



## THE SHUSHA-KHARIBULBUL INTERNATIONAL MUSIC FESTIVAL WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AZERBAIJAN'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE POLICY

EL FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE MÚSICA SHUSHA-KHARIBULBUL EN EL MARCO DE LA POLÍTICA DE IMAGEN INTERNACIONAL DE AZERBAIYÁN

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### ABSTRACT:

This study examines the Shusha-Kharibulbul International Music Festival as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power in Azerbaijan's international image management. In contemporary international relations, cultural diplomacy is a critical mechanism for states to construct national identity, showcase cultural heritage, and project soft power globally. However, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how cultural events function simultaneously as instruments of domestic nation-building and international reputation management, particularly in the South Caucasus. This research addresses this gap by analyzing how Azerbaijan strategically deployed the Kharibulbul Festival—held in the historically and symbolically significant city of Shusha—to achieve multiple diplomatic objectives. Using comparative and comparative-historical methods alongside a qualitative literature review, we examine the festival's evolution from its 1989 inception through its revitalization in 2021. The analysis draws on soft power theory (Nye), cultural diplomacy frameworks, and identity construction perspectives to assess how cultural events translate into tangible diplomatic capital. It was found that the festival's development represents a multilayered soft power strategy encompassing three dimensions: (1) symbolic affirmation of cultural sovereignty and historical narrative through artistic expression; (2) strategic nation branding through Shusha's successive designations as Azerbaijan's Cultural Capital (2022), Cultural Capital of the Turkic World (2023), and Cultural Capital of the Islamic World (2024); and (3)

cultivation of international legitimacy through multicultural participation from ICESCO member states, Turkic nations, and global artists. Thus, the festival goes beyond artistic performance, functioning as a manifestation of national memory, cultural identity, and diplomatic messaging.

**Keywords:** Cultural diplomacy, Shusha, Kharibulbul Festival, international image management, Cultural heritage.

### RESUMEN:

Este estudio examina el Festival Internacional de Música Shusha-Kharibulbul como instrumento estratégico de diplomacia cultural y poder blando en la gestión de la imagen internacional de Azerbaiyán. En las relaciones internacionales contemporáneas, la diplomacia cultural es un mecanismo crucial para que los Estados construyan la identidad nacional, muestren su patrimonio cultural y proyecten su poder blando a nivel global. Sin embargo, se ha dedicado poca atención académica a comprender cómo los eventos culturales funcionan simultáneamente como instrumentos de construcción nacional y de gestión de la reputación internacional, particularmente en el Cáucaso Sur. Esta investigación aborda esta deficiencia analizando cómo Azerbaiyán desplegó estratégicamente el Festival Kharibulbul, celebrado en la histórica y simbólica ciudad de Shusha, para lograr múltiples objetivos diplomáticos. Utilizando métodos comparativos e histórico-comparativos, junto con una revisión bibliográfica cualitativa, se examina la evolución del festival desde su creación en 1989 hasta su revitalización en 2021. El análisis se basa



en la teoría del poder blando (Nye), los marcos de diplomacia cultural y las perspectivas de construcción de identidad para evaluar cómo los eventos culturales se traducen en capital diplomático tangible. Se concluyó que el desarrollo del festival representa una estrategia multidimensional de poder blando que abarca tres dimensiones: (1) la afirmación simbólica de la soberanía cultural y la narrativa histórica a través de la expresión artística; (2) el desarrollo estratégico de la imagen nacional mediante las sucesivas designaciones de Shusha como Capital Cultural de Azerbaiyán (2022), Capital Cultural del Mundo Turco (2023) y Capital Cultural del Mundo Islámico (2024); y (3) el fomento de la legitimidad internacional mediante la participación multicultural de los Estados miembros de la ICESCO, las naciones turcas y artistas internacionales. De este modo, el festival va más allá de la representación artística, funcionando como una manifestación de la memoria nacional, la identidad cultural y el mensaje diplomático.

**Palabras clave:** Diplomacia cultural, Shusha, Festival Kharibulbul, gestión de la imagen internacional, patrimonio cultural

## INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, culture and cultural relations between states and peoples play no less a role than political relations. From this perspective, cultural relations are already becoming a political phenomenon, bringing nations and states closer together. In a globalized world, the most prominent manifestation is cultural globalization. "Music has no language!" - the expression can also be pronounced as: "Culture has no language!" In other words, cultural wealth, which previously belonged to only one people or ethnic group, increasingly belongs to humanity, and more and more people benefit from that cultural phenomenon.

In contemporary international relations scholarship, soft power has gained great relevance. Cultural diplomacy, as a primary instrument of soft power, operates through the strategic deployment of cultural assets to shape international perceptions, build goodwill, and enhance a nation's standing in the eyes of foreign people and governments (Janusch, 2023). Unlike traditional forms of power that rely on military might or economic leverage, soft power works by cultivating admiration and respect, thereby creating an environment in which a state's policy objectives become more achievable. Within this framework, cultural events, artistic traditions, and heritage sites serve not only as expressions of national identity but as deliberate tools of statecraft that contribute to a country's broader diplomatic goals.

The efficacy of cultural diplomacy as a soft power mechanism has been displayed across diverse contexts,

from France's promotion of its language and arts through Alliance Française to South Korea's global influence via the Korean Wave (Hallyu). These examples show how cultural initiatives can transcend geographical boundaries, foster cross-cultural rapprochement, and ultimately translate into tangible diplomatic and economic benefits (Klinova et al., 2024; Yoon, 2023). Understanding this theoretical foundation is essential to analyze how nations seeking to redefine their international image strategically use cultural heritage and events as instruments of soft power projection.

Azerbaijan is one of the countries with deep cultural roots, being one of the ancient cultural centers of history. Just remembering historical territories such as Gobustan, Gamigaya, etc., and the tangible and intangible cultural monuments there is proof of what has been said. Azerbaijan is as rich in intangible cultural heritage as it is in tangible cultural monuments - mugham art, ashug art, examples of oral and written literature, etc. In this article, we will analyze the cultural diplomatic dimensions and international implications of one such event—the Kharibulbul Music Festival, which is held regularly in the city of Shusha, one of the cultural centers of Karabakh and Azerbaijan. To accomplish this, we used comparative and comparative-historical methods.

The "Shusha-Kharibulbul International Music Festival", which represents a significant turning point in the reconstruction of Azerbaijan's cultural identity, should be regarded not merely as an artistic event but as a symbolic manifestation of national memory and international image policy. Organized following the restoration of Azerbaijani control over Shusha, the festival has evolved into a vital instrument of soft power in Azerbaijan's efforts to enhance its international visibility and to promote its cultural heritage on the global stage (Aliyev, 2000). In this context, the Kharibulbul Festival has emerged as a symbol of both cultural resistance and rebirth, reaffirming Shusha's place in Azerbaijani identity through art, music, and collective memory.

The decision to organize the festival should be interpreted not only as an artistic initiative but also as a strategic act of public diplomacy. Indeed, the declaration of Shusha as the "Cultural Capital" on May 7th, 2021, followed by the revival of the Kharibulbul Music Festival and the "Vagif Poetry Days" on May 12th, 2021, demonstrates Azerbaijan's clear intent to reconstruct its international image through cultural elements (Faracova, 2021). This process constitutes a noteworthy case in the field of international relations, meriting close analysis as a practical application of soft power strategies. These developments underscore the strategic role that cultural events can play not only in the context of a nation's restoration of territorial integrity, but also in the presentation and recognition of national identity within

the international community. The revival of the Kharibulbul Music Festival should be seen as a concrete example of Azerbaijan's efforts to strengthen its soft power capacity globally through cultural diplomacy.

## DEVELOPMENT

### Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and International Image Management

In international relations theory, the evolving nature of power—particularly in the post-Cold War era—has led to a redefinition of security and spheres of influence. In this context, the ability of states to exert global influence is no longer solely dependent on military or economic capabilities, but increasingly relies on their capacity to deploy cultural, ideological, and normative instruments. The theory of soft power, developed by Joseph S. Nye, articulates this transformation conceptually. According to Nye, soft power is the ability of an actor to achieve its desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or economic inducement. The sources of this attraction fall into three primary categories: cultural appeal, the universal acceptance of political values, and legitimate patterns of behavior in foreign policy (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

Among the most functional tools in operationalizing soft power is cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy refers to the strategic use of cultural products and values by states to engage with international audiences, foster mutual understanding, and indirectly advance foreign policy objectives (Mark, 2009, p. 11). This form of communication—established through art, music, literature, architecture, and other cultural expressions—can project a nation's identity and collective memory onto the global stage (Yeğen & Donmez, 2023). In societies experiencing territorial transitions, cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role not only in conveying messages to the international community but also in consolidating national unity and addressing collective memory reconstruction. In this regard, cultural diplomacy functions as a dual strategy that simultaneously targets internal social cohesion and external perception management.

One practical extension of cultural diplomacy is public diplomacy, which involves direct engagement with foreign publics to shape perceptions and influence public opinion. While traditional diplomacy remains confined to intergovernmental relations (Gönlübol, 1975, p. 112), public diplomacy operates through a multi-layered communication model encompassing civil society, media outlets, digital platforms, and cultural events. Consequently, public diplomacy is not merely a promotional tool in modern international relations but also a hub for the generation of perceptions and norms. Within this framework, the Kharibulbul International Music Festival held in Shusha should be understood as more than a musical event; it is a strategic initiative aimed at reproducing Azerbaijan's

historical narrative, reinforcing its legitimacy, and presenting its cultural heritage to the international community through an aesthetic and emotionally resonant language.

Such cultural events also constitute fundamental components of international image management and nation branding strategies (Karabulut, 2018). Nation branding refers to the efforts of states to promote themselves on a global scale, construct an appealing identity, and integrate this identity into economic, political, and cultural domains. International image is not merely rhetorical; it functions as a source of legitimacy in foreign policy, attractiveness in tourism, and trust in the investment environment (Abrams & Hogg, 2006). In this context, the designation of Shusha as the "Cultural Capital" and the organization of the Kharibulbul Festival therein are not merely symbolic gestures but concrete manifestations of a multilayered soft power strategy.

Through the Kharibulbul Festival, Azerbaijan not only communicates its historical grievances and rightful claims but also builds a positive international image by integrating its cultural richness with a universal aesthetic. Such cultural initiatives serve not only to commemorate the past but also to envision the future (Vatanda, 2020). Thus, the Kharibulbul Festival should be viewed not simply as a cultural event but as a symbolic bridge between memory and diplomacy—a strategic communication tool that spans from trauma to representation, and from representation to international recognition.

### The Cultural and Symbolic Significance of Shusha and the Reconstruction of the Kharibulbul Festival

Shusha, which holds a special place within Azerbaijan's historical and cultural fabric, is regarded not only as a city but also as one of the most significant sites of national memory, cultural heritage, and musical production. Founded in 1752 by Karabakh Khan Penaheli Khan, the city gradually became one of the cultural centers of the South Caucasus, renowned particularly for its contributions to music, literature, and the arts (Abbasova, 2022). Prominent artists such as Jabbar Garyagdioglu, Bulbul, Uzeyir Hajibeyli, and Fikret Amirov shaped Shusha not only as their birthplace but also as a cultural reference point. In this context, Shusha has been considered both a center of cultural production at local and regional levels and the "cradle of Azerbaijani music."

The city is especially distinguished by its traditional music genre, mugham, which symbolizes the spatial carrier of cultural continuity. The Kharibulbul flower (*Ophrys caucasica*), the material representation of this cultural heritage, symbolizes not only the botanical diversity of Karabakh but also the region's unique identity. Noted for its endemic nature, this flower has become one of Karabakh's iconic symbols in the collective memory and, especially after 2020, has transformed into a symbol of rebirth and cultural revival. This cultural and symbolic heritage is being

multidimensionally reconstructed through the “Kharibulbul International Music Festival.” The festival was first held in 1989 to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of the famous khanende (mugham singer) Seyid Shushinski and quickly gained not only local but also international dimensions, serving as a diplomatic instrument (Huseynova, 2024). The participation of numerous artists from different continents in the 1990 and 1991 festivals brought Azerbaijan’s cultural diversity and artistic production capacity to the international platform (Faracova, 2021, p. 8). However, the change in territorial control of Shusha in 1992 interrupted the festival’s physical continuity in its original location, leading to a hiatus in its celebration.

Following the 2020 change in territorial status of Karabakh, particularly Shusha, important steps were taken to revitalize the festival and reconnect with the city’s cultural heritage. Within this framework, the Kharibulbul Festival was reorganized in Shusha in 2021 under the auspices of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (Mükerremoğlu, 2022). This process of reconstruction aims to revitalize cultural production and reassert the city’s place within Azerbaijan’s cultural landscape. The commemorative elements during the festival’s opening ceremonies connected the event with recent historical developments, adding layers of meaning beyond the purely artistic.

The participation of artists from various countries in the festival should be regarded as a reflection of Azerbaijan’s cultural diplomacy strategy. The inclusion of artists from Turkey, Pakistan, Russia, Central Asian countries, and Europe in the festival program represents a soft power practice aimed at presenting Azerbaijan’s multicultural and tolerant identity to the international community (Lent. az, 2022). Diverse events such as mugham nights, folk dances, classical music performances, and the playing of local instruments serve not only to represent national culture but also to establish and strengthen mutual cultural interaction.

On the other hand, the festival’s revival carries multilayered significance. This revitalization process supports policies aimed at preserving the tangible cultural heritage of the Karabakh region while simultaneously strengthening Shusha’s position on the international cultural map. The key objectives of the festival in this new era include preserving Karabakh’s musical heritage, promoting Azerbaijani music internationally, transforming Shusha into an attractive center for cultural tourism, and encouraging intercultural dialogue (Aliyeva, 2025).

In this respect, the Kharibulbul International Music Festival should be understood not merely as an aesthetic event but as a performative manifestation of a historical narrative, national identity, and cultural resistance. Such events constructed with cultural symbols do not only positively shape a country’s image in the international arena but also enable nations to reproduce their historical and cultural

memories and express them in a universal language. Within this framework, the festival can be regarded as an important step toward symbolic transformation, reputation building, and institutionalizing cultural sustainability.

### **Reconstructing Cultural Memory: The Return of the Kharibulbul Festival to Shusha**

In May 2021, the Kharibulbul International Music Festival was held once again in Shusha, one of Azerbaijan’s cultural capitals, after a long hiatus. This event was not merely an artistic occasion but also an expression of a state strategy aimed at the symbolic reconstruction of historical memory, collective identity, and cultural sovereignty. In this regard, the festival should be analyzed as a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends cultural revival to encompass dimensions of soft power, nation branding, and public diplomacy. Historically, Shusha has been recognized as the cradle of Azerbaijan’s artistic and intellectual production, nurturing artists such as Uzeyir Hajibeyli, Bulbul, and Seyid Shushinski. Beyond being a geographic location, Shusha has become one of the tangible and intangible symbols of Azerbaijani cultural identity. In this sense, it functions as a spatial carrier of national narrative, aligning with Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1995).

The return of Shusha to Azerbaijani administration following the 2020 created opportunities for cultural revitalization and the reconstruction of public cultural spaces. This process can be interpreted through Edward Said’s notion of ‘spatial discourse’ as a reassertion of cultural presence following a period of administrative separation. Consequently, the 2021 Kharibulbul Festival, held in Jidir Duzu, was positioned not merely as a musical event but as a cornerstone of Azerbaijan’s soft power strategy. As Joseph Nye defines it, soft power is a state’s capacity to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 2004, pp. 14–15). Accordingly, the festival serves as a tool of public diplomacy, conveying messages of cultural diversity, tolerance, and peace to the international community.

The inaugural festival of 2021 was framed around themes of national unity and collective memory; it served commemorative functions while celebrating the resumption of cultural activities in the city. President Ilham Aliyev’s opening speech emphasized the cultural significance of the event and its role in reconnecting the city with Azerbaijan’s national cultural narrative (Aliyev, 2021).

The public performance of collective memory is one of the most effective mechanisms of identity construction. Drawing on Aleida Assmann’s theory of “memory spaces,” the Kharibulbul Festival becomes a cultural stage where society reinterprets its past, mourns, and simultaneously projects a vision for the future (Assmann, 2011).

The second festival, held in 2022, expanded this memory-based national narrative through broader international participation, transforming the festival into a showcase that highlights Azerbaijan's multicultural composition and global messages of tolerance. Thus, the festival's content strategically addresses not only domestic audiences but also foreign publics, functioning as an instrument to build Azerbaijan's positive image on the global stage.

The renewed flow of water from the "Khan's Daughter Natavan" fountain in Shusha should be read not only as the physical return of a resource but also as the reclamation of spatial symbols. The flowing water forms a powerful metaphor for the restoration of the damaged historical and cultural fabric. Similarly, reconstructed mosques, restored cultural structures, and organized events signify the re-establishment of cultural sovereignty and the ideological integration of the space within Azerbaijani identity.

The return of the Kharibulbul Music Festival should be understood not only as an artistic event but also as part of Azerbaijan's efforts in domestic nation-building through national unity and identity construction, as well as an international cultural diplomacy endeavor aimed at generating soft power. The designation of Shusha as "Azerbaijan's Cultural Capital" in 2022 and as the "Cultural Capital of the Turkic World" in 2023 demonstrates that this strategy is being carried out through a multidimensional and long-term plan (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022). Within this framework, the Kharibulbul Festival constitutes a multilayered representational arena where spatial memory is reproduced, cultural symbols are restaged, historical narratives are reconstructed, and ultimately, a cultural message is communicated internationally.

### **Shusha's Place in Cultural Memory: The Intersection of History, Identity, and Art**

Shusha holds a unique position not only in Azerbaijan's cultural memory but also across the entire Caucasus region. Referred to as the "cradle of Azerbaijani music," the "conservatory of the East," and the "capital of mugham," this ancient city—with over 270 years of history—has been recognized as a distinguished cultural center of Turkic-Islamic civilization. This development created conditions for both administrative restructuring and cultural revitalization initiatives.

In this context, the 2022 Kharibulbul International Music Festival emerged as one of the most significant milestones in Shusha's cultural reconstruction. The designation of Shusha as "Azerbaijan's Cultural Capital" by presidential decree on January 5, 2022, provided a formal and symbolic foundation for this process. Organized collaboratively by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Culture, and the Shusha State Historical and Architectural Reserve Administration, the festival conveyed powerful messages about Azerbaijan's multicultural identity and its vision of peaceful foreign policy. In 2022,

the festival featured folkloric and ethno-music ensembles from countries including Turkey, Uzbekistan, Georgia, France, Tunisia, Egypt, Mali, and Bulgaria. The program included jazz, traditional folk music, and diverse ethnic musical genres—attracting global attention. Beyond its artistic dimensions, the performances embodied cultural diplomacy in action.

Shusha's renaissance extended beyond cultural events; simultaneously, the restoration of the city's infrastructure and physical environment also proceeded. The construction of the Fuzuli-Shusha highway and its tunnels improved regional connectivity, accelerating cultural and economic integration. Electricity and water systems were modernized, and restoration began on historic mosques—the Upper and Lower Govhar Agha and Saatli mosques—carried out by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. Iconic landmarks such as Natavan's spring (Natavan bula ı), as well as monuments to Uzeyir Hajibeyli, Bulbul, and Khurshidbanu Natavan, were reinstated. These efforts carry deep symbolic weight in terms of historical justice and cultural continuity.

By 2023, Shusha was designated "Cultural Capital of the Turkic World" by the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY). The 2023 Kharibulbul International Music Festival thus became a multinational cultural platform featuring artists from across the Turkic world. Various concerts, theater performances, exhibitions, and film screenings were held citywide, revitalizing the arts in Shusha. These events delivered a strong message of unity and solidarity not only to Azerbaijanis but to all Turkic peoples.

Shusha occupies a central place in Azerbaijan's cultural, historical, strategic, and symbolic memory. A focal point of musical, literary, architectural, and intellectual life for centuries, Shusha has been redefined not only as a cultural capital but also as a symbol of national resistance, victory, and peace. The annual Kharibulbul International Music Festival has become an effective vehicle for cultural reconstruction and international cultural diplomacy.

The 2023 and 2024 editions of the festival have stood out not only for reviving Azerbaijan's artistic and cultural production but also as an international platform emphasizing the country's commitment to regional multiculturalism. The 2023 festival, dedicated to the 100th birth anniversary of Azerbaijan's national leader Heydar Aliyev, took place in Shusha—already recognized as Cultural Capital of the Turkic World—lending it additional gravitas. It has played a significant role in strengthening cultural bonds among Turkic world communities.

The festival's diverse program underscored cultural pluralism. National pavilions representing Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Indonesia, the UAE, Morocco, Qatar, Guinea, and many others showcased traditional crafts, culinary arts, and stage performances—creating a rich

cultural mosaic. The opening ceremony took place at Shusha's symbolic Jidir Duzu plain, where the inaugural concert was held. A classical concert dedicated to Uzeyir Hajibeyli was performed in the Mehmandarov mansion, directed by Mustafa Mehmandarov, a descendant of the Mehmandarov family—strengthening a sense of historical continuity.

### **Cultural Diplomacy in Action: The Program of the Second Day and Beyond at the Kharibulbul Festival in Shusha**

On the second day of the festival, attendees enjoyed a gala concert, followed on the third day by performances from the Natik Rhythm Group and the "Qaytaghi" Instrumental Ensemble, enriching the program's diversity. Additionally, the opera "Natavan" premiered in Shusha for the first time. Composed by Vasif Adigozalov and performed by the Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre under conductor Yalchin Adigozalov, this production offered not only an aesthetic experience but also played a vital role in the cultural revival of national memory.

During the festival, the documentary film "The Trace," centered on the life of Heydar Aliyev, was screened, and a classical Azerbaijani theatrical performance titled "Monsieur Jordan and Derviş Mesteli Shah" was staged in front of Khurshidbanu Natavan's house-museum. These productions allowed both local and international audiences to engage with Shusha's historical and cultural heritage through contemporary artistic expressions. In 2024, Shusha expanded its cultural mission by being designated as the "Cultural Capital of the Islamic World". Within this context, the seventh edition of the Kharibulbul Festival welcomed delegates from across the Islamic world, further affirming Shusha's status as a hub of Islamic cultural unity. President Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva personally attended, symbolizing the state's ongoing commitment to culture and the arts (AZTV News, 2024).

Throughout the festival, cultural diplomacy initiatives were evident. Representatives from international organizations and cultural envoys from various countries participated, reinforcing Azerbaijan's international image and diplomatic outreach through cultural engagement. Today, Shusha occupies a prominent place not only in Azerbaijan's national memory but also in the collective cultural memory of the Turkic and Islamic worlds.

President Aliyev's 2024 remarks on Shusha's designation as the Islamic World's Civilizational Capital underscore that these titles carry deep cultural diplomacy significance and reflect a comprehensive geopolitical vision. The decision by ICESCO (Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) confirmed Shusha's historical, cultural, and strategic value on the international stage and enhanced Azerbaijan's stature within the Islamic world

(AZTV News, 2024). These successive designations—Azerbaijan's Cultural Capital (2022), Cultural Capital of the Turkic World (2023), and Capital of the Islamic World (2024)—illustrate a deliberate and sustained soft power strategy.

President Aliyev has articulated that such honors require principled resolve and unwavering determination, aligning with Azerbaijan's recent policy maneuvers in cultural, sporting, and political arenas—most notably hosting the 2017 Islamic Solidarity Games in Baku. This approach integrates three strategic dimensions:

1. Articulating an independent foreign policy position that emphasizes sovereignty in cultural and diplomatic matters.
2. Prioritizing national, cultural heritage preservation, and reinforcing national identity.
3. Systematically promoting cultural assets as a source of soft power.

This strategy positions Azerbaijan not only as a cultural and economic actor but also as a values-based normative presence in international politics. President Aliyev's public statements during this period emphasized Azerbaijan's commitment to an autonomous foreign policy approach and cultural sovereignty in international forums. His insistence on "no bargaining" in dealings with international organizations signals Azerbaijan's resolve to follow a national line independent of Western pressures. Within this framework, the Kharibulbul Music Festival in Shusha functions as more than a cultural event; it is a stage for signaling Azerbaijan's sovereignty and national identity to the world. Every speech and performance at the festival is part of a broader narrative aimed at reshaping Azerbaijan's historical image and reinforcing its cultural power.

### **Shusha as a Symbol of National and Cultural Identity: Ilham Aliyev's Discourse on Liberation, Heritage, and Cultural Sovereignty**

President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has interpreted the designation of Shusha as the Cultural Capital of the Islamic World as a testament to the enduring national identity and historical heritage that firmly bind these lands to Azerbaijan. According to Aliyev, Shusha maintained its significance in Azerbaijan's cultural consciousness, representing connections that transcend physical presence and encompass symbolic and cultural dimensions (President of Azerbaijan Republic, 2024). These remarks underscore both the symbolic representation of Azerbaijan's national spirit and resilience and the broader ideological struggle that took place over the occupied territories.

Historically regarded as the cultural capital of Azerbaijan, Shusha faced a serious threat to its cultural identity during

the occupation in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, throughout the occupation, the city persisted as a symbol of national consciousness for the Azerbaijani people. More than a mere geographic space, Shusha is a profound site of cultural and historical memory. President Aliyev's emphasis on this matter goes beyond political rhetoric and situates the issue within a broader ideological and cultural framework.

President Aliyev's remarks celebrating Shusha's liberation and Azerbaijan's sovereignty speak to more than just a national victory. He stated:

I am confident that there will be peace on the lands of Azerbaijan from now on. It is my wish, and I am sure it is the wish of every Azerbaijani citizen, that under this sky, cannon fire will never again be heard. Let only the sound of music be heard here from now on. (President of Azerbaijan Republic, 2024).

These statements demonstrate the strengthening of Azerbaijan's international relations in the cultural and scientific spheres and underscore the country's emergence as a significant actor in these fields. At the 7th Kharibulbul Festival held in Shusha, both Azerbaijan and ICESCO (Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) expressed great satisfaction with their cooperation, highlighting the importance of such cultural events, particularly in relation to restoration and reconstruction the territories (Qafqazinfo, 2024). Furthermore, the cooperation protocol signed in May 2024 encompasses experience sharing in culture, science, education, and new technologies, thereby establishing a broader partnership framework between the two parties. This collaboration aims not only at the preservation of cultural heritage but also at promoting Azerbaijan's historical and cultural identity on a global scale.

The restoration and renewal works in Shusha ensure the recovery of the city's cultural identity alongside its physical reconstruction. Through comprehensive restoration projects initiated by the Azerbaijani government, Shusha has been fully transformed into a genuine Azerbaijani city. The meticulous reconstruction of every stone and detail in Shusha as an integral part of Azerbaijan's national identity serves not only to preserve the city's cultural heritage but also to reinforce national values and collective memory.

Currently, Shusha represents for the Azerbaijani people not merely a city but a symbol of national identity and ideological struggle. Following Shusha's liberation, significant steps have been taken to protect and sustain the cultural, religious, and historical heritage of the region. The collaborative efforts between the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and ICESCO demonstrate that this process carries not only local but also global significance, positioning Azerbaijan as a powerful actor in the domain of cultural diplomacy.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Kharibulbul Music Festival, first held in 1989 at Jidir Duzu in Shusha, emerged as a significant event that introduced Azerbaijan's cultural identity and traditional music to the world stage. At that time, Shusha, the festival's location, was regarded as a central hub of Azerbaijani culture. However, with the territorial changes during the 1990s, the festival was suspended, and questions emerged regarding the preservation and management of the region's cultural heritage. Following the 2020 conflict resolution and subsequent territorial changes, the Kharibulbul Music Festival was reinstated in Shusha. Following Shusha's designation as the Islamic World's Capital of Culture in 2024, the Kharibulbul Music Festival hosted a globally important cultural event. The 2024 edition of the festival featured artists and creative communities from ICESCO member states, further consolidating Azerbaijan's global cultural soft power. The festival in Shusha not only promoted Azerbaijani culture internationally but also served as a platform for strengthening cultural ties with the Islamic world. Its international impact has been recognized as an important soft power strategy that highlights Azerbaijan's cultural diversity and richness while contributing to regional peace.

The 2024 Kharibulbul Music Festival particularly stood out with events reflecting Azerbaijan's dedication to its culture and its international prestige. Performances by renowned Azerbaijani folk artists such as Arif Babayev, Polad Bülbülo lu, and Zeynab Khanlarova embodied the nation's cultural richness. Additionally, the participation of international artists, including the Maze group from the United Arab Emirates, positioned Shusha as a cultural meeting point. This development became a key component of Azerbaijan's process of enhancing its global image through cultural diplomacy and deepening cultural relations with the international community.

Thus, the Kharibulbul Music Festival plays a central role in Shusha's reconstruction and the consolidation of Azerbaijan's national identity. The Kharibulbul Music Festival is not only a celebration for the Azerbaijani people but also provides a platform for cultural exchange and interaction worldwide. The increasing international participation each year demonstrates that Azerbaijan's cultural influence extends beyond its borders and that Shusha's recognition as a cultural capital on both regional and international levels is a matter of time.

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