

Cultural Diplomacy as a Soft Power Tool in NATO's Southeastern Flank: Practices and New Approaches

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Introduction

In an era of rising hybrid threats and intensifying geopolitical competition, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a key security instrument, particularly along NATO's Southeastern flank. In regions where security intersects with identity, historical memory, and entrenched cultural narratives, traditional military tools alone cannot ensure cohesion and stability. This article examines cultural diplomacy as a strategic soft power tool, showing that NATO functions not only as a military defence structure but also as a community of shared values, where trust, dialogue, and cultural understanding are essential. By promoting positive narratives, addressing historical misperceptions, and sustaining communication among states with differing priorities, cultural diplomacy reinforces conventional security mechanisms. It is approached both as a national foreign policy instrument and as a regional stabilizing mechanism in a fluid geopolitical environment shaped by Greek–Turkish tensions, persistent Western Balkans instability, and the engagement of multiple external actors, while highlighting opportunities for Greece to enhance its soft power within NATO frameworks.

1. Cultural Diplomacy as a Strategic Soft Power Instrument in Foreign Policy

Cultural diplomacy is a central pillar of foreign policy, complementing traditional diplomacy and military power. While scholarly attention to cultural diplomacy has intensified in recent decades, its strategic logic is deeply rooted in the antiquity, showing how culture has long shaped authority, legitimacy, and stability¹. The discussion draws on Joseph Nye's distinction between hard and soft power: hard power relies on coercion and material resources, such as military or economic force, while soft power shapes preferences through attraction, culture, and values, making it a strategic tool for projecting influence². Beyond communication, cultural diplomacy fosters development, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable peace³. Spanning the arts, literature, music, sciences, sports, and economics, and engaging the humanities through the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, cultural diplomacy allows states to engage

¹ Vasileiadis 2015a, 7.

² Nye 1990; Nye 2005.

³ Donelli 2019, 9.

international audiences, convey values effectively, and build trust, reinforcing traditional diplomatic and security instruments while advancing long-term cooperation across borders⁴.

2. Case Studies

The case studies of Turkey and Greece illustrate how key states in NATO's Southeastern flank utilise cultural diplomacy as soft power. Both joined NATO in 1952, yet their trajectories diverged significantly. Turkey's approach demonstrates both opportunities and risks for regional cohesion⁵, while Greece's experience highlights untapped potential and structural deficiencies. A nuanced treatment of Turkey's outreach is necessary, acknowledging that its cultural initiatives have generated both influence and, at times, mistrust among neighbouring states, demonstrating how soft power can simultaneously stabilise and unsettle regional dynamics.

2.1. Turkey

Turkey has systematically transformed cultural diplomacy into a comprehensive instrument for global influence and regional engagement. Early efforts in the 1990s were fragmented, but after the Justice and Development Party rose to power in 2002⁶, Ankara placed cultural diplomacy at the centre of its soft power strategy⁷. Formalised in 2010 through the Public Diplomacy Coordination Office, this approach coordinates high culture, education, and popular culture, bringing together state and non-state actors under a unified national narrative⁸.

Religion

Religion forms a central pillar of Turkey's soft power. The Diyanet's international network, along with mosque construction and religious services abroad, transforms Turkey's religious identity into a tool of external influence across Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, fostering ties with Muslim populations and legitimizing Ankara's political messaging, strengthening Turkey's image as a natural point of reference for these communities⁹.

Cultural heritage

Cultural heritage constitutes another pillar of Turkey's cultural diplomacy. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) undertakes restoration projects in the Balkans, covering Ottoman and Christian monuments, supporting heritage preservation, tourism, and

⁴ Vasileiadis 2015a, 16-17.

⁵ Gürsoy 2025.

⁶ Donelli 2019, 11.

⁷ Ozkan 2014, 225.

⁸ Donelli 2019, 11-12.

⁹ Özkan 2014.

economic cooperation. Its shift toward development and commercial projects broadens outreach, illustrating how cultural diplomacy can facilitate economic engagement.

Education and Diaspora

Education has expanded significantly through the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) and the Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMV)¹⁰, promoting language, history, and the arts, while operating schools and dormitories internationally¹¹. Turkey's diaspora policy, coordinated through the Presidency for Turks Abroad (YTB) under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, strengthens educational and cultural ties, fostering long-term cooperation in the Western Balkans, enhancing Turkey's visibility in Muslim communities, and creating durable institutional networks that consolidate its cultural influence well beyond formal diplomatic channels¹².

Media and Tourism

The international reach of Turkish television series has become a defining element of the country's contemporary cultural soft power, blending modernity and tradition with historical narratives rooted in the Ottoman past to resonate with audiences across the Middle East, the Balkans, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia¹³. Beyond entertainment, these productions influence tourism by showcasing historical sites and monuments¹⁴, which acts as an additional immediate mechanism of soft power, promoting mobility, cultural exchange, and engagement with shared heritage. This in turn fosters social proximity, eases political tensions, and supports regional stability¹⁵. The global network of Turkish Airlines further amplifies this effect, projecting an image of a modern, outward-looking nation and consolidating Turkey's cultural presence internationally¹⁶.

In sum, Turkey's cultural diplomacy functions as a multidimensional instrument of foreign policy, combining cultural heritage, religion, education, and diaspora engagement into a coherent soft power framework. Its support for NATO enlargement in the Balkans and restoration of Ottoman monuments demonstrates a dual role as both ally and autonomous

¹⁰ Niemiec 2023, 20-22.

¹¹ Niemiec 2023, 18-20.

¹² Niemiec 2023, 17-18.

¹³ Çevik 2014; Donelli 2019, 1.

¹⁴ Vasileiadis 2015b, 42-43.

¹⁵ Dağkılıç 2023.

¹⁶ Donelli 2019, 16.

cultural actor. This strategy underscores the value of integrating cultural, social, and educational mechanisms to achieve lasting influence and regional stability¹⁷.

2.2. Greece

While Turkey illustrates a model of highly coordinated cultural outreach, Greece highlights untapped potential that could be strategically mobilised for NATO's benefit. The Greek experience offers a layered and revealing case of how cultural diplomacy can evolve into a central pillar of national strategy even before it acquires a formal structure. From its earliest phases, Greece relied on culture as a vehicle for international projection, using historical memory and its rich heritage to exert influence at moments when material capabilities were limited. During the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829), the philhellenic movement mobilised foreign elites across Europe and the United States in unprecedented ways, shaped by a narrative that drew heavily on classical antiquity. Greece appeared as the guardian of values foundational to Western civilisation, attracting moral, political and financial support long before state institutions or military strength were consolidated¹⁸. Cultural identity functioned simultaneously as protection and leverage, illustrating how cultural diplomacy may precede state formation and generate symbolic capital in periods of fragility¹⁹.

Following independence, cultural policies remained scattered yet indicative of a growing awareness of the need to safeguard and project cultural capital. Early legislation on the protection of antiquities during the Regency²⁰, influenced by Italian models, enhanced Greece's international reputation and reinforced its cultural authority. Over the interwar and post-war decades, Greek policy gradually transitioned from an inward-looking stance to a more outward orientation, with tourism emerging as one of the country's most effective tools of soft power. The establishment of the Ministry of Culture in 1971 constituted a turning point, providing institutional consolidation and confirming culture as a distinct strategic dimension of foreign policy²¹.

Current Institutions and Practices

This historical trajectory forms the basis of contemporary Greek cultural diplomacy. Today, Greece operates within a coherent institutional landscape that supports its cultural outreach. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the Directorate for Educational, Cultural and Sports

¹⁷ Niemiec 2023, 12.

¹⁸ Papazoi 2023, 376-377.

¹⁹ Vasileiadis 2015b, 33.

²⁰ Galanakis 2002, 169.

²¹ Vasileiadis 2015b, 34-35.

Affairs (E3), coordinates cultural promotion abroad, manages academic agreements, facilitates exchanges, administers scholarships, supports scientific cooperation and represents Greece in UNESCO. The General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad and Public Diplomacy functions as an autonomous body within the Ministry, recognising the diaspora as a long-term reservoir of cultural influence and cultivating enduring ties with Greek communities around the world.

The Ministry of Culture complements these efforts by supporting museums, theatres, film institutions and outward-oriented cultural initiatives that broaden Greece's visibility across regions. The Hellenic Foundation for Culture, active since 1992, further reinforces this outward projection by promoting the Greek language, literature and cultural heritage in centres of cultural and academic activity abroad, strengthening Greece's intellectual presence²².

At the multilateral level, Greece advances its cultural narrative through forums that combine political dialogue with cultural diplomacy. Platforms such as the Ancient Civilizations Forum, the Delphi Economic Forum and the Athens Democracy Forum allow the country to articulate values associated with democracy, historical continuity and open dialogue. Through these environments, Greece cultivates a contemporary form of cultural authority that expands its regional and international profile²³.

Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness

A closer examination of Greece's cultural diplomacy reveals a recurring pattern of fragmentation and inconsistency, despite the existence of a formally established institutional framework. The participation of multiple actors, combined with long-standing gaps in coordination and limited institutional continuity, has produced an environment where intentions often exceed tangible outcomes. Although Greece is capable of delivering strong individual initiatives, it continues to struggle in articulating a unified and recognisable narrative capable of sustaining long-term soft power objectives.

At an institutional level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remains the principal actor, yet the absence of specialised staff in embassies and the abolition of cultural attachés since the 1990s have significantly weakened cultural outreach. The Hellenic Foundation for Culture, despite periods of meaningful activity, has not succeeded in defining a stable and durable strategic identity²⁴. Engagement through UNESCO constitutes one of the most consistent dimensions of Greek cultural diplomacy, exemplified by achievements such as the inscription of monuments

²² Vasileiadis 2015b, 36-40.

²³ [Πολιτιστική Διπλωματία - Hellenic Republic - Ministry of Foreign Affairs.](#)

²⁴ Vasileiadis 2015b, 44.

on the World Heritage List²⁵, the establishment of International Greek Language Day²⁶ and participation in conventions including the Nicosia Convention on combating illicit trafficking of cultural goods²⁷. Participation in EU initiatives such as EUNIC, coordinated with Greek embassies, enhances Greece's visibility and nurtures cooperation with European partners²⁸.

In diaspora affairs, the establishment of the General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad addressed an actual need, but overlapping competences with the Ministries of Education and Culture frequently undermined its effectiveness. The absence of a unified decision-making centre resulted in fragmented initiatives and impeded the formation of a long-term strategy²⁹.

3. Enhancing NATO's Soft Power on the Southeastern Flank

Greece's long-standing presence in NATO since 1952 has established it as a consistently reliable ally on the Alliance's Southeastern flank. This continuity contrasts with Turkey's increasingly autonomous and, at times, non-aligned behaviour, which creates strategic uncertainty for the Alliance. In this environment, enhancing Greece's cultural diplomacy becomes more than a national objective; it becomes a resource that NATO itself can utilise. Greece's historical heritage, its strong regional relationships in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, and its reputation as a stabilising democratic actor together offer a powerful reservoir of soft power. By adopting a coherent and strategically coordinated cultural-diplomacy agenda that addresses current fragmentation and activates the country's institutional and cultural assets, Greece can reinforce NATO's influence and credibility in sensitive regions.

Diaspora and Religious Networks

Greece could capitalize on its ties with co-religionists and Greek communities to enhance its cultural diplomacy across Southeastern Europe. Religion can serve as a soft power instrument within this framework. In the post-Cold War context, religion has regained recognition as a component of foreign policy, capable of contributing to peacebuilding and crisis resolution³⁰,

²⁵ Mpoutsiouki 2015a, 72.

²⁶ <https://www.mfa.gr/en/announcement-by-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-regarding-the-unanimous-decision-by-unesco-to-proclaim-february-9th-as-world-greek-language-day-uzbekistan-12-11-2025/>.

²⁷ The Nicosia Convention, signed in 2017, is the only legally binding instrument specifically designed to prevent and combat the deliberate destruction, damage, and trafficking of cultural property, making it uniquely important for strengthening criminal justice responses while simultaneously fostering international cooperation in the protection of cultural heritage.

²⁸ Mpoutsiouki 2015b, 119-120.

²⁹ Vasileiadis 2015b, 44.

³⁰ Özkan 2014, 235.

functioning both as a tool of reconciliation and a mechanism for fostering trust³¹. Following Turkey's example, the creation of Centres of Orthodox Culture or Institutes, dedicated to promoting language, culture, and religious heritage could establish networks for dialogue, cooperation, and long-term influence, demonstrating how cultural and religious diplomacy together can become a strategic instrument for stabilization and the advancement of peace in the geopolitically sensitive Southeastern European region³².

Reintroducing Cultural Attachés and Establishing Hellenic Cultural Centres Abroad

Reintroducing cultural attachés would restore a vital link for synchronising programmes and ensuring continuity across diplomatic missions. Establishing Hellenic Cultural Centres abroad, staffed with specialists in language, cultural management and international relations, would secure a sustained and structured presence. International examples such as the Institut Français, the British Council and the Goethe-Institut demonstrate how cultural institutes promote outreach, reconciliation and trust-building, with the Goethe-Institut historically contributing to repairing the legacies of World War II and strengthening Germany's association with classical Greek culture³³.

Academic Cooperation and Archaeological Networks

Academic cooperation represents a valuable field for strengthening Greece's cultural diplomacy. Supporting Institutes of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies enhances Greece's standing in global academic communities, while the Institute in Venice remains the only one directly supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1951³⁴. Classical Studies Institutes abroad, which promote the teaching of ancient Greek language, archaeology, philosophy, and the values of classical culture, function as centres of knowledge production and cultural outreach, reinforcing Greece's cultural presence within international academic and intellectual networks.

Greece's network of nineteen foreign archaeological schools, active since the mid-19th century, forms a powerful basis for partnerships and research programmes, bringing to light globally recognised sites such as Olympia and Delphi. These schools foster long-standing diplomatic ties and sustain modern philhellenism, suggesting that deeper cooperation and the potential establishment of additional institutes could further enhance Greece's cultural influence³⁵. Local

³¹ Makris 2015, 175-176.

³² Makris 2015, 179-182.

³³ Vasileiadis 2015c, 49-52.

³⁴ Vasileiadis 2015b, 37.

³⁵ Papazoi 2023, 379.

revivals of ancient athletic traditions, such as the Nemean Games³⁶, and major exhibitions like the one presented at the UN in Vienna celebrating 2,800 years of the Olympic Games, strengthen Greece's cultural and touristic projection by promoting values of peace, cooperation and democracy³⁷.

Digital, Media, and Tourism Outreach

The transition to the digital era enables Greece to extend its cultural presence beyond traditional forms of outreach by enhancing access, research, and the global visibility of cultural heritage. A prominent example is the collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and Sports and Microsoft for the digital revival of ancient Olympia, which employs artificial intelligence and mixed-reality technologies to reconstruct the site with high photorealistic accuracy. Such initiatives strengthen digital cultural diplomacy and tourism outreach while opening new avenues for international cooperation³⁸.

Multilateral Engagement and Security Integration

Finally, multilateral initiatives offer significant potential for linking cultural diplomacy with regional stability and security. The OSCE's Heritage Crime Task Force in Vienna, established in 2021 and co-funded by Greece, brings together eighty experts from forty-six countries to combat illicit trafficking of cultural goods associated with organised crime and terrorism. As a unique global initiative involving partners such as NATO and UNODC, it enables states to integrate cultural heritage protection into broader frameworks of shared values and security cooperation, contributing to stability and peace at regional and international levels³⁹.

4. Conclusions

Cultural diplomacy emerges as a critical instrument of soft power in NATO's Southeastern flank, reinforcing trust, dialogue, and regional cohesion alongside traditional security measures. Greece holds exceptional cultural assets, yet institutional fragmentation and the lack of a unified strategy constrain their full potential. Comparisons with Turkey demonstrate the strategic value of integrating heritage, education, media, tourism, and religious diplomacy into a coherent framework. By mobilising assets ranging from archaeological and academic institutes to digital heritage initiatives and cultural tourism, Greece can enhance its credibility and expand its

³⁶ <https://www.nemea.gr/post/ta-sygxrona-nemea>.

³⁷ <https://www.mfa.gr/missionsabroad/austria/news/ekthese-gia-to-olumpiako-ideodes-kai-ten-olumpiake-ekkekheiria-776-pkh-2024-2800-khronia-istorias-ste-bienne.html>.

³⁸ <https://www.culture.gov.gr/el/Information/SitePages/view.aspx?nID=4006>.

³⁹ [Combating illicit cross-border trafficking in cultural property in the OSCE area | OSCE](#).

international influence. Embedding these initiatives within multilateral platforms such as UNESCO, the EU, and the OSCE creates channels for collaboration and trust grounded in shared cultural values, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, while simultaneously advancing NATO's goals of cohesion, stability, interoperability, and peace across Southeastern Europe.

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