

HUMAN CAPITAL IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: RETHINKING THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF SOFT POWER

Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj

Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, marija_t@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6069-5690

Nita Starova Spiroska

Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, nita_starova@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-0071-4734

Abstract: Cultural diplomacy is commonly analysed as an instrument of soft power, public diplomacy, and foreign policy, with the majority of scholarly literature focusing on its institutional mechanisms, cultural resources, and strategic objectives. Considerably less attention has been devoted to human capital as one of the key prerequisites for its successful design, implementation, and long-term sustainability. Although cultural diplomacy is fundamentally a people-driven process, the question of the competencies, knowledge, and professional capacities required for its effective implementation remains insufficiently explored in the contemporary academic literature.

Building on this conceptual gap, the paper examines the role of human capital as a strategic resource in cultural diplomacy. The analysis is based on the assumption that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on cultural resources, institutional frameworks, or foreign policy priorities, but also, to a large extent, on the availability of highly qualified professionals capable of designing, coordinating, and implementing cultural diplomacy initiatives. In this context, the paper reconsiders the traditional perception of human resources as performing primarily administrative functions, arguing that human capital should instead be understood as a fundamental prerequisite for the development and effective implementation of cultural diplomacy and, consequently, for its contribution to the generation of soft power.

Particular attention is devoted to the competencies required for contemporary cultural diplomacy, including intercultural communication, strategic thinking, digital literacy, cultural project management, public communication, and the ability to build international partnerships. The paper argues that the development of such interdisciplinary competencies represents an essential prerequisite for effective cultural diplomacy in an era of digital transformation, multipolarity, and intensified geopolitical competition.

The paper concludes that cultural diplomacy should be understood not only as an instrument of soft power but also as a policy field whose effectiveness largely depends on the strategic management of human capital. Consequently, investing in the development of specialised professional competencies and long-term institutional capacities represents a prerequisite of equal importance to cultural resources, institutional support, and foreign policy strategies. In doing so, the paper contributes to expanding the existing theoretical framework of cultural diplomacy by integrating the perspective of human capital as one of its essential components.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, Human Capital

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing complexity of contemporary international relations, characterised by intensified geopolitical competition, digital transformation and the increasing importance of soft power, has significantly transformed both the practice and scholarly understanding of cultural diplomacy (Gilboa, 2024; Grincheva, 2024). Once primarily understood as a means of promoting national culture abroad, cultural diplomacy has evolved into a strategic instrument for fostering international dialogue, strengthening mutual understanding, enhancing a country's international image and supporting broader foreign policy objectives. In an environment increasingly influenced by hybrid threats, information competition and rapidly changing communication patterns, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on cultural assets and institutional frameworks, but also on the professional capacities of those responsible for designing and implementing cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Existing scholarship has predominantly examined cultural diplomacy through the perspectives of soft power, public diplomacy, international cultural relations and foreign policy (Grincheva, 2024), focusing primarily on institutional arrangements, strategic objectives, cultural resources and policy instruments. While these dimensions remain essential for understanding cultural diplomacy, considerably less attention has been devoted to its human dimension. More specifically, the role of human capital as a strategic resource remains conceptually underdeveloped, despite the fact that cultural diplomacy is fundamentally a people-centred process built upon communication, trust, intercultural dialogue and long-term relationship building. This gap has become increasingly significant in the contemporary

international environment, where professionals are expected to combine diplomatic expertise with intercultural communication, strategic thinking, digital engagement, project management and international networking. Consequently, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy cannot be understood solely through the availability of cultural resources or institutional support, but also through the competencies of the individuals who translate strategic objectives into diplomatic practice.

Against this background, this paper examines human capital as a strategic component of cultural diplomacy. It argues that the development of specialised professional competencies constitutes a prerequisite for the effective implementation of cultural diplomacy and, consequently, for strengthening soft power in contemporary international relations. The paper addresses the following research question: **Which competencies constitute the human capital required for effective cultural diplomacy in the contemporary geopolitical environment?**

To answer this question, the paper adopts a conceptual approach based on the critical analysis and synthesis of the existing literature on cultural diplomacy, soft power and human capital. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the paper seeks to broaden the existing conceptual framework of cultural diplomacy and to position human capital as one of its essential strategic components.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopts a qualitative conceptual approach aimed at examining the role of human capital as a strategic component of cultural diplomacy. Rather than generating empirical data, it advances the theoretical understanding of the relationship between cultural diplomacy, soft power and human capital through critical analysis and synthesis of the existing scholarly literature. Following the principles of qualitative conceptual research, the paper adopts a theory synthesis approach to integrate and reinterpret existing theoretical perspectives and develop a broader conceptual understanding of the relationship between human capital and cultural diplomacy (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020).

The analysis draws upon academic publications addressing cultural diplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, human capital, competency-based approaches, strategic management of human resources and intercultural communication. Both classical and contemporary contributions were considered to capture the conceptual evolution of these fields and identify points of convergence relevant to cultural diplomacy in the contemporary geopolitical environment.

The methodological approach combines critical literature analysis, comparative examination of theoretical perspectives and conceptual synthesis. The dominant theoretical approaches to cultural diplomacy and human capital are first examined to identify their principal assumptions and analytical focus. They are then comparatively analysed to identify conceptual intersections and research gaps concerning the human dimension of cultural diplomacy. Finally, these insights are synthesised into an integrated conceptual framework that positions human capital as a strategic resource underpinning the effective design, implementation and sustainability of cultural diplomacy. This methodological approach follows the logic of conceptual theory building and is widely recognised as appropriate for developing integrative conceptual frameworks in non-empirical research (Jaakkola, 2020; Okoli, 2022).

The resulting framework enables the identification of the core competencies required for effective cultural diplomacy and provides the basis for reinterpreting human capital not merely as an administrative resource, but as a strategic capability contributing to the generation of soft power and the achievement of broader foreign policy objectives.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Reconceptualising Human Capital as a Strategic Resource in Cultural Diplomacy

The analysis of the existing literature indicates that cultural diplomacy has traditionally been examined through the perspectives of soft power, public diplomacy and foreign policy, with particular emphasis on institutional structures, cultural assets and strategic objectives. While these dimensions remain fundamental to understanding cultural diplomacy, they provide only a partial explanation of its effectiveness. Cultural diplomacy is, by its very nature, a people-centred process whose success ultimately depends on the individuals responsible for designing, implementing and sustaining cultural diplomacy initiatives. Although institutions provide the organisational framework within which cultural diplomacy operates, it is human agency that transforms cultural resources into meaningful international engagement and long-term relationships (Arndt, 2005; Cummings, 2003; Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010).

This human dimension becomes particularly evident when cultural diplomacy is considered within the broader framework of soft power. According to Nye (2004, 2011), soft power rests on the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce. However, attraction does not arise automatically from the existence of cultural resources. Rather,

it depends on the capacity of professionals to interpret cultural values, communicate across diverse cultural contexts, establish credibility and develop sustainable international partnerships. Cultural diplomacy should therefore be understood not merely as the international projection of national culture but as a strategic process requiring specialised human capacities capable of transforming cultural resources into diplomatic influence.

From the perspective of human capital theory, knowledge, competencies, experience and skills constitute strategic assets that enhance organisational performance and long-term competitiveness (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). Although this perspective has been widely applied in economics, management and organisational studies, it has received comparatively little attention within cultural diplomacy. Integrating these two bodies of literature suggests that human capital provides an appropriate analytical lens for explaining why some cultural diplomacy initiatives achieve sustainable international impact while others remain limited despite comparable institutional support or cultural resources.

Accordingly, human capital should be reconceptualised as a strategic capability rather than an administrative resource within cultural diplomacy. This perspective shifts analytical attention from institutional structures alone towards the competencies of the professionals who shape, communicate and implement cultural diplomacy policies. Consequently, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on the availability of cultural resources or institutional capacity, but equally on the development of specialised human capital capable of responding to the demands of an increasingly digitalised, interconnected and geopolitically competitive international environment.

3.2. Core Competencies Constituting Human Capital in Cultural Diplomacy

The conceptual analysis indicates that human capital in cultural diplomacy should not be understood as a collection of isolated professional skills, but as an integrated system of competencies that collectively enable the effective design, implementation and sustainability of cultural diplomacy initiatives. Contemporary competency-based approaches emphasise that professional competence extends beyond the possession of isolated skills and encompasses integrated combinations of knowledge, abilities, behaviours and attitudes that enable effective performance in complex professional environments (Popovska & Latkovikj, 2015; Škrinjarić, 2022).

Drawing upon the synthesis of the literature on cultural diplomacy, soft power, human capital and competency-based professional development (Becker, 1964; Bjola & Manor, 2022; Cummings, 2003; Cull, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Grincheva, 2024; Nye, 2011; Schultz, 1961; Škrinjarić, 2022), the competencies constituting human capital in cultural diplomacy can be organised into five interrelated competency domains: strategic, intercultural, communication, digital, and organisational and managerial. Together, these domains constitute the professional capacity required for effective cultural diplomacy in the contemporary geopolitical environment (Table 1).

Table 1. Core Competency Domains Constituting Human Capital in Cultural Diplomacy

Competency Domain	Core competencies	Contribution to effective cultural diplomacy
Strategic Competences	Strategic thinking, policy analysis, long-term planning, analytical reasoning	Aligns cultural diplomacy initiatives with foreign policy objectives and long-term strategic priorities.
Intercultural Competences	Intercultural communication, cultural intelligence, empathy, mediation, cultural awareness	Facilitates trust-building, intercultural dialogue and sustainable international relationships.
Communication Competences	Strategic communication, storytelling, public speaking, public engagement, persuasion	Enhances international visibility, credibility and engagement with foreign publics.
Digital Competences	Digital diplomacy, social media engagement, digital content creation, online networking, information literacy	Strengthens cultural diplomacy in digital environments and improves resilience against information competition.
Organisational and Managerial Competences	Project management, leadership, partnership building, resource coordination, monitoring and evaluation	Supports effective implementation, institutional sustainability and the long-term impact of cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Source: Authors' research

The first competency domain comprises strategic competencies that enable professionals to translate foreign policy priorities into coherent cultural diplomacy strategies aligned with long-term diplomatic objectives. These

competencies include strategic thinking, policy analysis, analytical reasoning and long-term planning, capabilities widely recognised within the strategic management and public governance literature as prerequisites for effective organisational performance and policy implementation (Bryson, 2018; Mintzberg, 1994). Within cultural diplomacy, they facilitate the transformation of cultural resources into coherent diplomatic action capable of responding to evolving geopolitical circumstances.

Complementing these strategic capabilities, intercultural competencies constitute the normative core of cultural diplomacy. They encompass intercultural communication, cultural intelligence, empathy, mediation and cultural awareness, competencies widely recognised as essential for effective intercultural interaction and international cooperation (Deardorff, 2006; UNESCO, 2013). Because cultural diplomacy fundamentally relies on dialogue, mutual understanding and trust-building, these competencies enable professionals to establish credibility, foster sustainable international relationships and facilitate meaningful cultural exchange.

Communication competencies further strengthen the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy by enabling professionals to communicate national values, cultural narratives and foreign policy priorities to international audiences. They include strategic communication, storytelling, public engagement, persuasive communication and public speaking. The public diplomacy literature increasingly emphasises that successful engagement with foreign publics depends on dialogue, credibility and sustained communication rather than one-way information dissemination (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005). Consequently, communication competencies contribute to enhancing international visibility, legitimacy and long-term diplomatic influence.

The digital transformation of diplomacy has added another essential competency domain. Digital competencies include digital diplomacy, social media engagement, digital content creation, online networking and digital information literacy. Contemporary scholarship argues that digital technologies have become integral to diplomatic practice, while broader competency frameworks increasingly emphasise digital literacy, adaptability and continuous skills development as essential professional capabilities in rapidly changing environments (Bjola & Manor, 2022; OECD, 2023). These competencies therefore strengthen both the effectiveness and resilience of cultural diplomacy within an increasingly networked international environment.

Finally, organisational and managerial competencies provide the operational capacity necessary for implementing cultural diplomacy initiatives. They encompass project management, leadership, partnership building, resource coordination, monitoring and evaluation, competencies widely recognised as essential for organisational effectiveness and institutional sustainability (Drucker, 2008; Mintzberg, 1994). Although comparatively less visible within the cultural diplomacy literature, these competencies ensure that strategic objectives can be translated into sustainable programmes, effective international partnerships and long-term institutional impact.

Taken together, the five competency domains should not be regarded as independent professional attributes but as mutually reinforcing components of human capital. Their integrated application enables professionals to transform cultural resources into effective diplomatic practice and provides the conceptual foundation for the competency-based framework presented in the following section.

3.3. A Competency-Based Framework for Cultural Diplomacy

The analysis presented in the preceding sections demonstrates that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy cannot be explained solely by the availability of cultural resources, institutional structures or foreign policy priorities. While these factors establish the conditions within which cultural diplomacy operates, its success ultimately depends on the competencies of the professionals responsible for translating cultural resources and strategic objectives into meaningful international engagement. Human capital therefore emerges as the strategic capability linking institutional support with the effective implementation of cultural diplomacy.

Building upon the synthesis of the literature on cultural diplomacy, soft power and human capital, this paper proposes a competency-based framework that conceptualises human capital as an integrated system of professional competencies rather than merely the availability of qualified personnel. Within this framework, strategic, intercultural, communication, digital, and organisational and managerial competencies operate as mutually reinforcing competency domains that collectively enable the effective design, implementation and long-term sustainability of cultural diplomacy initiatives. Their combined application allows cultural resources to be transformed into sustainable diplomatic relationships, enhanced international credibility and, ultimately, soft power outcomes that support broader foreign policy objectives.

The proposed framework contributes to the existing literature by integrating theoretical perspectives that have largely been examined independently. While cultural diplomacy scholarship has traditionally focused on institutions, cultural resources and foreign policy objectives, and human capital research has concentrated on organisational performance and competitiveness, this framework demonstrates their conceptual interdependence. It positions human capital as the critical mechanism through which institutional capacities and cultural resources are translated into effective cultural diplomacy.

The proposed framework should be understood as an analytical rather than a prescriptive model. Its purpose is not to establish a universal typology of competencies, but to provide an integrated conceptual framework that advances the theoretical understanding of the human dimension of cultural diplomacy. At the same time, it offers a foundation for future empirical research examining how professional competencies influence the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy across different institutional and national contexts.

4. DISCUSSION

The conceptual analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on the availability of cultural resources or institutional support, but also on the competencies of the professionals responsible for designing, implementing and sustaining cultural diplomacy initiatives. This finding reinforces the argument that human capital should be regarded as a strategic capability rather than merely an administrative resource, thereby extending the conventional understanding of cultural diplomacy beyond its institutional and policy dimensions.

The proposed competency-based framework contributes to the existing literature by integrating theoretical perspectives that have largely developed independently. While cultural diplomacy scholarship has traditionally focused on soft power, public diplomacy, cultural assets and foreign policy objectives (Cummings, 2003; Nye, 2004, 2011), human capital research has primarily examined knowledge, competencies and organisational performance within the fields of economics and management (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). By bringing these perspectives together, this paper identifies human capital as the conceptual link connecting cultural resources, institutional capacity and the effective implementation of cultural diplomacy.

The analysis further suggests that the competencies required for cultural diplomacy should not be understood as isolated professional skills but as mutually reinforcing competency domains. This perspective shifts attention from the recruitment of qualified personnel towards the systematic development of professional capabilities through education, specialised training and institutional learning. Consequently, the proposed framework offers a broader understanding of professional capacity in cultural diplomacy and provides a conceptual basis for competency-based approaches to the development of diplomatic personnel.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the framework also has practical implications for policymakers and institutions responsible for cultural diplomacy. It suggests that investments in cultural resources and institutional infrastructure should be accompanied by long-term strategies for developing human capital. Such strategies may include competency-based recruitment, specialised professional training, continuous capacity-building and systematic evaluation of professional competencies. Strengthening these capacities may enhance not only the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy but also its long-term contribution to soft power and foreign policy objectives.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the conceptual nature of this study. Since the proposed framework has not been empirically tested, its practical applicability remains to be examined across different institutional and national contexts. Future research should therefore investigate the relationship between professional competencies and the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy through comparative case studies and empirical analyses, thereby contributing to the further refinement and validation of the proposed framework.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined the role of human capital as a strategic component of cultural diplomacy, addressing the research question of which competencies constitute the human capital required for effective cultural diplomacy in the contemporary geopolitical environment. The conceptual analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on cultural resources, institutional support and foreign policy priorities, but equally on the competencies of the professionals responsible for designing, implementing and sustaining cultural diplomacy initiatives.

The study identifies five interrelated competency domains—strategic, intercultural, communication, digital, and organisational and managerial—that collectively constitute the professional capacity required for effective cultural diplomacy. By integrating insights from the literature on cultural diplomacy, soft power, human capital and competency-based approaches, the paper broadens the existing theoretical understanding of cultural diplomacy and reconceptualises human capital as a strategic capability rather than merely an administrative resource. In doing so, it proposes a competency-based framework that provides a more comprehensive perspective on the human dimension of cultural diplomacy.

Although conceptual in nature, the proposed framework offers a foundation for future empirical research examining the relationship between professional competencies and the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy across different institutional and national contexts. At the same time, it highlights the importance of investing in the development of

specialised human capital as an essential prerequisite for strengthening cultural diplomacy and enhancing its contribution to soft power and broader foreign policy objectives.

REFERENCES

- Arndt, R. T. (2005). *The first resort of kings: American cultural diplomacy in the twentieth century*. Potomac Books.
- Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bjola, C., & Manor, I. (2022). The rise of hybrid diplomacy: From digital adaptation to digital adoption. *International Affairs*, 98(2), 471–491. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab220>
- Bryson, J. M. (2018). *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement* (5th ed.). Wiley.
- Cull, N. J. (2009). *Public diplomacy: Lessons from the past*. Figueroa Press.
- Cummings, M. C. (2003). *Cultural diplomacy and the United States government: A survey*. Center for Arts and Culture.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Drucker, P. F. (2008). *Management* (Rev. ed.). HarperBusiness. (Original work published 1973)
- Gilboa, E. (2024). Public diplomacy from global peace to global conflict. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 20(Suppl. 1), 21–24. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-024-00374-1>
- Gilson, L. L., & Goldberg, C. B. (2015). Editors' comment: So, what is a conceptual paper? *Group & Organization Management*, 40(2), 127–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601115576425>
- Gienow-Hecht, J. C. E., & Donfried, M. C. (Eds.). (2010). *Searching for a cultural diplomacy*. Berghahn Books.
- Grincheva, N. (2024). The past and future of cultural diplomacy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 30(2), 172–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2023.2183949>
- Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *AMS Review*, 10(1–2), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0>
- Manor, I. (2019). *The digitalization of public diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melissen, J. (Ed.). (2005). *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mintzberg, H. (1994). *The rise and fall of strategic planning*. Free Press.
- Nye, J. S., Jr. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Nye, J. S., Jr. (2011). *The future of power*. PublicAffairs.
- Okoli, C. (2022). *A research agenda for the data age: Conceptual research methods for advancing the social sciences*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Popovska, M. B., & Latkovikj, M. T. (2015). The Competency Framework for Human Resource Professionals. *Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" Skopje*.
- Škrinjarić, B. (2022). Competence-based approaches in organizational and individual context. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9, Article 28. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01047-1>
- Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in human capital. *The American Economic Review*, 51(1), 1–17.
- UNESCO. (2013). *Intercultural competencies: Conceptual and operational framework*. UNESCO.