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CULTURAL HERITAGE RESTORATION AND INTEGRATION IN LIBERATED TERRITORIES AS AZERBAIJAN'S POST-CONFLICT SOFT POWER STRATEGY

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Abstract. The preservation, restoration and promotion of cultural heritage is a priority in the state policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and international cooperation in this area is highly valued. The strategic potential of national culture, provided that traditional national identity is preserved, plays a key role in Azerbaijan's integration into the global cultural community. This situation, coupled with the looting and destruction of approximately 20% of Azerbaijani territory under Armenian occupation for nearly 30 years, the destruction and usurpation of ancient historical and cultural monuments, underscores the importance of preserving, restoring, and promoting national cultural heritage and necessitates the establishment of international cooperation in this field. The return of territories liberated from 30 years of occupation has significantly contributed to international cultural cooperation, enhanced the international prestige of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and become one of the most important soft power tools for promoting national heritage and strengthening post-conflict peace.

Key words: cultural heritage, Republic of Azerbaijan, cultural integration, international cooperation, soft power, Karabakh, Eastern Zangezur.

Introduction. The rich cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people confirms that the country is one of the oldest centers of civilization in the world. Traces of our history live on in every region of Azerbaijan. These monuments, our national and cultural heritage make us reflect on the lifestyle and thoughts of our ancestors. Moreover, many of these ancient monuments are of not only national but also global significance. By studying their history, it is possible to learn about the lifestyle and aspirations of early humans. It is considered a moral duty for every citizen to approach ancient monuments with respect and sensitivity. From this perspective, the cultural integration of the Azerbaijani territories that have been under Armenian occupation for almost 30 years is a complex process that encompasses the reintegration of these regions into the cultural, historical, and social fabric of Azerbaijan, the restoration of destroyed heritage, and the organization of a “Great Return” to the region within a cultural context. State policy, aimed at promoting, recognizing and protecting the culture and cultural values of the liberated territories in the international community, and at increasing opportunities for integration in the international cultural sphere, with political, economic and social repercussions, aims to enhance Azerbaijan's “soft power” and strengthen its international reputation.

The purpose of research is to analyze the transformation of cultural activities in the liberated territories (Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur) into one of the most important soft power tools for enhancing Azerbaijan's international prestige, promoting its national heritage, and strengthening post-conflict peace.

Analysis of the latest research and publications on the subject, the scientific compilation “Cultural Heritage Management” edited by Turkish professor M. Çakır stands out. The book devotes considerable space to the relationship between culture and tourism, and concepts such as “cultural tourism”, emphasizing the preservation and importance of cultural heritage and its direct impact on the tourism sector. Globalization, changes in the cultural sphere, cultural diversity throughout history and its role in the development of nations and states, and reciprocal cultural relations are also among the topics covered. Australian researcher G. Aplin, in his book “Heritage, Identification, Preservation and Management”, includes all global elements that need to be preserved and appreciated for future

generations under the category of “heritage”. The author examines examples of movable and immovable heritage, encompassing everything from historical sites to buildings that constitute the integrity of cultural and national heritage. In light of the provisions of UNESCO conventions and other international agreements, the protection and management of cultural heritage, attitudes towards the historical heritage of national minorities, and other related issues are examined and compared. In his monograph, “International Legal Regulation of the Protection of Cultural Heritage and Issues in the Legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, S.A. Süleymanlı analyzes the factors determining such regulation and examines it in the context of Azerbaijani legislation (Süleymanlı, 2018, s. 58). An article published in the newspaper “Azerbaijan”, titled “Armenia's criminal acts aimed at destroying and distorting cultural heritage in Azerbaijani territories constitute genocide against humanity in general”, analyzes that Armenia's terrorist policy against humanity is not limited to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, but also causes serious damage to Azerbaijan's nature, biodiversity, historical and cultural monuments: “As a result of Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan after 1988, 20% of our territories were occupied, Armenians carried out a kind of 'genocide' against historical structures and, at best, Armenianized them (3)”. An article published in the journal “Public Administration: Theory and Practice”, titled “Restoration of Cultural Heritage in the Liberated Territories of Azerbaijan and International Cooperation in This Field”, analyzes how the restoration of liberated territories over the past 30 years has significantly contributed to international cultural cooperation, enhanced the international prestige of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and become one of the most important soft power tools for strengthening post-conflict peace through the promotion of national heritage (Şərifova, 2024, s. 261–263).

Results and discussion. Following the Patriotic War, which began on September 27, 2020, in response to Armenian provocation and lasted 44 days, culminating in Azerbaijan's victory, and thanks to local counter-terrorism operations conducted on September 19 and 20, 2023, the so-called separatist organization retreated, and as a final step towards restoring our territorial integrity, President İlham Aliyev raised the flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the regime's capital, Khankendi, on October 15. Our military successes have created favorable conditions for the recovery of our national and cultural heritage, which has been under occupation for thirty years, and for Azerbaijan to make significant contributions to international cultural cooperation in this area (17). However, Armenia, which has occupied Karabakh and the Eastern Zangezur territories, one of Azerbaijan's oldest settlements, for nearly thirty years and violated national and cultural heritage, plays a significant role in this matter. In the 1990s, disregarding international conventions, particularly the Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict of May 14, 1954, and its protocols, as well as the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, they looted and destroyed 13 world-renowned historical and cultural monuments, 22 museums with over 40,000 exhibits, 927 libraries containing approximately 5 million books, 31 mosques, and 4 art galleries in the occupied territories of Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur, and did not hesitate to seize and appropriate the national and cultural heritage of our people (18).

Victory created an opportunity to examine our rich cultural heritage, which had long remained uncontrolled in the region, to record its initial state, and to document the work done. The first step in this direction was the inventory process initiated by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan on November 3, 2020. Thus, Azerbaijan is recognized as one of the few countries that have taken significant steps to protect historical and cultural monuments in the territories liberated from occupation during the war. As a result of the initial monitoring (inventory), a number of artifacts of historical, architectural, and archaeological significance were identified and their condition recorded in the liberated territories (20). During the observation, it was found that many of the monuments had been deliberately destroyed, burned, looted, and subjected to other acts of vandalism; at the same time, acts of vandalism and aggression were carried out in places of religious and spiritual

significance, such as cemeteries, mosques, and mausoleums; It has been determined that a number of historical and cultural monuments were deliberately and purposefully altered from their original architectural features and used for military purposes, with the aim of denying and distorting Azerbaijan's history, culture, and ethnic identity (Sherifova, 2021, p. 118). Remaining committed to its multicultural traditions and tolerance, Azerbaijan considers the reconstruction of its Christian heritage, largely destroyed by Armenians during the occupation, as necessary and fundamental in the liberated territories. The reconstruction and restoration of the Kazanchi Church in Shusha is a vivid example of this. Built between 1868 and 1887 by Armenian masters Avetis Yeramishyans and Simon Ter-Akopyan, the Kazanchi Church became the center of the Armenian Gregorian diocese in the Karabakh region during the occupation of Shusha between 1992 and 2020, under the orders of Armenian clergy. Rebuilt between 1981 and 1988 by order of the Ministry of Culture of the Azerbaijan SSR, the Kazanchi Church was registered as a historical monument. Like other historical and cultural monuments, the Kazanchi Church was restored to its original artistic and aesthetic appearance based on historical documents, archival materials, and appropriate methodology. Because Armenians are well aware of historical facts, they distorted the true history of the ancient Albanian Christian monuments in Karabakh. This group, lacking any understanding of ancient historical and cultural traditions in Karabakh and Zangezur, distorted the true history of Albanian Christian monuments by carving Armenian inscriptions and adding Armenian-Gregorian elements under the pretext of “restoration”, thus altering their original architectural appearance. Thus, Armenian vandals attempted to seize the Church of St. John in the village of Tug in the Khojavend region through forgery and alterations. Another historical monument that Armenians tried to seize through forgery was the ancient Agoglan Alban monastery in the Lachin region. After the occupation of the Lachin region in 1992, Armenians made a number of changes to its architecture and interior in order to seize the monastery. According to Rafiq Danakari, vice-chairman of the Albanian-Udi Christian Religious Community in Azerbaijan (successor to the Independent Apostolic Church of Albanian (Caucasus)), while altars in Albanian churches are three steps high, those in Armenian churches are five to six steps high. The Armenians resorted to forgery, raising the monastery's altar even further. They also altered the cross stones and painted Armenian crosses on the walls. However, as the structure itself indicates, this is an Albanian temple. Since 1999, Armenians have been conducting archaeological excavations in the illegally occupied territories of Azerbaijan, presenting the findings from the Azikh cave to the world as “examples of Armenian material culture”. All these facts were corroborated in October 2010 by the international assessment mission led by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, who provided evidence of changes in infrastructure, place names, and illegal economic activities in the occupied territories. There are many other similar examples (Ismayilov, 2015, pp. 19–20).

The reconstruction of historical and cultural monuments destroyed during 30 years of occupation forms the basis of the cultural integration of Azerbaijani territories. Due to the scarcity of companies specializing in the restoration and preservation of monuments in our country, contracting with foreign partners to carry out these works is crucial. This situation, along with strengthening cultural cooperation between the Republic of Azerbaijan and these countries, has ensured and will continue to ensure a rapid influx of foreign investment into our country. Restoration and preservation projects entrusted to foreign experts are discussed with local experts, and work begins under their supervision only after the project has been approved by the relevant authorities in accordance with the law (Sherifova, 2024, pp. 261–263). President Ilham Aliyev of the Republic of Azerbaijan expressed his views on this matter at the Commonwealth of Independent States Heads of State Council meeting as follows: “We are attracting friendly countries to Azerbaijan and we will continue to do so. The first contract was signed with a Turkish company, and the second is planned with an Italian company. On this occasion, I call upon the heads of state and countries with whom Azerbaijan maintains friendly relations to actively participate in these projects as contractors through their companies. We want companies from friendly

countries to participate in the reconstruction of our cities and towns. We want them to implement these projects and show their solidarity, because undoubtedly we will rebuild all the cities, revive Karabakh, and make it one of the most developed regions in the world". At the same time, at the 12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) held in Gabala on October 7, 2025, President Ilham Aliyev expressed his gratitude to the brotherly countries for their support in the reconstruction of Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur, noting that the Mirza Ulugbey School in Fuzuli, the Kurmangazi Children's Creativity Center, and the Manas School in Aghdam are already operational: "This is a gift from our Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz brothers (19). The gift from our Hungarian brothers is the school built in Jabrayil, and the gift from our Turkmen brothers is the mosque whose foundation was laid today in Fuzuli. Brotherly Turkish companies are building countless tunnels, bridges, and roads. The Azerbaijani people will never forget this fraternal support".

The role of Azerbaijan's liberated territories in international cultural cooperation is fundamental, and this region serves as a platform for intercultural dialogue, a culture of peace, and the restoration of historical heritage. The main functions of the liberated territories on the international cultural platform are:

- The participation of international experts in the restoration of 68 religious monuments and other cultural and historical treasures destroyed during the occupation, and Azerbaijan's efforts to restore these monuments within the framework of cooperation with the UN and other international organizations, make a significant contribution to the restoration of historical and cultural heritage at the international level.

- By restoring Islamic and Christian (Albanian) heritage monuments destroyed by Armenians, Azerbaijan demonstrates its commitment to multicultural values to the world. Thus, the restoration and preservation measures carried out in the liberated territories, bringing these monuments back to their original artistic and aesthetic appearance, are an example of multiculturalism and tolerance.

- As we have noted, the liberated territories contain valuable historical and cultural monuments of national and international significance: the Khudaferin bridges, the Shusha fortress, the Azikh cave, the Ganjasar and Khudaven monasteries, and the Mausoleum of Qutullah Musa. Although some monuments such as the Uzeyir Bey Hacıbeyli statue, the Molla Panah Vagif bust and mausoleum, the Bulbul House Museum, the Saatli Mosque, the Ashaghi and Yuhari Govhar Agha, and the Aghdam Friday Mosques have been restored, vandalism against this rich cultural heritage poses a threat to the entire world heritage. Informing the international community about the destruction of these unique historical sites and condemning this aggressive policy means condemning vandalism at the international level.

- The reconstruction and opening of cultural centers, libraries, and theaters in the liberated territories, as well as the rebuilding of the region's cultural infrastructure, including cultural events and festivals held in Shusha, are among the factors accelerating the region's integration into Azerbaijan's cultural life. The Kharibulbul International Folk Festival, the Vagif Poetry Days, and the Uzeyir Hacıbeyli International Music Festival, traditionally held in Shusha, bring together folk groups, musicians, poets, writers, and foreign musicians from different countries, showcasing the region's cultural diversity and creating a conducive environment for literary exchange.

Cultural events held in the liberated territories (Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur) have become one of the most important soft power tools for enhancing Azerbaijan's international prestige, promoting its national heritage, and consolidating post-conflict peace. These events convey not only cultural messages but also political and geopolitical messages, strengthening the republic's image on the international stage as a "constructive and peace-loving state". Therefore, especially in the post-Cold War era, the importance of soft power has increased, and states have begun to apply elements of hard power, soft power, and smart power in a hybrid manner (Nye, 1990, pp. 156–157). Cultural diplomacy, as a field of soft power, aims to develop dialogue and understanding among other peoples and states by placing attractive cultural elements at the center of policy. Therefore, cultural activities

such as the restoration of cultural heritage and historical facts, strengthening the image of the “founding state”, conveying a message of intercultural dialogue and tolerance, the cultural expression of the “silk fist” strategy, and international participation that directly communicates Azerbaijani realities to the international community, all proclaim Azerbaijan's undeniable historical and cultural roots through soft power and enhance its soft power potential.

As can be seen, sensitivity and care towards Azerbaijan's rich historical and cultural heritage, including the preservation of the historical image of the city of Shusha, is an integral part of state policy. It is no coincidence that the city of Shusha was declared “Azerbaijan's Capital of Culture” by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2021, and that the “Shusha City Reserve State Administration” was established by Decree No. 1375 on June 22 of the same year (21). The full restoration of the territorial integrity and state sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan necessitates the creation of a new national ideology and a new cultural policy based on the Azerbaijani ideology of the National Leader of the Azerbaijani people, Heydar Aliyev (Mammadov, 2022, p. 49). Therefore, the “Azerbaijan Culture – 2040” concept, adopted in early 2026, aims to make these processes long-term and systematic, defining culture as an active national resource and a tool of soft power (16). Culture was recognized for the first time at the global level as a factor in sustainable development under Goal 11.4 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 25, 2015: “Strengthening efforts to protect and preserve the cultural and natural heritage of the world”. Preserving the diversity of cultural expressions is one of the global functions of culture in the modern era. The participation of all sectors of society is necessary to expand comprehensive and balanced cultural exchange in the name of intercultural understanding and a culture of peace. Therefore, intercultural dialogue should be encouraged, and cultural activities, cultural products, and services should be recognized as carriers of authenticity, value, and meaning, while preserving their unique characteristics.

Conclusion. The above-mentioned points once again prove that cultural diplomacy is one of the main tools in the process of integrating the liberated territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan into the international community. Activities related to the promotion, recognition and preservation of the culture and cultural values of the liberated territories in the international community, including the improvement of the activities of cultural centers operating under the diplomatic missions of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the promotion of examples of Azerbaijani cultural heritage, their placement on authorized online platforms, their exhibition, research and other promotion, the improvement of the legal framework and regulatory procedures, the inclusion of the documentary heritage of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the UNESCO “World Memory Register” (22), the submission of books such as “Karabakh Khanate: Historical and Cultural Identity” to UNESCO with the support of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the exhibition of mugham and carpet weaving art at the international level and measures to increase the possibility of creating an international cultural tourism destination based on the rich tangible and intangible culture of Karabakh, are aimed at increasing Azerbaijan's “soft power” and strengthening its international reputation. This process creates a positive image of Azerbaijan through culture, diplomacy, tourism and economic relations. In conclusion, opening Karabakh to the international community strengthens Azerbaijan's role as a regional economic engine and intercultural bridge, and enhances its international prestige.

Yes, integration takes place in the cultural sphere, and this is one of the most important features of the modern globalized world. Cultural integration is the process of interaction, convergence, and sometimes fusion of the cultural values, traditions, customs, art, language, and lifestyles of different peoples, societies, or groups. Therefore, the analysis allows us to identify the most important perspectives of the contribution that the measures taken can make to the international cultural cooperation of the Republic of Azerbaijan as follows:

- The “soft power” of the state will increase;

- The promotion of Azerbaijani culture and cultural values at the international level will be strengthened;
- Negative propaganda against the international image, history, and culture of the Azerbaijani state will be weakened and minimized.

In conclusion, the international integration of Karabakh reshapes Azerbaijani culture not only locally but also regionally and globally. This creates a sustainable platform for the restoration, study, and integration of cultural heritage into world culture.

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