

Cultural Diplomacy of Azerbaijan

Challenges and Opportunities

Farah Ajalova and Nargiz Gafarova

Topics of discussion

Priorities, challenges, and perspectives of cultural diplomacy of Azerbaijan; bilateral and multilateral cultural diplomacy; the role of non-state actors in cultural diplomacy; communication and media relations in cultural diplomacy; elaboration of a concept paper on Azerbaijan's foreign cultural policy and its implementation mechanisms.

Introduction

This document summarizes a roundtable discussion that took place on 8 June 2023 at ADA University under the auspices of the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD). The event was moderated by Farah Ajalova.

Participants represented a wide range of stakeholders including government bodies, diplomatic missions of Azerbaijan abroad, universities, and independent experts. The list of participants is provided at the end of the document.

An extensive discussion that lasted for almost three hours touched upon current state of play of Azerbaijan's foreign cultural policy, pointed at existing challenges and gaps, and highlighted new tendencies in this sphere.

There was a general agreement among participants that a discussion on the future of cultural diplomacy of Azerbaijan is both relevant and timely, as the country has

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stepped into a new political and diplomatic reality after its recent victory in the Second Karabakh War. In this new context—and in view of the fast-changing world with emerging new technologies, trends, and innovations—traditional diplomacy can yield somewhat limited results whereas culture as an effective instrument of soft power can bring far reaching and long-term benefits in terms of the advancement of national interests.

Among the major conclusions of the discussion was agreement on the need for a more coherent and institutionalized approach to cultural diplomacy, better and more efficient coordination of action between all relevant stakeholders, the importance of using innovative methods and tools as opposed to traditional practices based on the idea of promoting the country's cultural brand, and the adoption of a concept paper on Azerbaijan's foreign cultural policy that would include an elaboration of effective implementation mechanisms.

It was highlighted that due to its unique geographic location and history, Azerbaijan can culturally relate to many countries and nations. This, in turn, opens a window of opportunity for various forms of cooperation and exchange within the framework of the country's foreign cultural policy. Thus, many participants agreed that, in order to be optimally efficient, cultural diplomacy should be regarded as a two-way street: it should not solely focus on exporting its own culture and heritage but should be open to receive and connect with others.

Challenges and Priorities

One of the main objectives of this discussion was for participants to frame existing challenges and to identify priority directions of Azerbaijan's foreign cultural policy in the time ahead.

Some pointed at the continued political confrontation with Armenia, which directly affects the cultural sphere. From the unprecedented damage caused to Azerbaijani cultural, religious, and architectural heritage during the decades of military occupation to ongoing efforts by the organized Armenian diaspora to distort Azerbaijani history, traditions, and culture, participants considered these to represent the biggest challenge faced by the country's public diplomacy.

While it was noted that Azerbaijan has closely cooperated with a number of multi-state organizations (e.g., UN, UNESCO, ISESCO, Council of Europe), the weak or biased position of the majority of the secretariats of these organizations and the policy of double standards towards this issue was assessed as obvious.

In this context, the importance of prompt, efficient, and coordinated action was underlined.

In the postwar context, some speakers noted the importance of continued prioritization of the topics of multiculturalism, promotion of intercultural dialogue, culture of peace, and humanistic values. Here, global platforms launched at the initiative of Azerbaijan such as the Baku Process and Peace4Culture were mentioned as crucial projects towards this end.

A number of participants highlighted the insufficient quantity and quality of research, data, and information available for global audiences in various foreign languages. This challenge has made it difficult to disseminate up-to-date and objective information regarding the country, especially in light of the biased position of some foreign countries formed under the influence of powerful Armenian propaganda. In this context, the importance of cultivating local experts in various spheres of culture with knowledge of foreign languages as well as enhancing cooperation with foreign universities and think tanks was noted.

Prompt and effective inter-agency coordination remains another challenge affecting the efficiency of Azerbaijan's foreign cultural policy. Timelier communication and feedback between key government institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Azerbaijani diplomatic missions abroad would be key to ensure rapid and quality action at the international level.

The discussion also touched upon the issue of the quality of Azerbaijan's exported cultural products. Thus, some speakers pointed at the importance of producing competitive cultural products that would meet contemporary demands. While heritage and traditions are what make a country unique and should certainly remain at the core of cultural diplomacy and continue serving as cultural bridge-builders to connect nations, international art and culture has evolved to match global trends and changing tastes of its target audience. It is therefore critical to support local cultural industries, artists, and professionals in their international outreach, fostering partnerships and participation in international cultural platforms such as festivals, art fairs, etc., so that the former are able to stay up to date with latest trends and successfully represent Azerbaijan at the international level.

This, however, would significantly depend on the availability of an adequate budget. Thus, the lack of a dedicated budget for cultural diplomacy seriously impacts on current initiatives in the area of foreign cultural policy in terms of consistency and planning. It was mentioned that there are many opportunities to conduct public diplomacy and bridge gaps between cultures through continuous participation at international high-level events, festivals, concerts, and competitions but that these opportunities are sometimes lost due to the unavailability of pre-allocated public resources.

There was an overall agreement among the participants that success in foreign cultural diplomacy depends to a large extent on the factor of reciprocity, mutual interest, and the

ability to engage in intercultural dialogue so as to build upon common and connecting points. Where relevant, bilateral cultural relations should take into account shared history, values, and traditions. A vivid and successful example of building mutual cultural connections based on historical facts is work done by the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Poland. Particular emphasis is placed on the major role of ethnic-Polish architects in the building of Baku's historic center during the oil boom period of the end of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This has become one of the building blocks and critical references in the cultural agenda of the Embassy. Such shared moments in history can play their role in bringing countries closer and building trustful and friendly bilateral relations.

Discussion also pointed to the role of non-governmental actors in modern cultural diplomacy. It is well known that today, international cultural policy is carried out not only by governments but also by a wide range of other actors including cultural institutions and centers, civil society organizations, diaspora, artistic companies etc. Constant interaction and networking between such actors, cultural foundations, curators, and others can make a valuable contribution to fostering deeper and closer relationships whilst reinforcing the social and political impact of cultural diplomacy. In this context, the importance of “engaging” vs. “showcasing” was noted once again, putting a focus on interaction rather than unilateral promotion.

Relations with international media outlets were mentioned as a challenge that Azerbaijan has faced in terms of its public diplomacy efforts. Often biased and uninformed, leading international media outlets have demonstrated a great deal of reluctance and prejudice towards the country, which in turn has limited the impact and visibility of its foreign cultural policy. Social media was mentioned as an important tool to promote a positive image of the country, build awareness, affect perceptions, and dispel cultural myths. The importance of consolidating Azerbaijani society and the Azerbaijani diaspora in supporting and promoting the country's image on global social media platforms was underlined.

It was repeatedly noted by a number of speakers that cultural diplomacy should be treated as meticulous work whose strategy and outputs need to be both consistent and continuous in order to achieve lasting results rather than rely on the outcomes of one-time cultural events. Overall, consistency was underlined by many participants as key to the successful conduct of public and cultural diplomacy. Continuous and systematic activities at all levels, by government and non-governmental actors alike, are necessary for obtaining long-term benefits.

New Cultural Diplomacy Actors and Opportunities

Cultural diplomacy is traditionally a governmental practice that operates in the name of clearly defined aims and objectives of national interest in an international setting. At the

same time, in a modern setting and given the changing nature of international relations and policymaking, cultural diplomacy can also be practiced by other state and non-state actors such as investment and trade agencies, chambers of commerce, tourism boards, media outlets, cultural establishments (e.g., museums, theaters, film centers, festivals), and independent artists, civil society initiatives, NGOs, think tanks, universities, study-abroad students, and expats. All these actors are actively claiming their increasing role in the conduct of public and cultural diplomacy, and thereby cause a shift from formal diplomacy, traditionally concentrated in embassies and the diplomatic corps, to informal soft action in daily life abroad. This considerably broadens the meaning and nature of cultural diplomacy, cultural exchange, dialogue, and cooperation, creating new forms, formats, and opportunities for conducting cultural diplomacy.

Overall, there was a recognition by participants that the role of government-promoted efforts in international cultural interaction is decreasing while the vast majority of modern mechanisms are spontaneous in one way or another and non-formal, falling beyond pre-planned actions of governments.

These new realities and opportunities, and the challenges they create, were the center of discussion of the roundtable event. Participants also mentioned the increasing role of cities as new actors in public and cultural diplomacy worldwide, with reference to the rich but unexplored potential of Baku in this respect.

The transformative potential of the growing role of individuals and innovative formats of citizen dialogue and participation were acknowledged by the discussants. It was also mentioned that these novel formats of action and interaction require new forms of financial support in addition to existing public budget allocations.

Participants agreed on the importance of elaborating a new concept paper on Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy, which would serve as both a strategic and tactical roadmap for all stakeholders and would address existing gaps and challenges. It was noted that work on the concept paper is underway, and that its authors plan to hold expert consultations once an initial draft is finalized.

It was also underlined that the concept paper should be followed by an effective implementation mechanism that would take into account relevant international experience and best practice. This mechanism should cover all layers of actors carrying out foreign cultural policy including government bodies, cultural centers, diplomatic missions, and non-state actors.

Policy Recommendations for Future Action

The following constitute a summary of the recommendations formulated within the roundtable discussion:

- Change in strategic narratives of Azerbaijan’s cultural diplomacy in post-conflict times to adapt to new realities created by the victory in the Second Karabakh War. The old narrative, which has largely built on the country’s traditions of multiculturalism and tolerance, has to be enriched by the issues of rebuilding liberated territories of Azerbaijan and implementing the State Program on the Great Return; ensuring social, cultural, and economic development of newly liberated areas of Karabakh and reviving their rich cultural traditions; and protecting and promoting the cultural heritage of Western Azerbaijan as part of the agenda.
- Strengthening of inter-agency coordination with a view to ensuring more effective collaboration between different state bodies and helping them to address common challenges in a timely and efficient manner, as well as provide support for the promotion of cultural diplomacy initiatives.
- Developing cross-sectoral partnership in order to reinforce cooperation and the involvement of multiple actors including government bodies, the private sector, research and education institutions, and civil society;
- Allocating dedicated funds for cultural diplomacy within the annual budgets of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Promoting research, data, and information in various foreign languages, stimulating the establishment of think tanks on the topic of culture, history, heritage, historical monuments, cultural diplomacy, and so on.
- Conducting research on modern international cultural policy and latest methods and ways of promoting national interests through culture as well as stimulating education and training on cultural diplomacy in order to ensure an up-to-date approach to and understanding of contemporary cultural diplomacy.
- Cultivating cultural diplomacy professionals through improved education and training on cultural policy, intercultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, and related topics.
- Shifting the focus of cultural diplomacy from promoting and showcasing to interacting and engaging: the very understanding and the narrative of Azerbaijan’s foreign cultural policy should be reassessed and revised to place more emphasis on finding points of common interest with others, as well as on collaboration and exchange.
- Producing competitive cultural products that would meet the demands of a modern international audience—i.e., keeping a focus on promoting contemporary national culture which would build on national cultural traditions but would also evolve with the fast-changing international cultural and artistic landscape.

- Ensuring consistent participation of Azerbaijani art and culture professionals at major international cultural exchange platforms including festivals, art fairs, forums, and competitions.
- Creating the position of cultural attaché within diplomatic missions of Azerbaijan abroad.
- Strengthening the coordination of activities of Azerbaijani cultural centers abroad with all relevant stakeholders and between themselves. This needs to involve the better utilization of their resources for more coherent and targeted action in the field of cultural diplomacy.
- Elaborating systemic and comprehensive approach to Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy, which would include the adoption of a Concept Paper of the Foreign Cultural Policy of Azerbaijan and its implementation mechanisms.
- Establishing an institution (based on the example of the British Council, DAAD, etc.) that would be tasked with implementing the aforementioned Concept Paper to ensure continuous, coordinated, and systematic policy planning and activity. This cultural institution would follow the aim to convey a collectively set message corresponding to Azerbaijan's international agenda.

Institute for Development and Diplomacy

**Roundtable discussion “Cultural Diplomacy of Azerbaijan:
Challenges and Opportunities”**

8 June 2023 | 15:00 – 17:00

List of Participants

No	Full Name	Organization
1	Dr Fariz Ismailzada	Vice rector of ADA University, Director of Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD)
2	Farah Acalova	Consultant and Cultural Diplomacy Expert
3	Nargiz Gafarova	Senior Research Fellow, IDD
4	Farid Cafarov	Deputy Minister of Culture
5	Marat Kengerlinski	Head of department of humanitarian and social issues, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan
6	Dr Seymur Fataliyev	Ambassador at-large, Secretary-General of the National Commission for UNESCO
7	Dr Cahangir Salimxanov	Advisor to the Minister of Culture, Honored Art Worker of the Republic of Azerbaijan
8	Elchin Jafarov	Deputy Head of the quality assurance and strategic planning department, Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts
9	Dr Nigar Axundova	Chairman of the International Music Council (Azerbaijan), Researcher
10	Rizvan Nabiye	Director of Linguistic Support Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
11	Emin Rustamov	Adviser to the Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Diaspora, State Committee for Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan
12	Orkhan Karimov	Deputy head of the department for work with European countries, State Committee for Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan
13	Elchin Karimov	<i>Reserves Management Center, State Tourism Agency</i>
14	Elshan Mustafayev	<i>Reserves Management Center, State Tourism Agency</i>
15	Dr. Nargiz Gurbanova (online)	Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of Poland
16	Elnur Sultanov (online)	Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of Latvia
17	Leyla Abdullayeva (online)	Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of France
18	Aytan Mirzayeva (online)	CEO, Vasconi Architects International
19	Sadagat Aliyeva	Vice-Rector, Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts
20	Yegana Eyvazova	Professor, Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts