were established in 1990.<sup>8</sup>

The Foundation was autonomous, had legal personality and was not subordinated to any other central authority. However, it received support and assistance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from the Ministry of Culture. Its budget was covered from the state budget, donations, sponsorships and sales of various products it created. Its mission was two-fold: on the one hand, the promotion of Romanian culture around the world; on the other hand, the promotion of foreign cultures in Romania. Thus, its goal was to nourish a free exchange of ideas among different cultures and to be a platform for reciprocal understanding between East and West in order to prepare the Romanian civil society for democratic dialogue and for the integration into Western structure, such as NATO and the European Union. Moreover, another objective of the Foundation was to actively build bridges between Romania and the Romanian

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<sup>6</sup> Robu, Lucian, *Imaginea României comuniste în propaganda turistică și culturală externă între anii 1960-1975. Forme de implicare a nomenclaturii și strategii acționale*, in *Studia Universitas Cibiniensis Series Historica*, vol. 8/2011, pp. 117-131.

<sup>7</sup> Boia, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> HG nr.354/1990, published in the Official Gazzette nr.74/23 April 1992.

communities around the world.<sup>9</sup> Trying to keep away from politics and political struggles for power, the Foundation implemented hundreds of different projects focusing on Romanian artistic products, folklore, language and cultural values. Besides organising and participating in seminars, conferences and meetings, in regional, European and international art, book, music and film fairs and festivals, the Foundation also organised art exhibitions, translated works by Romanian authors, published albums about the country, the people, the customs, and provided Romanian language classes and training for teachers of Romanian, gave scholarships in Romania and abroad. Furthermore, it organised various cultural and academic events in Bucharest about other cultures and inter-cultural dialogue.

However, its activity was made more difficult by the fact that it could not open cultural centres or institutes abroad and it depended on its collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for implementing projects around the world. This issue was regulated in 2003 when it was decided to restructure the Foundation and the Romanian Cultural Institute (RCI) was established by Law nr.356/11 July 2003, which allowed for the creation of cultural institutes in several European countries and the United States of America.

Although, at first, the Institute was under the authority of the President of Romania, in 2012 this changed and the RCI was placed under the control of the Senate. The amendment raised a heated debate within political and cultural circles, with two opposing groups emerging: one who believed that this measure meant the politicisation of the Institute and one who believed that thus the Institute was re-given its independency which allegedly had been lost when the president Traian Băsescu was elected in December 2003. The Institute's president at the time, Horia-Roman Patapievici (which had held this position since 2004), resigned as an act of protest against the change. Public demonstrations in support of H.-R. Patapievici took place around the country; various personalities (e.g. film directors, actors, artists, politicians) came forward with public declarations against the change<sup>10</sup>. Thus, politics influenced the RCI which became a tool used by political parties in their struggles for power and control.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Augustin Buzura, president of the Romanian Cultural Foundation between 1990-2003 and of the Romanian Cultural Institute between 2003-2005, in *Formula AS*, nr.411/2000 (<http://www.formula-as.ro/2000/411/spectator-38/spectator-1397>).

<sup>10</sup> The controversy was the headline in different publications for weeks, everybody on the political, social and cultural scene was commenting the subject (<http://www.gandul.info/stiri/scandalul-icr-augustin-buzura-isi-aminteste-cum-a-trecut-institutul-cultural-roman-in-subordinea-lui-iliescu-cand-existau-tracasari-politice-apelam-la-presedinte-9758670>).

Today's Romanian Cultural Institute functions according to the law voted in 2012, with its subsequent amendments.

### III. Agent

The Romanian Cultural Institute is an autonomous administrative authority, with legal personality, under parliamentary control<sup>11</sup>.

Central autonomous administrative authorities are executive state organs that ensure the functioning of public services and exercise administrative-jurisdictional competences on the whole territory of the country. They are independent from the government but have collaborative and coordinative relations with the government. Other autonomous administrative authorities in Romania include the *Ombudsman*, the Supreme Council of National Defense, the Romanian Intelligence Service, the Romanian Press Agency ROMPRES and the Permanent Electoral Authority among others.

The structure of the Institute consists of a board, a president, two vice-presidents, a board of directors and five general departments which manage several smaller departments and offices.

The *Board* is the deliberative body of the Institute and it has the following structure<sup>12</sup>:

- the president of the Institute
- the two vice-presidents of the Institute
- one member designated by the President of Romania
- one member designated by the prime-minister
- one state secretary designated by the ministry of foreign affairs, by order of the minister
- one state secretary designated by the ministry of culture, by order of the minister
- one state secretary designated by the ministry of education, by order of the minister
- the president of the Romanian Academy or one vice-president designated by him
- 14 members appointed by the Senate: 7 members nominated by the creators' associations and unions legally constituted (the Romanian Filmmakers Association, the Romanian Association of Theatre Artists, the Union of Architects of Romania, the

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<sup>11</sup> Art. 1 of Law nr. 356/11 July 2003, as subsequently amended and completed.

<sup>12</sup> According to Art. 6 (1) of Law nr. 356/2003 the board consists of 23 members, although the list published on the Institute's website includes 21 members at present. The proposals for the board members need to have the approval of the Senate convened in plenary session and the members are appointed for four years, with the possibility of extension.

Writers' Union of Romania, the Romanian Publishers' Association, the Visual Artists Union of Romania, the Interpretative Creation Union of the Romanian Musicians) and 7 members nominated by the parliamentary groups, according to their weight in the Senate's political configuration.

The Institute's *board of directors* is made up of 7 members and it is the executive body that ensures the application of the decisions that had been previously approved by the Board, the implementation of the Institute's projects, programmes and daily activities, and the elaboration of internal norms and regulations, as well as the budget proposal.

The operational management of the Institute is ensured by *a president and two vice-presidents*, who coordinate the entire activity of the Institute, and whose positions are incompatible with political party affiliations<sup>13</sup>.

There is also a *consultative council*, the Senate of the Romanian Cultural Institute, which functions by the office of the president and is made up of prestigious public figures in the fields of culture, art, education and science, from Romania and abroad.

The Institute's main activities are aimed at the Romanian minorities, Romanian communities abroad and foreign audiences. Thus, the Institute has developed programmes and projects that are implemented in Romania by the various specialised departments in its headquarters in Bucharest and by its foreign branches abroad.

The Romanian cultural institutes abroad (18 branches) maintain their administrative subordination to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and develop their activities in collaboration with the Romanian diplomatic missions and consular offices in the respective countries. The institutes are run by a director and a deputy director, and throughout the duration of the mission abroad, the personnel, except for the technical-administrative staff, is subject to the provisions of the Statute of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps of Romania. The current branches are the following: Berlin, Brussels, Budapest (with a subsidiary branch in Szeged), Chisinau, Istanbul, Lisbon, London, Madrid, New York, Paris, Prague, Rome, Stockholm, Tel Aviv, Warsaw, Venice and Vienna. There are on-going advanced discussions about opening two new branches in Kiev and Moscow, and there are also talks about the possibility of setting up new institutes farther away in Beijing, Sao Paulo, and Alexandria.

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<sup>13</sup> Art. 12 of Law nr. 356/2003.

Although the Institute can finance its current activities from its own income (selling printed works, studies, researches, as well as from public-private partnerships, donations, or sponsorships), the administrative expenses of the cultural institutes abroad are supported from the state budget in a separate budgetary chapter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the expenses needed for the cultural programmes and projects are supported from the state budget in a separate budgetary chapter of the Romanian Cultural Institute.

The establishment or termination of the institutes is approved by decision of the government, at the proposal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Ministry of Culture.

The activity of the Institute is approved by the Romanian Senate after the annual activity report is examined by the Committee for culture, art and mass-media and the Committee for foreign affairs of the Senate, and has received the authorisation of the Senate's Committee for budget, finances and banks.

Thus, the functioning of the Institute relies on different state bodies: the Senate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture. Its president and vice-presidents cannot be members of any political party, but 7 members of its board are nominated by parliamentary groups. While most of its board members are designated by governmental bodies or the President, a significant share is made up of members recommended by the creators' associations and unions which represent both the involvement of civil society and the art and culture body of expertise within the main decision-making structure of the Institute. It can generate its own income but, for the most part, its activities are government funded.

These connections and dependencies affect the Institute's activities, public image and credibility because it can be seen as an instrument of governmental propaganda subjected to political interests and decisions.

#### **IV. Agenda**

As stated on its website, the Romanian Cultural Institute "is tasked with raising the profile of Romanian culture around the world. In order to achieve this, it spreads information and spearheads cultural projects involving Romanian artists and writers. Furthermore, the

Romanian Cultural Institute acts as the means through which foreign audiences can experience the products of Romanian culture.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the Institute’s mission is to *promote* (this is the term most used when referring to the Institute’s objectives in laws, reports or articles regarding its organisation and functioning) *Romanian culture around the world*. On the Institute’s website, culture is defined as “a complex whole which includes knowledge, convictions, arts, morality, laws, customs and techniques acquired by a community, all these organising its life and aspirations.”<sup>15</sup> The fields represented by the Institute are literature, music, visual arts, sciences (economy, law, and experimental sciences), architecture, philosophy and theology<sup>16</sup>.

Besides increasing the visibility of Romanian cultural products in foreign markets, the Institute also aims at stimulating and enhancing cultural exchanges with the countries where it has branches and at fostering dialogue with public and private cultural institutions and organisations abroad.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, high on the Institute’s agenda is to develop and maintain cultural and spiritual relations with Romanian minorities and diaspora.<sup>18</sup>

## V. Vehicle

Since its establishment, the Romanian Cultural Institute has organised and participated in thousands of different fairs, festivals and exhibitions abroad and in Romania, it has organised hundreds of events dedicated to the Romanian diaspora, it has published hundreds of titles, it has offered hundreds of scholarships and fellowships. Quantitatively it has definitely been very active on all levels of its activities.

The key programmes it develops are the following:<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.icr.ro/bucharest/objectives-mission/about-rci.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.icr.ro/bucharest/objectives-mission/programs-of-the-romanian-cultural-institute-2012-2013.html>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Art. 4 (1) of Decree nr.492/1 April 2004 on the organisation and functioning of Romanian cultural institutes abroad by reorganising the cultural centres abroad, as well as by establishing new institutes.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> I completed this list by using information taken from the activity reports and the description of the programmes for 2012-2013 on the Institute’s website: <http://www.icr.ro/bucharest/annual-reports/activity-report-2005-2008.html>, <http://www.icr.ro/bucharest/objectives-mission/programs-of-the-romanian-cultural-institute-2012-2013.html>.

- the translation and publication support programme and the *Publishing Romania* programme – translation of Romanian authors abroad;
- the *Cantemir* programme – non-refundable financing programme for projects submitted by Romanian and foreign authors, structured on festivals (participation of Romanian cultural operators), promotion (projects aimed at promoting culture abroad) and cooperation (projects fostering inter-cultural dialogue);
- the *Orizont* programme – six-months funding for Romanian authors for documentation, participation in international conferences and events, and publication of works completed;
- the *EUNIC* programme - financial assistance for cooperation among cultural institutes within the European network;
- the *Presence of Romania in the World's Libraries* programme – improvement and development of Romanian publications suppl in all major libraries around the world, and inclusion of Romanian authors in encyclopaedias, dictionaries, histories and other important publications;
- the *mobile exhibitions* programme – thematic exhibitions focused on Romanian artists and artistic productions, e.g. painters, poets, films, crafts;
- the *Democratic and European Romania* programme – organisation of internationally attended national debates and conferences on economy, law, and public administration;
- the *Romania's participation in book fairs, festivals and other major international events* programme – provision of support to Romanian artists to participate in events organised in important European cities, in Bucharest and other cities in Romania, and assistance for the organisation of major film, theatre and music festivals around the country;
- the *Cultural Romania* programme – provision of support for Romanian communities abroad: Romanian language courses, Romanian festivals, traditional craft workshops, camps, summer schools;
- the *Romania among European Languages* programme – opportunities for learning Romanian in its headquarters and branches abroad;
- the *fellowship* programme – seven fellowships granted to foreign translators from the Romanian language, to visual artists, to musicians, to Romanians living abroad to come to a Romanian institution, to foreign scholars to come to a Romanian institution, to

- Romanian and foreign youths to make research in institutions in different countries, to Romanian and foreign journalists to carry out projects about Romanian culture;
- the *publications* programme – publication of a bimonthly information bulletin, of the *Lettre Internationale* magazine, of other publications submitted and selected by competition, and financial assistance to publications from other countries (e.g. Moldova, the Ukraine);
  - the *UNIVERSALIA* programme – promotion of cooperation between the RCI and external partners by funding different projects.

The projects to be realised as part of these programmes are selected by open competition, by independent panels of judges. Their implementation is carried out by or with the participation of the Institute's branches, its General Department for Foreign Cooperation, its General Department for Romanian Abroad and its General Department for Promotion of Creativity.

Researching the events presented on the websites of foreign branches of the Institute, the activities organised include classical music concerts, film projections, theatre and dance productions, visual art exhibitions, talks about Romanian culture and civilisation, book readings and Romanian language courses. The works presented are mostly by Romanian contemporary, mainstream artists but also unconventional. The events are small-scale in duration and amplitude.

## **VI. Target audience**

Given the Institute's mission, objectives and activities, its target audience includes the following categories: foreign general public abroad, Romanian minorities, Romanian diaspora, foreign nationals interested in studying and researching Romanian language and civilisation, the Romanian general public, as well as the expat community in Bucharest.

This audience is concentrated in Europe, with the exception of New York City. For the most part, it is an elite and niche audience given the nature of the events, programmes and activities developed and promoted by the institutes: academics, people involved or interested in the local cultural scenes, urban population (living mostly in the capitals or main cities), highly (culturally) educated people, diplomatic communities, or local dignitaries. Moreover, given the means of marketing used (within the diaspora, via the usual embassy channels, in specialised magazines and websites), the access to the events becomes rather restrictive and therefore the audience becomes even more exclusivist.

## VII. Conclusions

Since the fall of the communist regime and the new-found democracy finally allowed people to openly and unrestrictedly voice their opinions, there have always been controversies about the activities of the Romanian Cultural Institute, under its present and former systems. Some of the polemics regarded the management, as some of the Institute's presidents were seen as ineffective and as puppets for various political groups and their interests. Other polemics regarded the types of projects implemented and the artists promoted, like the famous "pink pony" scandal about an exhibition of three Romanian street artists, organised at the branch in New York in 2008, where one of the objects on display was a pink pony with a swastika stamp on its back. There were media scandals about declarations of people in the Institute's management, about the Institute's expenses, about its inability to develop financially sustainable products (e.g. magazines that were not sold), about the fact that it promoted cultural products that were not representative of Romanian values.

On the one hand, some of the reasons for these controversies spring from the on-going political struggles: political actors make use of the RCI to gain public support, to harm the public image of adversaries, to influence changes at various levels. On the other hand, the debates are related to the legacy of communism because not only can people finally criticise and express their opinions publicly but the society still has not truly found its direction yet. After decades of enforced consistency by the one ruling party, it is very difficult for the political class and for civil society representatives to decide on, agree upon and jointly follow a constructive path that would benefit the whole country and society in the long term.

Moreover, culture is very subjective and therefore controversies may arise because of different tastes, different approaches and different views about what is a qualitative cultural product, what is representative for Romanian values and society, how modern and innovative one should be, what should the share of employed traditional products be, how much of the old cultural representations should still be kept. But this is a constant, philosophical debate.

I believe that the Institute is demonstrative of how positive cultural diplomacy is employed by the state, as in the definition given by President Emil Constantinescu, for the purposes of strengthening relations, enhancing sociocultural cooperation and promoting national interests. The RCI has foreign branches only in the main cities and capitals of the major actors in the European Union, the United States and in the countries with strong Romanian communities (e.g. Moldova or Israel). This shows that the interests of the Romanian state is to enrich and

maintain good relations with its friends and partners in order to consolidate its political position within European and Euro-Atlantic structures to further boost economic relations.

Historically, this has been the role of the Institute since the 1960s when the first cultural organisation was established. The state's ultimate goals and the means employed have not changed that much since communist times. The Institute has been an instrument for positive propaganda – present and decipher Romanian culture and civilisation to prove that it is a viable political and economic partner with strong values in line with its Western and Eastern allies.

Moreover, since the beginning of the 1990s, the RCI has continuously and strongly reclaimed and reinforced ties with the Romanian minorities and diaspora with the openly declared objective of consolidating Romanian identity and values abroad. However, I think this also has another supplementary goal which is that of adding political pressure in the countries with Romanian communities by increasing the presence and visibility of these communities in order to achieve other political and economic goals. A good example for this is the Visa Waiver program in the United States and how the Romanian government is strengthening its ties with the local Romanian communities which in turn put pressure on their local representatives to lobby for the visa waiver.

Especially in the last few years, the Institute has proved it can be rather creative and current as regards its activities, the promoted cultural products and representations. Although I believe there is still room for diversity regarding the employed cultural expressions. Less high culture and more mainstream young culture might help connect with the younger generations which, in the long run, will prove more efficient. The issue of lacking financial means has often been mentioned and seen as a cause for failures and malfunctions within the Institute. But I believe that good, very effective things can be accomplished if people are creative and resourceful.

Another important aspect is the socio-cultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue which have not been given too much attention lately. The focus has been on Romanian products rather than collaborations (except for EUNIC projects) and partnerships. I am certain that if people work together they get to know one another better, which, in turn, strengthens relationships and gains support for one's future actions.

To conclude, I consider that the key issue regarding the RCI is the lack of consistency. Too many state bodies are involved in the management of the Institute, which negatively affects the way decisions are taken and projects implemented. There should be consistency in the management and the political support. There should be consistency regarding long term

planning of framework, policies and programmes. There should be creative consistency regarding the essence of the activities chosen to be implemented, shaped by Romania's goals and objectives, and also adapted to the local realities and interests of the various cities and communities around the world where there are Romanian cultural institutes.

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