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INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL ACTORS AS ARCHITECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART ECOSYSTEM IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This paper considers international organisations and foreign cultural institutions as key actors in the development of the contemporary art ecosystem of independent Uzbekistan. It compares four models of support: institutional funding by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, capacity-building by the Goethe-Institut, the creative-economy approach of the British Council and the selective cultural diplomacy of the French Embassy and the Alliance Française.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, contemporary art, art ecosystem, international organisations, cultural diplomacy, SDC, Goethe-Institut, British Council, creative economy.

Introduction

In the absence of a developed art market and private patronage, international organisations have long acted as the main patrons of independent art in Uzbekistan. Their role goes beyond financing individual projects: they shape professional communities, introduce new roles and institutional practices, and connect the local scene with regional and global networks. However, these actors pursue different strategies, and their influence on the art ecosystem varies accordingly.

The aim of this paper is to compare the models of support used by the main international cultural actors in Uzbekistan and to assess their contribution to the formation of the local art ecosystem.

Methods

The study is based on a comparative analysis of the programmes of four actors working in Tashkent, using programme documents, project descriptions and case studies of the early 2020s. The actors were compared by type of funding, target group and expected long-term effect.

Results and Discussion

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC): institutional funding. Since 2007 the SDC has implemented the Central Asia Art and Culture Programme, which formalised Swiss support for culture in the region dating back to 1998 and covers Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (1). The programme promotes cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and inclusive societies. Its distinctive feature is institutional funding: through an open regional competition and a three-year grant cycle, creative organisations could not only implement projects but also cover running costs, stipends, travel and professional development. By 2023 the SDC had supported nine creative organisations; among the successful cases are the repertoire of the Ilkhom Theatre, the Focus school and Art Station. This model created the conditions for the survival and growth of independent initiatives.

Goethe-Institut: an environment for development. The Goethe-Institut does not shape the art market directly and does not finance individual artists. Instead, it builds an environment in which practitioners can develop and reflect on their experience, through international contacts, support for local initiatives and the transfer of institutional practices. Examples include German Drama Week with the Ilkhom Theatre (2023), the Goethe Poetry Lab (2022) and the residency of the artist Mokhira Mullyadjanova in Leipzig (2023) under the Kultur in Bewegung mobility programme.

British Council: culture as a creative economy. The British Council views culture through the lens of the creative industries, focusing on entrepreneurial skills and sustainable models of monetisation. Its key initiative, the Creative Producers programme, launched in 2019, trains early-career managers of cultural projects and supports their joint projects with grants; its first two years brought together 46 participants from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and gave rise to the independent moc fest in Tashkent (2). The programme introduced the cultural producer as an independent professional figure, while the Creative Central Asia Network built regional infrastructure for exchange. Funding here is a tool for creating structures that become self-sustaining over time.

French Embassy and Alliance Française: selective cultural diplomacy. French institutions follow a more traditional model focused on representation, authorship and artistic excellence. They work selectively through curatorial projects, festivals and film programmes, such as the French film premieres organised by Tashkent Film School in 2024. Their presence is concentrated and of high cultural value, but it functions more as a cultural bridge than as a mechanism for institutional development.

Taken together, these actors complement one another. The SDC ensures the institutional survival of independent organisations, the Goethe-Institut and the British Council develop human capital and professional infrastructure, and French institutions integrate local audiences into the international cultural context. Joint initiatives, such as the Nomsiz Festival of Central Asian experimental and documentary cinema supported in 2024 by the Goethe-Institut and the British Council, show how these models intersect.

Conclusion

International cultural actors have become one of the main drivers of the contemporary art ecosystem in independent Uzbekistan. Their influence is determined less by the volume of funding than by its model: long-term institutional grants, capacity-building and the creative-economy approach have the most lasting effect on the local scene. At the same time, dependence on foreign support remains a vulnerability, which makes the development of domestic sources of funding and patronage an important task for the future.

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