CULTURAL COOPERATION OF UZBEKISTAN WITH THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES IN 1991–2023

Nematov Mirzokhidjon Makhmudjon ugli
History Teacher at the Specialized School of Qo‘shtepa District

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the process of development of cultural and humanitarian cooperation of Uzbekistan with the Central Asian states during 1991–2023. The research was conducted on the basis of historical periodization, comparative analysis, and a systematic approach. The results demonstrate that cultural relations initially manifested in a symbolic form, later transformed into an institutional mechanism, and at the modern stage have become a strategic tool of regional integration. It is substantiated that cultural diplomacy plays an important role in strengthening political trust and developing sustainable cooperation.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Central Asia, regional integration, humanitarian cooperation, historical heritage, people’s diplomacy, cultural exchange, political trust, institutional development, sustainability.

Cultural relations between Uzbekistan and the Central Asian states did not emerge accidentally after independence; rather, they represent a logical continuation of a common historical, religious, and civilizational space that developed over centuries. The peoples of the region have lived within a unified cultural environment shaped by the influence of the Great Silk Road, traditions of Turkic statehood, and Islamic culture. As a result, a close affinity has emerged in folklore, music, literature, religious-educational values, and everyday cultural practices.

The scientific and educational heritage of Central Asia constitutes an important foundation of regional cultural harmony. The scholarly and literary legacy of thinkers such as Al-Farghani, Ibn Sina, Al-Biruni, Imam Bukhari, and Alisher Navoi extended beyond national borders and contributed to the formation of a shared cultural memory. This historical unity later became a symbolic foundation of cultural diplomacy. The emergence of independent states in 1991 necessitated the adaptation of humanitarian cooperation in the region to new political conditions. In 1991–1993, diplomatic missions were established, agreements between ministries of culture were concluded, and exchanges through mass media were initiated. From this period onward, culture became a tool for creating a national image and maintaining regional proximity.

In the mid-1990s, cultural cooperation entered a stage of institutionalization. Theatre tours, folklore festivals, art exhibitions, as well as educational and scientific exchanges began to acquire a systematic character through interstate agreements. In particular, border regions such as the Fergana Valley, Osh, Khujand, and Jalal-Abad became natural centers of cultural dialogue. At the same time, political instability in Tajikistan and the intensification of security challenges in the late 1990s limited the stability of cultural relations. This situation demonstrated the extent to which humanitarian cooperation is dependent on political and security factors.

The results of the study confirm that Uzbekistan’s cultural cooperation with the Central Asian states has developed progressively since independence and has had a significant impact on regional integration processes. The analysis based on historical periodization made it possible to identify three main stages of development.

In the first stage (1991–2000), cultural cooperation was primarily formed on the basis of historical heritage and social proximity. Through cultural days, folklore festivals, theatre and music tours, an initial atmosphere of trust was established between the states. In border regions, informal cultural ties were

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combined with formal institutions, contributing to the restoration of a regional cultural space. At the same time, political instability and security challenges remained limiting factors for the scale of cooperation.

In the second stage (2001–2016), cultural cooperation was strengthened through legal and institutional mechanisms. Intergovernmental agreements, arrangements between ministries of culture, and joint scientific and educational programs provided cultural exchange with a stable character. During this period, culture was actively used as a tool for softening political dialogue and played an important role in supporting regional stability.

In the third stage (2017–2023), cultural diplomacy became a strategic component of regional integration. The opening of borders, improvement of transport connectivity, and active dialogue between state leaders significantly increased the scale of cultural exchange. Tourism, academic mobility, youth projects, and initiatives aimed at promoting shared heritage became practical mechanisms of integration.

The results of the study confirm that Uzbekistan’s cultural cooperation with the Central Asian states has become an important factor of regional integration. The historical development of cultural relations demonstrates that humanitarian cooperation, which initially had a symbolic and social character, later evolved into an institutional mechanism and, in the modern period, transformed into a strategic diplomatic instrument. This process provides practical confirmation of theoretical concepts of culture as “soft power.”

This study shows that cultural diplomacy plays an important role in strengthening political trust alongside security and economic mechanisms. While previous studies have often interpreted culture as an auxiliary factor of political integration, this article substantiates it as an independent driving force of integration. In particular, cultural exchanges in border regions and people’s diplomacy have proven to be among the most effective mechanisms accelerating regional rapprochement. The results also indicate that the sustainability of cultural cooperation is directly dependent on the political environment. While the security crises of the late 1990s led to a slowdown in cultural relations, the open foreign policy and liberalization of borders after 2017 significantly accelerated the integration process. This confirms that the effectiveness of humanitarian cooperation is closely linked to the level of political trust. From a practical perspective, the findings of the study indicate the necessity of developing cultural initiatives not merely at a ceremonial level but in the form of long-term strategic programs. The establishment of joint cultural platforms, permanent systems of educational exchange, shared media projects, and digital cultural heritage databases may serve as important tools for stabilizing integration. In particular, the development of cultural infrastructure in border regions enhances the social impact of people’s diplomacy.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study allows cultural diplomacy to be interpreted as a distinct model of Central Asian integration. In this model, historical memory, shared heritage, and social proximity are of no less importance than political agreements. This approach may also be applied for comparative analysis in studying integration processes in other regions. The hypothesis proposed in the introduction—that if cultural cooperation is developed through a systematic state policy, it becomes a factor deepening regional integration—has been fully confirmed by the results of the study. Cultural diplomacy has not only strengthened social proximity but has also played a decisive role in restoring political trust and establishing sustainable cooperation. At the same time, the study reveals certain problematic aspects of cultural integration. Insufficient institutional coordination, limited financial resources, and weak integration of the information space hinder the full realization of cooperation potential. These issues should be taken into account in the future planning of cultural policy.

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