

# Art as a Cross-Cultural Connector between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye

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In recent years, the use of art to foster the peaceful resolution of disputes among conflicting parties has become increasingly significant.

The transformative and unifying power of art can play an important role in establishing empathy between post-conflict parties, facilitating active listening and understanding of opposing perspectives, and collectively addressing traumas arising from a common conflict history.

Edel Hughes, a Lecturer in Law at the National University of Ireland, Galway, illustrates the transformative power of art in post-conflict settings in a [recent research paper](#) titled “The Art of Resolution: The Role of Culture and the Arts in Conflict Transformation.” The study discusses how, in the aftermath of the [peace treaty](#) between Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) following 52 years of civil conflict, music emerged as a pivotal tool for addressing the repercussions of violence and fostering reconciliation among Colombians, involving both victims and combatants.

There is also the example of what George Mason University’s Arthur Romano terms “hip-hop diplomacy,” which also points to the crucial role of art in peacebuilding. He [brought together](#) a group of hip-hop DJs, MCs, beatmakers, and dancers from various conflict zones worldwide like Uganda, El Salvador, Tanzania, Thailand, and Honduras. Romano believes that these individuals have the potential to instigate positive change in their respective post-conflict national and regional settings through their art.

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## Laudable Goal

Considering its unifying power, art can be an important bridge between the peoples of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye who have lived in the same geography for centuries and have significantly influenced each other in domains ranging from food culture and music to theater and cinema.

Tbilisi-based journalist and political analyst Onnik James Krikorian through his works argues that culture and art can play a critical role in reconciling the nations of the region. “It can provide positive examples of coexistence and demonstrate how Armenians and Azerbaijanis share similarities despite dominant nationalist narratives that suggest otherwise,” [says](#) Krikorian.

To achieve this laudable goal, it is necessary to refer to the shared cultural and artistic heritage of these communities and evoke the common values they once embraced together.

For example, legendary Georgian-Armenian film director Sergei Parajanov’s 1988 movie [Ashik Kerib](#) (known internationally as [The Lovelorn Minstrel](#)) has won the hearts of thousands of Azerbaijanis. At the very beginning stage of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Parajanov shot a movie based on a short story written in 1837 by Mikhail Lermontov that was in turn based on an Azerbaijani folk tale. It features traditional Azerbaijani clothes, music, dance, art, and customs and was filmed in significant Azerbaijani historical locales like Baku’s Icherishehir, the Shirvanshahs’ Palace, and the Sheki Khan Palace.

Additionally, the director used the poetry of renowned Azerbaijani literary figures such as Aliagha Vahid, Ashig Alasgar, and Ashiq Peri. The film’s electronic and instrumental music was written by the famous Azerbaijani composer Javanshir Guliyev, and the film’s mugham and ashug music was performed by Alim Gasimov.

Parajanov’s film sparked criticism in Armenia due to its filming in Azerbaijan and its presentation in the Azerbaijani language, leading to its [ban](#) from being screened in Armenia until 1996. *Ashik Kerib*, which stands as a notable example of art serving as a bridge between people, won the [Jury Prize](#) at the Istanbul Film Festival in 1989.

No matter how rare and improbable this may now seem, there was a time, not so long ago, when artists in Armenia and Azerbaijan would visit each other’s countries, giving concerts and collaborating on stage together. For example, People’s Artist of Azerbaijan Zeynab Khanlarova enjoyed widespread popularity not only in Azerbaijan but also in Armenia. It was said that during Khanlarova’s [concerts](#) in Armenia, the entire population of Yerevan flocked to attend.

I believe it is useful to include my personal experience regarding this matter. During a visit with a journalist friend to the village of Shaumiani, inhabited by

ethnic-Armenians in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, we had a conversation with an Armenian woman in her early 60s. She shared with us her admiration for Zeynep Khanlarova's art, highlighting the enduring popularity of the artist in the village and among the Armenian community there and far beyond. She mentioned that her brother's wife still sings Zeynep Khanlarova's songs in Azerbaijani.

When discussing the reconciliatory influence of art, some people advocate for exploring the significant contributions of Türkiye's ethnic-Armenian community to the social and cultural life of Türkiye. Some of us [believe](#) this community has the potential to play a crucial role in the normalization process between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye.

### *Going Further Back*

The ethnic-Armenian community in Türkiye has played an important role in the development of culture and art since the Ottoman period. The theater was one of the fields that ethnic-Armenians pioneered during the Ottoman period. The founder of theater in Türkiye was the Ottoman Armenian theater actor and director Agop Vartovyan, known as Güllü Agop ("gül" means rose in Turkish, "vart" or "vard" means rose in Armenian). It was through Güllü Agop's efforts that Turkish actors came to grace the stage for the first time.

Additionally, Vartovyan played a crucial role in [founding](#) the Theater Committee. Consisting mainly of ethnic-Turkish writers, the committee conducted linguistic and dramaturgical work, contributing significantly to the development of the theatrical landscape.

Vartovyan's theater company not only contributed to the training of Turkish actors, but also pioneered the appearance of female actors on the stage.

Thus the ethnic-Armenian actress Merope Kantarcıyan, famously known as Lady Siranush, raced the stage of the Güllü Agop Theater Group and made her mark in Turkish theater history as the [first actress](#) to portray Shakespeare's Hamlet, having earlier played *Hamlet's* Ophelia and Catherine (a character in *The Taming Of The Shrew*) amongst other roles. Her art garnered significant support in the South Caucasus countries as well. In 1897, Lady Siranush started her South Caucasus tour with her theater group and performed in Tbilisi, Yerevan, Gyumri, Baku, and Shusha. Notably, the thirty-fifth anniversary of the artist's illustrious career was celebrated during her visit to Baku in 1909.

### *Sixty Years of Friendship: Muhsin Ertuğrul and Vahram Papazyan*

Muhsin Ertuğrul is considered the father of Turkish cinema; Vahram Papazyan was a People's Artist of all three South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. They were friends for 60 years.

Ertuğrul, also a [pioneer](#) of modern Turkish theatre, was 35 years old when he was considered one of the best actors in the world, 40 when he opened Türkiye's first theater school, and 42 when he shot the first film that brought an international award to Turkish cinema.

He also shot Türkiye's first color film and its first sound film, helped establish the first real film studio in Türkiye, and went down in Turkish cinema history as the artist who included female actors in his films for the first time.

Papazyan, known as the Othello of the Soviet theatre, was born in Istanbul and settled in Armenia in 1922-1923, where he became one of the founding members of the Armenian State Theatre, served as its general artistic director for a long time and became a prominent artistic figure both in Europe and the Soviet Union.

Ertuğrul referred to Papazyan as his “mentor,” with their paths crossing for the first time during the staging of [Hamlet](#) in 1910, when Ertuğrul was only 18 years old. When young Ertuğrul, who was at the beginning of his acting career, had a hard time during a rehearsal, Papazyan helped him out—thus launching a friendship that lasted 60 years. It is known that when Ertuğrul left home to become a professional actor, he stayed at Papazyan's house for a while. Papazyan, along with other Armenian artists, took part in Ertuğrul's first film, [İstanbul'da Facia-i Aşk](#) (1922).

Papazyan's artistic prowess extended beyond borders, earning him acclaim in Azerbaijan where he was honored as the People's Artist in 1935.

Papazyan collaborated with Azerbaijani actors in the production of [The Legend of the Maiden Tower](#) (1924), a silent film based on motifs in Azerbaijani folk legends about Baku's Maiden Tower. One of those actors was People's Artist Aghasadyg Garaybeyli. Papazyan played the role of Samad Khan in the film, while young Garaybeyli made his auspicious debut portraying the doctor. As Garaybeyli later [put](#) it in his memoirs, “In the midst of filming, emerging actors like myself found ourselves captivated by Papazyan's every gesture, his nuanced expressions, in essence, his remarkable talent.”

Garaybeyli also wrote about his friendship with Papazyan in his memoirs. Papazyan, who came to Baku to stage [Othello](#), called Garaybeyli and asked him to take part in the play too.

Portraying the character of Othello in the Azerbaijani language, Papazyan generated immense excitement among the audience, leading to the performances being sold out five days before opening night.

## *Armenian Actors of Turkish Cinema and the Azerbaijani Public*

The increase in the number of Turkish channels in Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to an increase in the public's interest in Turkish films. Consequently, the Azerbaijani populace became more acquainted with ethnic-Armenian actors from Türkiye.

Today, if you were to stroll through the streets of Yerevan and inquire about Nubar Terzyan, Sami Hazinses, Kenan Pars, or Danyel Topatan, it is likely that only a handful would recognize their faces and names. Yet, these individuals of Armenian descent hold a special place in the hearts of Azerbaijanis as beloved figures of Turkish cinema.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which has been going on for more than 30 years, has damaged the common cultural and artistic memory of both peoples. But during these years, many ethnic-Armenian artists from Türkiye were loved and admired by Azerbaijani society, their films were watched, and their music was listened to.

Speaking of music, we can't help but mention ethnic-Armenian Hayko Cepkin, one of Türkiye's famous rock stars. He became one of the popular names in both Türkiye and Azerbaijan with his first album released in 2005. Rock music fans in Azerbaijan made covers of his songs and traveled to Istanbul to attend his concert.

Prominent Azerbaijani artists have influenced the Armenian community in Türkiye as well. Through my research among Türkiye's ethnic-Armenian community, I have found that the music of renowned Azerbaijani figures such as Rashid Behbudov and Sara Gadimova is cherished and loved by the ethnic-Armenian community in Türkiye.

During a series of interviews that I conducted with people belonging to that community, one of its prominent members, businessman Nurhan Çetinkaya, told me about two paintings hanging side by side on his wall. One belonged to the ethnic-Azerbaijani painter [Ibrahim Safi](#) who fought on the side of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and then spent much of the rest of his life in Türkiye; the other belonged to the Istanbul-born ethnic-Armenian painter Krikor Zarifyan. Born in Nakhchivan, Safi is also known as one of the first painters to paint the portrait of Türkiye's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (in 1924). Safi received his first painting education from an ethnic-Armenian teacher during his high school years in Yerevan. "I wish it were possible to bring these two nations together as easily as the pictures on this wall," Çetinkaya said during our conversation.

## *A Tool for Peace and Reconciliation*

Given that peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are ongoing, the use of art as a tool should be seen as being of strategic importance in terms of reconciling peoples.

Neighboring Georgia has been hosting festivals featuring artists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye for many years. For example, in 2023 heavy metal bands from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye [came together](#) to represent the region at the world's largest heavy metal competition, the Wacken Open Air Heavy Metal Festival (Germany).

Obviously, there are risks involved in such a proposal. Art is not a panacea for solving complex issues, and it can also be wielded as a potent tool for propaganda purposes.

Maria Pinto Garcia, in her [thesis](#) on the Colombian example mentioned above, also warns that music can be used for propaganda purposes. She emphasizes that although music allowed victims of conflict and former combatants to discover shared experiences and even common traits of identity by developing feelings of sympathy and understanding, it can also have opposing effects.

Such initiatives thus need to be planned meticulously to prevent projects aimed at using the unifying and reconciling power of art from causing more harm than good.

Sociologists, psychologists, educators, conflict resolution specialists, and other relevant professionals should play integral roles in the planning process to prevent further polarization between the parties involved. But this is emphatically worth doing.

In the time ahead, perhaps official Ankara, Baku, and Yerevan could designate responsible and well-meaning artists and cultural figures from their respective countries to work together on common projects of this sort, drawing on a rich legacy of cultural intermingling and mutual influence of the sort outlined in this IDD Analytical Policy Paper.