

# CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A WAY TO PROTECT DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES



On September 3-5, 2022, the conference "Culture Diplomacy to Counter Disinformation" took place in Berlin, organized by the non-governmental organization CRISP with the support of the German Federal Foreign Office. Participants from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine exchanged experiences, participated in lectures and workshops, and planned joint projects.

Why is culture still important in a polarized world, and can it sound louder than propaganda? We are looking for answers together.

## Speaking up to be heard

In a world of almost unlimited access to information, the truth, unfortunately, does not always sound loud – it is the loudest information that is often considered the truth, not the verified one. Cultural projects serve as a tool that allows us to amplify the truth through metaphors, images, and cultural codes. While statistics appeal to the mind, and propaganda mostly appeals to emotions, culture can reach both the mind and the heart through emotional perception, and this is its great strength.

It is also important to note that culture is a powerful tool, so it can cause a lot of destruction if it falls into the wrong hands. Let us recall the propaganda film «The Birth of a Nation» (David Griffith, 1915), which glorified racial inequality and provoked the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan. This is one of the many examples of why cultural diplomacy is important and why culture needs to be protected so that it does not serve the destructive intentions of dictators.

At the "Culture Diplomacy to Counter Disinformation" conference held in Berlin, during reports, presentations, or conversations over coffee, cultural figures from the six countries invited to the dialogue discussed how culture can counter propaganda and help build healthy and friendly relations between countries. During the discussions, the

participants often mentioned artists who are unfairly unknown abroad or painful moments in history and the present that become the centerpiece of art projects.

For example, the name Sergei Parajanov has been repeatedly mentioned: an Armenian filmmaker born in Tbilisi who was repressed by the Soviet government for his films about Ukrainian culture. His film "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" is set in the Hutsul region of Ukraine, and the director simply could not allow the movie to be made in any language other than Ukrainian. The film, for which the Soviet authorities morally destroyed the director, is now recommended by Harvard University for viewing by students applying for a higher degree in film studies.



## Institutional level

For the voice of culture to be heard powerfully, cultural diplomacy should involve different segments of the population. For the sustainable and long-term development of this strategy, both professional state institutions should be involved in the process, as in the UK, where representatives of the monarchy initiated the creation of the British Council more than a hundred years ago, and non-state institutions, such as Hollywood in the United States.

What is happening in the Eastern Partnership countries at the institutional level? Here are some examples.



In 2021, **Armenia** established a Cultural Diplomacy Committee under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help promote the country's long-standing culture and thus strengthen international relations. The honorary chairman of this committee is composer Tigran Mansurian, a world-class music star. Also, since 2018, Armenia has been home to EUNIC Armenia, a local branch of the European association EUNIC that brings together institutions that promote cultural diplomacy within and outside the European Union.

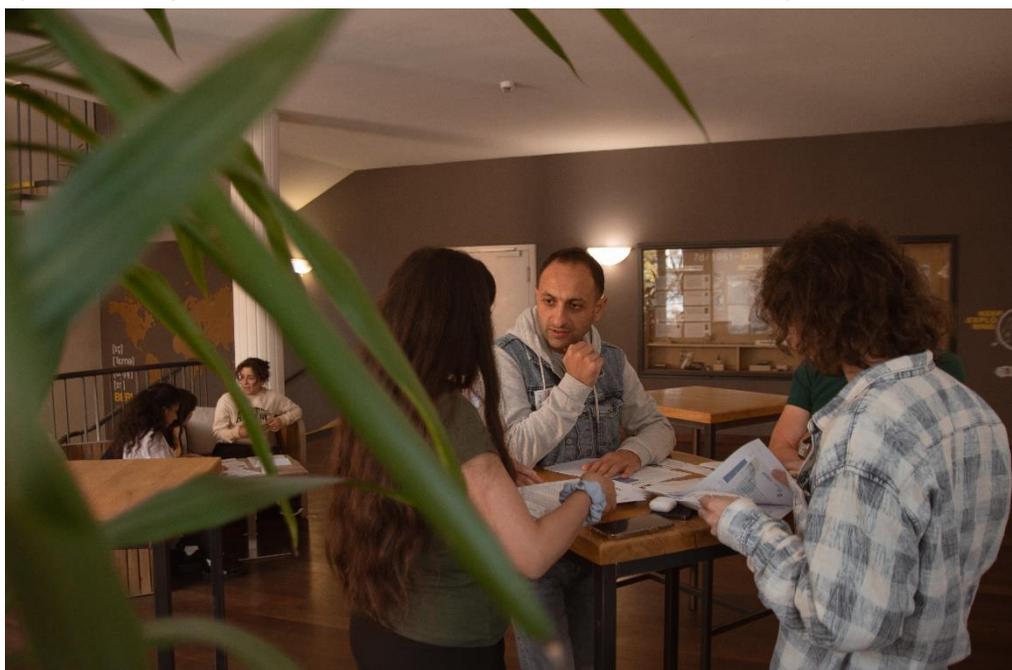
In **Azerbaijan**, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Baku Process Cultural Forum are working to promote culture at the international level.

**Belarusian** cultural diplomacy efforts have been supported by the United Transitional Cabinet of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is leading the political opposition. The cabinet is focused on promoting cultural initiatives that help restore the national identity and language, as well as raise awareness about the ongoing political situation. These cultural efforts are seen as crucial in promoting national unity and helping the country transition toward a more democratic future.

The **Georgian** parliament has a cultural committee that drafts and reviews the country's annual strategy for cultural diplomacy. The committee is chaired by the famous pianist Eliso Bolkvadze. The committee sees its task as presenting Georgian culture to the modern world.

In **Moldova**, cultural diplomacy at the state level is also under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is mainly focused on scholarships, international exchanges, and training.

In **Ukraine**, the Ukrainian Institute, established in 2017 and subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, is responsible for the promotion of national culture at the international level. The Institute's team has created many outstanding projects. Among them is the organization of a concert in



New York to celebrate the centenary of the Ukrainian "Shchedryk" (known worldwide as "Carol of the Bells") and the launch of an English-language online course on Ukrainian culture.

## Conference: what happens in practice

The participants of the CuDi conference often mentioned that in some of the countries represented, the vision of official institutions, cultural professionals, and practitioners differs significantly. As a rule, such contradictions do not arise in countries where cultural representatives are invited and effectively integrated into the work of commissions, institutes, and other bodies engaged in cultural diplomacy.

Where there is no dialogue between different stakeholders, culture simply lives separately from institutions: there are interesting projects, and there are artists, but they do not have institutional support, or it goes to artists whom the regime considers convenient.

Another important issue is building an international cultural dialogue at all levels: not only at the institutional level, but also at the level of individual events, artists, and festivals. The CRISP's CuDi conference was created for such a dialogue: so that practitioners in the field could share their experiences, exchange methods and ideas, and, on the last day of the conference, present ideas for joint projects.

## About us

CRISP is an international NGO based in Berlin. We develop projects, workshops, and simulation games dealing with conflict transformation, civic education, and youth participation in post-conflict settings. Our projects abroad are mainly situated in the EU, the Western Balkans, the Middle East as well as in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Our activities are mostly targeting young civic activists who aim for democratic transition in their countries. For more information about our projects please visit <https://crisp-berlin.org/>.

