

INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTIONS AS A TOOL OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINE AND THE USA

Mariia Demydenko
Creative Project Manager, USA

Abstract

This article analyzes international film co-productions as a form of cultural diplomacy and a mechanism of soft power. Based on a comparative analysis of practices in Ukraine and the United States, the legal framework, institutional mechanisms, and economic and communicative effects of co-productions are examined. The paper offers practical recommendations for states and filmmakers.

Keywords: International co-productions, cultural diplomacy, Ukraine, USA, public diplomacy, cinema, transnational cooperation, creative industries, state image, strategic communications.

Introduction

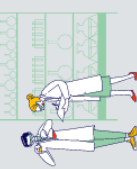
Scientific novelty. This article compares for the first time the experiences of Ukraine and the United States in using international film productions as a tool of cultural diplomacy and formulates practical recommendations for their effective application.

In the context of globalization and the growing role of information processes, culture has become an integral tool of foreign policy. The concept of "soft power," proposed by Joseph Nye , defines a state's ability to influence the international arena not through coercion, but through the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and institutions.

Cinema, as a powerful cultural product, plays a key role in shaping a country's global image and serves as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy. This is especially relevant for states seeking to increase their influence.

The experiences of Ukraine and the United States provide a valuable basis for studying the use of international film co-productions as an element of soft power. The United States has traditionally and systematically used cinema to strengthen its global influence and cultivate a positive image. Ukraine, especially after the events of 2014, has stepped up efforts to promote its culture and national values abroad, including through active participation in international film projects. An analysis of the experiences of these two countries reveals both common trends in the use of cinema as a means of cultural diplomacy and unique approaches shaped by their geopolitical position and cultural goals.

Cultural diplomacy is the strategic use of a state's cultural resources, values, and institutions to foster a positive international image, strengthen ties, and advance national interests. The concept of "soft power," developed by Joseph Nye , argues that the appeal of culture and political institutions can be a more effective tool for influencing other countries than traditional



methods of coercion. In this context, cinema is a powerful medium: films not only entertain but also serve as a channel for conveying values, stories, and images, directly shaping the perception of a country abroad [1].

International film co-productions (the joint production of films by several countries) are an important element of cultural diplomacy. They allow:

- combine financial and creative resources;
- strengthen cultural ties between partner countries;
- jointly promote national values on the broad international stage.

For countries like Ukraine and the United States, joint film projects are becoming a strategic tool. For example, the documentary "Defiant," a co-production between Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom, covers the events of Russian aggression [2]. Such projects provide international audiences with a unique perspective on key events and the country's culture, often unavailable through traditional media.

Effective cultural diplomacy cannot be implemented without key institutional structures. Organizations such as the Ukrainian Institute play a key role in developing and implementing strategies [3]. They facilitate the establishment of international relations, the organization of cultural events, and the promotion of national culture abroad. Programs aimed at supporting the creative sector (e.g., Creative Enterprise Ukraine), strengthen cultural diplomacy "from within" [4]. They provide training and support to entrepreneurs, facilitating the development of a competitive cultural sector, whose products subsequently become an object of soft power. Our research is a comparative case study. It compares practices in Ukraine and the United States based on an analysis of secondary sources (scholarly articles, legal documents, reports, press releases, reviews, and news) and specific film projects that have influenced international perceptions of the countries. When selecting cases, we considered international collaboration in production, the participation of government institutions or cultural diplomacy programs, and international resonance (festivals, awards, official screenings).

Following the events of Euromaidan in 2014, Ukraine significantly intensified its strategic efforts to promote its culture and national image on the international stage. The Ukrainian Institute and the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine play a key role in this work. An important element of cultural diplomacy is the active use of international film co-productions. Participation in joint projects allows Ukrainian filmmakers to integrate into the European co-production system, which facilitates the exchange of cultural experience and the expansion of international audiences. This collaboration demonstrates Ukraine's openness to intercultural dialogue and reveals its potential as a cinematic nation. Co-productions also contribute to strengthening ties with European business and the cultural community [5].

The institutes are implementing a number of targeted initiatives to increase the international visibility of Ukrainian cinema:

1. Developed by the Ukrainian Institute, the proMOTION program is aimed at the international promotion of Ukrainian films. It includes support for subtitling and dubbing, the creation of marketing materials, and the organization of screenings at international film festivals. Since its launch, proMOTION has supported over 50 projects [6].

2. Ukraine is represented at major international film festivals, such as the Berlinale (Berlin International Film Festival). For example, in 2025, the Ukrainian film "Timestamp" was presented in the competition program, demonstrating the growing international recognition and high level of national cinema [7].

International film co-productions serve as a powerful tool for Ukraine to disseminate information about current events, preserve evidence, and strengthen cultural ties:

1. Documentary film "In the Rearview". Co-production: Ukraine, Poland, France. The film focuses on people evacuating from Ukraine against the backdrop of a full-scale war. The film demonstrates a high level of integration into the European film industry. The film was screened at over 50 film festivals worldwide, including the prestigious Cannes Film Festival.

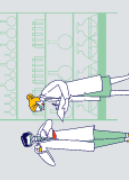
2. Docudrama "To the Victory!". Co-production: Ukraine, Lithuania. The film explores the profound impact of war on families and personal relationships (friendships). The project was successfully presented at international film festivals and received positive reviews from critics, confirming its cultural and artistic value on the international stage.

3. Multi-format project (documentaries, theatrical productions) "Museum" of Civilian Voices." Co-production: Implemented in collaboration with international partners. The project draws on the memories of Mariupol residents, collecting personal stories and testimonies. It has received wide recognition for its humanitarian focus, fulfilling an important cultural diplomacy function by documenting war crimes and preserving human memory.

Unlike many countries, the American model of cultural diplomacy in film does not rely on a centralized system of state subsidies, but rather utilizes decentralized mechanisms and the power of Hollywood. Although the federal government does not have direct funding mechanisms for film, it actively utilizes the film industry for public diplomacy purposes. Motion is a key institution linking the industry and the government. Picture Association of America (MPAA). It acts as a powerful lobbyist, representing studio interests in Congress and the executive branch, and influences the conditions for the international distribution of American products [8]. The US State Department directly uses cinema for cultural exchange. An example is the American Film Showcase (organized in partnership with the University of Southern California), which presents American films abroad, promoting cultural exchange and improving the image of the United States [9].

Hollywood cinema, thanks to its global distribution and dominance in the global market, is the most powerful and self-sustaining instrument of US soft power. Hollywood films widely communicate American values such as individualism, freedom, and democracy, helping to spread these ideas around the world. It's important to note that the American model differs from practices in other countries: there are no quotas for foreign films in the US, and federal government support for the film industry is limited. Its power is based on commercial success and the appeal of its content.

American cinema has historically been used both to support and lobby for public policy and to critically examine it, demonstrating the close but complex relationship between Hollywood and Washington:



1. The film " Mission" to Produced at the direct request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, " Moscow " is a classic example of propaganda film used for diplomatic purposes. It portrayed the Soviet Union in a positive light, which was important for strengthening allied relations during World War II.

2. Documentary film " The Power " Principle " demonstrates how film can be used for critical analysis. The film questions US foreign policy and explores the role of the military-industrial complex in shaping public opinion.

3. Documentary research " Theaters of War ," which reveals the influence of the Pentagon and the CIA on Hollywood and television scripts. The film highlights the deep and often implicit connections between government security structures and the film industry.

These examples demonstrate that cinema not only conveys official values but also serves as an important platform for public dialogue, self-reflection, and criticism within the United States. International cinematic co-productions are a two-way instrument that offers significant benefits for cultural diplomacy and the film industry, but also carries significant managerial and creative risks.

Table 1 - Advantages of international co-productions

Advantage	Description
Expanding audiences and markets	Films gain automatic access to new international markets, significantly increasing their commercial potential and global visibility.
Enrichment of cultural content	The collaboration integrates diverse cultural elements, talents and perspectives, enriching the films' content and increasing their appeal to a wider international audience.
Strengthening international relations	Co-productions serve as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy, contributing to improved mutual understanding and strengthening ties between partner countries.
Access to resources and risk reduction	The pooling of financial, technical and human resources from several countries contributes to improved product quality and helps reduce individual financial risks for each party.

Table 2 - International restrictions co-productions

Limitation	Description
Cultural differences and creative disagreements	Differences in cultural values, traditions or creative approaches can lead to conflicts and serious difficulties at the production stage.
Difficulties in coordination and management	International projects require extremely complex logistics and coordination between teams and jurisdictions, which often leads to delays and unexpected cost increases.
Dependence on subsidies and policies	Many projects rely on government subsidies from partner countries. Changes in political situations or priorities can impact the availability of these resources, making funding unstable.
Ethical and legal dilemmas	Collaboration with entities or countries under international sanctions may raise ethical and legal issues , which negatively impacts the reputation of all project participants.

Thus, international co-productions represent an effective tool of cultural diplomacy, combining economic, creative, and communicative advantages. They expand film audiences, enhance content quality by pooling resources, enrich the cultural narrative, and strengthen international ties. However, the effectiveness of co-productions is limited by a number of factors: cultural differences and creative disagreements can create conflicts within a project; coordination between countries requires additional effort and resources; dependence on government subsidies and political stability increases risks; and legal and ethical issues require careful regulation.

International co-productions offer significant opportunities for promoting cultural diplomacy, but their successful implementation requires strategic planning, alignment of interests of all participants, and consideration of the political and cultural context.

Based on an analysis of the experiences of Ukraine and the United States, key strategic directions can be identified that ensure the effectiveness of international film production as a tool of soft power:

First, a strategic partnership between the state and filmmakers. Government agencies should work in close coordination with national production companies, providing systematic support for projects through grants and tax incentives, as well as facilitating access to international festivals. It is important to preserve the creative autonomy of filmmakers to prevent cultural diplomacy from devolving into outright propaganda, which could undermine audience trust [10].

Secondly, a balance between artistic value and diplomatic goals. Effective projects must achieve a dual goal: ensuring high-quality filmmaking and artistic value; while simultaneously promoting national values and a positive cultural image [11].

Third, developing international networks and festival activity. Active participation in the international film industry is essential for building long-term relationships. Participation in international film festivals, forums, and markets (such as Berlinale and Docudays) allows for establishing connections with foreign producers. This facilitates the exchange of experience and expands international film distribution channels [6].

Fourth, create a transparent legal and financial framework. The sustainability and predictability of international projects require a reliable legal foundation. Bilateral agreements and participation in international conventions are essential. It is essential to ensure the transparent distribution of copyright and financial rights between partners from different countries (in accordance with standards, for example, of the Council of Europe).

Fifth, monitoring and impact assessment. To confirm the strategy's effectiveness, it is necessary to implement a system for assessing the impact of cultural diplomacy through film: monitoring the number of international screenings and festival awards; assessing audience reach; and analyzing changes in the country's perception abroad. The data obtained should be used to adjust the strategy [4].

Consequently, international co-productions are an effective and flexible tool of cultural diplomacy, combining economic, creative, and communicational advantages. Ukraine's experience demonstrates that, with active international integration, co-productions can enhance

the visibility of national issues and counter disinformation. The US experience demonstrates mature institutional practices for using film within state public diplomacy programs. However, success depends on careful coordination between creative goals and diplomatic objectives, transparent legal mechanisms, and the preservation of creative autonomy. For states seeking to enhance their soft power, co-productions remain a strategically significant tool—provided they skillfully combine politics and film culture .

References

1. Soft Power and the American Climacteric // IRIS France. URL : <https://www.iris-france.org/180916-soft-power-and-the-american-climacteric/> (date of access: 10/16/2025).
2. Defiant (2023 film) // Wikipedia. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defiant_%282023_film%29 (date accesses : 16.10.2025).
3. Ukrainian Institute. URL: <https://ui.org.ua/en/> (date accesses : 17.10.2025).
4. Cultural Revival and Social Transformation: Ukraine // Chatham House. URL : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/cultural-revival-and-social-transformation-ukraine/03-transformative-power-culture-0> (date of access: 10/17/2025).
5. Pohrebniak H. Ukrainian cinematography in the context of intercultural cooperation / National Academy of Management of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine.
6. Suspilne Movlennya : Principi Roboti i Mozhливosti for Kinovirobniцtva // Docudays UA. URL : <https://docudays.ua/eng/2025/events/docupro/suspilne-movlennya-principi-roboti-i-mozhливosti-dlya-kinovirobniцtva/> (date of access: 10/18/2025).
7. Timestamp (film) // Wikipedia. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timestamp_%28film%29 (date accesses : 10/19/2025).
8. Public Diplomacy and Cinema // Cinema Arts Society. URL : <https://cinartsociety.org/public-diplomacy-and-cinema/> (date of access: 10.20.2025).
9. Using Movies to Do Public Diplomacy // US Global Leadership Coalition. URL : <https://www.usglc.org/blog/using-movies-to-do-public-diplomacy/> (date of access: 10/20/2025).
10. Soft Power and the American Climacteric // IRIS France. URL : <https://www.iris-france.org/180916-soft-power-and-the-american-climacteric/> (date of access: 10/21/2025).
11. Cultural Diplomacy: Promoting Film and Music in International Relations / ResearchGate. URL : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389616706_CULTURAL_DIPLOMACY_PROMOTING_FILM_AND_MUSIC_IN_INTERNATIONAL_RELATIONS (access date: 10/21/2025).

