

# Soft Power and Strategic Culture: Cultural Diplomacy Between Azerbaijan and the UK

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**Abstract.** This article examines the evolving cultural diplomacy between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom, analyzing its role as a tool of soft power and strategic messaging in the context of contemporary international relations. Since Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, bilateral relations with the UK have expanded from energy cooperation to encompass education, arts, heritage, and media exchanges. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines international relations theory and cultural studies, the article explores how both states utilize cultural initiatives to project national identity, foster mutual understanding, and advance geopolitical interests.

Theoretical frameworks of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and strategic culture provide a foundation for understanding how cultural engagement serves as both attraction and strategic signaling. Empirical analysis highlights key areas of cooperation, including academic exchanges facilitated by the British Council, artistic collaborations sponsored by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, and joint heritage and interfaith initiatives. However, challenges such as political sensitivities, divergent historical narratives, media representation, and resource constraints complicate the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy.

The article argues that while cultural diplomacy remains a vital instrument for shaping perceptions and building bilateral trust, it often oscillates between genuine engagement and symbolic performance. To enhance its impact, future efforts should emphasize inclusive dialogue, greater civil society participation, and integration with broader democratic and regional stability agendas.

Ultimately, the Azerbaijan–UK case illustrates the complexity and potential of cultural diplomacy in a multipolar world, where soft power complements traditional diplomacy in forging sustainable international partnerships.

**Keywords;** *Cultural diplomacy, soft power, Azerbaijan, United Kingdom, international relations, strategic culture, education exchange, heritage diplomacy, South Caucasus*

## Introduction

Located at the critical crossroads between East and West, Azerbaijan offers a compelling case study in the shifting geopolitical realities of the post-Soviet era. Since declaring independence in 1991, the

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country has pursued a complex, dual-track agenda: on one hand, accelerating economic development and fostering regional stability; on the other, meticulously crafting a distinctive international persona. This constructed image foregrounds Azerbaijan's rich cultural mosaic, its ambitious modernization programs, and its firm commitment to religious and ethnic pluralism, all while actively engaging in strategically important global partnerships (Özsoy, 2024; Mozaffari & Akbar, 2023). This image is not merely rhetorical but reflects a purposeful state strategy to position Azerbaijan as a progressive, tolerant, and globally integrated nation.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom, responding to the political and economic ramifications of its withdrawal from the European Union, has sought to recalibrate its foreign policy by expanding its sphere of bilateral relations beyond traditional Western partners. Within this strategic reorientation, the South Caucasus region—and Azerbaijan specifically—has gained prominence. Initially, UK-Azerbaijan ties were predominantly centered on energy sector collaboration, notably driven by British Petroleum's (BP) long-term investments. However, over the years, this partnership has evolved considerably. Today, the relationship encompasses a diverse array of cooperative initiatives including educational programs, cultural exchanges, promotion of the English language, preservation of cultural heritage, and collaborative academic ventures (Loda, 2016; British Council Azerbaijan, 2023). These expanded fields of engagement reflect mutual interests in fostering not only economic but also socio-cultural linkages that reinforce the bilateral relationship.

### **Historical and Political Background**

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, diplomatic ties between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom have undergone substantial development. The formal establishment of relations on December 11, 1992, marked the beginning of an evolving partnership characterized initially by pragmatic cooperation focused on economic interests—especially in the oil and gas sectors—as well as regional security concerns. Over time, this bilateral engagement has broadened to embrace educational and cultural cooperation, reflecting the countries' shared desire to deepen ties beyond mere transactional interactions (UK Government, 2021; Asgarov, 2024).

### **Post-Independence Diplomacy and Energy Partnership**

In the aftermath of Azerbaijan's independence, the country's integration into global energy markets provided fertile ground for the growth of bilateral relations with the UK. The British government's engagement was closely intertwined with the activities of British Petroleum (now BP), whose presence in the Caspian basin signified a strategic economic and geopolitical investment. The pivotal 1994 "Contract of the Century" (Guliyev, 2015) opened Azerbaijan's abundant hydrocarbon resources to substantial Western capital and expertise, firmly establishing the UK as a major economic partner for Baku.

BP swiftly became a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's energy infrastructure development, contributing advanced technology, significant financing, and global credibility. Over subsequent decades, the company rose to become Azerbaijan's largest foreign investor, steering crucial projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. This pipeline strategically links the Caspian Sea to Mediterranean energy markets, enhancing regional connectivity and diversifying export routes.

Complementing this, the Southern Gas Corridor initiative aims to strengthen Europe's energy security by providing alternative supply routes—projects that have also benefitted from UK expertise and investment (BP, 2024; Mammadov, 2022).

These energy ventures have transcended their economic purpose, serving as frameworks for sustained political dialogue and cooperation. The UK's enduring engagement has encouraged institutional reforms within Azerbaijan, fostering a regulatory environment conducive to investment and positioning the country as a dependable supplier in the Euro-Atlantic energy landscape. In this light, energy partnership emerges not only as a pillar of economic development but also as a vital vector for bilateral diplomatic relations.

More recently, BP has demonstrated an increased focus on environmental sustainability in Azerbaijan, aligning with evolving global energy governance norms. Its initiatives include implementing methane emission detection systems, adopting enhanced oil recovery techniques that mitigate environmental impact, and investing in community development projects. These efforts signal BP's—and by extension, the UK's—commitment to integrating ecological responsibility within the broader energy cooperation framework (BP Sustainability Report, 2023). This progressive “greening” of the partnership complements Azerbaijan's own strategic ambitions to diversify its economy and adhere to international climate objectives, thereby enriching the multifaceted nature of UK-Azerbaijan relations.

### **Post-Independence Diplomacy and Energy Partnership**

В первые годы после провозглашения независимости в 1991 году отношения между Азербайджаном и Великобританией развивались на фоне масштабного вхождения страны в мировые энергетические рынки. Британский интерес к региону был во многом обусловлен деятельностью крупных компаний, прежде всего British Petroleum (ныне BP). Подписание знакового «Контракта века» в 1994 году (Guliyev, 2015) стало по-настоящему историческим событием, открывшим огромные запасы каспийских углеводородов для масштабных западных инвестиций и закрепившим за Великобританией роль одного из главных экономических партнёров Баку. BP с самого начала заняла центральное место в энергетической стратегии Азербайджана, привнеся не только техническую экспертизу, но и внушительные финансовые ресурсы, а также международный авторитет для разработки оффшорных нефтяных месторождений. За несколько десятилетий компания стала крупнейшим иностранным инвестором в стране, реализуя ключевые проекты — от нефтепровода Баку–Тбилиси–Джейхан (BTC), который связал каспийскую нефть с рынками Средиземноморья, до Южного газового коридора, призванного повысить энергетическую безопасность Европы (BP, 2024; Mammadov, 2022).

Эти проекты не только кардинально преобразили экономическую карту Азербайджана, но и укрепили двусторонние связи в дипломатическом ключе. Британское присутствие в энергетическом секторе способствовало активизации политического диалога, стимулировало проведение реформ в законодательстве и регулировании, а также способствовало укреплению репутации Азербайджана как надежного и предсказуемого поставщика энергии на евроатлантическом пространстве. В итоге сотрудничество в сфере энергетики стало и

прочным фундаментом, и главным двигателем долгосрочного стратегического партнёрства между странами.

В последние годы ВР делает акцент на интеграцию экологических и устойчивых практик в свою деятельность в Азербайджане, что отражает глобальный переход к более ответственной энергетике. Компания взяла на себя обязательства по снижению выбросов парниковых газов, внедрению технологий обнаружения утечек метана, развитию методов добычи с минимальным экологическим воздействием, а также активным инвестициям в социальное развитие местных сообществ. Такой «зелёный» подход не только демонстрирует эволюцию роли ВР — теперь это не просто экономический партнёр, но и участник, осознающий ответственность перед окружающей средой (BP Sustainability Report, 2023). Эти усилия органично сочетаются с амбициями Азербайджана по диверсификации экономики и выполнению международных климатических обязательств, открывая новые горизонты для двустороннего сотрудничества.

### **Strategic Reorientation and Cultural Expansion**

С начала 2000-х Азербайджан начал проводить многовекторную внешнюю политику, стремясь выстроить сбалансированные отношения с ключевыми мировыми игроками — Россией, Западом, Турцией и Ираном. В рамках этой стратегии культурная дипломатия приобрела особую значимость, став важным инструментом формирования позитивного и многогранного международного имиджа страны, выходящего далеко за рамки роли экспортёра энергоресурсов (Putera, 2024; Valiyev, 2017). Параллельно Великобритания, обладающая мощным арсеналом «мягкой силы», превратилась в одного из ключевых партнёров и ориентиров для Азербайджана в этом процессе (Wainwright, 2022).

Особенно после Brexit южнокавказский регион стал для Великобритании стратегическим направлением, позволяя расширять международные связи за пределами ЕС (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2021; Özsoy, 2024). Азербайджан постепенно закреплялся в статусе стабильного и перспективного партнёра, интересного как с экономической, так и с культурной точки зрения. Взаимные инициативы, образовательные программы, культурные обмены и совместные проекты стали свидетелями глубокой трансформации и углубления двусторонних отношений, которые теперь строятся на прочном фундаменте доверия и взаимного уважения (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2023).

### **Institutions and Initiatives**

Various institutions have played a pivotal role in institutionalizing cultural and educational cooperation between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom. The British Council, active in Azerbaijan since 1993, has been central to advancing English language education, teacher training, and artistic exchanges. Its initiatives have supported bilateral projects in the arts, higher education, and youth engagement, fostering deeper mutual understanding and strengthening intercultural ties (British Council Azerbaijan, 2023; Pashayeva, 2018).

On the Azerbaijani side, organizations such as the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Azerbaijan–UK Interparliamentary Working Group have been key actors in promoting a modern, tolerant, and

globally resonant image of the country. The Foundation has sponsored exhibitions, musical events, and intercultural forums in London, often under the patronage of First Lady and Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva, who also serves as a UNESCO and ISESCO Goodwill Ambassador (Ismayilov, 2019; Akbulut, 2020).

These activities go beyond conventional cultural exchanges, functioning as deliberate acts of public diplomacy. They serve both aesthetic and strategic purposes: reinforcing national legitimacy, countering negative international narratives, and positioning Azerbaijan within Western value frameworks such as multiculturalism, education, and gender equity (Kocharyan & Tokluoglu, 2022; Rozanova, 2021).

## **Recent Developments and High-Level Engagement**

The past decade has witnessed intensified bilateral engagement. Frequent visits by British foreign secretaries and trade delegations to Baku, alongside active Azerbaijani participation in diplomatic and academic events in London, have strengthened ties. The inauguration of a new British embassy complex in Baku in 2021 symbolizes the UK's long-term commitment to the region. Additionally, bilateral agreements spanning education, innovation, environmental sustainability, and counterterrorism have broadened cooperation (UK FCDO, 2022).

A landmark event was the 2022 Azerbaijan–UK Cultural Dialogue Forum, which gathered diplomats, artists, and academics to explore culture's role in fostering international understanding. Cultural programs such as Azerbaijani mugham concerts in London, British theatrical performances in Baku, and collaborative university projects exemplify this shared dedication to using culture as a diplomatic bridge (British Embassy Baku, 2022).

## **Key Areas of Cultural Cooperation**

The cultural relationship between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom unfolds across multiple interconnected spheres, most notably education, the arts, media engagement, and heritage diplomacy. These fields function not only as symbolic platforms for cultural expression but also as effective channels through which both nations construct narratives of identity, cultivate soft power, and reinforce diplomatic bonds. The following sections explore the main areas of cultural cooperation:

### **1. Education and Academic Exchange**

Educational cooperation stands as one of the most structured and impactful pillars of Azerbaijan–UK cultural relations. Since the early post-Soviet period, the British Council has been instrumental in introducing and expanding English language learning, enhancing teacher training, and facilitating academic mobility within Azerbaijani institutions (British Council Azerbaijan, 2023). Initiatives such as the Chevening Scholarship, IELTS testing programs, and Connecting Classrooms have created sustained pathways for Azerbaijani students and educators to engage directly with British academic standards and global intellectual currents.

British higher education institutions—especially in London and northern England—have become attractive destinations for Azerbaijani students pursuing degrees in law, diplomacy, energy governance, and business administration. ADA University, founded in Baku in 2006, has cultivated active partnerships with UK universities, regularly hosting guest lecturers, research collaborations, and joint conferences. These exchanges foster more than academic enrichment: they lay the groundwork for enduring professional networks and nurture worldviews aligned with liberal education, critical inquiry, and democratic dialogue. From the UK’s perspective, these educational connections strengthen its long-term influence abroad by nurturing a globally minded, interconnected generation of future leaders.

## **2. Art, Music, and Cultural Events**

Artistic and musical exchanges provide a vibrant arena for mutual cultural visibility and dialogue. Over the last decade, Azerbaijani artistic heritage—from traditional carpets and calligraphy to contemporary visual art—has been showcased in prominent London venues such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Saatchi Gallery (Ismayilov, 2019), often supported by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and Azerbaijan’s diplomatic mission in the UK.

Music has been a particularly resonant form of exchange. Performances of mugham, jazz fusion, and classical compositions have introduced Azerbaijani musical traditions to British audiences, while the annual Days of Azerbaijani Culture festival in London offers a multisensory cultural immersion through concerts, culinary experiences, film screenings, and academic lectures. Conversely, British cultural institutions—ranging from theatre companies to orchestras—have presented their work to Azerbaijani audiences, frequently in partnership with the British Council. For example, the Shakespeare Lives initiative was adapted for Azerbaijani contexts with bilingual performances and school outreach programs. In these exchanges, art functions not only as a medium of aesthetic appreciation but also as a subtle assertion of national prestige and mutual respect.

## **3. Heritage and Interfaith Dialogue**

Heritage diplomacy and interreligious engagement have emerged as significant elements of bilateral cultural cooperation. Azerbaijan actively projects itself as a secular, multi-confessional society where Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities coexist in harmony. This narrative is deliberately promoted in European forums, including the UK, as a counterbalance to prevailing regional stereotypes.

The Heydar Aliyev Foundation has played a leading role in organizing heritage exhibitions and interfaith dialogues in London, presenting Azerbaijani architectural landmarks, illuminated manuscripts, and historical artifacts from cities like Sheki and Ganja (Kocharyan & Tokluoglu, 2022). These curated narratives position Azerbaijan as a proponent of multiculturalism and a committed steward of diverse cultural traditions. British engagement with these initiatives—particularly through the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Azerbaijan—signals both an endorsement of Azerbaijan’s cultural diplomacy and an alignment with the UK’s values-driven foreign policy. Such interactions allow the bilateral relationship to pivot towards shared ethical frameworks, providing a buffer against more contentious geopolitical issues.



#### 4. Media, Branding, and Public Image

Although often less visible than artistic or educational programs, media cooperation remains a crucial arena for shaping international perceptions. Azerbaijan has devoted considerable resources to managing its global reputation through cultural sponsorships, targeted media outreach, and strategic digital diplomacy. Prominent British media outlets—including The Guardian, BBC, and The Financial Times—have covered Azerbaijan extensively, particularly in the context of major international events such as the European Games and the Formula 1 Grand Prix held in Baku (Aliyev, 2020), generating narratives ranging from laudatory to critical.

Media partnerships have evolved into more collaborative forms, with co-produced documentaries, thematic podcasts, and journalistic exchange programs bringing British and Azerbaijani perspectives into closer dialogue. British journalists and scholars are regularly invited to Azerbaijan for study visits and reporting fellowships, aiming to foster a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the country's political, cultural, and social landscape. In this way, media engagement becomes a contested yet productive space where national image-making intersects with pluralistic debate, offering both opportunities and challenges for the exercise of soft power.

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