

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

Ne'matov Mirzohidjon Mahmudjon ugli
Master's student, Fergana state university

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.

Introduction. 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.

Literature review. Issues of cultural cooperation in Central Asia have been primarily examined in local studies from the perspective of the region's historical-civilizational unity and ethnic proximity. Meliqulov, analyzing the social foundations of the development of interethnic relations in Uzbekistan during the years of independence, emphasizes that a shared historical experience and cultural closeness have created a natural environment for humanitarian cooperation [1, p. 12]. This approach demonstrates that cultural relations possess a social foundation that existed even prior to political decisions. Doniyorov and co-authors, examining

the ethnological characteristics of the peoples of Central Asia, substantiate that similarities in customs, traditions, folklore, and religious values constitute one of the key factors in the formation of a regional cultural space [2, p. 30]. According to the authors, cultural proximity is not only a product of historical heritage but also serves as a social basis for contemporary integration processes.

The geographical and historical integrity of the region as a factor directly influencing cultural exchange processes has been studied by Abdunazarov and his collaborators. They consider Central Asia as a unified civilizational space and note that transport corridors, trade routes, and population migration have ensured the continuity of cultural interactions [3, p. 68]. This approach explains the territorial logic of cultural cooperation. Within the context of the political and social development of modern Uzbekistan, the role of culture in shaping the state's image has been analyzed by Yusupova and co-authors. They demonstrate that the international promotion of historical cities, heritage sites, and cultural events has become an important instrument of cultural diplomacy [4, p. 83]. This confirms the use of culture as a strategic resource in foreign policy. In foreign research, processes of regional rapprochement are examined through the interaction of political and humanitarian factors. Baizakova emphasizes that cultural and humanitarian ties have served as an important mechanism for restoring trust in the rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan [5]. This approach reveals the role of cultural cooperation in strengthening political stability. Kushkumbayev, analyzing the activities of early integration structures in Central Asia, notes that in the 1990s cultural relations were formed as an important component supporting political cooperation [6, p. 19]. His research is significant for understanding the stages of institutional development of cultural diplomacy.

Issues of identity and cultural heritage have been thoroughly studied by Levin in the context of regional integration. The author emphasizes that a shared historical heritage, on the one hand, contributes to strengthening national identity, and on the other hand, creates a symbolic space for regional rapprochement [7, p. 267]. This perspective explains both the unifying and differentiating functions of culture.

In conceptual documents related to Uzbekistan's foreign policy, humanitarian cooperation is defined as an important factor of regional stability and integration. In particular, documents devoted to priority directions of foreign policy recognize cooperation in the fields of culture, education, and science as a means of strengthening political trust [8, p. 16]. At the same time, in existing literature, cultural cooperation is often considered as an auxiliary element of political or economic processes, while its historical evolution and systematic development have not been sufficiently studied as an independent scientific object. In particular, the continuous development of Uzbekistan's cultural relations with all Central Asian states has rarely been analyzed within a comprehensive framework. This scientific gap determines the relevance and novelty of the present article.

Methodology. In this study, a historical-analytical and systematic approach was employed to analyze the formation and development processes of cultural cooperation between Uzbekistan and the Central Asian states. The methodological framework of the research was based on the principle of historical periodization and involved a comparative analysis of the evolution of cultural relations within the stages of 1991–2000, 2001–2016, and 2017–2023. As a data base, normative-legal documents of the Republic of Uzbekistan and neighboring states, intergovernmental agreements, reports of ministries of culture, materials of international organizations such as UNESCO and TURKSOY, as well as scientific monographs, dissertations, and contemporary academic articles were utilized. In addition, official statistical data, mass media publications, and documentary sources related to cultural events were analyzed.

During the research process, the comparative-historical method was applied to compare the forms of cultural cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Through systematic analysis, the interconnection of cultural diplomacy with political trust, security factors, and regional integration processes was revealed. The content analysis method was used to examine cultural discourses in official speeches, policy documents, and mass media materials. As primary data, reports published in open sources on specific cultural events, conference materials, and collections of inter-institutional agreements were synthesized. These data were classified in order to identify the scope and directions of cultural exchange. The study was not based on the application of economic or econometric models; instead, qualitative analysis was prioritized. The main variables were defined as forms of cultural cooperation (festivals, educational exchanges, academic projects), institutional mechanisms (agreements, commissions, cultural centers), and political environment factors (security, diplomatic activity, border openness), and their interrelations were analyzed.

Results. 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.

Table 1. Stages of Development of Uzbekistan’s Cultural Cooperation with the Central Asian States

Period	Key characteristics	Forms of cooperation	Impact on integration
1991–2000	Formation stage	Festivals, theatre tours, cultural days, educational exchanges	Restoration of cultural trust
2001–2016	Institutionalization	Intergovernmental agreements, joint projects, scientific platforms	Sustainable cooperation
2017–2023	Integration stage	Cultural diplomacy, tourism, people’s diplomacy, educational networks	Regional rapprochement

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 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.

Discussion. 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.

REFERENCES

1. Melikulov, B. (2017). Interethnic relations in Uzbekistan during the years of independence: Experience, problems and solutions (Doctoral dissertation). Samarkand.
2. Doniyorov, A. X., Bo‘riyev, O. B., & Ashirov, A. A. (2020). Ethnology of the peoples of Central Asia. Tashkent: NIF MSH.
3. Abdunazarov, L. M., Qambarova, S. A., & Tobirov, O. Q. (2017). Geography of Central Asia. Tashkent.
4. Yusupova, H. O., Sadullayev, F. B., & G‘aniyeva, O. X. (2023). Country study (Uzbekistan). Bukhara.

5. Baizakova, Z. (2017). Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: Signs of political and economic rapprochement. Eurasian Research Institute Weekly E-Bulletin, (101).
6. Kushkumbayev, S. (2025). Gone but not forgotten: The Central Asian Union, 1990–2005. Lithuania: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program.
7. Levin, J. (n.d.). From nomad to nation: On the construction of national identity through contested cultural heritage in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.
8. Main principles, priority directions and prospects of the foreign policy of Uzbekistan (1998–2018). (n.d.). Ziyonet Library. Retrieved from api.ziyonet.uz