

## CULTURAL DIPLOMACY OF THE NEW UZBEKISTAN: COOPERATION WITH UNESCO

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***Abstract.** This article examines the role of the cultural diplomacy of the New Uzbekistan in the contemporary global order amid globalization, and analyzes Uzbekistan’s soft power mechanisms in this process. Furthermore, it explores the history, activities, and current status of UNESCO — the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — which plays a significant role in the development and promotion of education, science, and culture worldwide.*

*The article also analyzes post-independence relations and strategic cooperation between Uzbekistan and UNESCO, including major summits and conferences related to cultural diplomacy.*

***Keywords:** Globalization, cultural diplomacy, SCO, UN, soft power, public diplomacy, UNESCO, Sharq Taronalari, Shashmaqom.*

In the 21st century era of globalization, relations between states are developing not only in economic and political spheres, but also in cultural exchange and cooperation. Cultural diplomacy plays a particularly important role in strengthening peace between nations, expanding cooperation, and developing soft power.

After gaining independence, Uzbekistan began shaping its cultural and political image in the international arena by developing its cultural diplomacy. The theoretical foundation of national image was first introduced in 1956 by the American political scientist Kenneth E. Boulding, who proposed the concept of the “national image” and became the founder of this research field. Today, this theory is especially relevant, as states actively promote their cultural diplomacy worldwide.

Uzbekistan preserves and promotes its cultural identity on the global stage through its rich historical heritage and ancient cities included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, such as Bukhara, Khiva, and Samarkand, as well as through its national traditions and customs.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) was established on November 16, 1945, after World War II. Due to the immense destruction caused by the war, states concluded that peace must be built not only through political or military means, but also in the minds of people through education, science, and culture.

UNESCO has a wide global network, with offices in more than 50 countries. These include regional, national, and cluster offices (serving multiple countries). The UNESCO Regional Office for Central Asia is located in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and has been headed by Dr. Amir Piric since June 2024. UNESCO’s headquarters is located in Paris, and according to 2026 reports, the organization has more than 190 member states.

UNESCO consists of three main organs:

1. The General Conference

2. The Executive Board

3. The Secretariat

The Director-General of UNESCO is Khaled El-Enany, who has led the Secretariat since 2025.

Uzbekistan became a member of UNESCO in 1993. In the same year, the National Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan for UNESCO was established in Tashkent. Cooperation between Uzbekistan and UNESCO goes beyond diplomatic relations; it serves as a platform for projecting Uzbekistan’s soft power globally.

After joining UNESCO, several historical cities of Uzbekistan were inscribed on the World Heritage List, including:

- Khiva (Ichan-Kala)
- The Historic Centre of Bukhara
- Samarkand – Crossroads of Cultures
- Shahrissabz Historic Centre

Among Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan has one of the highest numbers of inscribed heritage sites, which represents significant reputational capital internationally.

Uzbekistan also has more than 12 elements inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List, including:

- Navruz
- The tradition of Palov (pilaf)
- The cultural traditions of Boysun
- Shashmaqom
- Sharq Taronalari
- Atlas-Adras weaving traditions
- Lazgi dance

Additionally, more than 50 educational institutions in Uzbekistan cooperate with UNESCO through global initiatives such as ASPnet (UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network).

Another major achievement in Uzbekistan’s cultural diplomacy was the opening of the SCO Public Diplomacy Center in Tashkent in 2017. In 2018, Samarkand was declared the cultural capital of the SCO Public Diplomacy Center. These initiatives strengthened cultural exchange, youth diplomacy, public diplomacy, tourism, and scientific forums.

In 2022, the 22nd Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was held in Samarkand. The city was selected due to its infrastructure, historical prestige, and capacity to host major international events. Hosting this summit enhanced Uzbekistan’s national image and promoted its rich cultural heritage globally. Following the summit, Samarkand was symbolically referred to as a “bridge of cultures.” Today, major events of the SCO, UN, and UNESCO are regularly held in Samarkand.

Uzbekistan actively uses soft power in its cultural diplomacy, particularly through festivals such as Sharq Taronalari and Shashmaqom.

The Sharq Taronalari International Music Festival has been held in Samarkand since 1997. Registan Square serves as its visual symbol. The festival takes place every two years, and the XIII International Festival was held on August 26–30, 2024, with participation from nearly 80 countries.

Shashmaqom, a thousand-year-old musical tradition rooted in the Bukhara and Khorezm schools, was inscribed by UNESCO in 2003 as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Shashmaqom represents a synthesis of Eastern philosophy, Sufi rhythm, and psychological depth, and continues to influence global audiences.

One of the most significant achievements in Uzbekistan’s cultural diplomacy was the decision to hold the 43rd Session of the UNESCO General Conference in Samarkand in 2025. This decision was officially adopted during the 42nd Session of the General Conference in Paris in November 2023. This historic event marked the first time in nearly 40 years that UNESCO decided to hold its highest session outside Paris (the last similar case was in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1985).

The selection of Samarkand reflects Uzbekistan’s growing contribution to intercultural dialogue, preservation of cultural heritage, and promotion of sustainable development goals.

On September 14–16, 2021, the International Cultural Forum “Central Asia at the Crossroads of World Civilizations” was held in Khiva at the initiative of Uzbekistan during the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly. Within its framework, several major events were organized, including:

- A UNESCO International Advisory Committee meeting on cultural heritage
- The TURKSOY Council of Ministers of Culture meeting
- An international archaeological conference in Nukus
- The II International Bakhshi Art Festival
- The V International Congress of the World Society for the Study, Preservation and Popularization of Uzbekistan’s Cultural Heritage in Tashkent

Uzbekistan’s participation in TURKSOY (International Organization of Turkic Culture), established on July 12, 1993, is also significant. Cultural identity plays a crucial role in strengthening Uzbekistan’s international position, particularly within the Turkic world.

Since joining UNESCO in 1993, Uzbekistan has received annual grants ranging from 50,000 to 300,000 USD. These grants have supported projects in education, scientific research, cultural heritage preservation, Silk Road initiatives, and restoration projects in Samarkand and Bukhara.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that cooperation between Uzbekistan and UNESCO has developed steadily and dynamically since 1993. The recognition of Samarkand as a bridge of cultures is well justified. International conferences, cultural events, grant programs, and the inscription of Uzbekistan’s tangible and intangible heritage on UNESCO lists have strengthened the country’s international cultural standing.

Overall, within the framework of the New Uzbekistan’s cultural diplomacy, cooperation with UNESCO is progressing in a positive and effective direction.

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