

SMART POWER STRATEGIES IN AZERBAIJAN’S POLICY TOWARD GEORGIA

AZERBAYCAN’IN GÜRCİSTAN POLİTİKASINDA AKILLI GÜÇ STRATEJİLERİ

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Abstract

This article aims to examine Azerbaijan’s foreign policy toward Georgia—a country that is not only its northwestern neighbor but also holds a geostrategic position in the South Caucasus—through the lens of the concept of “smart power.” The study seeks to address the question: Can Azerbaijan’s policy toward Georgia be evaluated within the framework of smart power? To this end, the study draws on two primary sources of power: economic instruments and soft power tools. Focusing particularly on the trajectory of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy since 1993 and the subsequent development of bilateral relations with Georgia, the study employs document analysis and content analysis techniques. It aims to assess whether Azerbaijan’s actions in both domains can be interpreted as components of a comprehensive smart power strategy, and to what extent these actions contribute to shaping bilateral relations. Within this framework, policies implemented in key sectors such as energy, trade, transportation, education, culture, and healthcare are analyzed to reveal their impact on Azerbaijan–Georgia relations. Adopting an eclectic approach, the study ultimately aims to demonstrate how Azerbaijan effectively employs smart power to safeguard its national interests while simultaneously advancing regional stability and cooperation, but also to enhance and deepen its strategic partnership with Georgia.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Georgia, neighboring states, bilateral relations, smart power

Öz

Bu makalede Azerbaycan’ın Kuzeybatı komşusu olmanın yanı sıra Güney Kafkasya’da jeostratejik bir konumu bulunan Gürcistan’a yönelik dış politikasının “akıllı güç” kavramı düzleminde incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Azerbaycan’ın Gürcistan politikası akıllı güç kapsamında değerlendirilebilir mi? sorusuna yanıt aranan çalışmada iki kaynaktan bulgular incelenmektedir: Ekonomik ve yumuşak güç araçları. Özellikle 1993 yılından itibaren şekillenen Azerbaycan dış politikası ve bu bağlamda Gürcistan ile gelişen ikili ilişkilerin ele alındığı makalede belge incelemesi, içerik analizi tekniklerine başvurulmuş olarak Azerbaycan’ın her iki alandaki eylemlerinin bir bütün olarak değerlendirilmesinin mümkün olup olmadığının, bu eylemlerin akıllı güç araçları olarak değerlendirilip değerlendirilmeyeceğinin, akıllı güç politikalarının ilişkilerin şekillenmesindeki rolünün ektektik yaklaşımla incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda enerji, ticaret, ulaşım, eğitim, kültür ve sağlık gibi birçok alanda uygulanan politikalar analiz edilmekte, söz konusu politikaların Gürcistan ile ilişkiler üzerindeki etkisi ortaya konulmaktadır. Çalışma,

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Azerbaycan'ın ulusal çıkarlarını korurken aynı zamanda bölgesel istikrar ve iş birliği hedeflerine ulaşmak ve Gürcistan'la stratejik ortaklık ilişkilerini geliştirmek için akıllı gücü nasıl etkin biçimde kullandığını göstermeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Azerbaycan, Gürcistan, komşu devletler, ikili ilişkiler, akıllı güç

Introduction

Various approaches have emerged in the scholarly literature on Azerbaijan's foreign policy since independence. Seçil Oraz Beşikçi divides Azerbaijan's post-independence foreign policy into three phases: the formative (infancy), rupture, and balancing periods, emphasizing that Azerbaijan maintained an equal distance from both global and regional powers.¹

In their study *The Determining Factors of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy and the Reflections on Its Balancing Strategy*, Reha Yılmaz and Fatih Mehmet Say analyze Azerbaijan's international policy through the lens of common interests and mutual security, emphasizing the importance of economic, social, and cultural relations.²

According to Javid Valiyev, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has focused on three main objectives: preserving independence, resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and transforming Azerbaijan into a key partner for regional powers.³

Mamuka Tsereteli, in his book "Azerbaijan and Georgia: Strategic Partnership for Stability in a Volatile Region," discusses Azerbaijan's economic power, noting that these capabilities have enabled it to play a more active role in Georgia.⁴

According to Mehmet Yüce, following the victory in Karabakh, escaping the conditions of war and ensuring economic vitality, peace, and stability in the region have become priorities in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.⁵

Nabat Garakhanova has examined Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the context of soft power strategies, arguing that digital and cultural diplomacy initiatives constitute significant steps toward strengthening the country's position in international relations and expanding its sphere of influence on a global scale. She emphasizes that these strategies play a key role in shaping

1 Seçil Öraz Beşikçi, "Bağımsızlık Sonrası Dönemde Azerbaycan Dış Politikasındaki Stratejik Değişimler ve Yönelimler", *Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi*, XVI/ 2, (2016), p. 250.

2 Reha Yılmaz – Fatih Mehmet Sayın, "Azerbaycan Dış Politikasını Belirleyen Öğeler ve Denge Politikasına Yansımaları", *Çankırı Karatekin Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, IV/1, p. 39

3 Javid Valiyev, "Foreign Policy of Azerbaijan in 25 Years of Independence", *Caucasus International Journal*, VII/ 1 (2017), p. 30.

4 Mamuka Tsereteli, *Azerbaijan and Georgia: Strategic Partnership for Stability in a Volatile Region*, A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, Singapore 2013, p. 22.

5 Mehmet Yüce, "Karabağ Zaferinden sonra Azerbaycan Dış Politikasının Öncelikleri", *Türk Dünyası Akademik Bakış*, II/3 (2022), p. 113.

Azerbaijan's image both regionally and globally, as well as in fostering engagement with the international community.⁶

The reviewed literature suggests that Azerbaijan's post-independence foreign policy has been built on a strategy of balance, highlighting the effective use of economic and cultural power in both bilateral and multilateral relations and the broader international arena. However, these studies focus more on Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey, Russia, and the European Union, while offering limited analysis of its policy toward Georgia. Secondly, existing research on Azerbaijan–Georgia relations remains largely confined to the frameworks of energy and transport-communication projects. As a result, the topic has been primarily approached through the lens of Azerbaijan's economic influence. Moreover, the soft power strategies that are frequently emphasized in Azerbaijan's foreign policy discourse and supported by numerous international initiatives have not been examined in the context of their impact on Georgia. Investigating these dimensions is essential for analyzing the nature of Azerbaijan's policy toward Georgia and assessing whether the concept of smart power is applicable in this context.

Accordingly, the main research question of this article is as follows: Can Azerbaijan's policy toward Georgia be evaluated within the framework of smart power? The article pursues three main objectives: first, to examine Azerbaijan–Georgia relations in different periods following independence; second, to determine whether Azerbaijan's policy toward Georgia can be assessed from a smart power perspective; and third, to analyze the role of smart power strategies in shaping bilateral relations.

The first paragraph of the study explores the concept of power, its various forms, and particularly the notions of soft and smart power through an eclectic approach. The second paragraph reviews Azerbaijan–Georgia relations during the initial years following independence. The third paragraph focuses on Azerbaijan's Georgia policy during the Heydar Aliyev era, examining the economic and soft power tools employed. The fourth paragraph is dedicated to analyzing bilateral relations under Ilham Aliyev's presidency, with particular attention to economic diplomacy implemented through the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) and cultural diplomacy conducted via the Heydar Aliyev Foundation.

The article argues that Azerbaijan's policy toward Georgia can be characterized within the framework of smart power, as an effective combination of hard (economic) and soft power. The study demonstrates that smart power strategies have had a positive impact on the development of Azerbaijan–Georgia relations.

The study covers the period from 1991, when Azerbaijan and Georgia regained their independence, to the present. As sources, the article draws on compilations of official visits and

6 Nabat Garakhanova, "Azerbaycan'ın Dış Politikada Kültür ve Dijital Diplomasi Entegrasyonu", *Karadeniz Araştırmaları*, XXI/81 (2024), p. 46.

statements by Azerbaijani presidents, official agreements signed between the two states, annual reports from various institutions and organizations, and official government websites.

Please, revise your Introduction. Your Introduction should be an introduction to your work, not only to your topic. In Introduction, one should find your research question, research rationale, brief information on theoretical approach, literature review, methodology, your research design, organization of your article, some findings of your research, limitations of your work, etc.

The Concept of Smart Power in International Relations

The concept of power is one of the fundamental terms in the field of International Relations. According to Max Weber, the theorist of bureaucracy, power is the probability that an individual within a social relationship can realize their will despite opposition.⁷

As one of the most prominent representatives of classical realism, Hans Morgenthau describes power as the most essential means for achieving objectives. According to him, power is the ability of one actor to exert control over another through influence in specific areas.⁸

One of the key representatives of neoliberalism, Joseph S. Nye⁹ suggests that it is most effective to begin by examining the dictionary definition of power. He defines power as the capacity to achieve desired outcomes, and in a social context, as the ability to influence others to achieve one's goals. Nye notes that politicians and diplomats often define power in terms of resources such as population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military strength, and political stability. However, in the context of 21st-century globalization and technological advancements, Nye argues that power has evolved. He asserts that military power alone is no longer sufficient. In contrast, technology, education, and economic growth have gained importance, while geography, population, and raw materials have declined in strategic relevance. Nye introduced the term "soft power" in the late 20th century, defining it as the ability to influence others voluntarily through culture, values, economic interests, and ideas, without resorting to hard power. He contrasts hard power, which involves *pushing* or coercing others through military or economic sanctions, with soft power, which involves *pulling* or persuading others through positive and attractive energy to achieve desired outcomes. According to Nye, the primary sources of soft power include a country's culture, political values, and the legitimacy and morality of its foreign policies.¹⁰

In 2004, Nye expanded on these ideas by introducing the concept of "smart power" in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Smart power refers to the strategic

7 Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*, trans. A.M.Henderson and Tarcott Parsons, Oxford University Press, New York 1947, p. 152.

8 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred A.Knoph, New York 1949, p. 13-14.

9 Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, LXXX (1990), p.154.

10 Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *The Future of Power*, Public Affairs, New York 2011, [https://www.academia.edu/23946693/ THE_FUTURE_OF_POWER](https://www.academia.edu/23946693/THE_FUTURE_OF_POWER) [Accessed: 30.01.2024].

combination of soft and hard power tools to form effective strategies.¹¹ He argued that there are limits to what military power alone can achieve and emphasized that issues such as the development of democracy, human rights, and civil society cannot be resolved through force. After Nye introduced the concept of smart power into academic and political discourse, the term quickly gained traction, especially among U.S. policymakers and strategic thinkers. For instance, in a public address, Hillary Clinton advocated the use of smart power, referring to it as the full spectrum of diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural tools—employed selectively depending on the situation.¹²

In her 2004 article titled “Smart Power: Reclaiming Liberal Internationalism,” Suzanne Nossel emphasizes the necessity of combining hard and soft power in U.S. foreign policy and advocates for the reconstruction of liberal internationalism.

Over time, the notion of smart power has not only influenced the formulation of foreign policy strategies in the United States but has also entered the foreign policy vocabulary of various other states seeking to enhance their influence in an increasingly complex international system.

Interest in this concept has also emerged in Europe and has periodically appeared in the speeches of politicians and researchers. For instance, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, in a speech at the University of Oxford, outlined how the European Union could employ smart power to achieve its objectives.¹³

Tea Kiliptari writes that China's self-conceptualization reflects the importance it attaches to both hard and soft power elements, as well as the availability of these tools, yet China does not define itself as entirely a soft power or entirely a hard power. According to her, China prioritizes an appropriate combination of both types of power and pays close attention to the context and timing of their use. In other words, China has adopted a smart power approach in its international relations.¹⁴

In *The Future of Power*, Nye elaborated on smart power strategies, citing Singapore as an example of a state that successfully implemented such strategies. On one hand, Singapore fortified itself militarily to a level that prevented it from being easily dominated by its neighbors. On the other hand, its advances in education and active participation in international organizations transformed it into a developed and influential nation.¹⁵

When examining the literature on Azerbaijan's smart power strategies, we encounter arguments emphasizing the combined use of hard and soft power. For instance, Sirus Asgarov states that

11 Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *Soft Power the Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York 2004, p. 147.

12 U.S. Department of State, “American “Smart Power”: Diplomacy and Development are the Vanguard” <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/162459.pdf>, [Accessed: 03.02.2025].

13 Mai'a K. Davis Cross, *Europe as a Smart Power: The Impact of the European External Action Service* American Political Science Association 2011, p. 2.

14 Tea Kiliptari, “China's Smart Rise”, *Güvenlik Stratejileri*, IX/ 18 (2013), p. 77.

15 Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, https://www.academia.edu/23946693/THE_FUTURE_OF_POWER

Azerbaijan's strategy to enhance its influence on the global stage comprises a comprehensive set of measures encompassing economic, diplomatic, cultural, and educational dimensions.¹⁶

It can be concluded that different theories offer varying approaches to the concept of power. Broadly defined, power refers to an actor's capacity to compel or influence others to act in alignment with its interests. The main point of divergence lies in how and by what means this ability to influence or compel others is exercised. The concept of smart power can be regarded as one of the new approaches in international relations. In the works written by representatives of various theoretical schools, we encounter studies concerning the smart power strategies of a number of states around the world.¹⁷

Azerbaijan–Georgia Relations in the Early Years of Independence

Despite the implementation of Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring) in the 1980s to narrow the development gap with the West, the collapse of the Soviet Union—often referred to as the “prison of nations”—became inevitable. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan regained its independence on October 18, 1991, with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, marking the re-establishment of the Azerbaijan Republic, the successor to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic founded on May 28, 1918.¹⁸

In its newly regained independence, Azerbaijan was confronted with both the economic crisis resulting from the collapse of the USSR and the war resulting from Armenia's aggressive policies. In its struggle for survival, Azerbaijan sought to define its internal and external political lines. From the early years of independence, efforts were made to establish foreign policy alongside domestic policy, adopting a peaceful approach and striving to build friendly bilateral and multilateral relations.

Since the Declaration of Independence on October 18, 1991, several phases of Azerbaijan's foreign policy can be identified. The period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, under Ayaz Mutallibov¹⁹, was characterized by the dominance of Russian influence. A sharp shift occurred with the rise of Abulfaz Elchibey²⁰, who adopted a policy opposing Russia and Iran and leaned toward Türkiye. Under Heydar Aliyev²¹, a new structure for foreign policy was established, focusing on stability and the struggle to assert Azerbaijan's independence in

16 Sirus Asgarov, “Influence and Norm Entrepreneurship: Azerbaijan's Strategic Deployment of Soft Power”, *International Journal of Political Studies*, X/1, (2024), p. 41.

17 Yakup Şahin, “Uluslararası İlişkilerde Güce Farklı Yaklaşımlar ve Türkiye'nin Gücü”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Diplomasi Dergisi*, III/2, (2020), p. 2.

18 İlknur Dalkılıç, *Azərbaycan'ın Bağımsızlık Süreci və Türkiyə-Azərbaycan İlişkileri (1991-2000)* (PhD Thesis), Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi. Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, İzmir 2015, p. 49.

19 Ayaz Mutallibov (1938–2022), the First President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (1991–1992).

20 Abulfaz Elchibey (1938-2000) 2nd President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (1992-1993).

21 Heydar Aliyev (1923-2003) 3rd, 4th President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (1993-2003).

international relations. During Ilham Aliyev's²² presidency, Azerbaijan implemented key regional energy and transportation projects and invested heavily in the modernization of its armed forces. Simultaneously, the country hosted international forums, cultural events, and sports tournaments, while actively participating in global organizations such as the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organization of Turkic States. These efforts supported a balanced foreign policy between regional and global powers and were instrumental in safeguarding Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

From Heydar Aliyev's period onward, the establishment of mutually beneficial relations with all neighboring states became one of the key directions of foreign policy. In this context, bilateral relations with the neighboring country of Georgia were given special importance and selected as one of the main focal points in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

The geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions of relations between the two countries also affect their internal political and economic lines. Azerbaijan and Georgia, located in the strategic region between the Caspian and Black Seas, have unique geographic positions that influence their bilateral relations. Azerbaijan serves as Georgia's gateway to Asia, while Georgia is Azerbaijan's gateway to Europe.²³ Georgia conducts its relations with Asian countries through Azerbaijan, while Azerbaijan uses Georgian territory to engage with Turkey and Europe.

The Caspian Sea basin's resources and the region's role as a hub for East-West transportation and communication have defined the South Caucasus's geo-economic role. In particular, Azerbaijan's oil strategy, based on its hydrocarbon resources, and the projects implemented as part of this strategy have not only strengthened the region's geo-economic position but have also played a decisive role in securing the independence of both Azerbaijan and Georgia, providing opportunities for the development of their economies.

The shared history of the countries, the centuries-old neighborhood relations between the Azerbaijani and Georgian peoples, deep cultural and humanitarian ties, and the fact that approximately 250,000 Azerbaijanis live in Georgia,²⁴ with unofficial estimates suggesting up to half a million, while about 10,000 Georgian-origin citizens reside in Azerbaijan²⁵, are also significant factors shaping the bilateral relations. All these elements are carefully considered in the approach to relations with Georgia, with a preference for friendly ties.

In the early years of independence, relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia were marked by tension. As the Soviet Union was collapsing, a harsh campaign of discrimination against Azerbaijanis in Georgia had been initiated. This issue became even more pronounced after both countries regained their independence. Under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia,²⁶ nationalist

22 Ilham Aliyev (1961) President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2003-).

23 Musa Qasımlı et al., *Heydər Əliyev və Qafqaz Problemləri*, Aspoliqraf, Baku 2023, p. 150.

24 Musa Qasımlı et al., *Heydər Əliyev və Qafqaz Problemləri*, p. 156.

25 Samirə Həbibbəyli, *Azərbaycan Respublikası – Gürcüstan Münasibətləri*, Parlaq İmzalar, Baku 2024, p. 174.

26 Zviad Gamsakhurdia – The First President of Georgia (1991-1992).

forces came to power in Georgia and began pressuring the Azerbaijanis—long-standing residents of the region. These forces pursued policies of intimidation and attempted to expel Azerbaijanis from their historical lands. During Gamsakhurdia’s two-year rule, 94 Azerbaijanis were abducted, 660 were dismissed from their jobs, and 27,500 were forced to flee their ancestral homes.²⁷

At the same time, the newly independent Azerbaijan Republic was facing both internal and external turmoil. These difficulties hindered the formulation of an effective foreign policy, including the regulation of relations with Georgia. In such a tense environment, not only were there no measures taken to address the issues faced by Azerbaijanis in Georgia, but the increasing violence against Azerbaijanis was also kept hidden from the Azerbaijani public.

Following Mutallibov’s removal from power, the Azerbaijan government began taking steps to normalize relations with Georgia. On November 18, 1992, the two countries’ foreign ministries signed a protocol on cooperation, officially establishing diplomatic relations.²⁸ The groundwork for intergovernmental relations was further developed during Georgian Parliament Chairman Eduard Shevardnadze’s visit to Azerbaijan in February 1993, which resulted in the signing of 18 agreements across various sectors.²⁹ These agreements laid the foundation for a new phase of bilateral cooperation between the two countries.³⁰

Thus, it can be concluded that although relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia were tense in the first months following the restoration of their independence, the establishment of official diplomatic ties paved the way for the development of intergovernmental relations.

Azerbaijan – Georgia Relations during Heydar Aliyev’s Presidency

The turning point in bilateral relations began with Haydar Aliyev’s rise to power. During his presidency, Aliyev focused on the following areas in relations with Georgia:

- Increasing Azerbaijan’s influence on Georgia’s economy;
- Implementing energy projects;
- Resolving regional issues peacefully and ensuring prosperity and stability through the “Caucasus House” project;
- Coordinating positions on territorial integrity within UN negotiations and in international forums;

27 *Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası A.A. Bakıxanov adına Tarix İnstitutu, Azərbaycan-Gürcüstan Münasibətləri Tarixi (XVIII Əsr-XXI Əsrin Əvvəlləri)*, Şərq – Qərb Nəşriyyat Evi, Bakı 2013, p. 283.

28 *Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası A.A. Bakıxanov adına Tarix İnstitutu, Azərbaycan-Gürcüstan Münasibətləri Tarixi (XVIII Əsr-XXI Əsrin Əvvəlləri)*, p. 286.

29 Musa Qasımlı, *Azərbaycanın Xarici Siyasəti (1991-2003)*, Mütərcim, Bakı 2015, p. 611.

30 *Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası A.A. Bakıxanov adına Tarix İnstitutu, Azərbaycan-Gürcüstan Münasibətləri Tarixi (XVIII Əsr-XXI Əsrin Əvvəlləri)*, p. 289.

- Improving the living conditions of Azerbaijanis in Georgia and promoting their social integration;
- Preserving Azerbaijan's historical and cultural heritage in neighboring countries;
- Preventing the closure of schools providing education in Azerbaijani and thus maintaining the language's continuity;
- Strengthening intergovernmental relations with the help of personal diplomacy.

Since the first days of his presidency on June 15, 1993, Heydar Aliyev made efforts to revitalize relations with Georgia. For instance, two days after assuming office, Georgia's Deputy Prime Minister A.Mrgiani was received by Heydar Aliyev, and through an intergovernmental agreement, Azerbaijan committed to providing a 3 billion manat loan for the supply of petroleum and industrial products to Georgia.³¹ In subsequent years, Azerbaijan continued to provide financial assistance and loans to support the recovery of Georgia's economy.

Heydar Aliyev developed a petroleum strategy to bring Azerbaijan's energy resources to global markets, culminating in the signing of the "The Contract of the Century" in 1994, which secured not only Azerbaijan's but also Georgia's economic welfare. Initially signed by 10 companies from six countries,³² the agreement expanded in later years. The most critical issue that followed was determining the most suitable route for the transit pipeline. Despite potential challenges posed by the conflicts in Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions, the Georgian route was considered the most viable option for Azerbaijan. Firstly, Georgia was seen as "experienced" in this regard, having served as a route for transporting Azerbaijani oil during the Tsarist Russian era.³³ Most importantly, the pipeline, passing through Georgia, would connect Azerbaijan with Türkiye, aligning with Azerbaijan's national interests.

After bilateral and multilateral negotiations that lasted until 1996, Heydar Aliyev's first official visit to Georgia in March 1996 resulted in the signing of an agreement on transporting oil via Georgia.³⁴ Thus, despite various challenges, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project was realized, serving not only an economic but also a political function in transmitting Azerbaijan's oil to the West.

From the moment he came to power, Heydar Aliyev worked towards resolving the Karabakh issue, which led to a ceasefire being declared on May 12, 1994.³⁵ Aliyev emphasized that the resolution of the conflict depended on peace, security, and mutual cooperation, and he

31 Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası A.A.Bakıxanov adına Tarix İnstitutu, *Azərbaycan-Gürcüstan Münasibətləri Tarixi (XVIII Əsr-XXI Əsrin Əvvəlləri)*, p. 297.

32 The Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan Əsrin müqaviləsi. <https://minenergy.gov.az/az/neft/esrin-muqavilesi> [Accessed: 31.01.2020].

33 Musa Qasımlı et al., *Heydər Əliyev və Qafqaz Problemləri*, p. 166.

34 Heydər Əliyev, *Müstəqilliyimiz Əbədidir*, V, Azərnaşr, Bakı 1998, p. 413.

35 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan İlham Aliyev "Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict", <https://president.az/en/pages/view/azerbaijan/karabakh> [Accessed: 21.12. 2024].

consistently advocated for peace. He supported the creation of the “Caucasus House” platform for this purpose. During his first visit to Georgia, he initiated efforts in this direction, leading to the signing of a *Declaration on Peace, Security, and Cooperation in the Caucasus*.³⁶ This declaration aimed to foster cooperation for the peaceful resolution of international conflicts and to avoid the use of force in the region.

From the early days of independence, Azerbaijan and Georgia have fought shoulder-to-shoulder in international forums like the UN in their struggle against occupation. In over 30 resolutions related to territorial integrity at the UN, Azerbaijan has supported Georgia.³⁷ Similarly, Georgia voted positively on four UN resolutions concerning Azerbaijan.

As is well known, Azerbaijanis constitute the largest ethnic minority in Georgia. The majority of this population is settled in the historical Borchali region and in Tbilisi. Among them are students who attend schools offering instruction in the Azerbaijani language, some of which have been in operation since the late 19th century.³⁸ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia experienced a significant decline.

Heydar Aliyev regarded the Azerbaijanis in Georgia as a bridge in Azerbaijan–Georgia relations. As mentioned earlier, during the early years of independence, the living conditions of Azerbaijanis in Georgia were quite challenging, though some alleviation was noted after Eduard Shevardnadze’s rise to power. From the first days of his presidency, Heydar Aliyev paid close attention to the situation of Azerbaijanis in Georgia. During his first visit to Georgia, he raised this issue, stressing that the Azerbaijani state stood behind its citizens in Georgia.

During the tenure of Heydar Aliyev, fostering relationships in the field of education became a key focus, with particular attention given to preserving schools that offered instruction in the Azerbaijani language. Various projects were implemented to achieve this objective.

In 1994, following the directive of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan began providing textbooks for Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia.³⁹ This initiative was crucial for ensuring that the Azerbaijani population in Georgia could receive education in their native language, thereby contributing to the preservation of Azerbaijani heritage in the country. Moreover, this gesture, which relieved Georgia of part of the financial burden associated with educational expenses, can be viewed as a form of support for the Georgian economy. This process has continued to the present day.

36 Heydər Əliyev, *Müstəqilliyimiz Əbədidir*, V, p. 404.

37 United Nations, “Azerbaydjan, Qruzıya, Moldova i Ukraina Predlaqaet Prinyat Rezolyuçiyu Qeneralnoy Assambleey o Zatyanuvsixsya Konfliktax v Stranax QUAM” <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2007/12/1117071> [Accessed: 07.12.2007].

38 Ələddin Qarabağlı, *Gürcüstanda Azərbaycan dilli məktəblərin Tarixi Antologiyası*, Print Fabrika, Tbilisi 2023, p. 40.

39 Azerbaijan State News Agency, “Gürcüstanda 120 Azərbaycan Dilli Məktəb Fəaliyyət Göstərir”, https://azertag.az/xeber/gurcustanda_120_azerbaycan_dilli_mekteb_fealiyyet_gosterir-1203469 [Accessed: 12.10.2018].

Heydar Aliyev also mobilized his personal connections to expand relations with Georgia. Notably, the amicable ties he had established with Eduard Shevardnadze during the Soviet era positively influenced the development of Azerbaijan–Georgia cooperation. During the independence period, Aliyev frequently referred to the Georgian president as his “friend” and “brother” in his speeches, describing the relations between the Azerbaijani and Georgian peoples as deeply rooted bonds of brotherhood. He made a concerted effort to maintain warm relations with the Georgian president to strengthen bilateral ties.

For instance, on January 24, 1998, Heydar Aliyev visited Georgia to celebrate Shevardnadze’s 70th birthday—a gesture reciprocated later that year when Shevardnadze attended Aliyev’s birthday celebrations in Azerbaijan.⁴⁰ These mutual acts of goodwill underscored the importance of personal diplomacy in fostering bilateral relations.

In his speech during Shevardnadze’s birthday celebration, Aliyev emphasized the role of their friendship in advancing bilateral cooperation, stating: *The foundation of our friendship lies in the shared desire of Eduard Amvrosiyevich and myself to provide as much benefit as possible to our peoples.*⁴¹

Ilham Aliyev’s Presidency: The Strategic Partnership between Georgia and Azerbaijan

After Ilham Aliyev was elected President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2003⁴², he remained loyal to the political line of Heydar Aliyev, and frequently emphasized this commitment. Much like his predecessor, he pursued a balanced policy, and during his tenure, the widespread use of smart power strategies became increasingly prominent. Several key factors contributed to Azerbaijan’s growing international influence during Ilham Aliyev’s presidency. These included the continuation of petroleum projects central to the country’s economic development, the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor—strengthening regional and European energy security—and the inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which transformed the region into a major transportation hub. In addition, the government prioritized military modernization and enhanced Azerbaijan’s role in international organizations. Furthermore, Azerbaijan’s image in the international community was bolstered through hosting various global forums, large-scale sports and cultural events, active participation in the educational, scientific, cultural, and communication activities of UNESCO and ISESCO, humanitarian aid reaching numerous corners of the world, financing the restoration of art pieces from the world heritage, and other initiatives. Ilham Aliyev not only continued the line of friendly relations established with Georgia but also elevated bilateral ties to the level of strategic partnership⁴³. During his presidency, relations

40 Heydər Əliyev, *Müstəqilliyimiz Əbədidir*, XIV, Azərneşr, Baku 2005, p. 280.

41 Heydər Əliyev, *Müstəqilliyimiz Əbədidir*, XV, Azərneşr, Baku 1998, p. 186.

42 İlham Əliyev, *İnkişaf Məqsədimizdir*, II, Azərneşr, Baku 1998, p. 13.

43 Ministry of Justice of The Republic of Azerbaijan, “Azərbaycan Respublikası və Gürcüstanın Birgə Bəyannaməsinin

with the neighboring country were developed across various sectors, including commercial-economic, energy, transportation, tourism, and humanitarian areas.

Following the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, which brought Azerbaijani oil to global markets, the opening of the Southern Gas Corridor, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline and later the TANAP and TAP projects, became the key to the economic development of both Azerbaijan and Georgia. These projects provided Georgia with substantial revenue while ensuring energy security under favorable conditions.

After energy projects, the establishment of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye trilateral cooperation and the agreement on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project⁴⁴ transformed the region into a major transportation hub. The significance of this railway has increased, especially due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite the efforts of Western countries to block the project and their failure to allocate financial resources, the project was realized thanks to Azerbaijan's extensive efforts. Considering Georgia's financial difficulties and the geopolitical and geoeconomic advantages of the project, the Republic of Azerbaijan also took on the responsibility of financing the construction of the section passing through Georgian territory. For this purpose, the Republic of Azerbaijan provided loans to the Georgian Republic: \$200 million for Tranche A at an annual interest rate of 1% over 25 years, and \$575 million for Tranche B at an annual interest rate of 5%, totaling \$775 million.⁴⁵

Azerbaijan, leveraging the revenues from its energy resources, has not only utilized these funds domestically but also made significant investments abroad. In fact, Azerbaijan has been one of the leading countries investing in Georgia for many years. The first foreign expansion of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan⁴⁶ was notably in Georgia. Established in 2006, SOCAR Energy Georgia is one of the largest investors and taxpayers in the neighboring country. In addition to wholesale and retail activities in the Georgian market, it is involved in the construction and operation of fuel stations, gas distribution, and the execution of import operations. To manage these activities, subsidiaries such as SOCAR Georgia Gas, SOCAR Georgia Petroleum, and SOCAR Georgia Security were established, all fully owned by SOCAR Energy Georgia. Since 2006, SOCAR Georgia Petroleum, and since 2008, SOCAR Georgia Gas and the Kulevi oil terminal have been serving consumers.⁴⁷

Təsdiq Edilməsi Barədə Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu”, <https://e-qanun.az/framework/5931> [Accessed: 03.02.2024].

44 Ministry of Justice of The Republic of Azerbaijan, ““Bakı – Tbilisi – Qars Yeni Dəmir Yolu Xətti Haqqında” Sazişin təsdiq edilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu”, <https://e-qanun.az/framework/12958> [Accessed: 10.11.2023].

45 State Oil Fund of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Bakı – Tbilisi – Qars Yeni Dəmir Yolu”, <https://oilfund.az/projects/6> [Accessed: 12.04.2024].

46 SOCAR, “Gürcüstan”, <https://www.socar.az/az/page/gurcistan> [Accessed: 11.04.2023].

47 SOCAR, “Gürcüstan”, <https://www.socar.az/az/page/gurcistan> [Accessed: 11.04.2023].

SOCAR Georgia Petroleum's primary activity is the export of petroleum products from Azerbaijan and other exporting countries to the Georgian market. According to 2020 data, there are 110 fuel stations, 13 service centers, and 4 fuel terminals operating under the SOCAR brand in Georgia. Thus, SOCAR controls a significant portion of the retail fuel market in Georgia. As for natural gas, SOCAR Georgia Gas, which imports, sells, and distributes gas in both retail and commercial sectors, had more than 851 thousand subscribers, effectively holding control over nearly the entire gas network in the country.⁴⁸

The Azerbaijani government has extended a helping hand to Georgia in its most difficult times, offering support in overcoming crises. For example, in January 2006, after an explosion in the gas pipeline near the Georgia-Russia border and the Caucasian energy line, which resulted in an energy crisis in Georgia, Azerbaijan's assistance played a crucial role in resolving the situation.⁴⁹ In this instance, Georgia requested gas and electricity aid from Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan responded by exporting 3 million cubic meters of gas to Georgia on January 23. The gas first reached the regions of St. Stepan (formerly Kazbegi) and Dusheti, where temperatures were below – 20 degrees Celsius, and by the end of the day, it reached the capital, Tbilisi. Azerbaijan's aid enabled Georgia to overcome its energy crisis.

Since 1994, the Azerbaijani government has provided support to schools in Georgia that offer education in the Azerbaijani language. Under Ilham Aliyev's leadership, this support has continued and expanded. SOCAR and the Heydar Aliyev Foundation's commendable efforts in the field of education, including the development of bilateral relations and the preservation of Azerbaijani language schools, have resulted in large-scale projects that continue to this day.

In 2007, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation began the construction of a Computer Training Center in the town of Dmanisi, Georgia, which was opened on June 15, 2008.⁵⁰ Equipped with modern infrastructure, materials, and technical resources, this center plays a significant role in providing education that meets the contemporary needs of both Azerbaijani and Georgian youth. As part of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation's projects carried out in 2010-2011, schools in Tbilisi (73 schools), Marneuli (7 schools), Gardabani (3 schools), and Dmanisi district (School No. 2) were completely renovated, and new school buildings were constructed in Kirovi village in Dmanisi district, and in the villages of Hasanhocalı and Caferli in Bolnisi district.⁵¹

48 SOCAR GEORGIA GAS, "History", <https://www.socargas.ge/en/history> [Accessed: 05.12.2024].

49 Azerbaijan State News Agency, "Gürcüstan Azərbaycanın Köməyi ilə Enerji Böhranından Çıxır", https://azertag.az/xeber/Gurcistan_Azarbaycanin_komayi_ila_enerji_bohranindan_chixir-334947 [Accessed: 23.01.2006].

50 Heydar Aliyev Foundation, "Building of Computer Learning Center Built in Georgia on the Initiative of Heydar Aliyev Foundation Opened", <https://heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/content/view/59/1516/Building-of-Computer-Learning-Center-built-in-Georgia-on-the-initiative-of-Heydar-Aliyev-Foundation-opened> [Accessed: 15.06.2008].

51 Azerbaijan State News Agency, "Heydar Aliyev Foundation Opens Three Schools in Georgia After Major Repairs", https://azertag.az/en/xeber/heydar_aliyev_foundation_opens_three_schools_in_georgia_after_major_repairs-596604 [Accessed: 24.09.2010].

SOCAR's representative office in Georgia has regularly carried out projects aimed at supporting Azerbaijanis living in Georgia and encouraging young people to pursue education. In 2011, the repair of two secondary schools in Georgia was undertaken by this office.⁵²

Since 2009, the Azerbaijani government has been involved in supporting the integration of Azerbaijanis into Georgian society. As of that year, Georgian language courses were introduced in 84 of the 124 schools offering education in Azerbaijani⁵³. These courses quickly yielded results. For instance, in the 2006-2007 academic year, only 20 Azerbaijani students successfully passed the entrance exams for higher education institutions in Georgia, while by the 2010-2011 academic year, this number had increased to 485.⁵⁴

Since 2008, SOCAR has been covering the tuition fees of Azerbaijani students studying at Georgian universities under the "1+4" education project. Between 2008 and 2022, the company provided scholarships to 6,150 students.⁵⁵

In 2012, SOCAR opened the Tea House Training Center it built in the Marneuli district of Georgia, where the majority of the population is Azerbaijani. The center was designed to offer lessons in both Azerbaijani and Georgian languages, as well as chess and dance. Its aim was to help Azerbaijani youth integrate into Georgian society without forgetting their language and roots.⁵⁶

The Azerbaijani government has placed great importance on the establishment of cultural centers in Georgia. One of the most significant of these is the Georgia-Azerbaijan Friendship House. The foundation for this Friendship House was laid on November 27, 2004, in the park named after Heydar Aliyev in the Gardabani district of Georgia. A similar center was also opened in Tbilisi in December of the same year.⁵⁷

The Tbilisi Azerbaijan State Drama Theatre is one of the most important cultural institutions representing Azerbaijan's cultural heritage in Georgia. Established in the 1870s and operating as the Tbilisi Azerbaijan State Theatre since 1922, the center had to cease its activities in 1947 due to various difficulties.⁵⁸ After the re-establishment of relations between the two countries as independent states, Azerbaijan has consistently supported the revival of this cultural institution.

52 Samirə Həbibbəyli, *Azərbaycan Respublikası – Gürcüstan Münasibətləri*, p. 174.

53 Republic of Azerbaijan Cabinet of Ministers, *Azərbaycan Respublikası Nazirlər Kabinetinin 2009-cu ildə Fəaliyyəti haqqında Hesabat*, Baku 2010, p. 228.

54 Republic of Azerbaijan Cabinet of Ministers, *Azərbaycan Respublikası Nazirlər Kabinetinin 2010-cu ildə Fəaliyyəti haqqında Hesabat*, Baku 2011, p. 254.

55 SOCAR, "SOCAR. Gürcüstan", <https://www.socar.az/az/page/gurcistan> [Accessed: April 11.04. 2023].

56 The Azerbaijan State News Agency, "Gürcüstanda "Çay Evi" Azərbaycan Gənclər Mərkəzi açılmışdır", https://azertag.az/xeber/gurcustanda_chay_evi_azerbaycan_gencler_merkezi_achilmisdir-185776 [Accessed: 10.09.2012].

57 Azerbaijan State News Agency, "Gürcüstan və Azərbaycan Dostluq Evi" İctimai İttifaqı Təsis Olunmuşdur", https://azertag.az/xeber/gurcustan_va_azerbaycan_dostluq_evi_ictimai_ittifaqi_tasis_olunmusdur-323976 [Accessed: 03.12.2004].

58 İlham Rəhimli, *Azərbaycan Teatr Tarixi*, Çaşıoğlu, Baku 2005, p. 213.

During the visit of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ali Asadov, to Georgia in 2023, the foundation of the new building of the Drama Theatre was laid.⁵⁹

The Azerbaijani government has paid particular attention to preserving the legacy of Azerbaijani thinkers, writers, and politicians who lived and worked in Georgia, including the restoration of their graves, the opening of museum homes, and similar initiatives. It is well-known that the fate of many prominent Azerbaijani thinkers, writers, and statesmen has been linked to Georgia, especially its capital, Tbilisi. For instance, the renowned Azerbaijani thinker and writer, Mirza Fatali Akhundov, had a museum house in Tbilisi during the Soviet era. The museum was established in 1946, but over time, the building and its exhibits were damaged and rendered unusable. The Azerbaijani government did not remain indifferent to this situation and contacted the Georgian government for the transfer of the museum.

On May 13, 2009, by the decree of the Georgian President, the building housing the museum named after M.F. Akhundov was transferred to SOCAR Georgia Representation. SOCAR restored the building and reopened it for service.⁶⁰

Following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence, the Azerbaijani government took steps to reopen the museum homes of Neriman Nerimanov and Jalil Memmedguluzade in Tbilisi, where they had lived. Efforts were made to clarify their addresses, privatize the buildings, and restore them.⁶¹

In Georgia, significant dates, anniversaries, and commemorative days related to Azerbaijan are regularly observed, and grand events are organized for this purpose.

Based on the analyzed documents, facts, and materials, it can be concluded that during Heydar and Ilham Aliyevs' presidency, Azerbaijan's policy toward Georgia exhibited a successful combination of economic and soft power tools. With the rise of Heydar Aliyev to power, special attention was given to relations with Georgia, and the successful combination of economic and soft power tools increased Azerbaijan's influence over the country. Loans were provided, economic concessions were made, and Azerbaijan waived its transit rights to facilitate the realization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

In addition to his political and economic maneuvers, Heydar Aliyev also effectively utilized soft power tools. His efforts to improve the socio-economic conditions of Azerbaijanis living in Georgia, raise awareness about prominent Azerbaijani politicians, thinkers, poets, and writers who had lived, worked, and been buried in Georgia, and preserve the Azerbaijani language and

59 Samirə Həbibbəyli, *Azərbaycan Respublikası – Gürcüstan Münasibətləri*, p. 118.

60 Ministry of Culture of The Republic of Azerbaijan, *Azərbaycan Respublikası Mədəniyyət və Turizm Nazirliyinin İllik Hesabatı 2013*, Təhsil, Baku 2014, p. 96.

61 The Azerbaijan State News Agency, "Nəriman Nərimanovun və Cəlil Məmmədquluzadənin Tbilisidəki Ev-Muzeyləri Azərbaycanın Mədəniyyət və Turizm Nazirliyinin Mülkiyyətinə Keçirilmişdir", https://azertag.az/xeber/neriman_nerimanovun_ve_celil_memmedquluzadenin_tbilisideki_ev_muzeyleri_azerbaycanin_medeniyyet_ve_turizm_nazirliyinin_mulkiyyetine_kechirilmisdir-400725 [Accessed: 15.02.2008].

heritage, along with his sincere friendship with Georgian President Shevardnadze, are examples of this.

Under Ilham Aliyev's presidency, this approach was further developed, elevating bilateral relations to the level of strategic partnership. Like his predecessor, Ilham Aliyev applied the successful combination of economic and soft power tools in his relations with Georgia, further enhancing Azerbaijan's influence over the country. Key developments such as the routing of energy pipelines through Georgia, the establishment of SOCAR's first foreign companies in the country, financial support for the realization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project, and significant investments in the economy played a crucial role in deepening bilateral relations.

Efforts in education, healthcare, culture, and humanitarian fields, as well as projects aimed at preserving the Azerbaijani language and culture, have made significant contributions to preserving Azerbaijan's heritage in Georgia. These initiatives also helped the integration of Azerbaijanis in Georgia into Georgian society without assimilation, while improving their standard of living.

Joseph Nye argued that if a state exerts influence while simultaneously offering instruments of attraction and cooperation, this constitutes smart power. Azerbaijan's policy toward Georgia has also been structured along these lines. On the one hand, Georgia's energy security has largely been ensured by Azerbaijan (as the country's internal gas distribution network and retail fuel market are dominated by Azerbaijani companies), and investments have been made in various sectors, thereby granting Azerbaijan significant leverage over Georgia's economy. On the other hand, various initiatives aimed at preserving Azerbaijani cultural heritage, language, and identity in Georgia have strengthened the position of the Azerbaijani community living in the country and enhanced Azerbaijan's image. This strategy demonstrates the effective use of smart power strategies, which combine economic and soft power, in establishing relations with Georgia.

Conclusion

The effective use of smart power has resulted in several positive outcomes. Azerbaijan has played an important role in Georgia's energy security. By selecting Georgia as a route for energy and transportation networks and investing in the country, Azerbaijan has helped Georgia overcome its economic bottleneck and become an important economic partner. Azerbaijan's image in Georgian society has improved. Georgia has supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in regional and global discussions concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. During the Second Karabakh War, Georgia maintained a neutral stance and decided to close its borders, preventing the transfer of weapons to Armenia. The expulsion of Azerbaijanis from their homeland in Georgia was prevented. The socio-political situation of Azerbaijanis in Georgia has improved, leading to an increase in their standard of living. The closure of Azerbaijani language schools in

Georgia has been prevented. The establishment of Azerbaijani cultural centers and museums has contributed to the preservation of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage in Georgia.

In conclusion, the effective use of smart power strategies has advanced Azerbaijan–Georgia relations, creating a strategic partnership that aligns with the national interests of both countries. The dynamics of bilateral relations play a significant role not only between the two states but also in promoting peace, development, security, and cooperation in the region. Indeed, the prosperity and security of the region are ensured not through brute force or conflict, but through peace, mutual respect, and cooperation.

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