

Russia's Cultural Diplomacy in the South Caucasus: Instruments, Assets and Challenges Ahead

'Our culture has strengthened Russia's authority and influence in the world, allowing us to become a great power. We remember this and we must effectively use our humanitarian resources and increase international interest in our history, traditions, language, and cultural values.' Putin's [declaration](#) at the Presidential Meeting of Council for Culture and Art in 2012 confirmed that winning people's hearts and minds was a rising priority of Russia's foreign policy for the coming years. The importance of designing soft policies à la Russe gained momentum in the aftermath of the colour revolutions, when Moscow sought to balance the increased Western presence in the region. Since the late 2000s, culture has become an integral part of Russia's global agenda and a strategic component of its strategy towards the South Caucasus, an area that Russia considers, though not without international controversy and local resistance, within its sphere of influence.

According to the 2016 [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#), Russia's foreign policy should 'strengthen Russia's role in international culture' and 'promote and consolidate the position of the Russian language in the world'. The Russian language is considered to play a special role as an instrument of interethnic communication in the post-Soviet space, where a decreasing but substantial part of the population are native speakers or use Russian in everyday life. The [2015 National Security Strategy](#) argues that the decline in the role of the Russian language is a major threat to national security, especially in combination with the 'erosion of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values'. In the post-soviet Space, the Strategy recognises that supporting the study of the Russian language could further accelerate Eurasian integration. This blend of language and traditional values also permeates the [Fundamentals of State Cultural Policy](#), a document, adopted in 2014, supporting engagement in the cultural realm through moral standards, civic responsibility and patriotism.

Russia's cultural diplomacy in the South Caucasus depends to a large extent on the state of bilateral relations between Moscow and the regional states – with their local realities. Undoubtedly, Armenia is currently Russia's strongest cultural partner. In 2019, the Russian Centre of Science and Culture (RCSC) in Yerevan celebrated its first anniversary. The Centre is part of the network of RCSCs coordinated by the Federal Agency for the

Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, commonly known as Rossotrudnichestvo. Although these centres have the word 'science' in their name, there is only limited involvement in science and technology, mainly through the organisation of some conferences. In Armenia, the RCSC portfolio includes exhibitions, film festivals and concerts by renowned Russian artists. The Centre has also a history of cooperation with governmental organisations. For instance, since 2011 it has, together with the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science, implemented the School of Modern Education. The school organises seminars and workshops that aim to improve the forms and methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language. Armenia is also a founding member of the Intergovernmental Foundation for Educational, Scientific and Cultural Cooperation (IFESCCO), created by the Council of the Heads of Governments of the CIS in 2006. Each year, the foundation organises and funds the programme for the 'CIS Capital of Culture'. In 2017, it was decided to declare the Armenian city of Goris as the CIS Cultural Capital for 2018.

Although not comparable in size and resources, Azerbaijan has become another key recipient of Russia's cultural diplomacy. An RCSC was inaugurated in 2011, when the Baku International Humanitarian Forum was also launched. The forum is a [major public diplomacy event](#), jointly promoted by Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev and former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and seeks to 'overcome barriers in the dialogue between civilisations'. In the same period the Russian embassy signed an agreement with the Ministry of Education to teach the Russian language in 50 schools. Although it does not enjoy official status in the country, local elites consider Russian to be a fundamental boost for young people's careers. Similarly to Armenia, Azerbaijan is a member of IFESCCO, which it joined in 2008. In 2016, the ancient city of Ganja was named CIS cultural capital for 2017. While committing to deeper cultural cooperation through bilateral relations and multilateral initiatives, Azerbaijan has kept a balanced position vis-à-vis Moscow's attempts at soft diplomacy, in line with its broader foreign policy.

Finally, Georgia's case provides another example of variation. In the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and as a response to Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian government announced the severing of diplomatic relations with Moscow. In the absence of a Tbilisi-based RCSC, in July 2013 the Gorchakov Fund, a Russian public-sponsored foundation, established the Primakov

Russian–Georgian/Georgian–Russian Public Centre. The Centre sought to fill the existing void and provide opportunities for a dialogue between the societies of both countries. Opportunities for civil society involvement have also come from the Russky Mir Foundation, another Russian government-sponsored foundation promoting the Russian language worldwide. Through its grant program, Russky Mir has provided financial support to Georgian organisations working on the study of Russian language and culture in the country. Moreover, ties between the Orthodox churches have often been considered another powerful way in which to channel Russia's foreign policy objectives ([see here](#)). The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) are not in a master–servant relationship, but the latter's interest in foreign policy has been increasing since Kirill's election to the patriarchal throne. As a result, the ROC can become a gate opener into those countries where Russia's traditional means of access are obsolete or unsuccessful. This applies to Georgia, where the ROC's ideology that conceives of Orthodoxy as a unique civilisation has, in the local clergy, found an interested audience and messenger. The facts of the Inter-parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy of June 2019 and the ensuing crisis between Moscow and Tbilisi have confirmed the increased role of faith.

Russia's cultural diplomacy in the South Caucasus benefits from several assets. The Russian language is the most important one: despite an inevitable decline, Russia can still capitalise on the populations' language fluency and thus compete successfully with other regional contenders over the years to come. The existence of an audience that knows and looks for Russian cultural products make the South Caucasus a suitable space to host tours and events featuring leading artists. In addition, the shared Soviet heritage provides opportunities not only for remembrance events targeting older generations, but also for cultural preservation among post-Soviet youth. This would, of course, require careful consideration of how to showcase and evaluate a common past. In Georgia, where the Russian language and culture have currently lost their grip, public trust in the local Orthodox Church may shift attitudes towards Russia in the long run.

However, to fully capitalise on these assets, Russia's cultural diplomacy should quickly face up to its current shortcomings. Years of top-down engagements with foreign audiences have proven that, despite some regional consensus stemming from increased polarisation and conflict with the West, Russia has failed to attract and co-opt its public. The effectiveness of Russia's cultural work abroad is limited by an institutional model that provides no opportunities to engage with Russian and local civil

societies and to make successful people-to-people contacts. Russia should, in sum, do less 'public diplomacy' and more 'cultural relations'; depoliticise its work; and be ready to 'listen' to local communities' interests and needs. Only a more balanced and careful approach can defuse the scepticism of both elites and the general audience and provide real opportunities for long-term cultural cooperation in the South Caucasus.

Domenico Valenza is a PhD Fellow at the United Nations University (UNU)–CRIS and Ghent University (Belgium). In his research, Domenico enquires into the role of culture in foreign affairs and analyses the European Union's and Russia's cultural diplomacy discourses and practices towards the post-Soviet space. Prior to joining UNU and Ghent University, Domenico worked at No Peace Without Justice as a Program Officer and at the College of Europe in Bruges as a Senior Academic Assistant.