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CULTURAL
HERITAGE



CREATIVE
ECONOMY



DIGITAL
TRANSFORMATION



COOPERATION &
CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

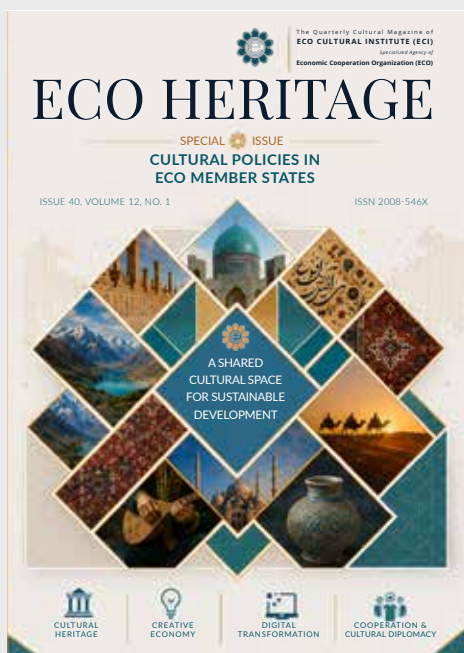


Showcasing the richness and diversity of cultural expressions around the ECO Region

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EDITORIAL

The ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) is pleased to present this Special Issue of ECO Heritage, dedicated to mapping cultural policies across the Member States of the Economic Cooperation Organization. This publication represents an important foundational effort to strengthen regional knowledge resources and support evidence based cultural governance across the ECO region. It has been developed as part of ECI's broader vision to enhance its analytical and research capacities, including the idea of establishing an ECO Cultural Policy & Research Lab in the future. This future oriented concept reflects ECI's intention to expand its role in generating comparative insights, supporting cultural policymaking, and fostering regional cooperation in the fields of culture, creativity, and heritage governance.

Across the ECO region, cultural systems reflect rich histories, diverse traditions, and varied institutional models. Yet, despite this shared cultural wealth, cultural policy frameworks remain unevenly documented and insufficiently compared across countries. This limits opportunities for regional learning, reduces policy coherence, and constrains the development of shared approaches to cultural governance, creative economy growth, and heritage protection. This Special Issue responds to these challenges by offering a structured, comparative overview of cultural policy landscapes in the ECO region, drawing on available national documents, thematic research, and regional consultations.

The idea of an ECO Cultural Policy & Research Lab reflects ECI's forward looking institutional vision. While ECI has long served as a platform for cultural exchange and dialogue, the Institute is exploring ways to complement these activities with more systematic research and policy oriented work. The Lab is conceived as a flexible, knowledge driven concept that, if developed in the future, would consolidate comparative research, generate policy insights, and provide

advisory support to Member States upon request. Its potential areas of focus include cultural governance, creative and cultural industries, heritage management, digital culture, and youth engagement, with alignment to UNESCO and ISESCO frameworks. This Special Issue illustrates the type of analytical work that such a future mechanism could support, demonstrating the value of structured, comparative cultural policy research for the region.

The preparation of this publication has been carried out by the ECI staff through the systematic review of publicly available national sources, official documents, and relevant policy materials from across the ECO region. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy by consulting authoritative national platforms and verified institutional resources. While the publication does not reflect direct inputs from cultural authorities or national experts, it aims to present an objective and well structured overview based on the information accessible through official channels. This approach reflects ECI's commitment to producing reliable, research based knowledge products that support regional understanding and cultural policy development.

ECI welcomes feedback and reflections that may support the continued improvement of its research and publications.

As ECI advances its vision for enhanced research and policy engagement, this Special Issue serves as both a foundational reference and a demonstration of the potential benefits of a dedicated regional mechanism for cultural policy analysis in the future. It is our hope that the insights presented here will support policymakers, researchers, and cultural practitioners in advancing coherent, sustainable, and culturally grounded strategies across the region. ECI remains committed to deepening regional cooperation, expanding knowledge resources, and contributing to the development of a vibrant and interconnected cultural space within the ECO community.

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MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT ECI



**MUHAMMAD
HASSAN**

President

ECO Cultural Institute

Culture is one of the most powerful expressions of our shared humanity. It shapes identities, preserves collective memory, strengthens social cohesion, and serves as a bridge between peoples and nations. Across the ECO region, our rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions constitute an invaluable resource for fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and regional cooperation.

It is my pleasure to present this Special Issue of ECO Heritage, dedicated to a comparative overview of cultural policies in the Member States of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). This publication represents an important step in strengthening regional knowledge resources and advancing a deeper understanding of the cultural policy landscapes that shape cultural development across our region.

The ECO region encompasses a remarkable diversity of cultures, languages, traditions, and institutional experiences. While this diversity is a source of strength, information on cultural policy frameworks has often remained dispersed and insufficiently documented in a comparative manner. By bringing together available information from official national sources and policy documents, this publication seeks to provide a structured reference that supports knowledge-sharing, comparative learning, and informed discussion on cultural governance.

This Special Issue also reflects the ECO

Cultural Institute's broader vision to strengthen its analytical and research capacities. As part of this forward-looking approach, ECI is exploring the concept of an ECO Cultural Policy & Research Lab that could, in the future, serve as a platform for comparative studies, policy analysis, and knowledge generation in areas such as cultural governance, creative industries, heritage management, digital culture, and youth engagement. The present publication demonstrates the value of such work and the potential contribution that systematic cultural policy research can make to regional cooperation.

I commend the dedicated efforts of the ECI team in preparing this publication through the careful review of publicly available national documents, policy materials, and institutional sources from across the ECO region. Their work has resulted in a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, cultural institutions, and practitioners interested in the cultural development of our Member States.

It is my hope that this publication will encourage further dialogue, stimulate new research, and contribute to the development of more informed, coherent, and culturally grounded policies throughout the ECO region. Through continued cooperation and knowledge-sharing, we can strengthen the role of culture as a driver of sustainable development, social inclusion, and regional solidarity.

About

ECO CULTURAL INSTITUTE (ECI)



The ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) is a specialized cultural body of the Economic Cooperation Organization, established to strengthen cultural cooperation, deepen regional understanding, and promote the shared heritage of the ECO Member States. Its foundation is rooted in Article II of the Treaty of Izmir, which emphasizes the importance of consolidating cultural affinities and the fraternal ties that bind the peoples of the region. The Institute was formally re-established under its present name with the signing of its Charter in 1995, and Tehran was designated as its Headquarters. Since then, ECI has served as a central platform for cultural exchange, dialogue, and collaboration among the ten Member States of the ECO region.

ECI's mandate reflects the rich cultural diversity and historical interconnectedness of the region. The Institute works to highlight the shared cultural values, artistic traditions, and historical experiences that unite the Member States, while also celebrating the unique cultural expressions of each nation. Through its activities, ECI seeks to foster mutual understanding, strengthen cultural diplomacy, and contribute to the development of a cohesive regional cultural

identity.

Over the years, ECI has organized a wide range of cultural initiatives, including exhibitions, literary events, artistic programs, and publications that showcase the cultural heritage of the region. These activities have helped promote dialogue among artists, scholars, and cultural practitioners, and have contributed to greater visibility of the region's cultural richness at both regional and international levels. ECI has also supported the dissemination of cultural knowledge through the publication of books, journals, and research materials that document and celebrate the cultural traditions of the ECO Member States.

As the cultural landscape of the region evolves, ECI is increasingly focusing on strengthening its role as a knowledge based institution. In addition to its cultural programming, the Institute is expanding its engagement in research, cultural policy analysis, and the development of knowledge products that support Member States in addressing contemporary cultural challenges. This includes exploring new approaches to cultural governance, creative economy development, heritage protection, and the role of culture in sustainable

development.

In line with this forward looking direction, ECI is working to enhance its analytical capacities and develop new mechanisms that can support evidence based cultural policymaking in the region. Among these future oriented ideas is the establishment of an ECO Cultural Policy & Research Lab, envisioned as a platform that could consolidate comparative research, generate policy insights, and provide advisory support to Member States. While still a concept for future development, this direction reflects ECI's commitment to evolving in response to the needs of the region and contributing more actively to cultural policy dialogue.

Today, ECI continues to serve as a bridge among the cultures of the ECO region, promoting cooperation, dialogue, and shared understanding. Through its cultural programs, research initiatives, and commitment to regional collaboration, the Institute remains dedicated to nurturing a vibrant cultural space that reflects both the diversity and unity of the ECO community. As ECI advances its vision, it seeks to contribute meaningfully to the cultural vitality, regional cohesion, and long term cultural development of the ECO Member States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**“ECI APPRECIATES
ALL INSTITUTIONS
AND EXPERTS
WHO MADE THIS
PUBLICATION
POSSIBLE THROUGH
COOPERATION.”**

The ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) extends its sincere appreciation to the institutions, experts, and cultural authorities across the ECO Member States whose cooperation made this publication possible. The preparation of this volume benefited from the support of national ministries, cultural agencies, research institutions, and heritage organizations that facilitated access to information, documentation, and policy materials.

The Institute also acknowledges the valuable perspectives shared by cultural scholars and practitioners from across the ECO region, whose contributions have enriched the thematic reflections presented in this volume. Their insights—reflecting diverse professional backgrounds in heritage safeguarding, cultural governance, academic research, and regional cooperation—have strengthened the analytical depth and comparative understanding that underpin this publication.

ECI expresses gratitude to the editorial team, researchers, and coordinators involved in compiling, reviewing, and harmonizing the country chapters and thematic sections. Their dedication ensured that the publication adheres to the Institute’s commitment to accuracy, neutrality, and the promotion of shared cultural understanding among ECO Member States.

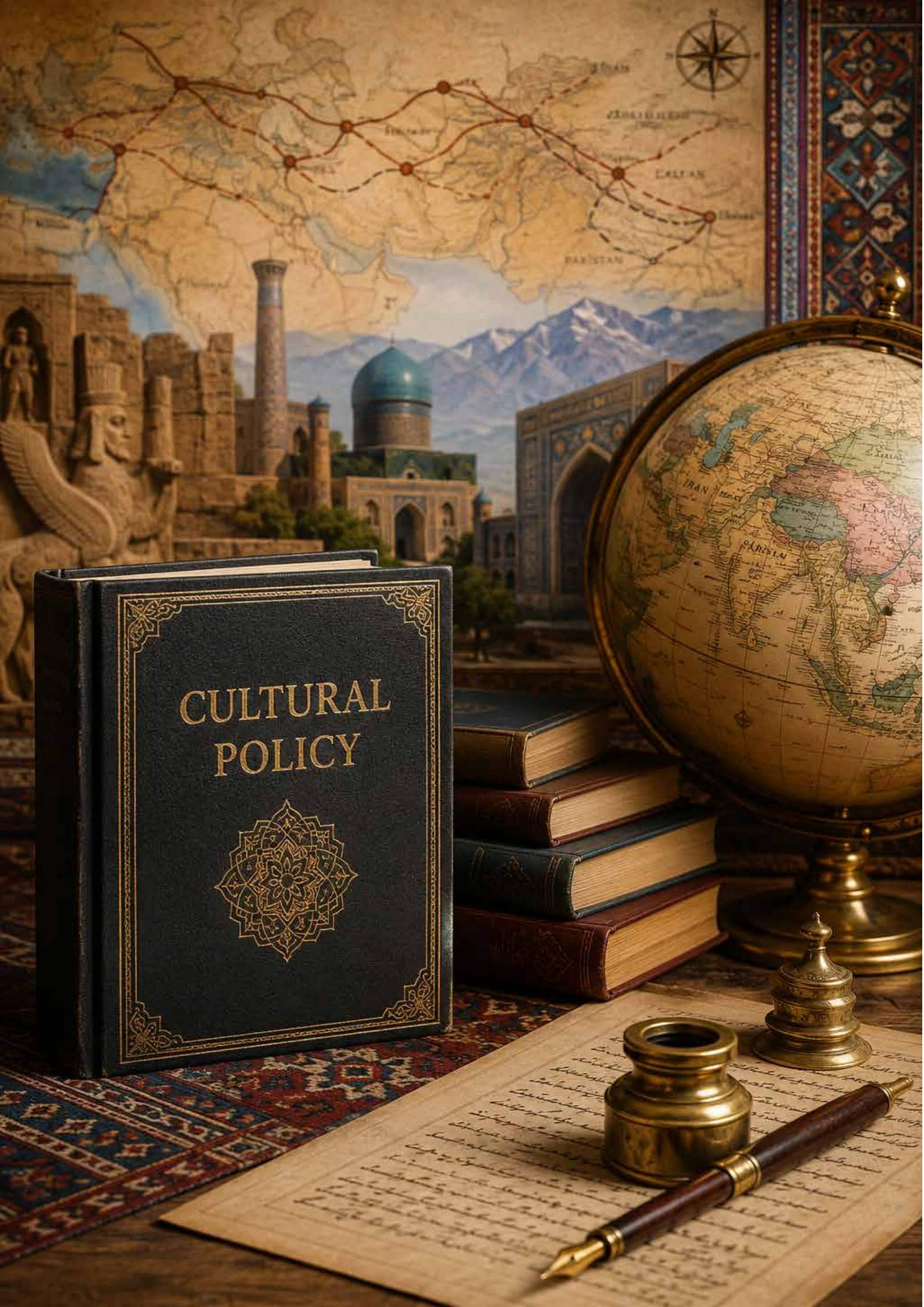
Finally, the ECO Cultural Institute reaffirms its appreciation to all partners who continue to support regional cultural cooperation. Their ongoing engagement contributes to the advancement of dialogue, mutual understanding, and the shared cultural future of the ECO region.

**“ECI reaffirms
commitment
to shared
cultural future
through
ongoing
regional
cooperation.”**

PART I:

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK & COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS





CULTURAL POLICY



SECTION 1.

FRAMING CULTURAL POLICY IN THE ECO REGION

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

1.1 Defining Cultural Policy in Contemporary Governance Contexts

Defining Cultural Policy in Contemporary Governance Context

Cultural policy is one of the most consequential dimensions of modern governance, shaping how societies preserve their heritage, express their identities, support creativity, and respond to social transformation. In the contemporary world, culture is no longer understood merely as a symbolic or artistic domain. It has become a strategic resource connected to education, economic growth, diplomacy, technology, tourism, and sustainable development. As globalization intensifies interactions among societies, cultural policy has emerged as an essential instrument for balancing national identity with international cooperation.

At its core, cultural policy encompasses the collection of laws, institutional arrangements, financial mechanisms, and strategic programs through which governments and organizations regulate, support, and promote cultural life. Its scope extends across museums, archives, libraries, performing arts, cinema, music, literature, cultural industries, heritage conservation, language preservation, digital creativity, and intercultural dialogue. Cultural policy also determines how societies distribute cultural resources, protect cultural rights, and ensure access to cultural participation for different communities.

Historically, the development of cultural policy is closely linked to the emergence of

modern nation-states. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, governments used cultural institutions such as museums, academies, monuments, and national theaters to consolidate national identity and social unity. Culture was bound up with state-building projects and historical narratives that reinforced political legitimacy and collective memory. Following the Second World War, international organizations — particularly UNESCO — encouraged countries to view culture as a universal human value connected to peacebuilding, international understanding, and human development. Many governments adopted policies designed to democratize access to culture by expanding public education, libraries, museums, and arts programs.

Different policy traditions reflect different understandings of the relationship between culture, society, and the state. In the state-centered model, governments play the dominant role in funding, regulating, and managing cultural institutions, emphasizing national heritage, public museums, and official cultural narratives. Market-oriented systems, by contrast, allow cultural production to be shaped primarily by private investment, commercial industries, and consumer demand, with governments playing a more facilitative role. More recent participatory and community-based approaches have sought to empower local communities, minority groups, youth, and indigenous populations to shape cultural life actively. Since the early twenty-first century, the creative economy model has gained considerable influence, framing creativity and innovation as economic resources capable of generating employment, exports, and urban development.

Culture as Development, Identity, and Soft Power

By the late twentieth century, globalization and technological transformation fundamentally changed the nature of cultural policy. The expansion of global media, migration, tourism, and digital communication created new opportunities for cultural exchange while simultaneously raising concerns about cultural homogenization and the erosion of local traditions. Governments increasingly recognized the need to protect cultural diversity while participating in the global cultural economy.

Today, cultural policy is understood as multidimensional and interdisciplinary. It intersects with economics, urban planning, education, communication, environmental policy, and international relations. Culture is now widely acknowledged as a soft power resource capable of enhancing a country's international image and diplomatic influence. States increasingly invest in cultural diplomacy, international exhibitions, film industries, festivals, and cultural exchanges to strengthen their global presence and cultivate bilateral relationships.

Heritage preservation — one of the oldest functions of cultural policy — encompasses both tangible assets such as historical monuments, archaeological sites, museums, manuscripts, and historic cities, and intangible dimensions including oral traditions, music and dance, rituals and festivals, traditional craftsmanship, culinary heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems. Preservation policies involve restoration, legal protection, documentation, research, public education, and digital archiving,

and have become especially important in regions affected by conflict, environmental degradation, or rapid urbanization. Alongside heritage, governments support artistic production through grants, scholarships, cultural institutions, and festivals. Language policy constitutes another central element, since language carries historical memory and cultural identity; governments may promote national languages, support multilingualism, or protect minority languages through education and media. Increasingly, cultural policy also addresses cultural rights — viewing access to cultural participation as part of broader human rights frameworks and seeking to reduce inequalities by supporting marginalized groups.

From Heritage Preservation to Creative Economy Systems

Digital technology has transformed cultural production and access in ways that challenge traditional policy frameworks. Museums provide virtual exhibitions, artists distribute work online, and digital archives preserve endangered cultural materials. Cultural policy must therefore address digital preservation, intellectual property, online access, and technological innovation alongside its more traditional concerns.

The growth of creative industries represents one of the most significant recent shifts in cultural governance. Creative sectors — including gaming, digital design, advertising, animation, film production, music, publishing, and cultural tourism — are among the fastest-growing in the global economy, and governments increasingly integrate them into national development strategies. Cities invest in cultural infrastructure, innovation districts, design centres, and creative entrepreneurship programs. Urban cultural development has become central to regeneration strategies, with museums, festivals, public art, and creative districts used to attract tourism, investment, and talent. Climate change and environmental concerns have also entered cultural policy, as heritage sites face risks from degradation and as traditional ecological knowledge gains recognition for sustainable development. Countries are moreover using culture as a diplomatic instrument with increasing sophistication, deploying international cultural centres, language institutes, exhibitions, and exchange programs to strengthen international relations and promote mutual understanding. Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and digital communication are now reshaping creative sectors in ways that require governments to address digital copyright, ethical AI use, digital preservation, and equitable access to

online cultural resources.

Despite growing recognition of culture's importance, cultural policy continues to face persistent challenges: insufficient public funding, political interference in cultural institutions, commercialization pressures, threats to heritage from conflict and climate change, unequal access to digital technologies, decline of traditional practices, and the migration of artists and cultural professionals to more enabling environments. Balancing heritage preservation with innovation remains one of the central dilemmas of contemporary cultural governance, and one that takes on particular urgency in regions of rich civilizational diversity such as the ECO.

1.2 Global Cultural Policy Trends and Regional Implications

UNESCO Cultural Frameworks and Global Standards

International organizations have become major actors in global cultural governance, establishing the standards, conventions, and policy frameworks within which national and regional cultural policies increasingly operate. Among them, UNESCO plays the leading role in articulating international norms for heritage protection, cultural diversity, and creative development. Since its establishment after the Second World War, UNESCO has promoted the idea that culture is essential for peace, human dignity, and international cooperation, framing cultural diversity not as a source of division but as a foundation for dialogue and development. UNESCO's cultural governance philosophy rests on several core principles: protection of cultural heritage, respect for cultural diversity, promotion of cultural rights, encouragement of creativity and innovation, international cultural cooperation, and the integration of culture into sustainable development.

UNESCO's conventions have established a comprehensive international framework for cultural policy. The 1972 World Heritage Convention created an international system for identifying and protecting cultural and natural sites of outstanding universal value, while the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage extended international protection to living traditions — oral traditions, music and dance, festivals, traditional craftsmanship, culinary heritage, and folk knowledge — recognizing their role in cultural continuity

and identity. The 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions affirmed that cultural goods and services carry social and symbolic value beyond their economic function, encouraging governments to support local cultural industries, protect artistic freedom, promote diverse expressions, and strengthen creative entrepreneurship. Together, these instruments encourage countries to develop legal protections, institutional mechanisms, and policy strategies consistent with internationally recognized best practices while adapting them to regional realities. For ECO member states, participation in UNESCO frameworks provides international recognition for cultural sites and traditions, access to technical expertise and capacity-building support, incentives for policy harmonization, and pathways for regional cooperation through joint nominations, cultural routes, and shared research initiatives.

Digital Transformation and Cultural Governance

Digital technology is reshaping cultural production, preservation, and access at a pace that challenges existing policy frameworks. Across the world, cultural institutions are deploying digital platforms for education and public outreach, creating virtual exhibitions and online archives, and using digital tools to document and disseminate endangered cultural materials. For governments, digitalization offers the opportunity to expand public access to cultural resources, engage youth through digital creativity, and promote regional culture internationally through online channels.

At the same time, digital transformation exposes and can amplify existing inequalities in technological infrastructure and digital literacy. Countries and institutions with advanced digital capacities can expand cultural reach dramatically, while those with limited connectivity and resources risk being further marginalized in the global cultural economy. Platform culture — shaped by social media, streaming services, and global digital networks — increasingly defines how younger generations engage with and produce culture, often bypassing traditional institutional channels. Cultural policy must therefore grapple with how to support digital cultural production while preserving the diversity of cultural expressions that commercial platforms may not prioritize. Artificial intelligence raises further governance questions around digital copyright, authorship, the ethical use of AI in creative sectors, and the authenticity of

algorithmically generated cultural content. Effective digital cultural policy requires investment in technological infrastructure, training for cultural professionals, development of regional digital archives, protection of digital cultural rights, and coordinated regional approaches to ensure that digital transformation strengthens rather than erodes cultural diversity.

Creative Economy as a Development Paradigm

The framing of culture as an economic resource — captured in the concept of the creative economy — represents one of the most significant shifts in global cultural policy over the past two decades. Creative industries, which include cinema and film,

music, publishing, fashion and design, digital media, animation and gaming, handicrafts, and advertising, are among the fastest-growing sectors in the global economy. Governments increasingly recognize that creative sectors contribute to economic diversification, employment generation, youth innovation, international competitiveness, and digital transformation. Cities around the world invest in cultural infrastructure,

1.2

GLOBAL CULTURAL POLICY TRENDS AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

1. UNESCO FRAMEWORKS

UNESCO CORE PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL GOVERNANCE



Protect Heritage



Respect Diversity



Promote Rights



Encourage Creativity



Foster Cooperation



Integrate Sustainable Development

KEY UNESCO CONVENTIONS TIMELINE

1972



World Heritage Convention

2003



Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention

2005



Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ECO



Recognize cultural sites and traditions



Access expertise and capacity support



Harmonize policies and best practices



Strengthen regional cooperation

2. FOUR GLOBAL TRENDS

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION



Culture created, accessed and shared digitally.

KEY IMPLICATION:
Invest in digital infrastructure and skills.

CREATIVE ECONOMY



Creative industries drive jobs and economic value.

KEY IMPLICATION:
Strengthen creative enterprises and market access.

SUSTAINABILITY & CLIMATE



Culture contributes to climate action and resilience.

KEY IMPLICATION:
Integrate culture in climate and sustainability strategies.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



Cross-border collaboration builds shared prosperity.

KEY IMPLICATION:
Deepen partnerships and knowledge exchange.

3. OPPORTUNITIES VS CHALLENGES



OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Expand access to cultural resources
- ✓ Create jobs and support inclusive economies
- ✓ Leverage digital tools to reach wider audiences
- ✓ Strengthen cultural identity and social cohesion



CHALLENGES

- ✗ Limited investment in cultural infrastructure
- ✗ Inadequate copyright protection and market access
- ✗ Skills and capacity gaps
- ✗ Risk of cultural homogenization and loss of diversity

creative hubs, and innovation districts as part of broader urban and economic development strategies.

The creative economy paradigm connects cultural policy directly to development agendas, positioning creativity and cultural production as engines of social and economic progress. UNESCO's emphasis on creativity and the diversity of cultural expressions aligns with regional efforts to diversify national economies, expand employment opportunities, encourage entrepreneurship, and promote digital transformation. Young people play a central role in this shift, as digital technologies allow artists, filmmakers, musicians, and designers to reach international audiences more easily than in previous generations. However, creative sectors in many countries continue to face structural obstacles: limited investment and infrastructure, weak copyright protection, restricted market access, inadequate training opportunities, and the migration of creative professionals to more enabling environments. Globalization, while creating new opportunities for cultural exchange and creative collaboration, also raises concerns about cultural standardization and the dominance of a small number of highly capitalized cultural industries from wealthier economies. Cultural policy must therefore find ways to harness the growth of creative industries while protecting the diversity of cultural expressions that give regional cultures their distinctive vitality. Sustainability has also entered the cultural policy agenda: heritage sites face growing risks from environmental degradation, while traditional ecological knowledge is increasingly recognized as valuable for addressing climate resilience — underscoring the need for cultural policies that integrate environmental stewardship alongside economic and social objectives.

1.3 The ECO Cultural Space: Historical and Civilizational Context

Silk Road Continuities and Civilizational Intersections

The Economic Cooperation Organization encompasses one of the most historically interconnected and civilizational rich regions in the world. Extending across Central Asia, South Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, the ECO region connects civilizations that have interacted for centuries through trade, migration, scholarship, religion, literature, and artistic exchange. The

cultural richness of the region is reflected in its languages, traditions, architecture, music, crafts, cuisines, and knowledge systems, which together form a unique civilizational mosaic of extraordinary depth and diversity.

The historical foundations of this cultural space are inseparable from the great transregional networks that connected Asia, the Middle East, and Europe across millennia. The Silk Road played a particularly defining role in facilitating the movement of goods, ideas, technologies, religions, and artistic traditions across the region. Merchants, scholars, poets, architects, and travelers contributed to the circulation of cultural knowledge and artistic innovation, making the cities of the ECO region among the most important centers of learning, commerce, and cultural production in the premodern world. Shared influences can be observed across architectural traditions, miniature painting, music and calligraphy, textile production, literature, and urban design, testifying to centuries of creative dialogue across linguistic and ethnic boundaries.

The region also produced many of the most influential thinkers, scientists, philosophers, and poets in global intellectual history. Scientific discoveries, literary traditions, and philosophical schools emerging from the region shaped intellectual developments far beyond its geographical borders, and the legacies of this productivity continue to form an important part of the shared cultural memory that connects ECO member states today. Religious and spiritual traditions — above all Islam, alongside other historical religious communities — contributed to the formation of shared ethical values, educational systems, artistic forms, and architectural styles. Mosques, shrines, madrasas, libraries, and historical urban centres remain powerful symbols of this layered heritage.

Turkic, Persian, Islamic, and South Asian Cultural Systems

The ECO cultural space is defined not by a single civilizational tradition but by the deep and ongoing interaction among several major cultural systems. Persian literary and artistic traditions have exerted a profound influence across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and South Asia, shaping poetic forms, musical traditions, architectural vocabularies, and philosophical thought over many centuries. Turkic cultural traditions — expressed in epic literature, music, textile arts, oral poetry, and nomadic heritage — constitute another foundational strand, extending across Central Asia and into Anatolia and the Caucasus. Islamic cultural traditions, cutting

across both Persian and Turkic worlds and deeply embedded in South Asian cultures as well, provided a common framework of values, aesthetics, and institutional forms that helped bind the region together even as local expressions diverged.

South Asian cultural contributions add yet another dimension to the ECO cultural space. The civilizations of the Indian subcontinent, with their rich traditions in literature, music, visual arts, textile production, and philosophical thought, have intersected with Central Asian and Middle Eastern cultures for centuries, producing distinctive hybrid forms that continue to shape the cultural life of Pakistan and Afghanistan and to resonate across the wider region. Poetry and literature occupy a place of special importance across all these traditions: classical poetic forms have historically functioned as vehicles for philosophical reflection, spiritual thought, ethical values, and cultural memory, and literary exchanges across languages and regions contributed to a shared intellectual heritage that continues to animate cultural life. Traditional arts and craftsmanship — carpet weaving, ceramics, calligraphy, miniature painting, textile arts, wood carving, metalwork — represent both cultural heritage and living economic opportunity. Music and performing arts, folk traditions, culinary heritage, and shared values of hospitality and community further underscore the deep cultural interconnections that give the ECO region its distinctive character.

Shared Heritage and Fragmented Institutions

Although the ECO region possesses a strong foundation of shared civilizational heritage, the institutional landscape of cultural governance across member states remains uneven and fragmented. The development of cultural policy in ECO countries has been shaped by different historical trajectories, political systems, colonial and post-colonial experiences, and nation-building processes. During the twentieth century, many states established centralized cultural institutions focused on heritage preservation, arts promotion, and national identity formation. Over time, however, globalization, urbanization, technological change, and economic transformation broadened the scope of cultural governance, and contemporary cultural policies increasingly include support for creative industries, cultural tourism, digital cultural initiatives, youth participation, and international cultural exchange.

Despite these common directions of policy evolution, the level of institutional

capacity and policy implementation varies significantly among member states. Some countries possess well-developed cultural infrastructures, substantial international cultural networks, and advanced digital capacities; others continue to face financial, technological, and administrative constraints that limit effective cultural governance. Coordination between ministries, municipalities, universities, cultural organizations, and private actors is often limited even within individual countries. At the regional level, institutional mechanisms for sustained cultural cooperation within the ECO framework remain underdeveloped relative to economic cooperation structures, despite the civilizational connections that provide a strong rationale for deeper collaboration. Migration and brain drain affect many ECO countries, as artists, researchers, and cultural professionals seek more enabling environments abroad. Heritage faces ongoing threats from conflict, environmental degradation, urban expansion, illicit trafficking, and climate change. Rural communities and marginalized groups often have limited access to cultural institutions and educational opportunities. The ECO region thus presents a striking paradox: extraordinary civilizational wealth and deeply interconnected cultural heritage coexist with fragmented institutions, unequal capacities, and unrealized potential for regional cultural cooperation. Addressing this gap — and building the institutional architecture that the region's civilizational unity deserves — is among the central challenges of ECO cultural policy in the twenty-first century.

1.4 Analytical Approach and Methodology

Country Profiling Framework

This publication adopts a structured and comparative analytical framework designed to produce systematic insights into cultural policy across ECO member states while remaining sensitive to the significant differences in historical context, institutional capacity, and policy orientation that characterize the region. The country profiling approach at the heart of the analytical method was developed to ensure consistency and comparability across all ten member states — Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — while allowing sufficient flexibility to capture each country's distinctive cultural landscape.

This section is an analytical and descriptive synthesis prepared for comparative and research purposes, and does not represent an official policy position or endorsement of the ECO Cultural Institute (ECI).

Each country profile is structured as an analytical reference sheet organized around a uniform template covering governance architecture, legislative and institutional frameworks, heritage systems, creative industries, digital cultural transformation, cultural education, and international cultural diplomacy. This template approach allows readers to compare how different countries address common cultural policy challenges while also identifying the particular strengths, gaps, and strategic priorities that define each national cultural system. The profiles are designed to serve both as standalone reference resources for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working on specific countries, and as building blocks for the comparative regional analysis presented in Section 2 of this publication.

Comparative Indicators and Thematic Axes

The comparative analysis draws on a set of thematic axes that cut across all country profiles, enabling systematic regional assessment. These axes include: governance models and institutional architectures; the scope and depth of heritage protection systems for both tangible and intangible heritage; the development and export capacity of creative and cultural industries; progress in digital cultural transformation; the strength of cultural education and knowledge transmission systems; the nature and ambition of international cultural cooperation and diplomacy; and the availability and quality of cultural data and monitoring systems. Together, these axes provide a

multidimensional picture of cultural policy across the ECO region, highlighting both areas of relative strength and persistent gaps.

Where quantitative indicators are available — including UNESCO reporting data, cultural trade statistics, World Heritage Site counts, and national budget allocations to culture — they are incorporated to provide an empirical grounding for comparative assessments. However, given the significant variation in statistical capacity across ECO member states, the analysis places equal weight on qualitative assessment of policy frameworks, institutional structures, and strategic directions. The thematic axes also inform the deep-dive chapters in Section 4, which examine cross-cutting issues in greater detail, and the strategic recommendations in Section 8, which draw on comparative insights to identify priorities for regional cultural cooperation.

Data Limitations and Interpretive Scope

Any comparative analysis of cultural policy across a diverse region such as the ECO must acknowledge significant data limitations. Statistical capacity for the cultural sector varies considerably among member states: while some countries have well-developed cultural statistics systems and regularly report to international bodies such as UNESCO, others have limited data collection infrastructure and irregular reporting practices. This means that quantitative comparisons must be treated with caution, and that the absence of data should not be interpreted as the absence of cultural activity.

The profiles and comparative analysis presented in this publication draw on a range of sources, including national legislation and policy documents, UNESCO convention reporting, government ministry publications, academic research, international organization assessments, and expert consultations. Where official data is unavailable or incomplete, the analysis relies on the best available secondary sources and clearly notes interpretive limitations. The scope of this publication is analytical rather than evaluative: its purpose is to map the cultural policy landscape of the ECO region, identify patterns and divergences, and surface strategic opportunities for regional cooperation — not to rank or assess the performance of individual member states against normative benchmarks. It is offered as a resource to support evidence-informed policymaking, regional dialogue, and further research, and it is hoped that it will contribute to the development of stronger cultural data systems and more sustained comparative analysis within the ECO framework over time.

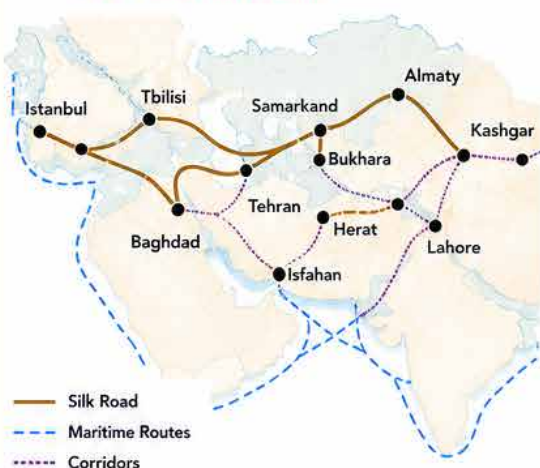
1.3

THE ECO CULTURAL SPACE: HISTORICAL AND CIVILIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Shared Heritage • Civilizational Intersections • Shared Future

1. SILK ROAD CONTINUITIES AND CIVILIZATIONAL INTERSECTIONS

SILK ROAD NETWORK



LEGACIES THAT ENDURE

- Knowledge & ideas
- Learning & commerce hubs
- Arts, music & architecture
- Thinkers & philosophers
- Heritage & traditions

CIVILIZATIONAL MOSAIC

- | | | |
|------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Languages | Traditions | Architecture |
| Music | Crafts | Cuisines |
| Literature | Knowledge Systems | Spiritual Heritage |

2. TURKIC, PERSIAN, ISLAMIC AND SOUTH ASIAN CULTURAL SYSTEMS

CULTURAL TRADITIONS

PERSIAN TRADITIONS



- Poetry & literature
- Calligraphy
- Philosophy
- Sciences
- Art & architecture

TURKIC TRADITIONS



- Oral epics
- Music & folk arts
- Nomadic heritage
- Hospitality
- Martial traditions

ISLAMIC TRADITIONS



- Faith & ethics
- Scholarship
- Law & justice
- Science
- Unity & solidarity

SOUTH ASIAN TRADITIONS



- Spiritual heritage
- Music & dance
- Textiles & crafts
- Philosophy
- Cultural diversity

SHARED CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS



Poetry & Literature



Arts & Crafts



Music & Performing Arts



Folk Traditions & Oral Heritage



Culinary Heritage



Values of Hospitality & Community

3. SHARED HERITAGE AND FRAGMENTED INSTITUTIONS

STRENGTHS: A SHARED FOUNDATION

- Civilizational unity
- Rich heritage & knowledge
- Cultural identity & dialogue
- Youth, creativity & digital transformation
- New opportunities

CHALLENGES: FRAGMENTED REALITIES

- Weak institutions
- Limited coordination
- Brain drain
- Conflict & instability
- Climate change risks

OPPORTUNITIES: THE WAY FORWARD

- Regional cooperation
- Stronger institutions
- Invest in people
- Innovation & creativity
- Sustainable development

SECTION 2.

Cultural Policy Landscapes Across the ECO Region

Comparative Analytical Synthesis

Editorial Note: How to Read This Section

This section is not a summary of the country profiles presented in Part II — readers should consult those profiles for national-level detail. Its purpose is different and more ambitious: to identify the cross-cutting patterns, structural tensions, and strategic insights that only become visible when the ten ECO member states are examined together as a regional system.

Three arguments run through the analysis that follows. First, the ECO region operates as a multi-speed cultural system: member states share deep civilizational foundations while operating at fundamentally different levels of institutional capacity and creative economy development. Second, this asymmetry is not only a challenge but also a source of complementarity — one that, if deliberately harnessed, can become the basis for a genuinely differentiated and mutually beneficial regional cooperation framework. Third, the most durable pathways toward regional cultural integration are those that build on shared civilizational heritage rather than attempting to impose uniform institutional models on a profoundly diverse regional landscape.

Each subsection concludes with a Key Finding that distills the analytical insight most relevant to regional policy. Where practitioner perspectives illuminate the analysis in ways that data alone cannot, Field Perspective inserts draw on voices gathered from policymakers, cultural professionals, and community practitioners across the region.

2.1 Overview: The ECO Region as a Multi-Speed Cultural System

Structural Diversity and Institutional Asymmetry

The ECO member states collectively constitute one of the most historically layered and culturally interconnected regions on the planet. Spanning from Anatolia and the Iranian plateau through the Caucasus, Central Asia, and into South Asia, the region encompasses an extraordinary breadth of civilizational traditions, governance legacies, and contemporary cultural realities. What makes this region analytically complex is not only its richness, however, but the deep structural diversity that extends into the very architecture of how culture is governed, funded, produced, and transmitted.

A defining feature of the ECO cultural landscape is institutional asymmetry: the wide variation in cultural governance capacity, institutional depth, creative economy maturity, digital infrastructure, and international cultural engagement across member states. This asymmetry reflects centuries of distinct historical trajectories, colonial and post-colonial transformations, Soviet administrative legacies, and uneven integration into global cultural networks. As a result, the ECO region does not function as a single-speed cultural system but as a multi-speed one — in which some member states operate highly developed, internationally visible cultural economies alongside others that are still consolidating foundational cultural institutions and national identity

frameworks.

This has important policy implications: regional cultural cooperation cannot proceed on the assumption of uniform capacity or shared institutional readiness. Effective cooperation requires differentiated approaches that recognise the varying stages at which member states engage with heritage preservation, creative economy development, digital transformation, and multilateral cultural diplomacy. Crucially, however, asymmetry should not obscure the equally important reality of deep civilizational convergence: shared linguistic affinities, interwoven literary traditions, overlapping spiritual and artistic heritage, and centuries of Silk Road interaction that continue to bind the region's diverse societies together.

The ECO region is also marked by a persistent tension between tradition and change. Long-established cultural systems — oral epic traditions, manuscript cultures, classical music forms, religious architectural heritage, craft economies — coexist with rapidly expanding digital cultures, youth-driven creative industries, and transnational cultural flows. Governments and cultural institutions across the region are navigating the challenge of preserving cultural authenticity while simultaneously adapting to shifting demographics, technological disruption, urbanization, and evolving public expectations. This navigational challenge is itself a defining feature of the contemporary ECO cultural landscape.

Country	Heritage Assets	Creative Economy	Digital Culture	Cultural Diplomacy	Overall Cultural Capacity
Afghanistan	High	Emerging	Emerging	Limited	Developing
Azerbaijan	High	Medium	Medium	High	Strong
Iran	Very High	High	Medium	High	Very Strong
Kazakhstan	High	Medium-High	High	High	Strong
Kyrgyzstan	Medium	Emerging	Medium	Medium	Moderate
Pakistan	Very High	High	Medium	Medium	Strong
Tajikistan	Medium	Emerging	Emerging	Medium	Moderate
Türkiye	Very High	Very High	High	Very High	Leading
Turkmenistan	Medium	Emerging	Emerging	Medium	Moderate
Uzbekistan	Very High	Medium-High	Medium	High	Strong

Table.1: Comparative Cultural Policy Landscape of ECO Member States

Cultural Clusters Across Member States

While each ECO member state presents a distinct cultural policy profile, a cluster-based reading reveals four broad typologies that illuminate patterns of institutional capacity, governance approach, and creative economy development. The table below summarises these clusters; they are referenced throughout the analysis that follows.

These clusters are analytical tools, not fixed categories. Member states within each cluster differ significantly in specific dimensions, and several are actively transitioning toward higher levels of institutional capacity. The cluster framework is intended to inform differentiated cooperation strategies, not to fix expectations or reinforce hierarchies.

2.2 Governance Models and Institutional Architectures

Cultural governance across the ECO region takes three broad forms — centralised, federal/decentralised, and hybrid transitional — each with distinct advantages, limitations, and policy implications. Understanding these governance models is essential for designing cooperation frameworks that are institutionally realistic.

Centralised Systems

Across a significant portion of the ECO region, cultural governance remains strongly state-led, with national ministries of culture serving as primary authorities over heritage protection, museum management,

archival systems, artistic programming, and international cultural representation. This model is most prominently evident in Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan, where the state plays a defining role not only in cultural administration but in shaping cultural narratives, managing collective memory, and establishing parameters for public cultural expression. Centralised governance enables large-scale, coordinated investment in heritage restoration, national commemorative programming, and flagship cultural institutions. It facilitates consistent policy implementation across wide geographic areas and allows governments to mobilise cultural resources in support of national development objectives, tourism strategies, and diplomatic goals. Several ECO member states have achieved notable successes in heritage conservation precisely through

► Key Finding 2.1 — Asymmetry as the Starting Point for Cooperation

The ECO region's profound institutional asymmetry is not an obstacle to regional cultural cooperation — it is its defining condition. Effective cooperation frameworks must be designed around differentiated capacities and complementary assets, not modelled on assumed uniformity.

Cluster	Member States	Defining Characteristics	Key Policy Priority
I — Heritage Powerhouses	Iran, Türkiye	Mature cultural institutions; internationally integrated creative economies; robust cultural diplomacy	Creative economy competitiveness & digital transition
II — Strategic Investors	Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan	Culture-led development; Silk Road branding; rapid heritage tourism growth	Heritage monetisation & international positioning
III — Identity Builders	Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan	Post-Soviet nation-building; nomadic/Persianate revival; centralised governance	Language revival & intangible heritage safeguarding
IV — Complex Landscapes	Pakistan, Afghanistan	Federal/conflict contexts; rich informal economies; South Asian civilizational depth	Institutional resilience & informal economy support

strong central institutional authority.

At the same time, highly centralised systems may constrain institutional flexibility, responsiveness to local cultural needs, and the enabling environment for independent artistic expression and market-based creative industries. In several member states, the space for independent cultural actors — artists, NGOs, cultural enterprises, community organisations — operating outside state frameworks remains limited, which can narrow the diversity and innovation of the broader cultural ecosystem.

Federal and Decentralised Systems

Pakistan represents the most developed example of federal cultural governance among ECO member states. Following significant constitutional reforms, cultural affairs have been substantially devolved to provincial governments, creating a multi-tiered governance architecture in which national and provincial authorities share responsibilities for heritage protection, arts funding, cultural education, and international cultural representation. This devolutionary model has opened important opportunities for locally driven cultural initiatives, the recognition of regional identities, and the development of culturally specific heritage and arts programmes tailored to provincial contexts.

The federal model also presents distinct coordination challenges: ensuring coherence between national cultural policy objectives and provincial programmes, managing heritage assets of national or international significance across provincial jurisdictions,

and maintaining consistent quality in cultural education and institutional management. Pakistan's vibrant media sector, large youth population, and expanding digital creative industries add further complexity, creating dynamic cultural spaces that often operate with significant autonomy from formal governmental frameworks.

Kyrgyzstan presents a further instructive example of relatively decentralised cultural governance within the Central Asian context, with civil society organisations and community-based cultural groups playing a notably active role — particularly in the stewardship of nomadic intangible heritage, oral epic traditions, and community-based craft and festival practices.

Hybrid Transitional Models

Several ECO member states are navigating transitions from more centralised governance models toward increasingly pluralistic and multi-stakeholder cultural systems — a process that may be described as hybrid transitional governance. Türkiye represents the most advanced example: while the state continues to play a significant role through the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, municipalities, universities, private cultural foundations, creative industries, independent artists, and civil society organisations increasingly contribute to the definition, funding, and management of cultural life. Istanbul exemplifies this dynamic, functioning as a space where public institutions, market actors, and civic cultural organisations interact in complex and sometimes contested ways.

Kazakhstan similarly reflects a hybrid model in which strategic state planning and investment in national cultural institutions coexist with growing private sector and international engagement in creative industries and cultural diplomacy. Uzbekistan is also undergoing significant institutional evolution, opening new spaces for private cultural enterprise, tourism-linked cultural industries, and international cultural partnership while maintaining strong state involvement in heritage governance. Digital transformation is playing an increasingly important role across all transitional models, enabling new forms of cultural participation, audience engagement, and institutional reach that both complement and sometimes challenge established state-led frameworks.

2.3 Cultural Heritage Systems: Monumental and Living Traditions

World Heritage Civilizations

The ECO region encompasses some of the world's most significant concentrations of tangible cultural heritage — monumental evidence of civilisations that shaped global history and continue to anchor national and regional identities. The historic cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Shakhrisabz in Uzbekistan; the architectural landscapes of Isfahan, Persepolis, and Yazd in Iran; Istanbul, Göbekli Tepe, and Çatalhöyük in Türkiye; the archaeological heritage of Mohenjo-daro and the Gandhara

► Key Finding 2.2 — Governance Diversity Requires Cooperation Architecture Flexibility

No single model of cultural governance dominates the ECO region. Regional cooperation frameworks must be flexible enough to engage effectively with centralised state ministries, federal provincial structures, and hybrid multi-stakeholder systems simultaneously — without defaulting to one-size-fits-all institutional assumptions.

civilisation in Pakistan; the medieval citadel of Baku in Azerbaijan; and the ancient sites of Merv and Nisa in Turkmenistan — these are among the anchor assets of a regional heritage landscape spanning millennia and multiple civilisational layers.

UNESCO World Heritage designations across the ECO region reflect the exceptional density and diversity of this monumental heritage. Member states have invested significantly in heritage conservation, site management, and heritage tourism infrastructure — with major investments particularly visible in Uzbekistan's Silk Road restoration programmes, Iran's ongoing conservation of its civilisational monuments, and Türkiye's extensive heritage management system that spans Ottoman, Byzantine, Anatolian, and Islamic

architectural legacies. Heritage restoration and site interpretation are increasingly integrated into broader tourism development and cultural diplomacy strategies.

However, the distribution of World Heritage assets and associated conservation infrastructure is uneven across the ECO region. Afghanistan — despite possessing an extraordinarily layered civilisational heritage, including the archaeological landscapes of Balkh and Herat, the pre-Islamic heritage of Bamiyan, and diverse Islamic-era architectural traditions — faces severe preservation challenges driven by decades of conflict and institutional disruption. The vulnerability of Afghanistan's heritage assets underscores the critical importance of regional solidarity and international cooperation in heritage protection.

Intangible Heritage and Oral Traditions

Alongside its monumental heritage, the ECO region is home to an extraordinary richness of living cultural traditions: the oral epic traditions of Central Asia, including the Kyrgyz Epic of Manas; the classical music forms of Iran (Radif), Uzbekistan (Shashmaqam), and Azerbaijan (Mugham); the nomadic material culture and equestrian traditions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; traditional craft systems of carpet weaving across Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan; the Sufi musical and spiritual traditions of Pakistan and Afghanistan; and the diverse performing arts, festival cultures, and culinary traditions distributed across all member states.

Country	Representative Intangible Heritage
Afghanistan	Attan Dance and Oral Traditions
Azerbaijan	Mugham
Iran	Radif of Persian Music
Kazakhstan	Dombra Performance Tradition
Kyrgyzstan	Epic of Manas
Pakistan	Qawwali
Tajikistan	Falak Music
Türkiye	Mevlevi Sema Ceremony
Turkmenistan	Dutar Performance Tradition
Uzbekistan	Shashmaqam

Table 2. Major Intangible Heritage Traditions Across the ECO Region

Intangible cultural heritage has gained growing recognition across the ECO region, supported in significant part by the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. UNESCO inscriptions have catalysed national efforts to document, transmit, and revitalise living heritage traditions, raising public and governmental awareness of the importance of safeguarding cultural practices at risk

from modernisation, urbanisation, and demographic change.

Community transmission remains the primary mechanism for the reproduction of intangible heritage across the ECO region — a reality that underscores the critical importance of community engagement in cultural policy. Master-apprentice relationships, family-based transmission, festival and ceremonial contexts, and informal community learning

remain essential pathways through which traditional knowledge, performing arts, craft skills, and oral traditions are passed between generations. Cultural policies that fail to support these community-based transmission systems risk accelerating the erosion of living heritage traditions, regardless of the sophistication of formal institutional frameworks.

Heritage Risk and Preservation Gaps

Despite significant investments in heritage conservation, a range of structural risks continue to threaten the long-term integrity of cultural heritage assets across the ECO region. Urban development pressures represent one of the most pervasive threats: rapid urbanisation has led to encroachment on historic urban cores, demolition or deterioration of historic structures, and the displacement of traditional community practices. Countries including Pakistan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Iran have experienced significant tensions between urban development imperatives and the preservation of historic urban landscapes.

Environmental pressure and climate change represent growing and underappreciated risks. Archaeological sites and historic urban landscapes are vulnerable to flooding, desertification, soil erosion, and temperature extremes. The Silk Road oasis cities embedded in fragile desert ecosystems face particular vulnerability. Heritage risk management frameworks that integrate climate adaptation considerations remain at early stages of development in most ECO member states.

Conflict-related heritage loss remains the most acute dimension of heritage risk in the region, most critically in Afghanistan. The deliberate targeting of cultural heritage as an instrument of conflict, alongside collateral damage from warfare and displacement, has caused irreversible losses in some of the world's most significant cultural landscapes. Finally, intergenerational transmission gaps — the failure to maintain meaningful connections between younger generations and living heritage traditions — represent a systemic risk across the entire ECO region. As younger populations engage increasingly with digital cultures and global entertainment forms, the appeal and accessibility of traditional cultural practices may diminish unless deliberate efforts are made to create relevant, dynamic pathways for youth engagement with heritage.

2.4 Creative Economy and Cultural Industries

Export-Oriented Cultural Economies

Among ECO member states, Türkiye has developed the most internationally visible and

commercially advanced creative economy — one that increasingly functions as an engine of cultural soft power and economic growth. Turkish television drama series have achieved extraordinary global reach, broadcast in dozens of countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, and Latin America, generating substantial export revenues and exercising significant cultural influence. Turkish cinema, music, publishing, fashion, design, architecture, and gastronomy similarly contribute to a diverse and internationally oriented creative sector. Istanbul functions as the production hub of this ecosystem, concentrating creative talent, media infrastructure, design industries, and international cultural networks.

Iran maintains a dynamic cultural economy of considerable sophistication, particularly in cinema, literature, visual arts, handicrafts, and publishing. Iranian cinema has achieved sustained international recognition, consistently winning major awards at international film festivals and building global audiences. Iranian handicrafts — most notably carpet weaving — represent significant export-oriented cultural industries with long-established international market presence. Literary and publishing traditions remain strong, with Persian-language literature attracting international attention and translation.

Pakistan has experienced rapid and largely market-driven growth in its creative sectors, particularly in media, music, fashion, and digital content. The country's large and youthful population, combined with rapidly expanding digital platform access, has created fertile conditions for cultural entrepreneurship, with Pakistani music, drama, fashion design, and digital content creators building substantial domestic and diaspora audiences.

Emerging Creative Systems

Several ECO member states are deliberately building more robust creative economy infrastructure, using a combination of state investment, heritage-linked tourism development, and international cultural partnership. Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan exemplify this emerging model, in which cultural policy is increasingly integrated with economic development strategy.

Uzbekistan is leveraging its extraordinary

Field Perspective

"When governments invest in our inscriptions and restorations, we are grateful. But the real question is whether the young men in our village still want to learn. Without that, the UNESCO plaque means very little."

— Master craftsman, carpet-weaving community (Central Asia)

Silk Road heritage assets as the foundation for a rapidly developing cultural tourism and creative industries strategy. Heritage restoration in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva has been paired with investment in craft revival, cultural festival programming, and museum development, creating a multi-dimensional cultural economy that positions the country as a premier destination for heritage and cultural tourism. Azerbaijan has developed a multi-layered approach combining heritage-linked tourism, the internationalization of traditional art forms such as Mugham and carpet weaving, and investment in contemporary arts and cultural event infrastructure. Kazakhstan has invested in contemporary arts infrastructure, creative industries support, and international cultural exchange alongside its strong emphasis on heritage preservation and nomadic cultural identity.

Field Perspective

"Ten years ago, our craft producers sold in local bazaars. Now we are getting enquiries from international buyers who found us through heritage tourism platforms. The restoration of the old city did not just bring tourists — it brought us a market."

— Cultural entrepreneur, craft revival enterprise (Uzbekistan)

► Key Finding 2.3 — Living Heritage is the Region's Most Vulnerable Asset

The ECO region's intangible cultural heritage — oral traditions, performing arts, craft knowledge, and community spiritual practices — faces greater systemic risk than its monumental heritage. Intergenerational transmission gaps, accelerated by urbanisation and digital disruption, represent the most pervasive and underaddressed heritage challenge across the region.

2.5 Digital Cultural Transformation

Digital Leaders and Emerging Actors

Digital transformation is reshaping the cultural landscape across the ECO region, albeit at significantly different speeds and with markedly unequal impacts. Türkiye and Kazakhstan stand out as the region's most advanced digital cultural actors, with well-developed digital media industries, growing investment in digital heritage initiatives, and active engagement with international digital cultural platforms. In Türkiye, the digital distribution of cultural content — particularly television drama, music, and film — has become central to the country's cultural economy, with streaming platforms significantly expanding the international reach of Turkish cultural production.

Iran maintains a distinctive digital cultural profile: despite restrictions on access to global platforms, domestic digital culture is remarkably dynamic, with significant innovation in domestic social media, online publishing, digital cinema distribution, and virtual cultural programming. The Iranian digital cultural ecosystem reflects

the creativity and adaptability of cultural producers operating within constrained but also, in some respects, stimulating regulatory environments. Pakistan's digital cultural transformation has been rapid and largely driven by the private sector and individual creators, with musicians, comedians, fashion designers, digital storytellers, and gaming developers building substantial audiences across global platforms. The country's youthful demographic profile and rapidly expanding smartphone and internet access create strong foundations for continued digital cultural growth.

Platform Culture and Youth Expression

Across the ECO region, younger generations are increasingly defining cultural life through their engagement with digital platforms — as consumers, producers, and distributors of cultural content. The emergence of platform culture — cultural production and consumption mediated through global and domestic digital platforms — is one of the most significant transformations reshaping cultural identity and expression across the region.

Youth-led digital cultural production is generating new hybrid cultural forms that blend inherited traditions with contemporary

global influences. Traditional musical forms are being reimaged through digital production techniques; epic and literary traditions are being retold through digital storytelling and animation; craft aesthetics are being incorporated into contemporary fashion and design; and religious and spiritual traditions are finding new expressions in digital media. These hybrid cultural forms represent creative responses to the complex identities of young people simultaneously embedded in local traditions and connected to global digital cultures.

The platforms through which this cultural production circulates are, however, primarily controlled by global technology corporations headquartered outside the ECO region. This raises important questions of cultural sovereignty, algorithmic influence on cultural visibility, intellectual property protection for traditional knowledge, and the risk of cultural homogenisation driven by platform recommendation systems that favour dominant global cultural forms. Several ECO member states are grappling with these policy challenges, developing regulatory approaches to platform governance, local content support, and digital intellectual property protection.

Field Perspective

"My grandmother's embroidery patterns are now trending on social media. That is wonderful. But the platform that is making them trend keeps the revenue. We need to think about who benefits from our cultural content going viral."

— Digital creator and heritage advocate (An artist from Pakistan)

Digital Divide in Cultural Production

Despite the dynamism of digital culture in several ECO member states, significant digital divides continue to shape the region's cultural landscape — creating inequalities not only in access to digital cultural content but also in the capacity to produce, distribute, and monetise digital cultural work. These divides operate along multiple dimensions: between urban and rural populations, between wealthier and poorer member states, between well-resourced cultural institutions and community-based practitioners, and between younger digitally fluent populations and older cultural practitioners.

Rural areas face significant barriers to digital cultural participation, with limited broadband connectivity, lower levels of digital literacy,

and insufficient institutional support for digital skills development among cultural practitioners. Traditional craft producers, oral tradition bearers, and community-based cultural groups in rural and remote areas are often unable to benefit from the market access, audience reach, and economic opportunities that digital platforms can provide for producers in well-connected urban environments. Infrastructure disparities between member states similarly shape the pace and inclusiveness of digital cultural transformation. Bridging these infrastructure gaps represents both a development challenge and a cultural policy priority, with significant implications for the equitable distribution of digital transformation benefits across the region.

2.6 Cultural Education and Knowledge Systems

Institutional Depth and Capacity Gaps

Cultural education systems across the ECO region vary enormously in depth, breadth, and quality — variations with significant long-term implications for the transmission of cultural heritage, the development of creative industries, and the formation of culturally engaged citizens. Iran and Türkiye possess well-developed cultural education ecosystems encompassing conservatories and performing arts schools, fine arts academies, heritage studies programmes, folklore and ethnography institutes, and

► Key Finding 2.5 — Digital Transformation Risks Amplifying Existing Inequalities

Digital cultural transformation in the ECO region is accelerating — but it is not inclusive. Without deliberate policy intervention, digital platforms will concentrate economic benefits among already advantaged urban producers and member states, while rural communities and informal cultural economies remain disconnected from the digital cultural economy.

cultural management curricula rooted in long-established academic traditions. These countries have the institutional depth to train cultural professionals across a wide range of disciplines and to conduct meaningful academic research on cultural heritage, creative industries, and cultural policy.

Other member states face more significant capacity constraints, with limited numbers of specialised cultural education institutions, curricula that may inadequately reflect contemporary developments in creative industries and digital culture, and insufficient integration of heritage and arts education into mainstream school curricula. These capacity gaps have direct consequences for the long-term sustainability of creative sectors, the quality of heritage management, and the development of the cultural workforce.

Across the ECO region, there is also variation in the degree to which cultural education systems are aligned with broader cultural policy objectives and labour market needs. In some contexts, arts and cultural education remains relatively disconnected from the creative economy, producing graduates whose skills do not match the evolving requirements of cultural industries, heritage management organisations, or digital creative enterprises. Building stronger linkages between cultural education, creative industry development, and heritage management represents an important systemic challenge.

Arts Education and Universities

Universities across the ECO region play an important and evolving role in the cultural ecosystem — not only as institutions of higher

cultural education but as sites of cultural research, heritage documentation, artistic experimentation, and community cultural engagement. The relationship between universities and cultural policy remains underdeveloped in many member states, however, with insufficient mechanisms for translating academic cultural research into policy-relevant insights and for connecting university cultural programmes with wider creative economy and heritage management systems.

Arts and design faculties in major urban universities are emerging as increasingly important incubators of creative talent, particularly in Istanbul, Tehran, Lahore, Tashkent, Baku, and Almaty. These institutions are producing new generations of designers, filmmakers, digital artists, and creative entrepreneurs whose work reflects the hybrid cultural identities and digital competencies of the ECO region's younger populations. Strengthening support for arts education in universities — through curriculum modernisation, infrastructure investment, industry linkage programmes, and international academic exchange — represents a high-leverage intervention for creative economy development.

Informal Cultural Transmission Systems

Formal educational institutions represent only one dimension of cultural knowledge transmission. Equally important — and in many contexts far more important — are the informal systems through which traditional knowledge, artistic skills, spiritual

practices, oral traditions, and cultural values are reproduced across generations. These systems include master-apprentice relationships in traditional crafts and performing arts, family-based transmission of cultural practices, community-based ritual and ceremonial contexts, and the informal learning environments of traditional cultural gatherings and festivals.

The vitality of informal cultural transmission systems varies considerably across the ECO region and is affected by urbanisation, migration, changing economic circumstances, and shifting generational cultural priorities. In communities where traditional lifestyles and social structures remain relatively intact, informal transmission systems continue to function effectively. In more urbanised and economically transformed contexts, the social conditions that support informal transmission — sustained intergenerational community interaction, economic viability of traditional cultural practices, social prestige of traditional cultural roles — may be eroding. Cultural policies that seek to support the sustainability of living heritage traditions must therefore attend carefully to the conditions that enable informal transmission systems to function — not only investing in formal institutional programmes for cultural education but also creating enabling environments for community-based cultural practice, providing economic support for master practitioners, and ensuring that traditional cultural knowledge is respected and recognised within broader educational systems.

► Key Finding 2.6 — Cultural Education Must Bridge Formal and Informal Systems

The ECO region's cultural education ecosystem encompasses both well-resourced formal institutions and largely unrecognised informal transmission systems. Effective cultural education policy must bridge these two worlds — aligning formal curricula with creative economy needs while simultaneously creating enabling conditions for the informal community-based transmission that sustains the region's living heritage.

2.7 International Cultural Cooperation and Diplomacy

UNESCO and Multilateral Engagement

The UNESCO framework constitutes the most significant multilateral reference point for cultural policy across the ECO region. ECO member states participate in UNESCO's major cultural conventions — notably the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage — and UNESCO inscriptions have served as important catalysts for domestic heritage

policy development, institutional investment, and international cultural visibility. The degree and sophistication of engagement with UNESCO frameworks varies across member states, however. Countries with well-resourced cultural ministries — including Iran, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan — are able to engage more actively and effectively with UNESCO processes, including through heritage nominations, monitoring compliance, and participation in capacity-building programmes.

Beyond UNESCO, ECO member states engage with the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) and various regional intergovernmental organisations. Building coherence across these different multilateral

engagements represents a growing challenge for cultural ministries, particularly where different multilateral frameworks may reflect competing cultural policy priorities.

ECO Cultural Cooperation Dynamics

Within the ECO framework itself, cultural cooperation has developed across joint cultural festivals, academic exchanges, heritage documentation projects, artistic collaborations, cultural conferences, and publication initiatives. The ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) has played an important convening role, promoting cultural exchange, dialogue, research, and awareness of the region's shared heritage.

The shared civilisational heritage of the ECO region — the legacy of the Silk Roads, Persian literary and intellectual traditions,

Turkic cultural expressions, Islamic scholarship, nomadic cultures, and South Asian artistic and spiritual traditions — provides a particularly strong foundation for cultural cooperation that goes beyond formal diplomatic exchange to touch on genuine historical and cultural affinities. Initiatives that draw on these shared heritage connections, through cultural routes, co-produced exhibitions, joint academic research, and digital heritage platforms, have particular potential to build meaningful people-to-people connections across the region.

At the same time, ECO cultural cooperation faces structural constraints that limit its depth and consistency. Limited dedicated funding for cultural cooperation programmes, weak coordination mechanisms between national cultural ministries and the ECO cultural framework, and uneven institutional

capacity across member states all create barriers to more ambitious regional cultural cooperation. Strengthening the institutional architecture for ECO cultural cooperation — through dedicated funding mechanisms, improved monitoring and evaluation, and more systematic engagement of cultural professionals, artists, and civil society organisations — represents an important priority.

Cultural Diplomacy Models

ECO member states have developed a range of cultural diplomacy approaches reflecting their different cultural assets, international positioning goals, and governance philosophies. Türkiye has built one of the most active and multidimensional cultural diplomacy frameworks in the region, with the Yunus Emre Institute operating cultural centres worldwide, Turkish television

drama functioning as a major instrument of cultural soft power, and cultural diplomacy embedded in broader foreign policy strategy across Central Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Africa. Iran's cultural diplomacy draws on the global reach of Persian language and literature, the international prestige of Iranian cinema and visual arts, and the network of Iranian cultural centres and language institutes. Kazakhstan has invested significantly in international cultural profile-building, particularly through major heritage conservation initiatives and international cultural events. Uzbekistan's cultural diplomacy is increasingly anchored in its Silk Road heritage positioning, attracting international attention through heritage tourism, joint conservation projects, and cultural festival programming.

► Key Finding 2.7 — Civilisational Assets Are an Underutilised Cooperation Resource

The ECO region's most powerful resource for cultural cooperation is not its institutions — it is its shared civilisational heritage. Initiatives that explicitly activate Silk Road historical memory, shared literary traditions, and common artistic legacies have greater integrative potential than those modelled on standard intergovernmental cultural exchange mechanisms.

2.8 Cross-Cutting Regional Patterns and Strategic Insights

Cultural Inequality and Complementarity

Across the ECO region, cultural development is marked by profound inequalities — in institutional capacity, creative economy maturity, heritage preservation resources, digital infrastructure, and international cultural visibility. These inequalities risk deepening over time if not addressed through deliberate regional solidarity mechanisms. Countries with stronger cultural economies and more robust institutional frameworks are better positioned to benefit from globalisation and digital transformation, while countries with weaker foundations may find themselves increasingly marginalised in regional and global cultural flows.

At the same time, these inequalities create significant potential for complementarity — for forms of regional cultural cooperation in which different member states contribute different types of cultural assets, expertise, and capacity in ways that generate mutual benefit. Countries with advanced heritage management expertise can support capacity building in countries with significant but under-resourced heritage assets. Countries with developed creative industry sectors can provide market access and co-production opportunities for emerging creative sectors in other member states. Countries with strong cultural education systems can offer

academic exchange and professional training opportunities for cultural practitioners from across the region. Realising the potential of complementarity requires, however, that cooperation mechanisms be designed with explicit awareness of asymmetries in power, capacity, and cultural capital — ensuring that arrangements are genuinely mutual and do not replicate existing inequalities in new forms.

Creative Economy Polarisation

Creative economy development in the ECO region is strongly polarised — both between member states and, within individual countries, between major cities and the rest. At the national level, Türkiye, Iran, and to a growing extent Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan account for the great majority of formal creative economy activity and output in the region. Other member states possess rich cultural traditions and significant cultural assets but have more limited formal creative industry sectors and more constrained participation in international cultural markets. Within individual countries, creative economy activity is heavily concentrated in major cities — Istanbul, Tehran, Lahore, Karachi, Tashkent, Baku, Almaty — while rural areas and peripheral regions participate in creative economies primarily through informal and traditional cultural practices. This urban-rural polarisation is both an economic phenomenon and a cultural challenge: it concentrates the economic benefits of creative economy growth in already advantaged locations, while risking the erosion of culturally distinctive traditions in rural communities not integrated

into mainstream creative economy circuits.

Institutional Fragmentation vs. Civilisational Unity

Perhaps the most fundamental tension in the ECO cultural landscape is between the profound institutional fragmentation of the region's cultural governance systems and the equally profound civilisational unity that links its diverse societies through shared heritage, linguistic affinities, spiritual traditions, and historical memory. Member states that are structurally quite different in terms of governance models, institutional capacity, and cultural economy development are simultaneously bound together by centuries of cultural exchange that have created genuinely common cultural foundations.

This tension has important strategic implications. It suggests that the most promising pathways for regional cultural cooperation are those that build explicitly on the civilisational foundations that unite the region — shared heritage, common literary and linguistic roots, interwoven artistic traditions, and Silk Road historical memory — rather than attempting to impose standardised institutional models or policy frameworks on a deeply heterogeneous regional landscape. Cultural cooperation within the ECO framework should be understood not as institutional harmonisation but as civilisational dialogue — one that celebrates the diversity of the region's cultural expressions while simultaneously reinforcing the shared historical and cultural foundations that give that diversity its coherence and depth.

► **Key Finding 2.8 — The Region's Greatest Strength is its Civilisational Coherence**

Despite profound institutional fragmentation, the ECO region possesses a civilisational coherence — rooted in shared Silk Road heritage, Persianate literary traditions, Turkic cultural expressions, and Islamic scholarship — that no institutional design can replicate. Regional cultural cooperation strategies that activate this civilisational unity will be more durable and more impactful than those that focus primarily on institutional alignment.

2.9 Strategic Outlook: Toward an Integrated ECO Cultural Space

From Fragmentation to Coordination

The strategic trajectory for cultural policy across the ECO region points toward the need for a more integrated and coordinated approach to regional cultural development — one that transcends the current landscape of parallel national programmes and fragmented bilateral initiatives in favour of genuinely multilateral cultural cooperation frameworks that can leverage the region's civilisational unity in service of sustainable development, mutual understanding, and shared cultural prosperity.

Moving from fragmentation to coordination requires addressing several key structural deficits in the current ECO cultural framework: the absence of a dedicated and well-resourced multilateral funding mechanism for ECO cultural cooperation; the lack of a systematic regional cultural data system capable of providing the evidence base for informed regional cultural policy; insufficient coordination between national cultural ministries and the ECO Cultural Institute; and limited institutional infrastructure for sustained, multi-year cultural cooperation programmes — in co-production, academic exchange, joint heritage conservation, and digital cultural platform development — that could generate lasting regional cultural integration impacts.

Institutional reform and capacity investment are necessary but not sufficient conditions for regional cultural integration. Equally important is the cultivation of a genuine culture of cooperation among cultural professionals, artists, scholars, heritage specialists, and policymakers across the ECO region — a professional community with the relationships, shared knowledge, and collaborative habits that can animate and sustain formal institutional frameworks. Investing in people-to-people professional

exchange, joint research programmes, and regional networks of cultural practitioners is therefore as important as investing in formal institutional mechanisms.

Regional Cultural Integration Pathways

Several concrete pathways offer promising directions for deepening regional cultural integration within the ECO framework, building on the civilisational foundations and complementary cultural assets of member states.

Cultural Routes and Shared Heritage Programming: The development of an ECO Silk Road Cultural Route — linking the historic cities, archaeological sites, and living cultural traditions of the region along the historical pathways of cultural exchange — offers a powerful framework for joint heritage interpretation, coordinated tourism development, and cross-border cultural programming. Building on the model of successful cultural route programmes in other regions, this initiative could catalyse joint investment in heritage site management, create a coherent regional cultural tourism product, and provide a platform for cross-cultural dialogue and mutual heritage recognition.

Creative Industry Co-Production and Market Access: The development of ECO regional frameworks for film, television, music, and digital content co-production could expand market access for creative producers across the region, enabling smaller creative economies to leverage the production infrastructure and distribution networks of more advanced creative sectors. Regional co-production agreements, joint cultural market events, and ECO creative industry exchange programmes could significantly expand the reach and commercial viability of cultural production across the region.

Digital Cultural Infrastructure and Platforms: The development of shared digital cultural infrastructure — including an ECO digital

cultural heritage platform, regional streaming services for ECO cultural content, and shared digital preservation facilities — could democratise access to the region's cultural wealth while creating sustainable digital ecosystems for ECO cultural content not entirely dependent on global platform intermediaries.

Cultural Education and Professional Exchange: Expanding academic exchange programmes, joint research initiatives, cultural professional mobility schemes, and regional arts education networks would strengthen the human capital foundations of regional cultural integration — building the professional communities and institutional relationships that are ultimately the most durable basis for sustained regional cultural cooperation.

A Note on Cultural Data and Evidence
Evidence-based regional cultural policy requires robust cultural data systems. Across the ECO region, the capacity to collect, analyse, and utilise cultural statistics varies enormously — from relatively sophisticated systems in Türkiye, Iran, and Kazakhstan to significantly underdeveloped infrastructure in several other member states. The informal dimensions of cultural economies present particularly significant measurement challenges: much of the most vibrant cultural production in the region occurs outside formal markets and is therefore invisible to standard statistical systems.

The ECO Cultural Institute is well-positioned to play a convening role in the development of a regional cultural observatory — a dedicated platform for the collection, harmonisation, analysis, and dissemination of cultural data across ECO member states. Such an observatory would build on the model of established regional cultural observatories in other parts of the world and provide the evidence base essential for informed regional cultural policy. Detailed considerations on data systems, UNESCO reporting frameworks, and the case for a regional cultural observatory are developed further in Section 8.2 of this report.

► **Key Finding 2.9 — Four Pathways, One Vision**

Toward an integrated ECO cultural space, four pathways are mutually reinforcing: Silk Road cultural routes, creative industry co-production frameworks, shared digital cultural infrastructure, and expanded cultural education and professional exchange. None of these pathways is sufficient alone — pursued together, they can transform the ECO region from a culturally fragmented neighbourhood into a culturally coherent civilisational community.

Section 2 Summary: Nine Findings, One Argument

The nine key findings of this section converge on a single strategic argument: the ECO

region's cultural future depends not on choosing between its diversity and its unity, but on learning to govern both simultaneously. The region's institutional asymmetry, governance plurality, heritage vulnerabilities, creative economy polarisation, and digital

divides are real challenges — but they are navigable challenges, because beneath them lies a civilisational coherence that no other regional grouping can claim. The ECO Cultural Institute, as the regional institution best positioned to activate this

SECTION 2: CULTURAL POLICY LANDSCAPES ACROSS THE ECO REGION



civilisational coherence through concrete cooperation programmes, faces a historic opportunity. The strategic recommendations developed in Section 8 of this report are grounded in the analytical findings of this

section and oriented toward a single long-term goal: an ECO cultural space that is institutionally stronger, creatively more inclusive, digitally more equitable, and civilisationally more self-aware than the

landscape documented here.



COUNTRY
ANALYTICAL
REFERENCE
SHEETS



PART II:

**COUNTRY
ANALYTICAL
REFERENCE
SHEETS**



1. Cultural Policy Overview

Afghanistan's cultural policy environment is shaped by decades of political transition, institutional restructuring, and the long-term effects of conflict. These dynamics have produced a governance landscape marked by discontinuity, limited administrative capacity, and uneven implementation of cultural frameworks. National policy documents and strategic plans articulate commitments to heritage protection, cultural identity preservation, and safeguarding of intangible traditions, yet the practical realization of these commitments is constrained by resource limitations, security conditions, and shifting institutional arrangements.

Culture is primarily framed as a means of maintaining historical continuity and reinforcing collective identity. Afghanistan's civilizational narrative is rooted in its position at the intersection of Central Asian, South Asian, Persian, and Persianate cultural spheres, as well as historic Silk Road routes. This historical depth continues to inform contemporary cultural priorities, particularly in relation to heritage protection, language, literature, and community-based cultural transmission.

International normative frameworks—especially UNESCO conventions—serve as important reference points for cultural safeguarding. Engagement with these frameworks reflects recognition of the global significance of Afghanistan's heritage assets, although implementation is often mediated through externally supported, project-based interventions rather than fully institutionalized national systems. As a result, cultural policy operates within a hybrid environment where formal commitments coexist with practical constraints, and where cultural continuity is sustained as much by community resilience as by state structures.



AFGHANISTAN



2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Afghanistan is formally centralized under national authorities responsible for culture, information, and heritage management. These institutions oversee policy formulation, heritage oversight, and coordination of cultural programming. However, institutional continuity is frequently affected by political transitions, administrative restructuring, and limited financial resources, resulting in fragmented implementation and uneven governance practices.

In practice, cultural governance functions through a dual structure. Formal state institutions provide the legal and administrative framework for cultural management, while informal cultural actors—local custodians, community elders, religious scholars, artisans, and civil society organizations—play a critical role in sustaining cultural practices, particularly in rural and community-based settings. These informal actors often serve as



the primary custodians of intangible heritage, ensuring the transmission of oral traditions, craftsmanship, and cultural rituals.

Within this governance context, Afghanistan possesses a highly significant and historically layered cultural heritage system. Tangible heritage includes globally recognized sites such as the Bamiyan Valley, Herat's Timurid architectural complexes, the Minaret of Jam, and numerous archaeological landscapes linked to ancient trade networks and Buddhist, Islamic, and Persianate cultural spheres. Intangible heritage encompasses musical traditions, oral storytelling, poetry, craftsmanship, and community-based rituals, with classical Dari and Pashto literary traditions remaining central to cultural identity. Despite this richness, the heritage system faces persistent structural risks. Conflict-related damage, unregulated urban expansion, and illicit trafficking of cultural property pose ongoing threats. Conservation infrastructure is limited, and technical expertise in restoration, documentation, and site management remains insufficient. External partnerships with UNESCO and international organizations provide technical support and emergency safeguarding, but long-term heritage management still requires stronger institutional capacity and more stable governance arrangements.

3. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

The creative economy in Afghanistan remains at an early stage of development and is largely informal. Cultural production is concentrated in traditional crafts, music, local media, and small-scale artistic practices. Crafts such as carpet weaving, embroidery, pottery, and jewelry-making constitute important livelihood

sources, particularly for women and rural communities, and reflect deep-rooted cultural traditions.

Institutional support for creative industries is limited. Financing mechanisms are scarce, regulatory frameworks for cultural enterprises remain underdeveloped, and market integration is weak. Value chains are fragmented and often dependent on intermediaries or external markets. Despite these constraints, informal cultural ecosystems demonstrate resilience. Music traditions, storytelling, and community-based artistic practices continue to thrive in localized settings, while diaspora communities contribute to cultural production through publishing, digital platforms, and artistic collaborations.

The creative economy holds potential for future development, particularly in crafts, cultural tourism, and digital content creation. Realizing this potential will require strengthened institutional support, improved market access, and investment in cultural entrepreneurship and skills development.

4. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Cultural education in Afghanistan is characterized by uneven access, limited institutional capacity, and disruptions in formal education systems. Universities and cultural institutes exist, but specialized programs in arts, heritage conservation, and cultural management remain underdeveloped and concentrated in a few urban centers.

Informal education systems play a central role in sustaining cultural knowledge. Family-based transmission, community mentorship, and traditional apprenticeship models



continue to serve as primary mechanisms for preserving craftsmanship, music, and oral traditions. These systems provide continuity in cultural practices despite broader institutional challenges.

Capacity-building initiatives in cultural professions—such as conservation, museology, and arts management—are often supported by international organizations. Training programs, workshops, and technical assistance projects contribute to skill development, though their long-term impact is constrained by limited institutional absorption capacity and the absence of comprehensive national training frameworks.

5. Digital Culture & Innovation

Digital culture in Afghanistan is in a formative stage but shows gradual expansion driven by mobile technology, social media, and diaspora engagement. Digital platforms serve as important spaces for cultural expression, particularly among youth and urban populations, enabling the sharing of poetry, music, visual arts, and cultural commentary. Institutional digitization of heritage assets remains limited. Few museums and archives maintain comprehensive digital catalogues, and systematic digital preservation initiatives are still emerging. Despite these constraints, digital platforms offer opportunities for cultural documentation, dissemination, and transnational connectivity, particularly through diaspora networks that actively engage in cultural promotion and knowledge sharing.

6. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Afghanistan maintains engagement with UNESCO and selected regional cultural initiatives, though participation is often constrained by institutional capacity and political circumstances. International cooperation is primarily project-based, focusing on heritage preservation, emergency safeguarding, and capacity-building in cultural sectors.

Cultural diplomacy remains a potential rather than fully operational domain. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's historical role as a civilizational crossroads positions it as an important cultural actor within regional frameworks. Engagement with ECO cultural platforms, bilateral cultural exchanges, and heritage-focused partnerships contributes to maintaining Afghanistan's cultural presence in regional cooperation mechanisms, even when domestic constraints limit broader cultural outreach.



7. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Policy implementation in the cultural sector is limited and uneven. Most cultural initiatives rely on external funding and technical support, resulting in localized and project-specific outcomes. While these interventions have contributed to safeguarding key heritage sites and supporting selected cultural practices, they have not yet translated into systemic institutional strengthening or comprehensive national cultural programming.

Despite these constraints, community-level cultural continuity remains strong. Local custodians, artists, and cultural practitioners sustain traditions through everyday practice, and targeted international interventions have yielded positive outcomes in documentation, conservation, and awareness-raising. However, the overall implementation environment continues to be shaped by resource limitations, institutional fragmentation, and broader socio-political challenges.

fragmented. Data on cultural infrastructure, participation, and creative industries is limited, making evidence-based policy formulation and long-term planning difficult.

International organizations play a central role in generating cultural data, particularly in heritage documentation and cultural statistics. Strengthening national data systems, including regular cultural mapping and statistical reporting, remains essential for future cultural policy development and for integrating culture more effectively into national development strategies.

9. Key Indicators

- Significant, historically layered cultural heritage with globally recognized sites
- High vulnerability of tangible heritage due to conflict, development pressures, and illicit trafficking
- Limited institutional and infrastructural capacity in cultural governance and heritage management
- Strong continuity of intangible and community-based cultural traditions

8. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Monitoring and evaluation systems in Afghanistan's cultural sector are weak and

10. Selected Sources

UNESCO reports and conventions, national cultural authorities, international development agencies, and heritage-focused research institutions.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Azerbaijan's cultural policy system is a highly centralized and strategically coordinated governance model in which culture is positioned as a core instrument of national identity formation, international visibility, and state-led modernization. Cultural policy is not treated as an isolated administrative domain but rather as an integrated component of foreign policy, tourism development, and national branding strategy.

The cultural system is shaped by Azerbaijan's unique historical positioning at the intersection of Turkic, Persian, Caucasian, and Islamic civilizational spheres. This multilayered heritage structure has produced a cultural policy orientation that emphasizes synthesis, continuity, and strategic reinterpretation of historical identity in contemporary state-building processes.

Since independence, cultural policy has evolved from a primarily heritage-preservation-oriented framework into a broader soft power architecture that incorporates creative industries, international cultural diplomacy, and urban cultural transformation. The state plays a central coordinating role in defining cultural priorities, allocating resources, and structuring international cultural engagement.

A defining feature of Azerbaijan's cultural policy is its strong alignment with national development planning. Cultural initiatives are

frequently embedded within broader economic modernization strategies, particularly those related to tourism expansion, infrastructure development, and global positioning of Baku as a cultural and diplomatic hub.

At the same time, cultural policy reflects a strong emphasis on identity consolidation. This includes systematic promotion of Azerbaijani language, musical traditions such as mugham, carpet weaving heritage, and historical narratives linking contemporary Azerbaijan to both ancient Caucasian civilizations and Turkic cultural continuities.

Within the ECO regional context, Azerbaijan represents one of the most proactive states in leveraging cultural policy as a diplomatic and economic instrument, particularly through international festivals, multilateral cultural cooperation platforms, and UNESCO engagement.

2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Azerbaijan is centralized under the Ministry of Culture, which operates as the primary institution responsible for cultural policy formulation, implementation, and international coordination. The Ministry is supported by a network of state agencies, including institutions responsible for heritage protection, museum management, cultural programming, and tourism integration.





REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN



A key feature of the governance system is its strong vertical coordination structure. Cultural decision-making is closely aligned with national strategic priorities, ensuring coherence between cultural policy and broader state objectives. This centralized coordination enables rapid implementation of large-scale cultural initiatives, particularly in urban development and heritage restoration. In addition to the Ministry of Culture, several other institutions contribute to the cultural governance ecosystem. These include state tourism agencies, municipal cultural departments, and specialized foundations involved in heritage conservation and cultural promotion. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation, in particular, plays a significant role in cultural diplomacy, heritage restoration, and international cultural visibility projects.

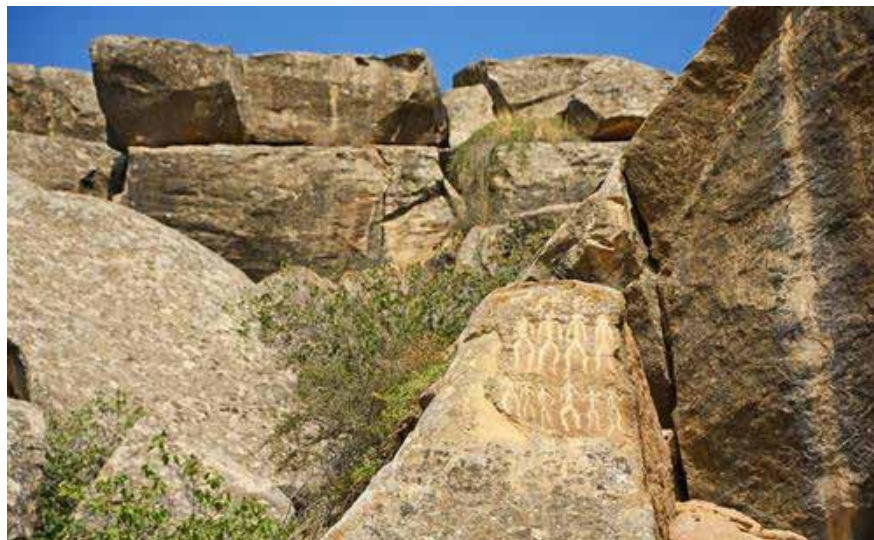
While civil society participation exists within the cultural sector, it operates within a framework that is largely state-directed. Independent cultural organizations, artistic collectives, and private cultural enterprises contribute to cultural production, but strategic direction remains centrally coordinated. Institutionally, Azerbaijan demonstrates relatively high administrative capacity compared to several other ECO Member States. This is reflected in its ability to implement large-scale cultural infrastructure projects, host international cultural events, and maintain consistent participation in global cultural governance frameworks.

The integration between cultural governance and foreign policy is particularly strong. Cultural diplomacy is not treated as an auxiliary function but as a core component of Azerbaijan's international relations strategy. This is evident in its active engagement with UNESCO, TURKSOY, ECO cultural platforms, and various bilateral cultural agreements.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Azerbaijan's cultural heritage system is characterized by a rich and multilayered civilizational composition, reflecting centuries of interaction between Turkic nomadic traditions, Persian literary and artistic influences, Caucasian indigenous cultures, and Islamic civilization.

The tangible heritage landscape includes significant historical and archaeological sites such as the Walled City of Baku (Icherisheher), Gobustan rock art cultural landscape, Sheki Khan's Palace, and numerous medieval caravanserais and fortifications that reflect



Azerbaijan's historical role along the Silk Road.

These sites collectively represent a continuous historical narrative of trade, cultural exchange, and urban development that situates Azerbaijan as a key node in Eurasian civilizational networks. Heritage preservation efforts are strongly state-supported and integrated into national tourism and cultural diplomacy strategies.

Intangible cultural heritage is equally significant and includes mugham music traditions, Azerbaijani carpet weaving, ashig oral poetry traditions, traditional dance forms, and culinary heritage practices. These elements are not only preserved as cultural artifacts but actively mobilized as living expressions of national identity.

Azerbaijan has successfully inscribed multiple elements on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, reflecting both institutional capacity and strategic engagement with global heritage governance systems.

Despite these strengths, the heritage system faces several structural challenges. These include pressures from rapid urbanization, environmental degradation affecting archaeological sites, and the need for continuous investment in conservation technologies and professional training in heritage management.

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's heritage system remains one of the most institutionally advanced within the ECO region, particularly in terms of integration between heritage preservation, tourism development, and international cultural visibility.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

The creative economy in Azerbaijan is moderately developed and increasingly integrated into national economic planning frameworks. Cultural industries are viewed as both an economic diversification strategy and a soft power instrument.

Key sectors include music production, film and television, fashion design, carpet production, publishing, digital media, and cultural tourism services. Baku functions as the primary hub for creative production, hosting a growing number of cultural festivals, international exhibitions, and industry events.

State support plays a significant role in the development of cultural industries, particularly through funding programs, cultural foundations, and infrastructure investments. This support has enabled the expansion of cultural infrastructure, including performance venues, museums, and cultural centers.

At the same time, private sector participation in the creative economy is gradually increasing, particularly in media production, advertising, and design industries. International collaborations and co-productions are also becoming more frequent, contributing to the global visibility of Azerbaijani cultural output.

However, structural limitations remain in terms of scaling creative industries for global competitiveness. These include limited export infrastructure, dependency on public funding, and the need for stronger intellectual property commercialization systems.

Despite these constraints, Azerbaijan

demonstrates a clear trajectory toward strengthening its creative economy as part of its broader cultural modernization agenda.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Cultural education in Azerbaijan is supported through a network of universities, conservatories, and specialized arts institutions. These institutions provide training in music, fine arts, theater, film production, cultural management, and related disciplines.

The education system reflects a dual orientation: preservation of traditional cultural forms and integration of contemporary global cultural practices. This is particularly evident in music education, where mugham traditions coexist with modern classical and popular music training.

Capacity building in cultural management and heritage conservation is gradually expanding, supported by international cooperation programs and partnerships with UNESCO and other cultural institutions.

However, compared to more advanced ECO cultural economies, Azerbaijan still faces challenges in fully integrating cultural education with creative industry labor markets. Bridging the gap between academic training and industry demand remains an ongoing policy priority.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Digital transformation in the cultural sector is increasingly significant in Azerbaijan. Digital platforms are used for cultural promotion, heritage dissemination, and international cultural diplomacy.

Museums and cultural institutions are progressively adopting digitization strategies, including online archives, virtual exhibitions, and digital cataloguing of heritage assets. These initiatives enhance accessibility and international visibility of Azerbaijani cultural heritage.

Social media and digital content platforms also play an important role in cultural expression, particularly among younger populations and diaspora communities.

However, digital cultural infrastructure remains uneven across institutions, and further investment is required to fully integrate digital technologies into heritage management and creative industries.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Azerbaijan is one of the most active ECO Member States in international cultural cooperation. It maintains strong engagement with UNESCO, TURKSOY, ICESCO, ECO cultural frameworks, and bilateral cultural diplomacy platforms.

Cultural diplomacy is a key pillar of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The country regularly hosts international cultural festivals, music competitions, and heritage conferences, positioning Baku as a regional cultural hub.

Azerbaijan also actively participates in global cultural governance processes, particularly in heritage protection, cultural diversity promotion, and intercultural dialogue initiatives.

Within the ECO region, Azerbaijan plays a bridging role between Turkic cultural systems and broader Eurasian cultural networks.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Azerbaijan is relatively strong and characterized by visible outcomes in infrastructure development, heritage restoration, and international cultural engagement.

Major urban cultural projects in Baku have significantly enhanced cultural visibility and tourism attractiveness. Heritage restoration initiatives have contributed to the preservation of historical sites while integrating them into modern urban environments.

Cultural festivals and international events have strengthened Azerbaijan's global cultural profile and contributed to tourism growth and international recognition.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Cultural monitoring systems in Azerbaijan are moderately developed and integrated into national statistical frameworks. Data collection includes indicators on cultural participation, tourism flows, heritage restoration projects, and cultural infrastructure development.

Reporting aligns partially with UNESCO frameworks, particularly in heritage and cultural diversity domains.

However, further refinement of cultural economy metrics and creative industry indicators remains an area for development.

10. Key Indicators

- Strong state-led cultural governance system
- Significant UNESCO-recognized heritage assets
- Expanding creative economy sectors
- High international cultural visibility and diplomacy activity

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan, UNESCO reports, ECO cultural cooperation documentation, international cultural policy research databases.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Iran's cultural policy system is one of the most institutionally dense and ideologically structured frameworks in the ECO region, shaped by a long civilizational continuity rooted in Persian heritage and Islamic governance principles. Culture is not treated as a sectoral policy domain but as a foundational pillar of state identity, social cohesion, and ideological continuity.

Cultural policy in Iran operates at the intersection of three mutually reinforcing dimensions: i) civilizational heritage, ii) religious-cultural governance, and iii) contemporary cultural production. This tri-layered structure produces a system in which cultural expression is both highly developed and institutionally regulated, with strong emphasis on continuity, authenticity, and moral-cultural alignment.

At the strategic level, culture is framed as a key instrument of national resilience and international influence. Iranian cultural policy therefore extends beyond domestic heritage preservation into broader domains of cultural diplomacy, scientific heritage promotion, and civilizational narrative projection.

Iran's cultural system is also deeply shaped by its historical position as a center of Persian literature, philosophy, architecture, and Islamic scholarship. This legacy continues to inform contemporary cultural policy, particularly

in areas related to language preservation, artistic production, and heritage interpretation.

Within the ECO regional context, Iran represents a civilizational anchor state whose cultural policy combines high institutional capacity with strong symbolic continuity, making it one of the most influential cultural actors in the region.

2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Iran is highly centralized and institutionally complex, primarily coordinated through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This ministry oversees cultural production, media regulation, publishing, arts, and cultural dissemination in alignment with national cultural and ideological frameworks.

In addition to the ministry, several semi-independent and parallel institutions contribute to cultural governance. These include the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO), and multiple foundations and academic institutions involved in cultural production and preservation.

The governance model is characterized by strong regulatory coherence, where cultural policy is closely aligned with national ideological frameworks and long-term state



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objectives. This enables a high degree of institutional stability and continuity, particularly in heritage preservation and cultural education.

At the same time, Iran maintains a highly active ecosystem of universities, research centers, artistic communities, and literary institutions that contribute significantly to cultural production. These actors operate within structured regulatory boundaries but remain highly influential in shaping intellectual and artistic life.

Civil society participation in cultural governance exists but is mediated through institutional frameworks. Independent cultural production is present, particularly in cinema, literature, and visual arts, but operates within defined regulatory parameters.

Overall, Iran's governance system is characterized by strong institutional depth, high administrative capacity, and tightly integrated cultural policy coordination across state institutions.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Iran possesses one of the most extensive and historically continuous cultural heritage systems in the world, reflecting its position as a cradle of Persian civilization and a major center of Islamic intellectual development.

The tangible heritage landscape includes globally significant sites such as Persepolis, Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, Yazd's historic urban fabric, Bam citadel, and numerous archaeological and architectural complexes spanning pre-Islamic and Islamic periods.

These heritage assets collectively represent continuous civilizational layers, including Achaemenid, Sassanian, and Islamic eras, each contributing to Iran's complex cultural identity structure.

Intangible cultural heritage is equally rich and includes Persian literature, classical poetry traditions, calligraphy, music systems (radif traditions), storytelling, Nowruz celebrations, and diverse regional cultural practices.

Iran has one of the highest numbers of UNESCO-inscribed heritage elements in the ECO region, reflecting both its historical depth and institutional capacity for heritage documentation and preservation.

Despite this strength, the heritage system faces structural pressures, including



environmental degradation affecting archaeological sites, urban expansion in historic cities, and the need for continued investment in conservation technologies and restoration expertise.

Nevertheless, Iran's heritage system remains a globally significant cultural infrastructure, functioning as both a domestic identity anchor and an international cultural diplomacy asset.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Iran's creative economy is relatively advanced within the ECO region, particularly in film production, literature, visual arts, animation, and publishing industries. Despite external constraints, domestic cultural production remains highly active and institutionally supported.

Iranian cinema, in particular, represents one of the most internationally recognized cultural industries in the region, known for its artistic innovation, narrative depth, and global festival presence. Literary production also remains strong, rooted in centuries of Persian poetic and philosophical tradition.

Visual arts, including painting, calligraphy, and contemporary installation art, constitute an important segment of cultural expression, supported by galleries, academic institutions, and cultural foundations.

However, the creative economy faces structural constraints related to international

market access, financial system limitations, and regulatory frameworks that shape distribution channels.

Despite these constraints, Iran demonstrates a high level of internal cultural productivity, with strong human capital and institutional support systems sustaining creative industries.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Iran has a highly developed cultural education system anchored in universities, research institutions, and specialized academies in arts, literature, cinema, architecture, and philosophy.

Institutions such as the University of Tehran, Art University of Tehran, and numerous regional universities provide structured training in cultural disciplines. These institutions are complemented by seminaries and religious educational centers that contribute to cultural and intellectual production.

Cultural education in Iran reflects a dual structure combining classical Persian intellectual traditions with modern academic frameworks. This produces a strong foundation for literary, artistic, and philosophical development.

Capacity building in cultural industries is supported by institutional training programs, although international integration of cultural education systems remains partially constrained.



6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Iran has a highly active digital cultural ecosystem, characterized by strong domestic content production, online cultural dissemination, and widespread use of social media platforms for cultural expression.

Digital culture plays a significant role in literature, film distribution, visual arts, and independent content creation. Online platforms also serve as important spaces for youth cultural engagement and diaspora connectivity.

However, digital cultural development operates within a regulated environment, which shapes platform access and content dissemination structures.

Despite these constraints, Iran demonstrates significant digital cultural productivity and innovation capacity within its institutional framework.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Iran maintains active participation in international cultural cooperation frameworks, including UNESCO, ECO, ICESCO, and other regional cultural networks.

Cultural diplomacy emphasizes Persian civilizational heritage, Islamic intellectual traditions, and contributions to science, philosophy, and arts. Iran engages in bilateral and multilateral cultural exchanges, academic cooperation, and heritage preservation initiatives.

Within the ECO framework, Iran functions as a major civilizational contributor, particularly in areas of shared Persian-Turkic-Islamic cultural history.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Iran is institutionally strong, particularly in heritage preservation, cultural production systems, and domestic cultural programming.

Museums, cultural centers, and heritage institutions operate at a high level of organizational capacity. Cultural production in cinema, literature, and visual arts remains robust despite external constraints.

International cultural visibility is significant, particularly through cinema, academic scholarship, and heritage diplomacy.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Cultural monitoring systems in Iran are institutionally structured but not fully aligned with international comparative statistical frameworks.

Domestic institutions maintain extensive cultural data systems covering heritage sites, cultural production, and institutional performance.

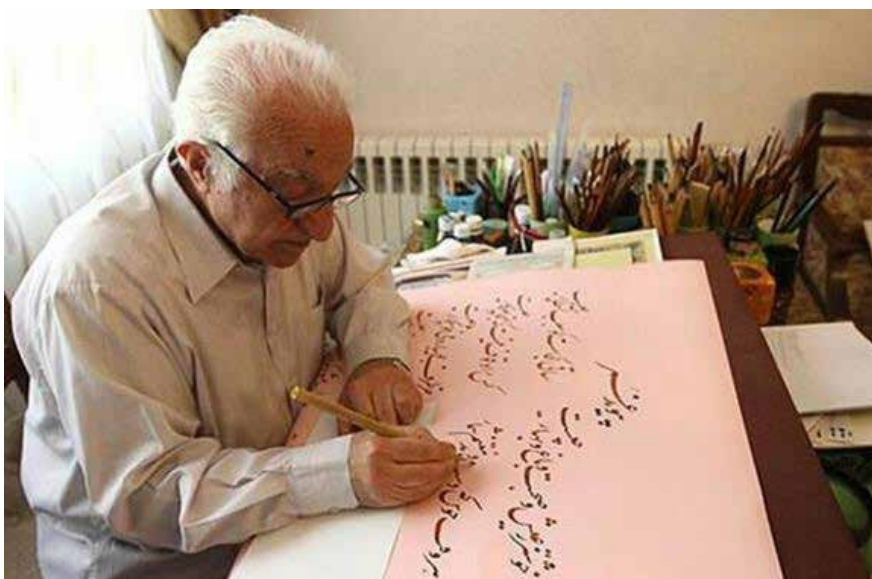
However, integration with global cultural economy indicators and standardized international benchmarking remains partial.

10. Key Indicators

- Extensive UNESCO World Heritage and cultural assets
- Highly developed film and literary industries
- Strong institutional cultural education system
- Significant civilizational continuity and cultural depth

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Iran), UNESCO, Iran Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHHTO), academic cultural research institutes.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Kazakhstan's cultural policy system is a strategically oriented, state-led governance framework that integrates nation-building, heritage revitalization, and international cultural positioning. Culture is treated as a core component of national identity construction and a key instrument for projecting Kazakhstan's image as a modern, multi-ethnic, and globally engaged state.

At the conceptual level, cultural policy in Kazakhstan is shaped by the country's dual identity structure: on one hand, a revival of nomadic civilization heritage and Turkic cultural roots; on the other, a modernization agenda aligned with global cultural, educational, and economic systems. This duality informs a policy environment that seeks to balance tradition and modernization in a structured and state-coordinated manner.

The state positions culture as a unifying force in a highly diverse society composed of multiple ethnic groups. As such, cultural policy is closely linked to social cohesion, interethnic harmony, and national integration. Simultaneously, cultural heritage is increasingly mobilized as a soft power asset within regional and global diplomacy.

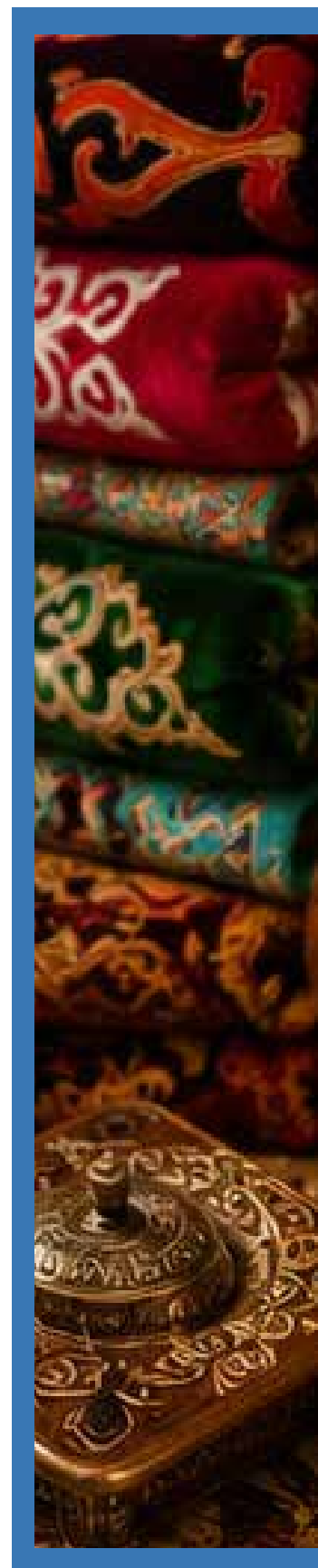
Kazakhstan's cultural strategy is also embedded within broader national development frameworks, particularly those emphasizing economic diversification, tourism development, and digital transformation. Cultural policy is therefore not isolated but fully integrated into national modernization planning.

Within the ECO region, Kazakhstan functions as a strategic cultural intermediary state, connecting Central Asian heritage systems with global cultural governance structures.

2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Kazakhstan is structured around the Ministry of Culture and Information, which serves as the central coordinating body for cultural policy, heritage management, media regulation, and cultural diplomacy.

The institutional framework includes national museums, cultural heritage protection agencies, regional cultural departments, and specialized development organizations. These institutions operate within a centralized policy coordination structure that ensures alignment with national strategic priorities.



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Municipal and regional authorities play an increasingly important role in cultural programming, particularly in urban centers such as Almaty, Astana (Nur-Sultan), Shymkent, and Turkistan. These cities function as cultural development hubs and contribute to decentralized implementation of cultural initiatives.

Kazakhstan's governance system also reflects a growing emphasis on public-private collaboration in cultural industries, particularly in tourism, media, and creative sectors. Civil society participation is present but remains secondary to state-led cultural planning.

International cooperation is institutionalized through engagement with UNESCO, TURKSOY, ECO, and other multilateral cultural platforms, reinforcing Kazakhstan's position within regional cultural diplomacy networks.

Overall, Kazakhstan demonstrates a moderately centralized but increasingly adaptive governance model, with growing institutional sophistication and policy integration.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Kazakhstan's cultural heritage system is deeply rooted in the historical legacy of nomadic civilizations, Silk Road trade networks, and Islamic cultural development in Central Asia.

Tangible heritage includes significant archaeological and architectural sites such



as the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Tamgaly petroglyphs, ancient Silk Road settlements, and historic urban centers in Turkistan and Otrar regions. These sites reflect Kazakhstan's role as a historical crossroads of Eurasian civilizations.

The heritage system is characterized by vast geographical dispersion, which creates both richness and management challenges. Preservation efforts require extensive logistical coordination across rural and remote regions.

Intangible cultural heritage includes epic traditions (such as oral epics and storytelling), dombra musical traditions, traditional craftsmanship, nomadic customs, and seasonal rituals linked to pastoral life. These elements remain actively practiced and are central to national cultural identity. Kazakhstan has made significant progress in UNESCO heritage recognition and documentation of intangible cultural elements. However, challenges remain in conservation capacity, climate vulnerability of steppe ecosystems, and documentation of dispersed cultural practices.

Overall, the heritage system functions as a core identity infrastructure linking historical nomadic culture with contemporary national narratives.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Kazakhstan's creative economy is moderately developed and undergoing structural expansion, particularly in urban centers. The sector includes film production, music, publishing, design, fashion, advertising, and cultural tourism.

Almaty functions as the primary cultural production hub, with Astana increasingly emerging as a center for cultural infrastructure and international cultural events. These cities anchor Kazakhstan's creative economy ecosystem.

The film and media sector has shown steady growth, supported by state programs and private investment. Music industries combine traditional Kazakh musical forms with contemporary global genres, reflecting hybrid cultural production patterns. Traditional crafts, including textiles, jewelry, and felt-making, remain important cultural-economic activities, particularly in rural regions. These sectors are increasingly linked to tourism and cultural branding initiatives.

Despite progress, the creative economy faces structural limitations, including limited export penetration, underdeveloped financing systems, and uneven regional distribution of cultural industries.

Kazakhstan's policy direction increasingly emphasizes the transition from heritage-based cultural production to a more diversified and internationally competitive creative economy.



5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Kazakhstan has a well-developed cultural education infrastructure, including conservatories, national arts universities, and specialized cultural academies.

Institutions provide structured training in music, theater, visual arts, cultural management, and heritage conservation. Educational reforms increasingly integrate creative industry skills, digital media training, and international collaboration frameworks.

International partnerships play a significant role in capacity building, with academic exchange programs and joint cultural research initiatives contributing to institutional development.

However, challenges remain in aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands in creative industries and expanding access to high-quality cultural education in rural regions.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Kazakhstan has made substantial progress in digital cultural transformation, particularly in heritage digitization, museum modernization, and digital media production.

Museums and cultural institutions are increasingly adopting digital platforms for exhibitions, archives, and public engagement. Virtual access to cultural heritage is expanding, improving both domestic and international visibility.

Digital media and content production are growing rapidly, particularly among youth populations and independent creators. Social media platforms play a significant role in cultural dissemination and identity formation.

Despite these advances, digital cultural ecosystems remain uneven, with disparities between major urban centers and rural regions.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Kazakhstan is highly active in international cultural cooperation, particularly within UNESCO, ECO, TURKSOY, and broader Eurasian cultural frameworks.

Cultural diplomacy emphasizes Kazakhstan's

identity as a bridge between Europe and Asia and highlights its nomadic heritage as a distinctive civilizational contribution.

The country frequently hosts international cultural festivals, heritage conferences, and regional cooperation initiatives, strengthening its role as a cultural convening hub.

Within ECO, Kazakhstan contributes to heritage cooperation, cultural tourism development, and regional cultural dialogue platforms.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Kazakhstan has produced visible outcomes in heritage preservation, museum development, and cultural infrastructure expansion.

Major achievements include restoration of key heritage sites, development of cultural tourism corridors, and modernization of cultural institutions in major cities.

Cultural events and international festivals have contributed to increased global visibility and tourism inflows.

However, continued challenges include ensuring sustainability of funding mechanisms and improving regional equity in cultural development outcomes.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Kazakhstan maintains structured cultural monitoring systems integrated into national statistical frameworks. These include data on cultural participation, museum attendance, tourism flows, and cultural infrastructure development.

Efforts are underway to improve alignment with international cultural indicators, including UNESCO frameworks and creative economy measurement standards.

Digital data collection systems are gradually enhancing the precision and scope of cultural monitoring.

10. Key Indicators

- Strong nomadic heritage preservation system
- Expanding cultural tourism and infrastructure base
- Moderately developed creative economy
- Increasing international cultural diplomacy engagement

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, TURKSOY documentation, ECO cultural cooperation frameworks.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Kyrgyzstan's cultural policy system is shaped by nomadic civilizational heritage, post-Soviet restructuring, and ongoing efforts to strengthen state capacity. Culture is framed as a core element of national identity, social cohesion, and continuity of historical memory. This is reflected in the preservation of oral traditions, epic storytelling, and nomadic cultural systems, which remain central to Kyrgyz identity.

After independence, cultural policy became closely tied to nation-building. Revitalizing pre-Soviet cultural identity, strengthening the Kyrgyz language, and safeguarding intangible heritage emerged as key priorities. These efforts reflect a broader attempt to consolidate a cultural narrative rooted in nomadic civilization and historical continuity.

Despite these ambitions, the system faces constraints. Limited financial resources, uneven institutional capacity, and reliance on external cooperation shape much of the cultural sector. Many initiatives are implemented through donor-supported projects rather than long-term national programs. As a result, cultural vitality is strong at the community level, while institutional modernization progresses gradually.

The state increasingly views culture as a development asset linked to tourism, education, and international visibility. Cultural

tourism is seen as a promising sector due to Kyrgyzstan's landscapes, nomadic traditions, and Silk Road heritage. Recent national development strategies also highlight culture as a contributor to social stability and regional identity. However, implementation varies across regions, reflecting disparities in infrastructure and administrative capacity.

Within the ECO context, Kyrgyzstan represents a heritage-rich but institutionally constrained cultural system. Strong community participation and resilient intangible heritage systems coexist with ongoing state-level modernization.

2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance is coordinated through the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy, which oversees cultural institutions, heritage management, and cultural programming. Policy design is centralized, but implementation is decentralized due to geographic dispersion and resource limitations.

Regional and municipal cultural departments play important roles in local cultural activity, though their capacity varies. Many rural and mountainous areas operate with limited staffing and infrastructure. Despite these constraints, cultural participation remains strong, reflecting the embedded role of



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cultural practices in community life.

Civil society organizations, community groups, and informal cultural actors contribute significantly to cultural preservation and transmission. Their role is especially important in sustaining intangible heritage systems such as oral traditions, music, crafts, and seasonal nomadic practices. These actors compensate for institutional limitations and ensure continuity of cultural knowledge.

International organizations, including UNESCO and development agencies, support heritage preservation and institutional capacity building. Technical assistance, training programs, and documentation projects contribute to strengthening national systems, though long-term sustainability depends on domestic institutional development. Recent administrative reforms aim to improve coordination between national and regional cultural bodies, though implementation remains gradual.

Overall, the governance system combines limited institutional capacity with strong community participation, creating a dual structure in which formal institutions face constraints while informal cultural systems remain vibrant.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Kyrgyzstan's cultural heritage system is distinguished by the continuity of nomadic civilization traditions and oral cultural systems. Tangible heritage includes Silk Road sites, ancient settlements, petroglyph complexes such as Saimaluu-Tash, and monuments linked to Islamic cultural expansion. These sites reflect the country's historical role as a crossroads of cultures and trade networks.

The defining feature of Kyrgyz heritage is its intangible cultural system. This includes the Manas epic tradition, komuz-based musical practices, nomadic pastoral systems, and seasonal migration rituals known as jailoo culture. These elements function as cultural expressions and as social systems that structure identity, memory, and intergenerational transmission.

Kyrgyzstan faces challenges in heritage preservation. Environmental pressures on mountainous ecosystems threaten archaeological and cultural landscapes. Institutional conservation capacity is limited, with shortages of specialists, restoration facilities, and long-term funding. Oral transmission systems are also vulnerable due to modernization, urban migration, and



shifting social dynamics.

Despite these challenges, Kyrgyzstan maintains one of the most resilient intangible heritage systems in the ECO region. Community custodianship, active transmission of traditions, and strong cultural pride support heritage preservation even with limited institutional infrastructure. UNESCO inscriptions of intangible heritage elements have further strengthened national awareness and international recognition.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Kyrgyzstan's creative economy is in an early development stage, with limited industrial scaling and strong reliance on informal cultural production. Key sectors include folk music, traditional crafts, small-scale film production, cultural tourism services, and artisanal textile production. These sectors are locally embedded and community-driven.

Bishkek serves as the main cultural and creative hub, hosting independent cultural organizations, galleries, theaters, and small media production companies. Urban actors contribute to contemporary artistic expression, while rural communities sustain traditional crafts and music.

Structural limitations include limited investment, weak market access, and underdeveloped cultural financing mechanisms. Creative industries often depend on donor-funded projects rather than

long-term institutional support. Despite these constraints, the sector demonstrates strong grassroots innovation, particularly in music, crafts, and community-based cultural tourism.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Cultural education is provided through universities, arts institutions, and vocational training centers, though institutional capacity remains uneven. Programs exist in music, theater, visual arts, and heritage studies, but access to specialized education is limited outside major urban centers.

Informal cultural education plays a central role in transmitting oral traditions, crafts, and musical practices. Family-based learning, community mentorship, and apprenticeship systems remain essential for cultural continuity.

International cooperation contributes to capacity building. UNESCO-supported programs and bilateral partnerships provide training in heritage preservation, documentation, and cultural management. Long-term institutionalization of these skills remains a challenge.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Kyrgyzstan's digital cultural ecosystem is emerging but uneven. Digital platforms are increasingly used for cultural expression,



particularly among youth and diaspora communities. Social media facilitates the dissemination of music, storytelling, and cultural identity expression.

Independent creators use digital tools to reach broader audiences, bypassing institutional limitations. Institutional digitization of cultural heritage remains limited due to financial and technical constraints. Despite these challenges, digital culture is becoming an important equalizing force for cultural visibility and participation.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Kyrgyzstan engages actively in international cultural cooperation through UNESCO, ECO, TURKSOY, and bilateral cultural agreements. International cooperation is essential for cultural preservation, capacity building, and funding support. UNESCO programs play a key role in safeguarding intangible heritage systems such as the Manas epic.

Within ECO, Kyrgyzstan participates in cultural dialogue initiatives and heritage cooperation frameworks, though its contribution is shaped by resource constraints. The country also engages in Turkic cultural cooperation platforms, which support language, literature, and traditional arts. Cultural diplomacy is emerging but remains secondary to domestic preservation priorities.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation is uneven but meaningful in heritage preservation and community-based cultural sustainability. Key outcomes include international recognition of

intangible heritage elements, preservation of nomadic cultural systems, and development of cultural tourism in selected regions.

Implementation challenges include limited funding, institutional fragmentation, and geographic dispersion of cultural assets. Despite these constraints, Kyrgyzstan maintains strong cultural continuity and resilience.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Cultural monitoring systems are limited and fragmented. Data collection is inconsistent across regions and relies heavily on international reporting frameworks. UNESCO mechanisms provide structure for heritage monitoring, particularly in intangible heritage domains.

National-level cultural statistics and creative economy indicators remain underdeveloped. Strengthening cultural data systems is a priority for future policy development.

10. Key Indicators

- Strong intangible nomadic heritage system (Manas epic, music traditions)
- Limited institutional cultural infrastructure
- High dependence on international cultural support
- Strong grassroots cultural participation

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism of Kyrgyzstan, UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage reports, ECO cultural cooperation documents, international development agency reports.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Pakistan's cultural policy system is a complex, multi-layered governance framework shaped by civilizational diversity, post-colonial institutional evolution, federal-provincial structures, and strong regional cultural variation. Culture is broadly framed as a vehicle for national identity formation, social cohesion, Islamic cultural heritage preservation, and international cultural engagement.

Unlike more centralized systems in the ECO region, Pakistan's cultural governance is significantly decentralized under its federal structure, where provinces play a major role in cultural management, heritage preservation, and arts promotion. This produces a culturally plural system in which policy implementation varies considerably across regions.

Pakistan's cultural identity is grounded in a rich civilizational continuum that includes Indus Valley civilization heritage, Gandhara Buddhist traditions, Mughal-era cultural synthesis, Islamic intellectual traditions, and diverse regional ethnolinguistic cultures including Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki traditions.

In contemporary policy discourse, culture is increasingly recognized as a strategic asset for tourism development, creative industries growth, diaspora engagement, and soft power projection. However, institutional fragmentation and resource constraints limit the coherence of national cultural strategy. Within the ECO region, Pakistan functions as a demographically large and culturally plural

actor, with significant soft power potential but uneven institutional cultural capacity.

2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Pakistan is distributed across federal and provincial levels. At the federal level, the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture plays a coordinating role in cultural policy, heritage protection, and international cultural cooperation.

Provincial governments—Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan—maintain substantial autonomy in cultural affairs, including museums, archaeology departments, festivals, and arts councils. This decentralized structure allows for strong regional cultural expression but often results in policy fragmentation.

Key institutions include the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA), provincial arts councils, archaeology departments, and numerous universities and cultural foundations.

Civil society plays a significant role in cultural production, particularly in literature, performing arts, music revival movements, and heritage advocacy. Private sector participation is growing in media, film, fashion, and cultural tourism.

International organizations such as UNESCO and bilateral cultural partners support heritage preservation and capacity building initiatives. Overall, Pakistan's governance system is characterized by high cultural diversity but fragmented institutional coordination.



ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN





3. Cultural Heritage System

Pakistan possesses one of the most historically layered cultural heritage systems in the ECO region, spanning prehistoric, Buddhist, Islamic, and colonial periods.

Tangible heritage includes globally significant sites such as Mohenjo-daro (Indus Valley Civilization UNESCO World Heritage Site), Taxila (Gandhara civilization), Makli Necropolis, Lahore Fort and Shalimar Gardens, Rohtas Fort, and numerous archaeological and architectural sites across the country.

These sites reflect Pakistan's position as a historical crossroads of South Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern civilizations.

Intangible cultural heritage includes Qawwali music traditions, Sufi shrine culture, truck art, folk storytelling, traditional crafts, regional dance forms, and diverse linguistic traditions. Pakistan faces significant heritage preservation challenges, including urbanization pressures, funding limitations, climate risks, and conservation capacity constraints.

Despite these challenges, Pakistan maintains a highly diverse and globally significant heritage system with strong civilizational depth.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Pakistan's creative economy is large, dynamic, and rapidly evolving, particularly in media, music, film, fashion, and digital content industries.

The television drama industry is one of the country's strongest cultural exports, with significant regional and diaspora reach across South Asia and the Middle East.

Pakistani music, including classical, Sufi, and contemporary genres, also plays a significant cultural role domestically and internationally.

The film industry (Lollywood) is undergoing gradual revival, supported by new production houses and digital streaming platforms.

Fashion design and textile industries are globally competitive, drawing on Pakistan's strong textile manufacturing base and cultural design traditions.

However, structural challenges include inconsistent policy support, limited funding mechanisms, and infrastructure gaps in creative industry development.

Overall, Pakistan's creative economy is characterized by high human capital and strong cultural output but uneven institutional support.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Pakistan has a diverse cultural education ecosystem consisting of universities, art schools, music academies, and private institutions.

Key institutions include the National College of Arts (NCA), Karachi School of Arts, and various university departments of fine arts, anthropology, archaeology, and media studies.

Capacity building in cultural sectors is also supported by civil society organizations, independent cultural collectives, and international partnerships.

However, access to cultural education remains uneven, particularly outside major urban centers, and institutional funding remains limited.

Despite these constraints, Pakistan produces a significant number of cultural professionals

in arts, media, and heritage-related disciplines.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Pakistan has a rapidly expanding digital cultural ecosystem driven by high mobile penetration, youth demographics, and social media engagement.

Digital platforms play a major role in music distribution, film promotion, independent content creation, and cultural discourse.

YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms have enabled new forms of cultural expression, particularly among youth and diaspora communities.

However, institutional digitization of cultural heritage and museums remains limited, and digital infrastructure gaps persist between urban and rural regions.

Overall, digital culture in Pakistan is highly dynamic at the informal level but unevenly institutionalized.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Pakistan actively participates in international cultural cooperation frameworks including UNESCO, ECO, ICESCO, and various bilateral cultural agreements.

Cultural diplomacy emphasizes Islamic heritage, Indus Valley civilization legacy, Gandhara heritage, and contemporary cultural production.

Within ECO, Pakistan contributes to cultural dialogue, heritage cooperation, and creative industry exchange initiatives.

Diaspora communities also play a significant



role in cultural diplomacy and transnational cultural flows.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Pakistan is uneven but substantial in certain sectors such as heritage preservation, film and media production, and cultural tourism.

Key outcomes include UNESCO recognition of multiple heritage sites, revival of cultural festivals, and growth of private cultural industries.

However, implementation is constrained by governance fragmentation, funding limitations, and institutional coordination challenges.

Despite these issues, Pakistan remains a high-output but institutionally fragmented cultural system.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Cultural monitoring systems in Pakistan are partially developed and uneven across federal and provincial levels.

Data collection exists for heritage sites, museums, and cultural institutions, but comprehensive national cultural statistics systems remain limited.

UNESCO reporting frameworks provide external structure for heritage monitoring.

Creative economy data is still underdeveloped, particularly in digital cultural industries.

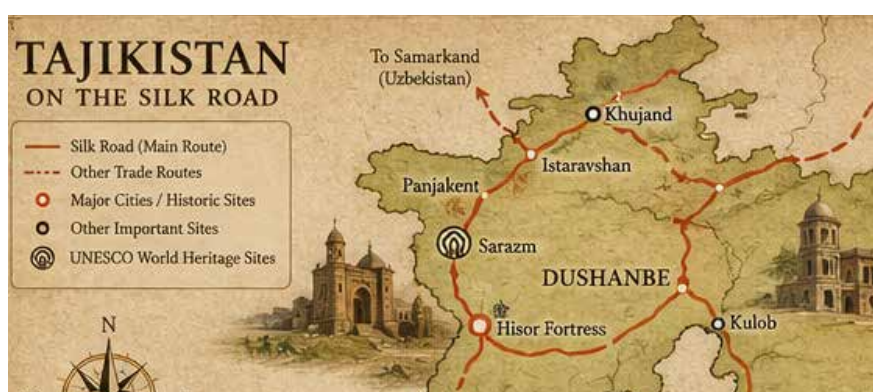
10. Key Indicators

- Highly diverse civilizational heritage base (Indus, Gandhara, Mughal)
- Large-scale creative economy with strong media sector
- Decentralized cultural governance system
- Uneven institutional capacity and funding structures

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of National Heritage and Culture (Pakistan), UNESCO World Heritage Centre, provincial cultural departments, ECO cultural cooperation documentation.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Tajikistan's cultural policy system is a state-centered yet capacity-constrained governance framework shaped by Persianate civilizational heritage, post-Soviet institutional restructuring, and ongoing socio-economic development challenges. Culture is primarily framed as a key instrument of national identity consolidation, linguistic continuity, and social cohesion in a geographically mountainous and administratively dispersed state.

Cultural policy is strongly anchored in the revival and preservation of Tajik language and Persian literary heritage, which form the symbolic foundation of national cultural identity. At the same time, the system is increasingly oriented toward tourism development, heritage protection, and international cultural cooperation as tools for economic diversification and global engagement.

The state emphasizes cultural continuity through historical reference to Sogdian civilization, Islamic scholarly traditions, and classical Persian literary heritage. However, institutional implementation capacity remains limited, with a strong reliance on international partners and donor-supported cultural initiatives.

Within the ECO framework, Tajikistan represents a heritage-rich but resource-constrained cultural system, where cultural vitality is high but institutional scaling remains limited.

2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Tajikistan is primarily coordinated through the Ministry of Culture, which oversees cultural policy implementation, heritage protection, and national cultural programming.

The governance system is highly centralized, reflecting broader state administrative structures. Regional cultural departments operate under central authority, with limited decentralization in decision-making processes.

Key institutions include national museums, cultural centers, libraries, and the Academy of Sciences, which plays a significant role in historical and archaeological research. However, institutional capacity varies significantly across regions.

Civil society participation in cultural governance is relatively limited, though local communities play an important role in preserving oral traditions, crafts, and local cultural practices.

International organizations, particularly UNESCO, play a significant role in supporting heritage preservation and capacity building initiatives.

Overall, the governance system is characterized by strong central control but limited institutional depth and financial capacity.



REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN





3. Cultural Heritage System

Tajikistan's cultural heritage system reflects a deep historical layering of Persian, Sogdian, Islamic, and Silk Road civilizations. Tangible heritage includes significant archaeological and historical sites such as the ancient city of Sarazm (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Hisor Fortress, Penjikent ruins, and various Islamic architectural monuments across Dushanbe, Khujand, and Khatlon regions.

These sites reflect Tajikistan's historical role as part of broader Transoxiana civilization networks, linking Central Asia with Persian cultural spheres.

Intangible heritage is equally important and includes traditional music (Shashmaqam traditions), oral poetry, storytelling, crafts, and seasonal cultural rituals.

Heritage preservation faces significant challenges, including limited conservation funding, environmental degradation, and infrastructure constraints in remote mountainous areas.

Despite these limitations, Tajikistan maintains a strong sense of cultural continuity rooted in language, oral tradition, and historical memory.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Tajikistan's creative economy remains in an early developmental stage, with limited industrialization and strong reliance on informal and artisanal cultural production systems.

Key sectors include traditional crafts, textile production, folk music, small-scale publishing,

and cultural tourism services. These sectors are primarily locally embedded and contribute modestly to national GDP.

Dushanbe serves as the main cultural hub, hosting museums, theaters, and cultural institutions, though the scale of creative industry infrastructure remains limited.

Constraints include limited access to finance, weak market integration, and underdeveloped creative industry ecosystems.

Despite these challenges, cultural production remains socially significant and closely tied to national identity and community life.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Cultural education in Tajikistan is provided through national universities, academies, and cultural institutions, though resources and infrastructure remain limited.

The system includes training in arts, music, literature, and cultural studies, supported by the Academy of Sciences and higher education institutions in Dushanbe and regional centers.

Informal education systems remain highly important in transmitting oral traditions, crafts, and local cultural knowledge.

International cooperation, particularly with UNESCO and regional partners, plays a critical role in supporting capacity building in heritage preservation and cultural education. Overall, the system reflects a hybrid structure of formal institutional limitation and strong informal cultural transmission.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Tajikistan's digital cultural ecosystem is emerging but remains underdeveloped compared to other ECO Member States.

Digital platforms are increasingly used for communication, cultural expression, and diaspora engagement, particularly among youth populations.

However, institutional digitization of cultural heritage and creative industries remains limited due to infrastructural and financial constraints.

Social media is gradually becoming an important channel for cultural visibility and informal cultural production.

Overall, digital culture remains an emerging but structurally constrained sector.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Tajikistan actively participates in international cultural cooperation frameworks, particularly UNESCO, ECO, ICESCO, and bilateral cultural agreements with neighboring states. International cooperation is essential for heritage preservation, technical assistance, and cultural funding support. UNESCO programs are particularly important for safeguarding archaeological sites and intangible heritage systems.

Within ECO, Tajikistan participates in cultural dialogue and heritage initiatives, though its engagement is often shaped by limited institutional capacity.

Cultural diplomacy remains a developing field, with increasing emphasis on tourism and heritage visibility.



8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Tajikistan is uneven but meaningful in terms of heritage preservation and cultural continuity. Key outcomes include recognition of UNESCO-listed heritage sites, continued preservation of Persianate cultural traditions, and gradual development of cultural tourism infrastructure.

However, implementation capacity remains constrained by financial limitations, infrastructure gaps, and geographic dispersion of cultural assets. Despite these challenges, cultural identity remains strong and resilient.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Cultural monitoring systems in Tajikistan are limited and fragmented. Data collection is inconsistent and often dependent on international reporting frameworks. UNESCO reporting mechanisms provide structure for heritage monitoring, particularly for World Heritage and intangible cultural heritage elements.

National cultural statistics systems remain underdeveloped, particularly in relation to creative industries and cultural economy measurement.

Strengthening cultural data infrastructure remains a key development priority.

10. Key Indicators

- Strong Persianate and Silk Road heritage base
- Limited creative economy development
- High dependence on international cultural support
- Strong intangible cultural continuity

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture of Tajikistan, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, ECO cultural cooperation reports, international development agency documentation.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Türkiye's cultural policy system represents one of the most comprehensive and globally outward-facing cultural governance models within the ECO region. It is characterized by a high degree of institutional capacity, strong strategic coordination, and an advanced integration of culture into foreign policy, tourism development, and national branding strategies.

Cultural policy in Türkiye operates at the intersection of historical civilizational depth and contemporary state-led modernization. The country's cultural identity draws from a multilayered heritage structure, including Anatolian civilizations, Byzantine legacies, Ottoman imperial culture, and Turkic-Islamic traditions. This complex historical foundation informs a policy environment in which culture is not merely preservational but actively mobilized as a tool of global influence.

In the contemporary policy framework, culture is explicitly positioned as a strategic sector contributing to economic growth, international diplomacy, and social cohesion. It is embedded within broader national development strategies, particularly those related to tourism expansion, urban regeneration, and creative industry development.

Türkiye's cultural policy system is also strongly export-oriented. The global success of Turkish television dramas, film production, music industries, and cultural festivals reflects a deliberate state-supported expansion of cultural influence beyond national borders. Cultural diplomacy is therefore not supplementary but central to Türkiye's foreign policy architecture.

Within the ECO region, Türkiye functions as a cultural bridge state, linking Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East through shared historical, linguistic, and civilizational ties. This positioning enhances its capacity to act as a regional cultural hub and agenda-setting actor.



REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE



2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Türkiye is structured, hierarchical, and institutionally diversified, with strong coordination between central government agencies and sector-specific institutions. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism serves as the primary authority responsible for cultural policy formulation, heritage management, and international cultural promotion.

This ministry operates through a wide network of directorates, including those responsible for museums, cultural heritage protection, libraries, performing arts, and cultural industries. The integration of culture and tourism under a single institutional umbrella reflects Türkiye's strategic approach to linking heritage with economic development.

In addition to the ministry, several key institutions contribute to the cultural governance ecosystem. These include the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which plays a significant role in cultural diplomacy and heritage restoration abroad, and the Yunus Emre Institute, which serves as a global cultural diplomacy and Turkish language promotion institution.

Municipal governments, particularly in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, also play an important role in cultural programming, urban cultural infrastructure development, and local creative economy support. These subnational actors contribute to a relatively decentralized cultural implementation environment, despite strong central strategic coordination.

Civil society and private sector participation in cultural production is highly developed



compared to many ECO Member States. Foundations, cultural associations, private museums, and media companies contribute significantly to cultural life. This pluralistic structure supports a dynamic cultural ecosystem while maintaining alignment with national cultural policy objectives.

Overall, Türkiye demonstrates high institutional capacity, strong inter-agency coordination, and a mature governance system capable of executing large-scale cultural initiatives domestically and internationally.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Türkiye's cultural heritage system is one of the most extensive and globally significant in the ECO region, reflecting its unique geographic and civilizational position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

The tangible heritage landscape includes globally recognized sites such as Göbekli Tepe, Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace, Ephesus, Cappadocia, Troy, and numerous Ottoman architectural ensembles across Anatolian cities. These sites collectively represent a continuous historical narrative spanning prehistoric, classical, Byzantine, and Ottoman periods.

Türkiye is among the leading countries globally in terms of UNESCO World Heritage inscriptions, reflecting both the depth of its

heritage assets and its institutional capacity for heritage documentation and preservation. Intangible cultural heritage is equally rich and includes traditional music forms, Mevlevi Sema ceremonies, shadow theatre (Karagöz and Hacivat), Turkish coffee culture, carpet weaving traditions, folk dances, and oral storytelling traditions. These elements are actively preserved and promoted as living cultural practices.

Heritage policy in Türkiye is strongly linked to tourism development strategies. Historic sites are integrated into national tourism circuits, contributing significantly to economic activity and international visitor flows. Urban heritage regeneration projects, particularly in Istanbul and Anatolian historic **المدين**, reflect a policy model that combines preservation with adaptive reuse.

Despite its strengths, the heritage system faces challenges related to urbanization pressures, environmental risks, and the balancing of tourism intensity with conservation needs. Nevertheless, Türkiye maintains one of the most institutionally advanced heritage systems in the ECO region.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Türkiye possesses one of the most developed creative economies in the ECO region,

characterized by strong global integration, export capacity, and institutional support.

The television and film industry is particularly prominent, with Turkish dramas achieving widespread international distribution across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Latin America, and Europe. This sector represents a major component of Türkiye's cultural soft power.

The film industry, supported by both state incentives and private production companies, has achieved increasing recognition in international film festivals. Istanbul functions as a major production hub for audiovisual content, supported by advanced technical infrastructure.

Music industries in Türkiye are diverse, ranging from traditional Turkish music forms to contemporary pop, rock, and electronic genres. Cultural festivals and live performance industries contribute significantly to domestic cultural economies.

Additional creative sectors include fashion design, publishing, digital media production, gaming industries, and advertising. Istanbul, in particular, functions as a regional creative capital with strong international connectivity. State support mechanisms include funding programs, tax incentives, and cultural export promotion strategies. However, the sector is largely driven by private industry dynamics, particularly in media and entertainment.

Türkiye's creative economy is characterized by high export potential, strong branding capacity, and increasing integration into global cultural markets.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Türkiye has a highly developed cultural education infrastructure, including universities, conservatories, fine arts academies, and specialized training institutions.

Major institutions such as Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and conservatories in Istanbul and Ankara provide structured training in visual arts, music, theater, and cultural management.

Cultural education is increasingly aligned with creative industry needs, including film production, digital media, design, and cultural entrepreneurship. This alignment reflects a broader policy shift toward integrating education with economic sectors.

International academic cooperation is extensive, with student exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and cultural diplomacy scholarships contributing to capacity building.

Despite strong institutional infrastructure, ongoing challenges include ensuring equitable access to cultural education across

regions and adapting curricula to rapidly evolving digital cultural environments.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Türkiye has a highly dynamic digital cultural ecosystem, characterized by strong social media engagement, digital content production, and expanding creative technology sectors.

Digital platforms play a major role in cultural dissemination, particularly in television streaming, music distribution, and independent content creation. Turkish digital content industries have achieved significant global reach.

The gaming industry represents a rapidly growing segment of the digital creative economy, supported by both startups and international investment.

Museums and cultural institutions are increasingly adopting digital technologies, including virtual exhibitions, digitized archives, and interactive cultural platforms.

Overall, Türkiye demonstrates advanced digital cultural capacity within the ECO region, though continued investment is required to sustain technological leadership.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Türkiye is one of the most active ECO Member States in international cultural cooperation, with extensive engagement across UNESCO, ECO, TURKSOY, ICESCO, and bilateral cultural diplomacy frameworks.

Through institutions such as the Yunus Emre Institute and TİKA, Türkiye conducts large-scale cultural diplomacy programs including language education, heritage restoration, academic cooperation, and cultural exchange initiatives.

Türkiye plays a leading role in Turkic cultural cooperation frameworks, particularly through TURKSOY and the Organization of Turkic States, where it contributes significantly to joint cultural programming and heritage initiatives.

Its cultural diplomacy strategy emphasizes shared civilizational heritage, intercultural dialogue, and global cultural connectivity.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Türkiye is highly effective and globally visible. Major achievements include large-scale heritage restoration projects, expansion of museum infrastructure, international cultural festivals, and the global success of Turkish media

industries.

Urban cultural transformation projects in Istanbul and other major cities have strengthened cultural infrastructure and enhanced tourism capacity.

Türkiye's cultural exports, particularly television dramas, represent one of the most successful cultural diplomacy tools globally.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Türkiye maintains relatively advanced cultural data systems integrated into national statistical frameworks. Indicators include cultural participation rates, tourism flows, museum attendance, and creative industry output.

The system is partially aligned with UNESCO frameworks and increasingly incorporates digital data collection mechanisms.

However, further integration of cultural economy indicators and creative sector analytics remains an area of development.

10. Key Indicators

- Highly developed creative industries with global export capacity
- Extensive UNESCO World Heritage portfolio
- Strong cultural diplomacy institutions (TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute)
- Advanced digital cultural ecosystem

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture of Türkiye, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, ECO cultural cooperation reports, international development agency documentation.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Turkmenistan's cultural policy system is a highly centralized, state-directed governance model shaped by strong nation-building priorities, controlled cultural production systems, and a pronounced emphasis on historical continuity and national identity formation. Culture is formally positioned as a key pillar of state ideology, social cohesion, and international representation, with particular focus on Turkmen heritage, language, and historical statehood narratives.

Cultural policy is closely integrated with broader state strategies emphasizing national unity, cultural sovereignty, and the preservation of traditional values. In this context, culture functions not only as a sectoral policy domain but as a core instrument of state legitimacy and

identity consolidation.

The policy framework draws heavily on Turkmenistan's historical narratives linked to ancient civilizations such as Margiana (Merv), the Parthian Empire, and Silk Road trade systems, as well as later Turkmen tribal and nomadic traditions. These elements are actively curated within state institutions and cultural programming.

At the international level, cultural policy is selectively outward-facing, emphasizing heritage diplomacy, neutrality-based international engagement, and participation in selected multilateral cultural frameworks. Within the ECO region, Turkmenistan maintains a low-profile but heritage-anchored cultural posture, with limited but symbolically significant participation in regional cooperation.



TURKMENISTAN



2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Turkmenistan is highly centralized under state institutions, with the Ministry of Culture serving as the primary authority responsible for cultural policy formulation, implementation, and oversight.

The governance structure is characterized by strong vertical control, with limited decentralization to regional or municipal levels. Cultural institutions operate within a tightly regulated framework that prioritizes alignment with national cultural policy directives.

Key institutions include national museums, cultural centers, libraries, and state-run artistic ensembles. These institutions are responsible for managing cultural programming, heritage preservation, and public cultural events.

Civil society participation in cultural governance is limited, and independent cultural organizations operate under significant regulatory constraints. Cultural production is primarily state-managed, with limited private sector involvement.

International cooperation exists but is selective and carefully managed, focusing on heritage preservation, UNESCO engagement, and controlled cultural exchange initiatives.

Overall, Turkmenistan's governance system reflects a highly centralized, state-controlled cultural model with limited institutional pluralism.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Turkmenistan's cultural heritage system is deeply rooted in the historical legacy of Central Asian civilizations, including the ancient city of Merv (Margiana), one of the most significant Silk Road urban centers and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Tangible heritage includes archaeological sites, Islamic architectural monuments, ancient urban settlements, and remnants of Silk Road trade infrastructure. Key heritage sites reflect historical continuity from pre-Islamic civilizations through Islamic Golden Age developments.

Intangible heritage includes traditional Turkmen music, carpet weaving traditions, oral storytelling, equestrian culture, and nomadic customs. Carpet weaving, in particular, is a nationally symbolic cultural practice and an important element of identity representation.

Heritage preservation is state-led and highly structured, with emphasis on formal documentation, restoration, and national narrative integration. However, limited international collaboration and restricted civil society engagement reduce the diversity of preservation approaches.

Environmental challenges, including



desertification and climate pressures, pose additional risks to archaeological and rural heritage sites.

Despite constraints, Turkmenistan maintains a symbolically strong but institutionally closed heritage system, heavily integrated into state identity frameworks.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Turkmenistan's creative economy is relatively underdeveloped and predominantly state-managed, with limited private sector participation and restricted market liberalization.

Key cultural production sectors include traditional crafts (especially carpet weaving), state-sponsored music and performing arts, literature, and cultural festivals organized by government institutions.

The carpet industry holds particular cultural and symbolic importance and is widely promoted as a national cultural emblem. It also represents one of the few semi-commercialized cultural sectors with international visibility.

Film, publishing, and contemporary media industries remain limited in scale and primarily state-directed. Cultural production is often oriented toward national narratives and official cultural themes.

Tourism-linked cultural industries are developing slowly, with some investment in heritage tourism infrastructure, particularly around major archaeological sites.

Overall, the creative economy remains narrow in scope, highly centralized, and symbolically driven rather than market-driven.

5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Cultural education in Turkmenistan is provided through state-controlled educational institutions, including universities, cultural academies, and specialized arts training centers.

The curriculum emphasizes national history, language, traditional arts, and cultural heritage, reflecting broader nation-building objectives.

Opportunities for international academic exchange exist but are relatively limited compared to other ECO Member States.

Capacity building in cultural sectors is primarily state-organized, with limited engagement from international cultural organizations or independent institutions.

Overall, cultural education is structured, centralized, and identity-focused, with limited internationalization.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Turkmenistan's digital cultural ecosystem is relatively limited and highly regulated. Internet access and digital content production operate within a controlled environment, which significantly shapes cultural dissemination patterns.

Digital platforms are used primarily for official cultural communication, state media dissemination, and limited cultural promotion activities.

Independent digital cultural production is minimal, and social media ecosystems are comparatively restricted.

As a result, digital cultural innovation remains



highly constrained and state-mediated, with limited diversification of cultural expression online.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Turkmenistan participates selectively in international cultural cooperation, primarily through UNESCO and ECO frameworks, while maintaining a broader foreign policy of neutrality.

Engagement focuses on heritage preservation, archaeological cooperation, and participation in selected cultural festivals and regional initiatives.

Within ECO, Turkmenistan's cultural participation is generally low-intensity but

symbolically important, reflecting its broader diplomatic posture of limited engagement combined with periodic regional cooperation. Cultural diplomacy emphasizes neutrality, historical heritage, and traditional cultural identity.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Turkmenistan is highly centralized and state-driven, with visible outcomes in heritage preservation, cultural symbolism, and national cultural programming.

Major achievements include maintenance and promotion of key heritage sites such as Merv and development of state cultural festivals and institutions.

However, implementation is characterized by limited institutional diversification and low levels of international integration.

Cultural production remains stable but narrowly structured around official state narratives.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Cultural monitoring systems in Turkmenistan are centralized and state-controlled, with limited transparency and restricted external data integration.

Statistical reporting on cultural activities exists but is not widely accessible for international benchmarking.

UNESCO reporting mechanisms provide partial external reference points for heritage monitoring, particularly for World Heritage sites.

Overall, cultural data systems are centralized, limited in transparency, and minimally integrated with international frameworks.

10. Key Indicators

- Strong Silk Road archaeological heritage (notably Merv)
- Highly centralized cultural governance system
- Limited creative economy development
- Restricted digital cultural ecosystem

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture of Turkmenistan, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, ECO cultural cooperation documentation, international heritage and development reports.





1. Cultural Policy Overview

Uzbekistan's cultural policy system is undergoing a sustained transformation toward an integrated, multi-sectoral governance model that links cultural heritage, education, tourism, science, and foreign policy into a unified strategic framework. Culture is increasingly positioned not only as a marker of national identity but also as a strategic development instrument supporting international visibility, economic modernization, and diplomatic engagement.

At the core of Uzbekistan's cultural policy is the "New Uzbekistan" vision, which reframes cultural heritage as both a repository of historical continuity and an active resource for state-led modernization. This approach marks a significant departure from earlier preservation-centered models, moving instead toward a dynamic system in which culture is embedded in national development planning.

Uzbekistan's cultural identity is deeply rooted in the historical geography of Transoxiana (Mawarannahr), Fergana Valley, and Khwarazm—regions that have historically functioned as centers of intellectual production, trade, and scientific advancement along the Silk Road. This civilizational heritage is actively mobilized in contemporary policy narratives to position Uzbekistan as a historical bridge between East and West.

The state's cultural policy framework emphasizes the revival and internationalization of this heritage through museums, festivals, educational diplomacy, and large-scale urban cultural projects. Cultural policy is also closely integrated with tourism development, particularly through the branding of cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Tashkent as global cultural destinations.

In the ECO regional context, Uzbekistan represents a rising cultural diplomacy actor, increasingly active in heritage cooperation, academic exchange, and multilateral cultural platforms.



REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN





2. Governance & Institutional Framework

Cultural governance in Uzbekistan is structured through a centralized yet increasingly diversified institutional system. The Ministry of Culture serves as the primary policy authority, supported by specialized institutions including the Cultural Heritage Agency, the Academy of Arts, and various national museums and cultural development organizations.

In parallel, Uzbekistan has developed a multi-sectoral governance approach in which culture is coordinated with tourism, education, sports, and foreign policy. Institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Higher Education play complementary roles in aligning cultural policy with broader national development objectives.

A defining feature of Uzbekistan's governance model is the increasing institutionalization of cultural diplomacy. The state actively supports international cooperation through UNESCO, TURKSOY, ICESCO, and ECO frameworks, while also developing bilateral cultural agreements with neighboring states and global partners.

Municipal and regional authorities are becoming more involved in cultural programming, particularly in heritage cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. These local governance structures contribute to cultural tourism management, urban heritage preservation, and festival organization.

Civil society and private sector participation in cultural governance is gradually expanding, particularly in creative industries, crafts production, and cultural tourism

services. However, the state remains the primary coordinator of cultural strategy and implementation.

Overall, Uzbekistan demonstrates a transitioning governance model that combines strong central coordination with growing institutional diversification and international engagement.

3. Cultural Heritage System

Uzbekistan possesses one of the richest and most historically layered cultural heritage systems in the ECO region, shaped by its central role in Silk Road civilization, Islamic intellectual history, and Timurid cultural development.

Tangible heritage includes globally significant sites such as Samarkand (Registan complex), Bukhara's historic center, Khiva's Itchan Kala, Shahrisabz, and numerous archaeological sites across Fergana and Khwarazm regions. These sites reflect centuries of architectural, scientific, and urban development traditions. The heritage system is strongly supported by state-led restoration programs and international cooperation with UNESCO. Several of Uzbekistan's historic cities are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, reinforcing their global cultural significance.

Intangible cultural heritage is equally significant and includes Shashmaqam music traditions, Navruz celebrations, oral storytelling, traditional crafts, Katta Ashula singing traditions, and Askiya humorous performance traditions. These elements are actively preserved and promoted through festivals, educational programs, and cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Uzbekistan has adopted a strategic approach to heritage management that links

preservation with economic development, particularly through cultural tourism. Heritage cities are increasingly positioned as integrated cultural-economic zones.

Despite strong progress, challenges remain in balancing conservation with tourism pressure, ensuring sustainable restoration practices, and strengthening technical capacity in heritage management.

4. Creative Economy & Cultural Industries

Uzbekistan's creative economy is in a phase of structured expansion, supported by state-led modernization policies and increasing integration with global cultural markets.

Key sectors include film production, music industries, publishing, performing arts, visual arts, and traditional crafts. The film industry is expanding through national studios and international co-production initiatives, while music production ranges from classical traditions to contemporary genres.

Traditional crafts—particularly ceramics, silk production, embroidery, and carpet weaving—represent an important intersection between cultural heritage and economic development. These industries are closely linked to cultural tourism and local employment generation.

The government has introduced policy incentives to support creative entrepreneurship, cultural SMEs, and cultural tourism enterprises. However, the sector is still in transition toward full market-based scalability and international competitiveness. Urban centers such as Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara function as primary hubs for creative production and cultural events.



5. Cultural Education & Capacity Building

Cultural education in Uzbekistan is anchored in a growing network of universities, academies, and specialized institutions. Key institutions include the Alisher Navoi Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature, the Tashkent State Institute of Arts and Culture, and Samarkand State University. These institutions provide training in arts, literature, cultural management, heritage studies, and media production. Education reform has increasingly emphasized alignment with international standards and integration into global academic networks. Presidential schools and specialized education initiatives contribute to elite talent development and cultural diplomacy objectives. International partnerships with foreign universities also enhance capacity building and knowledge exchange. Despite significant progress, challenges remain in expanding access to cultural education in rural regions and strengthening the linkage between academic training and creative industry employment.

6. Digital Culture & Innovation

Uzbekistan is experiencing rapid digital transformation in its cultural sector, particularly in heritage documentation, museum digitization, and cultural dissemination. Digital platforms are increasingly used for cultural promotion, tourism marketing, and educational outreach. Museums and heritage institutions are adopting digital archiving systems and virtual exhibition technologies.

Social media plays an important role in youth cultural expression and diaspora engagement, contributing to the globalization of Uzbek cultural identity. However, digital infrastructure remains uneven across regions and institutions, and further investment is required to fully integrate digital technologies into cultural governance systems.

7. International & Regional Cultural Cooperation

Uzbekistan has significantly expanded its international cultural cooperation profile in recent years. It is actively engaged in UNESCO, ECO, ICESCO, and TURKSOY frameworks, and increasingly participates in global cultural diplomacy initiatives. Cultural diplomacy emphasizes Uzbekistan's historical role in Silk Road civilization, Islamic intellectual heritage, and scientific contributions. The country regularly hosts international cultural festivals, academic conferences, and diplomatic cultural forums. Within ECO, Uzbekistan is emerging as a central actor in heritage cooperation, cultural tourism development, and regional educational exchange.

8. Policy Implementation & Outcomes

Cultural policy implementation in Uzbekistan has produced visible outcomes in heritage restoration, urban cultural development, and international cultural visibility. Major achievements include the revitalization of historic cities, expansion of museum infrastructure, and hosting of international cultural events. Large-scale restoration

projects have transformed heritage sites into active cultural and tourism centers. Cultural diplomacy outcomes are reflected in increased international recognition of Uzbekistan's heritage cities and growing participation in global cultural platforms.

9. Monitoring, Evaluation & Data Systems

Uzbekistan has developed improving but still evolving cultural monitoring systems. These include national statistical reporting on cultural institutions, tourism flows, heritage site conditions, and creative industry development.

The state increasingly uses digital tools for heritage inventory management and cultural asset tracking.

Alignment with UNESCO reporting frameworks is strengthening, particularly in heritage and intangible cultural heritage domains.

10. Key Indicators

- Extensive Silk Road heritage infrastructure
- Rapidly expanding cultural tourism sector
- Strong state-led cultural modernization program
- Increasing international cultural diplomacy presence

11. Selected Sources

Ministry of Culture of Uzbekistan, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, ECO cultural cooperation materials.

CULTURAL SYSTEMS OF ECO MEMBER STATES

A Shared Framework, National Profiles, and Cooperative Pathways

1 SHARED ECO CULTURAL FRAMEWORK



2 NATIONAL CULTURAL SYSTEM PROFILES



3 DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES WITHIN ECO



4 SHARED CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS



PART III:

**THEMATIC
ANALYSIS,
CASE STUDIES
& OUTLOOK**

SECTION 4.

Thematic Deep Dives

4.1 Cultural Heritage Protection (Tangible and Intangible)

The Historical and Conceptual Foundations of Heritage Protection

The imperative to protect cultural heritage did not emerge in a vacuum. It developed through a long and often painful history of destruction, dispossession, and loss — catalyzed by the colonial expansions of the seventeenth century, the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, and the catastrophic conflicts of the twentieth. Imperial expansion and the ideology of the Mission civilisatrice — the so-called “civilizing mission” wielded as justification for colonial domination — led to the systematic destruction, displacement, and appropriation of cultural artifacts, architectural monuments, and artistic traditions across vast geographies (Akalın, 2023: 62). Wars, both regional and global, compounded these losses immeasurably, stripping societies of irreplaceable material evidence of their histories and identities.

Raymond Williams observed that industrial society’s pollution extended far beyond air and water — that imperialism itself treated both people and the material products of conquered societies as raw materials (Williams, 2013: 102–103). This exploitation was not confined to physical resources; it evolved into what has since been termed “epistemic colonialism,” in which local identities, languages, and cultural memory were systematically suppressed through the use of communication tools as instruments of ideological domination (Salimov, 2025: 22). Terry Eagleton similarly argued that the imposition of cultural norms upon other societies constitutes one of the most transparent expressions of assumptions of ethnic superiority (Eagleton, 2019: 45).

These historical processes created the conditions from which new disciplines and international frameworks for cultural heritage protection gradually emerged. The spread of museology, the development of archival and documentation sciences, and the establishment of systematic conservation methods for artworks and archaeological

material were all significant outcomes of this process. Crucially, cultural heritage came to be understood not merely as a historical relic of the past but as an essential component of humanity’s shared inheritance — one that carries obligations of preservation and transmission to future generations.

This understanding also found expression in the ways that states and cultural industries began to engage with heritage through contemporary media. Cinema, animation, and digital storytelling have become powerful vehicles through which historical, mythological, and traditional elements are re-animated for global audiences. Japan’s anime industry provides perhaps the most globally prominent example, weaving traditional folklore, historical narrative, and mythological themes through internationally distributed productions. Chinese cinema has increasingly foregrounded mythology and epic narrative — as in the internationally successful production *Ne Zha* — while Indian cinema has drawn extensively on the country’s vast traditions of mysticism, epic storytelling, and classical cultural symbolism. In each case, heritage is not only preserved but actively reproduced, reinterpreted, and circulated as living cultural value.

Understanding Tangible Cultural Heritage

Tangible cultural heritage encompasses the material residue of human civilization: the built environment of historical structures, monuments, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes; the movable objects held in museums, archives, and collections; and the broader fabric of historic urban areas and sacred sites. These material dimensions of heritage are not merely aesthetic or antiquarian concerns — they carry the accumulated evidence of past civilizations, anchor societies’ sense of historical identity and spatial belonging, and provide irreplaceable physical links between present communities and the generations who preceded them.

Yet tangible heritage everywhere faces serious and often intensifying threats. Wars and armed conflicts have caused the

deliberate destruction and opportunistic looting of cultural assets throughout history and continue to do so in the contemporary period. Colonial dispossession removed vast quantities of artifacts, manuscripts, and artistic objects from their communities of origin, many of which remain in institutions far removed from those communities. Rapid urbanization exerts relentless pressure on historic urban fabrics, often prioritizing development over conservation. Climate change and natural disasters — floods, earthquakes, desertification, coastal erosion — increasingly threaten heritage sites across the world. Illegal trafficking in cultural property continues to drain heritage-rich but institutionally vulnerable regions of irreplaceable assets.

These threats transformed cultural heritage protection from a concern of individual nations into a challenge demanding coordinated international response. The most significant institutional actor in this domain is UNESCO — the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — established on 16 November 1945 in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. UNESCO’s founding premise was that lasting peace cannot be secured through political and military means alone. Sustainable peace requires the cultivation of shared understanding, mutual respect, and cultural exchange — the instruments of soft power — alongside the hard power of political and military settlement. In this sense, UNESCO functions as a major global soft power actor, using culture and education as foundations for international cooperation.

UNESCO’s landmark instrument for tangible heritage protection is the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted in 1972. This convention established the first comprehensive international framework for the identification, nomination, and protection of sites possessing Outstanding Universal Value — a concept that positions exceptional cultural and natural heritage as the common inheritance of all humanity, transcending the sovereignty of individual states. Through the World Heritage List, hundreds of historical monuments, cultural landscapes,

and natural sites have been brought under international protection, benefiting from technical expertise, international visibility, conservation programs, and in some cases financial support. Sites under acute threat from war, neglect, or natural disaster may be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, directing international attention and resources toward their protection.

UNESCO's activities in tangible heritage protection are not limited to listing and designation. The organization supports technical conservation programs, provides capacity-building assistance to member states with limited institutional infrastructure, promotes the development of heritage management frameworks, and encourages the integration of heritage conservation into sustainable development strategies. World Heritage inscriptions generate significant economic and diplomatic benefits for states — increasing international tourist arrivals, strengthening national cultural identity narratives, and enhancing soft power capacity in cultural diplomacy.

Technological innovation is increasingly reshaping conservation practice. Digital archiving, three-dimensional scanning and modeling, satellite monitoring of heritage sites, virtual museology platforms, and digital reconstruction techniques now allow cultural assets to be preserved in high-resolution digital form — providing both a safeguard against physical loss and a means of making heritage accessible to audiences who cannot physically visit sites. UNESCO has engaged progressively with these technologies, and it is anticipated that technology-supported conservation methods will play an ever-larger role in the international heritage protection framework going forward.

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

While the protection of tangible heritage has been a central preoccupation of international cultural policy since the mid-twentieth century, the recognition that cultural heritage encompasses far more than its material dimensions developed more gradually. Over time, it became clear that focusing exclusively on monuments and objects risked overlooking dimensions of cultural life that were equally vital — and often more immediately threatened by modernization, globalization, and demographic change.

Intangible cultural heritage encompasses the living practices, forms of expression, knowledge systems, and social institutions through which communities transmit their identities, values, and historical memories across generations. Oral narratives, epic traditions, folk tales, proverbs, poetry,

and songs carry the literary and historical memory of peoples who may or may not have possessed written traditions. Traditional performing arts — music, dance, theater, and ceremonial forms — embody aesthetic and spiritual knowledge accumulated over centuries. Social practices, rituals, and festive events structure communal life and reinforce collective identity. Traditional knowledge concerning nature, the universe, agriculture, medicine, and ecology represents sophisticated intellectual systems developed through long historical experience. And traditional craftsmanship — the making of textiles, ceramics, metalwork, woodwork, jewelry, and countless other objects — constitutes both cultural expression and living economic activity.

These dimensions of heritage do not exist in isolation from material culture; they are deeply interwoven with the physical environments, sacred sites, objects, and architectural spaces through which they are practiced and transmitted. But they have a distinctive character: they live primarily in people — in the bodies, memories, relationships, and practices of communities — rather than in physical objects. This makes them simultaneously resilient and fragile: capable of surviving the destruction of physical heritage assets as long as communities continue to practice and transmit them, but vulnerable to disruption when the social conditions that sustain them are undermined. Globalization and the accelerating interconnection of the world's cultural systems have brought the risks to intangible heritage into sharp focus. Advances in communication and transportation have dramatically accelerated cultural exchange, creating new forms of cross-cultural interaction and creativity. But these same processes have also generated powerful pressures toward cultural homogenization — the spread of globally standardized consumer culture at the expense of locally rooted traditions, languages, and practices. Many indigenous and minority languages are disappearing within a generation. Traditional craft systems are losing practitioners as younger generations migrate to urban areas and formal employment sectors. Oral traditions are eroding as new forms of entertainment replace the social contexts in which they were previously performed and transmitted. Cultural diversity — humanity's accumulated wealth of different ways of understanding and inhabiting the world — is diminishing in ways that parallel and in some respects exceed the loss of biodiversity.

The international community's primary response to these pressures is the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted on 17 October 2003 at

the 32nd General Conference of UNESCO. This convention marked a paradigm shift in international heritage policy, establishing a framework that recognizes intangible cultural heritage as a living value demanding active safeguarding rather than merely passive preservation. The convention organizes intangible cultural heritage into five domains: oral traditions and expressions, including language as their primary carrier; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship. Member states party to the convention commit to identifying and documenting intangible heritage on their territories, taking safeguarding measures, ensuring the transmission of heritage to younger generations, raising public awareness, and providing institutional and financial support for safeguarding activities.

A distinctive and important feature of the 2003 Convention is its emphasis on community participation. UNESCO's framework explicitly recognizes that intangible cultural heritage can only be effectively safeguarded with the active involvement of the communities, groups, and individuals who are its bearers and practitioners. Top-down institutional approaches — in which governments or experts define, document, and manage heritage from above — are insufficient; communities must be central actors in identifying what aspects of their heritage require protection, determining appropriate forms of transmission, and implementing safeguarding measures. This principle of community-centered heritage governance has significant implications for cultural policy design across the ECO region and beyond.

The threats facing intangible heritage today are pervasive and structural. Modernization, urbanization, migration, and digitalization all exert pressure on the social conditions that sustain living cultural traditions. Raising awareness among younger generations — ensuring that they engage with, value, and are equipped to carry forward inherited cultural practices — is recognized as one of the most critical dimensions of intangible heritage safeguarding. This is not simply a matter of institutional education programs; it requires the creation of enabling social conditions in which traditional practices remain meaningful, economically viable, and socially respected within contemporary life. Heritage that cannot find a living place in the present cannot be transmitted to the future.

Heritage Protection in the ECO Context

For the ECO region, the themes of heritage protection — both tangible and intangible

— carry particular weight and urgency. The region encompasses some of the world's most extraordinary concentrations of cultural heritage: the ancient cities and archaeological landscapes of the Silk Roads; the architectural monuments of Persianate, Ottoman, Central Asian, and South Asian

civilizations; the living traditions of nomadic culture, classical music, oral epic, and traditional craft that have been sustained across centuries of cultural interaction. This heritage is both a source of profound regional pride and a resource of enormous potential for cultural diplomacy, sustainable tourism,

and regional cooperation.

It is also a heritage under pressure from multiple directions simultaneously — from armed conflict and political instability in some parts of the region; from urbanization and development pressure in rapidly growing cities; from climate change and

Cultural Heritage Protection (Tangible and Intangible)

1. HISTORICAL & CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION



WHY HERITAGE MATTERS

-  Identity & belonging
-  Social cohesion & diversity
-  Sustainable development
-  Peace, respect & understanding

2. TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Physical legacy of human civilization.



KEY THREATS



3. UNESCO FRAMEWORK



UNESCO

Protect cultural & natural heritage for peace, dialogue & sustainable development.

Key Instrument:

World Heritage Convention, 1972

Identify • Protect • Conserve • Share



190+ States Parties | 1,150+ World Heritage properties
Shared commitment to our heritage.

4. INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Living expressions passed down through generations.

DOMAINS



SAFEGUARDING MEASURES



5. KEY APPROACHES



environmental degradation affecting fragile cultural landscapes; from the erosion of intergenerational transmission pathways as traditional communities transform; and from uneven institutional capacity for heritage management across member states. Meeting these pressures requires not only investment in physical conservation and institutional infrastructure, but also the cultivation of community engagement, the integration of heritage into living economic and social systems, and the development of regional cooperation frameworks that can pool expertise, resources, and commitment in service of the shared cultural wealth of the ECO region.

4.2 Creative Industries and Cultural Economy

Defining the Field: Where Creativity Meets Economy

Creative industries — sometimes termed creative cultural industries — constitute those economic sectors in which the primary source of value is creativity, cultural production, knowledge, design, and intellectual property (Aysan et al., 2025: 190). This broad field encompasses cinema, music, television and broadcasting, digital media, architecture, fashion, advertising, animation, publishing, video games, and heritage-based cultural production. Unlike traditional industries in which value derives primarily from physical raw materials and manufacturing processes, the distinctive characteristic of creative industries is that value arises from original ideas, aesthetic vision, cultural meaning, and the creative capacity of their producers.

The field emerges at the intersection of art, culture, media, technology, and economics — a convergence that makes it analytically complex and strategically significant. Creative industries are not merely cultural activities with incidental economic dimensions; they are increasingly recognized as major economic sectors in their own right, as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power, and as drivers of innovation, urban development, and international competitiveness. For this reason, many states now regard creative sectors as strategic investment priorities rather than merely as recipients of cultural subsidy.

The relationship between economic structure and cultural production is a longstanding concern of cultural theory. Pierre Bourdieu argued that cultural economy extends beyond material production and consumption to encompass multiple forms of capital — economic, cultural, social, and symbolic — that interact with and can be converted

into one another, shaping individuals' positions within social hierarchies. Cultural capital, encompassing education, aesthetic knowledge, language, and lifestyle; social capital, residing in networks of relationships; and symbolic capital, manifested in prestige and recognition, all interact with economic capital in determining the social value and impact of cultural production. Terry Eagleton similarly observed that economic power plays a decisive role in the development of cultural institutions — that art galleries, universities, publishing houses, and other cultural infrastructure presuppose the economic conditions that make their existence possible (Eagleton, 2019: 13).

The Global Creative Economy Landscape

On a global scale, creative industries have evolved into one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy, transformed by digitalization and globalization into industries of genuinely planetary reach. The United States exercises unparalleled influence over global cultural production and consumption through Hollywood cinema, the global entertainment industry, and the dominance of American technology corporations over the digital platforms through which cultural content now circulates worldwide. South Korea has achieved a remarkable transformation in global cultural standing through the deliberate cultivation of K-pop music, high-quality television drama, and digital content industries — demonstrating that strategic public investment in creative sectors can generate extraordinary returns in economic value, tourism revenue, and soft power capacity. Japan exercises global cultural influence through anime, manga, and the broader ecosystem of Japanese popular culture. The United Kingdom leverages its creative industries — among the most developed in the world — as central instruments of cultural diplomacy and international economic competitiveness.

Digital transformation has been the most significant structural force reshaping creative industries globally. The emergence of streaming platforms, social media networks, online publishing markets, and digital distribution systems has dissolved many of the geographic and institutional barriers that previously constrained the circulation of cultural content. Cultural products can now reach global audiences instantaneously and at marginal cost, fundamentally changing the economics of cultural production and distribution. This has simultaneously created enormous new opportunities for producers in previously marginalized cultural economies and intensified competitive pressures from

dominant global media corporations. The creative economy now directly affects not only cultural production but also tourism, technology development, brand value, and countries' international reputations.

Artificial intelligence represents the most recent and perhaps most profound technological disruption to creative industries. AI systems are increasingly capable of generating content — visual, musical, textual, and audiovisual — that can compete in quality and sometimes in originality with human-produced work. This development challenges fundamental assumptions about creativity as an inherently human capacity and raises significant questions about intellectual property, the economic position of human creative workers, and the future relationship between human and machine intelligence in cultural production. The integration of AI into creative fields requires a fundamental re-evaluation of how creativity, authorship, and cultural value are understood and institutionally organized.

Creative Industries in the ECO Region: Potential and Constraints

For ECO member states, creative cultural industries represent an area of significant but incompletely realized potential. The region possesses an extraordinary foundation of cultural capital — a richness of historical heritage, diverse artistic traditions, living craft systems, multilingual literary cultures, and a large and youthful population with strong capacities for creative expression and digital engagement. Translating this cultural capital into internationally competitive creative economies remains, however, a work in progress — and a strategically important one.

Türkiye stands as the most advanced creative economy in the ECO region and, by many measures, among the most globally impactful. The extraordinary international success of Turkish television drama series — broadcast across the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia, South Asia, and Latin America, reaching audiences numbering in the hundreds of millions — demonstrates the potential for cultural production from the ECO region to achieve genuine global reach. This success is not accidental: it reflects decades of investment in production infrastructure, a strong tradition of professional talent, a distinctive storytelling capacity that draws on Ottoman-Islamic heritage while engaging contemporary themes, and increasingly sophisticated digital distribution strategies. Turkish gastronomy, cultural tourism, fashion, design, and cinema complement this media success, positioning Türkiye as a multi-dimensional creative economy power.

Iran's creative industries, particularly in cinema and literature, have achieved sustained international recognition that belies the constraints under which they operate. Iranian cinema has consistently performed at the highest levels of international critical recognition, with filmmakers such as Asghar Farhadi achieving global audiences and prestigious festival awards. Iranian literature has a global readership, with Persian-language works translated into dozens of languages. Traditional arts — carpet weaving, miniature painting, calligraphy, metalwork — maintain both cultural prestige and international market presence. This creative capacity represents a significant asset for Iran's cultural diplomacy, demonstrating the power of civilizational cultural resources in generating international soft power.

Pakistan's creative sector is characterized by dynamism, entrepreneurial energy, and the distinctive creative force of a large, young, and digitally engaged population. Pakistan's music industry, television drama sector, fashion design scene, and growing film industry are all experiencing rapid development, often driven by individual creative entrepreneurs operating with limited institutional support but substantial social media reach. Digital platforms have been particularly transformative, enabling Pakistani content creators to build substantial audiences across diaspora communities and international markets.

The Central Asian ECO member states — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan — possess rich cultural capital grounded in Silk Road heritage, nomadic traditions, classical music forms, and distinctive craft systems, but face more significant structural constraints in translating this capital into internationally competitive creative economies. Limited digital infrastructure, relatively small domestic markets, insufficient investment in creative sector development, and limited international marketing capacity all constrain growth. However, heritage-linked cultural tourism represents a rapidly developing area of cultural economy activity, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where major investments in heritage restoration and cultural tourism infrastructure are beginning to generate significant returns.

Afghanistan's creative economy exists under extraordinarily difficult conditions — constrained by decades of conflict, political instability, and the destruction of cultural institutions. Yet even in these conditions, cultural production continues: oral literary traditions, poetry, music, carpet weaving, and embroidery crafts persist as expressions of cultural identity and, in some cases, as sources of economic livelihood.

The resilience of cultural production in Afghanistan reflects both the depth of cultural roots and the fundamental human drive to create and communicate meaning even under conditions of extreme adversity.

Structural Challenges and Strategic Opportunities

A SWOT-informed assessment of creative industries across the ECO region reveals a consistent pattern of strong cultural capital coexisting with significant structural constraints. The region's strengths are genuine and substantial: extraordinary cultural diversity, deep historical heritage, a large and growing youth population, strong local storytelling traditions, and demonstrable capacity for internationally competitive cultural production. These are not trivial advantages — they constitute the foundation on which successful creative economies can be built.

The weaknesses are also real and in many cases severe: limited access to finance for creative ventures; underdeveloped intellectual property protection systems that leave creators vulnerable to appropriation without compensation; weak institutional support for creative industries within national cultural and economic policy frameworks; insufficient digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas and less developed member states; and limited capacity for international marketing and distribution. Many ECO member states lack the institutional frameworks — creative industry agencies, copyright enforcement systems, arts councils, film commissions, design promotion bodies — that have proven effective in other regions in supporting the translation of creative talent into sustainable industry.

Opportunities abound, however, for member states willing and able to pursue them strategically. The global growth of digital platforms has radically lowered the barriers to entry for cultural content producers — a skilled filmmaker, musician, or designer with a smartphone and internet access can now reach global audiences without the institutional infrastructure that was previously required. Social media ecosystems have created entirely new cultural economy niches — digital content creation, influencer marketing, online education, and virtual events — in which ECO's young populations have demonstrated strong entrepreneurial capacity. Regional cooperation within the ECO framework offers opportunities for co-production agreements, joint cultural tourism products, shared digital platforms, and coordinated international promotion that individual member states would struggle to achieve independently.

The threats are also significant: global digital platforms are dominated by corporations headquartered outside the ECO region, creating dependency relationships and raising concerns about the marginalization of local content; brain drain draws creative talent toward wealthier cultural economies; and the political and economic instability that affects parts of the region creates environments hostile to the long-term investment that creative industry development requires.

Institutional responses to these challenges are emerging. In Türkiye, institutions such as the Creative Cultural Industries Research and Application Center (YAKEM) at Başkent University in Ankara provide important support for creative economy research, professional training, and ecosystem development. Similar institutional infrastructure — tailored to the specific contexts of different member states — is needed across the ECO region to translate the region's cultural potential into sustained creative economy growth.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has noted that creative entrepreneurship as a component of knowledge-based capitalism carries transformative potential for urban economies — yet the distinctive character of entrepreneurship at the intersection of creativity, culture, and technology is frequently underestimated in mainstream economic development frameworks (De Propriis et al., 2009: 9; Stam et al., 2008: 119). This underestimation is costly. Cultural economy is not a narrow domain of arts and entertainment activity: it is a modern development model directly linked to economic growth, international competitiveness, tourism, digitalization, and soft power. ECO member states that succeed in combining their historical and cultural richness with strategic investment in creative economy infrastructure and market access will position culture as a genuine engine of regional development.

4.3 Digital Transformation of Culture

The Nature and Scope of Cultural Digitalization

The digital transformation of culture is a multidimensional process — one that extends well beyond the simple digitization of existing cultural content to encompass the fundamental reshaping of how cultural products are conceived, created, distributed, consumed, and preserved. Internet technologies, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, digital media platforms, virtual and augmented reality systems, and mobile

communication tools are all transforming the cultural field in ways that are both enabling and disruptive. The boundaries between cultural production and consumption are dissolving as audiences become participants and content creators; the geographic constraints that previously limited cultural

circulation have been radically reduced; and new forms of cultural expression — born digital and native to networked environments — are emerging alongside and sometimes in place of traditional forms.

This transformation is reshaping virtually every domain of cultural life: media, music,

cinema, publishing, performing arts, visual arts, cultural heritage management, cultural education, and creative industries. The economic dimensions of culture have expanded dramatically, as digital platforms enable cultural content to generate value through subscription models, advertising,

Creative Industries and Cultural Economy



data monetization, and the creation of global brand ecosystems. Culture has ceased to be merely a heritage element requiring preservation or an amenity enriching social life; it has become a fundamental component of the digital economy and a central arena of geopolitical competition over influence, values, and soft power.

Global Patterns of Digital Cultural Power

The global landscape of digital cultural transformation is profoundly unequal. A small number of countries — primarily the United States, South Korea, Japan, China, and the United Kingdom — exercise disproportionate influence over global digital cultural flows, and the technology platforms through which those flows circulate are overwhelmingly controlled by corporations headquartered in the United States and China.

The United States holds a dominant position in global digital cultural circulation, exercising influence through streaming platforms, social media networks, the global entertainment industry, and the technological infrastructure of the internet itself. American popular culture, distributed through platforms that now reach billions of users worldwide, shapes cultural preferences, consumption habits, and aspirational identities across the globe in ways that dwarf the cultural influence of any previous hegemonic power. South Korea has achieved a remarkable transformation through the deliberate and sustained cultivation of K-pop, Korean drama, digital gaming, and online content production, demonstrating that a medium-sized economy can achieve outsized global cultural influence through strategic investment in creative industries and digital distribution. Japan has long exercised global cultural influence through anime, gaming, and the broader ecosystem of Japanese popular culture — cultural forms that have achieved genuinely global reach and that continue to evolve through digital transformation. China is rapidly developing its digital cultural capacity, combining the world's largest domestic digital market with growing investment in digital entertainment, online gaming, and international platform development.

The political and ideological dimensions of digital cultural power are important and cannot be ignored. Digital platforms are not neutral channels for the exchange of cultural content; they embody particular values, amplify certain kinds of content and suppress others through algorithmic systems, and create economic structures that benefit their owners disproportionately relative to the

content creators whose work they distribute. As Gültekin (2020: 77) observed, perception managers and manipulators frequently shape information before it reaches mass audiences — and the same dynamic applies to cultural content. Cultural products distributed through digital media may carry ideological, economic, or political orientations that make them instruments of perception management as much as vehicles of aesthetic expression. The historical parallels with cultural imperialism are relevant here. Young (2016: 8) noted that the Western-centered cultural impositions of the colonial period significantly transformed and suppressed local cultural systems. Today's digital popular culture, with its powerful commercial and technological infrastructure, carries analogous risks: its attractive content and seamlessly accessible platforms can impose their own cultural codes and consumption habits on local cultural ecosystems, potentially reshaping cultural preferences and identities in ways that marginalize locally rooted traditions and expressions.

Digital Transformation in the ECO Region

Within the ECO region, digital transformation presents a distinctive combination of opportunities and challenges, shaped by the region's cultural richness, its structural asymmetries, and its position within global digital power relations.

Türkiye is the ECO member state in which digital cultural transformation has most comprehensively reshaped the cultural economy. The global success of Turkish television drama through digital streaming platforms represents perhaps the most significant instance of digital distribution enabling a non-Western cultural producer to achieve genuinely global audience reach. Turkish content on platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and domestic Turkish platforms has demonstrated that high-quality, culturally distinctive storytelling can compete effectively in global digital markets when supported by professional production infrastructure and strategic distribution partnerships. Digital transformation has also reshaped Turkish music, online media, cultural tourism, and cultural heritage accessibility, with growing investment in virtual museum experiences, digital archiving, and online cultural education.

Iran's engagement with digital cultural transformation is marked by the creative dynamism of its cultural producers coexisting with significant regulatory constraints on access to global digital platforms. Iranian cinema has maintained its international presence through digital distribution, while

domestic digital arts and online media production have grown substantially despite — and in some respects because of — constraints that have encouraged domestic platform innovation. Iran's experience illustrates that digital cultural environments can evolve productively even under conditions of limited access to global platforms, although the costs of this constraint in terms of international visibility and market access are real.

Pakistan's digital cultural transformation has been rapid, largely market-driven, and disproportionately shaped by its young population's enthusiastic adoption of social media, video sharing, and digital content creation. Pakistani creators on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and domestic platforms have built substantial audiences for music, comedy, fashion, culinary culture, and commentary. Digital platforms have democratized cultural production in Pakistan, enabling individuals and small creative enterprises to reach audiences that were previously accessible only to large media corporations. At the same time, the infrastructure gaps — particularly in rural areas and among lower-income populations — that constrain access to reliable internet connectivity remain significant barriers to inclusive digital cultural participation.

The Central Asian ECO member states are at earlier stages of digital cultural transformation, though with growing momentum. Kazakhstan has invested significantly in digital infrastructure and is developing digital cultural economy capacity, particularly in online media and digital heritage preservation. Uzbekistan has embraced digital tools for heritage site promotion, virtual tourism, and online cultural content, seeking to leverage its Silk Road heritage assets in digital spaces. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan face more significant infrastructure constraints, though even in these contexts digital connectivity is rapidly expanding and younger populations are increasingly active in digital cultural spaces.

Afghanistan's engagement with digital cultural transformation is constrained by infrastructure limitations, economic challenges, and political conditions. However, digital platforms have proven important channels for Afghan cultural communities — both within Afghanistan and in the large Afghan diaspora — to maintain cultural connections, share cultural content, and sustain aspects of cultural identity across geographic dispersal.

Opportunities and Risks in the Digital Cultural Transition

Digital transformation creates genuine and significant opportunities for cultural development across the ECO region. Digitalization reduces the cost of cultural content production and distribution, enabling smaller and less-resourced cultural

producers to reach audiences that were previously inaccessible to them. Digital archiving technologies offer powerful tools for preserving heritage assets — protecting against physical loss and making heritage accessible to researchers and audiences worldwide. Social media and online platforms create new economic spaces for

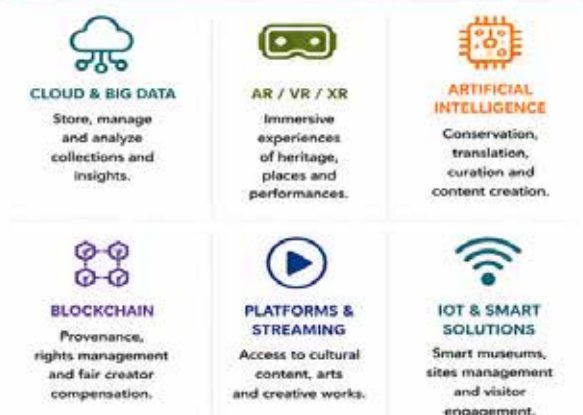
independent artists, creative entrepreneurs, and small-scale cultural producers who can now participate directly in cultural markets without the institutional intermediaries that previously controlled access. Digital platforms also enable diaspora communities to maintain connections with home cultures across geographic distance, sustaining

Digital Transformation of Culture

1 WHY IT MATTERS



2 KEY DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES



3 OPPORTUNITIES & BENEFITS



4 RISKS & CHALLENGES



5 ENABLERS FOR DIGITAL CULTURE



6 PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR ECO MEMBER STATES



TOWARD A SHARED DIGITAL CULTURAL FUTURE

Let us harness digital innovation to protect our heritage, empower our people and build inclusive, resilient and prosperous societies across the ECO region.

cultural identities and potentially driving demand for cultural products in new markets. At the same time, the risks and challenges of digital cultural transformation are substantial and demand active policy attention. The concentration of global digital platform infrastructure in the hands of a small number of large technology corporations creates structural dependencies and raises legitimate concerns about cultural sovereignty — the capacity of communities and states to shape their own cultural environments rather than having them determined by the commercial logics of foreign platform operators. Local cultural production may lose visibility in platform environments optimized to amplify globally popular content, disadvantaging culturally distinctive but commercially less powerful local creators.

Digital inequality — the gap between populations with robust digital access and those with limited or no connectivity — reproduces and potentially amplifies existing cultural inequalities within the ECO region. Rural communities, lower-income populations, and less developed member states all face barriers to full participation in digital cultural economies. Copyright protection and digital rights management remain underdeveloped in many ECO contexts, leaving creators vulnerable to appropriation without compensation and discouraging investment in creative production.

Artificial intelligence poses both opportunities and disruptions for cultural producers: AI tools can enhance creative productivity, reduce production costs, and expand the range of creative possibilities, but they also threaten to displace human creative labor, challenge established intellectual property frameworks, and potentially accelerate cultural homogenization if AI systems trained primarily on dominant global cultural content shape the production of local cultural material.

Looking forward, the digital transformation of culture in the ECO region must be understood not as a purely technological process but as a strategic transition with economic, social, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions. Effective policy responses require investment in digital infrastructure, development of local content support mechanisms, strengthening of intellectual property protection systems, engagement with platform governance questions at both national and international levels, and cultivation of the digital literacy and creative skills that enable ECO's young populations to be genuine producers and innovators in the digital cultural economy rather than simply consumers of content produced elsewhere.

4.4 Language, Identity, and Cultural Diversity

Language as the Foundation of Cultural Identity

Language is not merely a tool of communication. It is the primary medium through which cultural identity is constructed, transmitted, and reproduced across generations — the vessel in which a community's historical memory, value systems, aesthetic sensibilities, and ways of understanding the world are carried forward through time. As Vygotsky (2018: 10) observed, language constitutes the most advanced form of human communication, representing a structured pattern of logical verbal expression that is deeply interwoven with the development of thought itself. Language and thought, Vygotsky argued, originate from different sources but develop through a deep, complex, dynamic, and continuously evolving relationship — becoming so thoroughly intertwined in mature human consciousness that they are often experienced as a unified whole (Vygotsky, 2018: 7). An individual's cognitive development depends on the integrated cultivation of both language and thinking capacities; and since language is always a social and cultural artifact, cognitive development is inseparable from cultural formation.

This foundational relationship between language and cultural identity has profound implications for how communities understand themselves and their place in history. Languages carry not only grammatical structures and vocabularies but entire world-views — distinctive ways of categorizing experience, articulating relationships, expressing values, and imagining possibilities. The loss of a language is therefore not merely the loss of a communication system; it is the loss of a unique cognitive and cultural inheritance, an irreversible diminishment of humanity's collective intellectual diversity. The concern about language extinction — one of the most acute dimensions of the global cultural diversity crisis — is thus simultaneously a linguistic, cultural, and epistemological concern.

Modern linguistics has emphasized the social and cultural function of language from multiple theoretical perspectives. Structural linguistics, associated with Ferdinand de Saussure, established language as a system of differences whose meanings are constituted through social convention rather than natural correspondence — laying the groundwork for understanding language as a social institution rather than merely

an individual faculty (Williams, 2013: 143). Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous formulation captures something even more fundamental: "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 2023: 29). A language is not a transparent medium through which a pre-existing form of life is expressed; the language and the form of life are mutually constitutive, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

Language and Soft Power in the International System

The geopolitical dimensions of language have become increasingly visible in contemporary international relations. Language functions not only as the medium of individual cultural identity but as a strategic instrument of state power — a means through which states extend their cultural influence, build international coalitions, and shape perceptions of their values, interests, and legitimacy across the world.

The concept of *lingua franca* — a shared language that enables communication across communities with different native tongues — illuminates the political economy of linguistic power. Throughout history, different languages have served as international media of communication in different historical contexts: Latin in medieval European scholarship and ecclesiastical administration, Arabic in the classical Islamic world's networks of trade, science, and scholarship, French in early modern European diplomacy. Today, English functions as the global *lingua franca* of academia, technology, business, diplomacy, and digital culture — a position that provides substantial economic, cultural, and political advantages to the countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, whose native language it is. As Wittgenstein's formulation suggests, the global dominance of English does not merely facilitate communication across linguistic boundaries; it shapes the forms of life — the conceptual frameworks, institutional models, and value systems — that circulate most freely across those boundaries.

States have developed sophisticated institutional mechanisms for leveraging language as an instrument of cultural diplomacy. Germany's Goethe-Institut promotes German language and culture through a global network of cultural centers, exercising soft power influence well beyond Germany's political and economic weight. The British Council uses English language education as a foundation for projecting British cultural values and maintaining international networks of goodwill. France's Alliance Française and the broader Francophonie framework leverage the French language

to maintain cultural and political influence across the extensive geographic domains in which French has historical presence. Italy's Società Dante Alighieri promotes Italian language and cultural heritage internationally. China's Confucius Institute network — now among the most globally extensive of such cultural-linguistic institutions — uses Chinese language education as an instrument of Beijing's expanding global soft power strategy.

These institutions illustrate a clear principle: language teaching and cultural promotion are not merely educational or cultural activities. They are strategic investments in long-term international influence — building networks of individuals who have learned a language, developed familiarity with a culture, and formed positive associations with a country that may shape their attitudes and relationships for decades. The returns on such investments are difficult to quantify but potentially very large, operating across economic, political, and cultural dimensions simultaneously.

Language and Cultural Diplomacy in the ECO Region

Within the ECO region, language constitutes one of the most important dimensions of both cultural identity and regional solidarity. The member states of the ECO are historically embedded in multicultural civilizational basins formed along the Silk Road — networks of trade, scholarship, and cultural exchange through which Turkish, Persian, Urdu, and other regional languages have been in intense contact for centuries, generating shared cultural memory, cross-linguistic literary influences, and a deep sense of historical proximity and civilizational kinship.

Persian — or Farsi/Dari/Tajik in its various registers — has historically been one of the great literary and intellectual languages of the Islamic world, serving as the medium of poetry, science, administration, and courtly culture across an enormous geographic range extending from Anatolia and the Caucasus through Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent. The poetry of Rumi, Hafez, and Ferdowsi; the philosophical works of Ibn Sina; the historical writings of Bayhaqi and Biruni — these achievements of the Persianate cultural tradition constitute a shared intellectual inheritance for the ECO region that transcends the boundaries of individual nation-states. Iran actively promotes Persian language and literature through cultural diplomacy activities, with the Saadi Institute playing an important role in supporting the global reach of Persian cultural production.

Turkish, similarly, is a language that carries centuries of literary, administrative, and cultural achievement, and that has spread across an enormous geographic range through the historical dynamics of Turkic civilization. Türkiye's Yunus Emre Institute — operating cultural centers across dozens of countries and teaching Turkish language and culture to hundreds of thousands of students worldwide — exemplifies the strategic deployment of language as a cultural diplomacy instrument. The reach of the Yunus Emre Institute extends across the ECO region and beyond, promoting Turkish language and culture as components of a broader soft power strategy that is reinforced by the global reach of Turkish television drama and cultural tourism.

Urdu, as the national language of Pakistan, carries a rich literary tradition — poetry, fiction, and scholarship of great sophistication — and functions as a medium of cultural identity for the Pakistani nation as well as for the large Pakistani diaspora communities in the United Kingdom, the Gulf states, and elsewhere. The multilingual reality of Pakistan — with dozens of regional languages including Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Baluchi, and others alongside Urdu — reflects the broader linguistic diversity of the ECO region and the complexity of managing language policy in contexts where national and regional identities interact.

The Central Asian member states navigated profound linguistic transformations following Soviet-era policies that shaped language use, script systems, and educational frameworks across the region. Post-independence language revival and standardization efforts — including transitions from Cyrillic to Latin scripts in some countries, the promotion of national languages in education and public administration, and the revival of traditional literary and oral forms — have been central dimensions of cultural policy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These processes involve complex negotiations between national language promotion, the practical utility of Russian as a language of wider regional communication, the global reach of English, and the historical prestige of Persian and Arabic in Islamic scholarly traditions.

Cultural Diversity, Space, and Regional Solidarity

Cultural diversity in the ECO region extends far beyond linguistic pluralism to encompass ethnic, religious, artistic, and civilizational diversity of extraordinary richness. The region includes communities whose cultural practices draw on Persianate, Turkic, South Asian, nomadic, Buddhist, Islamic, and pre-Islamic traditions — a diversity that reflects the long history of the Silk Roads as a

corridor of encounter, exchange, and mutual enrichment. This diversity is not merely a historical fact; it is a living reality that shapes everyday life, social institutions, artistic production, and political identities across the region.

Globalization has complicated the management of cultural diversity, creating new possibilities for cross-cultural interaction while simultaneously generating pressures toward cultural homogenization. As global consumer culture spreads through digital platforms, it carries with it cultural codes, values, and lifestyles that may displace or reshape local cultural practices — particularly among younger generations who are most intensively engaged with global digital environments. The ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) has an important responsibility in this context: to develop and implement frameworks that protect ECO region populations from the adverse effects of cultural imperialism, and to strengthen the social awareness that enables younger generations to navigate global cultural influences while retaining meaningful connections to their own cultural inheritances (Akalin, 2023).

Space and place are also important dimensions of cultural identity and diversity. Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory — which understands space not as a static physical container but as a social phenomenon continuously produced and reshaped through social relations, cultural practices, and power dynamics — offers a valuable framework for understanding the cultural significance of the ECO region's architectural heritage. Lefebvre's "spatial triad," distinguishing perceived, conceived, and lived dimensions of space, reveals that the architectural structures of the ECO region are not merely aesthetic or functional objects: they are spatial productions that embody historical memory, articulate social belonging, and reproduce cultural identity in the materiality of the built environment. Historic mosques, bazaars, caravanserais, citadels, gardens, and domestic architecture across the region are simultaneously physical heritage assets and living cultural spaces — places where identity, memory, and daily social life continue to intersect.

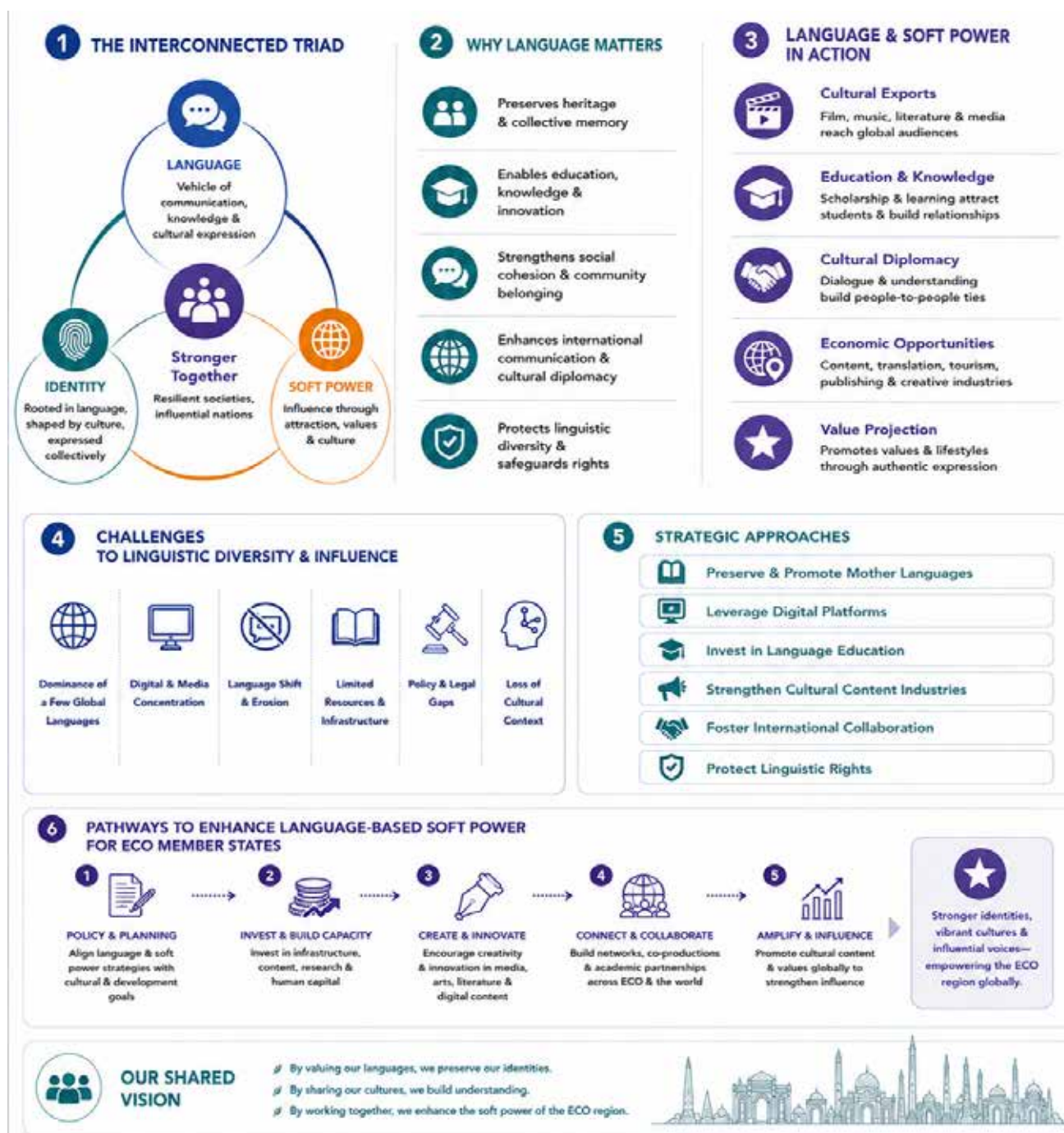
The ECO Cultural Institute, understood as a structure with responsibilities analogous to those of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) within its regional context, is positioned to play a central role in harnessing the region's linguistic and cultural diversity as a resource for regional solidarity and cooperation. The shared historical heritage of the Silk Roads, the overlapping literary traditions of Persian and Turkic civilization, the common

spiritual foundations of Islamic culture, and the convergent aesthetic sensibilities that connect artistic traditions across the ECO region all provide strong foundations for a cultural cooperation framework that celebrates diversity while reinforcing the bonds of shared civilizational memory. Language, identity, and cultural diversity have

become strategic soft power instruments in the contemporary international system. Through cultural diplomacy institutions and language promotion programs, the international reach of languages amplifies the global presence and influence of states. ECO member states that develop effective strategies for combining their historical and

cultural diversity through regional cooperation — building on the civilizational foundations that link their societies — can expand their collective cultural sphere of influence and develop a shared cultural diplomacy capacity that no individual member state could achieve alone.

Language, Identity, and Cultural Diversity



ECO

10 COUNTRIES, SHARED HERITAGE, COMMON FUTURE



AFGHANISTAN



AZERBAIJAN



IRAN



KAZAKHSTAN



KYRGYZSTAN



PAKISTAN



TAJIKISTAN



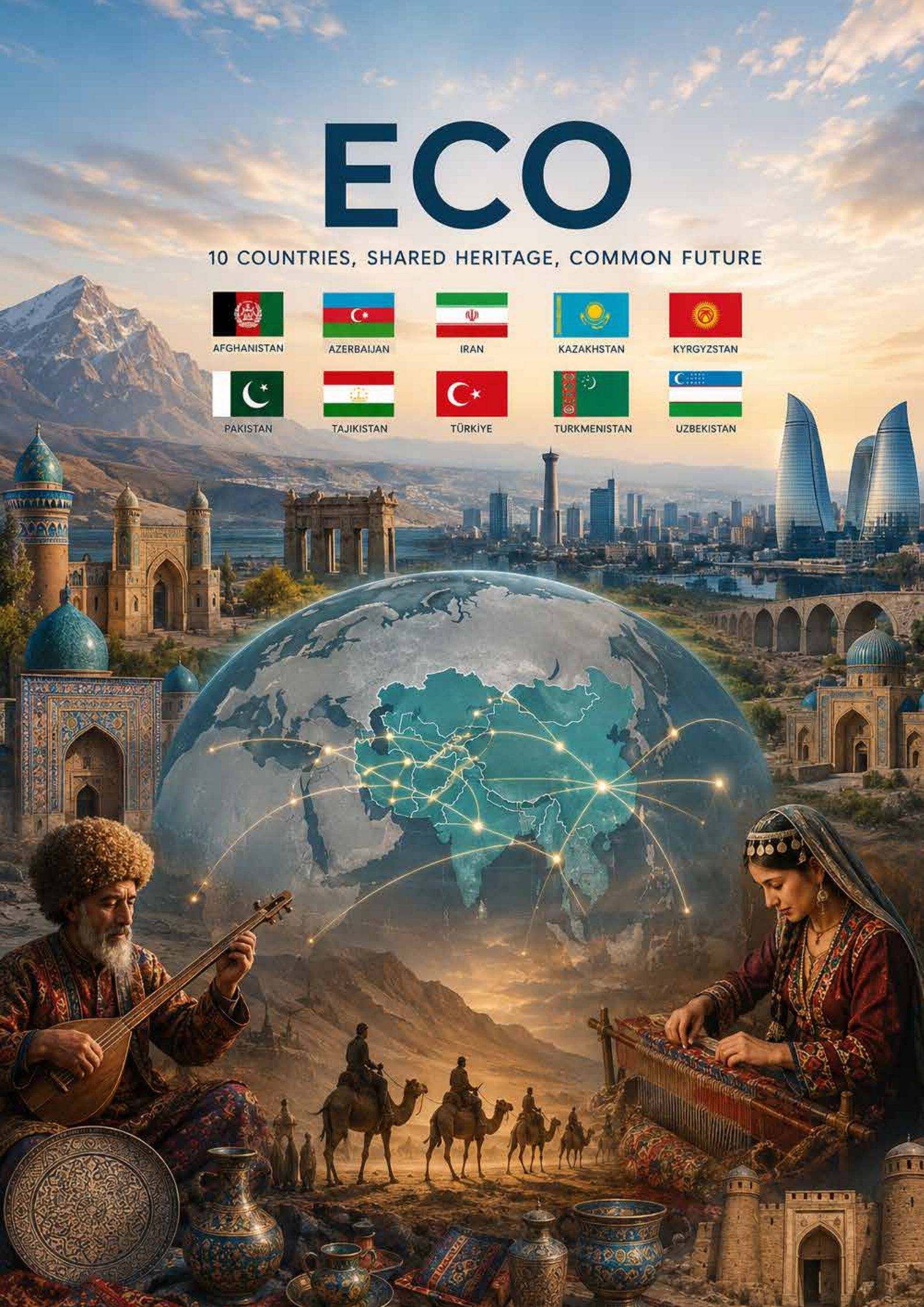
TÜRKİYE



TURKMENISTAN



UZBEKISTAN



SECTION 5.

Case Studies and Best Practices

5.1 Regional Case Studies in Cultural Cooperation

Culture as a Platform for Regional Connectivity

Across the ECO region, cultural cooperation has often advanced more effectively than political or economic integration. Shared historical experiences, linguistic affinities, religious traditions, and centuries of interaction along the Silk Road have created fertile ground for collaborative cultural initiatives. Although regional cultural cooperation remains uneven, several examples demonstrate how culture can serve as a practical mechanism for strengthening dialogue, trust, and regional connectivity.

One of the most significant examples is the collective celebration of Nowruz. Observed across several ECO member states, including Iran, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan's northern regions, Nowruz represents a shared cultural tradition that transcends contemporary borders. Joint cultural festivals, academic conferences, artistic performances, and public celebrations associated with Nowruz have become important instruments for reinforcing a sense of common cultural heritage while respecting national diversity.

The revival of Silk Road cultural initiatives represents another notable example of regional cooperation. Building upon centuries of historical exchange, various ECO countries have participated in collaborative projects aimed at promoting Silk Road heritage through exhibitions, tourism routes, academic research, and cultural diplomacy. These initiatives have contributed to greater awareness of the region's interconnected history while creating opportunities for

educational and cultural exchange.

Academic and educational cooperation has also emerged as an important area of collaboration. Universities, research centers, and cultural institutions across the ECO region have increasingly engaged in joint conferences, scholarly exchanges, and collaborative research projects focusing on history, heritage, literature, archaeology, and regional studies. Such initiatives help foster intellectual networks and contribute to the development of a shared regional discourse. The ECO Cultural Institute has played an important role in facilitating many of these activities. Through conferences, cultural forums, publications, exhibitions, and research initiatives, the Institute has helped create platforms for cultural dialogue among member states. While many programmes remain modest in scale, they demonstrate the potential of institutional cooperation in advancing regional cultural engagement.

These examples highlight an important lesson: cultural cooperation is often most successful when it is grounded in shared heritage, supported by institutions, and driven by sustained people-to-people interaction.

Best Practice Lessons

Several lessons emerge from these regional experiences:

- Shared heritage provides a strong foundation for cooperation.
- Cultural initiatives are most effective when linked to education and public engagement.
- Institutional continuity is essential for sustaining regional programmes.
- Cultural cooperation can build trust even when political relations are complex.
- Regional projects benefit from combining heritage preservation with contemporary cultural exchange.

Together, these experiences provide valuable insights for future cultural cooperation initiatives across the ECO region.

5.2 Heritage Restoration and Urban Cultural Regeneration

Revitalizing Historic Cities Through Culture

Historic cities across the ECO region represent some of humanity's most important cultural landscapes. They embody centuries of architectural innovation, artistic achievement, trade, scholarship, and social interaction. In recent decades, several cities have demonstrated how heritage restoration can become a catalyst for broader urban regeneration and sustainable development. One of the most frequently cited examples is the restoration of the historic centers of Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan. Extensive conservation programmes have focused on protecting monumental architecture, rehabilitating historic neighborhoods, improving public spaces, and strengthening tourism infrastructure. These efforts have not only preserved important heritage assets but also generated economic opportunities through cultural tourism and local entrepreneurship.

The revitalization of the historic city of Isfahan in Iran offers another important example. Restoration initiatives have sought to preserve architectural landmarks while maintaining the living character of the city. Heritage conservation has been integrated with urban planning, cultural programming, and tourism development, demonstrating how historic environments can remain active centers of cultural and economic life.

Türkiye's experience in restoring historic districts, particularly in Istanbul and several Anatolian cities, illustrates the importance of linking conservation with community participation. Restoration projects have

10 COUNTRIES • ONE REGION • SHARED FUTURE



increasingly incorporated cultural activities, museums, creative industries, and public engagement programmes, transforming heritage areas into dynamic urban spaces rather than static monuments.

In Pakistan, conservation efforts in Lahore's Walled City have shown how heritage-led urban regeneration can improve infrastructure, restore historic buildings, support traditional crafts, and enhance tourism. By combining conservation with community development, these initiatives have contributed to both cultural preservation and economic revitalization.

Community Participation and Local Ownership

A key lesson emerging from successful restoration projects is the importance of community involvement. Heritage conservation is most sustainable when local residents are active participants rather than passive beneficiaries. Community engagement strengthens local ownership, supports traditional knowledge systems, and ensures that heritage remains relevant to contemporary society.

Projects that integrate local artisans, craftspeople, educators, and community organizations often achieve stronger long-term outcomes. Such approaches contribute not only to physical conservation but also to the preservation of intangible cultural practices associated with historic environments.

Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Development

The most successful urban regeneration initiatives recognize that heritage is not merely a legacy of the past but a resource for the future. Heritage conservation can support tourism, creative industries, employment generation, education, and social cohesion. When integrated into broader urban development strategies, cultural heritage becomes a powerful instrument for sustainable and inclusive growth.

5.3 Cultural Diplomacy Success Models

Culture as a Tool of International Engagement

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as one of

the most effective instruments for promoting mutual understanding, strengthening international partnerships, and enhancing regional cooperation. Across the ECO region, several countries have successfully utilized culture as a means of projecting soft power and fostering international engagement.

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which operates primarily through political channels, cultural diplomacy engages directly with societies. It promotes dialogue through art, education, heritage, language, literature, and cultural exchange, creating long-term relationships that often transcend political fluctuations.

National Cultural Institutions as Bridges of Cooperation

Several ECO member states have developed robust cultural diplomacy institutions that provide useful models for regional cooperation.

Türkiye has achieved considerable international visibility through cultural institutes, educational programmes, heritage promotion, and globally distributed television productions. These initiatives have significantly increased international interest in Turkish culture, history, and language while strengthening cultural connections across different regions.

Iran has similarly relied on its rich literary, artistic, and civilizational heritage to support international cultural engagement. Persian literature, traditional arts, academic exchanges, and cultural centers have served as important channels for intercultural dialogue and intellectual cooperation.

The Central Asian republics have increasingly used heritage diplomacy to strengthen their international profiles. Promotion of Silk Road heritage, traditional arts, and cultural festivals has helped position these countries as important custodians of a shared Eurasian cultural legacy.

Pakistan's growing engagement in cultural diplomacy through literature, music, heritage conservation, archaeological cooperation, and creative industries demonstrates the increasing importance of culture in international outreach strategies.

The Nowruz Model: A Shared Diplomatic Success

Among the most successful examples of regional cultural diplomacy is the international recognition of Nowruz. Celebrated across multiple ECO countries, Nowruz has evolved into a symbol of shared cultural heritage and intercultural dialogue. Joint celebrations, cultural events, and international recognition

efforts have demonstrated how common traditions can strengthen regional identity while promoting cultural diversity.

The Nowruz experience illustrates how a shared cultural practice can become a platform for multilateral cooperation, public diplomacy, and regional solidarity.

Replicable Best Practices for the ECO Region

Several best practices emerge from successful cultural diplomacy initiatives across the region:

- Long-term investment in cultural institutions generates sustainable diplomatic benefits.
- Heritage and culture can create neutral spaces for dialogue and cooperation.
- Educational and academic exchanges strengthen lasting people-to-people connections.
- Cultural industries contribute to both economic development and international visibility.
- Shared cultural traditions can serve as powerful symbols of regional unity.

As the ECO region seeks to deepen cooperation in the coming decades, cultural diplomacy offers one of the most promising pathways for building trust, fostering mutual understanding, and strengthening regional integration.

Conclusion

The experiences highlighted in this chapter demonstrate that culture is not merely a supplementary dimension of regional cooperation; it is one of its most effective foundations. Regional cultural initiatives, heritage-led urban regeneration, and successful cultural diplomacy programmes provide practical examples of how cultural assets can contribute to development, dialogue, and integration.

These case studies and best practices suggest that future cooperation within the ECO region should increasingly build upon shared cultural resources, strengthen institutional collaboration, and invest in people-to-people connections. By doing so, culture can continue to serve as a bridge between societies and as a catalyst for a more connected and cooperative regional future.

SECTION 5: CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES IN CULTURAL COOPERATION

How Heritage, Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation Reinforce Sustainable Development in the ECO Region



CULTURE AS A DRIVER OF REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

Across the ECO region, shared heritage, living traditions and cultural exchange create trust, strengthen dialogue and advance cooperation even in challenging times.



5.1 REGIONAL CULTURAL COOPERATION

Culture as a Platform for Regional Connectivity

1 NOWRUZ COOPERATION

- Joint celebrations
- Academic conferences
- Artistic performances
- Shared heritage

2 SILK ROAD INITIATIVES

- Heritage exhibitions
- Tourism routes
- Academic research
- Revives interconnected history

3 ECO CULTURAL INSTITUTE

- Conferences & forums
- Publications & exhibitions
- Research initiatives
- Platform for dialogue

KEY OUTCOMES



Trust Building



Dialogue



People-to-People Connectivity



Regional Connectivity

5.3 CULTURAL DIPLOMACY MODELS

Projecting Heritage, Values and Creativity to the World

1 TÜRKİYE

- Cultural institutes & outreach
- Educational scholarships
- Media & creative industries

2 IRAN

- Persian language & literature
- Arts diplomacy
- Cultural centers worldwide

3 CENTRAL ASIA

- Heritage diplomacy
- Festivals & cultural events
- Silk Road branding

4 PAKISTAN

- Music, literature & arts
- Archaeology & heritage
- Creative industries

KEY OUTCOMES



Soft Power



International Visibility



People-to-People Relations



Mutual Understanding

SHARED CULTURAL CAPITAL

- Heritage
- Knowledge
- Identity
- Creativity
- Traditions

5.2 HERITAGE RESTORATION AND URBAN CULTURAL REGENERATION

Revitalizing Historic Cities Through Culture

1 SAMARKAND & BUKHARA (Uzbekistan)

Heritage preserved, tourism boosted.

2 ISFAHAN (Iran)

Historic identity maintained.

3 ISTANBUL & ANATOLIAN CITIES (Türkiye)

Heritage linked with modern development.

4 LAHORE WALLED CITY (Pakistan)

Heritage-led regeneration and tourism.

KEY COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL RESTORATION



Heritage Conservation



Community Participation



Tourism Development



Creative Economy & Crafts



Urban Revitalization

KEY OUTCOMES



Economic Growth



Social Cohesion



Living Heritage

BEST PRACTICE LESSONS

1



Shared heritage builds cooperation.

2



Institutional continuity is essential.

3



Culture linked to education and public engagement works best.

4



Cultural cooperation builds trust.

5



Heritage projects gain from cultural exchange.

SECTION 6.

Challenges, Gaps, and Opportunities

6.1 Regional Structural Challenges

The ECO region possesses extraordinary geographic, economic, and cultural advantages. Stretching from Anatolia and the Caucasus to Central and South Asia, it encompasses more than eight million square kilometers and serves as a bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Rich reserves of energy resources, strategic transit corridors, and a population exceeding half a billion people provide the foundation for significant regional integration. Yet despite these advantages, the region continues to face a series of structural challenges that have constrained both economic and cultural cooperation.

One of the most persistent challenges is the low level of intra-regional integration. Trade among ECO member states remains significantly below its potential, reflecting broader difficulties in transforming geographic proximity and historical connections into practical cooperation. Unlike more integrated regional blocs, ECO has struggled to develop the level of interconnectedness necessary to create a truly cohesive regional space.

Transportation and connectivity deficits remain another major obstacle. Seven ECO member states are landlocked and depend heavily on transit routes through neighboring countries. While the region occupies a strategically important position along major Eurasian corridors, inadequate infrastructure, inefficient border procedures, and high transportation costs continue to hinder regional mobility. Slow progress in rail, road, and logistics projects has reduced opportunities for trade, tourism, and cultural exchange.

Political tensions and geopolitical rivalries further complicate regional cooperation. Historical disputes, border issues, and differing foreign policy priorities often limit collective action. The ECO region also lies at the intersection of competing global interests,

making it vulnerable to external political and economic pressures. Competition over energy routes, strategic infrastructure, and regional influence has at times diverted attention from cooperative development initiatives.

Economic disparities among member states create additional challenges. Significant differences exist in levels of industrialization, income, infrastructure development, and institutional capacity. While some countries possess diversified economies and substantial natural resources, others face persistent development constraints. These asymmetries make it difficult to formulate and implement common regional strategies that benefit all member states equally.

Security concerns also continue to affect regional cooperation. Political instability, conflict, sanctions regimes, and cross-border security challenges have weakened investor confidence and complicated long-term planning. Such conditions not only affect economic projects but also limit opportunities for cultural mobility, tourism, and people-to-people interaction.

A further structural challenge concerns the limited development of a shared regional identity. Although ECO countries are connected by centuries of cultural interaction through the Silk Road and related civilizational networks, public awareness of ECO institutions and regional cooperation mechanisms remains relatively low. Educational, cultural, and media exchanges have not yet reached a scale capable of fostering a strong sense of regional belonging among citizens.

Digital inequality has emerged as a newer but increasingly significant challenge. While some member states have advanced digital infrastructures and growing innovation ecosystems, others continue to face limitations in internet access, digital governance, and technological capacity. These disparities affect opportunities for digital trade, cultural exchange, educational collaboration, and knowledge-sharing across

the region.

Collectively, these structural challenges highlight the complexity of regional integration within the ECO framework. Addressing them will require sustained political commitment, improved connectivity, and stronger mechanisms for regional coordination.

6.2 Institutional and Financial Gaps

Beyond broader structural challenges, the ECO region also faces significant institutional and financial gaps that limit the effectiveness of regional cooperation initiatives.

One of the most frequently identified institutional weaknesses is the limited implementation of regional agreements. While ECO has adopted numerous frameworks and action plans covering trade, transportation, culture, tourism, and development, implementation often remains uneven. The gap between policy formulation and practical execution continues to undermine the effectiveness of regional initiatives.

Institutional coordination among member states remains inconsistent. Unlike some regional organizations that possess stronger supranational mechanisms, ECO operates largely through intergovernmental cooperation. This structure provides flexibility but often limits enforcement capacity and slows decision-making processes. As a result, many agreements remain aspirational rather than operational.

The cultural sector is particularly affected by these institutional limitations. Cultural cooperation frequently receives less political attention and fewer resources than economic or security-related initiatives. While cultural institutions and organizations have made important contributions to regional dialogue, they often operate with limited funding and insufficient institutional support.

Financial constraints represent another major challenge. Many cultural programs



depend on short-term project financing rather than long-term investment strategies. Limited budgets affect heritage conservation, museum modernization, cultural infrastructure development, artistic exchanges, and educational initiatives. In several member states, financial resources allocated to culture remain insufficient when compared with the scale of existing needs. Traditional arts and handicrafts illustrate these challenges clearly. Across the ECO region, artisans continue to preserve valuable cultural traditions, yet many face difficulties related to production capacity, marketing, access to international markets, and business development. Without targeted financial support and capacity-building programs, many traditional crafts remain economically vulnerable despite their cultural significance.

Tourism development also suffers from institutional and financial shortcomings. The region possesses some of the world's most important historical cities, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes. However, inadequate infrastructure, visa restrictions, fragmented marketing strategies, and limited investment continue to constrain the growth of regional tourism networks.

Educational and academic cooperation similarly faces resource limitations. Although universities and research institutions possess significant potential for collaboration, funding constraints often restrict student exchanges, joint research projects, translation initiatives, and scholarly mobility. The absence of sustained financial mechanisms limits opportunities for deeper intellectual and cultural engagement across the region.

The digital sphere presents both opportunities and institutional challenges. While digital technologies offer new possibilities for cultural preservation and communication, many member states lack the infrastructure, expertise, and investment necessary to fully exploit these tools. Digital archives, virtual museums, cultural databases, and online educational platforms remain unevenly developed across the region.

Addressing these institutional and financial gaps requires stronger governance mechanisms, enhanced resource mobilization, increased public investment in culture, and more effective partnerships among governments, cultural institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

6.3 Opportunities for ECO Cultural Cooperation

Despite the challenges outlined above, the ECO region possesses exceptional opportunities for advancing cultural cooperation and strengthening regional integration through people-centered initiatives.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity lies in the region's shared civilizational heritage. For centuries, the Silk Road facilitated the exchange of ideas, artistic traditions, languages, philosophies, and cultural practices across the territories that now constitute ECO member states. These historical connections continue to provide a strong foundation for contemporary cooperation.

Cultural heritage represents one of the most promising areas for collective action. The region's rich legacy of historical cities, monuments, traditional arts, literature, music, and craftsmanship offers significant potential for collaborative preservation, promotion, and interpretation. Joint heritage initiatives can strengthen regional identity while contributing to sustainable development.

Traditional arts and handicrafts present particularly important opportunities. ECO countries possess globally recognized artistic traditions, including carpets, ceramics, miniature painting, embroidery, woodwork, metal crafts, silk production, and textile arts. Regional exhibitions, artisan exchanges, cultural festivals, and collaborative marketing initiatives could strengthen both cultural preservation and economic development.

Tourism offers another major avenue for cooperation. The ECO region contains a remarkable concentration of historical, religious, and cultural destinations. Developing integrated tourism routes, heritage corridors, and multi-country travel packages could significantly increase visitor flows while promoting intercultural understanding. Simplified visa procedures, coordinated branding strategies, and joint tourism promotion campaigns could transform the region into a major cultural tourism destination.

Educational and academic cooperation provides equally significant opportunities. Universities, research institutions, cultural academies, and policy centers can collaborate through joint research programs, scholarship schemes, exchange initiatives, and regional conferences. Such activities

can help cultivate a new generation of professionals with stronger regional awareness and intercultural competence.

Language and translation initiatives offer another powerful mechanism for strengthening regional connections. The ECO region encompasses diverse linguistic traditions, including Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Pashto. Expanding translation programs would facilitate greater access to literary, historical, and academic works across member states while promoting intellectual exchange.

Digital technologies have opened new possibilities for cultural cooperation. Virtual museums, online archives, digital heritage platforms, educational networks, and cultural content-sharing initiatives can transcend geographic barriers and reach wider audiences. Increased investment in digital infrastructure could support more inclusive and accessible forms of regional engagement.

Media collaboration and cultural industries also present important opportunities. Joint film productions, television programs, documentaries, music projects, and digital content creation can foster greater understanding among neighboring societies. At the same time, creative industries can contribute to employment generation, innovation, and economic diversification.

Perhaps most importantly, cultural diplomacy offers a constructive pathway for building trust in a region often affected by political complexity. Cultural exchanges create spaces for dialogue that are less constrained by political disagreements. Artists, scholars, students, journalists, and civil society actors can serve as informal ambassadors of regional understanding and cooperation.

The future of ECO cultural cooperation depends on the ability of member states to transform their shared cultural assets into practical platforms for collaboration. By investing in heritage, education, tourism, creative industries, digital connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges, the region can strengthen both its cultural resilience and its broader integration objectives.

Ultimately, culture remains one of the ECO region's most valuable strategic resources. Properly leveraged, it can contribute not only to cultural preservation but also to economic development, social cohesion, regional stability, and a stronger sense of collective identity across member states.

SECTION 6

CHALLENGES, GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

PATHWAYS TO A STRONGER ECO CULTURAL COMMUNITY

Turning Regional Challenges into Cultural Opportunities for Integration and Shared Prosperity

THE ECO REGION: EXTRAORDINARY ASSETS AND POTENTIAL



STRATEGIC LOCATION
Bridge between Europe, Asia and the Middle East



ENERGY RESOURCES
Abundant energy reserves and natural wealth



EURASIAN CORRIDORS
Strategic transit routes connecting major markets



500+ MILLION POPULATION
A young, dynamic and diverse population



SHARED CIVILISATIONAL HERITAGE
Silk Road legacy, rich cultures, deep connections

Strong foundations for regional integration and cultural cooperation.

SECTION 6.1 STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

1



LOW REGIONAL INTEGRATION
Intra-regional trade remains far below its potential.

2



CONNECTIVITY DEFICITS
Landlocked states, weak infrastructure and high transport costs.

3



POLITICAL TENSIONS & GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES
Disputes, differing priorities and external pressures complicate cooperation.



STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Key obstacles limiting regional cooperation and cultural progress.

4



ECONOMIC DISPARITIES
Wide gaps in development levels, infrastructure and institutional capacity.

5



SECURITY CHALLENGES
Instability, conflict, sanctions and cross-border threats weaken investor confidence.

6



WEAK REGIONAL IDENTITY
Limited awareness of ECO and low sense of regional belonging.

7



DIGITAL INEQUALITY
Uneven digital infrastructure and innovation capacity across the region.

SECTION 6.2 INSTITUTIONAL AND FINANCIAL GAPS



POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAP
Many agreements and plans exist, but implementation remains uneven.



WEAK COORDINATION
Intergovernmental structure limits enforcement capacity and slows decisions.



UNDERFUNDED CULTURE
Culture receives less political attention and insufficient long-term financing.



LIMITED TOURISM INVESTMENT
Inadequate infrastructure, visa barriers and fragmented promotion constrain growth.



EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS
Limited funding restricts exchanges, research, translations and academic mobility.



DIGITAL CAPACITY GAPS
Uneven digital infrastructure, skills and investment across member states.

Strong frameworks, weak execution.

SECTION 6.2 OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECO CULTURAL COOPERATION



1. CULTURAL HERITAGE
Preserve and promote rich legacy of historical sites, monuments, literature, music and traditions through joint initiatives.



2. TRADITIONAL ARTS & HANDICRAFTS
Empower artisans, support creative livelihoods and develop regional exhibitions and market linkages.



3. TOURISM & HERITAGE ROUTES
Develop integrated tourism corridors, simplify travel procedures and promote the region as a major cultural destination.



4. EDUCATION & ACADEMIC COOPERATION
Expand exchanges, joint research, scholarships and regional conferences to build knowledge networks.



5. LANGUAGE & TRANSLATION
Support translation of literature, history and knowledge across languages to deepen mutual understanding.



6. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES & PLATFORMS
Build digital heritage platforms, virtual museums and online learning networks for wider engagement.



7. MEDIA & CULTURAL INDUSTRIES
Foster joint film, TV, music and digital content to share stories and strengthen cultural industries.



8. CREATIVE INDUSTRIES
Leverage creativity for innovation, employment and economic diversification across the region.



9. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY & PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES
Promote exchanges among artists, youth, scholars and civil society to build trust and friendship.

TOWARD AN ECO CULTURAL COMMUNITY



HERITAGE
Valuing our shared roots and traditions



TRUST
Building understanding and mutual respect



COOPERATION
Working together for common goals



CONNECTIVITY
Linking people, ideas and opportunities



DEVELOPMENT
Driving inclusive growth and cultural vitality



REGIONAL INTEGRATION
A cohesive ECO region of peace, prosperity and shared future

SECTION 7.

Field Perspectives

7.1 What Policymakers Say About Governance Gaps

Interviews with cultural policymakers, heritage administrators, and institutional leaders across the ECO region reveal a growing consensus that cultural heritage protection has become a strategic policy priority rather than a purely conservation-oriented activity. Decision-makers increasingly view cultural heritage as a key resource for strengthening national identity, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development. Many policymakers emphasized that the ECO region occupies a unique civilizational position, encompassing some of the world's most historically significant cultural landscapes. From the historic cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Isfahan, Istanbul, Lahore, and Merv to the extensive network of Silk Road sites, heritage assets are increasingly recognized as strategic cultural resources that connect contemporary societies with centuries of shared history. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of aligning national heritage policies with international frameworks, particularly the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972) and the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). According to cultural leaders, these instruments have helped broaden the understanding of heritage beyond monuments and archaeological sites to include living traditions, languages, performing arts, and community knowledge systems.

Challenges Identified by Cultural Leaders

Despite significant progress, policymakers identified several challenges affecting heritage protection efforts. Rapid urbanization was repeatedly cited as one of the most pressing concerns. Historic urban centers are increasingly exposed to development pressures, infrastructure expansion, and

commercial construction that may undermine the integrity of cultural landscapes. Climate change was identified as an emerging threat affecting both tangible and intangible heritage. Rising temperatures, desertification, flooding, and environmental degradation are placing increasing pressure on archaeological sites and traditional settlements throughout the region. Interviewees also expressed concern regarding illicit trafficking of cultural property, insufficient conservation funding, and the need for stronger regional coordination mechanisms. Several leaders stressed that cultural heritage should be viewed as a shared regional asset requiring collective action rather than isolated national interventions.

Vision for Regional Cooperation

A recurring theme among cultural leaders was the importance of enhanced regional cooperation. Interviewees emphasized the role of ECO institutions in facilitating knowledge exchange, joint conservation initiatives, professional training, and cultural diplomacy programs. Many participants suggested the development of a coordinated regional framework for heritage protection that would promote information sharing, capacity building, and collaborative responses to common challenges. Such initiatives were seen as essential for strengthening cultural resilience and preserving the region's rich civilizational legacy for future generations.

Sector	Cooperation Potential
Heritage Restoration	Very High
Museum Cooperation	High
Cultural Tourism	Very High
Film Co-production	High
Digital Heritage	Very High
Academic Exchange	High
Translation Programs	Very High

TABLE 3:
Potential Areas for Regional Cooperation

7.2 What Practitioners Say About Creative Economy Barriers

Community-Based Heritage Safeguarding Practitioners working in museums, cultural organizations, heritage sites, and community initiatives consistently emphasized the importance of community participation in heritage preservation. According to field practitioners, successful safeguarding efforts depend not only on government policies but also on the active engagement of local communities who serve as custodians of cultural knowledge. Civil society representatives noted that many cultural traditions continue to survive because of informal systems of transmission within families, local associations, and community networks. Traditional crafts, oral storytelling, music, rituals, and customary practices are often maintained through community-based mechanisms that operate independently of formal institutions. Several practitioners stressed that heritage conservation efforts are most effective when communities are involved in decision-making processes rather than treated merely as beneficiaries of cultural programs. This approach aligns closely with UNESCO's emphasis on community-centered safeguarding practices.

Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage

Cultural practitioners highlighted the importance of intangible heritage as a living source of identity and collective memory. Across the ECO region, oral traditions, folk music, craftsmanship, poetry, storytelling, and traditional knowledge systems continue to play an important role in maintaining cultural continuity. However, practitioners expressed concern regarding the gradual erosion of traditional knowledge. Urban migration, changing lifestyles, and the influence of global media



were frequently cited as factors affecting the transmission of cultural practices across generations.

Many interviewees emphasized the need for practical safeguarding measures, including documentation projects, apprenticeship programs, support for artisans, and the incorporation of local cultural knowledge into educational curricula. Such initiatives were viewed as essential for ensuring that living traditions remain relevant and sustainable in contemporary society.

Civil Society and Cultural Advocacy

Representatives of non-governmental organizations and cultural associations described their growing role in heritage advocacy and awareness-raising activities. Civil society actors often serve as intermediaries between communities and public institutions, facilitating dialogue, promoting cultural participation, and mobilizing support for heritage initiatives. Several organizations reported increasing involvement in documenting endangered traditions, organizing cultural festivals, supporting traditional crafts, and promoting intercultural understanding. These activities contribute not only to cultural preservation but also to broader objectives related to social inclusion and community development. Practitioners consistently emphasized that sustainable heritage protection requires a balanced approach combining governmental support, community participation, and civil society engagement.

7.3 What Youth Say About Digital Culture and Identity

Young cultural actors across the ECO region increasingly view cultural heritage not as a relic of the past but as a source of inspiration for contemporary creativity. Interviews with young artists, cultural entrepreneurs, students, and creative professionals reveal a growing interest in reconnecting traditional cultural expressions with modern forms of communication and artistic production. Many young participants described cultural heritage as an important element of personal and collective identity. At the same time, they emphasized the need to reinterpret cultural traditions in ways that resonate

with contemporary audiences and changing social realities.

Digital Platforms and New Forms of Cultural Expression

Digital technology has significantly transformed the cultural landscape for younger generations. Emerging cultural actors increasingly use digital platforms to document, share, and promote cultural heritage. Social media, virtual exhibitions, digital archives, podcasts, and online storytelling initiatives have expanded opportunities for cultural participation and public engagement.

Young professionals working in the cultural sector highlighted the potential of technologies such as digital archiving, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and 3D documentation for preserving and promoting heritage resources. Digital tools are helping to make cultural heritage more accessible to wider audiences, particularly younger generations who engage with culture through online platforms.

At the same time, interviewees expressed concerns about cultural homogenization and the dominance of global digital content. Many emphasized the importance of ensuring that local languages, traditions, and cultural narratives maintain visibility within the rapidly expanding digital ecosystem.

Creativity, Innovation, and the Cultural Economy

Emerging cultural actors also emphasized the growing connection between cultural heritage and creative industries. Young entrepreneurs, designers, filmmakers, musicians, and digital creators increasingly draw upon traditional cultural resources as foundations for innovation and economic activity.

Participants pointed to the expanding role of cultural tourism, creative media, design, fashion, gastronomy, publishing, and digital content production as important opportunities for economic growth. In countries such as Türkiye, Iran, Pakistan, and several Central Asian states, young cultural professionals are contributing to the development of vibrant creative ecosystems that combine heritage with contemporary innovation.

However, interviewees identified several barriers, including limited access to

funding, insufficient institutional support, weak intellectual property protections, and restricted opportunities for international collaboration. Addressing these constraints was viewed as essential for unlocking the full potential of youth-led cultural entrepreneurship across the ECO region.

Looking Forward

Young cultural actors expressed optimism about the future of culture in the ECO region, provided that adequate support systems are established. They emphasized the importance of education, digital literacy, cultural exchange programs, and regional collaboration in fostering the next generation of cultural leaders.

Their perspectives suggest that the future of cultural heritage protection will increasingly depend on the ability to connect tradition with innovation, ensuring that cultural heritage remains a living and dynamic resource for contemporary societies. Through creativity, technology, and entrepreneurship, young people are emerging as key contributors to the preservation, transformation, and revitalization of the region's rich cultural heritage.

The insights presented in this section were enriched by contributions from distinguished scholars and cultural leaders across the ECO region.

Contributor Profiles

Prof. Sayed Askar Mousavi (Afghanistan) Scholar, cultural intellectual, and author of *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*. Former Senior Adviser to Afghanistan's Ministry of Higher Education.

Dr. Atousa Momeni (Iran) Director-General of the Regional Research Centre for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in West and Central Asia under the auspices of UNESCO (Tehran ICH Centre).

Ms. Zulfia Burhon (Tajikistan) Secretary General of the National Commission of the Republic of Tajikistan for UNESCO.

Prof. Elaheh Koolaei (Iran) Professor of Regional Studies at the University of Tehran and a leading scholar of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and regional cooperation in the ECO area.

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

Strengthening cultural collaboration across the ECO region

SECTOR		COOPERATION POTENTIAL
01	 HERITAGE RESTORATION Collaborative conservation of monuments, historic sites, and cultural landscapes.	VERY HIGH
02	 MUSEUM COOPERATION Partnerships for exhibitions, professional development, and collection sharing.	HIGH
03	 CULTURAL TOURISM Joint tourism routes, promotion, and sustainable tourism development.	VERY HIGH
04	 FILM CO-PRODUCTION Regional collaboration in film production, distribution, and storytelling.	HIGH
05	 DIGITAL HERITAGE Digitization, virtual preservation, and online access to cultural heritage.	VERY HIGH
06	 ACADEMIC EXCHANGE Student and faculty exchanges, joint research, and academic partnerships.	HIGH
07	 TRANSLATION PROGRAMS Translation of literature and knowledge to promote mutual understanding.	VERY HIGH
08	 CULTURAL STATISTICS Harmonizing data collection and sharing for evidence-based cultural policy.	VERY HIGH

COOPERATION POTENTIAL KEY

VERY HIGH

Excellent potential for impactful collaboration

HIGH

Strong potential with good opportunities



Building a connected cultural future

SECTION 8.

Recommendations and Future Outlook

8.1 Strategic Recommendations for Member States

The Member States of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) possess rich cultural traditions, extensive heritage assets, and established national cultural institutions. Across the region, governments have invested in heritage protection, cultural governance, education, and the promotion of national identities. Nevertheless, cultural cooperation at the regional level remains relatively limited, often characterized by project-based initiatives rather than sustained and institutionalized collaboration.

To unlock the full potential of culture as a driver of regional integration and sustainable development, Member States should adopt a more coordinated approach to cultural cooperation. Such an approach should complement national cultural policies while respecting cultural sovereignty and diversity. The objective is not to harmonize cultures but to strengthen cooperation among them.

A first priority is the establishment of a structured regional cultural cooperation framework under the ECO platform. Such a framework would provide a regular mechanism for policy dialogue, facilitate coordination among cultural authorities, and support the development of common priorities in areas such as heritage, education, arts, and cultural exchange. The framework should function as a platform for collaboration and mutual learning rather than as a regulatory structure.

Member States should also strengthen cooperation in the safeguarding of cultural heritage, particularly heritage of shared or transboundary significance. Joint initiatives may include coordinated heritage inventories, information-sharing systems, collaborative conservation projects, emergency response mechanisms, and coordinated action against illicit trafficking of cultural property. Particular attention should be given to cultural assets threatened by climate change, natural disasters, urban expansion, and conflict.

Facilitating cultural mobility across the region should constitute another strategic priority. The movement of artists, researchers, cultural professionals, students, and heritage experts remains essential for strengthening regional understanding. Simplified visa arrangements for cultural purposes, artist residency programmes, fellowship schemes, academic exchanges, and touring cultural exhibitions would significantly enhance people-to-people connectivity within the ECO region.

Member States should further strengthen youth participation in cultural cooperation. Young people represent the region's most important cultural resource for the future. Regional youth forums, cultural leadership programmes, heritage education initiatives, creative entrepreneurship schemes, and artistic competitions can help cultivate a generation of culturally engaged regional citizens. Greater investment in cultural education and intercultural learning will contribute to stronger social cohesion and mutual understanding.

Finally, Member States should recognize culture as a strategic contributor to sustainable development. Integrating cultural considerations into broader development policies can strengthen social inclusion, economic diversification, innovation, and community resilience. A stronger policy commitment to culture will provide a foundation for deeper regional cooperation in the years ahead.

8.2 Strengthening the Role of ECO Cultural Institute (ECI)

As the specialized cultural institution of the ECO framework, the ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) is uniquely positioned to serve as the principal catalyst for regional cultural cooperation. To realize this potential, the Institute's institutional role should be progressively strengthened and expanded.

ECI should function as the central platform for regional cultural dialogue, bringing together policymakers, cultural institutions, scholars, artists, and practitioners from across the ECO region. Through regular consultations, conferences, and expert forums, the Institute can facilitate the exchange of experiences and promote greater policy coherence among Member States.

Beyond its convening role, ECI should serve as a technical coordination body responsible for supporting the implementation of regional cultural initiatives. This includes developing policy guidance, producing research and analytical studies, preparing technical recommendations, and assisting Member States in the design and execution of cooperative programmes.

The Institute should also evolve into a regional knowledge and resource hub. By maintaining databases, digital repositories, policy observatories, and research networks, ECI can contribute to evidence-based cultural policymaking and strengthen institutional learning across the region. Such functions are particularly important in a rapidly changing cultural environment characterized by digital transformation and globalization.

Capacity-building should become another core pillar of ECI's mandate. The Institute can support professional development through training programmes, workshops, fellowships, and exchange initiatives targeting cultural managers, heritage professionals, researchers, and creative entrepreneurs. Strengthening human capital across the cultural sector will enhance the region's overall cultural resilience and competitiveness.

ECI should further expand its role in cultural diplomacy by promoting regional dialogue through arts, heritage, education, and intercultural exchange. In doing so, the Institute can contribute to confidence-building among Member States and strengthen the cultural foundations of regional cooperation. Ultimately, a stronger ECI would provide the institutional continuity necessary for transforming cultural cooperation from

a collection of isolated initiatives into a coherent and sustainable regional agenda.

8.3 Regional Cultural Integration Pathways

The future of cultural cooperation in the ECO region depends upon the development of practical pathways for integration that connect societies, institutions, and cultural sectors across national boundaries.

One of the most promising pathways lies in digital cultural cooperation. Digital technologies provide unprecedented opportunities for preserving, sharing, and promoting cultural heritage. ECO Member States should collaborate on the development of interoperable cultural databases, regional digital archives, virtual museums, multilingual cultural platforms, and shared standards for digitization. Such initiatives would improve access to cultural resources while strengthening regional connectivity.

Another pathway concerns cooperation in cultural and creative industries. Sectors such as film, music, publishing, design, crafts, digital media, cultural tourism, and audiovisual production possess significant potential for economic growth and regional collaboration. Encouraging co-productions, joint investment mechanisms, regional marketplaces, and professional networks can stimulate innovation while generating employment opportunities throughout the region.

Educational and academic cooperation also offers an important route toward greater cultural integration. Universities, research institutions, cultural academies, and think tanks should be encouraged to establish joint research programmes, exchange schemes, scholarship opportunities, and collaborative publications. Such initiatives would strengthen intellectual cooperation and promote greater regional awareness among future generations.

Translation and language cooperation represent equally important integration mechanisms. The ECO region encompasses a rich linguistic landscape that includes Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Pashto, among others. Expanded translation initiatives would facilitate access to literary, academic,

and historical works while fostering deeper cultural understanding among member societies.

Regional cultural festivals, exhibitions, and artistic exchange programmes can further strengthen integration by creating opportunities for direct interaction among citizens. Shared celebrations of cultural heritage, including festivals linked to common traditions and historical experiences, can reinforce a sense of regional belonging while respecting national diversity.

Through these pathways, cultural cooperation can move beyond symbolic engagement and become a practical mechanism for regional connectivity and collaboration.

8.4 Other Recommendations

Develop an ECO Cultural Indicators Framework

Effective cultural policy requires reliable evidence. ECO Member States should work together to develop a common set of cultural indicators that can measure participation in cultural life, heritage preservation, creative economy performance, cultural employment, and public investment in culture. Comparable data would enable governments to identify trends, evaluate policies, share good practices, and make more informed decisions. A regional indicators framework would also provide a stronger basis for monitoring cultural development across the ECO region.

Create an ECO Cultural Heritage Emergency Response Network

Cultural heritage faces growing risks from natural disasters, climate change, conflict, urban expansion, and illicit trafficking. To address these challenges, Member States should establish a regional mechanism for rapid cooperation in times of crisis. Such a network could facilitate information sharing, technical assistance, expert deployment, and coordinated responses to emergencies affecting cultural assets. Protecting heritage requires collective vigilance and regional solidarity.

Launch an ECO Cultural Capitals Programme
The ECO region would benefit from a flagship

programme that celebrates its cultural diversity while promoting regional visibility. An annual ECO Cultural Capital initiative could highlight the cultural achievements of selected cities, encourage investment in cultural infrastructure, stimulate tourism, and create opportunities for regional exchange. Such a programme would bring culture closer to citizens while strengthening the profile of ECO cultural cooperation.

Promote Regional Cooperation in Intangible Cultural Heritage

Many of the region's most valuable cultural assets are living traditions passed from one generation to another. Oral traditions, performing arts, traditional crafts, festive practices, and indigenous knowledge form an essential part of the region's cultural identity. Member States should expand cooperation in documenting, safeguarding, and promoting these traditions through joint research, regional inventories, and collaborative cultural programmes. Shared heritage can serve as a powerful bridge between societies.

Establish an ECO Translation and Publication Fund

Language diversity is one of the region's greatest strengths, but it can also limit access to each other's intellectual and cultural achievements. A regional translation and publication fund could support the translation of literary works, scholarly publications, historical texts, and contemporary cultural studies. Greater access to ideas, stories, and knowledge from across the region would deepen mutual understanding and strengthen cultural connectivity.

Encourage Public-Private Partnerships in Cultural Development

Public resources alone are often insufficient to meet the growing needs of the cultural sector. Governments should encourage partnerships with private enterprises, philanthropic organizations, academic institutions, and civil society actors. Such collaborations can mobilize additional expertise, innovation, and financial support for heritage conservation, cultural entrepreneurship, creative industries,

and community-based cultural initiatives. Strengthen the Role of Cities in Cultural Cooperation

Cities are increasingly becoming engines of cultural innovation and exchange. Municipal authorities should play a more active role in regional cultural cooperation through city-to-city partnerships, cultural networks, joint festivals, and collaborative heritage projects. Stronger links among cultural cities can create new opportunities for cooperation while bringing regional integration closer to local communities.

Develop a Regional Strategy for Digital Culture

Digital technologies are transforming how culture is created, preserved, shared, and experienced. ECO Member States should cooperate in developing a regional vision for digital culture that supports heritage digitization, cultural content creation, digital literacy, and equitable access to online cultural resources. A coordinated approach will help ensure that the region's cultural wealth remains accessible and relevant in the digital age.

Establish an ECO Network of Museums and Cultural Institutions

Museums, libraries, archives, galleries, and cultural centres are among the region's most important custodians of knowledge and heritage. Connecting these institutions through a structured regional network would facilitate joint exhibitions, staff exchanges, collaborative research, professional training, and resource sharing. Such cooperation would strengthen institutional capacity while making cultural resources more accessible to the public.

Promote Regional Research on Cultural and Creative Industries

The cultural and creative industries are becoming important drivers of innovation, employment, and economic growth worldwide. Member States should support collaborative research to better understand the size, impact, and potential of these sectors across the ECO region. Evidence-based policies can help unlock new opportunities for entrepreneurship, investment, and sustainable cultural development.

Create an ECO Cultural Mobility Fund

Direct interaction remains one of the most

effective ways of strengthening cultural understanding. A dedicated mobility fund could support artists, researchers, cultural professionals, and young leaders participating in regional exchanges, residencies, festivals, and collaborative projects. By reducing barriers to mobility, ECO can foster stronger professional networks and deeper people-to-people connections.

Encourage Joint UNESCO and International Cultural Initiatives

Many cultural challenges and opportunities extend beyond national borders. Member States should pursue greater cooperation in advancing joint heritage nominations, transnational cultural projects, and collaborative initiatives within the frameworks of UNESCO, ISESCO, and other international organizations. Acting together can amplify the region's cultural voice and increase its global visibility.

Establish an ECO Youth Cultural Network

The future of cultural cooperation depends on the engagement of young people. A regional youth cultural network could bring together students, artists, researchers, entrepreneurs, and emerging cultural leaders from across the ECO region. Through dialogue, innovation, volunteerism, and collaborative projects, young people can become active contributors to regional cultural integration. Prepare a Long-Term ECO Cultural Cooperation Strategy (2030–2040) Sustainable cultural cooperation requires long-term vision and continuity. Member States may therefore consider adopting a comprehensive regional cultural cooperation strategy for the period 2030–2040. Such a framework would define shared priorities, establish implementation mechanisms, identify measurable objectives, and provide a roadmap for future cooperation. A common strategic vision would help transform cultural collaboration from a series of individual projects into a coherent and lasting regional endeavour.

8.5 Long-Term Vision: Toward a Shared ECO Cultural Space

The long-term aspiration of cultural cooperation within the ECO region should be the gradual emergence of a shared

cultural space characterized by connectivity, cooperation, mutual respect, and cultural diversity.

Such a cultural space would not imply cultural uniformity. Rather, it would recognize the region's extraordinary diversity as a source of strength while building upon the historical, linguistic, and civilizational ties that connect its peoples. The objective is to create conditions in which cultural interaction becomes a normal and sustained feature of regional life.

In this vision, culture serves multiple strategic functions. It acts as a foundation for sustainable development by contributing to economic growth, tourism, innovation, and employment. It strengthens social cohesion by reinforcing cultural identities and promoting inclusion. It supports peacebuilding and intercultural dialogue by creating opportunities for communication and mutual understanding. It also serves as a catalyst for creativity, knowledge exchange, and regional innovation.

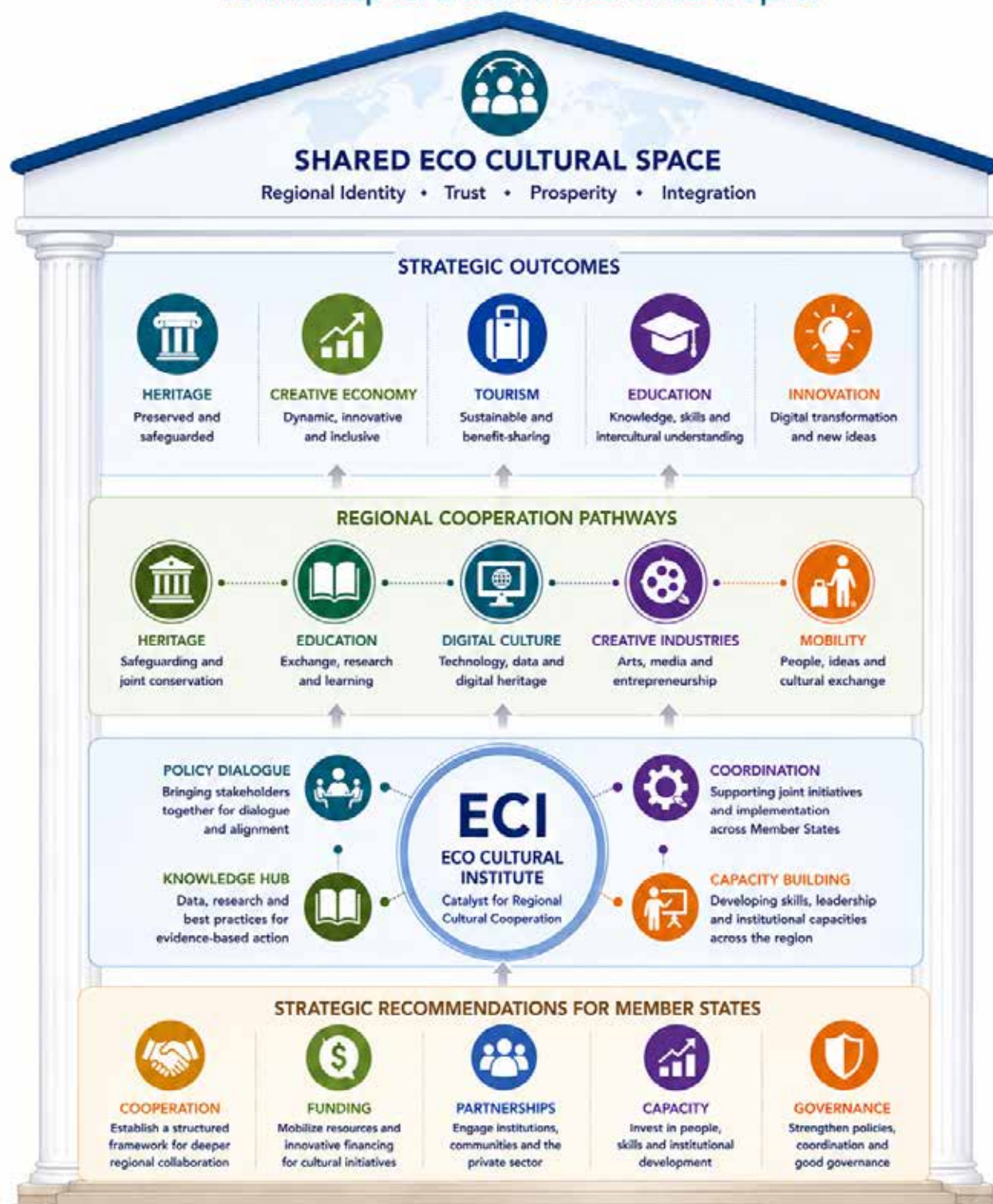
A shared ECO cultural space would be supported by interconnected institutions, active cultural networks, accessible digital platforms, vibrant creative industries, and regular people-to-people exchanges. Heritage protection, cultural education, youth engagement, and artistic collaboration would become integral components of regional cooperation rather than peripheral activities. The transition toward this vision will require sustained political commitment, institutional strengthening, and long-term investment. Progress is likely to be gradual, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the region. However, the foundations already exist in the form of shared historical experiences, cultural affinities, and longstanding traditions of exchange.

Ultimately, the future of cultural cooperation in the ECO region lies in transforming these historical connections into contemporary partnerships. By investing in culture as a strategic resource, Member States can strengthen regional solidarity while preserving the unique identities that make the ECO region one of the world's most culturally rich and historically interconnected spaces.

This version follows a UNESCO-style analytical structure and aligns directly with your table of contents headings (8.1–8.4), making it suitable for a flagship ECO Cultural Institute publication.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

A Roadmap for a Shared ECO Cultural Space



BACK

Key Regional Indicators

Indicator	Value	Policy Relevance for Cultural Cooperation
Organization Name	Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)	Principal regional framework linking West, Central, and South Asia
Year Established	1985	Institutional foundation for economic, technical, and cultural cooperation (minenergy.gov.az)
Year of Expansion	1992	Expansion from 3 to 10 member states, creating the present ECO region (minenergy.gov.az)
Number of Member States	10	One of the largest regional cooperation frameworks in Eurasia (minenergy.gov.az)
Headquarters	Tehran, Iran	Administrative center of regional cooperation (minenergy.gov.az)
Total Population	Over 500 million	Large cultural market and significant human capital base (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Türkiye)
Total Area	Over 8 million km ²	Vast geographical coverage encompassing diverse cultural landscapes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Türkiye)
Population Density	~63 persons/km ²	Reflects uneven settlement patterns and cultural distribution
Landlocked Member States	7 of 10	Creates connectivity challenges for cultural exchange and tourism
Coastal/ Semi-Coastal States	3 of 10	Strategic gateways for international cultural interaction
Intra-Regional Trade Volume	Approx. USD 60 billion annually	Indicates potential for expanding cultural and creative economy exchanges
Intra-Regional Trade Share	7.7% of total foreign trade	Demonstrates relatively low regional integration compared with other regional blocs
Official Working Language	English	Administrative and institutional communication
Major Cultural-Linguistic Families	Turkic, Persian, Indo-Aryan	Foundation of the region's cultural diversity
Major Civilizational Corridors	Silk Road, Persianate World, Turkic World, South Asian Cultural Sphere	Shared historical heritage supporting regional cultural diplomacy
UNESCO World Heritage Properties	More than 90 sites across the region	Significant cultural tourism and heritage assets
Geographical Reach	Europe–Asia–Eurasia Interface	Strategic bridge connecting multiple civilizations
Founding Members	Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye	Original members that established ECO in 1985 (minenergy.gov.az)
Members Joining in 1992	Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	Transformation of ECO into a major regional organization (minenergy.gov.az)

MATTER

Comparative Structural Indicators of ECO Member States

Country	Population (latest official / UN est.)	Area (km²)	Landlocked Status	Cultural Region Profile
Afghanistan	~42.6 million (2023 est.)	652,000	Yes	Persian–Central Asian–Islamic heritage
Azerbaijan	~10.2 million (2024 est.)	86,600	No	Turkic–Caucasian–Islamic synthesis
Iran	~89.6 million (2024 est.)	1,648,000	No	Persian civilizational core
Kazakhstan	~20.2 million (2024 est.)	2,724,900	Yes	Turkic–Steppe–Eurasian
Kyrgyzstan	~7.2 million (2024 est.)	199,900	Yes	Mountain nomadic Turkic culture
Pakistan	~242.0 million (2023 census)	881,913	No	South Asian–Islamic civilization
Tajikistan	~10.3 million (2024 est.)	143,100	Yes	Persian–Central Asian mountain culture
Türkiye	~85.4 million (2024 est.)	783,562	No	Anatolian–Turkic–European interface
Turkmenistan	~7.0 million (2024 est.)	488,100	Yes	Turkmen steppe–desert culture
Uzbekistan	~36.8 million (2024 est.)	447,400	Yes	Silk Road urban–Islamic heritage



Glossary of Cultural Policy Terms

A

Accession — The formal act of joining an international treaty or convention.

Archaeological Heritage — Physical remains of past human activity preserved for scientific and cultural study.

Archives — Organized collections of historical documents and records.

Artistic Literacy — The ability to understand, interpret, and engage with artistic expressions.

Audiovisual Media — Communication formats combining sound and visual components, including film, television, and digital video.

C

Censorship — Regulation or restriction of content by state or institutional authorities.

Cinematography — The art and technique of motionpicture production.

Craftsmanship — Traditional skills used in producing handmade cultural goods.

Creative Economy — Economic activities based on creativity, knowledge, and intellectual property.

Creative Industries — Sectors generating economic value through creative content and services.

Cultural Diplomacy — The use of cultural exchange to advance international relations.

Cultural Diversity — The coexistence of multiple cultural identities within a society.

Cultural Education — Instruction aimed at developing knowledge of arts, heritage, and cultural practices.

Cultural Heritage — Tangible and intangible assets inherited from past generations.

Cultural Identity — A community's shared sense of cultural belonging.

Cultural Industries — Sectors producing cultural goods and services, such as film, publishing, and music.

Cultural Infrastructure — Physical and institutional systems supporting cultural activities.

Cultural Institutions — Organizations responsible for preserving and promoting culture, such as museums and libraries.

Cultural Inventory — Official list of recognized cultural assets.

Cultural Legislation — Laws regulating cultural heritage, institutions, and activities.

Cultural Literacy — Understanding of cultural symbols, practices, and expressions.

Cultural Modernization — Processes of updating cultural systems while preserving heritage.

Cultural Participation — Public engagement in cultural activities and events.

Cultural Policy — Government strategies and regulations governing cultural development.

Cultural Preservation — Measures taken to safeguard cultural assets for future generations.

Cultural Rights — Rights ensuring access to cultural life and participation.

Cultural Routes — Thematic pathways linking cultural sites across regions.

Cultural Sector — All institutions, industries, and activities related to culture.

Cultural Sovereignty — A state's authority over its cultural assets and narratives.

Cultural Statistics — Data measuring cultural production, participation, and economic impact.

Cultural Strategy — Longterm planning for cultural development and governance.

Cultural Sustainability — Ensuring cultural continuity across generations.

Cultural Tourism — Travel motivated by interest in cultural heritage, arts, and traditions.

Cultural Values — Shared beliefs and norms shaping cultural identity.

Copyright — Legal protection of original creative works.

D

Digital Archives — Digitized collections of documents, images, and media.

Digital Economy — Economic activities based on digital technologies.

Digital Heritage — Cultural materials preserved in digital formats.

Digitalization — Integration of digital technologies into cultural systems.

E

Education Policy — Government frameworks guiding educational development.

Ethnography — Study of cultural practices and social groups.

F

Festival Policy — Regulations and strategies governing cultural festivals.

Folk Arts — Traditional artistic expressions rooted in community practices.

H

Heritage Conservation — Protection and restoration of cultural heritage.

Heritage Management — Administration of cultural heritage resources.

Heritage Site — A location recognized for cultural, historical, or natural significance.

Historical Memory — Collective remembrance of past events shaping identity.

I

Identity Policy — State strategies for shaping national cultural identity.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) — Living traditions, expressions, and skills recognized by UNESCO.

Intercultural Dialogue — Exchange between cultures to promote understanding.

International Cultural Cooperation — Crossborder collaboration in cultural fields.

Inventory System — Mechanism for registering cultural assets.

L

Legal Framework — Set of laws governing cultural policy.

M

Media Literacy — Ability to critically understand media content.

Monument Protection — Legal and technical measures safeguarding historic structures.

Museum Studies — Field concerned with museum management and curation.

N

National Cultural Strategy — Statelevel longterm cultural planning.

National Identity — Shared cultural characteristics defining a nation.

National Inventory — Official registry of cultural heritage elements.

P

Performing Arts — Artistic expressions presented live, such as music, dance, and theater.

Preservation Policy — Government measures to protect cultural heritage.

Public Culture — Cultural expressions accessible to the general population.

Publishing Sector — Industry producing books, journals, and printed materials.

R

Restoration — Technical process of repairing cultural heritage.

S

Soft Power — Influence derived from cultural appeal rather than coercion.

State Cultural Program — Government initiative supporting cultural development.

Statistical Indicators — Quantitative measures used to assess cultural performance.

T

Tangible Cultural Heritage — Physical cultural assets such as monuments, artifacts, and sites.

Traditional Knowledge — Communitybased knowledge systems passed through generations.

U

UNESCO Convention — International treaty administered by UNESCO.

W

World Heritage — Sites recognized by UNESCO for outstanding universal value.

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Established in 1995, ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) is a specialized, international organization, located in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, which aims at fostering public awareness and preserving the rich cultural heritage of its member states.

Within the framework of its Charter, which has been approved by the member states, ECI has been entrusted with the key mandate to preserve and promote the common cultural heritage of the ECO region to encourage understanding among the nations of the region.

To this end, ECI has always organized a diverse range of art, cultural, literary, research, academic and sporting events and has published books and journals in English, Farsi, Russian and Urdu with the approach to strengthen cooperation and preserve the common cultural heritage of the member countries.

The ECO region is a vast territory with centuries-old history, rich civilization and culture which includes 10 member states, namely the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of Tajikistan, Republic of Türkiye, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan.



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The ECO Cultural Institute (ECI) is committed to promoting cultural cooperation, preserving our shared heritage, and supporting creative and innovative solutions for sustainable development across the ECO region.



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