

Spotlight Diplomacy, A Case Study: Azerbaijani Culture Illuminated by a U.S. Cultural Foundation

"Exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding."¹

–Definition of cultural diplomacy

“Cultural diplomacy” at its best brings out the finest aspects of a culture and in so doing generates understanding and appreciation in others. It is a form of persuasion; another tool in the public-diplomacy tool kit.

But how to practice “cultural diplomacy” in an age of globalization? How does the concept translate in a world where more and more countries are focusing on their own diversity? How does cultural diplomacy work in a universe where anyone with access to a computer can curate a world experience that exceeds political boundaries?

The end of the Cold War brought an end to numerous U.S. cultural programs that targeted the people and the government of the Soviet Union. Once programs like the earlier iteration of Voice of America and Radio Free Europe kindled breakthroughs between nations. Today social media, a plethora of exchange programs, and ever-increasing geotourism opportunities free individuals to practice cultural diplomacy with the potential for enormous impact (think one million YouTube hits). Just as the world has become complex and multipolar, the business of U.S. cultural diplomacy now extends across disciplines and sectors and encompasses multiple partners.

So how does one set up shop to practice cultural diplomacy? Specifically, how does one, equipped with today's tools of cultural diplomacy, engage Americans to embrace a seemingly remote culture?

Today's practitioners of U.S. cultural diplomacy include not only museums and cultural foundations but also an array of public and private innovative programs and organizations that often work in tandem. Clearly today's cultural-diplomacy target audiences expect more than a solid performance, a professional stage, and a free ticket. Just as academicians today speak of “smart power,” the cultural-diplomacy community often thinks in terms of “smart cultural diplomacy.”

“Spotlight diplomacy” is the method we use at the Karabakh Foundation, a U.S. 501(c)3 cultural charity foundation, to connect Americans with the culture and heritage of the Azerbaijani nation, that is, the country of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis around the world.

What Is Spotlight Diplomacy?

Spotlight diplomacy is an approach that brings together two and often more cultural entities, e.g., a country-of-origin community, a diaspora community, and a host community, for a cultural dialogue in which all parties play a distinct and critical role. The practice creates opportunities for each entity to shine individually under a spotlight on culture as well as opportunities for the groups to engage in dialogue. The opportunity for the parties to express themselves as they would like is as integral to the program.

Spotlight diplomacy as practiced by the Karabakh Foundation extends beyond strictly Azerbaijani or Azerbaijani-American or U.S. expressions of culture; we incorporate cultural interpretations from Foundation volunteers (“cultural ambassadors”) of various backgrounds and from other participants. Our view is that public programs are experiences and not presentations per se, and that everyone present is alternatively participant and audience member.

Challenges

The concept of spotlight diplomacy is hardly revolutionary, of course, but it can be counterintuitive in the context of Americans learning about other cultures. Spotlight diplomacy brings the various “sides” of the dialogue into sharper focus, tearing away the masks of supposed Eastern exoticism or stereotyped American pop-culture fixation. Bringing a range of players into the spotlight, to include diaspora members and volunteers from varied backgrounds, can be startling to those who enter with an “us, and them” mentality.

Keeping the spotlight on the cultural and away from the political can be a challenge in any such setting. But perhaps the challenge is even more acutely felt in the world of the Caucasus.

To many who are in tune with the region, the term “Karabakh” itself speaks of an area that is embroiled in a 20+-year conflict. The conflict continues to result in deaths, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and bitter resentments. To others in the know, “Karabakh” conjures up glorious Azerbaijani music, literature, and art born in this region of Azerbaijan before outside forces came to power. The name “Karabakh Foundation” is intended to invoke civic-society markers as well as cultural masterpieces. Critical to our mission is the use of *culture*-based and not *conflict*-based diplomacy.

Drawing the line between civic-society aspects of culture in particular and elements of the land dispute can be daunting, no doubt. The Foundation remains ever mindful and respectful of the other meanings behind our work, including the powerful emotions it often invokes. We are careful not to allow our spotlight-diplomacy events to devolve into free-for-alls. We do this in part by being vocal and transparent about our mission. We also continually emphasize the archival and scholarly aspects of our work, which we see as building a foundation for critical dialogues between and among nations.

Another set of challenges involved in connecting Americans with Azerbaijani culture and heritage involves the complexity of Caucasus history and geography and the lack of materials with which to tell the story.

While many Americans may know that Azerbaijan was once a part of the Soviet Empire, few realize the rich history of the khanates that once composed the area, or the fact that the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, 1918-20, was the first secular, democratic republic in the Muslim world.

Few reliable sources about Azerbaijani history, heritage, and culture have been published in English. And, alas, relatively few material artifacts are available for showcasing in a museum-exhibition setting, in part due to the destruction of material artifacts in the heart of Azerbaijan's culture—the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Even Azerbaijan's vast legacy in the design of “Oriental carpets”—a vast number of which are of Azerbaijani origin—has been obscured by twists of history.

So given Azerbaijan's overall “remoteness” for Americans, it would seem that giving special attention to the few available cultural means is not only useful but necessary. The technique of spotlighting has helped the Foundation to garner loyal devotees to specific aspects of Azerbaijani culture and heritage, such as music and cuisine.

Whereas cultural diplomacy overall may bypass the political minefields of traditional diplomacy, it also at times affords entrée into territory that is off limits to traditional diplomats. Cultural expression speaks to the heart and soul of a people. The Karabakh Foundation and others like us recognize the honor and the responsibility of a passport into the territory of human expression.

In the Spirit of a World Partner

"Not in the spirit of a patron but the spirit of a partner."

—U.S. President Barack Obama, 2009²

Azerbai—what? Isn't that . . .? No wait . . . Here in Washington, D.C., it sometimes seems that everyone was at one time an exchange student or Peace Corps volunteer in a far-off land. Nonetheless, coming on board as the Karabakh Foundation's first executive director, I found that virtually no American I encountered could place Azerbaijan on the map.

At the same time I found that many members of the D.C. Azerbaijani/Azerbaijani-American community were both knowledgeable in and eager to share the wealth of Azerbaijani culture. And many American “newbies” were ready if not eager to participate in Azerbaijani cultural experiences.

One of the Foundation's first initiatives was the Foundation's Azerbaijani Documentary Project, an oral-history initiative aimed at capturing the firsthand accounts of anyone with a connection to Azerbaijani culture. This program yielded the Foundation's first crop of volunteers, or cultural ambassadors. It also allowed us to figure out useful questions to ask, points of interest in discussions between Azerbaijani/Azerbaijani-American interviewees and U.S. interviewers, and interesting program topics. Overall it helped us to establish a baseline of materials on which we could draw when approached by filmmakers and other researchers seeking information about Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani Documentary Project probably also sparked our concept of spotlight diplomacy. Each oral-history interview reflects a process of coming up with boilerplate questions that our volunteers brought to the project. Each interview also reflects a philosophy of responsiveness to the interviewee; a flexibility in allowing interviewees to share their own stories their own way, which has led to ever new questions . . . and to new dialogue.

Azerbaijani Radio Hour: The Voice of the Karabakh Foundation

Even with the mandate of engaging U.S. audiences with a culture-based program, we spent much of our first year focusing on the critical first step of capturing attention. We knew that simply helping Americans to place Azerbaijan on the map would lead them to important insights about this tiny country situated cheek to jowl with Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, and Iran. But we also recognized a need to establish an emotional connection that would lead to additional learning.

With the dedicated assistance of Azerbaijani/Azerbaijani-American “explainers” we presented a series of exhibitions with images of the land, the cuisine, the people. The beginnings of the spotlight approach evolved as staff facilitated and encouraged interactions between cultural insiders and outsiders.

In this early period building up a reliable and accessible online database—our online Azerbaijani Heritage Center—took on an urgency as we recognized an overwhelming lack of reliable information about Azerbaijani culture and heritage on the Internet. In addition we felt a sense of responsibility to connect the name “Karabakh” with the historic region of Azerbaijan and the extensive Azerbaijani cultural accomplishments ranging from literary and musical masterpieces to astonishingly beautiful textile arts.

While building our knowledge databases and presenting exhibitions, we took care to nurture individual relationships with our stakeholders. We encouraged our volunteers, individuals from many different backgrounds recruited for a range of expertise, to explore their own curiosities and to cultivate their own interactions within our KF world. We encouraged Azerbaijani friends to bring in American friends and vice versa.

If every early KF program included a map of Azerbaijan each event also featured someone to bring the map to life with a family story, a research finding or other insights.

While establishing our brand, we stumbled on an approach that would increase both the scope and depth of our reach. Just a few months after launching operations, we started scripting and producing the Azerbaijani Radio Hour: The Voice of the Karabakh Foundation.

A variety program featuring topical shows, interviews, and Azerbaijani music, the Azerbaijani Radio Hour allowed us to reach out to millions of people “from the Shenandoah Valley to the Eastern Shore, serving the Metro Washington area, suburban Virginia, Maryland, and the city of Baltimore.”³ In one of our early months, according to the station, we had 2,172 listeners via the

station's Audio on Demand web service, 1,230 via the cell-phone listening service Audio Now, and 96 tuning in via the station's Online Live streaming service. This was in addition to any of the people in our listening area who might have caught the show live on the air or the number from around the world who downloaded it via the Foundation website. The archived shows remain invaluable English-language resources on Azerbaijani culture that are accessible on the Foundation website.

The volunteer host of the Azerbaijani Radio Hour for the first year was Ms. Shafag Mehraliyeva, an Azerbaijan journalist who had spent some ten years in the United States. Ms. Mehraliyeva brought insider knowledge of many aspects of the show and could anticipate questions that would arise. In this first year, we produced a portion of the show in Azerbaijani, which introduced many Azerbaijanis/Azerbaijani-Americans—and future cultural ambassadors—to the KF.

In the next year we focused increasingly on interviews, including interviews with a variety of well known experts. The show allowed us to reach a far broader audience than would one-of-public events and even brought cultural celebrities under our spotlight.

One of our Azerbaijani Radio Hour shows, an interview with the host of PBS' "Build It Bigger" speaking about architecture in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku, won an award from the International Academy of the Visual Arts.

Spotlight on Textiles

A continuing emphasis on the individual backgrounds and interests of our volunteers, Azerbaijani and otherwise, enabled us to bring our public image into clearer focus with Washington audiences. Participating in our first Turkish Festival, a major annual Washington happening, we presented hands-on textile activities focused on Azerbaijani carpets, drawing on the passions of some of our volunteers.

After our first Turkish Festival, we began holding our rug gatherings at local rug showrooms, bringing local ruggies' extraordinary fund of knowledge and interest into the programming. Rug dealers and collectors came together to discuss Azerbaijanis' role in Oriental carpet design. New alliances formed, paving the way for other Foundation textile initiatives. The Foundation's role truly was that of facilitator, shining a light on experts.

At the request of the Textile Museum—Washington's internationally renowned institution addressing all aspects of handmade textiles—we presented an afternoon of Azerbaijani culture in the form of Azerbaijani folk dancing and carpet-history displays as part of an environmentally themed outdoor textile festival. We brought in a top-notch *mugham* performer whose love of this poetically infused folkloric music conveys in his entire demeanor. We also brought in, as an explainer, an American who is himself not only a gifted *mugham* performer but also a tremendously effective cultural ambassador for Azerbaijan. And we presented the Karabakh Foundation Dancers, students who interpreted Azerbaijani culture through dance.

The dazzling impact of the music and the carpets is evident in the video we shot of this event (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FciQ3BWxQjA>). But in reality the spotlight on the

cultural practitioners captured the appreciation and the interest of the crowd. Several in the audience have become KF repeat customers and even volunteers.

Expanding the Spotlight's Reach

In our second year we embraced new audiences and new program partners, continuing to shine the light wherever it took us. The business of planning and securing funding for our innovative ideas yielded words for our growing belief in spotlight diplomacy. That is, we learned to articulate concretely yet passionately that we were building not only experiences but relationships; that people-culture connections would yield valuable outcomes for people-people relationships. Even while moving forward strategically, we allowed ourselves to respond intuitively to opportunities. We recognized that just as in building relationships between and among individuals, we would need to remain sensitive to personalities, interests, beliefs, and other realities of human variation.

With the Library of Congress and the women's-history organization the Sewall-Belmont House & Museum we talked about Azerbaijan's proud record of granting women the right to vote in 1918. We produced a father/son art exhibition in Boston and cosponsored a *mugham* concert with the World Music Institute. We cosponsored the Continuum Ensemble's concert at the Smithsonian Freer and Sackler Galleries that featured Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian music. Audiences came to know our programs by their spirit of intellectual adventure and quest for authenticity.

Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2012: Spotlight on Azerbaijan

“We have seen how anti-Americanism persists in many corners, giving rise to violence against our citizens, our nation, and our partners. So whether we choose to accept it or not, the United States will always be part of the global conversation—not only through our actions as a government but through the popular culture with which we are identified. The question isn’t whether we should participate in public diplomacy—of which cultural diplomacy is a major part—but how we can harness cultural diplomacy as a force for good.”³

—Tara Sonenshine, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, U.S. State Department, before an audience of the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2013

“Cultural diplomacy . . .

- Affirms that we have such values as family, faith, and the desire for education in common with others . . .
- Is uniquely able to reach out to young people, to non-elites, to broad audiences with a much reduced language barrier . . .
- Fosters the growth of civil society . . .

- Educates Americans on the values and sensitivities of other societies, helping us to avoid gaffes and missteps.”
—“Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy,” report by U.S. Department of State, September 2005⁴



At the 2012 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Azerbaijani and U.S. students and Karabakh Foundation employees and volunteers interacted closely with Festival attendees in the spirit of culinary diplomacy.

Photo by Karabakh Foundation. Used by permission.



Attendees of the Azerbaijani Thursday musical series at the 2012 Smithsonian Folklife Festival enjoyed opportunities to interact with the *mugham* performers, the music curator who introduced the concert, and the Karabakh Foundation staff involved in arranging the program.

Photo by Karabakh Foundation. Used by permission.

In a 2005 report, the State Department cited cultural diplomacy as “the linchpin of public diplomacy.” Groups like the Karabakh Foundation recognize that, just like today's multipolar world and multifaceted public diplomacy, today's cultural diplomacy has spread well beyond two superpowers' governmental initiatives.

As part of a 2013 conference of the Global Diaspora Forum, which is funded by the State Department, the Karabakh Foundation introduced the concept of spotlight diplomacy. Foundation leadership spoke about our efforts to engage Americans and Azerbaijanis via Azerbaijani cultural contributions. We emphasized the vital role of public- and private-sector creative partnerships.

Earlier, in the summer of 2012, at the request of the Smithsonian Institution, a team assembled and staffed by the Karabakh Foundation prepared and served traditional Azerbaijani foods as part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. We also presented Azerbaijani Thursdays, a musical series featuring the traditional Azerbaijani *mugham* folk idiom.

In isolating the successes of that exercise in cultural democracy—as the Smithsonian refers to that mega-festival on the U.S. National Mall—one must look behind the tents as well as in the

lines in front of the tents. On the Karabakh Foundation team were a number of Azerbaijani graduate students studying in the United States. The pride among these students in sharing their national fare, and their willingness to share descriptions of food and food traditions with the many interested customers, generated what we call spotlight moments.

Smithsonian Folklife Festival audiences gave the Azerbaijani team performers a standing ovation after each number. Audiences, the curator we designated to introduce the performances, and the performers themselves interacted after the shows.

Perhaps the biggest spotlight moment of the festival came while we were interviewing an American musician during a concert intermission. He discussed his earlier exposure to Eastern music and then articulated his reactions to the Azerbaijani *mugham*. Unexpectedly, while sharing his reactions, he burst into tears.

The Foundation documents what we do via oral histories and other interviews. The so-called crying-man video interview continues to add dimension to the Folklife concerts.

Training the Spotlight

Sometimes under our auspices the Azerbaijani community shines a spotlight on itself, and sometimes U.S. experts interpret Azerbaijani culture for Americans. The spotlight shines not so much on the “products” of culture as on the “experiences” of culture—art being made and used and not just art under a spotlight for example. The spotlight shines on pop culture as well as on “high culture.”

Along with disseminating culture, the Foundation became increasingly involved with showcasing artifacts as well as artifacts in the context of use. We are continuing to build a modest artifacts collection composed in large part of ancient and modern coins that reveal critical aspects of Azerbaijani history. We are developing an online exhibition, to complement our online Heritage Center, that tells the Azerbaijani story with images as much as with words.

Simple understanding, familiarity, a smile, an interest to return to the topic another time—these are the main elements for which we at the Foundation strive. We are in this endeavor for the long haul, helping Americans and Azerbaijanis get to know each other through all kinds of platforms, in all kinds of scenarios.

Dance has become an important element of the Foundation’s public programming, and we are carefully building the Karabakh Foundation Dancers by training new dancers in old traditions. Some of these traditions were almost destroyed when Azerbaijan was a part of the Soviet Union. Whether putting on a performance or teaching schoolchildren steps, we aim to shine the light in ways that will illuminate what may not be immediately visible.

Each coin or painting or stamp in the Foundation's collection is more than just an object. Each object is a piece of history, of heritage, of family, of a continuum of time and place that deserves more than a box, a light, and a label—each piece deserves the full spotlight treatment.

But in the end it is the people behind the artifacts—those whom the Karabakh Foundation spotlights and many more—who represent the smart power behind the Foundation's mission.

Spotlight diplomacy is in a sense nothing more than the glow of appreciation that human beings can have for each other. In another sense, spotlight diplomacy is a powerful tool that can nurture powerful and long-lasting bonds.

References

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3 http://wust1120.com/WUST/Signal_Area.html

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Diana Cohen Altman is Executive Director of the Washington, D.C.-based Karabakh Foundation, a U.S. 501(c)3 focused on Azerbaijani culture. She is a longtime cultural professional, having served for seven years as director of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, where her work in cultural diplomacy led to the development of the B'nai B'rith Center for Jewish Culture. Before that, she worked in the Smithsonian Institution's central exhibits office as an exhibition content developer. Ms. Altman has served on numerous cultural boards and is recognized as a leader in the museum field for her role in developing the magazine of the National Association for Museum Exhibition over nine years. Ms. Altman has published on a range of cultural topics in *Museum News*, *Curator*, and *Moment*, and other publications. A graduate of Vassar College, Ms. Altman lives in Virginia with her family.