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"Soft power" potential of Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus

Abstract

Although economic interests dominate the evolution of interstate relations, Azerbaijan attaches special importance to the application of soft power policy in order to strengthen its foothold in the South Caucasus region. We are not mistaken in our opinion that Azerbaijan plays the role of a bridge in the regulation of both intergovernmental and inter-national relations for the establishment of closer relations with other countries of the region, such as the South Caucasus country. In this sense, deepening cooperation in a number of fields, especially education, is one of the important issues that should be investigated in order to strengthen social and cultural relations between countries and at the same time to create efficient coordination mechanisms. In this article, we will clarify what methods and tools Azerbaijan implements its global soft power strategy in the South Caucasus region within the framework of diplomacy. We will also comparatively examine which spheres in the South Caucasus are more exposed to soft power politics and try to determine its effectiveness.



<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/atdd>

Keywords: *Soft power, South Caucasus, Azerbaijan*

Azerbaycan'ın Güney Kafkasya'daki “Yumuşak Güç” Potansiyeli

Öz

Devletlerarası ilişkilerin gelişiminde ekonomik çıkarlar ön planda olsa da Azerbaycan, Güney Kafkasya bölgesindeki konumunu güçlendirmek için yumuşak güç politikasının uygulanmasına özel önem vermektedir. Azerbaycan'ın, Güney Kafkasya ülkesi gibi diğer bölge ülkeleriyle daha yakın ilişkilerin kurulması için hem hükümetler arası hem de ülkeler arası ilişkilerin düzenlenmesinde bir köprü rolü oynadığı görüşümüzde yanılmıyoruz. Bu anlamda ülkeler arasındaki sosyal ve kültürel ilişkilerin güçlendirilmesi ve aynı zamanda etkin koordinasyon mekanizmalarının oluşturulması için başta eğitim olmak üzere bir dizi alanda işbirliğinin derinleştirilmesi araştırılması gereken önemli konulardan biridir. Bu makalede Azerbaycan'ın Güney Kafkasya bölgesinde küresel yumuşak güç stratejisini diplomasi çerçevesinde hangi yöntem ve araçlarla uyguladığını açıklayacağız. Ayrıca Güney Kafkasya'da hangi alanların yumuşak güç politikalarına daha fazla maruz kaldığını karşılaştırmalı olarak inceleyecek ve etkinliğini belirlemeye çalışacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yumuşak güç, Güney Kafkasya, Azerbaycan*

Introduction

Before talking about Azerbaijan's current soft power diplomacy in the South Caucasus, we will look at what soft power is and how it differs from traditional means and mechanisms of influence. "Power" as one of the important categories in the theory and practice of international relations has always been the subject of research since ancient times. The main reason for this is that power is the most extensive and decisive tool among the influence mechanisms of international actors. It is known that the existence of the state, the protection of its national interests, and the safety of its population were ensured only through force. In particular, it should be noted that recently this topic has aroused great interest in a number of researchers and led to the writing of several articles. The main difference of this article, which we have presented, from the ones written until now, is that full information has been collected from the works of European researchers dedicated to the topic and their detailed analysis has been given in the article. Accordingly, in this article, Azerbaijan's soft power diplomacy in the South Caucasus is discussed and the article is completed in the light of literature sources. In this review article, research and interpretation methods were used.

1. Soft power and soft power diplomacy

Soft power is an important concept in international relations and is often compared to hard power, which is more coercive. According to Joseph Nye, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Turkey's Soft Power in International Relations - Panorama, 2024). This form of power is based on the appeal of culture, political values and foreign policies that are seen as having legitimate or moral authority. Unlike hard power, which is exercised through military or economic means, soft power requires countries to build and maintain a favourable image and reputation on the global stage. This influence is often exerted covertly through cultural exchanges, media and public diplomacy and emphasises the importance of mutual understanding and cooperation between nations.

The role of culture, values and policies is integral to the exercise of soft power. Culture, one of the primary sources of soft power, encompasses the material and immaterial values that constitute a nation's identity and unity (Kamu diplomasisi nedir, 2022). For example, a country's film industry, music and art can significantly increase its cultural appeal worldwide. Similarly, political values such as democracy and human rights can attract global admiration and support when defended and promoted. Moreover, foreign policies that emphasise humanitarian assistance and global cooperation contribute positively to a nation's soft power. Countries that effectively project these values and policies can establish themselves as leaders in promoting international goodwill and understanding. Soft power plays an important role in shaping international relations and enhancing a nation's global influence. Defined by its reliance on culture, values and policies, soft power goes beyond traditional diplomatic approaches by fostering connections that resonate on a personal and societal level. By effectively leveraging cultural assets and promoting shared values, countries can create a positive image and strengthen diplomatic ties with others.

2. Azerbaijan and South Caucasus

First of all, we would like to point out that for a long time the power category was measured by the state's military resources. However, the collapse of the cold war and the development of information technologies increased the role of non-power factors in the arsenal of the state. For this reason, the range of foreign policy tools used in the modern world has expanded considerably. The course of events suggests that the traditional models of influence through force are being replaced by more flexible strategies, where the desired result is accepted not by coercion, but by the consent of the opposite party. The concept of "soft power" has become the most popular theory in the international political discourse and the practice of the

struggle for power and influence in the international world in the last two decades. Although the term "soft power" entered political circulation relatively recently, a similar concept was known in ancient China. Thus, in the treatise "The Art of War" written two thousand years ago by the warrior and philosopher Sun Tzu, one finds such an idea: "Winning a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the height of martial art. To defeat the enemy without fighting - see, this is the peak" (China's "soft power", 2024). One of the most vivid examples of the successful use of "soft power" is the collapse of the USSR. Today, there is a generally accepted tendency that the reason for the collapse of the Soviet state and the entire socialist system is not the military-economic victory of the West, or even the economic weakening of the USSR, but the devaluation of socialist values and the society's rejection of Western liberal values: political democracy, personal freedom, personal property, etc. mass acceptance.

Soft power, one of the current foreign policy concepts of our time, was first put forward in 1990 by Joseph Nye, a professor at Harvard University in the United States. He notes that: "States can achieve their goals in world politics when other countries want the same thing that they have achieved or agree to the situation that leads to the desired result" (Soft power and its evolution yrd., 2024). He brings power to any result in three ways - coercion, purchase, persuasion, etc. understood as the ability to achieve. Two of them are equivalent to the concept of hard power, while attraction is a sign of soft power. According to the American author, the main criteria reflecting the "soft power" factor of the state are culture, political values and foreign policy. According to A. O. Naumov, associate professor of the Faculty of Public Administration of Moscow State University named after M. V. Lomonosov, unlike C. Nye, "soft power" is the ability to achieve goals in the foreign policy arena by persuading and attracting the sympathy of other actors. This is a special type of foreign policy activity related to the influence of a state on others through mass media, popular and high culture, provision of educational services, creation of a favorable economic environment, dissemination of attractive humanitarian and political ideals, and its original value system that other subjects of international relations want to import.

We think that the problem of "soft power" in Azerbaijan is a new area that is studied in a political-philosophical framework. In this direction, new scientific researches have been started. In the few existing studies in this direction, "soft power" is mostly presented as the historical and modern achievements that shape the country's image and the spread of the lifestyle and liberal values of the leading countries, as well as the humanitarian policy that realizes the country's foreign policy interests. Azerbaijani professor N. Mammadov notes that "soft power"

in the West means that states try to ensure their geopolitical influence not by military and economic power, but by culture, political ideology and predictions. If "hard power" is based on coercion, "soft power" implies voluntary participation (Abbasbeyli, 2006). However, the ultimate goal of voluntary participation is to accept the cultural criteria of the leading state. In this sense, we can talk about changing the type of compulsion. In a word, although the terminology in geopolitics changes, the basic idea and strategic objective do not change.

Taking into account that the issue analyzed in the article is the use of soft power in the South Caucasus in the example of Azerbaijan, we would like to note that in this article, the soft power and potential of Azerbaijan have been comprehensively investigated, prioritized development directions, weaknesses have been analyzed, and suggestions have been made for its development in relevant areas. Considering this point, we would like to note that the relevance of the topic cannot be doubted by any researcher who deals with the history and politics of Azerbaijan and understands the current reality. The potential of the soft power of the Republic of Azerbaijan has not been fully formed structurally like its concept of hard power. Despite this, the inclusion of Azerbaijan in the list of soft power index, either since independence in 1991 or after the Second Karabakh war, and the progress in this list from year to year shows that the state is moving to a structural approach in this field. At this point, it would be appropriate to emphasize that the element of soft power is being investigated by many international indices in several subcategories. These categories are respectively: development of cooperation, education, science, sports, culture, tourism and migration. We are not mistaken in our opinion that the existing soft power potential of the Republic of Azerbaijan in these categories has increased even more, especially after the Second Karabakh War. In order to deeply analyze the events taking place in the South Caucasus today, the Armenian aggression against Azerbaijani lands, and as a result, the whole Caucasus became a war scene, it is necessary to turn to the events that took place a century ago. However, taking into account that the issue analyzed in the article is the concept of soft power in the example of Azerbaijan, it would be more appropriate to direct the main attention to this problem without deviating from the topic. At this point, let's emphasize that after gaining independence, Azerbaijan, with the occupation of 20% of its land, had to develop in the field of hard power and keep the element of soft power in the background for a while. As Joseph Nay emphasized, Azerbaijan had to either create an agenda or have attraction in this period. The state, which did not have enough tools to create an agenda in wartime, tried to fill this gap with its hydrocarbon reserves. Thanks to this attraction, the "Contract of the Century" agreement was signed in 1994, which paved the

way for the development of pipeline transport for the transportation of the country's oil to Europe. In the following periods, the state created new areas of attraction and tried to do things in the field of creating an agenda. Having become one of Europe's main energy suppliers with the signing of the "Contract of the Century", Azerbaijan has proven itself to be an important partner in the field of regional and global energy security through the implementation of international energy and transport projects. In the field of development of cooperation, since the day of its establishment, the Republic of Azerbaijan has tried to solve the main problem of Karabakh in a fair way by creating bilateral and multilateral relations with both states and international organizations, and also tried to bring its energy products, which are its only center of attraction for this period, to the world market. Especially until the 2000s, more importance was given to the relations with the neighboring states, the Muslim and post-Soviet states that had influence in the Karabakh war, but since 2000, diplomatic relations were also established with the Asian states. At the same time, from the period when independence was won, by joining organizations such as the UN and OIC, he freed himself from isolation in the new world system, and then tried to convey the voice of truth to the world more easily. The greatest success of Azerbaijan for this period is undoubtedly the adoption of 4 resolutions (822, 853, 874, 884) related to the "Nagorno-Karabakh" conflict at the UN and being a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2012-2013. the expansion of cooperation with organizations continued on a rising line, especially in the second decade of the 21st century. So, in order to contribute to a fairer world system, as well as to be able to correctly assess its own potential, in 2011, Azerbaijan became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, which is the largest organization after the UN.

During this period, Azerbaijan did not stop with developing its soft power potential only through diplomatic relations. By increasing the economic cooperation, it gained a soft power tool like SOCAR. This, in turn, laid the foundation for the construction of new transport routes for the transportation of hydrocarbon resources, which was the first attraction of the state. These logistically important roads created a second attractive opportunity for Azerbaijan. It is no coincidence that during this period, international logistics projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Supsa, TAP, TANAP were implemented. The role of the energy factor in strengthening Azerbaijan's place in the system of international relations should be emphasized. It is an indisputable fact that the independent energy policy of the country has a great role in the transformation of Azerbaijan into an important regional and global actor. As we know, no project of global importance in the region can be realized without the participation and consent

of Azerbaijan. The implementation of our energy strategy based on national interests on the principles of equal and mutually beneficial cooperation has increased the country's economic opportunities and international reputation. Also, at a time when raw material resources are decreasing against the background of increasing demand in the world, and the protection of energy security has become a priority issue for every state, Azerbaijan is strengthening its position in international relations with its visionary energy policy. It is in this context that Azerbaijan's soft power potential in the region is increasing. The role of Azerbaijan in the future development of the South Caucasus is undeniable. The South Caucasus region, located between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, as well as the states of Turkey, Russia and Iran, has a favorable geographical position that has a fundamental impact on the system of international relations and creates new geopolitical realities. Since the geopolitical reality has turned the South Caucasus into an East-West and North-South corridor, this region has always been the focus of great powers.

The "Caucasus Region" map prepared by the US State Department in 1994, the National Security Strategy for the New Century published in 1997, and the positions of the world's leading states, including Russia, prove that the region has a special position on the political map of the world. In short, the South Caucasus is an extremely important region with its political, strategic, historical and sociological aspects. Not only geographically, but also from a sociological point of view, the events taking place in this region affect the region and the states with political interest in the region for many reasons. Relations between the Caucasian states, regional policies of major powers and processes taking place in the international world; seriously affects regional security, stability and prosperity.

In this region, which was occupied by Russia in the 19th century, three independent republics - Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia - were established at the beginning of the 20th century. It should be noted that the establishment of the independent Republic of Armenia in the region was the result of the political interests of Tsarist Russia. The purposeful transfer of Armenians to the region in the 19th century brought the region face to face with a new geopolitical reality. As a result, a very serious threat to peace and security in the entire region has emerged.

Although the states of the region gained independence at the beginning of the 20th century, the sovereignty of the states did not last long, the region was occupied by the Soviet authorities. Both during the period of independence and in the later stages, Armenia, which turned to the policy of expansion by occupying the lands of the neighboring states, snatched

land from Azerbaijan and included it within its borders as it found an opportunity in various historical processes. Russia, the most powerful state of the Soviet Union, which became the undisputed power center in the region for 70 years, played a direct role in shaping the political reality of the region even after the regional states regained their independence at the end of the 20th century. While outlining the contours of Russia's regional policy, it tried to implement a strategy of a specific and special approach towards the regional states. After the establishment of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, Armenians were granted autonomy in the mountainous region of Karabakh. However, Armenia was not satisfied with this and raised territorial claims against Azerbaijan at every opportunity. Armenia, which took action again during the collapse of the USSR, this time resorting to armed methods and occupied approximately 20 percent of Azerbaijani lands through war. Armenia, while launching new attacks against other regions of Azerbaijan, rejected all proposals for a peaceful solution to the problem. The provocations of the Armenian army in 2020 and the new attacks it carried out in this context revealed that the Second Karabakh War was inevitable.

However, the acceleration of research in the field of soft power by international indices before and after the Second Karabakh War and the inclusion of Azerbaijan in these indices have created opportunities to compare other elements of soft power. The Global Soft Power Index, which measures the soft power of many countries in this area, is the Global Soft Power Index. Azerbaijan has been included in this statistic since 2021, which allows us to analyze the indicators for the last 3 years.

Table 1: Azerbaijan's Soft Power Index
(<https://brandirectory.com/softpower/nation>).

	2021(point/degree)	2022(point/degree)	2023(point/degree)
Indeks of soft power	31.70/72	31.3/77	39.1/57
International relations	1.9/68	2.2/85	3.9/48
business and commerce	2.3/70	2.5/94	4.0/70
culture and heritage	2.1/82	1.9/100	3.4/80
population and values	2.5/69	2.3/96	3.6/88

media and communication	1.9/71	2.3/72	3.3/60
reputation	5.1/83	5.3/77	5.4/96
education and science	2.3/34	2.6/43	3.0/38

As can be seen from Table 1, Azerbaijan's Global Soft Power Index has improved by 20 places.

By fully restoring its territorial integrity and sovereignty as a result of the 44-day Patriotic War in 2020 and the one-day anti-terrorist operation in 2023, Azerbaijan has created favorable conditions for lasting peace, lasting stability and reliable security in the South Caucasus, as well as important opportunities for establishing new cooperative relations in a wider geography. The outcome of the Second Karabakh War was an important stage in the formation of the new geopolitical situation of the Caucasus. As a result, a radical change occurred between the past and the future of the Caucasus. The change of regional power and the new geopolitical reality in the Caucasus were accepted by global and regional powers. The attitude of the presidents of Russia and Turkey to the issue, the steps taken to ensure the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in accordance with international law, and the political moves made in accordance with the interests of other powers in the region showed that the effectiveness of other global and regional players in the region has decreased. States and power centers that were forced to remain observers of political processes after the signing of the November 10 capitulation act openly declare their great concern about this situation. Realizing that the activities of some organizations are insignificant, the great powers are trying to react to this issue in one way or another. However, both world states and regional states understand well that the future salvation of the region now depends on the permanent stability that will be established in the region. It is known that armed conflicts, in addition to causing human losses, the destruction of social infrastructure, in many cases economic decline and serious security problems, also cause great damage to the environment for decades. However, today Azerbaijan continues to pursue its policy in accordance with the soft power strategy in peacebuilding in the South Caucasus. While taking steps to strengthen its own security, Azerbaijan also defends broader regional security. Regional security requires the cooperation of interested parties. Commitment to peace,

cooperation with European partners, solving humanitarian problems, promoting economic development and ensuring regional security are important elements of Azerbaijan's strategy for the region. Azerbaijan continues to play an active role in shaping the future of the South Caucasus. Our country's commitment to peace and cooperation promises a more stable and prosperous region for all. As the role of “soft power” tools in modern international relations increases, the main task of the state in the struggle for geopolitical influence is considered, first of all, to be a policy of ensuring “soft” security. The concept of “soft” security focuses more on general political, social, ecological, economic, ethnic, religious and other aspects of international cooperation, which are considered extremely relevant in the context of globalization, than on military-political issues (as in the traditional hard system).

Conclusion

Thus, the Azerbaijani “soft power” concept is based on the idea of promoting national interests through a comprehensive demonstration of the history, culture, tolerance, and potential of the people, thereby increasing confidence in our state in the international arena. Along with other factors, the rapid development of the material base of specific areas such as tourism, culture, and sports, which develop the country's image, is an integral part of this concept. The holding of the International Humanitarian Forum, the World Forum for Intercultural Dialogue, the Davos Economic Forum, the Eurovision Song Contest 2012 in Azerbaijan, the first European Games in 2015, the Formula 1 auto races in 2016, and the European Football Championship matches in 2020 - all this means the recognition and assessment by international structures of the great achievements of Azerbaijan in various areas of socio-economic life. Azerbaijan has become an important country in terms of soft power with its policy of mediation in foreign policy, foreign assistance, and participation in peacekeeping forces. The implementation of various global projects, such as the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, has contributed to the growth of Azerbaijan’s international prestige. These examples show that even if a state has few resources, it can achieve a successful soft power policy by using them effectively.

In conclusion, we would like to note that in the foreign policy course of the Azerbaijani state, the “soft power” - humanitarian policy factor creates a favorable basis for diplomatic activity to achieve its goals, serves to establish equal and mutually beneficial relations between states and peoples, mutual promotion of cultural heritage, free exchange of cultural wealth, and elimination of threats and restrictions that hinder cultural integration and dialogue processes. It is expected that processes in the world will proceed more smoothly through soft power,

problems will decrease, and possible conflicts will be resolved not by military means, but through negotiations and compromises in accordance with the norms and principles of international law. Military power is now relegated to the second place as the main means of influence. It is being adapted to new realities, becoming more subtle, complex and “cultural”, and justified by humanitarian aspects, that is, it is becoming “soft power”. The human factor is now being brought to the fore, democracy and human rights are being used to put pressure on individual countries. Azerbaijan, both as a government and as a society, has been distinguished by its tolerant attitude towards ethnic and religious differences to this day. It is our advantage to be one of the rare countries in the world where anti-Semitism does not prevail. This is one of the positive images of the country and its people. The message that our ethnic, religious and cultural differences send to the world is: "we can accept everyone and live together in peace."

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