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Research Article

**INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AS A MEANS OF BUILDING
IMAGE AND REPUTATION: THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN**

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ABSTRACT

Azerbaijan, a key player in the South Caucasus, has leveraged its participation in international organizations (IOs) to enhance its global image and reputation. Azerbaijan strategically uses international platforms to advance its global standing. This article explores the country's activities within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of Turkic States by analysing the country's approach in undertaking initiatives to build its international standing. This research emphasises Azerbaijan's role in shaping and driving cooperative endeavours on the global stage. The practical significance of the analyses is to offer insights into the dynamics of initiatives undertaken by Azerbaijan within international organizations, taking the perspective of emerging theoretical discussions on 'small states' in international relations. The method of the study is based on a systematic analysis of legal documents (i.e. declarations, agreements, and others), speeches, and news from the official websites of Azerbaijan and international organizations.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, International organizations, Reputation, Image-building, Rising minor power.

INTRODUCTION

There are two main competing perspectives – classical theories of international relations – on the role and significance of international organizations in international affairs, namely realism (or reductionism) and liberal institutionalism (or idealism). Realism and liberalism offer distinct and contrasting explanations regarding the relationships between the states and international organizations.

Liberal institutionalists highlight the potential for cooperation among states facilitated by IOs, emphasising the importance of rules and norms (Katzenstein et al., 1998: 647). In contrast, (neo)realists underscored the dominance of state interests within IOs and downplayed the impact of international organizations on policy outcomes, rendering IOs as discussion platforms and means to serve the interests of powerful states (Reinalda and Verbeek, 1998: 2). Liberal institutionalism counter-argues by saying that states do not solely act upon their interests, but also regard international law and order established by IOs.

In fact, the number of international institutions has been continuously growing since World War II. Governments across the world continue to allocate material and symbolic resources towards the sustenance and expansion of international organizations (Goodin and Klingemann, 1996: 467). State support for the expansion of international institutions implies that they fulfil functions that align with state interests. States' continued backing and investment in international institutions signify that these organizations perform functions deemed beneficial to state interests.

This partly explains why countries sometimes opt for international institutions to achieve their foreign policy goals. Realism acknowledges that cooperation through IOs is possible, though defined by the principle of relative gains (distribution of benefits) and concern about potential cheating, defection, or losses (Reinalda et al., 1998: 14). Therefore, international cooperation cannot be taken for granted as it is limited by its alignment with the national interests of states, with relative gains and losses being critical factors that influence the extent and sustainability of such cooperation.

Liberal institutionalism foresees exponentially growing cooperation among states in a globalised world underpinned by universal values and intellectual progress. Especially, the increasing globalisation of the economy enhances interdependence among various actors such as states. As these actors deal with the structural shifts linked to globalisation, they may find motivations to engage in international collaboration collectively.

For institutionalists, IOs create opportunities for states to engage in honest behaviour by providing credible information about each party and clarifying gains from cooperation, lowering transaction costs, establishing connections, and offering prominent reference points for fostering cooperation (Keohane and Martin, 1995: 45, 49). The idea of international organization advances a positive image in itself. For instance, advocates of the League of Nations were initially inspired by the 'open' diplomacy it entailed (Williams et al., 2012: 162).

While realism and liberalism as schools of thought in international relations offer insights about the role of states in international organizations, these insights can also help us to understand the means and methods of building image and reputation by states. State activities within IOs can be interpreted as directly or indirectly involving efforts that serve to improve their international image and reputation. A new wave of scholarship acknowledges that states prioritise their reputation, identity, and sense of community as part of international society (Ingebritsen, 2002: 12). Careful and systematic construction of ‘state image and reputation’ across IOs, using a broad repertoire of strategies, may result in positive perceptions of a state and its acceptance as ‘expert, mediator, impartial, reliable,’ etc.

One such strategy used to gain attention and create a certain image is “pseudo-events,” which are usually well planned and demonstrative of a country’s image-boosting intentions (Kunczik, 2002: 120). John H. Herz claimed: “It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that today half of power politics consists of image making. With the rising importance of publics in foreign affairs, image making has steadily increased” (Herz, 1981: 187). In shaping the international image of a state, international organizations are deemed indispensable actors, allowing states to implement image-building tools (Yeremieieva, 2022: 66). Interestingly, research conducted on the Czech Republic’s state policy of supporting Czech nationals in positions within international organizations suggested that it mainly served the purpose of enhancing the country’s international status (Hornát et al., 2023).

Although international organizations take the form of associations of states (intergovernmental) with actual power kept in state control, this control should not be understood as a monopoly zone exclusive to hegemonic powers but also shaped and influenced by rising minor powers (RMPs). In fact, member states’ behaviour within IOs can even go as far as “bolstering or staining the organization’s reputation” (Hafner-Burton and Schneider, 2019). In this article, we will see how a rising minor power wields its membership within IOs, constructs its identity, and projects a persona by initiating, leading, and/or contributing to global policies despite its relatively limited capacity (i.e. material resources).

Rising minor powers highly regard the potential of international organizations as multiple-actor fora where they may act as norm entrepreneurs shaping global politics; engage in discourse; frame global issues; and construct new identities in their relationships (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 9–15; Long, 2017: 145). Multilateralism is considered indispensable for RMPs as a means to gain influence by using strategies like coalition-building and image-building (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017: 2). In addition, within international bodies, RMPs focus on policy areas of great importance or where direct benefits are likely to compensate for their lack of overall structural power (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017: 9).

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan reaffirmed that RMPs “give well out of proportion to their size” and “play a central and innovative role” in all issue areas of the United Nations (United Nations, 1998). It is argued that when traditional power resources are less critical – typically relevant in con-

ventional security matters – and factors like diplomatic competence and discursive power are more significant, RMPs can take on the role of a great power (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006: 658).

Therefore, RMPs' engagement in multilateral relations within IOs is not solely driven by the 'fear' of counteracting potential threats from great powers but also by the desire to emerge as international players with distinct character, which may lead to heightened activity within IOs, including setting global agendas. RMPs' belief in the 'systemic role' they play equally defines small powers' attitudes toward IOs (Keohane, 1969: 61). Alan Chong and Matthias Maass, professors of international studies, even exalt the power of 'small states,' which helps to stabilise international order by initiating efforts to address humanitarian and moral issues often overlooked by larger states, thus subtly influencing global affairs (Chong and Maass, 2010: 381).

This research paper investigates the following research question: "How does Azerbaijan build its image and reputation through participation in international organizations?" To answer this question, the author consulted legal documents, literature on rising minor powers or 'small states' as the literature refers to them, other official institutional documents, speeches, and relevant articles. Besides the literature review, data collection is mainly based on accessing key foreign policy documents and speeches/statements from official state websites (i.e. president.az, azerbaijan.az) and the websites of international organizations.

This research paper will be well substantiated with examples supporting certain claims, aspiring to include new geographies (CIS countries) into the small states discourse, which is mainly dominated by Scandinavian countries, Gulf countries, and the 'Four Asian Tigers'. The article will illustrate various initiatives announced by Azerbaijan through international organizations in fields like humanitarian aid, intercultural dialogue, promoting sustainable development, building stronger societal foundations, and investing in tourism, transportation, and economically important infrastructure projects and research. Azerbaijan's strategic use of multilateral platforms underscores its belief in the utility of international organizations as effective actors that can aid its cooperation-oriented policies and bolster its global standing.

AZERBAIJAN'S STRATEGIC INITIATIVES IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Azerbaijan strategically uses international platforms to advance its global standing. In this section, the author explores the country's activities within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of Turkic States by analysing the country's approach in undertaking initiatives to build its international standing. The objective is to reveal how Azerbaijan constructs and projects an image through engagement with international organizations while aiming to enhance its reputation by taking initiatives in all spheres. The practical significance of the analyses is to offer insights into the dynamics of initiatives undertaken by Azerbaijan within international organizations, taking the perspective of emerging theoretical discussions on 'small states' in international relations.

Aligning with the rising minor power theories, Azerbaijan boosts its international reputation by hosting numerous significant events and fostering strong relationships within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In September 1995, Azerbaijan deepened its cooperation with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) by hosting an international investment conference in Baku. This event marked the deepening of a fruitful partnership between Azerbaijan and the IDB (Şirəliyeva, 2023: 1061). Fast forward to June 2006, Baku hosted the 33rd Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers, highlighting Azerbaijan's growing influence within the OIC. This session was followed by the 5th Session of the Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers in September 2006, further establishing Baku as a hub for OIC activities. In November 2011, Baku also hosted the 29th meeting of COMSTECH, furthering cooperation among OIC member states.

In October 2014, Baku welcomed the 5th International Conference on 'The Role of Women in the Development of the Member Countries of the OIC,' drawing global attention to Azerbaijan's efforts in underscoring women's role in development. The 11th Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers, held in Baku in June 2022, continued Azerbaijan's tradition of hosting important OIC meetings. These events, and others which will be mentioned below, span over three decades and indicate Azerbaijan's strategic use of its OIC membership to build its international image and reputation.

Azerbaijan's active participation and influence within the OIC have increased over the years, as demonstrated by its election as the chair of the Committee for Labour and Social Protection and as a member of the Executive Committee on Labour Issues for the OIC for the periods of 2014-2016 and 2018-2020, respectively. In April 2013, Baku hosted the 2nd conference of Labour Ministers of OIC member states.

During the conference, the establishment of the OIC Labour Centre² was proposed by President İlham Aliyev, receiving unanimous approval from the heads of delegations. However, the centre was only inaugurated a decade later, in November 2023, within the framework of the 5th conference of Labour Ministers of OIC, which was again held in Baku. The 5th conference under the theme of "Innovative Solutions and Digitization of Labour and Employment Services in OIC Member States," illustrated Azerbaijan's determination to modernise labour and employment practices.

The 2nd conference also resulted in the adoption of the "OIC Framework for Cooperation on Labour, Employment, and Social Protection," a strategic plan aimed at tackling unemployment, boosting socio-economic development across member states as well as outlining future priorities in labour, migration, workforce development (Worldfolio, 2013; Mammadli, 2019: 131). Additionally, the Baku Declaration was issued, focusing on the creation of new opportunities in labour, employment, and social protection (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.). This meeting significantly strengthened the bonds and cooperation among OIC countries.

1 Note: The new institution complements the ongoing cooperation activities of the OIC General Secretariat in the areas of trade and investment, agriculture, and food security, tourism, education, science and technology, and health, among others.

Moreover, during the Baku meeting in 2013, President Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's substantial efforts to eradicate poverty and unemployment, positioning the country as a leading example of socio-economic progress within the Muslim world (Worldfolio, 2013). This recognition was further validated by acknowledgments from the United Nations and the World Bank, which praised Azerbaijan's achievements in meeting its Millennium Development Goals. Azerbaijan's contributions extend beyond labour initiatives to the establishment of key institutions within the OIC, such as the creation of a Youth Forum (regional centre) and a Journalists Association in Azerbaijan.

Baku played a pivotal role in encouraging cultural exchange between the West and the East by hosting the conference of the Council of Europe's Culture Ministers in 2008, inviting colleagues from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Habibbeyli, 2017: 41). Within the framework of this initiative, called the 'Baku Process,' Azerbaijan hosted the OIC Culture Ministers' Conference in 2009, this time allowing European countries' culture ministers to take part. The World Intercultural Dialogue Forum, held every two years, further promotes intercultural dialogue and understanding between the two organizations (Council of Europe and OIC) and civilizations.

'Baku Process' epitomises Baku's function as a mediator between European organizations and the OIC. The Baku Process is unique in that it merges intercultural dialogue initiatives based on the values and activities of both the Council of Europe and ICESCO, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation across cultural and religious divides.

In recognition of Azerbaijan's role as a cultural bridge between the Islamic world and European organizations, the OIC, through ICESCO, expressed strong confidence in Baku (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.). Consequently, Baku was declared the cultural capital of the Islamic world by the decision of ICESCO in 2009, and similarly in 2018, the city of Nakhchivan, and in 2024, the city of Shusha received the same prestigious title from the organization. Under this banner, the Azerbaijani government organised numerous events promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue both domestically and internationally.

In June 2008, Baku organised the International Forum on 'Expanding the Role of Women in Cross-Cultural Dialogue,' which outlined Azerbaijan's plan to promote gender equality and intercultural dialogue simultaneously. Following the declaration of 2017 as the 'Year of Islamic Solidarity' in Azerbaijan, the country held the grandiose event of the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games in May 2017, which brought together athletes from 24 states. The Declaration of the 13th ECO Islamabad Summit in March 2017 endorsed Azerbaijan's initiatives to enhance Islamic solidarity through various activities.

These initiatives reinforced Azerbaijan's image as a unifying power within the Islamic world. In April 2018, Baku once again became a focal point for the OIC with the 4th Session of the Islamic Conference of Youth and Sport Ministers. This event attracted youth and sports ministers from over 40 OIC member countries, emphasising Azerbaijan's role in promoting youth development and sports.

Azerbaijan is also interested in building its reputation through organising international events and establishing new institutions within the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). In 2013 and 2014, Azerbaijan hosted the 1st and 2nd Baku Forums of ECO Member States' Economic think-tanks. These forums brought together economic intellectuals to evaluate the prospects of growth and cooperation. Within the same period, Azerbaijan managed to hold the 1st and 2nd International Conferences on 'Energy, Regional Integration, and Socio-Economic Development,' creating fertile grounds for deeper cooperation within the ECO region.

In 2002, the former president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, proposed the establishment of an ECO Research Centre in Baku to enhance the organization's effectiveness. Finally, after years, in March 2021, the Charter of the ECO Research Centre was signed at the 14th ECO Summit. Serving as the ECO think-tank, the centre's main objective is to facilitate regional cooperation between member states based on economic research, strategic planning, and empirical evidence.

During the 25th Meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers in November 2021, held in Turkmenistan, the Charter for the Clean Energy Centre for the ECO Region (CECECO) was adopted, with Azerbaijan selected as the host country. This selection was based on a competitive process, and the ECO Secretariat partnered with UNIDO and received financial support from the Austrian Development Agency to finalise the arrangements related to the establishment (CECECO, n.d.).

President Ilham Aliyev highlights Azerbaijan's commitment to strengthening cooperation within the ECO in various sectors, including healthcare, renewable energy, oil and gas, taxes, and disaster management (Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017). He once underscored Azerbaijan's dedication to developing ICT cooperation in the region, reinforcing the nation's role as a pivotal player in fostering regional integration and economic development.

In this respect, significant energy-related meetings of the organization were held in Baku in June 2021. The 4th ECO High-Level Experts Group Meeting on Energy was followed by the 4th ECO Energy Ministerial Meeting. The "Baku Declaration," which was adopted at the conclusion of the meeting, aims to intensify energy cooperation within the ECO. Additionally, the meeting resulted in the adoption of the ECO Energy Strategy 2030 and its Action Plan, the Charter of the Clean Energy Centre, and the Regional Electricity Market Roadmap.

Azerbaijan's ambition to become a transport hub is reflected in its substantial investments in transport and logistics infrastructure, positioning the country as a crucial player in the East-West and North-South transport corridors of Eurasia. President Ilham Aliyev frequently mentions Azerbaijan's strategic projects that serve to enhance the North-South and East-West transit corridors. By investing in seaports, railways, roads, and air transport, Azerbaijan aims to capitalise on its geographical location to become a regional transport centre (Economic Cooperation Organization, 2012).

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, completed in October 2017, became a key link not only between Azerbaijan and Türkiye but also across continents, promising geopolitical and geo-economic benefits for all ECO member states. To increase diversification, in 2013, Azerbaijan hosted the 1st ECO High-Level Working Group Meeting focused on the ‘Ghazvin-Rasht-Astara (Iran)-Astara (Azerbaijan)’ Railway Project, garnering strong political support for the North-South Corridor (Economic Cooperation Organization, 2017). Azerbaijan had already completed its segment of this project, inviting further cooperation from other ECO countries.

Within the framework of the ECO, official reports have recently referred to the concept of a ‘Zangezur corridor’ in relation to the documents signed by Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. This demonstrates Azerbaijan’s successful foreign policy in promoting the term ‘Zangezur corridor’³ within the ECO region and drawing the attention of key regional players to this new transportation route (Azerbaijan.az, n.d.).

On the other hand, Azerbaijan places special emphasis on improving its global economic stature and emerging as a significant investor country within the ECO. During the 12th ECO Summit, the President Aliyev, after listing economic achievements of Azerbaijan in reference to GDP growth, poverty reduction, employment rate, and country credit ratings, argued that Azerbaijan is rightfully a shareholder in the ECO Trade and Development Bank⁴, and thereby participates in major infrastructure and economic projects in ECO member states as an investor. “Azerbaijan has now started to invest abroad. We are conducting research to access new markets. Of course, we primarily invest in countries that are friendly and brotherly for us (Economic Cooperation Organization, 2012).

Azerbaijan is active within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) through a series of strategic initiatives and hosting key events, which contribute to the reputation and image-building endeavours of the country. In November 2023, Azerbaijan’s leadership was highlighted at the Tenth Summit in Astana. Notable initiatives of the country included the establishment of a consular cooperation platform within the OTS, which was well received by member states, and the ‘Economic Glossary of the Turkic World’ project aimed at advancing academic integration in the domain of economics.

Aside from these initiatives, Azerbaijan’s constructive and supportive stance in the OTS was further demonstrated through initiatives to host new related/affiliated institutions of the organization. For example, at the Sixth Summit of the OTS in 2018, Azerbaijan took on the responsibility of dedicating special

2 Note: Zangezur corridor is a transportation route that passes through the southernmost borders of Armenia and connects Azerbaijan to Türkiye, which became dysfunctional after the First Karabakh War (1988-1994).

3 Note: The ECO Bank started to operate in 2008. In 2013 February, Azerbaijan became the 5th member of the bank. Currently, there are 6 members, namely Türkiye, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, while Uzbekistan is still not part of the ETDB. The ECO Bank provides financial support for the purpose of development of agriculture, energy, transport, information technology, small and medium entrepreneurship, industry, service and other areas of the member countries. Source: <https://www.economy.gov.az/en/post/1645/iet-in-ticaret-ve-inkisaf-banki-ile-emekdasliq-muzakire-edilib>

Secretariat buildings for both the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TurkPA) and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation (TCHF) in Baku. This helped Azerbaijan to assume a role in supporting the institutional infrastructure of the OTS and facilitating its operations. At the Seventh Baku Summit of the OTS, participating countries expressed their gratitude and satisfaction with the official opening of the new premises in Baku.

During the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, Azerbaijan played an essential role by organizing an extraordinary meeting of the OTS Council of Heads of State. The meeting, named 'Solidarity and Cooperation in the Fight Against COVID-19,' also included participation from the Director-General of the WHO. This initiative led to the 1st video-conference meeting of Health Ministers of the OTS member and observer states in late April 2020, reinforcing Azerbaijan's leadership in promoting regional health cooperation and solidarity.

The year 2018 saw the organization of the 1st Turkic Council Young Leaders Forum in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan. This initiative helped operationalise the Turkic Council Youth Platform, promoting a sense of unity and purpose among young leaders from OTS member states. In 2019, Azerbaijan hosted the International Conference on the 'Role of Turkic World Women in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals' in Baku. This event, organised jointly with the *Milli Majlis* (National Assembly of Azerbaijan), underscored Azerbaijan's influence in the confluence of gender equality and sustainable development issues within the Turkic world.

In 2016, Sheki was declared the 'Cultural Capital of the Turkic World' as part of TURKSOY's initiative. This designation created an opportunity to celebrate the country's historical and cultural significance and enhanced Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy within the Turkic world. Shusha was similarly designated the 'Cultural Capital of the Turkic World 2023,' promoting a series of activities in the symbolic city. In addition, in July 2019, the National Meadow Festival held in Gadabay District of Azerbaijan illustrated the country's adherence to cultural preservation and community engagement.

In the realm of tourism, the TCHF, situated in Baku, carries out international projects, conferences, and publications on the cultural traces of the Turkic states (Organization of Turkic States, 2021). The first academic book, 'Azerbaijan on the Silk Road,' exemplifies these efforts, contributing to the promotion of Azerbaijani cultural heritage. During the 7th Meeting of the Ministers in Charge of Tourism of the OTS, held in May 2022 in Shamakhi (Azerbaijan), significant progress was made in advancing tourism-related projects. According to the meeting results, key initiatives were outlined, including increasing air connectivity between major cities, implementing the 'Modern Silk Road Joint Tour' and 'Turkic World Tourism Capital' projects, and developing winter and golf tourism across OTS member and observer states (Organization of Turkic States, 2022).

Earlier efforts to host OTS events include the 1st meeting of the heads of customs authorities of the member states, which took place in Nakhchivan in

October 2012, resulting in a declaration to enhance customs cooperation. In August 2013, the 3rd Cooperation Council of Turkic States (CCTS) Summit was held in Gabala, Azerbaijan, with a focus on Transport and Connection, further solidifying Azerbaijan's role in facilitating regional connectivity and trade.

Azerbaijan's activities within the OTS extend beyond intra-organizational cooperation, encompassing initiatives that foster global integration and humanitarian assistance. Noteworthy is Azerbaijan's initiative to host a conference on humanitarian aid and development assistance in 2019, aiming to integrate donor institutions from member states into the global humanitarian system and enhance cooperation in achieving sustainable development goals (Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, 2019). Another example is Azerbaijan's vaccine donations to African countries under the auspices of the OTS, showing the country's global health initiatives and desire to establish inter-organizational cooperation.

In parallel, Azerbaijan has leveraged the OTS's capacity to gain reputation in international relations. By securing collective OTS support, Azerbaijan has advanced its global standing and garnered backing for significant international endeavours. In particular, Azerbaijan received OTS support for Baku's candidacy to host the ambitious World EXPO-2025⁵ and for nominations⁶ to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List (Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, 2018).

Azerbaijan's global-scale initiatives in various areas to promote regional and international cooperation accentuate the 'initiative-taker' character of the state. Multilateral diplomacy has become a key determinant in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. As mentioned above, the country's leadership initiated several conferences, established new centers (i.e. Clean Energy Centre, ECO Research Centre, Youth Forum), and led the adoption of many internationally relevant documents (i.e. Baku Declaration), which simultaneously serve the purpose of building the international image and demonstrating the goodwill of Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, achieving new levels of dialogue between nations and civilizations is among the aspirations of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. For instance, Azerbaijan initiated the bi-annual World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue under the Baku Process, which puts peace, dialogue, and understanding at the core of diplomacy. This process shows that Azerbaijan intends to play a 'linchpin' role in fostering security and solidarity as well as facilitating dialogue and connectivity (Center for Intercultural Dialogue, 2024).

Azerbaijan also projects its image by organizing global-scale events that thematically span from culture and sports to politics. Mega-events such as the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games (2017) and COP29 (2024) – deemed by some researchers as pseudo-events – arguably help Azerbaijan to construct a posi-

4 Note: In 2018, Baku lost the bid to Osaka (Japan) in a secret ballot to select the winner.

5 Note: A prime example is the successful inscription of the "Dolma making and sharing tradition," which is celebrated as a symbol of cultural identity in Azerbaijan.

tive identity by increasing awareness, reducing negative perceptions, and providing authentic associations with the host country (Dragin-Jensen and Kwiatkowski, 2018). In addition, Azerbaijan emerges as a ‘donor and investor’ in the international arena, as observed in the case of extending help to African nations with vaccination. This similarly improves the country’s reputation.

Last but not least, Azerbaijan promotes its national interests by investing in the creation of new fronts of cooperation. For instance, Azerbaijan assumed the role of ‘founder and initiator.’ As a founding member of the Organization of Turkic States, Azerbaijan demonstrates its commitment to enhancing cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries in various areas, guided by shared roots, history, and culture. Additionally, Azerbaijan is one of the initiators of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, displaying its constructive approach and role in increasing the transportation and transit potential of the region. As a founding member of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM), Azerbaijan actively engages in promoting democracy, security, economic development, and conflict resolution at a regional level. Through its active participation, chairmanship, and support for initiatives, Azerbaijan continues to be a key actor in shaping and advancing regional cooperation within these organizations.

CONCLUSION

Azerbaijan, an influential nation within the OIC, has actively engaged in initiatives that positively contribute to its international image. By hosting significant events, proposing impactful projects, and contributing to regional and global discussions within the OIC, Azerbaijan demonstrates its commitment to cultural heritage, labour and human rights, and socio-economic development.

In the cultural sphere, Azerbaijan promotes intercultural dialogue and gender equality, exemplified by the Baku Process and the International Forum on ‘Expanding the Role of Women in Cross-Cultural Dialogue.’ Azerbaijan’s significant investments in humanitarian aid, sports, and its focus on youth development serve as a reference point for other nations.

In the ECO, Azerbaijan has prioritised becoming a transport hub, investing heavily in transport infrastructure. Similarly, the country distinguished itself with a focus on sustainable and green development. For instance, Azerbaijan masterminded the establishment of the Clean Energy Centre for the ECO region. There seems to be a chance for the country to emerge as an expert in sharing best practices and tackling environmental sustainability issues.

Moreover, Azerbaijan’s initiatives within the OTS, such as hosting cultural events and conferences on social issues (i.e., gender equality), highlight its dedication to promoting cultural diplomacy and social issues. Additionally, Azerbaijan supported the institutional infrastructure of the OTS by providing Secretariat buildings and establishing cooperation platforms, ensuring smooth organizational operations and academic integration.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's initiatives within international organizations like the OIC, ECO, and OTS demonstrate its comprehensive approach to enhancing its global image and reputation. By hosting significant events, fostering intercultural dialogue, promoting human rights (i.e., labour rights, gender equality), and investing in sustainable development, Azerbaijan positions itself as a proactive and influential player on the international stage. These efforts not only foster regional cooperation but also solidify Azerbaijan's identity as a forward-looking and dynamic nation, capable of contributing meaningfully to global discourses and developments.

Even though this research delves into the analysis of how Azerbaijan, as a small state, constructs its image and reputation within the limits and scope of international organizations, more meaningful analysis may emerge once the current research is further embedded into the 'small states' literature by comparisons to other small state nations such as Qatar and Singapore. Thus, departing from its limitations, this article may inspire future comparative research, taking new geographies into account.

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