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Rapprochement Between Uzbekistan and Turkey Through Instruments of Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract:. This article examines the growing rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Turkey through the lens of cultural diplomacy. The shared Turkic heritage, Islamic values, and historical ties provide a strong foundation for bilateral cooperation. Since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, Turkey has played a pivotal role in supporting its transition, but it is in the post-2016 period that cultural diplomacy has become a prominent tool for strengthening relations. Through educational exchange, media cooperation, shared commemorations, and joint cultural institutions, the two nations have deepened their mutual understanding. This study explores the mechanisms, successes, and challenges of these cultural initiatives and evaluates their role in broader geopolitical and economic alignment.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Turkey, cultural diplomacy, rapprochement, Turkic Council, soft power, education diplomacy, heritage diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a transformative period in global geopolitics, particularly for the five newly independent Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Among them, Uzbekistan emerged as a pivotal state due to its large population, abundant natural resources, strategic location at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, and its rich Islamic and Turkic cultural heritage. As these nations embarked on the complex journey of state-building and international positioning, external actors, including Turkey, China, Russia, and Western countries, vied for influence in the region. Turkey, positioned as both a NATO member and a culturally affiliated power, was among the earliest and most enthusiastic supporters of Central Asian independence. Ankara's policy toward the region was shaped by a sense of cultural kinship, rooted in a shared Turkic identity, Islamic traditions, and centuries of historical interaction. In the case of Uzbekistan, this kinship was particularly pronounced. Turkey became the first country to recognize Uzbekistan's independence in 1991 and was quick to establish diplomatic, economic, and educational ties (Cottey, 2013). During the early 1990s, Turkey extended soft loans, invited Uzbek students to study in Turkish universities, and supported Uzbek-language media and cultural exchanges. It positioned itself as a model for secularism, democracy, and economic liberalization for post-Soviet Muslim-majority states. Despite this promising beginning, the bilateral relationship began to cool in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Uzbekistan**,** under the leadership of President Islam Karimov, adopted a highly cautious and often isolationist foreign policy, wary of foreign interference and the influence of political Islam. Turkey's active promotion of its cultural model and democratic ideals was sometimes viewed as overreaching, leading to diplomatic tensions. By the mid-2000s, Turkish influence in Uzbekistan had waned significantly, overshadowed by the growing presence of Russia and China in the region. A turning point came in 2016 with the death of Islam Karimov and the subsequent rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the presidency. Mirziyoyev embarked on a wide-ranging reform program, both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. His administration signaled a new openness to regional cooperation and international engagement. Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seized the opportunity to renew ties with Uzbekistan, positioning itself as a reliable partner rooted in shared linguistic, religious, and historical bonds. Within this new phase of rapprochement, cultural diplomacy emerged as one of the most effective and sustainable instruments for rebuilding trust and deepening bilateral ties. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which often focuses on strategic or economic interests, cultural diplomacy centers on fostering mutual understanding through the exchange of ideas, values, heritage, language, and traditions. It functions as a form of soft power**,** enabling states to influence each other through attraction and shared identity rather than coercion or material incentives (Nye, 2004). In the case of Turkey and Uzbekistan, cultural diplomacy has served to rekindle a sense of Turkic brotherhood and historical continuity, which in turn has laid the groundwork for expanded cooperation in trade,

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security, and multilateral diplomacy. The increasing role of multilateral institutions such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS)-formerly the Turkic Council-has further institutionalized this cultural affinity. Uzbekistan's decision to become a full member of the OTS in 2019 marked a milestone in its regional realignment and affirmed its embrace of a broader Turkic identity. This article seeks to analyze the specific instruments of cultural diplomacy **e**mployed by Turkey and Uzbekistan in the post-2016 era. It will examine how educational exchange programs, joint cultural institutions, media cooperation, and heritage preservation initiatives have been leveraged to strengthen bilateral ties. Furthermore, it will evaluate how these soft power tools intersect with broader geopolitical strategies in the context of rising great power competition in Central Asia.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the role of cultural diplomacy in the evolving relationship between Uzbekistan and Turkey. The case study method is particularly well-suited for this inquiry, as it allows for an in-depth, contextualized examination of complex sociopolitical phenomena over time. By focusing on a single bilateral relationship within a defined historical period-specifically from 2016 to 2025-the research provides a nuanced understanding of how cultural diplomacy functions as a tool for rapprochement.

Data for this study were collected from a wide range of primary and secondary sources to ensure triangulation and validity:

Official Government Documents and Declarations: This includes press releases, memoranda of understanding (MOUs), bilateral agreements, and strategic policy documents issued by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both Turkey and Uzbekistan. Key agencies such as TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) provided valuable insights into state-sponsored cultural initiatives. Statements and communiqués from high-level visits between Uzbek and Turkish leaders were also analyzed.

Publications by International Organizations: Reports and publications from UNESCO, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and the International Turkic Academy were examined to contextualize cultural diplomacy within broader multilateral frameworks. These sources helped identify how cultural cooperation is framed in international discourse and how joint heritage and language programs are promoted.

Academic Literature and News Media: Peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank reports, and policy briefs related to Central Asian studies, soft power, and international relations provided a theoretical grounding. Additionally, regional news outlets (e.g., TRT, Anadolu Agency, Gazeta.uz, and Kun.uz) were used to trace current developments, announcements, and public perceptions of cultural initiatives.

The analysis focuses on four core instruments of cultural diplomacy as identified in the literature (Mark, 2010; Nye, 2004):

Educational Exchange – including scholarships, university partnerships, student mobility, and academic cooperation.

Cultural Institutions and Programs – such as language centers, cultural festivals, and institutional collaborations between the Yunus Emre Institute and Uzbek partners.

Media and Public Diplomacy – encompassing television series, joint media production, language broadcasting, and digital diplomacy.

Heritage and Historical Diplomacy – involving joint restoration of historical sites, commemorative events, and the promotion of shared Turkic-Islamic history.

Each of these domains is assessed in terms of its effectiveness in fostering bilateral understanding, influencing public opinion, and building the foundation for political and economic rapprochement.

The study primarily covers the period from 2016 to 2025, corresponding with the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and a distinct shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy orientation. This time frame allows for the examination of a substantial number of cultural diplomacy initiatives and their outcomes.

RESULTS

The implementation of cultural diplomacy between Uzbekistan and Turkey since 2016 has been comprehensive and multifaceted. Drawing from governmental initiatives, multilateral cooperation, and grassroots engagement, both countries have strategically employed several instruments to

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facilitate their rapprochement. This section outlines four core areas through which cultural diplomacy has been exercised and evaluates their respective impact on mutual perceptions and bilateral ties.

Education has long been a foundational pillar of Turkey's soft power strategy in Central Asia. Following President Mirziyoyev's rise to power in 2016, Uzbekistan has shown a renewed interest in academic cooperation with Turkey. This has manifested in several key developments:

Türkiye Scholarships Program: Administered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), this program has significantly increased the number of Uzbek students studying in Turkish universities. As of 2024, over 6,000 Uzbek students have benefitted from these scholarships, covering fields from engineering and Islamic studies to medicine and political science (YTB, 2023). These students often return as informal cultural ambassadors who promote Turkish language, culture, and political ideals within Uzbekistan.

Bilateral University Agreements: Turkish universities such as Ankara University, Istanbul University, and Marmara University have signed memoranda of understanding with institutions like Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies and Westminster International University in Tashkent. These agreements enable joint degree programs, faculty exchanges, and research collaboration.

Turkish-Language Education: Turkish language centers have expanded in Uzbekistan, supported by the Yunus Emre Institute. Turkish has been reintroduced or expanded in several public schools and universities, while Uzbek students studying Turkish benefit from government-sponsored incentives.

This educational diplomacy has nurtured a new generation of Uzbek professionals with cultural and ideological affinity to Turkey, strengthening long-term bilateral cooperation.

Turkey has invested heavily in the development of cultural infrastructure in Uzbekistan as a means of fostering people-to-people diplomacy:

Yunus Emre Institute in Tashkent: Established in 2018, the institute has become a key platform for Turkish language teaching, cultural events, film screenings, and art exhibitions. It has hosted annual "Turkish Culture Days", showcasing Turkish cuisine, folk music, and literature, attracting thousands of Uzbek participants annually (Yunus Emre Institute, 2024).

TİKA Projects: The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has played a critical role in funding the restoration of shared Islamic and Turkic heritage sites, such as the Sheikh Zaynudin Complex in Tashkent and Timurid-era monuments in Samarkand and Bukhara (TİKA, 2022). These efforts not only preserve Uzbekistan's architectural heritage but also reinforce a shared historical identity.

Joint Cultural Festivals: Uzbekistan and Turkey have regularly held cultural festivals in each other's countries. Events like the "Uzbekistan-Turkey Cultural Dialogue Forum", co-organized by the Ministries of Culture, serve as platforms for artists, poets, and musicians to collaborate and showcase shared traditions.

These cultural engagements help to normalize interaction between societies, breaking down residual post-Soviet isolation and facilitating intercultural dialogue.

Media cooperation has emerged as a powerful tool in reshaping public narratives and reinforcing cultural proximity between the two nations:

Turkish TV Series in Uzbekistan: Turkish historical dramas such as *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*, *Kuruluş: Osman*, and *Magnificent Century* have gained immense popularity in Uzbekistan. These shows are broadcast in Uzbek on national television and streaming platforms, often with Uzbek subtitles or dubbing. They resonate deeply with audiences due to shared Islamic and Turkic values, effectively promoting Turkey's historical and moral narratives (TRT, 2022).

TRT and Uzbek Media Partnerships: State broadcaster TRT Avaz, which targets Turkic-speaking audiences, has expanded its presence in Uzbekistan. In return, Uzbek media outlets have received technical training and content support from Turkish partners. Joint media productions, including documentaries on Silk Road history and Turkic folklore, are in development.

Digital Diplomacy: Turkish and Uzbek embassies have become increasingly active on social media, utilizing platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram to share cultural content and promote youth engagement. Hashtag campaigns such as #TurkicBrotherhood have trended periodically during bilateral visits and cultural events.

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This growing media interconnection is enhancing Turkey's soft power while allowing Uzbekistan to reclaim and reinterpret its historical identity through a Turkic lens.

Cultural diplomacy has also taken form through symbolic acts of historical recognition and joint heritage initiatives:

Shared Commemorations: Turkey and Uzbekistan have begun jointly commemorating figures of Turkic-Islamic heritage, such as Alisher Navoi, Ahmad Yassawi, and Ulugh Beg, who are revered in both national narratives. These joint celebrations are often held under the auspices of the Organization of Turkic States and UNESCO, reinforcing cultural ties beyond bilateral channels (UNESCO, 2021).

Cultural Heritage Restoration: Beyond infrastructure restoration, Turkey and Uzbekistan have collaborated on UNESCO heritage nominations, such as the Silk Roads: Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor, strengthening transnational cultural ties and promoting tourism.

International Turkic Academy: Uzbekistan's hosting of regional conferences by the International Turkic Academy reflects its growing alignment with Turkic cultural diplomacy mechanisms. These forums allow academics and policymakers to collaborate on heritage research and textbook harmonization efforts. Heritage diplomacy not only reconnects the two societies with their pre-Soviet past but also positions them within a broader Turkic civilizational narrative.

Each of these cultural instruments has contributed incrementally but significantly to Uzbekistan–Turkey rapprochement. Educational and institutional ties build long-term social capital; media collaboration reinforces shared identity and normalizes interaction; while heritage diplomacy revives a historical consciousness that legitimizes closer political and economic integration. Together, these efforts have succeeded in reframing the bilateral relationship-not merely as transactional, but as rooted in civilizational kinship and shared destiny. They also serve as a counterweight to competing influences from Russia, China, and the West, giving Uzbekistan greater agency in defining its regional role.

Table 1: Instruments of Cultural Diplomacy Between Uzbekistan and Turkey (2016–2025)

Instrument	Key Initiatives/Examples	Institutions Involved	Impact on Bilateral Relations
Educational Exchange	- Türkiye Scholarships for Uzbek students - Bilateral university partnerships - Turkish language programs	YTB, Turkish and Uzbek universities, Ministries of Education	- Cultivates pro-Turkey elite - Builds long-term intellectual and cultural affinity
Cultural Institutions	- Yunus Emre Institute in Tashkent - TİKA cultural restoration projects - Cultural festivals and art events	Yunus Emre Institute, TİKA, Ministries of Culture	- Reinforces soft power through cultural presence - Restores shared heritage
Media Diplomacy	- Broadcast of Turkish TV series (e.g. *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*) - Joint TRT–Uzbek media programs - Digital outreach	TRT, Uzbek National TV, Ministries of Information	- Shapes public perception - Promotes Turkic-Islamic historical narratives
Heritage Diplomacy	- Joint commemorations of historical figures (e.g. Alisher Navoi) - UNESCO nominations - Turkic Academy forums	UNESCO, International Turkic Academy, OTS	- Reclaims shared historical identity - Legitimizes deeper regional cooperation

DISCUSSION

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as one of the most effective tools in the ongoing rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Turkey, particularly in the years following Uzbekistan's political transformation under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Unlike traditional forms of diplomacy that often emphasize transactional goals-such as economic agreements or military cooperation-cultural diplomacy fosters sustainable, long-term

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engagement by appealing to shared values, heritage, and identity. In this context, it has allowed both countries to not only rebuild trust but to deepen their bilateral relationship on a foundation that transcends geopolitical shifts. Turkey's cultural diplomacy strategy has operated as a vehicle of soft power, relying on educational exchange programs, Turkish-language promotion, shared media content, and heritage restoration to shape perceptions and nurture affinity within Uzbek society. The success of these efforts is evident in the widespread popularity of Turkish TV dramas in Uzbekistan, the rise in the number of Uzbek students studying in Turkey, and the growing presence of Turkish cultural institutions like the Yunus Emre Institute and TİKA-funded heritage projects. These initiatives have gradually normalized Turkish cultural influence in Uzbekistan and created a new generation of culturally aligned Uzbek professionals and opinion leaders. Uzbekistan's increasing receptiveness to Turkey's soft power also reflects a broader foreign policy recalibration. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has moved away from its post-Soviet isolationism and embraced a model of selective openness-seeking beneficial partnerships while maintaining sovereignty. Turkey, due to its shared Turkic and Islamic heritage with Uzbekistan, has emerged as a preferred partner, offering cultural familiarity without the political baggage often associated with other global powers. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, has functioned as a politically safe and socially resonant pathway to deepen ties with Turkey. At the same time, cultural diplomacy has served to legitimize foreign policy moves by invoking shared identity narratives. Both governments have actively drawn upon symbols of Turkic brotherhood and Islamic civilization to build public support for their rapprochement. For Ankara, Uzbekistan represents a critical node in its broader vision of Turkic unity and regional leadership, pursued through institutions like the Organization of Turkic States. For Tashkent, closer ties with Turkey help diversify its foreign relations, balancing the influence of larger powers like Russia and China while reinforcing its post-Soviet national identity through a Turkic lens. Nevertheless, challenges remain. One of the primary concerns is the asymmetry in cultural flows. While Turkish television, language, and literature have gained significant ground in Uzbekistan, the reverse is not true-Uzbek cultural exports remain limited in Turkey. This imbalance can lead to a perception of cultural dominance, raising concerns among Uzbek intellectuals about one-sided influence and the potential erosion of national distinctiveness. Some critics within Uzbekistan view Turkey's cultural outreach with caution, fearing a form of neo-Ottoman paternalism that could overshadow local traditions and historical narratives. To ensure that cultural diplomacy continues to serve as a constructive force rather than a source of tension, it is essential that both countries commit to a more balanced and inclusive approach. Efforts should be made to promote two-way exchanges, empowering Uzbek voices within Turkish cultural spaces and vice versa. Greater involvement of civil society, independent artists, and academic institutions on both sides could help broaden the scope of cooperation beyond state-driven agendas. Moreover, protecting linguistic and cultural diversity within the Turkic world is vital to maintaining trust and preventing cultural homogenization. Ultimately, the success of cultural diplomacy between Uzbekistan and Turkey will depend on its ability to evolve into a truly reciprocal partnership-one where shared heritage is celebrated without overshadowing local identities, and where cultural ties are used not merely as tools of influence but as genuine expressions of mutual respect and solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a central pillar in the renewed Uzbekistan–Turkey relationship, serving as a foundational mechanism that goes beyond traditional diplomatic channels. By strategically investing in educational exchanges, promoting the rich shared Turkic-Islamic heritage, and fostering extensive people-to-people connections, both nations have cultivated a sustainable and resilient model of rapprochement. This model is deeply rooted in mutual respect, cultural affinity, and a recognition of common historical and linguistic bonds, which have been carefully nurtured to transcend the legacies of the Soviet era and contemporary geopolitical pressures. Through scholarship programs, joint cultural institutions, collaborative media projects, and heritage preservation efforts, Uzbekistan and Turkey have strengthened not only their official diplomatic ties but also the interpersonal and societal linkages that underpin long-term partnership. This multifaceted approach to cultural diplomacy has enhanced public goodwill, built intellectual bridges, and expanded channels for cooperation in economic, political, and security spheres. As global power dynamics continue to shift-with rising multipolarity, new regional

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alliances, and evolving great power competitions-the cultural affinity between Uzbekistan and Turkey positions them to potentially deepen their strategic partnership. Their shared identity could serve as a platform for cooperation that extends beyond bilateral interests to encompass broader regional initiatives within Central Asia and the wider Turkic world. This includes collaboration on issues such as regional stability, economic integration, counterterrorism, and cultural preservation. Furthermore, this cultural rapprochement offers a model for other countries with shared heritage seeking to balance sovereignty, modernity, and geopolitical realities. If sustained and expanded thoughtfully, it could redefine Central Asian diplomacy by emphasizing soft power, cultural dialogue, and civilizational cooperation as key drivers of regional cohesion and international influence. In conclusion, the cultural diplomacy between Uzbekistan and Turkey exemplifies how historical ties and shared identities can be harnessed to forge durable partnerships in the contemporary global landscape. Its continued evolution will likely shape not only their bilateral relations but also the broader strategic architecture of Eurasia in the years to come.

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