



Iran's Deputy Culture Minister for Arts Affairs Mahmoud Salari emphasized the significance of cultural diplomacy in fostering comprehensive cooperation.

He made the statement during the regional conference of cultural attachés of the Islamic Republic of Iran in neighboring countries, ICRO reported.

Salari stated that cultural diplomacy, especially with neighboring nations, serves as a strategy for enhancing political, economic, and social ties.

On October 7, Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Mohammad-Mehdi Esmaeili also highlighted the influential role of cultural power and its global resonance in cultural discussions.

He stressed the importance of family values as a common human heritage that unites nations.

Esmaeili also announced the dispatch of cultural attachés to Latin American countries and the renewed focus on the Latin American region within Iran's diplomatic efforts.

Regarding Syria and Palestine, Esmaeili mentioned active engagement and upcoming visits to strengthen cultural ties with these nations.

In the past two years, Iran has been highly active in the realm of cultural diplomacy, particularly through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO). These efforts have resulted in increased interactions with cultural authorities of neighboring countries, he noted.

Esmaeili pointed out successful agreements and collaborations with Middle Eastern, Caucasian, and neighboring countries from the south of the Persian Gulf.

Numerous ministerial interactions, reciprocal visits, and regional and bilateral conferences have contributed to the expansion of cultural diplomacy, the minister continued.

The minister also highlighted the growth of Iran's cultural activities abroad, including joint film productions, cultural exchange events, and the signing of new cultural, artistic, and media agreements.

These efforts aim to facilitate cooperation across various sectors, including politics and economics.

Organized by ICRO, the conference began on October 7 and will continue until October 12, to strengthen cultural ties within the region.

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Address: #22, Hosseini-Rad Alley, South of Shahid Motahari St., Vali-e Asr Ave., Tehran, Iran
● Editorial Dept. Tel: +98 21 88913453
● Editorial Dept. Fax: +98 21 88930684
● ICPI Publisher: +98 21 88548892, 5
● Advertising Dept. Tel & Email: +98 21 88500617
irandaily@iranagahiha.com
www.irandaily.ir
newspaper.irandaily.ir
irandaily@icpi.ir
Iran Cultural & Press Institute



Tourism can counter sanctions for Iran, Russia

Arts & Culture Desk

Over the last two decades, Iran and Russia have expanded their ties in various dimensions, with tourism emerging as a particularly important factor for both nations. These ties have seen significant developments thanks to the introduction of a visa exemption policy for tourists from both countries. The agreement between the two sides regarding this matter was officially finalized in early July 2021.

In line with this agreement, citizens of both nations were given the opportunity to engage in tourist visits to each other's countries without the need for visas as long as they traveled in groups of up to 50 individuals and their stays did not surpass 15 days. The agreement went into effect in early September 2023, and the first group of Iranian tourists went to the North Caucasus region in Russia — which encompasses the Republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia — without visas. Considering the strategic significance of their relations, which can only be described as a two-way street, the decision to cancel visa requirements and expand tourism connections between the two nations opens up various opportunities for both sides.

The movement of tourists between Iran and Russia has always been in progress due to their geographical proximity. In 2022, the number of Iranian and Russian tourists visiting the other country reached 42,400, which doubled compared to 2021. Moreover, in the first six months of 2023, Iranians had the fifth-highest number of tourists visiting Russia, after Chinese, Turkish, Turkmen, and German visitors. Meanwhile, even though most foreign tourists in Iran come from Iraq, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Kuwait, approximately 22,000 Russian tourists entered Iran with visas during the same six-month period.



Tourism's contribution to economies

The tourism industry is of great significance to both Iran and Russia. Prior to the global outbreak of COVID-19, Russia had seen more than 10 million tourists, generating an estimated \$10 billion in revenue. In September 2019, the former prime minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev announced a strategy to develop tourism in Russia until 2035, aiming to increase the country's revenue from the tourism industry from 3,158 billion rubles to 16,306 billion rubles by 2035, double the number of domestic tourist trips, increase the export of tourism services from \$8.9 billion to \$28.6 billion by 2035, and triple the investments in tourism by 2035. In 2022, approximately one million jobs were created in the tourism industry in Russia.

While the successful hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup had a positive impact on Russia's image globally, the conflict in Ukraine had repercussions for the country.

Tourism is one of the most important sources of income for both Iran and Russia. In 2021, prior to the Ukraine War, Russia had an income of approximately \$6.31 billion from tourism alone. This accounted for 0.28% of its GDP and nearly 18% of international tourism revenues in Eastern Europe. In 2022, despite limitations imposed on Russia after the Ukraine conflict, domestic and international tourism directly contributed 860 billion rubles to Russia's GDP. On the other hand, in Iran, the tourism industry accounted for about 4.6% of the country's

total economy in 2022. Foreign tourism income for Iran reached some \$1.9 billion in 2020, approximately \$2.5 billion in 2021, and \$6.2 billion in 2022.

The tourism industry is of the same great importance to Iran, which is among the world's most endowed countries in terms of historical, natural, and recreational tourist attractions. According to statistics, Iran enjoys more than 4,000 tourist attractions and is ranked 10th in historical and cultural attractions, fifth in natural attractions, and third in terms of handicraft diversity. Despite its high potential, Iran has not yet achieved a desirable status in the tourism industry, but in recent years, there has been an increased focus on the impact of this sector on the country's economy.

Areas to improve

Tourism has always been a field of interest for both Iran and Russia, leading to mutual cooperation efforts in this field in parallel to their economic, political, and nuclear energy cooperation. For example, in April 2023, a memorandum of understanding on tourism cooperation was signed between the two countries. From cooperating on tourism, Tehran and Moscow aim to bring an increase in the number of tourists in both countries, develop human resources, promote innovation — especially regarding their attractions, cultural heritage, and natural and recreational resources — exchange experts, share experiences, create new maritime tourism routes, and provide information on the expansion, management, and development of various historical, cultural, nature-based, and adventure tourism.

In recent years, both countries have faced limitations in selling their energy resources in global markets due to Russia's involvement in the Ukraine conflict, the imposition of EU and US sanctions on Russia, the intensification of sanctions, and the launch of the "maximum pressure"

campaign against Iran on 2018, along with the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. The use of domestic currencies of both countries is important for the continued operation of the tourism industry between the two countries, which, in turn, can alleviate the impact of sanctions.

However, in addition to economic benefits, boosting cooperation in tourism plays an important role in the future of Iran and Russia's political and cultural relations and interests. Tourism plays a very important role in changing the perspectives of both countries towards each other, especially in terms of increasing communication between the two nations. As Iran's Envoy to Russia Kazem Jalali argues, "Some people inside Russia spread Iranophobia, and some others inside Iran spread Russiophobia. We believe that this Russophobia has its roots in the propaganda of the West, which does not want these two countries to make the most of their capacities with each other's help."

So, it seems that expanding the tourism industry is vital for both countries, especial-

ly for Iran in the face of sanctions. For this reason, Mohammad-Hossein Sufi, the head of the Touring & Automobile Club of the Islamic Republic of Iran, stated that Iran has proposed the cancellation of visas to more than 50 countries. A visa waiver between Iran and Russia can potentially increase the capacities of both sides and open a new horizon in their relations. To this aim, Iran should prioritize factors such as increasing flight capacity, developing infrastructure in related areas including transportation within the country, and better coordinating between security agencies including the police and tourism agencies.

On the Russian side, as Jalali said, it can only help to see "better behavior with Iranians at Russian airports, increased efforts to expand its tourism capacity, more flights for Moscow — Tehran and St. Petersburg — Tehran routes by airlines of both countries, and the expansion of Russian flights to other Iranian cities like Rasht, Tabriz, Sari, Kish, Shiraz, as well as the expansion of Iranian flights to the Russian cities of Astrakhan and Kazan."

