

COP29 as a Nation Branding Instrument: Analysing Azerbaijan's Global Image in International Media

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Abstract.

Relevance. Hosting mega-events that attract international attention has become an integral part of nation branding, enabling states to project a favourable image and promote their soft power. While Azerbaijan's hosting of the 29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) received significant worldwide attention, the potential implications for the country's nation branding and soft power remain under-examined.

The purpose. Examining how Azerbaijan used COP29 as a platform for nation branding, this study compares the state's projected image with its portrayal in both internal and external media. It also evaluates the potential impact of these portrayals on Azerbaijan's international reputation and soft power.

Results. The findings suggest that hosting COP29 significantly increased Azerbaijan's international exposure; however, the foreign press did not consistently convey the country's intended image. Although positive and neutral coverage largely focused on conference management and procedural leadership, biased narratives and limited attention to environmental leadership restricted the event's potential to contribute to nation branding and soft power more broadly.

Conclusions. In conclusion, the study suggests that environmental diplomacy and global climate summits can be useful platforms for nation branding and projecting international image. Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani case shows that although hosting COP29 increased diplomatic visibility, this did not automatically lead to long-lasting reputational or soft power benefits. Long-term success hinges on the implementation of sustained international engagement, and the consolidation of projected narratives by target audiences.

Keywords: COP29, Azerbaijan, nation branding, soft power, mega-events, public diplomacy, international image, climate diplomacy

СОР29 як інструмент брендингу нації: аналіз глобального іміджу Азербайджану в міжнародних ЗМІ

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Анотація.

Актуальність. Проведення міжнародних мега-заходів, які привертають значну увагу світової спільноти, стало важливою складовою брендингу нації, надаючи державам можливість формувати позитивний міжнародний імідж і зміцнювати свою м'яку силу. Незважаючи на те, що проведення Азербайджаном 29-ї Конференції сторін Рамкової конвенції Організації Об'єднаних Націй про зміну клімату (СОР29) отримало широкий міжнародний резонанс, його потенційний вплив на брендинг країни та її м'яку силу залишається недостатньо дослідженим.

Мета дослідження. Дослідити, яким чином Азербайджан використав СОР29 як платформу для брендингу нації, шляхом порівняння іміджу, який держава прагнула сформувати, із його висвітленням у національних та міжнародних засобах масової інформації. Також оцінюється потенційний вплив такого медійного висвітлення на міжнародну репутацію Азербайджану та його м'яку силу.

Результати. Встановлено, що проведення СОР29 суттєво підвищило міжнародну пізнаванність Азербайджану, однак іноземні засоби масової інформації не завжди відображали образ країни відповідно до її запланованого позиціонування. Хоча позитивне й нейтральне висвітлення переважно акцентувало увагу на ефективності організації конференції та дипломатичному лідерстві Азербайджану, упереджені наративи й обмежена увага до екологічного лідерства зменшили потенціал заходу щодо посилення брендингу нації та м'якої сили.

Висновки. Встановлено, що екологічна дипломатія та глобальні кліматичні саміти можуть бути ефективними платформами для брендингу нації та формування позитивного міжнародного іміджу. Водночас досвід Азербайджану демонструє, що проведення СОР29, незважаючи на підвищення міжнародної дипломатичної видимості країни, не забезпечило автоматичного досягнення довготривалих репутаційних переваг і зміцнення м'якої сили. Довгостроковий успіх залежить від послідовної реалізації державної політики, сталого міжнародного залучення та закріплення сформованих наративів у сприйнятті цільових аудиторій.

Ключові слова: СОР29, Азербайджан, брендинг нації, м'яка сила, мега-заходи, публічна дипломатія, міжнародний імідж, кліматична дипломатія

Introduction.

In November 2024, Azerbaijan's hosting of the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP29) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) marked a significant moment in the country's international positioning as a participant in global climate governance and a diplomatic convenor. As the UNFCCC's central decision-making forum, the COP brings states together to advance collective action toward limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C under the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2023). Beyond their formal policy outcomes, COP summits function as high-visibility international platforms through which host states can project narratives about their roles, priorities, and identities in global affairs. In this context, hosting COP29 offered Azerbaijan an opportunity to increase international profile, participate directly in climate negotiations, and project an image of global responsibility (Pham, 2025, p. 3).

Mega-events are widely recognized as instruments of nation branding and soft power, shaping foreign perceptions and influencing international audiences through symbolic performance and mediated visibility. Nation branding refers to the strategic construction and communication of a country's image through diplomatic practices, political values, and engagement in global processes. Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), denotes the ability to influence others through attraction, legitimacy, and agenda-setting rather than coercion. Hosting COP29 thus enabled Azerbaijan to mobilize both nation branding and soft power logics by embedding preferred narratives within a globally salient event.

Despite growing academic, political, and economic attention to COP29, its implications for Azerbaijan's international image and reputational standing remain insufficiently examined. Existing scholarship has largely assessed the conference through environmental or geopolitical lenses, paying limited attention to its strategic role as a nation branding and communicative tool. This gap is particularly significant given Azerbaijan's economic profile and its evolving regional and international ambitions.

The purpose of this research is to examine how Azerbaijan used COP29 for nation branding, how the official narrative was reported in the global media, and the extent to which this contributed to the country's soft power.

Guided by one overarching research question and three sub-questions, the study asks how COP29 operates as a nation branding and soft power instrument in Azerbaijan's international image construction. It examines: (1) how Azerbaijan projected its desired image through hosting COP29; (2) how this projected image was received and mediated by international and domestic media; and (3) the extent to which COP29 generated soft power gains, as well as the limitations shaping these outcomes.

Methodological approach. Using a qualitative

case study design, this study examines how Azerbaijan used COP29 to project a positive international image and strengthen its soft power through nation branding. The research develops a conceptual framework through a critical review and analytical synthesis of literature on public diplomacy, nation branding, soft power, and mega-events. This framework guides the subsequent document analysis involving the interpretation of media coverage from sources such as Reuters, BBC, Euronews, Trend.az and Modern.az, as well as official COP29 statements and promotional materials. Media outlets were selected through purposive sampling to encompass both local and global representations of Azerbaijan's role during COP29. Then, a theory-guided interpretive approach is applied to compare Azerbaijan's self-presentation, as reflected in official statements and promotional materials, with its received image in domestic and international media coverage. Through this comparison, recurring narratives, points of convergence and divergence are identified, along with their implications for Azerbaijan's nation branding and soft power.

Analysis of Previous Research and Publications.

Nation Branding. Understanding nation branding requires an examination of the related concepts of national identity, image and reputation. National identity refers to a nation's internal self-perception; image reflects how it is perceived abroad; and reputation involves the judgements formed by external audiences (Fan, 2010, pp. 4–5). These elements are closely linked: identity guides branding efforts, branding shapes image, and reputation evolves from external perceptions. Nation branding principally operates at the levels of image and reputation, aiming to align international perceptions with domestic realities (Fan, 2010, p. 6).

The association of nation branding with marketing communications and the creation of national images reflects this concept to a limited extent (Anholt, 2011, p. 6). Nation branding is not just about slogans, logos or advertising campaigns, but also a long-term and multidimensional process of managing a country's international reputation. Even in the absence of targeted branding strategies, every nation has a brand, which is defined as the sum of perceptions held by international audiences about its people, culture, governance, history and symbolic representation (Fan, 2010, p. 6). As a result, nation branding involves a strategically important framework that encompasses national identity, image, reputation, competitiveness and soft power (Dinnie, 2008, p. 15; Fan, 2010, p. 11). This perspective is defined by Bolin and Ståhlberg as “a phenomenon in which governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at creating a particular image of the nation-state” (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010, pp. 79–80). Such a definition is based on the purposeful and state-directed nature of nation branding, distinguishing it from the more diffuse and unplanned development of national reputation.

Simon Anholt's concept of Competitive Identity

provides a basic model for understanding nation branding as a coordinated strategy for managing national reputation rather than a marketing exercise (Anholt, 2006a, pp. 1–2). Competitive Identity portrays global politics as a “marketplace of places” in which states compete for investment, tourism, talent, and influence through prestige rather than coercion (Anholt, 2006a, p. 2). Anholt’s Nation Brand Hexagon identifies governance, investment, exports, tourism, culture, and people as interrelated dimensions that shape international perceptions and competitiveness (Alakbarli, 2025, p. 48). This framework further emphasizes that national reputation develops through consistent performance across these multiple sectors, rather than through isolated promotional efforts.

Regardless of its strategic importance, nation branding has its limitations. It is not possible to communicate a single national image to all audiences uniformly, and a nation’s reputation cannot be improved sustainably through communication alone without credibility and corresponding actions (Fan, 2010, p. 7). Therefore, the success of nation branding initiatives, including those conducted through global mega-events, largely depends on their perceived credibility and authenticity.

Soft Power. Soft power, conceptualized by Joseph Nye as an alternative to coercive power, refers to a state’s ability to shape the preferences of others not through force or material inducements, but through attraction (Nye, 2004, p. x). Soft power is grounded in cultural appeal, political values, and the perceived legitimacy and moral authority of foreign policy (Nye, 2004, p. 6). Expanding upon Nye’s framework, Vuving distinguishes three operational “currencies of attraction”: “benignity,” which is rooted in kindness and trust; “brilliance,” which is derived from perceived competence and achievement; and “beauty,” which is grounded in a commitment to shared ideals (Vuving, 2009, 2019). These currencies work through instrumental, normative and emotional logics, and conceptualise soft power as a non-coercive type of “power-with”, which depends on reciprocity and shared notions rather than dominance. Under this approach, soft power is closely associated with legitimacy, values, and moral authority, emphasising attraction, cultural resonance, value-based politics, and credibility as key components of influence.

Fan (2008) emphasizes that soft power is by its nature relative, intangible and context-dependent, which makes it challenging to measure, control or convert into direct political influence. He further indicates that its efficacy hinges on receptive audiences and favourable contextual factors, such as cultural affinity, historical bonds, and economic interdependence (pp. 5–6). Perception-influencing factors such as the media and international organizations are also key factors, and they also play a significant role in the formation of soft power.

Mega-Events as Instruments of Nation Branding and Soft Power. In this context, nation branding emerged as

a strategic response to global competition and enabled states to shape international perceptions and leverage key soft power resources through coordinated communication strategies (Gilmore, 2002; Anholt, 1998, as cited in Fan, 2008, pp. 16–17). Relying more on core national assets than on superficial image structures, nation branding operates through the interplay of political, economic, and cultural sub-brands (Fan, 2008, pp. 17–20). Imran conceptualizes nation branding as a functional soft power tool that shapes a country’s desired image while simultaneously advancing economic goals such as promoting foreign direct investment, tourism, and exports (Imran, 2017, p. 44). Building on Anholt’s distinction between public diplomacy and nation branding, Imran emphasizes that while public diplomacy represents the political face of international communication, nation branding constitutes a broader and more pragmatic strategy for projecting national values, policies, and culture (Anholt, 2006b; Imran, 2018, p. 100).

Szondi (2008, p. 23) suggests that nation branding plays a vital role in transitional states, enabling them to distance themselves symbolically from former political systems and reposition their national identity within the international arena as modern and credible rather than peripheral. Branding strategies have two purposes in post-socialist contexts: they serve external communication and internal political reorientation. Mega-events have emerged within this framework as powerful instruments of nation branding, functioning as widely visible ‘acts of communication’ that can reshape international perceptions and accelerate re-imaging processes. Examples of this include the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany (Knott et al., 2016, p. 218).

However, the existing literature consistently highlights that the reputational advantages gained from hosting major events are neither guaranteed nor self-sustaining. Instead, these benefits depend on post-event strategies, stakeholder coordination, consistent media narratives and long-term policy continuity (Knott et al., 2016). Mega-events primarily create symbolic and communicative opportunities, but failure to capitalise on them, particularly after the event, may limit their long-term nation branding outcomes. From this perspective, COP29 offers a chance to evaluate whether hosting a global climate summit has led to long-term nation branding and soft power benefits.

Conceptual Framework. The study conceptualises COP29 as the primary tool for Azerbaijan’s nation branding strategy. According to the framework, Azerbaijan’s nation branding strategy was realised by hosting COP29, which enabled the country to project its desired global image through various official narratives and promotional initiatives. Subsequently, these projected narratives were mediated by local and foreign media, shaping the image received by foreign audiences. The contrast between the projected and received images provides insight into the extent to which COP29 contributed to the country’s

soft power. Therefore, media framing is considered the primary mechanism through which nation branding efforts are linked to soft power outcomes.

Nation Branding Strategy → COP29 (nation branding instrument) → Projected Image → Media Framing → Received International Image → Soft Power Outcomes

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Research Results.

History of Azerbaijan's Mega-event Diplomacy.

Public diplomacy has a key role to play in shaping national images, creating positive perceptions among target audiences, strengthening international ties, boosting tourism and attracting investment (Leonard, Stead & Smewing, 2002, pp. 9–10). Azerbaijan's case shows that these activities are not limited to traditional diplomatic communication, but are also achieved through high-profile international events and government-led branding initiatives. These initiatives act as additional means of public diplomacy.

Azerbaijan's hosting of major events is a key part of its soft power strategy via nation branding. Rather than relying on a single approach, the government has adopted a multifaceted strategy that integrates export enhancement, tourism branding, and high-profile international events to collectively shape its global image. Thus, campaigns such as "Amazing Azerbaijan," "Azerbaijan – The Land of Fire," and, in particular, the "Made in Azerbaijan" scheme were launched to showcase the country's natural resources, potential for economic growth, and governance to a global audience (Imran, 2017, p. 112). The "Made in Azerbaijan" campaign is a type of soft nationalism that aims to increase recognition on the international stage, attract foreign investors, boost tourism and increase exports. This is achieved through coordinated visual and symbolic communication, including international advertising and transport logos branding (Imran, 2017, p. 114).

Azerbaijan's strategy of hosting international mega-events has been closely linked to these branding initiatives. Beginning with the Eurovision Song Contest (2012) and continuing with the European Games (2015), Formula One races from 2016 onwards, and the Islamic Solidarity Games (2017), the UEFA Europa League Final (2019), UEFA Euro 2020 matches held in Baku (2021), and COP29 (2024) Azerbaijan has used these global events to raise its international profile and project an image of a modern, secular, tolerant, and economically prosperous Muslim-majority state with regional and global objectives (Imran, 2018, p. 112). This strategy reflects a state-led approach to seeking visibility through diplomacy, where large-scale events serve as symbolic platforms for showcasing modernity, organisational capability, and international connectivity.

At the discursive level, Azerbaijan's branding

strategy is caught between a desirable global modernity and nationalist symbolism. Baku is often portrayed in state narratives as a postmodern global city, often through iconic architecture, luxury consumption, and international events – often compared to the "Dubai of the Caspian" (Valiyev, 2012, as cited in Imran, 2018, p. 119). Krebs (2015) argues that Azerbaijan's official branding increasingly highlights "tolerance" as a defining national trait. This narrative is primarily framed around religious harmony and is supported by symbolic references such as the "Land of Fire" imagery and the Zoroastrian Atesgah temple. These elements are used to project an image of historical interfaith coexistence. Consequently, Azerbaijan's nation branding strategy deliberately adopts a widely recognized discourse of tolerance and multiculturalism, aligning with broader place-branding practices (pp. 125–126).

In this regard, the continuity of mega-events is also necessary to be able to consistently deliver these messages, one of which is COP29. However, within this strategic model of state-driven branding and mega-event diplomacy, COP29 represents a qualitative shift from music and sports-based visibility to participation in global governance, and it is clear that Azerbaijan has a higher profile than previous hosting experiences.

Media as a Mediator of Global Image Formation.

Within the contemporary information landscape, the concept of soft power is influenced not only by the messages that states aim to convey, but also by how these messages are perceived and evaluated by external audiences. Global news coverage plays a vital role in this process, shaping national images and disseminating narratives that influence how foreign publics view states (Almakaty, 2025, p. 132). The importance of the media in shaping international perceptions is also reflected in the Global Soft Power Index, which includes media as one of its indicators of global influence (Brand Finance, 2025). While not employed as an analytical measure in this study, the index further supports the use of media analysis to evaluate the influence of nation branding strategies on soft power outcomes. As intermediaries between states and global audiences, media organisations shape the reception, interpretation and contestation of state-sponsored messages. Through cultural diplomacy, global broadcasting and digital platforms, as well as broader public diplomacy initiatives, governments aim to promote positive national attributes and enhance their international reputation (Almakaty, 2025, pp. 132–136). However, the success of these efforts hinges not only on official communication, but also on how media organisations frame, contextualise and disseminate these narratives.

Public diplomacy is a particularly good example of this dynamic. According to Nye (2004, pp. 108–110), public diplomacy has three interconnected dimensions: the daily communication of policy decisions to foreign audiences; the strategic use of symbolic events and

activities; and the establishment of long-term relationships through educational, cultural and institutional exchanges. The aim of these activities is to create favourable perceptions about the state. However, their effectiveness ultimately rests on consistency between communication and policy. Nevertheless, governments often prioritise local audiences while overlooking how their actions are interpreted overseas, especially through international media coverage. Consequently, strategic communication can be rendered ineffective by contradictory policies, inconsistent messaging or behaviour that appears self-interested or lacking in legitimacy to foreign audiences. As Nye (2004, p. 110) points out, even the most effective communication strategies cannot compensate for policies that lack credibility, as these will inevitably diminish rather than increase a country's soft power.

This emphasis on credibility is in line with Anholt's (2006a) view of national reputation. Rather than being formed primarily via promotional campaigns, a country's international image is shaped by the substance of its internal and external policies, as interpreted by the media (Anholt, 2006a, pp. 19, 25). Accordingly, audiences are inclined to respond more to tangible events and evolving situations that seem relevant, authentic, and newsworthy than to meticulously designed branding messages alone. International reporting thus functions not only as a channel for disseminating official narratives, but also as an arena in which those narratives are scrutinised, and evaluated. Recurring patterns of coverage contribute to a self-reinforcing process over time, in which image shapes public expectations, while those expectations in turn influence how future events are viewed (Anholt, 2006a, p. 35).

Considered as a whole, these perspectives show that soft power is best understood as a relational and mediated concept, rather than as a resource that states can use unilaterally. Favourable reporting in external media coverage can boost a country's attractiveness, while critical scrutiny can undermine it, thereby influencing the effectiveness of nation branding efforts (Almakaty, 2025, p. 136). This dynamic is particularly important in the context of mega events, which combine deliberate image projection with significant foreign media attention. Therefore, evaluating Azerbaijan's utilisation of COP29 as a soft power instrument necessitates an examination of both the official narratives promoted by the country's government and the representations constructed through global news coverage. Comparing these official and external representations is a means of evaluating the extent to which Azerbaijan's soft power and nation branding objectives were supported, challenged, or altered by foreign press scrutiny.

Projected Image. As the host of COP29, Azerbaijan has presented itself as a responsible and cooperative contributor to global climate governance. The country has framed the hosting of COP29 as evidence of its growing diplomatic engagement and international relevance,

presenting itself as a climate-responsible and cooperative actor within global climate governance (Heydarova & Panahov, 2024, p. 7). Discourse emphasises Azerbaijan's ongoing role as an energy producer, alongside a dedication to a gradual transition. This is reflected in investments in renewable energy projects, especially large-scale solar and wind initiatives implemented in collaboration with Masdar. Additionally, there are targets to increase renewable energy capacity (Heydarova & Panahov, 2024, p. 7; Niftiyev, 2024, pp. 10, 13). Government-led COP event and policy discussions have presented Azerbaijan as a regional green energy leader and active diplomatic intermediary. These discussions have emphasised Azerbaijan's cooperation with the European Union and its role in the COP 'Troika' alongside the UAE and Brazil (Heydarova & Panahov, 2024, p. 7). President Ilham Aliyev further elaborated on this framing by presenting Azerbaijan's COP29 presidency as a bridge between the Non-Aligned Movement and the EU. Additionally, he highlighted expanded partnerships with EU member states, assistance to Small Island Developing States, and proposals to provide them with dedicated support funding (Ibadoghlu & Bayramova, 2024, p. 4).

Azerbaijan unveiled the COP29 logo, which symbolises the state's priorities by combining cultural elements with environmental themes. According to the COP29 Operating Company, the logo design incorporates the traditional 'buta' motif alongside elements representing leaves and water droplets. This links sustainability and innovation to Azerbaijan's historical identity. The logo is aimed at conveying ecological sensitivity, unity and harmony between humanity and nature by featuring core environmental elements such as flora and fauna, air and wind, water, energy, and the universe. It also frames climate action as a bridge between past traditions and future-oriented solutions (Azertac, 2024). This intended image is reinforced by existing nation branding initiatives, such as "Made in Azerbaijan" and "Azerbaijan – The Land of Fire," as well as visual symbols, exhibitions and promotional content that link green transition narratives with modernisation and international collaborations (Imran, 2017, pp. 112–114). These branding initiatives set the standard against which external media coverage is evaluated.



Fig. 2. COP29 Azerbaijan logo.

Note: Brandfetch. (n.d.). COP29 Azerbaijan logo & brand assets (SVG, PNG and vector). <https://brandfetch.com/COP29.az/>

Received image by dominant media frames. The portrayal of Azerbaijan in the dominant international media frame is primarily through its role as conference host and COP presidency, emphasising diplomatic presence, procedural leadership, and the country's ability to facilitate multilateral climate negotiations. Reuters, Euronews and the BBC provide neutral to positive coverage, depicting Azerbaijan as the convener of negotiations between almost 200 parties, as the facilitator of discussions on a new global climate finance goal and as the guarantor of the continuity of the implementation of the Paris Agreement (Daigle, 2024; McGrath & Rannard, 2024; Volcovici & Dickie, 2024). According to this narrative, Azerbaijan is portrayed less as a substantive climate leader and more as a diplomatic facilitator, particularly with regard to climate finance negotiations. In particular, Reuters highlights the COP29 presidency's efforts to broker consensus despite persistent political

divisions and the complexity of reaching an agreement (Daigle, 2024; Volcovici & Dickie, 2024).

Complementary media coverage portrays Azerbaijan as a competent host and organiser of a major multilateral event. Euronews highlights the country's infrastructure, logistical preparedness, security arrangements and experience of hosting large-scale international events. The broadcaster presents Baku as a modern, well-connected venue with the capacity to accommodate 40,000–50,000 summit participants (McGrath & Rannard, 2024; Amirov, 2025). Meanwhile, domestic outlets such as Trend.az and Modern.az extend this narrative by linking COP29 to Azerbaijan's broader strategy of media diplomacy and international positioning, drawing attention to initiatives like the establishment of a Euronews office in Baku (Rahimova & Amirov, 2025). Together, these narratives build an international image of Azerbaijan as a competent organiser of multilateral diplomacy.

Table 1.
Positive and netral media frames and their nation branding implications

Key Outlets	Media Frame	Tone	Core Narrative	Nation Branding Outcomes
Reuters Euronews BBC	Procedural leadership/ Diplomatic visibility	Neutral- Posiitive	Azerbaijan as COP host managing a major multilateral summit, and facilitating negotiations, advancing climate finance discussions	Enhances Azerbaijan's diplomatic profile through effective conference leadership and multilateral engagement; recognition as a convener of international climate negotiations (contingent nation branding achievement).
Euronews Trend. az/ Modern.az	Strategic host/ competent organizer	Positive	Indications on logistics, connectivity, infrastructure readiness, and Baku's capacity to host large-scale international events	Promotes Azerbaijan's image as a modern, stable, and capable host; reinforces organisational competence and international event-hosting capacity

The consistent global media coverage served to further solidify this image. Reuters, the BBC and Euronews repeatedly characterised Azerbaijan as the conference host, the COP presidency, a mediator and a broker responsible for facilitating negotiations and overseeing discussions on climate finance. The repetition of these descriptors across major international outlets established a consistent media narrative centred on institutional capability and diplomatic coordination. However, this framing focused on Azerbaijan's role in delivering COP29 rather than its climate performance, meaning broader environmental leadership was only marginally reflected in international reporting.

Evaluating of COP29 through the Lens of Soft Power. Previously identified media frames have considerable branding implications for Azerbaijan. Consistent international coverage has portrayed Azerbaijan as a competent organiser and diplomatic facilitator, raising the country's profile within global climate governance. Nonetheless, this increased visibility only partially translated into broader reputational gains, as international reporting primarily focused on Azerbaijan's procedural

duties in hosting COP29, rather than its domestic climate policies or ecological leadership.

When interpreted through Vuvings (2009; 2019) framework, these outcomes primarily correspond to the brilliance of soft power – reflecting perceptions of administrative competence, procedural leadership and diplomatic performance. In contrast, the currency of beauty, which signifies a commitment to shared values, and the currency of benignity, which denotes goodwill and generosity, were evident only to a limited extent. Elements of beauty were expressed through Azerbaijan's support for shared climate governance goals and its participation in the COP Troika, as well as its commitment to multilateral cooperation under the 1.5°C pathway, while limited signs of benignity emerged in its engagement with Small Island Developing States and its involvement in climate finance negotiations. Despite broadening Azerbaijan's diplomatic profile, these initiatives remained secondary to the dominant image of Azerbaijan as an effective conference host and facilitator.

This pattern is indicative of a wider trend in nation branding through mega-events. While such events can

swiftly boost international visibility and foster diplomatic cooperation, they do not inherently generate enduring reputational benefits. Furthermore, governments have limited control over the ultimate interpretation of such events, as nation branding outcomes depend largely on external actors' reproduction and reinforcement of specific narratives. In the case of COP29, for example, foreign news coverage, diplomatic audiences and international organisations consistently reinforced images of Azerbaijan's multilateral coordination and institutional capability, while comparatively little attention was devoted to its long-term environmental performance and climate leadership. Consequently, COP29 shows how mega-events can boost international visibility and reinforce positive perceptions in specific areas without necessarily leading to broader reputational gains. As such, the soft power benefits generated by the event were limited and largely confined to the event itself.

Diplomatic Achievements and Potential Soft Power Gains. COP29 generated several tangible diplomatic gains for Azerbaijan, extending its participation in international climate governance and increasing opportunities for multilateral engagement. As COP29 president, Azerbaijan was responsible for facilitating negotiations among almost 200 parties, setting the summit's agenda, and coordinating preparatory negotiations, ministerial consultations, and ongoing processes. These roles elevated Azerbaijan's status within the UNFCCC process, strengthening its position in multilateral climate diplomacy (Ibadoghlu & Bayramova, 2024, pp. 1–4).

Azerbaijan's diplomatic presence was further enhanced by its participation in the COP Troika with the United Arab Emirates and Brazil. According to the UNFCCC Roadmap to Mission 1.5°C, this arrangement will extend Azerbaijan's involvement to COP28–30, ensuring its continued participation in global climate initiatives until mid-2026 at the very least (Townend et al., 2024, pp. 5–6). Additional commitments, such as hosting UN World Environment Day in 2026, launching Baku Climate Action Week and bidding to host the 2026 Convention on Biological Diversity summit, have also consolidated Azerbaijan's involvement in international environmental diplomacy (Townend et al., 2024, pp. 5–6).

By hosting COP29, Azerbaijan was able to strengthen its diplomatic participation across various negotiating blocs, including the European Union, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Small Island Developing States. By fostering dialogue between these groups, Azerbaijan broadened its diplomatic influence and solidified its position as a mediator in multilateral climate negotiations (Ibadoghlu & Bayramova, 2024, p. 4; Townend et al., 2024, pp. 2–3, 13). This in turn expanded Azerbaijan's diplomatic network and created more opportunities for long-term collaboration.

However, whether these diplomatic opportunities evolve into durable soft power advantages will depend on the sustained implementation of the partnerships and

commitments forged during and after COP29. Although perception indicators should be interpreted with caution, Azerbaijan's position in the Global Soft Power Index improved modestly from 85th place in 2024 to 81st place in 2025. While this change cannot be directly attributed to hosting COP29, it broadly aligns with the heightened international profile and diplomatic engagement associated with the conference. Nevertheless, the modest improvement suggests that, while COP29 strengthened Azerbaijan's diplomatic profile, it did not fundamentally transform its broader international image reinforcing the research findings that its soft power gains tended to be limited rather than transformative.

Conclusions.

Hosting COP29 significantly increased Azerbaijan's international exposure; however, foreign media did not consistently portray the country as intended. Although favourable and neutral coverage largely focused on conference management and administrative capacity, biased narratives and limited attention to environmental leadership prevented Azerbaijan's intended image from being fully realised, thereby constraining the event's impact on its nation branding.

Beyond these practical findings, the study shows that international reporting functions not only as a channel of communication, but also as an active intermediary in nation branding processes. The discrepancy between Azerbaijan's projected image and its portrayal in domestic and global news outlets shows that states cannot fully control how they are received by external audiences. Therefore, increased attention in the international media should not be equated with a consolidated reputation or realised soft power, as both depend on the extent to which projected narratives are echoed by external actors. Given that many COP29 initiatives extend to 2030, the long-term impact on Azerbaijan's international image and soft power will hinge on the consistent implementation of policies, ongoing international engagement, and the validity of the country's commitments.

The research also makes a contribution to the literature on nation branding by revealing that environmental diplomacy can serve as a platform for nation branding. With regard to Azerbaijan, the international media predominantly conveyed perceptions of organisational competence and diplomatic performance, in line with Vuving's concept of “brilliance” while placing comparatively less emphasis on “beauty” and “benevolence.”

However, this study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study based on selected internal and external media outlets, it does not encompass the full range of global media coverage surrounding COP29. To address these limitations, future research could involve comparative analyses of a broader range of foreign press, cross-national studies of nation branding strategies in relation to climate diplomacy and longitudinal research investigating whether the visibility and positive reputation associated with COP29 lead to long-term soft power outcomes.

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