

## **SOSIOLOGIYA**

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### **THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF AZERBAIJAN'S NATION BRANDING STRATEGY THROUGH MEGA-EVENTS**

*In the global political arena, gaining influence and creating an image has become a key foreign policy strategy for many states. For post-Soviet countries with limited international visibility, a nation-branding strategy provides a strategic means to reshape their image and enhance soft power. Azerbaijan is a prominent example of this, having hosted a number of high-profile cultural as well as sporting events. The article examines how international events are used as tools of nation branding in Azerbaijan and the role these staged events play in creating and projecting the country's national image. Methodologically, the study applies a conceptual literature review and a comparative textual analysis of secondary scholarly sources related to Azerbaijan. This allows for the identification of recurring patterns in image-building. The analysis shows that events such as the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, the 2015 European Games, and the Formula 1 Grand Prix, held from 2016 to the present, convey narratives of progress, modernity, and geopolitical unity. Nevertheless, their effectiveness is closely linked to the audience's trust in them and their alignment with prevailing socio-political conditions. While event-based nation branding increases visibility, it may fail without sustained cultural legitimacy and consistent governance reforms.*

*Keywords:* Azerbaijan, nation branding, soft power, cultural diplomacy, mega-events

#### *Introduction*

In the modern international arena, image and reputation are regarded as key determinants of influence. To shape external perceptions and strengthen their international standing, states increasingly engage in nation branding, which is understood as the application of branding and marketing communication techniques to promote a nation's image [5, p. 6]. This approach aligns closely with the concept of soft power, which refers to a non-coercive form of influence based on attraction, credibility and recognition rather than material capabilities [17, p.x].

Thus, for emerging post-Soviet states, where historical visibility and international recognition have been limited, developing a positive and coherent image is both a diplomatic necessity and a means of defining themselves in a competing global environment. Following its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has attempted to overcome the limitations of its "image deficit" and position itself within the international landscape through strategic image-building initiatives. While the country has experienced significant economic growth and geopolitical importance, its global perception is often influenced by inadequate visibility or politically motivated narratives.

In this respect, the government of Azerbaijan has utilised large-scale cultural and sporting events as communicative strategies to increase its visibility, convey narratives of progress and modernity, and alter global perceptions. Studies have shown that while the images of well-known states are ingrained and resistant to change, those of lesser-known countries remain flexible and susceptible to external triggers such as media outreach or global events [9, p.2]. However, the efficacy and longevity of event-led branding strategies remain under-researched, especially in the realm of emerging, semi-peripheral nations.

This research examines how Azerbaijan uses international events as tools for nation branding, exploring the extent to which they contribute to its wider soft power strategy. Particularly, this study examines how mega-events serve as performative venues through which states express modernity, competence, and heritage, while fostering their global visibility. The main question guiding this research is: How does Azerbaijan leverage international events as part of its nation-branding efforts to bolster its global image and soft power influence?

The research contributes to the developing academic literature on soft power and nation branding by investigating post-Soviet and emerging-state contexts, where image diplomacy plays a crucial role in international repositioning. Examining Azerbaijan's case provides insights on how states with restricted global recognition utilise event diplomacy to garner attraction and influence. Existing study indicates that international events have been integral to Azerbaijan's branding approach, combining culture, sport, and spectacle to create and transmit unique national images.

Methodologically, the study employs a conceptual literature review combined with comparative textual analysis of existing, relevant case studies. The analysis is based upon secondary academic research that examines Azerbaijan's event-hosting practices, processes of image formation, and socio-political identity narratives. Synthesising findings on sports mega-events, cultural diplomacy, place branding and post-Soviet nation-building, the study uncovers recurring patterns in the use of international events to shape and project national identity.

### ***1. Nation branding attempts of Azerbaijan via international events.***

*Historical and political context.* A country's image can be considered a cognitive–affective–behavioural construct that incorporates perceptions of competence, emotional attraction and intentions to engage. Such images tend to be stable for well-known states; for lesser-known ones, they remain flexible and susceptible to external influences [9, p. 3-16]. In this respect, mega-events can increase visibility by linking emerging nations to narratives of progress, competence, and culture [9, p. 3]. Therefore, nation branding becomes particularly pertinent in contexts of flux, when states need to actively establish legitimacy and visibility in the global arena [3, p. 22; 6, p. 2].

Azerbaijan exemplifies a post-Soviet state confronting both the challenges and opportunities of nation branding. Emerging from the Soviet Union, the country initially faced an image deficit, yet possessed the potential to define its identity on its own terms. Since 1991, energy-driven growth and elite-led modernisation have provided the material and institutional foundations necessary for strategic image-building. The country's international image remains in development, shaped predominantly by high-profile symbolic events and media exposure rather than by entrenched familiarity [9, p. 3]. Consequently, Azerbaijan can be characterised as an “image-deficit” nation, where deliberate nation-branding initiatives function as a compensatory mechanism for limited recognition and geopolitical marginality [6, p. 15]. In this context, the country's natural resource wealth has enabled the utilisation of

large-scale cultural and sporting events as instruments of political and diplomatic influence, reinforcing both domestic legitimacy and international visibility [18, p. 1107].

### ***1.1. Eurovision Song Contest 2012.***

Azerbaijan's nation-branding trajectory is exemplified by the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). As a large-scale cultural event positioned at the juncture of soft power, image politics and identity construction, the ESC provided Azerbaijan with an opportunity to redefine its international presence using spectacle rather than geopolitics. This section reveals the interplay between internal identity negotiation and external image projection, examining how the ESC functioned as both a catalyst and a showcase for Azerbaijan's rebranding process.

A comprehensive account of Azerbaijan's engagement with the Eurovision Song Contest demonstrates how the event reshaped national identity and reframed the country's external orientation. The analysis identifies four interrelated mechanisms through which Eurovision contributed to nation-building and soft power. First, it fostered a Western-oriented self-perception, enabling identity construction in relation to Europe's symbolic "Other" [12, p. 835]. Second, the event acted as a domestic integrator by facilitating interaction between internationally oriented groups and more traditional segments of society, thereby reducing internal sociocultural divides. Third, it transformed the cultural landscape, with musical production and aesthetic expression increasingly aligning with Western and cosmopolitan standards [12, p.839]. Finally, the contest contributed to the decoupling of national identity from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, redirecting external attention from territorial disputes toward culture, historical depth and modernity [12, pp. 833–842].

Operating within these intersecting dynamics, Eurovision assumed the role of a *modernisation symbol*, providing a platform through which state and society jointly articulated notions of belonging, progress and international visibility. The event elevated the country's external profile while generating domestic pride, tourism gains and infrastructure investment [12, p. 844]. Within this framework, Eurovision functioned as a cultural-diplomatic instrument that enabled a redefinition of post-Soviet identity through global cultural participation rather than through energy or security-driven narratives. This trajectory aligns with the concept of *projected identity*, which posits that internal processes of self-redefinition precede their external communication [7, pp. 5–6].

Expanding on this, the hosting of Eurovision 2012 is shown to have positioned identity work as a central component of a deliberately planned nation-branding performance. The event fulfilled two simultaneous functions: reinforcing national unity and projecting a favourable image abroad, despite Western media attention often centring on political concerns while domestic narratives emphasised cultural richness, hospitality and modernity [13, p.175]. Further analysis identifies three narrative frames that structure the country's Eurovision branding: **(1)** the portrayal of a stable and thriving modern state, **(2)** the depiction of a nation rich in culture and natural assets, and **(3)** the success narrative associated with state leadership. These fused narratives integrated heritage with modernity, producing a coherent symbolic message that communicated both competence and a consolidated sense of identity [13, p. 182-184]. In this configuration, Eurovision operated not only as a cultural spectacle but also as an instrument of statecraft, creating an opportunity to convert symbolic capital into reputational gain. This dynamic aligns with the 'competitive identity' perspective, in which culture, governance and communication function as mutually reinforcing components of national brand construction [3, p. 23].

The argument is further reinforced by evidence indicating that the country's international image remains in a state of development and is shaped predominantly by high-profile events rather than long-term familiarity. Within this context, Eurovision operated as a

deliberate visibility platform through which the state projected an image of dynamism, hospitality and modernity. Substantial investment in infrastructure and cultural diplomacy transformed what appeared as entertainment into a calculated soft-power initiative, integrating the country into Europe's broader cultural imagination [9, p. 3].

Eurovision therefore exemplified the convergence of nation branding, soft power and mega-event strategy, elevating a previously peripheral post-Soviet state into a more prominent cultural actor through managed symbolism, mediated spectacle and international appeal. As such, the contest constituted the first major instance in which cultural and communicative resources were mobilised as a strategic soft-power tool.

### **1.2. Baku 2015 European Games.**

The 2015 European Games marked a shift from cultural display to infrastructural spectacle, employing material presentation as a means of projecting an image of modernity and administrative competence. The event functioned as a form of *image-centric governance* in which large-scale projects communicated progress without necessarily reshaping underlying identity structures [20, pp. 131–132]. Within this “city-as-stage” logic, *urban design* operated as a symbolic demonstration of capability; however, the critique of the *growth-machine dynamic* reveals that the distribution of benefits was uneven, with gains concentrated among elite groups [20, pp.143–146]. This illustrates how soft power can be instrumentalised to convert visibility into political legitimisation rather than fostering inclusive, society-wide nation-building. Further analysis also draws attention to the country's civilisational ambiguity, showing that while the Games attempted to project a Europeanised image, they ultimately reinforced a dual identity positioned between differing cultural and geopolitical reference points [20, pp. 141–143].

The European Games were similarly positioned as a central component of the country's nation-branding strategy, enabled largely by revenues from the energy sector. The spectacle was used to project national pride and organisational capability, demonstrating the capacity to host a European-scale event. The opening ceremony—featuring references to Gobustan, Ateshgah, carpets and Nizami Ganjavi—was carefully designed to blend historical continuity with contemporary aspirations, producing a narrative of cultural vitality and political stability [18, pp.7–9]. This aesthetic fusion reflects the broader soft-power logic associated with mega-events, whereby symbolic heritage and modern competence are combined to enhance international appeal.

Despite extensive media attention, the resulting recognition was short-lived, revealing the inherent fragility of *visibility-driven strategies*. The gap between temporary exposure and sustained reputation aligns with the understanding of attraction as contingent, perception-dependent and easily disrupted. Economic pressures and international human-rights criticism further constrained the reputational benefits of the Games, demonstrating how political conditions can undermine soft-power objectives [18, pp. 10–11]. Seen within a broader trajectory stretching from Eurovision to Formula 1, the 2015 European Games marked a shift from episodic promotional events toward a more sustained, cyclical branding strategy subsequently reinforced through the continuity of Formula 1.

### **1.3. Formula 1 (2016-present).**

Formula 1 constitutes a central element of the country's event-based nation-branding strategy, signalling a transition from isolated spectacles to sustained and institutionalised visibility. Building upon earlier events such as Eurovision and the European Games, the Grand Prix provides recurring soft-power leverage through continuous global media exposure, effectively transforming the urban environment into a communicative platform. The event has

been identified as a significant milestone in *event-led urbanism*, wherein major events function as drivers of modernisation and international exposure [14, p. 1663].

Empirical findings indicate substantial economic and infrastructural gains, including a 10–25% rise in tourism revenue, improvements in transport systems and expanded business opportunities [14, pp. 1659–1663]. At the same time, the analysis underscores the social and environmental costs associated with such developments, emphasising that the construction of a credible sustainable image depends on transparency and the meaningful involvement of stakeholders [14, pp.1663–1664]. This demonstrates that soft power is contingent not only on spectacular visibility but also on the authenticity underlying the narratives projected.

Building on earlier phases of urban development, the Grand Prix has been positioned as a key instrument of nation branding. The Baku City Circuit's fusion of historical and futuristic architectural elements symbolically unites tradition with modernity, extending the visual diplomacy established by previous mega-events. *Three main branding dimensions* are identified: economic gains through tourism and investment; cultural showcasing of hospitality and artistic heritage; and political signalling of managerial competence and stability. However, reports of forced evictions and environmental damage have weakened the event's credibility, illustrating the soft-power paradox of attempting to construct a persuasive image without corresponding institutional coherence [1, pp. 94–95].

Further analysis situates the 2016 European Grand Prix within broader debates on the geopolitics of global sport. The ostensibly apolitical posture adopted by governing bodies allows host states to employ such events as instruments of symbolic modernisation while limiting scrutiny. In this configuration, neutrality becomes a soft-power asset by enabling governments to seek legitimacy through large-scale displays that communicate cosmopolitanism and technological sophistication while simultaneously reinforcing internal control. As a result, Formula 1 exemplifies the “paradox of apolitical attraction,” wherein global sporting visibility contributes both to external appeal and to the consolidation of domestic authority [16, pp. 9–19]. The country's continued participation in Formula 1 thus reinforces a broader strategy of leveraging recurring international events to enhance visibility, authority and prestige.

Considering all together, Eurovision prioritised cultural sophistication and domestic cohesion, while the European Games and Formula 1 focused on infrastructural prowess and global visibility. However, this curated visibility reveals the fundamental challenge of soft power: while large-scale events can attract attention and create an impression, their persuasive power hinges on perceptions of authenticity, inclusivity, and the credibility of governance.

#### ***1.4. Broader nation branding strategy.***

The country's nation-branding initiatives reflect a multifaceted soft-power strategy that extends beyond individual mega-events. By integrating cultural spectacles, sporting competitions and multilateral diplomacy, the approach aims to project a contemporary and culturally distinctive national image. A conceptual distinction is drawn between national identity as an internally rooted sense of belonging and national image as the external perception shaping international influence [11, p. 40]. Positioned at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the country's cultural and historical hybridity provides a symbolic foundation for narratives of integration and geopolitical relevance, enabling it to present itself simultaneously as Eastern and Western and thereby bridge civilisational divides.

Within this framework, a secular, modern and economically resilient national vision is advanced through government-led initiatives such as Eurovision 2012, the European Games 2015 and promotional campaigns including “*Made in Azerbaijan*” and “*The Land of Fire.*”

These activities transform domestic modernisation into performative diplomacy in which visibility itself becomes a form of influence [11, p. 42]. Such events generate emotional and cognitive associations with openness and cultural vitality, contributing to a favourable international image [9, pp. 11-12]. Collectively, these efforts illustrate a gradual move toward sustained brand recognition. At the same time, the country's absence from the *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index*—due to the survey's restricted sample—highlights a persistent challenge for emerging nation brands: achieving global visibility even when event-led promotional activity is extensive.

*Tourism* constitutes another significant dimension of the country's soft-power strategy. Evidence indicates that visitors perceive the destination as a harmonious synthesis of tradition and modernity, closely associated with multiculturalism, hospitality and architectural diversity, illustrated through the contrast between the Old City, the Maiden Tower and the Flame Towers [2, p. 339]. The relationship between cognitive and conative images shows that favourable impressions regarding culture and safety translate into admiration, which is a core outcome of soft-power influence. This dynamic strengthens the country's attractiveness and contributes to a positive external reputation [2, p. 339]. Tourism therefore functions as a form of *experiential soft power*, in which direct encounters with culture, hospitality and urban aesthetics accumulate into long-term reputational gains. In this context, the portrayal of the country as a tolerant and vibrant destination becomes a central component of its broader nation-branding strategy [2, pp. 343–344].

**Tourism Investment in Azerbaijan (2009-2018)**

Year	Investment (mln AZN)	YoY Change	Mega-events
2009	~500	–	–
2010	~900	+80%	–
2011	~1300	+44%	–
2012	~1500	+15%	<b>Eurovision</b>
2013	~1500	0%	–
2014	~2200	+47%	– (preparation for 2015 Games)
2015	~1300	–40%	<b>European Games</b>
2016	~500	–62%	<b>Formula 1 begins</b>
2017	~300	–40%	Formula 1
2018	~250	–17%	Formula 1

**Source:** State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (as cited in Huseynzade, 2020).

As Table 1 shows, Azerbaijan experienced a surge in tourism investment ahead of major mega-events, reflecting the country's strategy of leveraging tourism expansion to enhance its global visibility. Spending soared ahead of the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest and the 2015 European Games, with a focus on hotels, visitor services, recreational facilities and transport infrastructure. The peak in 2014 illustrates the extent of the preparations made to accommodate large numbers of visitors and project a positive national image. Following the annualisation of the Formula 1 event in 2016, investment decreased, not due to waning interest in tourism, but rather because the necessary infrastructure was already in place. The

post-2016 period saw a shift from significant capital projects to leveraging existing assets and utilising recurring events such as F1 to achieve a sustained impact on the nation branding.

Alongside cultural and tourism initiatives, the country further employs multilateral diplomacy as a mechanism for image-building. Analysis shows that active participation in organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) contributes to strengthening its position as a cooperative and influential regional actor. This approach has been interpreted as a form of *pseudo-event politics*, in which strategically organised multilateral engagements are utilised to enhance global visibility and legitimacy [15, p. 84].

Despite these efforts, the nation-branding trajectory faces enduring structural and political constraints. Previous assessments identify a continued dependence on hydrocarbon revenues, limited diversification within the branding sphere and insufficient international recognition as core barriers to consolidating a sustainable long-term image [11, p.11]. Further examination indicates that sports mega-events and large-scale development projects, while communicating narratives of stability and modernisation, primarily operate as state-directed instruments for shaping public perception. Energy-financed investments in international sporting activities appear to reinforce top-down modernisation and centralised governance rather than participatory development [19, p. 854]. Existing scholarship therefore suggests that the country's soft-power projection aligns with broader patterns of state-led modernisation, where increased international visibility does not necessarily coincide with parallel domestic transformation.

### *Conclusion*

Azerbaijan's deployment of soft power through nation branding is reflected in its use of mega-events, urban spectacles and cultural diplomacy. Hosting events such as the Eurovision Song Contest (2012), the European Games (2015) and the Formula 1 Grand Prix (2016–present) has presented the country in desired images, boosting domestic confidence and raising its international profile. This strategy embodies the dual logic of nation branding, linking internal narratives of progress with external imagery to foster both admiration and recognition.

In light of the country's post-Soviet 'image deficit' and restricted visibility, purposeful branding emerged as a strategic imperative. According to the frameworks of Nye, Anholt, Fan, and Grix, the effectiveness of soft power relies not only on cultural and infrastructural assets, but also on authenticity and credibility. Mega-events provide performative platforms that transform architecture, culture, and organisational capacity into sources of attraction.

Rather than merely showcasing infrastructure, Azerbaijan's branding seeks to demonstrate cultural sophistication, hospitality and a modern and cosmopolitan identity, using high-profile events as tools of geopolitical outreach. However, the success of this soft power strategy hinges on perceptions of inclusivity, ethical governance and social equity, and on whether the projected values manifest in lived realities.

**Implications and future research:** Large-scale events provide emerging states with a symbolic platform on which to articulate their national identity, but the long-term impact of such events on branding remains underexplored. Therefore, future research should analyse international audience perceptions, media framing and the longevity of the soft power and nation branding generated by such events, with a view to making regional comparisons. The way in which these narratives are embraced domestically also merits attention, in order to determine whether they are embraced by the general population or remain elite-driven.

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UOT 316

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MEGA-TƏDBİRLƏR VASİTƏSİLƏ AZƏRBAYCANIN MİLLƏT BRENĐİNQİ  
STRATEGİYASININ NƏZƏRİ TƏHLİLİ  
XÜLASƏ

*Açar sözlər:* Azərbaycan, milli brendinq, yumşaq güc, mədəni diplomatiya, meqa-tədbirlər

Qlobal siyasi arenada nüfuz qazanmaq və imic yaradaraq təsir etmək bir çox dövlətin əsas xarici siyasət strategiyalarına çevrilmişdir. Zəif beynəlxalq görünürüyə malik postsovet dövlətləri üçün millət brendinqi strategiyası, imici yenidən formalaşdırmaq və yumşaq gücü artırmaq üçün strateji bir yol təqdim edir. Azərbaycan bunun parlaq nümunəsidir və bir sıra yüksək səviyyəli mədəni eləcə də, idman tədbirlərinə ev sahibliyi etmişdir. Məqalə beynəlxalq tədbirlərin Azərbaycanda millət brendinqi aləti kimi necə istifadə olunduğunu və bu səhnələşdirilmiş tədbirlərin ölkənin milli imicini yaratmaq və təqdim etməkdə oynadığı rolu araşdırır. Metodoloji cəhətdən tədqiqat konseptual ədəbiyyat icmalı və ikinci dərəcəli elmi mənbələrdəki Azərbaycana dair məlumatların müqayisəli mətn analizini tətbiq edir. Bu, imic quruculuğunda təkrarlanan nümunələri müəyyən etməyə imkan verir. Təhlil göstərir ki, 2012-ci il Eurovision Musiqi Müsabiqəsi, 2015-ci il Avropa Oyunları və 2016-cı ildən indiyə qədər keçirilən Formula 1 Qran Prisi kimi tədbirlər inkişaf, müasirlik və geosiyasi birlik haqqında ssenariləri nümayiş etdirir. Bununla belə, onların təsirliliyi qəbul edən auditoriyanın onlara olan inamı və mövcud sosial-siyasi şəraitlə uyğunluğu ilə sıx bağlıdır. Tədbir əsaslı millət brendinqi görünürülgü artırsa da, davamlı mədəni legitimlik və ardıcıl idarəetmə islahatları olmadan uğursuz ola bilər.

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ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ СТРАТЕГИИ БРЕНДИНГА НАЦИИ  
АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА ЧЕРЕЗ МЕГА-ИВЕНТЫ  
РЕЗЮМЕ

*Ключевые слова:* Азербайджан, брендинг нации, мягкая сила, культурная дипломатия, мега-ивенты

На глобальной политической арене приобретение влияния и формирование имиджа стали ключевыми инструментами внешней политики для многих государств. Для постсоветских стран с ограниченной международной видимостью стратегия брендинга нации предоставляет стратегическое средство для переопределения собственного имиджа и усиления «мягкой силы». Азербайджан является ярким примером этого, будучи организатором ряда масштабных культурных и спортивных мероприятий. В статье рассматривается, как международные мероприятия

используются в Азербайджане как инструменты брендинга нации и какую роль эти постановочные события играют в создании и продвижении национального имиджа страны. Методологически исследование основывается на концептуальном обзоре литературы и сравнительном текстовом анализе вторичных научных источников, касающихся Азербайджана. Это позволяет выявить повторяющиеся модели формирования имиджа. Анализ показывает, что такие события, как конкурс песни «Евровидение» 2012 года, Европейские игры 2015 года и Гран-при Формулы-1, проводимый с 2016 года по настоящее время, транслируют нарративы прогресса, современности и геополитического единства. Тем не менее их эффективность тесно связана с доверием аудитории к ним и их соответствием преобладающим социально-политическим условиям. Хотя брендинг нации через мероприятия повышает видимость страны, оно может оказаться неэффективным без устойчивой культурной легитимности и последовательных реформ управления.

*Daxil oldu: 20.11.2025-ci il*