

**SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**MASTER OF ARTS IN DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**CAPSTONE PROJECT**

*Azerbaijan's involvement in International Social Projects : A Proposal for strengthening soft power through social protection policies*

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## STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

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### **Abstract (by Leyla)**

The capstone analyses the degree of Azerbaijan's participation in international social projects by identifying three core constraints limiting its effective engagement. These impediments include capacity limitations of institutions operating in Azerbaijan, geopolitical hurdles and insufficient level of soft power commitment of state. Based on the results of qualitative data collection methods involving semi-structured interviews with three experts and in-depth evidence-based research, the project introduces three practical policy alternatives. First policy option aims to establish institutional development through implementing a comprehensive capacity-building program, the second alternative presents 3 subsections to address regional dynamics, namely, Track 1 diplomacy and diplomatic involvement in initiatives, economic diversification to overcome domestic limitations and modernization of media outlets to elevate Azerbaijan's positive image. The project further discusses the establishment of a solid soft power strategy as the last option which plays a crucial role in enhancing Azerbaijan's global profile. The paper posits preference on soft power strategy building which can most effectively enable Azerbaijan's involvement in global development goals by transforming domestic reforms into international project engagement through targeted social protection measures.

## Table of Contents

<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1. Methodology.....	9
<b>CHAPTER 2 - PROBLEM DESCRIPTION.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1. Limited institutional capacity of governmental institutions.....	12
2.1.1 Limited institutional capacity of non-governmental institutions.....	14
2.2. Internal and regional pressures impacting Azerbaijan’s global social participation.....	17
2.3. Limited soft power commitment.....	20
<b>CHAPTER 3- POLICY ALTERNATIVES.....</b>	<b>27</b>
3.1 Implementation of institutional capacity-building program.....	27
3.2. Balancing internal and regional pressures through diplomacy, economic diversification, and media influence .....	33
3.3 Establishment of a centralized national soft power strategy.....	41
<b>CHAPTER 4-EVALUATION OF POLICY ALTERNATIVES.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5-CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>75</b>

## **Chapter1: Introduction (by Ruqaia)**

The concept of participation, of course, is not a new one in development. Over the last thirty years, it has acquired a spectrum of meanings and given rise to diverse practices (see Cornwall, 2000). This exemplifies how participation in development social projects has always gained a lot of importance through the years due to its tremendous positive effects not only for the groups that get the privileged outcomes of a project, but also for the participant who acts to produce those outcomes. Participation in social projects was only understood through the lens of merely moral social activity since it was called "community Participation", but through the years, as Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) indicated, participation has evolved from being a community service that benefits society to being a means that allows for actively shape political policies and be an effective part within the governing system.

This demonstrates that participating in social projects regardless of whether it is in a smaller or a bigger one within the international society, the reward of being a part of any social initiatives has many social and political rewards to the initiator and the participant, the benefits don't just revolve around social gains, but political and diplomatic gains as well. The World Bank (1994) defines participation as "a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them" (p. 1). As a result, it is plausible to suggest that participation in social projects could put the participant in a position to make decisions and have a sufficient amount of control and power to influence politically. The United Nations has always encouraged the participation and inclusion of all countries in international social projects for sustainable development; it has also consistently facilitated the involvement of countries in its SDGs, as highlighted in the UN's 2030 Agenda of Sustainable

Development. "The importance of participation by all actors is emphasized throughout the 2030 Agenda. The Preamble highlights "a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries" (United Nations, 2015, p. 1).

In light of the points mentioned, it can be asserted that a country's involvement in international social projects holds significant importance for the world and considerable advantages for the country that sets itself in a position as an active participant in global initiatives such as humanitarian aid, health campaigns, climate change mitigation efforts, and poverty reduction programs. Azerbaijan has been a key participant in many international social projects that had a very positive effect on the world. According to Dr. Jafarova, Azerbaijan was involved with international organizations specifically around 2012-2013, Azerbaijan was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security council. "Azerbaijan's emphasis on multilateralism is no less important. Its belief in the power of international institutions and increasing weight in international affairs has elevated it to the non-permanent member status of the UN Security Council in 2012-2013" (Jafarova, 2020). During which, it worked on enhancing relationships between the UN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), not only that, it has also been cooperating with many international organizations, especially from 2019 to 2022.

These steps signify how Azerbaijan is dedicated to enhancing cooperation and unity among nations and its involvement in international society. These initiatives and Azerbaijan's active involvement in various international organizations have resulted in significant political, diplomatic, and social rewards. A successful example of the substantial gains of Azerbaijan's collaboration in international social projects especially as an NAM's member, was its support of

Humanitarian aid and collaboration in Africa as remarked by the Azerbaijani Chairmanship to the Non-Aligned Movement (2019)

Moreover, Azerbaijan has contributed to disaster relief efforts, medical aid, and financial support to other countries such as Pakistan (2005), Nepal (2015), and Iran (2013) according to 30 Trend News Agency (2009) and Azernews.az (2025). These cumulative positive efforts on Azerbaijan's part can be reasonably linked to favorable political outcomes, as evidenced by what happened when the 2018 United Nations General Assembly resolution 'The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan.' This resolution called for the immediate withdrawal of all Armenian armies from Azerbaijani territories. We can suggest that Azerbaijan's active cooperation with the international community and goodwill may have had a direct or indirect impact on the 39 votes that Azerbaijan got in favor out of 46 voting countries (U.N., 2008). All that being said, even though it has been proven that Azerbaijan has played an influential role in international social projects for the past years, its involvement and participation are still considered limited compared to other countries worldwide such as Norway, Sweden, and more recently, Türkiye, which has been observed to boost their global and diplomatic influence in the world (Donor Tracker, 2023; The Soft Power 30, 2019).

Moreover, it would be more relevant to highlight how Türkiye's social participation has made it one of the countries that has gained significant diplomatic and political benefits, as both countries, Azerbaijan and Türkiye share many political, social, and geopolitical similarities. To highlight those benefits, Türkiye has become an influential country in humanitarian diplomacy, particularly through its active participation in UN and non-UN projects that are revolving around resolving crises in neighboring and regional countries. For example, it played an essential role during the Syrian war by being the largest host country for Syrian refugees. In addition, it invested

around 40\$ billion to support them. (Middle East Monitor, 2024). Expanding further, Türkiye also exerted its efforts on Community integration programs for Syrians, and it didn't stop there; it also expanded its humanitarian efforts to other countries in Africa and Asia, such as Somalia, Pakistan, and Myanmar (Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2019). It is believed that Türkiye's social projects' influence has enhanced its diplomatic impact, which could be connected with Africa, where the number of Turkish embassies grew from 12 in 2003 to 43, showing a significant increase in political and economic influence (African Business, 2011; Calabar, 2024). This could be referred to as an insightful model for Azerbaijan, given their similarities. The research problem is the need for more strategies in Azerbaijan to enhance its international diplomatic presence and participation in global social projects through soft power, particularly by leveraging social protection policies. Taking this into account, the purpose of this paper is to explore how Azerbaijan can increase its participation in global social projects by strengthening its international diplomatic presence.

### **1.1. Methodology (by Leyla)**

The primary objectives of the project included identifying key causes contributing to the constraints in Azerbaijan's active involvement in international social projects and offering policy alternatives to practically address the challenges. The project is of significant importance in terms of examining policy development for Azerbaijan's international cooperation strategies that would be enhanced through strengthening its soft power.

Considering the substantiality of the investigation, research involving deeper qualitative analysis has been considered the most practical method in order to achieve the target of the project effectively. As such, the research was conducted through both primary and secondary data collections. For the core problem causes and their thorough description in following chapters, secondary data from various scholarly articles and official reports have been sufficient use. To

ensure deeper analysis in the policy alternatives sections and further, the research plans to utilize supplemented primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews together with secondary data.

The secondary data was collected through existing literature review, case studies, comprehensive analytical reports and researches done by diverse international institutions including The World Bank, Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD) and more.

Secondary data sources on quantitative data include reports by State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (SSC), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and others which provided statistical data and analytical framework to assess the effectiveness of current policies and trends.

For in-depth analysis of our research, a semi-structured interview technique was applied to conduct interviews. This format has been prioritized over structured and unstructured interviews in order to utilize both pre-determined questions for holistic coverage of the study from all aspects and detailed exploration of our topic while making it flexible with interviewer guidance. This allowed us to cover essential inquiries for thorough examination, help to understand the context, to find out impact, to analyse the root causes of the research problem and to determine possible effective solutions. Interview was consisted of 8 open-ended questions on three main directions: Institutional limitations and their development strategies, analysis of the soft power strategy and media strategy.

Two government officials from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Azerbaijan and a professional expert in the media field were contacted and participated as interviewees. To ensure ethical conduct, consent form and description of the interview procedure together with a clear set of objectives was shared prior to interviews and were signed by both

parties. Interviews with the media expert have been recorded and transcribed accordingly which will later be analyzed comprehensively, while the project will discuss the responses given by Ministry officials based on taken notes. Confidentiality of the research has been assured based on the will of interviewees. The government officials did not demonstrate objection for indication of their names in the project, while the media expert required anonymity which will be respected throughout the paper.

## **Roadmap (by Leyla)**

The roadmap for this capstone project involves the structure as follows. Consisting of 5 main chapters with subsections in each, 1st chapter will discuss the description and general background of the policy problem which will explain validity and urgency of this research to focus on Azerbaijan's efforts on contributing to social welfare globally. While clearly setting the stage for further discussion, the methodology part will be exploring the core methods utilized to obtain required data for further analysis of the problem. The second chapter will discuss three substantial problem causes including limited institutional framework, geopolitical and regional challenges, lack of effective soft power strategies which will be defined as key hindering factors preventing Azerbaijan to play a substantive role in international social projects. The third chapter will identify 3 effective solutions in accordance with each problem cause. The following section will evaluate the results and rank each solution by applying 5 key criterias. The last chapter will set concluding remarks with further discussions and recommendations for policy strategies.

## **Chapter 2 - Problem Description (by Leyla)**

Azerbaijan's effective engagement in international social programs are hindered by several factors. The challenges include limited institutional capacity of governmental and non-governmental institutions which are in charge of contributing to the country's involvement in global social development programs, regional and geopolitical issues resulting in unequal resource allocation, and lack of soft power management which prevents Azerbaijan from implementing social protection policies.

## **2.1 Limited institutional capacity of governmental institutions (by Leyla)**

One of the fundamental challenges hindering Azerbaijan from extensively engaging in international social projects is weak institutional capacity. The term refers to the capability of governmental institutions to effectively manage policy coordination, generate specific rules of policy-making arrangements and sustain in their function to fulfill their policy objectives efficiently (Domorenok, Graziano, & Polverari, 2021, p. 8). The capacity involves critical elements such as technical and human expertise, financial and material systems, legal framework and administrative mechanisms. According to Amy Javernick-Will and Raymond Levitt, institutional "knowledge" is vital for implementation of successful international projects (Javernick-Will & Levitt, 2009, p. 7).

For Azerbaijan in particular, limited capacity often reflecting in terms of material, technical, administrative and legal framework is a challenging factor that causes disruptions in the country's active participation in international initiatives, collaboration with international organizations and establishing social diplomacy through its responsible institutions. The report provided by The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for Independent Country Programme Evaluation on Azerbaijan in 2019 indicates that the weak institutional capacity of Azerbaijani government has been one of the

concerning obstacles to develop and execute sustainable development policies and to better engage in international partnerships.

Since 2005 UNDP has been supporting the government to address institutional challenges while ensuring the smooth and adequate provision of policies. The World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index presented the steady improvement over the following years as an outcome of UNDP programs by 2019 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019). Dynamics goes in different directions after 2019, reaching its slight growth in 2023 (World bank, 2023). In addition, a recent order by Azerbaijani government includes closure of UN-led offices due to their irrelevance in the modern context. This creates controversies with Azerbaijan's commitment to international initiatives (Newsroom, 2025)

On the other hand, it is crucial to draw attention to the most recent data by Voice and Accountability Index, which presents reverse development being -1.41 in 2023 and reaching its lowest in previous years (World Bank, 2023) Additionally, Azerbaijan has been reported with the lowest indicator for Global Freedom Score being 7 by Freedom House Report in 2025 highlighting the issues of corruption, civil liberties and independent activism which negatively affected the institutional governance (Freedom House, 2025, United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019). According to Daniil Filipenco, such corruption causes disruptions in the country's ability to implement social programs once it becomes a part of institutions (Filipenco, 2024).

In addition to the UNDP program, another initiative aiming to provide assistance is Support to Institution Building Activities (SIBA) funded by the European Union. The primary purpose of the project was to strengthen institutional capacity in Azerbaijan in order to ensure to effectively execute sustainable programs in connection with international cooperation, particularly with EU-funded programs (Ecorys, n.d.). Moreover, this initiative was implemented to assist Azerbaijani

government to independently manage its obligations under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan and the Eastern Partnership (Ecorys, n.d.). The program focused on effectively developing, implementing, and raising awareness about capacity building on governmental institutional advancement framework by addressing pressing issues like project monitoring, assessment, technical assistance and project support by identifying needs (Ecorys, n.d.) Thus, while examining the programs implemented in the country in recent years, it becomes evident that Azerbaijan relies on external support programs which aim to provide institutions with required institutional assistance. This provides one more evidence that Azerbaijan is insufficient in internal capacity to address the challenge on its own.

### **2.1.1 Limited institutional capacity of non-governmental institutions (by Leyla)**

In addition to insufficient capacity of governmental institutions, there are also constraints for the efficient operation of non-governmental, often non-profit institutions like Civil Society Organizations. These organizations play a key role in addressing social, economical, humanitarian and environmental challenges and specific needs with the goal to achieve social wellbeing. It is also crucial to highlight that Civil Society Organizations often take part in the implementation of sustainable and society-oriented policy change initiatives, international social protection programs and collaborate with various regional and international partners. As Arzuman Amirov indicates in his research, integration with foreign partners is a fundamental driver for global cooperation which facilitates non-governmental and civil society institutions that in turn, reinforces interconnectedness on a global level (Amirov, 2017, p. 11). Hence, Civil Society Organizations are essential in advocating for international initiatives by boosting a country's engagement in international social projects. However, Civil Society Organizations in Azerbaijan face institutional

restraints such as lack of sufficient financial resources, expertise, operational and organizational capacity limitations together with legal barriers added.

According to the 2020 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for Azerbaijan primary reasons preventing Civil Society Organizations from operating in full capacity and hindering their independent functioning are legal and bureaucratic pressure. Report further highlights the lack of funding as another major challenge for Civil Society Organizations. Material resource limitations prevent Civil Society Organizations to fully adhere to their short-term or long-term domestic and global missions no matter in what level of scale they are at, hindering them from fulfilling international commitments to achieve sustainable growth (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2021, p 3). Crucial to highlight that these organizations face significant complications to attain and secure their funding on a domestic level which occurs partly as an inevitable outcome of legal and administrative barriers. The other part of the issue is due to limited availability of funding opportunities allocated by the government which is even harsher for regional Civil Society Organizations compared to those which are run in Baku. (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2021, p 3). This financial fragility forces Civil Society Organizations to rely on external backing and discloses broader institutional shortcomings of Azerbaijan. The report on Policy and Ecosystem Recommendations for Supporting Social Enterprises in Azerbaijan which was initiated by the Developing Innovation-Driven and Sustainable Civil Society in Azerbaijan indicates that the program was funded by the European Union and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, aims to increase the capacity of Civil Society Organisations to engage in effective policy-making processes in Azerbaijan (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Heavy reliance on external

support from international institutions like UNDP and EU also aligns with the general pattern of limited self-sufficiency..

Thus, due to the restrictive hurdles, Civil Society Organizations not only struggle to develop necessary competencies domestically but also lose the credibility to engage with international stakeholders who often refuse to accept cooperation considering potential disruptions in their smooth functioning (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2021, p 3).

The above mentioned challenges are results of interconnected factors stemming from various economic, political, historical reasons. After Azerbaijan gained its independence, the country needed to reestablish its own independent institutional framework free from the inherited centralized structure of the Soviet Union. Additionally, Azerbaijan had to focus on stabilizing its economy before focusing on the development of its institutions to function for the welfare establishment abroad. The process is seemingly slow and difficult to adapt in the context of regional instability issues which became the main priority for Azerbaijan while driving its attention and resources to security concerns for over the last 30 years. According to the Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD) report on State Budget of Azerbaijan after the second Karabakh war and the period of COVID-19 pandemic the government identified 2 key areas to allocate finances as expenditure focus from the state budget. First area included omission of the negative consequence of the Second Karabakh War, investment in the reconstruction projects in the liberated territories including support programs for families of martyr and soldiers, as well as, the infrastructure development. The second focus point was for combatting the further spread of COVID-19, implementing state support mechanisms for affected population and accelerating the economy while ensuring guarantees and loans to businesses (Center for Economic and Social

Development [CESD], 2020) This indicates that Azerbaijan's state budget is rigid and can not effectively expand into diverse areas proportionately apart from priority matters which adds to the challenge of financial constraints institutions face.

Hence, lack of budget fund allocation, reliance on external support programs, ineffective bureaucratic and legal framework bring us to institutional inefficiency and indicate the necessity to focus on Azerbaijan's institutional capacity building to ensure effective participation in global social projects.

## **2.2. Internal and regional pressures impacting Azerbaijan's global social participation (by Ruqaiya)**

One of the most important causes that are hindering Azerbaijan's efforts in international social projects is the geopolitical and regional scenery the country is tackling all at once.

Looking back at its strategic location, its complex geopolitical position among powerful countries like Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, and most importantly its long-political conflict history up until recently with Armenia, Azerbaijan's main priority has been focused on regional and national security and stability, especially with the long-lasting conflict with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh that has just ended in 2020.

This among other reasons has resulted in Azerbaijan's tendency towards domestic social projects over international initiatives to respond to the difficult sensitive geopolitical circumstances the country has been going through. As a result, after the 2020 cease-fire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020). Moreover, Azerbaijan has launched an initiative called " the Great Return Program" aimed at allocating an estimated 5 billion AZN to rebuild conflict-impacted areas in Nagorno-Karabakh, it also includes facilitation of the relocation of displaced population, this initiative alone necessitates a significant

financial portion of the country's fund. Additionally, according to the official website of the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, the State Social Protection Fund (SSPF) budget for 2025 has been approved with a budget of 7.676 billion manats (\$4.515 billion), showing a 10.45% increase since 2024.

While the country is in continuous notable progress in all sectors, another financial obstacle to its international participation is the fact that Azerbaijan is still focused on improving other persisting domestic issues the country is experiencing. Azerbaijan has been dedicating its efforts to its economic advancement to strongly position itself geopolitically as well. This process requests the country's attention on issues such as the high rate of youth unemployment "Despite steady employment growth, challenges persist, particularly in reducing youth unemployment and the size of the informal labor market" (Azerbaijan State Statistical Committee, 2023, p. 7). and the difficulties in financing small or medium-sized enterprises that would help the financial growth in the country "Azerbaijan's financial sector remains small and fragile, with insufficient institutional capacity and economic diversification" (World Bank, 2023, p. 4). All of those financial issues require Azerbaijan to prioritize domestic issues rather than international social projects, as the continuous focus on the latter issue could put the country on an unnecessary financial burden. All of these limit the country's involvement in any international social projects that could advance its position in the diplomatic and international arena.

Lastly, another geopolitical and regional factor is that Azerbaijan has been greatly struggling with its international image. Many Western media outlets and international organizations have been attacking Azerbaijan's alignment with human-rights values and have been highlighting many negative inequitable claims widely recognized global platforms. Amnesty International (2024) reported that Azerbaijan has been targeting some independent media outlets,

indicating a lack of human rights and freedom of expression. Additionally, some other media platforms have criticized Azerbaijan negatively especially when it comes to the war with Armenia as indicated in an article written by Hauer in CBC News (2024). Also, the limited worldly recognized English Azerbaijani media outlets have put Azerbaijan in a vulnerable position to clarify back against any false claims which further adds to the negative effects a country's international image could have. According to AngolaInfo Azerbaijan (n.d.), in Azerbaijan, there are only two TVs. Channels broadcast in English and in very limited manners such as AZTV which has news in English only on Saturdays, and XAZAR TV which has ten percent of its content in foreign languages. Although recently, as indicated by Axar.Az (2024) one of the first international Azerbaijani TV channels was launched in Azerbaijan called "ANEWZ.AZ" which will be broadcasting 24 hours a day about more than 110 countries in English and will be focused on presenting Azerbaijan's perspectives and voice to the world. This step was hugely needed; however, given that it came in a bit later, it could take a while for the channel to establish worldwide recognition impact the country's international media presence. In light of the reasons provided, lacking a media strategy, Azerbaijan's image is harmed. This could affect the possibility of Azerbaijan establishing partnerships and funding for the sake of international social projects. That is also interfering in the process of Azerbaijan's diplomatic and political influence worldwide.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's involvement in international social projects can be linked to its complicated geopolitical and regional difficulties. The country's main priority has been its national security given the historical events and disputes with Armenia. National security and stability strategy has led Azerbaijan to aim its resources toward domestic necessary social projects such as the "Great Return Program", and a significant amount of Azerbaijan's financial fund is focused on internal social projects such as humanitarian projects and employment

projects. Eventually, all those reasons combined resulted in the inability to expand its involvement in international humanitarian social projects.

## **2.3 Limited soft power commitment (by Fidan)**

### **2.3.1 Azerbaijan's contribution to international social protection missions**

Azerbaijan's involvement in international social projects has been largely passive. Azerbaijan International Development Agency, also known as AIDA, has implemented several projects in more than 90 countries all over the world (MFA of Azerbaijan, 2017; AIDA, 2024). Its domain of operations includes helping developing countries like Yemen, Burundi, Palestine, Somali, Syria, Pakistan and others in their fight against poverty, developing science, culture, education and healthcare, applying communication and information technologies, implementing various scholarship programs, as well as other humanitarian and technical projects. Thus, Azerbaijan's contribution to international social projects have been conducted through these programs since 2011, the year of AIDA's foundation, have helped up to 100,000 people who benefited from various projects. However, outside being the donor country and implementing AIDA's limited scope and scale activities, Azerbaijan is mostly seen by the global community not as a donor country but an international development support recipient mainly relying on outside financial support for its own institution building and domestic social protection. Azerbaijan has also been known to allocate non-AIDA humanitarian aid resources for international reasons to keep its friendly political relations with countries like Ukraine at high level. For example, by the year 2025, Azerbaijan has sent about 120 transformers and complete transformer stations, about 70 generators, as well as more than 3.3 million meters of cables and wires, amounting to the total

reconstruction and humanitarian assistance package exceeding 40 million US dollars (Aliyev, 2025).

As mentioned before, the SIBA (Support to Institution Building Activities) project carried out in between 2014-2017, provides one proof that Azerbaijan received financing from the EU to assist the government in fulfilling its obligations under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, further demonstrating Azerbaijan's continuous dependence on international funding for social and institutional development programs (Ecorys, 2017). This tendency is also explained by one of the United Nations Development Programme report (2023) submitted through "Developing Innovation-Driven and Sustainable Civil Society in Azerbaijan" project which identified country's limited domestic institutional capacity as the reason for requiring external support. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the social protection and welfare planning in Azerbaijan shows more preference toward national matters rather than international sources for these policies. The "2022-2026 Social and Economic Development Strategy" devotes its focus on domestic social welfare initiatives to construction projects and IDP reintegration efforts in the Karabakh region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Considering all that, Azerbaijan's involvement in these international social protection projects should be evaluated from the lenses of increasing its soft power capabilities for global reputation enhancement programs. While among the principal factors linked to Azerbaijan's involvement in the international social protection projects, the country's limited soft power application has restricted its further participation in international social projects, including on larger scope and impact projects.

### 2.3.2 Importance of projecting soft power for Azerbaijan

Unbeknownst to such limits, some have argued that Azerbaijan's soft power strategy to be comprehensive for its strategic use of economic influence, as evidenced by its exploitation of energy resources, implementation of infrastructure projects, and active engagement in diplomatic alliances Azerbaijan's conferring on it the title of 'norm entrepreneur' (Asgarov, 2024).

On one hand, it would not be right to outright dismiss the proponents' ideas that Azerbaijan values soft power projection in its foreign policy initiatives, as evidenced by Azerbaijan's leveraging of oil and gas resources into its advantage to strike strategic bargains with strong actors such as the EU; its use of online platforms and social media such as X for public diplomacy in the digital field; Azerbaijan's commitment to humanitarian leadership; its participation in cultural events such as ESC (Eurovision Song Contest), and successful hosting of international sports events such as the European Games, Islamic Solidarity Games, Formula 1 and international political events and programs including COP29, international student exchange programs and scholarships, its chairmanship at Non-Aligned Movement and many other activities (Ahmadzada, 2024; Loda, 2016; Cordies, 2014; Rojo-Labaien, 2023).

On the other hand, it would be easier to call Azerbaijan's energy policy a component of hard power projection as it relates to the vital necessities, while it would be an overstatement to amount the basket of other activities into a 'comprehensive' soft power strategy (Goldthau & Sitter, 2015). It is usually the strategic implementation of cultural appeal alongside with language promotion, media, education and diplomacy normally generates positive international perception through soft power (Nye, 2004). Although Azerbaijan's relationships boost its geopolitical visibility they lack the essential elements which typically form soft power capacity such as people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges (Javernick-Will & Levitt, 2009). What one can also

observe is that Azerbaijan is primarily focusing, with these attempts, on temporary projects which reduces its influence abroad in the longer term and cannot be considered a strategic move as it does not take into account the sustainability and future actions, rather constituting a seize-the-moment tactic of Azerbaijani foreign policy.

Soft power effectiveness and global recognition of countries can be measured through international indexes including the Soft Power Index. Azerbaijan occupied position 78 out of 121 countries in the Global Soft Power Index released by Brand Finance during 2023 which demonstrates substantial potential growth in its cultural and diplomatic international impact (Brand Finance, 2023). The moderate place Azerbaijan holds in international rankings demonstrates the country's low visibility in global cultural matters and insufficient international marketing success. The country faces challenges in maintaining soft power plans because civil society and governmental initiatives including international events struggle to receive persistent policy structure and funding support. Azerbaijan, thus, demonstrates significant limitations in its implementation of soft power indicators which consist of language promotion together with cultural export through music and film and its educational agenda. Language promotion stands as an essential element of successful soft power practices, but international promotion of Azerbaijani language remains inferior to other regional languages. However, Azerbaijan has even more underutilized potential when one looks at all the other aspects of soft power projection.

### **Cultural heritage**

Firstly, Azerbaijan underutilizes its valuable cultural heritage together with historical identity as fundamental components for promoting its soft power profile. The location of Azerbaijan between East and West enables this nation to combine Turkic Persian and Russian cultural elements (UNDP Azerbaijan, 2023). The varied cultural elements of Azerbaijan could

form an effective national soft power framework by enabling dialogue at different cultural levels while promoting heritage elements and developing pan-regional identity profiles. These assets exist independently but do not develop into formal programs for international cooperation (Brand Finance, 2023).

### **Education**

Secondly, the current approach toward education diplomacy also presents an unfulfilled chance for Azerbaijan. International education already acts as the central element of soft power strategy for many countries such as United Kingdom and Turkey and United States who managed to gain global academic visibility (Gauttam, Singh, Singh, Bika, & Tiwari, 2023). Even though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan (2023) indicates cultural festivals together with the previously mentioned scholarships for international students, the country lacks well-structured educational programs such as ones organized at Turkey's global "Yunus Emre" institutes and China's "Confucius" Institutes. The current academic recruitment programs from Azerbaijan to international students and scholarships funded by Azerbaijan aim to support overseas student exchanges remain scarce. There is limited academic visibility for Azerbaijan worldwide because of a lack of initiatives which prevents the country from successfully shaping future global elites (UNDP Azerbaijan, 2023).

### **Arts and music**

Thirdly, the movie and music businesses in Azerbaijan have achieved only modest international market penetration. Although there is a significant niche and a specific group of international listeners who make up the global fanbase of Azerbaijani music, including its traditional mugham that possesses global commercial potential, yet Azerbaijani performers fail to

reach an international audience in a way most would wish it would, mostly because of insufficient funding paired with the lack of strategic international marketing plans. This tendency with Azerbaijani musicians failing to conform with the global music trends can be observed from the fact that in the list of top artists by monthly listeners compiled by Spotify (2025), there is not a single Azerbaijani artist in the Top 22500 which represents the whole list. In fact the most listened and streamed Azerbaijani artist, Paster, has 31,928 monthly listeners while the artist on 22500<sup>th</sup> rank has at least half a million monthly listeners, while one can easily find dozens of Indian-Pakistani artists, Russian-Azerbaijani artists like Rauf & Faik (6786<sup>th</sup>), Russian artists like Oneheart (1800<sup>th</sup>), Turkish artists like Gülşen (2122<sup>nd</sup>), American-Armenian rock groups like System of a Down (270<sup>th</sup>), whose repertoire even includes songs like “Protect The Land”, “Genocidal Humanoidz”, “Holy Mountains” which had explicit references to Caucasian region and Armenian Genocide, Norwegian artists like AURORA (602<sup>nd</sup>), dozens of DJs in the top 2500 (first page of the list), and even Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (2012<sup>th</sup>) (Spotify, 2025). This shows that critiques of this argument will not be able to use the factors of population, appeal to modernity and social media promotion, region or even the language as excuses. What really matters with this is funding focused on building the digital web of artists operating based off global trends which, in turn, are based on social media platforms such as X, Tiktok, Instagram, Youtube and many others (Umbrex, 2025).

## **Diaspora**

Last but not the least, Azerbaijan's efforts at soft power usage have failed to reach their maximum potential by not engaging properly with its international communities. The State Committee on Work with Diaspora of Azerbaijan Republic oversees cultural events abroad but these activities have yet to become an organized strategy to utilize diasporas in changing

worldwide perceptions or establishing cultural and political connections (State Committee for Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022).

### **Focus on Hard Power: military and energy**

Azerbaijan also faces major obstacles in exercising soft power capacity because it continues to prioritize hard power elements especially when it comes to military capabilities and energy diplomacy. The national budget continuously supports defense and security costs more than other national needs. Events in Nagorno-Karabakh leading to new military clashes in 2020 hardened security priorities within Azerbaijan's diplomatic framework as the need for sovereignty preservation through this method locked the country into a security-first foreign policy structure which evaluates international cooperation by regional security standards alone (President.az, 2020). It also leverages its economic power as a significant energy exporter through projects like Southern Gas Corridor using it as a bargaining chip against the European countries that seek alternative Russian gas imports (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Thus, the emphasis on hard power and the lack of sustained financial backing for public diplomacy efforts coupled with international cultural outreach activities results in them being secondary considerations behind commitment to national security (UNDP, 2019).

### **2.3.3 How does lacking soft power strategy lead to the deficiencies in int social protection involvement?**

As such the absence of a centralized soft power strategy leads to the unstructured manner in which Azerbaijan conducts its global relations. Countries like Turkey and South Korea alongside France have implemented national cultural diplomacy strategies through institutions. These nationwide institutions obtain state funding to conduct long-term programming for global

image development by promoting languages and arts training while delivering educational programs and media content (Nye, 2004). No single entity exists in Azerbaijan that combines the responsibility of global cultural and educational promotion nor the management of such activities. The existing foreign policy direction which effectively pursues important strategic objectives simultaneously hinders Azerbaijan's ability to build wider international recognition. Azerbaijan needs to reallocate its resources towards soft power structures including global media outreach together with educational institutions abroad and consistent humanitarian aid otherwise the country will primarily be seen as a diplomatic trader instead of a culture-led international force. To close this gap Azerbaijan needs both better resource distribution and conceptual changes in its worldwide activities (UN Azerbaijan, 2022).

## **CHAPTER 3-Policy Alternatives (by Leyla)**

This chapter will present three policy alternatives in accordance with three aforementioned problem descriptions. The options will include the implementation of institutional capacity building program to eliminate core barriers hindering the effective functioning of institutions responsible for country's international engagement, Track 1 diplomacy, economic diversification, modernization of media outlets in the country to handle regional dynamics and establishment of a centralized national soft power strategy to address limitations in Azerbaijan's soft power advancement through promoting active social protection policies.

### **3.1 Implementation of institutional capacity-building program (by Leyla)**

A viable policy option to strengthen institutional effectiveness in Azerbaijan is the initiation of a targeted and robust state-led capacity building program. This policy alternative will address not only systemic challenges such as resource allocation, legal and bureaucratic constraints

but also will focus on improving human expertise, organizational matters and alignment strategies with international dynamics. It is crucial to highlight that the program will necessitate an integrated plan while addressing the differences in sectors (whether it is governmental or nongovernmental) and creating conditions for both to ensure a sustainable and systemic development policy. The proposed policy alternative will also cover capacity by 2 dimensions in accordance with the allocation of Pires and Gomide, namely, the administrative-technical dimension (financial, material and technological resources, professionalized bureaucracies); and the political dimension (various stakeholders and their interactions) (Pires and Gomide, 2014 as cited in Haque, Ramesh & Gomide, 2021). By implementing a comprehensive policy program, Azerbaijan will be able to tremendously enhance its involvement in international social projects.

The capacity building program can be implemented based on three core strategies as allocated in the Public Administration Review - development and advancement strategy, service delivery performance strategy and adaptive strategy. (Farazmand, 2009, p. 1012). First and foremost, the development and advancement strategy focuses on the identification of a broader advancement spectrum for achieving tangible outcomes. Through development and advancement strategies, the program will ensure to provide institutions with required technicalities and mechanisms. Moreover, service delivery performance strategy is identified to ensure that institutions operate at their maximum capacity with the least wasted efforts. Lastly, adaptive strategy will aim at achieving responsiveness to ever-changing political dynamics by adopting integrative policy mechanisms.

### **Development and advancement strategy**

According to Bahruz Aghalarov - the expert from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population “Azerbaijan’s participation in international social projects is a

complicated process requiring numerous stages. Starting from preparation of project proposals, involving a properly-prepared Terms of Reference (TOR), strategic fit assessment, approval and agreement from relevant government institutions and implementation planning” (B. Aghalarov, personal communication, May 1, 2025). Taking the comprehensiveness of the procedure into account, the effective capacity building program should be tailored based on the required steps across all stages. It should include clear coordination tools, well-trained human and technical expertise with data analysis capabilities, integration of sustainable communication channels, progress tracking instruments and regulatory frameworks. To achieve that, Azerbaijan can incorporate Chile’s successful case on implementing the Monitoring and Evaluation System into its capacity building program. The system enforced by Chilean government included Ex ante cost-benefit analysis which aimed at implementing forward-looking assessment by identifying if costs outweigh benefits prior to the implementation, Performance indicator information collected for all programs based on the regular information on 1600 indicators to track and compare the progress to the previous projects, Comprehensive spending reports to identify essential budget requirements for effective engagement in the proposed project, Government program evaluations (which can be tailored specifically for international program evaluations) to apply program review and analysis of existing data through log frame analysis and conduct of desk reviews, Rigorous impact evaluations by using control groups to analyse the volume of impact and Comprehensive spending reviews to review the programs based on particular functional areas to identify duplication or inefficiencies (V. Thomas, 2005, p.5). The last component is particularly essential for similar content based programs which is a common case as will be discussed below.

Important to highlight that, one of the conditions for the inter-ministerial approval of projects is based on their alignment with national development goals of a country. For instance,

according to Gullu Ahmadova- the expert from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “some project proposals were considered no longer a priority and were dismissed as they duplicated the already initiated projects or the ones with concrete efforts being already underway” (G. Ahmadova, personal communication, May 1, 2025). This indicates that institutional capacity building program should not be solely limited to the development of internal efficiency but also include external engagement mechanisms which should entail clear articulation of a country's needs to international partners, setting of central thematic schemes, and partnership guidelines. This would allow institutions to captivate properly targeted proposals and bring efficiency for procedures implemented without having a need to spend efforts to assess nonessential projects.

**Service delivery performance strategy:**

When it comes to systemic factors which create a burden for both governmental organizations and for non-state entities to function in their best capacity, it is useful to examine some of Azerbaijan's own initiatives which have been successfully undertaken in specific fields and can be selected as development points. During the personal communication with Gullu Ahmadova, she highlighted that “The country has made tremendous development in addressing bureaucratic hurdles in recent years. For instance, Dost Agency (Agency for Sustainable and Operational Social Security) - the public institution operating under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population - has been one of the key initiatives by government towards digitization of the social service delivery which included citizen-friendly, efficient and modernized online system accessible for everyone. Some of the developed and reform-oriented countries such as Japan and Moldova also have taken practical measures to adopt the system developed by Azerbaijani government’s pension system and Dost Agency model for diminishing bureaucracy

risks.” (G. Ahmadova, personal communication, May 1, 2025). This is an example of Azerbaijan’s commitment for welfare reforms. Building upon this successful strategy, Azerbaijan can further develop its plans for reducing red tape and regulatory obstacles in a broader context including the establishment of favorable conditions for effective functioning of CSOs. As Z. Rzazade et.al outline the capacity-building program should enforce the simplification of CSO registration processes through (1) reduction of registration documents, (2) digitized registration, (3) reduction of registration time frame. Additionally, the requirement for foreign grantors to obtain approval from the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan should be eliminated, “single window” principle - passing procedure with one entity instead of multiple agencies- should be fostered, and state-interference in financial bank operations of CSO should be minimized by adopting slight changes in law (Z.Rzazade, et. al 2019, p.21). This strategy would allow non-governmental organizations including CSOs to independently operate and be free from financial and regulatory challenges.

**Adaptive strategy:**

Ability to recognize unpredictability and transformation is the primary step towards building effective administrative capacity (Farazmand, 2009, p. 1013). Bahruz Aghalarov further highlighted that “Azerbaijan's participation in international social projects is not solely driven by institutional strength, but also it is largely affected by the country’s foreign policy. Shifting political dynamics is one of the crucial factors affecting a country’s decisions and shaping further dynamics of its engagement in global social initiatives. Sometimes, it is all about politics and it does not matter what we do. For instance, Azerbaijan’s diplomatic relations are no longer on the most positive line after the tragic passenger airplane crash of Azerbaijani Airlines Flight 8243 near Aktau, Kazakhstan. Therefore, due to emerging tensions donor confidence can fluctuate and

Azerbaijan can shift in its decisions to engage in potential upcoming global projects involving the collaboration with partners such as Russia. In addition, the recent closure of the UN-led institutions in Azerbaijan also is an indicator of the country's shifting foreign policy goals and priorities which severely affects the participation in international projects and partnerships (B. Aghalarov, personal communication, May 1, 2025).

This underscores the inherent complexity of developing capacity building programs. As such, the proposed campaign aimed at addressing the gaps in institutional capacity should be thoroughly designed and should anticipate the adaptability and flexibility due to geopolitical tensions. As Farazmand discusses, the age of globalization necessitates the capacity building to expand into tackling the worldwide context of intensive competition, uncertainty, and complexity (Farazmand, 2009, as cited in Haque, Ramesh, & Gomide, 2021). As well as, it should effectively address security threats, financial crises, pandemics and natural disasters (Christensen, 2012, as cited in Haque, Ramesh, & Gomide, 2021). Therefore, the proposed program can and should also include political analysis, risk management mechanisms, back-up partnership plans which will effectively operate and will be responsive to political uncertainties.

The proper capacity building program should also focus on the development of financial mechanisms. According to Gullu Ahmadova and Bahruz Aghalarov "there is a considerable increase in the allocation of financial resources to the social field in recent years" (B. Aghalarov, G.Ahmadova, personal communication, May 1, 2025). It is demonstrated in various international social projects which Azerbaijan became involved in recent years including a wide range of programs with UN agencies due to which the country gained international recognition and made a positive social impact. Considering the advantages, Azerbaijan needs to put more efforts to achieve sustainability in financial planning and increase the trend upwards. Thus, as part of the program,

a financial empowerment model can be established. This model will involve both the targeted support fund from the state budget for institutional development and integrated funding plan for longer-term framework. Azerbaijan can implement similar strategy based on the cases of South Korea's KOICA (Korea International Cooperation Agency) and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) which aim at funding provision through multi-year framework and ensure channeling budget to the development of international engagement (KOICA, n.d.; Sida, n.d.).

The practical steps to implement the program should include a modular and phased approach while targeting state and non-state agencies. The initial phase will involve identifying key focus areas and gaps to detect needs and requirements through comprehensive needs assessment tools. As IEG states "operations that aim to build capacity need to be based on an adequate upfront assessment of capacity and incorporate ways to monitor and evaluate results" (V. Thomas, 2005, p.4). It will allow the program to prioritize key directions preventing the dispersion of efforts and waste of resources. Following these strategies based on sectors should be identified and implemented across different regions.

### **3.2. Balancing Internal and Regional Pressures through Diplomacy, Economic Diversification, and Media Influence (By Ruqaia)**

Having mentioned the pressures the country is going through, there are essential aspects to apply in three core strategies such as the use of diplomacy regionally-and internationally, economic diversification and the application of a constant modernized effective Media strategy.

## **Track 1 Diplomacy:**

When it comes to regional dynamics, to ensure a long-lasting peace and regional strategy to mitigate the burden of dealing with extra tension in the region especially when it comes to its newly-ended conflict with Armenia, Azerbaijan should obtain more diplomatic means specifically Track I diplomacy which means Azerbaijan could be more involved in official negotiations and dialogue between both governments, even if that what Azerbaijan has already done many times, and even if the war has already ended, it is still recommended to keep Track I diplomacy visible and constant to know where both countries are at, to make sure that both countries are still on the same page, and to emphasize on peace intentions and the good will of the countries. “Track I diplomacy plays a critical role in mitigating tensions by facilitating negotiations between conflicting parties. The success of Track I interventions depends on the political will of the involved states, effective communication between parties, and the involvement of third-party mediators. In many instances, these diplomatic efforts have helped reduce national and regional pressures, thereby preventing further escalation of conflict and promoting long-term stability” (Zartman, 2001). This shows how effective the constant use of Track I diplomacy with two-conflicting countries is to reduce the tension. As a result, reduce the pressure on both countries as shown in the Indian-Pakistani conflict, which could be very effective in the case of Azerbaijan and Armenian conflict as well. The aim here is to give the country more space to focus on other important aspects, which won't be possible if the stability factor hasn't been completely dealt with. Moreover, given Azerbaijan's complex regional situation where it is caught between powerful neighbors who are also going towards different alliances and shifting dynamics such as Russia, Iran, Georgia and Ukraine. Moreover, on the pursuit of diplomacy, it is crucial that Azerbaijan

continue obtaining a balancing approach rather than a complete alliance with one major power As Chiragov (2024) argues, "It is very difficult to find a delicate balance and neutralize both the pressures of powerful neighbors and those of the outside powers without risking direct confrontation." Also, the 3+3 initiative done by Türkiye was a successful strategic move especially by including Armenia. The fact that Azerbaijan and Armenia are included in more than one initiative, is going to contribute to lessen the level of tension. "Through the 3+3 format, Azerbaijan aims to guide this competition toward a more constructive path" (Chiragov,2024). It is recommended that countries in the region like Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Iran and others work together especially in more initiatives, particularly in a sense of economic or diplomatic collaboration that strengthens relations between them without making them purely politically-focused. Chiragov (2024) highlighted "Azerbaijan's cooperation with any country has not and will not be directed against a third country, especially neighboring nations." All that being said, Azerbaijan will be able to decrease its regional and political tensions, and it will be able to capitalize on diplomatic means, collaborative initiatives and balancing out. As a result, soft power will grow and further international social projects will emerge.

### **Economic Diversification:**

An important factor Azerbaijan must address in order to be able to navigate geopolitical and regional Dynamics, which in return can significantly enhance its international social projects involvement and soft power presence is its economic stance. As discussed earlier, Azerbaijan has had some economic limitations and employment issues due to its Nagorno-Karabakh war that drained its financial assets, as well as the country's overreliance on oil revenues. We recommend

that Azerbaijan start working strategically on diversifying its economic resources. While this step is a long-term process that will take plenty of sources, effort and years, it has been evident that its returns to the country's internal and external rewards are exceptional. For this strategic step, we choose The United Arab Emirates as a Model case study that Azerbaijan could take some remarks from and apply them accordingly. The UAE and Azerbaijan have many similarities in the sense that they both have oil resources, Emirates used to be almost completely oil dependent, but then completely diversified its economic resources through trade, entrepreneurship, real-estates, innovations and modern productions. According to WorldData.info, Azerbaijan and The UAE have many similarities, Azerbaijan covers 86,600 km<sup>2</sup> and the UAE 83,600 km<sup>2</sup>. Azerbaijan's population is almost as large as the UAE's; the first has nearly around 10,154,000 people, and the latter has around 10,484,000, and finally both countries are major oil-producing states. "The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a prominent player in global energy production, primarily due to its substantial oil reserves, which rank among the largest in the world" (EBSCO, 2024). The UAE's economy heavily relies on oil, which constituted about 30% of its gross domestic product (GDP) in recent years"(EBSCO, 2024). From here, we understand that even though the country is still reliant on Oil production, it accounts for only 30% of its GDP. And the other 70% comes from various economic sources, which has been working very well to elevate the country's economy. While in Azerbaijan, the situation is taking a different manner. According to the Baku Research Institute (2024), Azerbaijan is still heavily dependent on the oil and gas sector, accounting for 48% of the GDP, which is more than half of the country's revenue, not only that, but 52.7% of the national budget comes from oil revenues and 92.5% of the country's exports were oil products. The issue remains in what happens when or if oil prices go down, and given the finite nature of oil as a natural source, Azerbaijan should consider economic diversification to avoid this risk, to

create more job opportunities domestically and to have an economic strength and presence internationally. If we take the UAE model, there are many steps the country has taken in order to achieve less oil dependency. According to Mishrif and Kapetanovic (2018), the UAE started first by choosing one of its emirates and preparing it to be a completely business friendly environment, which in that case was Dubai. The reason is to attract international investors and companies, new working sectors from all around the world. Moreover, many strategies were taken in order to make Dubai appealing to businessmen and companies. They first established Dubai as a free-taxes zone except for very particular sectors, and they made it easy for businessmen to move money in and out of the country in such a facilitated manner. "Free movements of factors of production, including capital and labour, as well as of goods and services are a cornerstone of its development strategy" (Mishrif & Kapetanovic, 2018, p. 93). "Dubai pursues a regime that is consistent with liberal economic policies and does not impose restrictions on capital inflows and outflows or taxes on capital or labour " (Mishrif & Kapetanovic, 2018, p. 93). Also, it was stated that Dubai isn't necessarily following all the federal laws of the whole country strictly as it has more space to make some- not all- laws flexible to achieve its economic facilitations. An example was when Dubai allowed some foreigners to buy some property and houses in a free-zone which federal laws in the UAE don't allow (Mishrif & Kapetanovic, 2018). Also, another strategy was making sure the political system is relatively stable and making foreign visa process to work in Dubai easier than most countries "His main elements are defined as (1) a political system, which has resulted in the perception of stability and minimal political risk, encouraging investment.... openness to foreign skills and management; and (5) labour policies that have enabled the immigration of vast numbers of foreign low-skilled workers"(Mishrif & Kapetanovic, 2018, p. 93).

According to Balawi (2021), another factor to Dubai's economic evolution is the idea of entrepreneurship, where the government is creating big business, as a result, creates job opportunities for its people instead of just giving them money from oil revenue such as Emaar and Emirates Airlines. While Dubai has been attracting international business companies, it still applied Protectionism and Legal Duality, where it secures Emiratis citizens' interests by limiting foreigners' owning properties outside the Free-zone area, and when Emiratis and foreigners partnering in a business, they dictate that locals have a share of 51% of the business ownership at least (Mishrif & Kapetanovic, 2018, p. 104). In light of all this, Azerbaijan seems to have a highly promising economic future especially given that it is one of the oil-rich countries. Economic diversification would definitely strengthen the country, reduce employment immensely, where it is going to shift its financial focus toward international social projects, thereby enhancing its soft power on the international society.

### **Media Outlets Modernization:**

Furthermore, in addressing how Azerbaijan can counter negative or one-sided narratives in Western media, it can enhance its Media Outlets in a way that best serves its diplomatic image to process through regional and international dynamics, there were several solid approaches suggested based on an insightful interview conducted with an ADA Media Expert. When asked how to encounter opposing Media narratives, she emphasized using a more proactive strategy to choose the narrative you want the world to know, being extremely clear and constant about it, then strategically work on it using your own tools that tell the world what you want to tell them and this could happen through different stages and not overnight (ADA Media Expert, personal communication, April 2025).

According to her, for a very long time, Azerbaijan has been exerting all its effort for The Karabakh-Armenian war, which is over now, and that is why Azerbaijan is in the preparation phase to enter its global Media creation stage, that will take time and strategy, yet it is already on its way. “For years and years, the biggest issue for this country was the resolution of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Karabakh. And the entire narrative of Azerbaijan around the world was built on taking the story of Karabakh and injustices that have been done and the occupation that Azerbaijan has been subjected to... this was the main block for all of the other relevant issues for national development, and the media is definitely one of them,” and added, “So, I think that right now we are in the stage that comes after the strategy, which means finding the right channels, media included, of how to deliver your consistent narrative to the world. Those stages are yet to come...I think that we are at the infancy stage of finding the right channels to take our consistent narrative to the world stage.” (ADA Media Expert, April 2025).

An additional significant solution she proposed is to establish new Media Schools of Education to go hand in hand with the already existing International Media creation in the country. These schools should move beyond the old-way of Media, especially the ones that are still following the Soviet-era models, and embrace modern Media education that aligns with the current Media revolutions. “I think our biggest disadvantage was that from the moment we reclaimed our national media back in '91, and until the moment when media technologies began to sprout and completely revolutionize the media environment, we didn't have enough time to build our own school. We didn't have enough time to practice and go through the evolution that we were supposed to” (ADA Media Expert, April 2025). Which overall emphasizes establishing new worldly Media outlets in Azerbaijan such as Anews.az that creates its own narrative to the world, and engage with the world's news as well accoupling that with preparing the media youth of

Azerbaijan educationally to the new media revelations. After a while, the world will be able to have a different perspective about Azerbaijan that Azerbaijan chose. She also stressed the idea of this process taking time especially if its success depends on building solid ground "reputation building takes time," comparing it with the fleeting instant breakthrough that will not be sustainable "Popularity is not sustainable, but reputation is," she asserts. Emphasizing the idea that it took decades to be successful and heard globally, which was due to the consistency factor. Lastly, she highlights the importance of facilitating other means to help people in the world to know Azerbaijan from Azerbaijan itself by opening up its tourism and logistics, to know there is more to Azerbaijan than what the world has been saying, particularly in terms of image building and soft power. In that sense, she advised Azerbaijan to find its unique quality "soft power product." Taking the example of Türkiye's success with soap operas, she is cautious that what works for one country may not necessarily work for another. She (April, 2025) stated, "Azerbaijan has been a part of Eurovision for a relatively little amount of time. And we have already won the competition once, which was an incredible result. And I think except one time, in all other times, we have passed to finals, which means that Azerbaijani music culture resonates well. And we have a tremendous school of music. We have national conservatories". She also emphasized, "Cuisine, it's been gaining more and more popularity. I think that it has something to offer for all the taste buds, so to speak, from West to East. So, cuisine could be another one". Finally, she highlighted the importance of better outreach strategies "You have to go to them," she clearly stated.

In conclusion, by applying through diplomatic strategies and engagement to move beyond any possible regional tensions and to keep regional harmony, officially taking solid steps towards economic diversifications and by being an initiator in terms of using effective Media techniques, Azerbaijan would own the capability to handling its regional dynamics influentially. Which will

strengthen Azerbaijan's role in international social projects, enhancing its soft power and influence.

### **3.3 Establishment of a Centralized National Soft Power Strategy (Fidan)**

#### **3.3.1 Policy Description**

In considering the limitations of the Azerbaijan Evolving Soft Power Interaction, as found in Chapter 2.3, it becomes increasingly evident that there is an urgent need for the nurturement of a full-fledged institutionalized policy framework focusing on enhancing the global image and influence of the country. The policy alternative promoted is the so-called Centralized National Soft Power Strategy, through which an agency is created in theory by the state but remains operationally autonomous and thus takes full charge of Azerbaijan's international cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, educational work, diaspora building, and communication strategy.

The proposed agency would serve a broad range of functions. Firstly, it would treat Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy, such as mounting international exhibitions, heritage fairs, and international contacts to present Azerbaijani music, literature/poetry, crafts, and performing arts. Secondly, the agency would boost the presence of the country internationally by arranging for Azerbaijani studies departments in foreign universities, giving scholarships to foreign students, and encouraging exchange of students and faculty. Thirdly, AGACE would manage the strategy of public diplomacy of Azerbaijan and initiate international media outlets with a digital platform that would adequately carry Azerbaijan's language, cultural, and diplomatic messages. Mutually, the agency would formally pursue diaspora diplomacy by channeling the hitherto mostly scattered cultural networks and associations into coordinated instruments of soft power projection.

In contrast to the current patchwork model, where programs operate in silos and completely different ministries or institutions with no shared objectives, projects or funds incompatible with one another, thus negating any sustainable character, here is one policy: to ensure an overall strategic direction. AGACE would not attempt to replicate existing efforts; rather, it would incorporate, streamline, and bring them into being in one institution, much like better-known models abroad, especially Turkey's Yunus Emre Institute, France's Alliance Française, or South Korea's Korea Foundation. This understanding acknowledges that soft power is not something imparted in an incidental sense through cultural abundance but is rather an intentional and continuous investment, strategically managed and internationally targeted.

### **3.3.2 Rationale**

The established rationale for creating one centralized national soft power strategy lies in the present imperfections in Azerbaijan's international engagement through soft power tools. As noted afore, Azerbaijan's fragmented and episodic programs with regard to soft power gained little response on the worldwide stage. The 2023 Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index sees Azerbaijan ranked 78th out of 121 countries, with moderate visibility and limited influence within the international community (Brand Finance, 2023). This ranking is attributed not to a lack of cultural assets but rather to a failure of long-term investment in developing truly structured cultural diplomacy and coordinated public outreach.

Currently, soft power instruments in Azerbaijan exist all over the place in different institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, Heydar Aliyev Foundation, and the State Committee on Work with Diaspora. While all of these actors bring forth meaningful initiatives, these efforts remain uncoordinated, reactive, and to a large extent underfunded. There is no common *weltanschauung*, strategic roadmap, or institutional coordination mechanism.

Furthermore, many of these programs rely excessively on foreign funds, for instance, the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in the form of Support to Institution Building Activities (SIBA) and Developing Innovation-Driven and Sustainable Civil Society in Azerbaijan. In itself, reliance on international donors underscores the absence of a locally sustainable soft power development framework.

International comparisons justify the policy shift. Successful implementations of soft power onto foreign policy regimes have been seen in countries like Turkey, France, and South Korea, all of which have created semi-autonomous bodies working under national mandates albeit with special missions and an international reach. On the side of Turkey, the Yunus Emre Institute has more than 60 centers worldwide to promulgate the Turkish language, arts, and values in line with Turkey's foreign policy objectives (Yilmaz, 2017). The Korea Foundation and related institutions have arguably converted Korean pop culture and education into global export commodities, contributing to South Korea's ability to edge into the top-20 slots of soft power rankings for several years now.

In contrast, Azerbaijan carries enormous recorded potential. The musical culture in the country, including mugham, which is recognized by UNESCO, its Silk Road cities of the past, and even the present-day architectural cityscape, create a backdrop against which soft power can be nurtured-whether in the East or West. But alas, these assets go largely untapped for lack of one guiding policy vehicle. Hence, AGACE would endow the capacity at an institutional level and strategic focus and financial backing to transform this cultural habitat into international lefthanded instruments of soft power.

On the other hand, with mounting foreign policy imperatives, Azerbaijan would increasingly need to promote a situation in which hard-power reactive measures, underpinning

military strength and energy diplomacy, are replaced with an active cultural leadership and public diplomacy. A soft power becomes pivotal in creating the concept of trust, fostering international solidarity, and strengthening Azerbaijan's image as an international actor that is value-based and constructive when penetrating the ecosystem of international organizations, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), in which it seeks to promote itself.

### **3.3.3 Strategic Components**

Establishment of a centralized national soft power strategy in Azerbaijan would require an overall structure premised on institutional autonomy, inter-ministerial collaboration, and long-term resource allocation. Strategic elements of such policy would have to include capabilities of institutional design, legal framework, source of funding, capacity to rally the diaspora, and evaluation of results, as these factors constitute the framework allowing viable conditions for hardening soft power.

At the heart of this strategy is the creation of an institution for Azerbaijani soft power, AGACE (Azerbaijan Global Affairs and Cultural Exchange Office). It would be structured as a semi-autonomous public agency supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but under its own independent executive board with representatives from civil society, academia, culture, and diaspora. This would give the agency the legitimacy of governmental authority while allowing sufficient autonomy to coordinate engagements with international stakeholders and civil society partners. The agency would be mandated to carry out cultural diplomacy, international education, public broadcasting, digital media, and diaspora relations, managed by various directorates.

This new structure should be backed with a National Assembly law on a comprehensive "National Soft Power Development Act." This piece of legislation would stipulate the agency's mandate and outline how government ministries, educational institutions, NGOs, and international

bodies would coordinate among each other. The act will also empower the agency to enter into bilateral and multilateral agreements with respect to education, culture, and development cooperation. It should also require a performance report every year to be submitted to the National Assembly as well as form the grounds for budget preparation and external cooperation.

The concern about this plan arises over the question of financial sustainability since Azerbaijan might have budgetary issues now concerning defense expenditure and reconstruction in the Karabakh region. Nonetheless, international comparisons provide evidence that soft power institutions can potentially offer high returns for relatively little expenditure. Countries operating successful soft power models spend between 0.2% and 0.7% of their national budget on cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and education-based activities (OECD, 2023). In the case of Azerbaijan, an initial budget of around 0.5% of the national budget with co-financing from multilateral partners like UNESCO, European Commission, and various other cultural diplomacy arrangements under the NAM would give the AGACE sufficient room to pilot programs as it exercises financial caution. Over time, the initiation of revenue-generating cultural projects, university collaborations, and international endowment funds could go a long way toward fiscal sustainability.

One of the other fundamental components consists of the systematic mobilization of the Azerbaijani global diaspora. The presence of Azerbaijani communities all over Europe, North America, and Middle East regions makes the diaspora an insufficiently exploited resource for promoting the country's culture and values abroad. The agency would be interested in setting up a collaborative platform with diaspora organizations to facilitate a working relationship and fund them while also offering training and strategic guidance. These support measures could involve creating cultural centers, supporting diaspora festivals, or instituting a "Global Azerbaijan

Ambassadors" fellowship that would train diaspora youth in cultural diplomacy and media communication.

In the interest of establishing a sustainable accountability mechanism, AGACE would have to set in motion a strict performance management discipline. Such an evaluation scheme would look at input, through indicators, into both the qualitative and quantitative aspects. A handful of skeletal variables can be seen across the quantitative assessment: Azerbaijan's position on the Global Soft Power Index in any given year, growth in foreign student enrollment, total increase in cultural exchange agreements, and media outreach score-based statistics. In terms of qualitative indicators, there will be stakeholder surveys, cultural impact assessments, and henceforth, the agency will make selections for third-party assessments of a few programs. Reports, either quarterly or annual, become input into the roadmap for adaptive policy planning when considered by the M&E unit inside the agency. Thus, this feedback loop that the assessments prepare can be opportune for AGACE to modify its programs in the way during implementation, so that it will best serve the twists and turns of a domestic and international situation.

In a nutshell, strategic components of the centralized soft power strategy provide a framework for institutional transformation. Anchoring Azerbaijani soft power endeavors in legal authority, strategic funds, cultural coherence, and strict evaluation, the above policy annex itself in sustaining international engagement and reputation building.

### **3.3.4 Comparative Policy Models**

The formulation of a centralized soft power strategy in Azerbaijan receives serious nourishment from the study of best practices internationally. In some nations, soft power policies have been institutionalized by specific agencies in regard to an agreed-upon legal, financial, and

diplomatic framework. These examples become a source of inspiration coupled with practical direction for Azerbaijan's policy-making.

One of the best examples comes from the Yunus Emre Institute of Turkey, which came into existence in 2007. Currently having centers in more than 60 countries, the Institute, in fact, stands out as the main institution to promote Turkish culture as well as language and values across the world. The Institute offers Turkish language instruction and organizes exhibitions of arts, cultural symposiums, and academic works. In its core functioning, the Institute coordinates activities with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey and, on the other hand, forms a vital part of Turkey's broader cultural diplomacy strategy, which is in line with its geopolitical ambitions (Yilmaz, 2017). Though publicly funded, the agency is operationally autonomous, enabling agile formation of partnerships and local customization of programs. Azerbaijan, given its special historical and linguistic links with Turkey, may copy this model with suitable localization.

The Korean foundation is one such instructive case, having been created by the government of South Korea in 1991 to promote Korean culture, academic exchange, and certain public diplomacy aspects. It translated the waves of Korean popular culture, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, into worldwide phenomena such as K-pop, Korean cinema, and fashion. The Foundation works with more than 300 universities worldwide to set up Korean Studies departments, provide long-term scholarships, fund conferences, and provide visiting lecturers. Thanks to a national policy vision that deems soft power to be a key pillar of foreign relations, South Korea is consistently ranked among the top 20 soft power countries in the world (Brand Finance, 2023). Azerbaijan, with its rich though little-promoted cultural heritage, could follow the Koreans' mode of educational and academic engagement to build elite relationships and propagate long-term goodwill.

Another model of success is provided by Alliance Française, operating in more than 130 countries and thus reputed to successfully combine state co-funding with locally raised resources as well as private sector contributions. They maintain their legitimacy and popularity through programs with roots in local communities and curriculum design reflective of local persons and culture. The French example is of particular interest for Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy in the multilingual and multiethnic regions that require utmost flexibility and cultural sensitivity.

These models suggest that soft power institutions have to have legal autonomy to act across borders, stable core funding to protect credibility, and programmatic flexibility to respond to the various cultural and geopolitical contexts. They also show that state-led cultural diplomacy must not have to resort to propaganda or coercion but can be predicated on genuine cultural exchange and mutual benefit.

In the case of Azerbaijan, these comparative findings mark the pressing nature and practicability of shifting toward a centralized model of soft power. The country does not have to invent such a strategy on its own but can learn from these international examples while adapting them to its national identity, policy objectives, and geopolitical constraints. Indeed, a hybrid approach that marries the structural rigor of the Yunus Emre Institute, the media astuteness of the Korea Foundation, and Alliance Française's decentralized programmatic outlook may serve Azerbaijan best.

### **3.3.5 Implementation Timeline**

Existing policy conditions, institutional needs, and international opportunities have all strongly reinforced the feasibility of a centralized national soft power strategy for Azerbaijan. This policy is considered in Azerbaijan's national agenda in the context of longer-term development priorities, with issues concerning soft power being reflected in the 2022–2026 Socioeconomic

Development Strategy and Azerbaijan's recent leadership activities in multilateral forums, one such being the Non-Aligned Movement. Hence, there exists a pressing call to establish a consistent soft power agenda to create an identity for Azerbaijan beyond energy exports and the issues of territorial conflicts.

Financing of the strategy would need to be done in phases, allowing the gradual rollout of the plan, accumulation of experience on the institutional front, and resource-building. The initial phase would see the formation of the institution and legislative codification. The first twelve months following endorsement of the strategy in a political forum would adequately allow for the conclusion of this stage. In that period, the law establishing the AGACE would be passed by the National Assembly, and the agency would be vested with formal authority, financial independence, and diplomatic recognition. Leading personnel would be appointed on the basis of competence and experience in international cultural exchanges, public diplomacy, or project management. Meanwhile, initial partnership agreements would be negotiated with UNESCO, the OECD DAC Network on Governance, and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The next phase, lasting for 12 to 18 months, concentrates on the mission of initiating pilot projects on the ground. Cultural centers could be established at a few diplomatic missions or partner institutions in partner countries chosen through strategic criteria. These centers, which serve as Azerbaijani hubs of culture and education, organize language classes, arts workshops, policy dialogues, and youth forums. Scholarship programs will exist for foreign students whose interests are in Azerbaijani culture and policy, including the creation of Azerbaijani Studies chairs at large foreign universities. Cooperation with Azerbaijani universities, such as ADA University and Baku State University, will enable reciprocal exchange through outbound programs. The final stage of the implementation, starting in the third year and continuing into the fourth and fifth years, will be

for the full-scale rollout, institutional consolidation, and enhancement of outreach. At this point, AGACE will extend its geographical coverage, reaching ideally some 20-25 countries. The key priority in this phase will be increasing the quality and quantity of multilingual broadcast content through a system of partnerships between domestic media outlets like ANEWZ with possible regional partners such as TRT World or Al Jazeera Balkans. The agency shall also begin organizing international cultural festivals and launch an annual Azerbaijani Cultural Week abroad, which could rotate between countries.

Such a phased implementation will ensure institutional maturity and public accountability. Monitoring and evaluation tools are intended to be incorporated during the process for assessing the progress of implementation, stakeholder satisfaction, and the impact on Azerbaijan's soft power indicators.

### **3.3.6 Anticipated Outcomes**

The expected outcomes emanating from the implementation of a common centralized national soft power strategy for Azerbaijan are effects from better international standing to increased economic and diplomatic gains. Within diplomacy, the soft power strategy is expected to substantially bring to light Azerbaijan in key global forums such as the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and many other multilateral forums. This enhanced visibility will increase Azerbaijan's potential to agitate the policy discourse, engage in coalition building, and take on lead roles in international organizations.

Regarding culture, these programs would place more focus on promoting Azerbaijani music, literature, film, crafts, and historical heritage internationally. A more active participation in international book fairs, film festivals, and art biennials would lift Azerbaijan's profile in culture and start to open up avenues for its creative industries. More importantly, organized cultural

exchange programs would help broaden mutual understanding, break down stereotypes, and foster peaceful coexistence, which is priceless for Azerbaijani diplomacy.

Azerbaijani studies programs abroad and reciprocal student exchange initiatives will foster the development of a new generation of foreign professionals and academics well-versed in, and appreciative of, Azerbaijani societies, history, and policy. This intellectual engagement bears long-term potential for bringing Azerbaijan into world academic networks and policy.

Improved soft power would bring foreign direct investment and increase tourism. Countries that enjoy high levels of cultural visibility and positive perceptions internationally usually report increased investor confidence and elevated international business cooperation situations. For instance, the global appeal of South Korean culture has resulted in visible augmentations in tourism, FDI, and global brand licensing (OECD, 2023). Azerbaijan's rich-but-underpromoted-cultural assets can do the same for it with strategic planning.

On the domestic level, a coherent soft-power strategy will go a long way in building a sense of civic pride, cultural creativity, and youth engagement. Citizens and the diaspora would perceive themselves as members of a worldwide project to propagate the values and traditions of Azerbaijan, thus binding national cohesion and identity.

In addition, the strategy would serve to diversify the identity of Azerbaijan worldwide. At present, on the global scale, it is mostly labeled as relating to energy exports or regional conflicts. A properly executed soft power strategy would shift the image of Azerbaijan to that of a bridge builder between civilizations, a center for intercultural dialogue, and an active actor of social development in the world. This repositioning will be essential to withstand for the long term in a changing multipolar international setting.

### **3.3.7 Potential Risks and Mitigation Strategies**

This policy proposal is ambitious and promising but not without some risks. Prominent risks include discontinuity in the political arena; budgetary constraints and limitations; limited administrative capacity; and possible unwillingness from stakeholders. Nevertheless, each of these risks can be mitigated through careful planning.

One of the more serious risks concerns the discontinuity of policies following the exit of a particular government or some shift in government priorities. To forestall this, the soft power agency should ideally be created through parliamentary legislation instead of by ministerial decree. Such a legal basis would insulate the agency's mandate from political cycles and also require it to formally report, be evaluated, and allocated budgets.

A second risk factor would be limitations in finance, especially in the presence of many other pressing demands such as defense spending and post-conflict reconstruction. Minimizing this challenge could involve phased implementation, costs-sharing arrangements with other countries, and income-generation activities. For example, cultural centers may offer language classes, workshops, and publishing projects for a fee as a means to cover operating expenses.

Administrative capacity constitutes another risk. Establishment of a new agency along with managing a complex international partnership requires highly skilled personnel, coordination, and ongoing training. To mitigate against this, programs to build capacity should be initiated in the very first phases through secondments and technical assistance from such established institutions as UNESCO, Yunus Emre Institute, or the Korea Foundation. Inter-institutional learning exchanges and training for staff will form an integral part of implementation Phase One.

Lastly, public skepticism or weak engagement from diaspora or civil society could erode the agency's legitimacy. Another way to reduce this risk would be to engage the stakeholders early in the planning process, set up advisory boards comprising diaspora leaders, artists, and academics,

and ensure that the programming actually reflects the variety and wealth of Azerbaijani society. Furthermore, a full-on public communication campaign stressing shared values, cultural pride, and the international good arising from soft power will secure even wider public backing.

When these mitigation tactics are examined together, they seem to provide a reliable framework whereby risk can be reduced and resilience created in the policy from the beginning. The centralized soft power paradigm that is proposed is not just a necessity but an urgent need in a world where diplomatic influence, international engagement, and a nation's reputation are determined as much by cultural capital and shared values as by economic or military might.

## **CHAPTER 4-Evaluation of Policy Alternatives (by Leyla)**

This chapter will evaluate 3 policy alternatives -implementation of institutional capacity-building program, navigating regional and international dynamics through diplomacy, economic diversification, solid media strategy and centralized, national soft-power strategy based on 5 criteria, namely, effectiveness, efficiency, feasibility, flexibility and equity. The evaluation of each criteria will be ranked as low (1), moderate (2), and high (3).

### **4.1. Implementation of institutional capacity-building program (by Leyla)**

#### **Effectiveness**

With the growing challenges that institutions encounter in order to effectively ensure the improvement in Azerbaijan's participation in global social projects, the state-led capacity building

program emerges as a matter of critical relevance. The implementation of a comprehensive capacity-building program will be highly effective due to several factors. First and foremost, the program will be multidimensional while considering all aspects hindering institutional effectiveness across different sectors. The program will address technical and administrative hurdles which will equip institutions with crucial instruments such as inter-ministerial coordination tools, digital monitoring, standardized international project management and regulatory frameworks. Simultaneously, it will allow institutions to effectively function by incorporating adaptive strategies in accordance with political and prioritized agenda.

However, there may be slight challenges in combining the needs of state and non-state actors. It can also stimulate unintentional consequences by centralizing power, while limiting the room for the growth of non-state entities. Despite the possible difficulties the benefits still outweigh the challenges making the capacity building program an effective solution.

### **Efficiency**

The program may require a considerable amount of budget allocation due to its comprehensive setting. According to the research, developing countries often face challenges in administrative capacity building without adequate natural resources and the countries with solid national income are in a better position to invest in such projects (Haque, Ramesh & Gomide, 2021). This is the case of Azerbaijan which has abundant resources and, therefore, has the capacity to provide enough material resources due to its high national income obtained specifically by the oil sector. Hence, with a diversified and multi-year framework of budget allocation, Azerbaijan can easily reinforce the sophisticated development programs on a state level which will make this option highly cost-efficient.

### **Feasibility**

The capacity building program for institutional development seems feasible due to Azerbaijan's previous experience in implementing similar projects. Azerbaijan has already taken steps towards capacity building through initiatives like Azerbaijan Rapid Technical Assistance Facility (AZTAF), Capacity Building for Enhanced Transparency Framework, Public Investment Capacity Building Project and others. Therefore, it will allow the government to reinforce a new initiative with more advanced and practical techniques. The financial, technical resource requirements are within the reach of the government. However, the sophisticated nature of the program may require phased implementation which can slow down the process. In addition, the institutional challenges can also affect the very implementation of the program since at the first stages the obstacles will still be inherent to the system. Considering the challenges, the program can be evaluated moderately feasible to implement.

### **Flexibility**

The program is highly flexible as one of its major focus areas involves adaptive strategy. The adaptive strategy will allow the program to not remain rigid and to be responsive to emerging priorities and global political dynamics. Additionally, the proposal is considered flexible as it is not limited to solely governmental institutions but also shifts across all existing institutional bodies. The capacity building initiative will be designed based on a scalability and modular program which will aim to deploy operations step by step in different modules and assess the scale of effectiveness according to the unique needs of institutions. A few focus points involving major governmental institutions will be identified to begin as a pilot initiative which will continue with other agencies. By doing so, the program will evaluate successful outcomes and risks to make incremental changes and absorb best practices for upcoming modules which will make it highly flexible and adaptive.

## **Equity**

Equity is one of the crucial components of evaluation which refers to equitable and fair allocation of required resources for institutional development, involving participation of all stakeholders including underrepresented institutions. The program aims at including regional hubs that will provide diversification and prevent centralization exclusively in Baku. The institutions operating in the secondary cities will also get access to technical, financial, material resources and will benefit from systemic development plans. The challenges may occur in identification of priority institutions in modular stages. While the modular approach is practical and effective, organizational hierarchy may exclude some institutions or at least take it to a long-term procedure to involve all stakeholders. Thus, equity can be ranked moderate due to challenges in providing fair order of access.

## **4.2 Balancing Internal and Regional Pressures through Diplomacy, Economic Diversification, and Media Influence. (By Ruqaiya)**

### **Effectiveness:**

There are three sub-options that will be evaluated based on the three criteria mentioned above, within this alternative policy option. As indicated in the first criterion which is effectiveness, that constant use of Track I diplomacy in the region especially with Armenia, and establishing more collaborative initiatives within neighboring countries is believed to be on a high level of effectiveness. In the case of the Sulu-Sulawesi Sea between Indonesia and Malaysia, where both countries had many armed confrontations and conflicts over territorial waters, the use of Track 1 diplomacy, coupled with more collaborative initiatives have proven to have very positive impactful results and kept peace between the two countries up until now. This example

projects that continuous diplomatic engagement and collaboration can result in having tangible peace, which makes it a highly effective strategy for Azerbaijan. The second sub-option is applying economic diversification especially by incorporating the UAE (Dubai) Model, which is believed to be ranked a very highly *effective*. As it is a real-life case where it achieved effective tangible results, especially given that Azerbaijan and the UAE have very similar attributes. While results may not be identical, Azerbaijan might achieve comparable or even better outcomes. Additionally, using real-life examples is often seen to be more efficient and less risky than inventing a new, untested approach. The last sub-option is to enhance Azerbaijan's media strategy by modernizing its media's outlets and education. This sub-option is regarded as highly effective on the criteria as it seems like the very next logical step to handle the regional and international dynamics especially in terms of conveying Azerbaijan's image the way the country aspires.

### **Efficiency:**

In terms of the second criteria- efficiency, the first sub-option; Track1 diplomacy is believed to be highly efficient. Given that diplomatic efforts will definitely require moderate cost, yet it is considered to be a relatively small investment in cost compared to unnecessary possibly avoided military conflicts. The second sub-option, which is economic diversification following the UAE (Dubai Model), is regarded to be less efficient in the short term due to the significant financial investment required to do the necessary reforms. However, long-term economic rewards are considered to be transformative, given this, we can say it is moderately *efficient*. Lastly, modernizing the whole media approach and strategies in the country is viewed as highly efficient, it may require a relatively large upfront investment, yet it will maximize the absolute use of the

current resources the country has in terms of having long-term rewards such as in improved national image, international collaborations and potential political and economic gains as well.

## **Equity**

When it comes to equity, for the first-sub option- Track 1 diplomacy and regional initiative support is considered highly ranked- given that it ensures all the neighboring countries are involved in the diplomatic and peace efforts, and are going to get equal benefits from any initiatives planned. In addition, no regional country -that accepted to be a part of the process- will be left out. It is also considered high in equity for all the citizens of Azerbaijan, with equal benefits expected for everyone. When it comes to the second sub-option which is economic diversifications, it may be considered ranked as moderate in terms of equity since it will have mixed results, some regions in Azerbaijan will be benefiting more than other regions especially wealthier more business-oriented areas. Also, many people in Azerbaijan will be benefiting from this economic evolution, but it is evident that some people are going to benefit more than others. Lastly, in this criterion, enhancing Azerbaijan's media strategy by modernizing its media's outlets and education is believed to be ranked moderate in terms of equity, the rewards achieved by making this step are going to give the country very important advantages that everyone will enjoy directly or indirectly. For example, the country's political image will be enhanced, making it a regional and international influencer in the world, this will attract more investments, create new opportunities, strengthen diplomatic ties, expand its role international social projects and ultimately improve the overall quality of life for its citizens, yet it may not include everyone conveying its content as it is only in English.

## **Feasibility**

In terms of feasibility, Sub-option 1 is regarded as highly feasible as Track 1 diplomacy has already been established and initiated by Azerbaijan, so keeping the effort open between the countries and in the region seems a very achievable. Following the UAE Model is considered moderate in feasibility since both countries have evident similar characteristics, so if the UAE is able to implement it with what it had, so is Azerbaijan, yet it will call for a very profound and strategic long-term plan with many reforms. Sub-option three is considered highly feasible, Azerbaijan is already moving towards media modernization starting by Anews.az channel. Azerbaijan also already has a strong foundation for Media-skilled professionals and the right environment for such a step.

## **Flexibility**

Evaluating flexibility, all sub-options are relatively adaptable, Track 1 diplomacy is highly flexible as it should be since this is one of its core values to adapt to everyone's needs, it is designed to deal with having unpredictable events and situations between countries, and if things go out of hand, there is more to do in terms of having mediators and other adjustable methods. As usual, applying the UAE model in Azerbaijan, is ranked moderate in terms of flexibility, it will definitely take time and effort specifically in adapting the prior-established structure of the country to new adjustments. However, it can be more adaptable by gradually introducing it to more sectors to Azerbaijan's economy. Seeking professional recommendations from others who have already gone through the same path, should also help in terms of adaptability. Finally, modernizing Media strategies is highly flexible given the inherently, adaptable nature of New Media tools that directly align with the global trends. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's ability to quickly respond and adjust to the change supports this flexibility.

## **4.3 Evaluation of the Centralized National Soft Power Strategy (Fidan)**

### **4.3.1 Efficiency**

Efficiency is studied in relation to whether the policies are fulfilling their goals with minimum resources. Asking this of Azerbaijan becomes important, as is simultaneously demanding defense, post-war reconstruction, and infrastructure expansion from the national budget. Here, the centralized soft-power strategy offers an interesting perspective since the initial approximation to the national budget is as low as 0.5%, translating to nearly AZN 180 million, compared to the anticipated spendings of about AZN 36 billion for the year 2024 goes towards defense, a proxy sector that would imply hard power. It uses very little upfront investment, unlocks long-term diplomatic and economic gains, and opens up the pathway for external funding and revenue. In both static terms and dynamic terms, this strategy equates to good return-on-investment and fits international trends that offer rewards for nations who pursue well-structured, culture-related diplomacy.

### **4.3.2 Flexibility**

Flexibility measures whether a policy can be changed to adapt to the changing policy needs. Hence, in this perspective, the centralized soft power scheme can be designed with multiple experimentation possibilities in mind and thus, corresponds highly with Azerbaijan's current foreign policy orientations, government messaging, and institutional mandates. At the institutional level, the policy can be aligned with, in case of the need for the improvements or different designs, the objectives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, and State Committee on Work with Diaspora. The newly envisaged AGACE will provide the platforms in which the initiatives of these bodies are combined under one umbrella, pooling resources to increase

flexibility, and align with improvable design frameworks. Unlike reforms to human rights or governance, investments in soft power would be politically neutral and could enjoy near-universal popular support, more so if they are directed towards cultural outreach, language promotion, or diaspora engagement, proving to have a good amount of flexibility.

### **4.3.3 Feasibility**

Feasibility examines whether the proposed strategy can be realistically implemented in Azerbaijan's present administrative, legal, and institutional setting. Thus, under this view, a centralized soft power policy is not just feasible; it is strongly supported by state capacities and precedents as Azerbaijani state is known to be innovating with institutional reforms in public administration over the last two decades in Azerbaijan, with ASAN service model proving workable globally for its efficiency and citizen-orientation. Same principle will be the cornerstone for the Azerbaijan Global Affairs and Cultural Exchange Office (AGACE) in its creation and operations, with a heavy emphasis on professional service delivery coupled with cross-ministerial coordination and meta-criteria of evaluation unrelated to political bureaucracy. Therefore, built upon Azerbaijan's administrative strengths and existing resources and supported by strategic legal mechanisms and international cooperation the centralized soft power strategy is highly feasible.

### **4.3.4 Equity**

Equity examines whether a certain policy leads to equitable treatment of different groups within its stakeholder population and inclusive access to its benefits. In the context of Azerbaijan's centralized soft power strategy, equity is about domestic inclusion and international representation

for populations traditionally sidelined, such as regional populations, diaspora, women, youth, and CSOs. The idea of a centralized body in the vein of AGACE will contribute to bridge existing inequalities in access to culture and education among different genders, age groups, and cities/districts while also fostering diversity through fellowships, leadership programs, and creative projects that will reinforce the values of inclusivity by involving women and young professionals of all ethnicities and backgrounds via national cultural umbrella. That way, one would not be wrong to claim that the centralized soft power plan reveals a great deal of fairness, places more cultural diplomacy and international representation across geographic, generational, gender, and class lines and treats everyone equally.

#### **4.3.5 Effectiveness**

When it comes to effectiveness on an international scale, the question is whether the policy being suggested could aid in enhancing the visibility, credibility, and influence of Azerbaijan within the global setup. Given that the country seeks to move out of the narrow identity pegged largely on energy exports and territorial security, the centralized soft power strategy offers a roadmap of projecting a differentiated and constructive global image. A centralized strategy will allow spreading its history, culture, values, and international commitments to the global audience, helping Azerbaijan be project its power not only through being an infamous destination for international and regional tourism, but also as a player in the production of world culture and cooperation. So, in short, the centralized soft power approach offers a very practical and effective way through which Azerbaijan can raise its profile in world affairs and develop more capacity for participating in international social protection programs.

#### **4.4 Comparative Analysis and Concluding Assessment**

Generally speaking, with an assessment of all the five criteria, a centralized soft power strategy comes as the first-best policy alternative for implementation. This is because it acts in the interest of abating many of the persistent inefficiencies in its institutional framework, achieves the goal of enhancing Azerbaijan's capacity for getting more involved in the space of international social projects, all while offering an attainable, inclusive, and politically flexible means of actually engaging with the foregoing social protection programs. Moving from a jigsaw-type structure of soft power to a harmonized national agenda will thereby allow Azerbaijan to better equip its global brand and align it with its conviction as a constructive, inclusive, and value-driven actor on the world stage.

<b>EVALUATION CRITERIAS</b>	<b>POLICY ALTERNATIVES</b>				
	<b>Centralized National Soft Power Strategy</b>	<b>Track 1 Diplomacy</b>	<b>Economic Diversification Following the UAE Model</b>	<b>Modernization Media Outlets</b>	<b>Implementation of capacity-building program</b>
<b>Effectiveness</b>	3	1	3	3	3
<b>Efficiency</b>	3	3	2	3	3
<b>Flexibility</b>	3	3	2	3	3
<b>Feasibility</b>	3	3	2	3	2
<b>Equity</b>	3	3	2	2	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	15	13	11	14	13

## **CHAPTER 5- CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**(by Leyla)**

This paper presented limited institutional capacity both in governmental and non-state sectors as one of the root barriers hindering Azerbaijan's effective involvement in the international social projects. The trends presented that, despite the recent development in institutional capacities, institutions are still in need of more solid technical, financial, material and other varied kinds of resources in order to contribute to a country's involvement in social international projects in a more effective way. Legal and regulatory framework with structured bureaucracy also are among the hindering factors for institutional development. Numerous examples demonstrated that Azerbaijan mostly relies on external donors for capacity development which makes the country less sustained on its own. As well as, there is less room for productive operation of non-governmental institutions including Civil Society Organizations which are key players for advancing in the international social agenda. The viable and impactful policy option presented in the paper is a state-led Capacity Building Program which will aim to increase the functional sustainability both for governmental institutions, as well as, will create positive conditions for non-state actors to thrive. The program aligns with the strategic goals to apply soft power effectively while increasing Azerbaijan's long-term impact through successful engagement.

**(By Ruqaiya)**

Moreover, Azerbaijan's participation in international social projects to achieve diplomatic influence is highly linked to its geopolitical scenery and developing national priorities in the region and internationally as well. Now that the war is over, Azerbaijan is shifting its focus towards having a stronger, more influential diplomatic stance by having a prominent role in international social projects, which will result in developing its diplomatic alliances and leveraging its potential to enhance its soft power.

However, the potential for Azerbaijan to achieve a permanent position as a responder to international social crises in the world, linking its name as a highly diplomatic humanitarian country, Azerbaijan needs to be able to navigate its regional dynamics navigating diplomatic missions, economic diversification to reduce the financial burdens and to capitalize on the use of media as an important tool as a part of its regional dynamics management, which will pave the way to its international social involvement, and its diplomatic flourishing.

**(by Fidan)**

The central conclusion of this study is that soft power can never be secondary to small and medium states like Azerbaijan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; it becomes an urgent strategic necessity. In an environment where legitimacy, credibility, and attraction often weigh as much as economic or military might, Azerbaijan's current international image deficit may hinder its development, diplomatic, and security goals. Its ad hoc approach to public diplomacy reflects the last gasp of an outdated model in an international system that evolves swiftly.

By investing in culture, international academic cooperation, youth diplomacy, and global communication infrastructure, Azerbaijan could indeed change its global profile and thus, have a better capacity for contributing to the international social projects. Going even further, a centralized strategy for soft power promises Azerbaijan more than a way just to get involved in international social projects; it promises a way to lead them. With sustained commitment, a political will, and innovative institutions, Azerbaijan can certainly carry the torch not just as a geopolitical partner, but as an exemplar for creative diplomacy, intercultural interaction, and regional innovation. Thus, it will be a force over influence in the coming decade.

## **Policy recommendations ordered by prioritization**

### **Recommendations (Fidan)**

At present Azerbaijan's application of soft power remains limited in scope and deficient in effectiveness. With a rich cultural heritage, a dynamic and expanding diaspora, and a growing diplomatic footprint, the international image of Azerbaijan is frequently reduced to one of security concerns or an energy-based transaction. As discussed in Chapter 2.3, this has largely debilitated Azerbaijan's potential to command or even meaningfully participate in international social projects and humanitarian interventions. On an ad hoc basis, there are some cultural events plus a few high-level summits accompanied by diaspora activities. But these are uncoordinated and short-lived, very much lacking an institutional framework for long-term strategic impact.

The policy solution proposed in Chapter 3.3 envisions a centralized soft power organ, namely, the Azerbaijan Global Affairs and Cultural Exchange Office (AGACE), having the mandate to consolidate and develop the country's cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and educational exchange activities. As critiqued in Chapter 4.3, the approach stands very well against some of the most important criteria: cost-effectiveness, political viability, administrative feasibility, international effectiveness, and capability of long-term sustainability. A set of well-targeted and realistic policy prescriptions will need to be adopted to see the particular solution through successfully.

The first and most important point relates to establishing AGACE as a parliamentary act. This would, on a broad spectrum, confer institutional validity upon it, allowing it legal existence and thereby securing it from being closed down with every political change. The creation of the agency should be done as a semi-autonomous entity under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, having its governing board, strategic line on a budget, and planning authority. Some initial seed funding of approximately 0.5 percent of the national budget would be useful for setting up pilot programs and setting up infrastructure for the institution itself.

Another core focus would be the National Soft Power Strategy (NSPS) that would provide a framework in which the international messaging goals of Azerbaijan are stated; regional and sectoral priorities are identified; measurable outcomes defined; and policy coherence achieved among the ministries. The document should be prepared jointly between AGACE and the key stakeholders consisting of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, and the State Committee on Work with Diaspora.

The launch of pilot projects will prove initial impact and operational credibility for AGACE with five culturally and educationally oriented centers in the most strategic cities across the globe, for instance, Berlin, Doha, Nairobi, Ankara, and Jakarta. The centers would offer language courses, cultural festivals, exhibitions, and academic lectures fostered on Azerbaijani identity promotion and cultural exchange at an international level. In parallel, partnerships with universities should develop Azerbaijani Studies programs abroad encompassing scholarships and academic exchanges.

Two-way diaspora outreach should transcend anything resembling a passive, event-based relationship. AGACE should initiate a Global Azerbaijani Ambassadors program aimed at creating a critical mass of young diaspora leaders trained in cultural diplomacy, international advocacy, and media representation. These community-based initiatives will invigorate Azerbaijan's global identity across societies and institutions. In return, diaspora networks themselves will be institutionalized with channels of support, funding, and strategic objectives.

Azerbaijan also must multiply its digital presence and media diplomacy footprints. AGACE may initiate multilingual content platforms and public diplomacy projects that emphasize Azerbaijani cultural pluralism and her social and intellectual traditions. Working alongside world media partners and diaspora content creators will give Azerbaijan the opportunity to stand for its own narrative, rather than be defined by foreign reportage.

Last but not least, acre of accountability is also required. AGACE should open a dedicated wing relating to monitoring and evaluation of performance, with duties to monitor the nation in soft power indices, international student flows, foreign publicity, and diplomatic presence in key sectors. Regular reports to the Parliament and public reporting on certain impact indicators would ensure their transparency and adaptive learning.

Considered together, these measures offer a reasonable and scalable means of triggering the repositioning of Azerbaijan as a cultural and humanitarian actor. They do not call for radical redo of finances or to discard the hard power; rather, they signal a strategic recalibration that plays in elegant tandem with Azerbaijan's existing foreign policy assets while opening up new avenues of engagement and influence.

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**CONSENT FORM**

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Title of Project: *Azerbaijan's involvement in International Social Projects : A Proposal for strengthening soft power through social protection policies*

Name of Researchers: *Heyla Shahaliyeva, Fidan Abirade, Ruzia Bashamova*

Name of Interviewee: *Gulle Ahmadova, Bakur Aghalakov*

**(Interviewee) Please tick as appropriate**

Yes  No  I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

Yes  No  I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

Yes  No  I consent to interviews being audio-recorded

Yes  No  I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

**(Researchers) We agree that:**

Yes  No  All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be confidential.

Yes  No  The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.



Yes  No  The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research

Yes  No  I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.




I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

*Signatures*

G. Ahmadova   
B. Abzalova 

Interviewee

Researchers

Date:

01.05.25

DD/MM/YY