

Development of Cultural Diplomacy of States within the Organization of Turkic States

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The abstract. This article explores the development of cultural diplomacy within the Organization of Turkic States, established in 2009 and renamed in 2021. Employing Joseph Nye's soft power concept and constructivist international relations theory, it examines how member states utilize shared history, language, and culture to strengthen regional cohesion and Eurasian influence. Key institutions like TÜRKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation drive initiatives such as joint UNESCO heritage listings, Cultural Capitals designations, and diaspora engagement. Aligned with the Turkic World Vision 2040, these efforts enhance collective identity, regional stability, and global visibility while addressing geopolitical challenges. The article evaluates mechanisms, achievements, and limitations of this identity-driven diplomacy in contemporary regional organizations.

Key words. TÜRKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, Navro'z, kurash, Turkic literary figures and cultural cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary international system, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a pivotal instrument of soft power, enabling states to foster mutual understanding, build collective identities, and advance national interests through non-coercive means. As Joseph Nye conceptualizes it, soft power derives from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies, attracting rather than coercing others. Within regional organizations, cultural diplomacy often serves to consolidate shared historical narratives and linguistic affinities, transforming cultural heritage into a foundation for deeper political and economic integration.

The Organization of Turkic States exemplifies this dynamic. Established in 2009 as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council) through the Nakhchivan Agreement signed by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye, the OTS was renamed in 2021 during its Istanbul Summit to reflect its evolving institutional maturity and expanded scope.[1] Uzbekistan joined as a full member in 2019, while Hungary, Turkmenistan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

hold observer status. Rooted in the four pillars of common history, language, identity, and culture, the OTS positions cultural cooperation as a core pillar alongside economic, educational, and strategic domains, as articulated in its founding documents and the Turkic World Vision-2040.

Cultural diplomacy within the OTS has developed through specialized affiliated bodies, notably the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSÖY), established in 1993 and often dubbed the “UNESCO of the Turkic World” TÜRKSÖY coordinates commemorative events, literary translations, and designations of Turkic Cultural Capitals, while the International Turkic Academy and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation focus on scholarly research, heritage preservation, and joint UNESCO inscriptions such as Navro‘z and traditional wrestling (Kurash). [2] These initiatives not only reinforce intra-Turkic solidarity but also project a unified Turkic narrative globally, engaging diasporas and promoting cultural tourism through projects like the Turkic Museum Card.

MAIN PART

The foundations of cultural diplomacy among Turkic-speaking states predate the formal establishment of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). As early as 1992, summits of heads of state from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye laid the groundwork for collaboration rooted in shared linguistic, historical, and cultural ties. This culminated in the creation of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSÖY) in 1993, often referred to as the “UNESCO of the Turkic World”. Headquartered in Ankara, TÜRKSÖY was established by an agreement signed in Almaty to coordinate cultural activities, preserve common heritage, and promote Turkic values globally.

TÜRKSÖY’s early initiatives focused on commemorating shared literary and historical figures, organizing Navruz (Nowruz) celebrations, and fostering artistic exchanges. These efforts exemplified transactionalism in cultural diplomacy, as theorized by Karl Deutsch, where increased interactions build community and solidarity. [3] By the 2000s, post-Soviet Turkic republics sought to reaffirm national identities while countering lingering Russian influence, making cultural cooperation a low-risk arena for integration.

The formal institutionalization occurred with the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, establishing the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council), renamed the Organization of Turkic States in 2021 during the Istanbul Summit. This transformation reflected growing maturity, with Uzbekistan joining as a full member

in 2019. As of 2025, full members include Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan, while Hungary (since 2018), Turkmenistan (since 2021), and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (since 2022) hold observer status. [4] Cultural cooperation is enshrined as one of the OTS's four foundational pillars—alongside common history, language, and identity—complementing political and economic domains. The Turkic World Vision 2040, adopted in 2021, elevates culture as a strategic tool for resilience, adaptation, and transformation, aiming to document and promote Turkic heritage amid global challenges.

Cultural diplomacy within the OTS operates through a network of affiliated institutions, each specializing in distinct yet interconnected domains. TÜRKSOY remains the flagship body for operational cultural activities. Since 2010, it has annually commemorated prominent Turkic figures, such as Alisher Navoi, Magtymguly Pyragy, and Yunus Emre, through international events, publications, and performances. A hallmark initiative is the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World program, launched in 2012. Each year, a designated city hosts festivals, exhibitions, and forums to showcase Turkic arts. [5] Past capitals include Astana (2012), Eskişehir (2013), Kazan (2014), Merv (2015), Sheki (2016), Turkistan (2017), Kastamonu (2018), Osh (2019), Khiva (2020), Bursa (2022), Shusha (2023), and Anau (2024). This program not only boosts cultural tourism but also fosters urban diplomacy and economic ties.

TÜRKSOY also coordinates global Nevruz celebrations, held at UNESCO and UN venues, emphasizing renewal and unity. The International Turkic Academy, established in 2012 and based in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), focuses on scholarly research. It produces common textbooks on Turkic history, literature, and geography, and has developed a 34-letter Common Turkic Alphabet to promote linguistic harmony. [6] Over 90 publications and projects like the Turkbarometer survey advance evidence-based understanding of shared heritage, countering fragmented post-Soviet narratives.

The Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, headquartered in Baku since its operational launch post-2015 Astana Summit, emphasizes preservation and promotion. It funds restoration of monuments, organizes exhibitions, and publishes multilingual works on Turkic literary figures. Recent projects include the “Turk Discovery” YouTube platform for digital outreach and the multilingual catalog “TurkHeritage”. [7] The Foundation collaborates on UNESCO nominations and diaspora engagement. Joint UNESCO inscriptions exemplify multilateral cultural diplomacy: Nowruz (multinational, including Turkic states) and traditional sports like Küreş wrestling highlight shared intangible heritage. Emerging initiatives include the Turkic Museum

Card for cross-border access, cultural tourism routes, youth programs, and co-productions in cinema and media.

From a political science viewpoint, OTS cultural diplomacy aligns with Joseph Nye's soft power theory, attracting through cultural appeal rather than coercion. It also embodies constructivism, as articulated by Alexander Wendt, where shared identities reshape interests and behaviors. In a multipolar Eurasia, these efforts enhance collective agency, counterbalancing Russian, Chinese, and Western influences while promoting stability in Central Asia and the Caucasus. [8] Post-2020 Karabakh resolution and geopolitical shifts have accelerated integration, with culture bridging divergences in foreign policy orientations. Diaspora engagement extends influence to Europe (via Hungary) and beyond. Achievements include heightened global visibility, increased tourism, and youth mobility. [9] Limitations persist: varying national priorities, resource disparities, and external pressures (e.g., Cyrillic retention in some states). Nonetheless, cultural diplomacy has proven resilient, laying groundwork for deeper political-economic ties.

Furthermore, integrating cultural diplomacy with economic and infrastructural goals offers synergistic prospects. The OTS's emphasis on Eurasian connectivity, including trade routes and energy cooperation, could incorporate cultural elements like joint tourism corridors and co-produced media content to enhance regional stability. [10] Scholarly work highlights how such initiatives have enabled collaboration with international NGOs and academic bodies, suggesting scalability through partnerships with UNESCO or the EU. In a 2024 study, the diverse motivations of member states—political for Türkiye, economic for Kazakhstan, and cultural for Azerbaijan—are seen as converging toward common aims, potentially accelerating digital diplomacy tools like AI-driven language translation for Turkic dialects. [11] Recent media coverage of OTS summits, such as the 2025 Budapest informal meeting, emphasizes cultural cooperation as a pillar for global stability, indicating momentum for expanded youth programs and diaspora networks.

CONCLUSION

The development of cultural diplomacy within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) illustrates a deliberate and increasingly sophisticated deployment of soft power in a geopolitically contested Eurasian space. Rooted in shared linguistic, historical, and cultural affinities, this diplomacy has evolved from ad hoc post-Soviet initiatives in the early 1990s, exemplified by the founding of TÜRKSOY in 1993, into a structured, institutionalized pillar of regional integration following the 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement and the 2021 rebranding and adoption of the Turkic World Vision 2040.

Through specialized bodies such as TÜRKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, member states have transformed common heritage into tangible instruments of attraction, solidarity, and collective agency.

From a political science perspective, the OTS case substantiates key tenets of Joseph Nye's soft power theory and constructivist approaches to international relations. Cultural initiatives-ranging from joint UNESCO intangible heritage inscriptions the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World program, common alphabets and textbooks, to diaspora-oriented digital platforms-actively construct and reinforce a shared Turkic identity that transcends national boundaries. These efforts not only mitigate the lingering effects of divergent post-Soviet trajectories but also enable member states to pool resources in projecting a unified narrative globally, thereby enhancing their attractiveness and legitimacy in international forums.

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