
TOURISM DIPLOMACY AS SOFT POWER: ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Tourism diplomacy has emerged as a strategic instrument of soft power in contemporary international relations, linking foreign policy, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and sustainable development. This article examines how tourism shapes international perceptions, strengthens intercultural dialogue, reduces stereotypes, and builds trust between societies. Grounded in soft power theory, the study analyzes the roles of governments, private-sector actors, civil society, and local communities in developing tourism diplomacy strategies. It also explores how cultural heritage, destination branding, visa policy, and public-private partnerships contribute to national image and global influence. In the context of pandemics, environmental crises, geopolitical instability, and post-conflict recovery, tourism diplomacy is presented as a tool for peacebuilding, economic resilience, and sustainable cooperation. The findings suggest that tourism diplomacy is a vital foreign policy resource for enhancing soft power, advancing sustainable development goals, and strengthening long-term international partnerships.

KEYWORDS: Tourism diplomacy; soft power; international relations; public diplomacy; nation branding; cultural diplomacy; sustainable development; global governance.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary system of international relations, the nature of state interaction has undergone significant transformation due to globalization, increased geopolitical competition, and the diversification of instruments of influence. Traditional diplomacy, which was once primarily based on political negotiations and military or economic leverage, is increasingly complemented by non-coercive mechanisms of influence that operate through attraction rather than pressure (Nye, 2004; Chen & Duggan, 2016, pp. 45-66). In this context, tourism diplomacy has acquired a key position as an important pillar of “soft power” Tourism, as a social, cultural, and economic process, provides an opportunity for nations to present themselves to the world, promote their cultural values, and create a foundation for mutual trust (Cherevichko, 2002, pp. 214-218).

Each tourist trip is not just a physical movement, but a process of intercultural communication - communication, which affects the formation of positive or negative perceptions of countries, nations and customs, and in general, the foreign policy of countries in this area. Therefore, in most developed countries, the tourism industry has become an important element of foreign policy.

In the last two decades, a new horizon has emerged in the art of modern diplomacy called “Tourism Diplomacy”, which allows states to strengthen their influence at the international level through culture, historical heritage, environment, and interpersonal relations (Ney, 2003, pp. 15).

This process not only contributes to improving the national image but also creates a basis for the development of economic cooperation, attracting investment and expanding multilateral relations. In this regard, tourism diplomacy has both theoretical and practical significance. In the context of increasing global challenges, including environmental crises, health crises and political conflicts, the role of tourism diplomacy becomes even more important. It can serve as a means of reducing tensions, strengthening peace and sustainable development. It is these features that have made tourism diplomacy an important subject of scientific research in the field of international relations (Cherevichko, p. 216).

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TOURISM DIPLOMACY

Tourism diplomacy as a modern phenomenon has been formed based on long-term historical and theoretical processes. Even in ancient times, the travels of merchants, scientists and intellectuals were considered a means of cultural exchange and knowledge transfer. Although these trips did not have a formal diplomatic character, they provided the basis for interstate relations, namely it can be clearly stated that its core theoretical foundation derives from the concept of “soft power” (Ney, 2003, p.3).

In the 17th–19th centuries, with the emergence of the “Grand Tour” phenomenon (an early form of tourism diplomacy - a historical and scientific term referring to the long and educational journey of young people from the nobility and elite of Europe), tourism became an important element of the cultural education of the European elite. This process led to increased mutual understanding between nations, strengthened the basis of cultural diplomacy, and opened a new window into the understanding of tourism (Dagkilich et al., 2023, pp. 453-466).

Later, in the 20th century, especially during the Cold War, tourism became not only a social and cultural activity, but also a political tool. During this period, states used tourism to present their ideological values, lifestyles, and the superiority of their social and political systems on the international stage (Bechmann et al, 2019).

Theoretically, tourism diplomacy is most often explained within the framework of the theory of “soft power” (Nye, 2004, p. 46). According to this theory, countries can influence the behavior of others through cultural attraction, values, and friendly policies. Tourism activates this attraction and contributes to changing international perceptions. These approaches emphasize that identity, values, and social perceptions play a key role in international relations. Tourism diplomacy acts as a means of shaping these perceptions, contributing to the construction of new meanings in interstate relations.

In the post-Cold War era and with the expansion of globalization, tourism diplomacy entered a new stage of development. The development of digital technologies, social networks and modern means of communication have increased the impact of tourism many times over. Thus, tourism diplomacy has turned from an additional phenomenon into an important element of foreign policy (Dagkilich et al., 2023, p. 457; Ney, 2004, p.47).

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS AND PARTNERSHIPS IN TOURISM DIPLOMACY

Having identified the theoretical and historical foundations of tourism diplomacy, it is of particular importance to consider the role of governments and partnership mechanisms in its practical implementation. In the modern system of international relations, states, as the main subjects, are responsible for the development, coordination and implementation of tourism diplomacy policies. It is governments that determine the strategic directions of using tourism as a foreign policy tool and provide the legal and institutional framework for its implementation (UNWTO, 2022).

One of the important state tools in this direction is visa policy and regulation of border processes. Facilitation of visa regime, introduction of electronic visas and agreements on bilateral or multilateral visa regimes, or visa-free travel, or setting a certain period (one week or more) without visas can activate the flow of tourists and at the same time contribute to strengthening interstate trust. Such measures are not only economic in nature but also convey a political message that the country is ready for cooperation and open dialogue. The evidence of these ideas is also supported by the Russian scientist A. G. Savoysky, who states that “tourism diplomacy is a means of implementing foreign policy on the coordination and provision of services in tourism, information and promotion, compliance of hotel and restaurant services with international standards” (Savoysky, 2011, p. 3376)

In addition, governments are taking tourism diplomacy to a multilateral level by concluding international agreements in the field of tourism and participating in regional and global organizations, such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022). These partnerships allow for the exchange of standards, best practices, and sustainable strategies in the tourism sector. In this context, tourism diplomacy becomes a factor of regional and global integration. Despite the key role of the state, the successful implementation of tourism diplomacy is impossible without partnerships with other non-state actors. Public-private partnerships are considered one of the most effective forms of cooperation. Tour operators, airlines, travel agencies, hotel chains, and private investors can strengthen state initiatives in the foreign policy system because of “soft power” with their innovations and financial resources. At the same time, the state protects public interests through regulation and control and creates broad development opportunities (UNWTO, 2022). In this context, the role of local (civil) communities and non-governmental organizations is also of particular importance. Community-based tourism not only contributes to local economic development, but also contributes to the preservation of historical heritage, the preservation of cultural values, and at the same time strengthens national identity and pride. The participation of the civil society in the development of tourism diplomacy leads to the expansion of contacts, the greater presentation of tourism opportunities, and the sustainability of this process.

TOURISM DIPLOMACY, CULTURE, AND SOFT POWER

Culture is the main axis of tourism diplomacy, making it one of the most effective forms of soft power. In international relations, culture acts as a source of attraction and influence, and can change the relationship between nations and states without the use of pressure. It is through culture that tourism activates this attraction and contributes to the presentation of the values, traditions, and way of life of nations.

Tourism diplomacy provides an opportunity to present culture not as a static element, but as a living process and dialogue. Historical heritage, architectural monuments, national art, music,

language and literature, and national cuisine are presented to an international audience or the same international information space through tourism (tourists). This process contributes not only to the growth of cultural knowledge, but also to the formation of intercultural respect and tolerance (Mbria, 2024, p. 47).

The concept of soft power, proposed by Joseph Nye, is particularly relevant in this context. According to this theory, states can influence the behavior of others through cultural appeal and values. Tourism diplomacy provides just such an influence, since the direct experience of tourists often has a deeper impact than official propaganda. In addition, tourism diplomacy helps to break negative stereotypes and strengthen intercultural dialogue. Direct contact between people can eliminate misunderstandings and misconceptions. In this sense, tourism is not only a means of cultural representation, but also a tool for peacebuilding and social cohesion (Cherevchko, 2022, p. 216; Dagkilich et al., 2023, p. 460).

However, the use of culture in tourism diplomacy requires ethical responsibility. The risks of commercialization of culture, distortion of national values, and loss of authenticity can have negative impacts. Therefore, sustainable approaches and respect for cultural diversity should be at the core of tourism diplomacy (UNWTO, 2022).

TOURISM DIPLOMACY AS A TOOL FOR THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IMAGE AND CREATION OF NATION BRANDING

In the competitive conditions of the modern international system, branding and the formation of a national image have become one of the most important directions of foreign policy of states (Claro et al., p. 66). Tourism diplomacy acts as an effective tool in this process, allowing countries to present themselves on the world stage not only as a political entity, but also as a cultural, social and civilizational space. National image is a set of perceptions, feelings, and evaluations that the international community has about a country. Tourism plays a key role in shaping this image, as direct experiences of tourists often have a more profound impact than official or media information (UNWTO, 2022).

Countries can create a positive and attractive image by presenting their historical heritage, unique nature, rich culture and hospitality of their people. In this context, destination branding and city branding are of particular importance. Cities, as modern economic, cultural and diplomatic centers, are becoming independent players in tourism diplomacy through international festivals, cultural events and modern infrastructure (Claro et al., p. 73). The role of the private sector in this process is also significant. Professional tourism organizations or tourism market actors (tour Operators), international hotel chains, airlines and digital platforms act as branding intermediaries. They convey the image of countries to a global audience through marketing and branding strategies. Coordination of public policy and private sector initiatives can significantly increase the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy (UNWTO, 2022).

However, incorrect or one-sided branding can create a negative perception of an ethnic group, nation or even a country. Oversimplification, stereotyping and commercialization of culture can lead to a decline in national identity. Therefore, tourism diplomacy should be based on the principles of sustainability, cultural authenticity and respect for its diversity, based on historical evidence and reliable sources.

TOURISM DIPLOMACY IN PROCESS OF GLOBAL CRISIS

Global crises, such as pandemics, armed conflicts, environmental disasters and economic crises have a significant impact on the tourism industry. However, recent experience shows that tourism diplomacy can play a key role in the process of recovery and strengthening resilience (UNWTO, 2022). Tourism in such conditions is not only a vulnerable sector, but also a tool for international recovery and solidarity. For example, the “COVID-19 pandemic” is a clear example of the importance of tourism diplomacy in times of crisis. International cooperation in the field of health, travel regulation, recognition of medical documents and exchange of experiences have shown that tourism can contribute to the coordination of public policies. Proof of all this has been observed in the post-pandemic period, when tourism has served as an engine of economic recovery and job creation and development of the service sector in various sectors (IJSRD, 2025).

In post-conflict areas, tourism diplomacy also contributes to peacebuilding and social reconciliation. Promoting areas as safe places to travel, promoting cultural tourism and the preservation of historical sites, and engaging local communities can help restore trust and peaceful coexistence and foster tourism acceptance (UNWTO, 2022).

Furthermore, environmental crises also highlight another role for tourism diplomacy. Sustainable tourism development, ecotourism, and environmental protection projects allow economic interests to be reconciled with environmental protection. International cooperation in this area can contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and contribute to ensuring peaceful livelihoods (IJSRD, 2025).

However, the use of tourism in crisis situations requires careful policy and careful planning. Ignoring social, environmental, or security factors can have negative impacts (UNWTO, 2022). Therefore, tourism diplomacy should rely on inclusive, sustainable, and people-centered approaches. A comprehensive analysis of tourism diplomacy shows that this phenomenon has become one of the most important elements of the modern system of international relations (Mbria, 2024, p. 55; Nye, 2004, p. 15). Tourism diplomacy acts not only as an economic sector, but also as a tool of “soft power”, a means of cultural representation and a factor of sustainable development (Cherevochko, 2022, p. 217) and (UNWTO, 2022). This allows states to advance their national interests without using pressure and at the same time contribute to the strengthening of international cooperation.

A review of the theoretical and historical background has shown that tourism diplomacy has deep roots and has adapted to the changing international environment (Nye, 2004, p. 30) and (Demir et al., p. 1). The role of governments and various forms of partnerships prove that the success of tourism diplomacy depends on the coordination of public policy, the private sector and local communities (UNWTO, 2022).

National culture and values, as the axis of soft power, give tourism the power to exert transnational influence (Mbria, 2024, p. 53). The initial understanding of tourism diplomacy is that it is an effective means of international influence, relying on the coordination of the state, the private sector and local communities, using national history, culture and values as a tool of soft power.

In addition, branding and national image building show that tourism diplomacy can change the world's perception of countries (Dagkilich et al., 2023, p. 73). In times of global crises, tourism becomes a tool for revival, peacebuilding, and international solidarity (IJSRD, 2025).

All these facts indicate that tourism diplomacy has great strategic potential. Branding and national image building prove that tourism diplomacy in modern conditions not only changes the world's perception of countries, but also becomes an important tool for revival, peacebuilding, and strengthening international solidarity in times of crisis, gaining high strategic potential.

Within the framework of tourism diplomacy, the effective use of this approach relies on the development of a comprehensive state policy, the integration of political, cultural and social interests, as well as the implementation of sustainable strategies at the national and international levels. The summary of tourism diplomacy is that with respect for cultural diversity and the preservation of historical heritage, tourism can become an instrument of soft power, strengthening intercultural dialogue, international solidarity, preventing conflicts and strengthening long-term peace in the global system.

CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that tourism diplomacy has evolved into a significant and multidimensional instrument within the contemporary system of international relations. It operates at the intersection of soft power, public diplomacy, cultural communication, and sustainable development, thereby extending its relevance beyond the traditional boundaries of tourism as an economic sector.

Tourism diplomacy contributes to the construction and projection of national identity, the enhancement of international image, and the strengthening of mutual understanding among nations. Through direct interpersonal contact, cultural exchange, and experiential engagement, tourism facilitates the formation of more nuanced and positive perceptions of states in the global arena. This process is particularly important in reducing stereotypes, mitigating cultural misunderstandings, and fostering trust-based international relations.

From a theoretical perspective, tourism diplomacy is firmly grounded in the concept of soft power, where attraction rather than coercion becomes the primary mechanism of influence. Today, this systemic ideology may still influence how Central Asian authorities respond to new ideas, particularly in determining which innovations are accepted, adapted, or resisted (Chiaramonte, 2025). The findings of this study confirm that cultural values, historical heritage, and social experiences transmitted through tourism significantly contribute to a country's ability to influence international audiences.

Institutionally, the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy depends on the coordinated interaction between state institutions, private sector actors, and civil society organizations. Governments play a central role in policy formulation and international engagement, while private enterprises and local communities ensure practical implementation and authenticity of tourism experiences.

In addition, tourism diplomacy demonstrates increasing relevance in addressing global challenges, including health crises, environmental degradation, and post-conflict recovery. Its capacity to support economic recovery, promote sustainable development, and facilitate peacebuilding highlights its strategic importance in contemporary global governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of tourism diplomacy as a tool of soft power and sustainable international engagement:

1. Institutionalization of Tourism Diplomacy in Foreign Policy: States should formally integrate tourism diplomacy into their foreign policy frameworks. This includes incorporating tourism strategies into national development plans, diplomatic agendas, and international cooperation policies, ensuring coordinated action among relevant institutions.

2. Strengthening Intercultural Communication Programs: Governments should expand cultural exchange initiatives, international festivals, educational tourism programs, and people-to-people diplomacy platforms. These mechanisms help reduce stereotypes, enhance mutual understanding, and build long-term trust between societies.

3. Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Tourism diplomacy should be closely aligned with sustainability principles, ensuring responsible use of natural resources, protection of cultural heritage, and inclusion of local communities. Sustainable tourism practices enhance both environmental protection and long-term economic stability.

4. Development of Public-Private Partnerships: Effective tourism diplomacy requires strong cooperation between government institutions and the private sector. Airlines, tour operators, hospitality industries, and digital platforms should be actively engaged in shaping international tourism strategies and promoting national branding.

5. Enhancement of Crisis-Resilient Tourism Systems: Considering global uncertainties, states should develop adaptive tourism strategies capable of responding to pandemics, environmental disasters, and geopolitical instability. Crisis preparedness and digital transformation are essential components of resilient tourism diplomacy.

This study suggests that tourism diplomacy is not merely a supportive element of international relations but a strategic instrument capable of enhancing soft power, promoting sustainable development, and strengthening global cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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