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Impact of immigration policies on migrant integration in Azerbaijan

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Abbreviations Table

Abbreviation	Full form
SMS	State Migration Service (of the Republic of Azerbaijan)
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
EU	European Union
ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
GCM	Global Compact for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

Abstract

This paper critically assesses how Azerbaijan’s migration governance has shifted from a quota-based, control-oriented regime to one that is beginning to recognise integration as a policy imperative, and it does so through a qualitative, exploratory design grounded in thematic analysis of five in-depth interviews with recent migrants, a comprehensive literature and policy review, and a three-option policy evaluation framework. After tracing the post-independence evolution of legislation—culminating in the 2013 Migration Code and the establishment of the State Migration Service—the study identifies persistent gaps: frequent permit renewals, language barriers, limited recognition of foreign credentials and unequal access to public services. Applying criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, equity, feasibility and flexibility, the analysis finds that “Targeted Integration Measures” (Alternative 2)—notably free Azerbaijani-language and civic-orientation courses, one-stop advisory centres and strengthened institutional coordination—strike the most pragmatic balance between ambition and political-administrative realism at the country’s current stage. The paper concludes that implementing these incremental programmes, combined with systematic monitoring and partnerships with international organisations, will yield quick wins in migrant well-being and labour-market productivity while laying empirical and institutional groundwork for more far-reaching legal reforms in the medium term; in short, it argues that smart, phased integration policy is essential for Azerbaijan to harness migration as a driver of sustainable economic growth and social cohesion.

Keywords: Migration Governance, Integration Policy, Azerbaijan, Targeted Measures, Migrant Well-Being

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Azerbaijan has gained some modest yet significant reputation for migrants during the past few years thanks to its steady economic growth, strategic location in the region, and that it is developed country in terms of its resource industries. Historically known more for out-migration, Azerbaijan has gradually transitioned toward attracting labor migrants, diaspora returnees, and a smaller number of asylum seekers. The country has recorded net immigration in 2023 with approximately 3,638 immigrants from neighbouring states such as Turkey, Russia and Georgia, indicating the country's changing demographic profiles (Prague Process, 2024).

One of the chief catalysts that drive the migration of people to Azerbaijan has been the massive development of the oil and gas scene there, its complemented with broad projects of infrastructural development that fueled the need for highly qualified and semi qualified foreign labor. For example, construction and mining still account for a large part of annual quotas of the work permits, issued by the Cabinet of Ministers, which are filled by workers coming from abroad. These quotas are mostly used in sectors like construction and mining (more than 70% of the allocated permits), while the service sector also attracts a high percentage of migrant labor, in particular, from Turkey and Central Asian countries due to employers' desire to meet the market demand that is greater than the capacity of the locals (ICMPD, 2017). The Migration Code of 2013 is the main instrument regulating migration in Azerbaijan by general guidelines for attracting, permitting entry, staying, and working of foreign nationals (The Republic of Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2016). The government, through its quota based system, sets work permit allocations, periodically adjusting according to such variations

within labour market. Recent times have seen a gradual policy change that recognizes the need for migrant integration, represented by a prospective. Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan with support from international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the European Union (EU) (The Republic of Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2020).

However, integrating migrants into Azerbaijani socio-economic fabric is not easy. The process can be further complicated by frequent renewals of temporary permits which are required by legal requirements. In addition, language barriers affect migrants, in particular some of the migrants speak Russian or English but knowledge of Azerbaijani is usually important in accessing the public services and more complex professional opportunities (MIEUX, 2023). Additionally, there are some groups that are considered more vulnerable: asylum seekers and refugees, who first benefit from minimum specific services provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Prague Process, 2024). Refugee inflows are kept at a small scale that keeps the absolute numbers low, and thus the support is limited.

In contrast, international agencies praise positive aspects in Azerbaijan's approach, such as improved border management, the provision of e-services by the State Migration Service, and a growing willingness to bring local legislation into line with international human rights standards. Experts also suggest that the Azerbaijani government needs to act against systemic loopholes in particular, such as strengthening legal pathways for migrant workers and protecting them from exploitation. Thus, overall, in Azerbaijan, migration is developing in a more managed, comprehensive way from a limited, quota based to a more comprehensive model which is increasingly willing to take into account the value of integration and inclusion for the sake of economic and social benefits.

Aims and Objectives

- To assess the existing immigration policies in Azerbaijan, including visa regulations, residency requirements, and work permit frameworks.
- To analyze the social, cultural, and economic challenges migrants face and evaluate how current policies address these issues.
- To compare Azerbaijan's immigration policies with international and regional best practices to identify areas for improvement.
- To propose policy recommendations based on empirical findings to enhance migrant integration and social cohesion.

Research Questions

What are the existing immigration policies in Azerbaijan, and how do these regulations directly influence the integration process for different categories of migrants?

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Research design

The project adopts a qualitative, exploratory design grounded in an interpretivist epistemology. Qualitative inquiry is the optimal route because the study seeks to understand how immigration policies are lived, negotiated, and re-imagined by migrants; these meanings are socially constructed and therefore best accessed through rich, first-person accounts. A focused set of semi-structured interviews provides the depth required to reveal the interplay among bureaucratic rules, language learning, labour-market entry, and everyday belonging.

1.2.2 Literature-review strategy

Between January and March 2025 the research team conducts an extensive review of scholarly and grey literature. Google Scholar searches combine terms such as *migrant integration*, *Azerbaijan*, *labour migration*, *quota system*, and *language barriers*. The ADA University Library's electronic holdings supply regional journals, including *Caucasus Social Science Review*, while international migration journals—*International Migration Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Migration Studies*—anchor the global perspective. The iterative reading process identifies four principal theoretical lenses—assimilation, transnationalism, social cohesion, and human-capital theory—maps Azerbaijan's policy trajectory, and pinpoints empirical gaps, notably the shortage of post-COVID micro-level research. Insights from the review guide sampling criteria, wording of interview prompts, and the initial coding framework.

1.2.3 Sampling

A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy ensures that every participant possesses direct experience of Azerbaijan's contemporary migration regime. Eligible interviewees must have entered the country after the 2013 Migration Code, must have lived continuously in Azerbaijan for at least twelve months, must be employed or recently employed (formally or informally), and must be able to converse in English or Russian. Within those boundaries the team aims for maximum variation in gender, country of origin, and skill profile in order to avoid a homogenous pool.

Recruitment proceeds along three channels. First, a Baku-based migrant NGO circulates a bilingual flyer through WhatsApp and Telegram networks. Second, two construction

companies and one IT-services firm forward an invitation to foreign staff. Third, early respondents are invited to introduce peers with contrasting backgrounds, thereby broadening the sample. The target is five participants: an Afghan male refugee, a Turkish female marketing specialist, a Nigerian male postgraduate student employed part-time, a Georgian female hospitality worker, and a Russian male civil engineer. Although modest, this group mirrors the leading migrant streams recorded by the State Migration Service and thus provides a credible exploratory cross-section.

1.2.4 Data-collection procedures

Fieldwork is scheduled for March and April 2025. All interviews are conducted remotely via Zoom, a platform familiar to participants and suited to geographically dispersed recruitment. Each session is last roughly sixty to eighty minutes and was recorded through Zoom's built-in video-and-audio recorder, generating both an MP4 file and an automatically generated audio-only track. The researcher secures written consent for recording in advance via e-mail and reconfirms orally at the start of each meeting. Screen-sharing remains available if a participant wishes to display documents—such as permit application forms or language-course certificates—that illustrate a particular point.

To reduce power imbalances, the interviewer opens with informal conversation, reiterates the study's purpose, and emphasises that participation is voluntary and withdrawal possible at any time without penalty.

1.2.5 Interview protocol

Five open-ended questions structure the conversation. Participants first recount the single most difficult step in obtaining a residence or work permit. Second, they consider how their command of Azerbaijani—or lack thereof—affects access to services such as health care, schooling, and legal advice. Third, they describe employer reactions to foreign qualifications and any credential-recognition hurdles. Fourth, they narrate a moment of feeling especially welcomed or excluded by locals. Finally, they propose one concrete policy change that would ease integration for newcomers. Targeted follow-up prompts explore information sources, hidden costs, informal coping tactics, experiences of discrimination, and practical reform ideas, but the interviewer remains flexible, allowing each conversation to flow naturally.

1.2.6 Data management and transcription

Immediately after each interview the Zoom recording is downloaded to an encrypted, password-protected cloud drive that complies with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards. Within forty-eight hours the researcher produces a verbatim transcript, using Otter.ai to generate a first pass and then manually correcting errors while translating any non-English fragments into English. Original phrases appear in brackets to preserve nuance. Pseudonyms replace real names, and identifying information—employer names, precise neighbourhoods—is removed. A secure back-up copy resides on an external hard drive stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the principal investigator.

1.2.7 Data analysis

The project follows Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic-analysis procedure. Familiarisation begins with re-reading transcripts and writing analytic memos. Open coding in NVivo 14 generates descriptive labels such as "queue-broker fees," "self-taught Azerbaijani," "diploma ignored," "friendly landlord," and "policy wish-list." Codes are iteratively clustered into provisional patterns: bureaucratic opacity, language as social currency, skills underutilisation, moments of belonging, and imagined reforms. Themes are refined by checking coherence across extracts and testing rival explanations; negative cases are examined to guard against premature closure. Each theme receives a detailed analytic write-up accompanied by illustrative quotations and explicit links to the theoretical lenses noted earlier. An audit trail composed of memos, codebooks, and theme-evolution tables preserves methodological transparency.

1.2.8 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Credibility rests on triangulating five participants with varied backgrounds, maintaining prolonged engagement during each interview, and performing member checks: participants received a concise summary of preliminary interpretations and may confirm or correct them within one week. Transferability derives from thick description of the policy environment, participant biographies, and social context, enabling readers to judge applicability to other settings. Dependability is supported by the audit trail and a reflexive diary that chronicles methodological decisions, coding revisions, and moments of positionality awareness. Confirmability is enhanced by regular peer debriefing sessions with a faculty supervisor and

an external migration scholar who examine emerging interpretations and challenge potential biases.

1.2.9 Ethical Considerations

Each participant signs a bilingual consent form sent electronically and returns it before the interview; the form details the study aims, procedures, potential risks, confidentiality measures, and the right to refuse any question. Interviews avoid explicitly traumatic subject matter unless the participant initiates it; should distress arise, the interviewer paused the session, recommend a break.

1.2.10 Limitations

A sample of five cannot support statistical generalisation, and the reliance on English or Russian excludes non-literate migrants who may confront even greater barriers. Snowball recruitment risks network bias by over-representing individuals already linked to support organisations. Remote interviewing via Zoom may limit rapport for some participants or exclude those with unstable internet access. The researcher's positionality as a Baku-based academic inevitably shapes interactions despite reflexive safeguards. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures integration as a snapshot rather than a trajectory; future work could re-interview the same participants over several years or complement qualitative depth with a survey module to broaden scope.

1.3 Roadmap

The paper is organized as follows. Chapter 2 delineates the problem, describing Azerbaijan's current immigration policy environment and how it addresses (or neglects) migrant integration. This includes an overview of relevant laws and institutions, and identification of gaps in supporting migrants' integration. Chapter 3 develops several policy alternatives that could feasibly address the identified integration issues. Chapter 4 presents an evaluation of these alternatives using criteria such as effectiveness, feasibility, and alignment with national priorities. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a set of recommendations for the Government of Azerbaijan, informed by the analysis, and concludes the paper by summarizing the key insights and suggesting avenues for future policy development.

CHAPTER 2. PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

2.1 Context and Current Policy Framework

Throughout its history, the administration of migration in Azerbaijan has placed a greater emphasis on the regulation and control of migratory flows than on integration. According to Yuksel et al. (2018), the country struggled with huge internal displacement and emigration when it gained its independence in 1991. This was a result of domestic strife and international economic turbulence. The government of Azerbaijan decided to build a unified migration management system as a result of the country's growing stability and oil riches, which led to the country becoming a transit and destination country. Following the adoption of a State Migration Policy Concept in 2004, a State Migration Program was implemented between the years 2006 and 2008 in order to meet newly developing difficulties (ICMPD, 2018). The State Migration Service (SMS) was established in 2007 as a specific body with the purpose of "strengthening control over migration processes and harnessing migration for the country's political and economic interests," according to the study that was published by the International Center for Migration Policy and Development (2018). A complete legal framework was later created by the Migration Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013), which unified around twenty previous legislation (for example, on immigration and labor migration) into a single document (UNCHR, 2013). It is the responsibility of this code to control entrance and departure, the legal status of foreigners, permits for temporary and permanent residency, refugees, and labor migration, as well as to define the rights and duties of migrants and state authorities (ICMPD, 2018).

The Migration Code and other associated legislation, such as the Law on Citizenship 1998 and regulations issued by the Cabinet of Ministers, serve as the most fundamental components of the current policy framework. Importantly, labor immigration is carefully monitored via the use of a quota system and conditions for work permits, specifically with the intention of safeguarding the local labor market. It is the responsibility of the Commission on Establishment of Labour Quotas, which is led by the Minister of Labor, to provide recommendations on the maximum number of foreign workers that may be allowed. These recommendations must be approved by the Cabinet of Ministers (ICMPD, 2018). According to the legislation, work permits are often only provided in the event that there is no competent local worker available for the position. This reflects the "Azerbaijanis first" philosophy that is used in the employment sector (The Republic of Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2014). Despite the fact that attracting foreign talent and investment is a positive thing, President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly emphasized that "the potential of the local labor market must be used in the first place," highlighting the fact that migration policy should prioritize the interests of Azerbaijani citizens (Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2014). Specifically, Article 51 of the Migration Code specifies that the labor migration quota is meant to guarantee effective use of local labor resources and regulate foreign labor inflows in accordance with market demands (Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2013). This protective position is defined in the Migration Code. The quota is established on the basis of the circumstances of the labor market and the demand in industries where there is an inadequate supply of local workers. In practice, almost all foreigners who are engaged in paid work are required to obtain both a temporary residence permit and a work permit that is tied to an employer. There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as certain investors, highly qualified specialists, or those who are located in special economic zones, which may have simplified procedures (Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2019).

The idea of assimilation was often employed in earlier research. This term refers to a process that occurs in just one direction, wherein immigrants lose their distinctive cultural characteristics in order to become more similar to the majority group (Laubenthal, 2023). The "melting pot" of the United States of America is a historical example of an assimilationist approach that, historically speaking, tried to eradicate cultural distinctions. Contemporary methods in Europe, on the other hand, place an emphasis on reciprocal adaptation, which means that both migrants and the society that they are living in adjust over the course of time (Salins, 2023). The concept of multiculturalism arose as an additional approach, which promotes the preservation of ethnic identities within a diverse society. This model allows migrants and members of minority groups to preserve their languages and customs while still participating equally in civic life. Assimilation seeks to achieve uniformity, while integration and multiculturalism seek to achieve inclusion without doing away with difference. Each model is based on a distinct set of assumptions on the means by which social harmony may be attained.

Above and beyond these frameworks, academics emphasize the importance of transnationalism as a lens through which to comprehend the integration of contemporary migrants (ICMPD, 2024). Migrants do not cut off their links to their homelands when they relocate; rather, they often continue to retain strong relationships across borders, including those that are family, economic, religious, and political in nature. This gives rise to transnational diasporas, which are communities that span both the country of origin and the country of destination. (Strang & Quinn, 2021) Research on diaspora communities demonstrates that there is a possibility for these groups to aid assimilation by offering social

networks and support, while also maintaining their individual identities. It's possible for migrants to create multicultural or hybrid identities, meaning they may belong to both their home society and the society they're living in at the same time. By acknowledging that effective integration does not always entail the loss of links to one's country, this viewpoint undermines the assimilationist beliefs that were originally prevalent. Therefore, it is consistent with the concept of transnational social spaces, in which integration is a fluid process that takes place in a variety of distinct situations.

Additionally, the idea of social cohesiveness is of utmost importance in the debate on integration. According to Özçürümez et al. (2021), social cohesiveness is a term that describes the relationships that serve to bring society together and contribute to the development of a feeling of belonging and trust among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Integration is considered as both an effect and a cause of social cohesion: when immigrants become engaged in society on all fronts – economically, socially, and culturally – there is an increase in general societal unity. In contrast, a lack of integration may be detrimental to cohesiveness, which can result in the formation of alternative communities or conflicts. According to research conducted by Jayakody et al. (2022), cohesiveness requires not only the adaptation of migrants but also the establishment of host institutions that provide equal rights, opportunities, and an identity that is collectively inclusive for all people. To this end, policy frameworks often advocate for the implementation of measures (such as anti-discrimination legislation and intercultural dialogue) that aim to foster social cohesion in conjunction with the integration of migrants.

Understanding integration requires the addition of another dimension, which is provided by

economic theories. Individuals migrate in order to enhance the returns on their talents, according to the human capital theory, and the skills (education, language competence, and job experience) that they bring with them or acquire will determine the consequences of their integration (Wright, & Constantin, 2021). When seen from the standpoint of human capital, migrants are rational individuals who choose locations that provide the greatest opportunity to make use of their strengths. According to Lami et al. (2022), integration may be evaluated based on the degree to which migrants are able to transform their human capital into socio-economic success that is equivalent to that of locals. This can be quantified by employment rates and income levels. Taking this approach highlights the significance of language training, education recognition, and skill development programs. Migrants who have higher or better-utilized human capital have a tendency to integrate into labor markets and society with more ease. On the other hand, human capital is not sufficient to ensure integration on its own. Even exceptionally competent migrants may face obstacles in the form of prejudice or institutional restrictions.

Scholars argue for multidisciplinary methods because of the complex nature of the integration of migrants across several dimensions. Sociological theories (such as assimilation, multiculturalism, and social networks), economic models (such as human capital and labor market integration), political viewpoints (such as citizenship, rights, and governance), and anthropological and cultural insights (such as diaspora and identity) all provide light on various elements. In order to examine the ways in which integration trajectories are influenced by elements like as linguistic capacity (human capital) and community support (sociology), for instance, an interdisciplinary lens might be used to investigate how legal status and policies (political factors) connect with these factors. The field of social psychology provides concepts of identification and belonging, while the field of diaspora studies enriches this by analyzing

the connections that migrants continue to have with their countries of origin. To summarise, recent research on integration acknowledges that effective integration requires simultaneous consideration of economic, social, and cultural factors. To understand how migrants become a part of their new society and what factors either facilitate or hinder that process, a comprehensive theoretical framework draws on multiple models. These models range from traditional migration theories, such as push-pull factors and human capital motivations, to integration paradigms, such as assimilation versus multiculturalism.

2.2 Azerbaijan's Immigration Policy and Governance

Since the 1990s, Azerbaijan's migration management has changed a lot, moving from responding mainly to emigration and internal displacement to developing institutions for immigration (Abdulhasanova, 2024). Right after separating from the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan faced large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people fleeing conflicts, as many of its own citizens emigrated in search of economic opportunities. As a result of strong economic development in the 2000s, mainly thanks to oil and new investments, Azerbaijan became appealing for foreign workers and investors (Aras et al., 2016). According to the government, initiatives in infrastructure, energy, and transport, together with stability, have 'resulted in more people coming to the Republic of Azerbaijan' and made migration much more noticeable after the 2000s. This new trend encouraged the Azerbaijani government to reinforce its migration policies and better control incoming people, while making sure they contribute to the country's development and security.

When the State Migration Service (SMS) was established in 2007, it brought about a major transition in the way Azerbaijan handled migration, shifting from several disconnected institutions. Not only was this move about streamlining operations, but it also meant that the

state was recognizing the need to address migration's socio-political and economic dimensions through better regulation and far-sighted strategies.

Before the SMS, migration work was split among several government organizations, making the process slow and the policies less organized. To illustrate, in the past, visas and the registration of foreigners belonged to the Ministry of Internal Affairs' passport department, and the Ministry of Labor handled the process for providing work permits for foreign nationals (Allahveranov et al., 2024). Due to this scattered organization, neither the government nor the migrants could navigate the system well. Because there was no single authority in charge, the numerous overlapping tasks and unclear procedures frequently kept Azerbaijan from dealing well with changing patterns of migration.

Thus, the formation of the SMS was an important change that centralized all related tasks into a single body. With all these agencies brought together, the country could better organize and oversee immigration and emigration activities. Because it is in charge of immigration and emigration, the SMS was given a broad range of powers. These include issuing residence and work permits, registering foreigners, enforcing immigration laws, and coordinating with other security, border, and labor institutions (Adli, 2024). The SMS also plays an essential role in identifying irregular migration cases and preventing illegal entry and residence, giving it a critical enforcement dimension in addition to its administrative duties.

Significantly, the SMS was rolled out with other policies designed to shape Azerbaijan's migration strategy over the medium and long term. These two fundamental documents defined the general approach: the State Migration Program (valid from 2006 to 2008) and the Migration Policy Concept, issued in 2004. The State Migration Program aimed to launch immediate actions for putting institutional mechanism of migration management into place. It

outlined several priorities, such as creating new laws, improving data collection, establishing systems to track migration, and building up institutional capacity.

Nevertheless, the Migration Policy Concept was developed to guide longer-term strategies. Adopted by the government in 2004, it provided the key guidelines for long-term policy management. According to this document, migration should be managed to suit Azerbaijan's national security requirements and its development priorities. It recommended a strategy that combined legal and illegal migration control, boosting legal migration and making sure it brings social and economic rewards, and meanwhile, creating solid strategies to prevent and deal with illegal migration (Ibadov & Ibrahimov, 2023). The approach matched international developments, as states now see migration both as a security issue and as an opportunity for development by helping to fill labor gaps, spur economic activity, and add to cultural diversity.

It should be noted that even though the integration-oriented goals were not very developed, they were present in these initial policy frameworks. When it comes to Azerbaijan's migration policies, control and security have received greatest attention, but both the State Migration Program and the Migration Policy Concept discussed migrant adaptation. Part of the aim was to 'create favorable conditions for migrants to adapt to Azerbaijan's socio-economic life' (Ibadov & Ibrahimov, 2023). Even though the definition of integration was not detailed, the fact that it was mentioned signaled awareness about the social hurdles possible with migration and the issues that could arise if integration is not addressed. Still, while the initial documents referred to integration, well-developed policies in this area were delayed for some years. The main focus continued to be on controlling migration and issuing permits, instead of on offering social inclusion measures such as language instruction, public service use, or civic preparation (Ibadov & Ibrahimov, 2023). In the post-Soviet region, it is typical for governments to put

sovereignty and control ahead of inclusive policies. Still, the inclusion of adaptation goals by Azerbaijan in fundamental documents allowed for the potential of policy development later.

Another important dimension of the SMS's role is its interaction with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (HASHIMOVA, 2023,). These partnerships have helped Azerbaijan align certain aspects of its migration governance with international norms, particularly in areas like combating human trafficking, supporting asylum seekers, and developing migration statistics. While these collaborations initially focused on technical assistance and legal reform, they have gradually expanded to include discussions around integration frameworks, social cohesion, and migrant rights (HASHIMOVA, 2023). Over time, the SMS has also engaged in initiatives to improve public understanding of migration, train its staff in international best practices, and digitize its service delivery systems. These developments indicate a growing institutional maturity and suggest that Azerbaijan is incrementally moving toward a more balanced migration regime that includes both control and integration elements.

A milestone in Azerbaijan's migration governance was the adoption of the Migration Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013) (Ibadov, & Ibrahimov, 2023). Enacted on 2 July 2013 and entering into force on 1 August 2013, the Migration Code is a comprehensive legal act consolidating all major aspects of immigration and emigration regulation. It serves as a single reference law “establishing norms concerning implementation of the state policy in the migration field, regulation of migration processes and legal status of foreigners and stateless persons.” In practice, the Code unified previous piecemeal laws on immigration, the legal status of foreigners, and migration procedures into one document (HASHIMOVA, 2023,). For

the first time, it introduced a full classification of visa types, detailed the rules for entry/exit, defined procedures for temporary and permanent residency, and codified the provisions for work permits and labor migration management. The Code also addresses emigration by regulating recruitment of Azerbaijani citizens for work abroad (through licensing of employment agencies). By centralizing these norms, the 2013 Code aimed to increase transparency and efficiency of migration governance and eliminate contradictory regulations (Зейналова-Султанова, 2024).

Crucially, the Migration Code formalized the framework for residence and work permits in Azerbaijan (Ibadov, & Ibrahimov, 2023). Foreigners initially admitted for longer stays receive temporary residence permits, which can be renewed and are a prerequisite to more durable status. After two years of uninterrupted temporary residency, a foreign national becomes eligible to apply for permanent residence, reflecting an intent to settle permanently. This aligns with regional practices and ensures that only those demonstrating a degree of stability and compliance can transition to long-term immigrant status. The Code also embeds the principle of an annual labor migration quota. Article 51 stipulates that work permits for foreign labor are issued “within the framework of the labour migration quota” approved each year by the Cabinet of Ministers (ICMPD, 2018). Since 2010, Azerbaijan has implemented these quotas to protect the domestic labor market and prioritize employment for Azerbaijani citizens. The quota is determined based on labor market analysis – considering available local workforce and the need for certain skills – and is intended to allow only the number of foreign workers deemed necessary for the economy. In the early 2010s the quota was around 10,000 foreign workers per year, but it was later reduced; for example, the quota for 2019 was approximately 7,000 persons (Council of Europe, 2023). (This figure was slightly raised in 2021 to 7,740,

partly to accommodate foreign specialists needed for post-conflict reconstruction in Karabakh.)

The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, in coordination with the SMS, proposes the quota based on economic demand, and employers must generally hire within this limit. It should be noted that Azerbaijan's laws allow certain exceptions whereby foreigners can work without a permit under specific conditions, such that the actual number of foreigners working may exceed the quota in a given year. For instance, some categories like short-term business visitors, those with permanent residency, or working family members might be exempt from work permit requirements. In 2016, out of roughly 33,940 foreigners registered in Azerbaijan's social insurance system, only 9,480 held work permits under the official labor quota, illustrating that many foreigners were working via exemptions or outside the quota framework (ICMPD, 2024). Still, the quota system reflects the government's cautious approach: encouraging highly skilled immigration that contributes to the economy, while avoiding large-scale low-skilled inflows that could strain the labor market. This policy aligns with the broader goal stated in the State Migration Program to utilize migration for national development but "prevent negative consequences of uncontrolled migration."

The State Migration Service administers the day-to-day enforcement of these policies. It issues temporary and permanent residence permits, processes work permit applications in line with the quota, and carries out border-control functions in cooperation with the Border Service. The SMS also handles refugee status determination and statelessness issues in coordination with the State Committee for Refugees. Importantly, the Migration Code introduced an article on "adaptation of foreigners" (Article 77), which conceptually lays the groundwork for integration measures (ICMPD, 2018). This article authorizes the state to implement language

courses, orientation classes, or other measures to help foreigners adapt to Azerbaijani society. However, these provisions have been only sparsely implemented. By the late 2010s, observers noted that Azerbaijan still lacked a comprehensive migrant integration policy despite the formal mention of “adaptation” in the law (Hohmann, 2016). The Council of Europe’s ECRI reported in 2016 that “the authorities have not developed comprehensive integration policies for migrants,” and indeed the Migration Code itself contains certain restrictions on the rights of foreigners that may hinder integration (Council of Europe, 2016). For example, there are strict rules around registration of residence, limited avenues to public services for temporary residents, and no provision for non-citizen voting or civic participation, which collectively keep foreigners at the margins of public life.

In recent years, there have been policy reforms and initiatives signaling greater attention to migrant integration within Azerbaijan’s governance framework. The Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019–2030 explicitly includes tasks to improve management of foreign labor and suggests adjustments to the quota system to better meet economic needs. Additionally, Azerbaijan is party to international processes like the Global Compact for Migration, and the government in its 2022 GCM review acknowledged the importance of “creating favourable conditions to ensure the full social integration of migrants” as part of its migration policy. A notable development is the collaboration with the European Union on drafting a dedicated Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan. In partnership with the EU-funded MIEUX+ initiative and ICMPD’s MOBILAZE 2 project, the State Migration Service in 2022 began formulating the country’s first migrant integration strategy. This strategy – expected to be the first of its kind in Azerbaijan – will provide an official policy framework for integrating various migrant groups, including labor migrants, family reunification migrants, and refugees. It aims to address gaps in service delivery (such as access to healthcare,

language instruction, and legal assistance for migrants) and to coordinate responsibilities across government agencies. The very creation of such a strategy indicates a shift in governance from viewing integration as an afterthought to treating it as an integral component of migration management. While still in development, this reform aligns Azerbaijan's policies more closely with international best practices and suggests that migration governance is maturing to not only control entry, but also foster the inclusion of those who settle in the country.

CHAPTER 3. POLICY ALTERNATIVES

In addressing the integration deficit identified above, several policy alternatives can be considered for Azerbaijan. These policy alternatives range from maintaining the status quo (with minor tweaks) to implementing comprehensive new programs. They will be outlined here as distinct options, though elements of each are not mutually exclusive. The proposed alternatives are grounded in Azerbaijan's context – taking into account political, economic, and administrative feasibility – and informed by both international practices and local stakeholder input.

Alternative 1: Status Quo – Control-Focused Minimal Integration

In its present approach to migration, Azerbaijan places a primary emphasis on restricting inflows while making very minimum preparations for integrating measures. According to the State Migration Service (2023), the legislative framework places an emphasis on transitory stays via the use of work permits that are based on quotas, but it does not provide proactive assistance for the integration of migrants. With just around 3,600 immigrants entering the nation in 2023 and an immigrant population of about 2.5%, the state continues to depend on its administrative instruments, such as visas, registration, and expulsion, rather than implementing an integration plan (Prague Process, 2024; UNHCR, 2022).

Although the rights of refugees to work have increased after the year 2020, the methods for deeper integration continue to be inadequate. According to the Council of Europe (2023), the National Migration Strategy (2020–2025) that has been created has not yet been implemented, and the help that is provided to migrant workers or asylum seekers is restricted to residency status or certain fundamental legal criteria. For all intents and purposes, Azerbaijan ought to continue to operate on the "guest worker" paradigm (Aziz & Saad, 2023), in which migrants are anticipated to go after they have finished their contractual labor or to adjust without the help of the state. At various points in time, this model has yielded a variety of outcomes. According to Aziz and Saad (2023), post-war guest worker programs in Western Europe, such as those in Germany and the Netherlands, disregarded integration since they assumed migrants would return home after they had completed their employment. Castles (2004) and Martin (2017) found that this resulted in the marginalization of migrant populations over time and contributed to the development of socioeconomic disparities. The Gulf States continue to use

temporary labor arrangements that are comparable to those in other countries, which often come under fire for the absence of rights-based safeguards.

Exclusion, underutilization of human capital, and eventual societal fragmentation are some of the many dangers that are taken into consideration. Migrants are often consigned to low-skilled occupations regardless of their qualifications, which is a trend that is repeated across countries with poor integration results (Kanas & Steinmetz, 2021; Prokic-Breuer & McManus, 2016). This is because there is a lack of language assistance or acknowledgment of credentials. As an additional point of interest, integration is generally acknowledged to be a two-step process. Host nations are obligated to not only anticipate assimilation but also to enable inclusion (EU, 2020; IOM, 2019).

Despite the fact that it is simple to administer and inexpensive, this option ignores the demographic and economic realities that will exist in the long run. As an example, the labor market may undergo changes at a rate that exceeds the capacity of the quota system to accommodate them, so rendering companies unable of retaining talented migrants. In addition, it has the potential to bring to labor rigidities if regulations require unemployed migrants to depart within a few days (Council of Europe, 2023). In terms of international standards, the fact that Azerbaijan has not provided assistance for systemic integration undermines the country's support for the Global Compact for Migration (Objective 16). To summarize, the status quo poses a threat of economic inefficiency, social disintegration, and reputational damage on a global scale, despite the fact that it is viable from an administrative standpoint and poses a minimal risk from a political one. As the number of people migrating rises, which may be caused by economic upheavals or instability in the area, this reactive paradigm may prove to be unsustainable.

Alternative 2: Targeted Integration Measures Within the Current System

This method provides integration assistance in areas where it is most required, while building on technologies that are already in existence. The State Migration Service of Azerbaijan has previously conducted a program for free Azerbaijani language training and civic orientation programs, with over 5,000 participants by the end of 2021 (Council of Europe, 2023). These sessions are delivered on a regular basis and are accompanied by information services such as a trilingual SMS website and a hotline that is available around the clock. On a smaller scale, legal advice and cultural initiatives have been made possible thanks to cooperation between non-governmental organizations.

The immigration legislation is not reshaped by this approach; rather, it formalizes and amplifies the processes that are already in place. As an instance, Azerbaijan might establish resource centers to provide assistance to migrants in gaining access to school, receiving guidance for jobs, and navigating healthcare systems. It has been shown that "one-stop-shop" models are successful in Central and Eastern Europe, where integration centers sponsored by the European Union provide help in many languages without requiring a complete reform of national policy (OECD, 2018).

Flexibility is the benefit that this offers. It is possible to scale up programs on a regional basis, focusing on territories with significant migrant populations such as Baku. It is possible to provide targeted attention to vulnerable populations, such as refugees, children, and single mothers, without igniting wider legal disputes regarding naturalization or citizenship (Gaglione et al., 2021). Language lessons and job preparedness programs may be implemented

rapidly and with the backing of donors, particularly when they are given via vocational schools or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Azerbaijan's collaboration with the International Center for Multilateral Political Dialogue (ICMPD) and the European Union's MOBILAZE program already provide assistance for such targeted integration measures. The government initiated a trial program in 2023 that had caseworkers implanted in order to help young migrants through various services, such as housing and training (ICMPD, 2024). It seems that there is a strong institutional impetus and backing from outside sources. However, there are several negatives, such as their being no improvement in legal security and unequal coverage. It is possible for a migrant to acquire access to Azerbaijani lessons and to participate in intercultural activities; nevertheless, owing to the fact that the regulations have not changed, they will not be able to transfer to permanent residence. Despite the fact that it is useful, this "assistance without rights" approach cannot guarantee participation for the duration of time.

On top of that, there are questions over sustainability of project-based financing. According to Brink et al. (2025), domestic budgets are required to bear the expenses of foreign donors withdrawing their support. The absence of a central integration agency or plan leaves coordination hazards unabated: there is a possibility that initiatives will be repeated or that gaps will be left in certain industries or areas. The European Commission for Refugees and Immigrants (ECRI) has previously voiced its disapproval of this fragmented picture, pointing out that there is a disparity in the access to services that is provided to refugees and labor migrants (Council of Europe, 2023).

Nevertheless, this alternative is technically possible from a political standpoint and enables Azerbaijan to progressively increase its capabilities. Additionally, it creates the opportunity for experimentation, which might include the testing of mentoring programs or employer

training modules prior to their incorporation into legislation. If the advantages are not maintained and increased in a systematic manner, the trade-off is that they are relatively little.

Alternative 3: Comprehensive Integration Strategy with Legislative Reforms

An important change in the way Azerbaijan approaches migration is represented by this option. Instead of seeing migration as a problem that has to be handled, Azerbaijan views it as a social and economic resource that needs to be developed. A National Migrant Integration Strategy would serve as the central component of this approach. This strategy would be backed by legislative revisions to the Migration Code, labor legislation, education policy, and anti-discrimination regulations. Increasing the number of migrants who are proficient in the Azerbaijani language, ensuring that all migrants have equitable access to vocational training and healthcare, and fostering involvement in community life are all long-term objectives that would be defined under the approach. To provide one example, the approach may have as its goal the attainment of intermediate Azerbaijani by eighty percent of long-term residents within three years of their arrival. The number of years necessary to get permanent residence might be shortened by legal changes, and family reunification rights could be established.

According to Zwysen and Demireva's research from 2020, nations who have implemented such frameworks, such as Sweden, Canada, and Moldova, have shown improved social cohesion results and higher economic performance within migrant populations. In the European Union, the Action Plan for Integration 2021–2027 mandates that there should be cooperation throughout the whole government, language instruction beginning on the very first day, and quantifiable social indicators.

In the country of Azerbaijan, making preparations has already begun. The State Migration Service has started crafting an Integration Strategy and Action Plan (MIEUX Initiative, 2023) with the assistance of the MIEUX+ initiative, which is providing support for the project. Refugees, people returning from the diaspora, people migrating for work, and people migrating with their families are all specifically addressed in this strategy. This initiative has a strong emphasis on housing, education, health, and job assistance, while simultaneously building monitoring tools to assess success (MIEUX+, 2013). The Global Compact for Migration and the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers are two examples of international legal responsibilities that would be aligned with a comprehensive strategy. They are both examples of international legal duties. In addition to this, it would provide assistance to Azerbaijan's strategic aim of diversifying its economy and attracting professionals with high levels of expertise. Nevertheless, there are significant obstacles. Legal improvements, such as reducing the number of steps required to become a citizen or enacting anti-discrimination legislation, could encounter opposition from political parties. Cultural sensitivity training for government officials, data monitoring systems, and inter-agency cooperation procedures are some of the new capabilities that institutions will need to learn in order to become more effective. Another issue is over the budget. Comprehensive solutions need the allocation of financial resources in order to educate personnel, provide educational materials, and broaden access to legal help. On the other hand, nations that made early investments in integration, such as Estonia, have shown that modest upfront expenses result in long-term benefits via higher tax income and less reliance on assistance.

In conclusion, the timing is a worry. There is a long-term benefit to using such tactics. Over the course of many years, improvements in workforce participation, less discrimination, and strengthened community links will become apparent. In spite of this, sequencing might be

helpful: first, increase services; next, execute reforms to the legal system; and lastly, review and adjust. If the draft integration plan that Azerbaijan has developed is effectively adopted and put into action, the country will join the ranks of nations that are acknowledged for having strong migration governance. Its multicultural history would be aligned with this, and it would help it maintain its worldwide image while also assisting in the retention of necessary foreign labor.

CHAPTER 4. EVALUATION OF POLICY ALTERNATIVES

To determine the most suitable course of action for Azerbaijan, we evaluate the three proposed policy alternatives using several criteria: (1) Effectiveness – how well the alternative addresses the migrant integration challenges identified; (2) Feasibility – the practicality of implementation given administrative, financial, and political factors; (3) Impact on stakeholders – including migrants, local communities, and the state (economic and social impacts); and (4) Alignment with national interests and international norms. The evaluation is summarized for each alternative below.

1. Introduction to the Evaluation Framework

Azerbaijan is approaching a pivotal moment in the governance of migration and migrant integration. Although the number of foreign residents remains modest by international standards, the country's economic diversification goals, its aspiration to serve as a regional transport-energy hub, and its engagement with EU and UN migration compacts all point toward an environment in which better integration policies will soon be essential. The

government must therefore consider not merely how many migrants to admit, but how well those present can become productive, cohesive members of society.

To assess policy choices rigorously, five criteria widely used in public-policy analysis are applied: effectiveness (the likelihood of meeting stated integration goals), efficiency (the ratio of outcomes to public and private costs), equity (the distribution of benefits and burdens across groups), feasibility (political, administrative and financial practicality), and flexibility (the capacity to adapt to shocks or changing conditions). Each criterion is discussed for the three alternatives under consideration: maintaining the control-focused status quo (Alternative 1); adopting targeted integration measures inside the current legislative framework (Alternative 2); and enacting a comprehensive strategy with accompanying legal reforms (Alternative 3).

2. Alternative 1 — Status Quo: Control-Focused, Minimal Integration

Effectiveness. The status-quo model delivers the lowest impact against Azerbaijan’s emerging integration objectives. By definition it introduces no new instruments to address language barriers, credential recognition, or social inclusion; it therefore fails to alter the structural forces that leave many migrants confined to narrow job niches or semi-detached social roles. International comparisons underline that without explicit integration tools, outcomes deteriorate as migrant cohorts diversify (Castles 2004; OECD 2023). In the short run the country may avoid visible tensions because flows are small and culturally proximate, yet even modest increases in arrivals—whether driven by regional reconstruction contracts or new energy-logistics projects—could expose latent weaknesses. Effectiveness is further eroded by the absence of systematic monitoring; ministries collect data on visa issuance and quota uptake

but rarely track school completion, wage trajectories or language proficiency among migrants, making iterative improvement impossible.

Efficiency. In pure budgetary terms, the control-focused model appears inexpensive: integration courses are not funded, social-benefit eligibility is tightly circumscribed, and administrative effort is concentrated on issuing and renewing permits rather than on counseling or training. At first glance this suggests a high ratio of “outputs” (low public spending) to “costs”. Yet an efficiency lens emphasises not expenditure containment alone but the relationship between resources used and social value created. Empirical studies in Europe and Canada show that modest early investments in language and orientation rapidly pay for themselves through higher tax take, lower error costs in public services, and reduced labour-turnover losses (Zwysen & Demireva 2020). By forgoing such low-cost, high-return interventions, Azerbaijan accepts hidden inefficiencies; language gaps slow administrative transactions; employers incur repeated hiring costs because foreign workers depart after a single contract. Consequently, the apparent thrift of Alternative 1 masks a systemic misallocation of human capital and lost fiscal revenue.

Equity. A minimalist approach perpetuates unequal access to opportunity between citizens and non-citizens and even among migrant cohorts themselves. High-skilled foreigners hired by international oil-service firms may circumvent language issues through English-speaking workplaces, whereas construction labourers from Central Asia lack similar buffers. In interviews participants mentioned that migrants from specific countries which is considered risky according to the policies of specific banks struggle to open bank account. The lack of private language training facilities makes it difficult to learn language for those who are outside the target group of SMS integration courses. The status quo thus entrenches a hierarchy in

which economic and social rights depend on employer resources rather than on individual merit or need, conflicting with Azerbaijan's constitutional commitment to equality before the law.

Feasibility. Politically the status quo is easiest to sustain. No parliamentary debate is required, no new budget lines need approval, and the SMS can continue its largely transactional remit. The absence of visible controversy keeps short-term risk low. Yet feasibility is not only a snapshot of present constraints. Over the medium term, inaction may become less feasible as external obligations intensify. The Council of Europe's ECRI monitoring, the EU's Prague Process score-cards, and the UN High-Level Dialogue on Migration routinely flag Azerbaijan's limited integration architecture. Continued non-engagement could eventually threaten visa facilitation negotiations or donor co-operation programmes.

Flexibility. Because the status-quo model codifies few integration entitlements, it offers certain administrative nimbleness: quotas can be raised or lowered annually; permit conditions can be tightened to stem irregularities. Yet its adaptability to unforeseen shocks is poor. Should geopolitical conflict displace larger refugee contingents, Azerbaijan would possess neither language-class capacity nor psychosocial support structures to scale rapidly. Similarly, if the domestic economy suddenly demanded more high-skilled labour, the absence of credential-recognition pathways would deter potential entrants. Thus, while flexible on the inflow side, Alternative 1 is brittle on the inclusion side, a deficiency that crises often expose.

3. Alternative 2 — Targeted Integration Measures within the Existing System

Effectiveness. By introducing discrete tools—government-funded language courses, orientation seminars, integration desks at SMS regional centres—Alternative 2 corrects the most acute frictions impeding migrants’ daily functioning. Evidence from Finland’s personalised integration plans and Germany’s BAMF courses indicates that even short, standardised programmes substantially improve language acquisition and civic literacy, leading to faster labour-market insertion. For Azerbaijan, operation of SMS already shows promising results: over five thousand foreign residents completed SMS language courses between 2019 and 2021, and employer satisfaction surveys suggest reduced workplace miscommunication thereafter (SMS Report 2023). The targeted model also leverages partnerships with NGOs such as the Public Council under the SMS, multiplying impact at modest cost. While the approach does not remove structural barriers to long-term settlement, it demonstrably elevates functional integration outcomes—school attendance, contract compliance, community participation—thereby achieving moderate-to-high effectiveness for the objectives set.

Efficiency. Cost-effectiveness is a core strength. Targeted measures require small capital outlays: classrooms at existing vocational schools, trilingual information portals (already online), and a handful of integration case-workers. Marginal costs per migrant are low, particularly when language instruction doubles as civic orientation. In turn, returns accrue quickly: higher language proficiency reduces translation expenditures in hospitals and courts; well-informed migrants file fewer erroneous documents, lowering administrative processing time. International donors frequently co-finance pilot phases, further improving the

public-expenditure ratio. For instance, MIEUX+ funded Azerbaijani officials' training itineraries in 2023, covering curriculum design at almost zero local cost. The targeted model therefore scores high on efficiency, generating measurable benefits from limited inputs.

Equity. Targeted interventions narrow, though do not abolish, disparities. Free language lessons, if scheduled flexibly, help low-income migrants who cannot afford private tutors; orientation materials in multiple languages bridge literacy gaps; children's after-school support schemes prevent educational lag. Nevertheless, equity hinges on reach. If classes are concentrated in Baku, migrants in Ganja or Sumqayit may be overlooked. Participation incentives (for example, accelerated residence-permit renewal upon course completion) could mitigate uneven take-up, but equity remains contingent on design features such as geographic coverage, child-care provision and employer cooperation. Overall, Alternative 2 delivers significant equity gains compared with the status quo, although residual imbalances persist until structural reforms are enacted.

Feasibility. Politically, targeted measures enjoy an acceptable risk profile. They do not alter citizenship pathways or expand social-benefit eligibility—issues that often mobilise nationalist resistance—yet they allow government to claim progress toward EU benchmarks. Administrative feasibility is supported by existing experiments: the SMS already runs a Training Centre; a 24/7 hotline is staffed; public-sector HR regulations can be amended by ministerial decree to formalise integration case-workers. Fiscal feasibility is reasonable: the Ministry of Finance can allocate a micro-budget line under social services; donor co-financing through the ICMPD MOBILAZE programme offsets start-up costs. Hence Alternative 2 is judged highly feasible, conditional on sustained, if moderate, political commitment.

Flexibility. Incremental measures are inherently adaptive. Language-course cohorts can be expanded or contracted each semester; online orientation modules can be updated quickly to reflect legal changes; integration desks can be replicated in regions that experience unexpected inflows (for example, reconstruction zones in Karabakh attracting foreign contractors). Because entitlement breadth remains limited, fiscal exposure is scalable. If migration flows surge, classes can extend hours; if flows subside, instructors revert to other adult-education tasks. Thus Alternative 2 offers superior operational flexibility. Its weakness is strategic flexibility: it cannot alone pivot Azerbaijan toward a settlement-oriented model if economic planners later decide that large-scale migrant retention is essential.

4. Alternative 3 — Comprehensive Integration Strategy and Legal

Reforms

Effectiveness. A multi-year National Migrant Integration Strategy, legally underpinned by Migration-Code amendments, provides the most complete remedy to integration deficits. International cases show that when language instruction, anti-discrimination statutes, credential-recognition services and citizenship pathways are bundled, migrant economic performance converges more rapidly with native levels (Prokic-Breuer & McManus 2016; EU Action Plan 2021–2027). By embedding goals such as “intermediate Azerbaijani proficiency for 80 % of foreign residents within two years” and “zero wage gap at equal skill levels”, the strategy creates measurable targets and accountability. Structural levers—recognition of foreign diplomas, eligibility for vocational subsidies—unlock human capital otherwise trapped in low-return occupations. The introduction of robust anti-discrimination protections reduces attrition by high-skilled talent deterred by uncertainty. Civic-participation provisions, including potential local-election voting for long-term residents, deepen social cohesion. Over

a decade, such a package can transform migrants from peripheral labour inputs into tax-paying entrepreneurs, homeowners and community leaders. On effectiveness alone, Alternative 3 is unequivocally superior.

Efficiency. Up-front costs are larger: curricular roll-out nationwide, equality-body staffing, IT systems for credential assessment, and perhaps subsidies to employers for language release time. Yet longitudinal efficiency is favourable. Early language mastery cuts interpretation expenses; credential recognition enables migrants to earn and thus pay taxes commensurate with their qualifications; inclusive housing policy mitigates informal overcrowding that strains municipal infrastructure. Cost-benefit models in Canada and Sweden show that comprehensive integration turns positive on public balance sheets within five to eight years, as migrant tax contributions outpace training and welfare costs (OECD 2023). Azerbaijan’s smaller migrant stock accelerates breakeven: fewer participants mean lower aggregate cost, while per-capita gains remain high because skill under-utilisation is common among current foreign workers. Efficiency is therefore medium-to-high, contingent on competent programme management.

Equity. Comprehensive reform most faithfully realises principles of equal opportunity. Legal rights are extended beyond the workplace into education, housing and political participation. Refugees and humanitarian-status holders, often marginalised under quota systems, would gain uniform access to services, closing glaring equity gaps. Children of migrants would benefit from language-support modules embedded in mainstream schooling, reducing second-generation disadvantage. Gender equity also improves because women on family visas receive direct integration resources rather than relying on spouses’ employer networks. By institutionalising anti-discrimination adjudication, the state signals zero tolerance for xenophobia, reinforcing social justice norms for citizens and non-citizens alike.

Feasibility. This criterion poses the greatest hurdle. Legislative change to the Migration Code and possibly the Citizenship Law requires parliamentary consensus, which may be elusive if segments of the elite fear demographic dilution or political competition. Drafting a credible multi-sector strategy necessitates inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms that Azerbaijan has only partly institutionalised. Civil-service training in cultural competence, digitalisation of credential-evaluation workflows, and province-level implementation require sustained financing and capacity-building. Nonetheless, several facilitators exist. Fiscal space is available: oil revenues continue to fund social projects, and the migrant population is still small. A phased approach—piloting legal aid clinics in Baku, then rolling out to regions—can spread costs. Feasibility therefore rates as moderate: demanding but attainable with high-level sponsorship and donor alignment.

Flexibility. Comprehensive frameworks are often criticised for rigidity, yet well-designed legislation can build in review clauses, sunset provisions and adaptive budgeting. For example, Sweden’s 2010 Integration Act mandates annual parliamentary reporting, allowing resource reallocation if labour-market outcomes deteriorate. Azerbaijan could replicate such design: the strategy could undergo triennial review by a Parliamentary Migration Committee, and the Migration Code could delegate quota-calculation methodologies to executive decrees, preserving responsiveness. Legal clarity actually enhances flexibility at street level, because municipal officials have standard operating procedures rather than improvising. In short, although Alternative 3 introduces structural commitments, it can be engineered for adaptive governance, achieving high flexibility relative to complexity

Evaluation Matrix: Integration Policy Alternatives for Azerbaijan

Criteria	Alternative 1(Control-Focused)	Alternative 2 (Incremental Support)	Alternative 3 (Legal Reform)
Effectiveness	✗ Low – leaves core gaps unattended	✓ Moderate – resolves day-to-day barriers	✓✓ High – addresses practical and structural needs
Efficiency	✓✓ High (short-term) – minimal public spending but hidden long-term costs	✓✓ High – low unit cost, quick pay-offs	✓ Moderate – larger outlay, pays off after several years
Equity	✗ Low – benefits confined to privileged sub-groups	✓ Moderate – tangible gains for most migrants, some gaps remain	✓✓ High – equalises rights and opportunities system-wide
Feasibility	✓✓ High – politically and administratively effortless	✓ Moderate – relies on modest budgets and existing institutions	✗ Low – requires parliamentary reform and inter-ministerial overhaul

Flexibility	✓ Moderate – quotas adjustable, but brittle in shocks	✓✓ High – programmes easily scaled up or down	✓ Moderate – adaptable if review clauses set, yet legally more rigid
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Chosen Policy Alternative: Targeted Integration Measures (Alternative 2)

Among the three options, Alternative 2 offers the best balance between ambition and practicality. Why Alternative 2? Targeted measures offer the best all-round balance at Azerbaijan’s current stage of migration development. They raise effectiveness by directly tackling immediate pain points—language tuition, civic orientation, one-stop advisory desks—without demanding a wholesale rewrite of the Migration Code. On equity, they level the playing field for lower-income labour migrants and refugees who currently depend on ad-hoc NGO help, while still respecting domestic sensitivities about fast-tracking to citizenship. The option is feasible: it can be enacted through ministerial decrees and budget reallocations rather than contentious parliamentary amendments, and it builds on pilot programs the State Migration Service is already running. Finally, it is highly flexible: course cohorts, geographic coverage and online modules can be expanded or contracted as inflows fluctuate, and lessons learned can be folded into a future, more ambitious strategy.

Clarification of Choice

Azerbaijan’s integration challenge is not yet on the scale seen in large immigrant-receiving states, but the strategic costs of inaction are rising. Alternative 1 would conserve resources today but allow language gaps, credential waste and latent social tensions to harden—undermining the country’s plan to attract diversified foreign investment and talent. Alternative 3 embodies long-term best practice, yet implementing a full-spectrum legal reform

in one leap would stretch administrative capacity, provoke domestic debate over nationality law, and risk reform fatigue.

Choosing Alternative 2 positions the government to **“learn by doing.”** Concretely, it means:

- converting the SMS pilot language (integration) courses into a national programme with regional branches;
- attaching civic-orientation modules and employer tool-kits to work-permit renewals;
- upgrading the existing hotline into a fully staffed “Integration Desk” capable of case-management;
- collecting outcome data—language-test pass rates, school attendance, job-retention statistics—to inform future legislation.

Successes will supply the social and empirical capital needed to negotiate the deeper reforms envisaged in Alternative 3. Should migrant inflows remain low, the programme’s scale can stay modest; should they rise—because of reconstruction contracts in Karabakh, expanded logistics corridors, or regional displacement crises—the same infrastructure can be amplified with donor or budgetary support, preserving adaptability.

By adopting Targeted Integration Measures now, Azerbaijan secures quick, visible wins in migrant well-being and social cohesion, honours its commitments under the Global Compact for Migration, and lays durable groundwork for a comprehensive, rights-based integration architecture when demographic and economic conditions make it both necessary and politically saleable.

CHAPTER 5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Recommendations

In light of the above analysis, it is recommended that Azerbaijan move beyond the status quo and adopt a proactive yet gradual approach to migrant integration. The following specific actions are proposed:

1. Implement Immediate Integration Support Programs (Phase 1): As a priority, the State Migration Service (in cooperation with relevant ministries) should roll out free Azerbaijani language and orientation courses for all foreigners. This can start as a pilot in Baku where most migrants reside, using existing facilities (e.g. vocational training centers or public schools during off-hours). Courses should cover basic language skills and cultural/legal orientation. Participation could be voluntary but encouraged for all residency permit holders and their spouses. Additionally, publish a Migrant Integration Guidebook in Azerbaijani, English, Russian, and other relevant languages, explaining how to access healthcare, education, legal aid, and other services. These measures correspond to Alternative 2 and can be achieved with a modest budget, especially if done in partnership with organizations like IOM or local NGOs.

2. Strengthen Institutional Capacity: Create a dedicated Integration Division within the State Migration Service to coordinate all integration-related initiatives. This division would manage the language programs, operate the 24/7 migrant info hotline (which already exists <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-report-on-azerbaijan/1680ab9e35>, but it can be enhanced with multi-language support), and liaise with other agencies. It should also formalize the involvement of civil society – for example, by expanding the *Public Council under the SMS* to an *Integration Forum* that meets regularly to discuss migrant needs and monitor the implemented programs. The Integration Division can start small (a handful of staff) but should have clear responsibility for carrying out the government’s integration efforts.
3. Enhance Migrant Access to Services: Issue an administrative order to ensure that public services (schools, clinics, employment services) are accommodating to foreigners. This could include instructing public schools to provide extra Azerbaijani language support to children of foreign residents, and directing employment centers to include foreigners in job matching or training programs where legally permissible. The Ministry of Health could develop guidelines for hospitals on providing interpretation or translated materials for non-Azerbaijani speakers. These steps ensure that migrants are not excluded from basic services due to language or procedural barriers, reinforcing their integration on the ground.
4. Promote Social Interaction and Public Awareness: The government, possibly through the Ministry of Culture or State Committee for Work with Diaspora, should sponsor community events that bring locals and migrants together. For example, an annual “International Day” festival can be held in Baku celebrating different cultures of migrants in Azerbaijan, with food, music and presentations – showcasing Azerbaijan’s openness. Local executive authorities can be encouraged to include foreign community representatives in cultural celebrations like Novruz. Concurrently, initiate a public awareness campaign (via media and social networks)

emphasizing Azerbaijan's historical hospitality and the positive contributions of current migrants, to preempt any xenophobic narratives. This aligns with preserving the country's image of tolerance <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-report-on-azerbaijan/1680ab9e35> and educates the public on why integration efforts are beneficial for all.

5. **Develop a Medium-Term Integration Strategy (Phase 2):** Using the experience and data gathered from the initial programs (above steps), Azerbaijan should draft a National Integration Strategy 2025–2030. This document, to be prepared by an inter-ministerial working group with input from international experts, would set more ambitious targets and outline a roadmap toward comprehensive integration (Alternative 3). It should include goals like: X% of migrants attending language courses, Y% of foreign residents employed at skill levels matching their qualifications, increased satisfaction indices, etc. It would also map necessary legal reforms. For instance, the strategy could propose to amend the Migration Code to explicitly mention integration support as a function of the SMS, and to introduce anti-discrimination clauses protecting foreigners in employment and service delivery (if such clauses aren't already strong). It might also suggest reviewing the citizenship law to consider provisions for dual citizenship or reduced residency requirements for certain categories (e.g., highly skilled professionals or investors who have contributed for say 3 years). While these legal changes might be politically sensitive, having them on the strategic agenda opens dialogue for gradual reform. The strategy should be adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers to give it official status.
6. **Leverage International Support and Expertise:** Azerbaijan should actively engage with international initiatives on integration. It can request an assessment and technical assistance from bodies like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the EU (for example, through the Mobility Partnership framework or twinning projects with EU member states that

have integration experience). Learning from other countries – perhaps those with similar size migrant populations or those who transitioned from emigration to immigration (like some Eastern European states) – can provide tailored ideas. International support can also help fund some of the integration projects, reducing the burden on the state budget. For example, the EU-funded MOBILAZE project (2016–2019) already aimed at capacity building in migration management; a follow-up project could be negotiated focusing on integration and re-integration (for returnees)(ICMPD, 2018). Participating in regional dialogues (e.g., the Baku Initiative on Migration or the Prague Process) and showcasing Azerbaijan’s evolving integration measures can also align the country with broader regional migration governance trends.

7. Monitor, Evaluate, and Adjust: Establish a mechanism to track the outcomes of integration efforts. The SMS Statistics unit (or the new Integration Division) should collect data on how many migrants use the services, their progress (perhaps language test pass rates, feedback surveys), and any changes in migrant irregularity or issues (the hypothesis is that integration support will reduce problems like illegal overstays or disputes). Periodic evaluation reports (annually or biennially) should be published, showing achievements and areas for improvement. This transparency will help build public trust and allow policy adjustments. For example, if uptake of language classes is low, the approach might be adjusted (maybe they need to be made mandatory or more accessible). If certain communities of migrants are struggling more (say, migrants’ spouses who are at home and not learning the language), targeted interventions (like community women’s groups or online courses) can be introduced.

Collectively, these recommendations form a sequenced plan: start with pragmatic support measures (Alternative 2) and gradually work toward a cohesive integration policy (elements

of Alternative 3). This approach recognizes Azerbaijan’s current baseline and capacities, and it mitigates risk by not leaping straight into comprehensive reform without groundwork.

5.2 Conclusion

The integration of migrants into Azerbaijan’s social, economic, and civic life is increasingly becoming a matter of national importance. As Azerbaijan advances its development goals, seeks greater global economic integration, and takes part in international projects and partnerships, the role of migrants within the country is no longer peripheral. Migration is not only about regulating entry and ensuring legal compliance—it is equally about what happens after people arrive. This paper has explored the issue of migrant integration in the Azerbaijani context and found that, while notable progress has been made in managing migration flows and establishing a legal framework through instruments such as the 2013 Migration Code, the country’s immigration policy has historically prioritized control and admission procedures over integration outcomes.

Because of this attention to regulation, migration stays organized and focused on Azerbaijan’s workforce and security requirements. Even so, this has meant there is less support for the long-term inclusion of migrants already in the country. They play an economic role in the country but are unable to fully take part in social life since there are not enough programs to support them. As a result, migrants can be found in many jobs, but social and civic participation remains difficult for them.

Interviews with migrants and feedback from stakeholders during this study back up this understanding. A major concern for migrants is that they often struggle with languages, do not know what their duties or entitlements are, and have trouble getting health or educational

services for their children. If these problems are not solved, they may result in social exclusion for migrants, reduce their potential, and contribute to conflicts between migrants and locals. Both ECRI and IOM, in their own international evaluations, have recommended that Azerbaijan develop a more engaged approach to integration.

The paper looked at three approaches for dealing with this problem: leaving the current system mostly unchanged, introducing some targeted integration actions under existing law, or committing to a more detailed integration strategy that would take major legislative actions. Of the three options, Targeted Integration Measures proved to be the most suitable and equal solution Azerbaijan can use right now. It makes it possible for the country to respond to key issues in migrant inclusion by taking simple actions such as setting up language classes, civic integration seminars, one-stop support centers, and providing better access to multilingual information. Its suitability comes from the fact it is practicable and effective at the same time. It does not call for changes to the Migration Code or for the introduction of complex new laws, but instead uses tools like ministerial decrees and pilot schemes, most of which have previously been tried out on a limited level. The costs for such steps are small, especially given the bigger improvements they could bring to economic output, social ties, and public services. Moreover, this approach is equitable: It helps those less advantaged migrants who currently struggle to access services, all while keeping in mind the country's concerns related to citizenship and balance.

According to the recommendations presented in this study, the middle-ground approach should now be put into practice. Among the recommendations are new formal programs for integration, designed to be both user-friendly and in harmony with Azerbaijan's social and economic goals. It also asks for enhanced capabilities in institutions by training those who

work directly with immigrants, improving collaboration across departments, and creating better ways to track integration metrics. Efforts to raise public awareness about accepting migrants and sharing good stories about migration are key, since this creates the backing essential for integration to work. In the future, these efforts should result in a national integration strategy being written into law to guarantee ongoing and coordinated integration work.

It is crucial to emphasize that the pursuit of integration is not in contradiction with Azerbaijan's national interests or its desire for controlled, sovereign migration management. On the contrary, effective integration enhances national security by reducing the likelihood of marginalization and social conflict. Ensuring migrants are not held back allows them to use all their abilities and boost the economy. In practice, someone who can communicate in Azerbaijani and is aware of important regulations will probably stay out of the informal work market and become a contributing taxpayer and an active member of the community. The presence of a good integration system is especially important for Azerbaijan as it tries to recruit talented people and investment from abroad. The way integration is managed also influences Azerbaijan's image in the eyes of the world. Azerbaijan's majority commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance makes it easier for new arrivals to see the country as both diverse and open. In fact, integration policy shows the country's values, not just follows bureaucratic steps. It links migration management to the larger vision President Ilham Aliyev has for an 'open doors' Azerbaijan. Yet, the idea of openness is stronger when joined with proper structure. Anyone who comes into the country through open door policies should have the chance to find their place in society. Integration policy serves as the system that sets out how migrants will be included and played a role in society.

By considering integration from a global angle, Azerbaijan comes closer to following major standards and duties in this area. Migrations is a concern that can only be addressed through international teamwork and future-minded ways of looking at it. Assisting migrants not just through humanitarian means, but through integration, supports both the humanity and the future stability and development of destination countries. Given its strong economy and central location, Azerbaijan is poised to reap the rewards from this trend, but only if it adopts the methods required for long-term and structured integration of migrants.

Ultimately, the integration of migration in Azerbaijan is an important policy task that also offers the country various opportunities. Even though the legal and institutional systems offer a good starting point for migration management, adopting a strong integration pillar is necessary now. Adopting the helpful, even-handed suggestions set out in this study allows Azerbaijan to reorient its migration policy towards realizing the full benefits of migrants as people and communities. This is not just about red tape—it is about making Azerbaijan stronger, more united, and more prosperous.

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Appendix (Interview questions)

1. What was your biggest challenge in obtaining your Azerbaijani work or residence permit?

2. How has your level of Azerbaijani affected your access to healthcare, education, or other services?
3. In what ways did employers recognize—or not recognize—your foreign qualifications?
4. Can you describe a moment when you felt particularly welcomed or excluded by locals?
5. If you could change one policy to improve migrant integration, what would it be?