

Nation Branding Endeavours of Azerbaijan: Reshaping National Image

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Abstract

Every nation possesses a certain nation brand image, with or without nation branding. A well thought-out nation branding campaign can, however, project a nation's image and solicit its global recognition. Such an endeavour concurrently instils a greater sense of belonging, self-determination and ideals of public communication in the domestic audience. The value of nation branding for tapping the economic potential of a nation remains arguable. In this paper, an effort has been made to understand how a developing country like Azerbaijan is gaining international recognition through an apt utilisation of nation branding tools. Strategic, conceptual and practically relevant aspects are being analysed to ascertain the efficacy of nation branding techniques and their impact on national image building. With occasional reference to the international brands of the developed countries, this study is focused on the endeavours of Azerbaijan to market its name and build its own national brands.

Keywords: Azerbaijan Brand, Nation Branding, National Identity, Nationalism, Global Recognition, Azerbaijan.

Introduction

History, culture, religion, language, geography and politics are the constituents of a nation's brand identity. Nation branding is an enormous undertaking, which cannot be left to the marketers, brand managers or advertisement experts alone. Instead, a fine blending of nation's culture is required for the success of any nation branding campaign. Nation branding helps project a nation's policies and culture to an international audience, the public face of international diplomacy.¹ Nation brands shape the strategic

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¹ Paul Jordan, "Nation Branding: A Tool for Nationalism?," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 45, no. 3 (September, 2014): 283-303.

framework for a nation's cultural policy and, thus, are reflected through the branded exports, brand ambassadors, cultural artefacts, the standard of governance, its achievements in sports and tourism initiative etc. The essence of a nation's brands is extracted from its culture, language, literature, music and architecture. The audiences of a nation's brands belong to both the local and foreign spheres, be they consumers, firms, investors, the relevant authorities and media outlets. The commercial approaches of a nation's brand would be well received by the relevant authorities and societies depends on the fact that how much influence a nation is able to exert through its nation branding efforts. This is such a factor which requires due attention when it comes to achieving desired results in a nation branding campaign. In today's globalised world, nation branding has become a compulsion for the nations to optimise their cultural and economic potential. If a nation is not making a concerted effort to brand itself then others might do it for their own purposes.²

Other than the developed nations, the developing countries, too, have joined the bandwagon to gain global recognition and improve their national image through nation branding. Azerbaijan is but one example, which is a South Caucasian state and situated at the crossroads of Asia and Europe. This developing Muslim country is characterised with a pluralistic society and exemplary interfaith harmony. The spirit of co-existence and multiculturalism are the trademarks of the Azerbaijani society. The country received a diverse culture from the Ottoman, Russian and Persian Empires. At the close geographical proximity of mighty nations like Russia, Iran and Turkey, Azerbaijan has been struggling to establish its distinct national identity.

To seek global recognition, Azerbaijan embarked upon a number of nation branding initiatives, which are aimed at promoting national identity, improving the national image and enhancing its economic profile. This study attempts to explore the correlation between national identity, national image and nation branding techniques of Azerbaijan.

² Tim Lincoln, "Nation Branding: Perception can be Reality — so Manage it," Knowledge/Wharton, 2015, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/nation-branding-perception-can-reality-manage/>

National Identity

National identity is a sense of belonging, which one associates with his state or nation. It is also described as a sense of solidarity, one feels towards a particular group. It is termed as a collection of people who have been united by certain shared cultural features, myths and values.³ In the recent political philosophy, the concept of national identity has been used frequently, especially by the philosophers who have been advocating for legitimising the principle of political self-determination.⁴ National identity is not a trait with which people are born rather it comes with the experiences from the common lives of the people, which construct their identity. If one views national identity positively, it is usually called patriotism. In the pursuance of self-respect, the sense of belonging and security and giving a meaning to life, national identities are utmost essential. A national identity is a creditable form of identification.⁵ As an encouraging measure, self-categorisation is needed for national identity. This implies the identification of an indigenous association with one's nation as well as discrimination of out-groups from other nations. Realisation of the similarities like common descent and identical destiny, help people associate themselves with one particular nation to form an in-group and, simultaneously, direct them to treat the people from a different nation(s) as out-group(s).

A well-developed and strong sense of national identity has the power to be a productive and enabling force within the society, providing positive social capital with the benefits such as improved cooperation with others, improved flow of information and better functioning of the authorities as well as other state institutions.⁶ Thus, nation is necessarily believed to be an ethnically self-defined and politically self-conscious group, which gets influenced by certain factors such as history, race, language, national colours symbols, culture, cuisine and music etc.

³ Lowell W. Barrington, "Nation and Nationalism: The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science," *Political Science and Politics* 30, no. 4 (December, 1997): 713.

⁴ Omar Dahbour, "National Identity: An Argument for the Strict Definition," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (January, 2002): 17-37.

⁵ Kai Nielsen, "Cultural Nationalism, Neither Ethnic nor Civic," in *Theorizing Nationalism*. Beiner, Ronald. ed. (NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 119-30.

⁶ Stephen Aldridge, "Social Capital," Presentation to European Commission Conference on Social and Human Capital in the Knowledge Society, 2002, http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/knowledge_society/docs/aldrIDGE.pdf

In case of Azerbaijan, the national identity formation process appears to be an interesting phenomenon. Structured on the components of geography, history, culture and religion, Azerbaijan enjoys a complex, yet multi-layered, geo-political identity. Geographically, it acts as the gateway to Europe. The evident European outlook of Azerbaijan substantiates its people's affinity to Europe. In 2001, Azerbaijan acceded to the Council of Europe but, later on, refused to sign the association with the European Union (EU) in 2014. Nevertheless, the US and UK remain the largest trade partners of Azerbaijan. Historically, it was a part of the Russian Empire as well as the Soviet Union. Despite its glaring ideological differences with Russia, Azerbaijan still has a sizeable majority which speaks the Russian language. In 1993, it became a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Culturally and linguistically, it is a part of the Turkic World. The Turkic integration process started in the 1990s. In 2009, Turkey, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan formed the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (CCTS) in Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan.

From a religious standpoint, Azerbaijan is a secular Muslim country, exuding an exemplary interfaith harmony, the spirit of peaceful coexistence and multiculturalism. Despite the fact that it appears to be different from many other Muslim countries in social, political and economic dispositions, it has been an active member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) since 1991. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned facts, the state authorities of Azerbaijan have been striving to foster an independent national identity, built upon its values of secularism, civic nationalism and multiculturalism. The cumulative desired effect of all these efforts is to project a soft image of Azerbaijan in the comity of nations.

National Image

A national image refers to an overall impression that a nation leaves on others.⁷ It is generally considered to be the sum of people's cognition, affection and evaluation regarding an object, person or an organisation. An image is the subjective portrait of a part of reality that is perceived by a person or a group of people. Relevant to scholarship in strategic

⁷ E. Dichter, "What's in an Image?," *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 2, no. 1 (Winter, 1985): 75-81.

communication, an image can be a country, institution or organisation, a brand or product and a label, to name a few.⁸

In the realms of strategic communication, marketing communication or consumer behaviour, the Country of Origin (COO) effect focuses specifically on the association between the product and overall national image of the nation producing that product. A country image is positively correlated with perceptions of product integrity, the pride of ownership, product satisfaction, willingness to buy from particular countries and general product knowledge.⁹ The national image can be seen as the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country, what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people.¹⁰ Many researchers agree that impressions or general evaluations of countries tend to serve as buzzwords or judgment shortcuts. Therefore, it is the sum total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs, one has about a particular country.¹¹ Consumers with little product knowledge depend more on COO information to assess the product as opposed to people with more knowledge on the same product. Apt projection of product-related national image pays rich dividends. It is against this backdrop that scores of developing countries have recently joined the comity of developed nations using soft power for image projection.

Product-related National Image

Before delving into the nation branding practices, it seems prudent to assimilate the impact of product-related national image towards the global standing of nations. National image or country image has been an important subject discussed in a variety of communication disciplines.¹² Countries are famous globally for different reasons. The US is known for the state of art

⁸ M. Abrudan and M. Mucundorfeanu, "Brand and Nation-branding in the Case of Romania," *Journal of Media Research* 5, 89-100.

⁹ N. Papadopoulos and L. Heslop, "Country Equity and Country Branding: Problems and Prospects," *Journal of Brand Management* 9, no. 4-5 (2002): 294-314.

¹⁰ Michael Kuncik, "Images of Nations and International Public Relations," Mahweh. N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 46.

¹¹ Ingrid M. Martin and Sevin Eroglu, "Measuring a Multidimensional Construct: Country Image," *Journal of Business Research* 28, no. 3 (1993): 193, <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eee/jbrese/v28y1993i3p191-210.html>

¹² C. A. Luther, "National Identities, Structure and Press Images of Nations: The Case of Japan and the United States," *Mass Communication and Society* (2002): 57-85.

cyber technology, aircrafts, spacecraft, optical technology, medical technology and related equipment. China is famous for its low-cost manufacturing capability, connectivity infrastructure projects and abundant provision of the Chinese products in the remotest parts of the world. The UK dominates the European Continent as the financial leader and London being the hub of commercial initiatives. Russia and Gulf states excel in the petrochemicals industry, often leveraging their hydrocarbon riches to derive politico-economic mileage. Japan is popular for its cutting-edge computer technology, automotive industry and electrical appliances. Germany is known for its vehicles, machinery, electrical equipment, medicines and for the provision of apt business conditions to world entrepreneurs. In the same context, South Korea is known for its cellular phones and electrical machinery; Switzerland for the banking industry and tourist attractions; Pakistan for textiles, sports goods and edible items; India for cheap human resource and IT potential and South Africa for its diamond industry. The expertise of a nation in a peculiar product range also increases the country's exports of that product. Suits and shoes from Italy; perfumes from France; watches and chocolates from Switzerland; crystal ware from the Czech Republic; rice, mangoes and textiles from Pakistan and the construction consultants of Turkey can be cited as few examples.

Sometimes a country's name adds credibility to the value of the product. The economic turnaround of Japan is a brilliant success story of modern times. There was a time, when "Made in Japan" carried a negative connotation for most of the consumers as the Western countries considered the Japanese products to be cheap, worthless and second-rate commodities. However, with the turn of the tide, the Japanese products are now regarded as the outcome of the most up-to-date technology, highest quality, style prowess and competitive pricing. Images of countries only ever change for two reasons: either because the country changes or because it does something to its people.¹³ The manufacturers of the countries that have developed strong and recognised associations of trust, quality and integrity globally enjoy the perks. In a globalised world, such an affinity is an added advantage. This edge is akin to a product being tagged to its parent brand. The increased trial that it experiences just because of the parent brand name support puts it way ahead in relation to a new product with no prior associations.

¹³ Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 10.

It is a matter of common observation that Coke remains synonymous to the US; pizza to Italy; perfumeries to France; skis to Slovenia; dairy products to Australia and New Zealand and vodka to Russia. People might buy the Indian accounting software, Pakistani fabric or Swiss watches but may not be comfortable purchasing the Indian wine, the Turkish cell phones or the Iranian computers. Having said this, it might not always be true because if there is anything more permanent or constant in marketing that is 'change.' Attitudes can and do change very quickly.¹⁴ Consumer behaviour predictions have more often proved to be wrong. The success of marketing efforts often occurs as a consequence of an obstinate and resilient marketer that does not solely rely on the findings of consumer research. One needs to understand that nations have to continually strive for favourable attention of the audience; once this battle is won; political advantage and economic dividends can be reaped.

Popular brands are used strategically by a nation's decision-making authorities for enhancing its image worldwide. Leverage for a brand to evolve at its own is somewhat limiting due to this growing influence. It is no longer a question of 'to brand or not to brand' for a state's authorities, but rather a decision of doing the branding or going bust.¹⁵ It is the buyers' not the sellers' opinion which matters. In other words, a country should be selling what the 'buyers' – tourists and consumers abroad – are interested in paying for, rather than what a 'seller' – a country, its politicians and population at large – decides to offer or sell. Ad hoc brand campaigns, rarely if ever, bring expected 'dividends.' To be effective, image-formation not only needs to be constantly managed but also rely on time-tested marketing techniques.¹⁶

Nation Brand and Its Image

A nation brand is the attribute which is associated with a country that affects the brand image of the country. Although there is some contentiousness over treating a country as a brand, evidence shows that employing business

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Van Ham Maarten, *Job Access, Workplace Mobility, and Occupational Achievement* (The Netherlands: Eburon Publishers, 2002).

¹⁶ Ausra Park, "Selling a Small State to the World: Lithuania's Struggle in Building its National Image," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 5, no. 1 (February, 2009): 67-84.

branding strategies can significantly enhance a country's brand image.¹⁷ The enhancement of a nation's image benefits many countries outside their borders for the export of its products and attracting tourists from other countries.¹⁸ The process of branding a country is somewhat akin to branding a business, which is either implemented by marketing or advertising staff of a company or by the responsible authorities to communicate views on governance and commerce, similar techniques can be utilised for image projection. In both cases, the overarching belief remains the same, stating that people can be influenced in similar ways. A healthy brand is beneficial for a country in many ways. For example, tourism or destination branding¹⁹ has been greatly augmented by healthy nation brands. Despite being the brands themselves, nation brands offer extrinsic clues about the product evaluations.

Nations can be viewed as brands that encompass multiple dimensions in their role as producers, exporters, investment locations and migration or tourism destinations.²⁰ However, the differences between a nation and the brand need to be carefully studied. By no means can a nation be termed as a product. A nation brand exhibits a wide range of affiliations to the place; natural resources; people; history; language; social institutions; political and economic systems; icons and images. People may hold preconceived notions or buzzwords about a nation, linking its products and services to its values and cultural beliefs, hence, turning the nation brand personality into a nation stereotype.

Nation Branding in Practice

Nation branding is a process by which a nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance

¹⁷ J. G. Klein, "Us Versus Them, or Us Versus Everyone? Delineating Consumer Aversion to Foreign Goods," *Journal of International Business Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 345-363.

¹⁸ I. A. Kleppe, N. M. Iversen and I. G. Stensaker, "Country Images in Marketing Strategies: Conceptual Issues and an Empirical Asian Illustration," *Journal of Brand Management* 10, no. 1(2002): 61.

¹⁹ N. Caldwell and J. R. Freire, "The Differences between Branding a Country, a Region and a City: Applying the Brand Box Model," *Journal of Brand Management* 12, no. 1, 50-61.

²⁰ J. Rojas-Méndez, "The Nation Brand Molecule," *The Journal of Product and Brand Management* 22, no. 7 (2013): 462-472.

the country's reputation among a target audience.²¹ Out of these tiers, nation's image management is the most crucial one as it is directly related to assisting the people to overcome their disbelief about the use of nation branding. Simultaneously, it clarifies what can be branded and what cannot. To advance nation image management, it seems important to ascertain how the country's image is constructed and associated with the product evaluation. By employing soft power tools intelligently, the projection of national brands can improve the perception of national identity. Nation branding comprises many levels that include national identity, national image, nation's soft power, nation's competitiveness, umbrella brands and management of visual symbols.²² Despite varied implications of the principles and practice of nation branding, embedding the national identity in brand campaigns encompasses the consumers' understanding as national citizens and global subjects. Nation branding is the art of applying the branding and marketing communication techniques to promote nation's image.²³

Arguably, one of the main goals of public diplomacy is to cultivate and communicate a certain image or reputation of a nation-state to the international audience. The same applies to nation branding, as well. Nation branding represents the desire of the states to persuade people to pay attention to their particular nation-state, its achievements and product qualities. Theoretical consensus on nation branding is rare. Authors, such as Anholt, believe that nation branding is an indispensable phenomenon in the globalised world.²⁴ Anholt further argues that nations must compete for visibility in an increasingly crowded and globalised environment. His critics like Aronczyk, however, are of the view that nation branding is a version of soft nationalism and remains a process that authorities continue to buy into.²⁵ Whilst nation branding is becoming an international phenomenon, it is a practice that retains the capacity to illuminate the more salient narratives

²¹ T. Fang, "Asian Management Research Needs More Self-Confidence: Reflection on Hofstede (2007) and Beyond," *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 27, no. 1 (2010): 155-170.

²² Y. Fan, "Soft Power: Power of Attraction or Confusion?," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4, no. 2 (2008): 147-158.

²³ Ying Fan, "Branding the Nation — What is being Branded?," *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 12, no.1(2006): 5-14.

²⁴ Anholt, "Competitive Identity," 10.

²⁵ Melissa Aronczyk, "How to Do Things with Brands: Uses of National Identity," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, (2009): 291-296.

of nation-building and, in some cases, reflects nationalist rhetoric of politicians.²⁶ If a country wishes to increase its credibility, it needs to make itself known amongst other nations. Nation branding does the trick by stimulating investment inflows and attracting tourists and boosting the exports.²⁷ Unlike products, nations are complex entities. Therefore, nation branding, at times, presents them an extremely simplified object to improve the marketability of a state. The critics raise questions on viability and desirability of branding something as complicated as national identity, which at the same time can be used as a tool for doctoring histories, memories and rituals, which underpin and encapsulate a nation's overall image.²⁸

Azerbaijan “The Land of Fire”

Despite the challenges it confronts, Azerbaijan emerges as a stable and safe Muslim country in the South Caucasian region. It is blessed with a geo-strategic location, sizeable hydrocarbon riches and a fast-growing economy. Azerbaijan lies at the crossroads of Southwest Asia and Southeast Europe. A balanced interplay of geo-strategic location and available energy resources makes the country, a key player in the regional matrix. The esthetical traces of the Ottoman, Russian and Prussian empires have transformed the Azerbaijan's historical and cultural legacy into a highly affluent heritage. It is a secular country with a pluralistic society, enriched with the commendable spirit of co-existence. Safe and secure domestic environment coupled with stable political dispensation makes Azerbaijan a land of peace in the middle of a burning region. Country's economy is heavily contingent upon the oil revenues. The current leadership is, however, trying to diversify the economy in other sectors, as well. While appreciable fiscal space and peaceful domestic environment help attract foreign direct investment, the country's mesmerising beauty and traditional hospitality turns it into an ideal tourist destination. With the help of persuasive nation branding initiatives, the efforts are being made to internationally project the 'Brand Azerbaijan.' It has been done alongside

²⁶ Paul Jordan, “Nation Branding: A Tool for Nationalism?,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 45, no. 3 (September, 2014): 283–303.

²⁷ Simon Anholt, *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can Help the Developing World* (Oxford, Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann Linacre House, Jordan Hill, 2003).

²⁸ Jordan, “Nation Branding.”

introducing broad financial reforms, diversifying economy, liberalising of trade authorities, simplifying visa procedures and maintaining the state patronage of indigenous industrial production work.

Azerbaijan follows a relatively independent foreign policy. At times, this act of balancing between the regional obligations and the global compulsions becomes a slippery slope. Azerbaijan, however, exercises a careful balance in its relations with the global, regional and Islamic powers. It continues to maintain good relations with Russia, the US, Iran, Israel, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Europe, China, trans-Caspian Central Asian States and other countries. The unresolved conflict of Nagorno Karabakh and the liberation of 20 per cent Azerbaijani lands from the Armenian occupation are the cornerstones of foreign and defence policy of Azerbaijan. It celebrated 2016, as the “Year of Multiculturalism²⁹” and 2017, as the Year of Islamic Solidarity.³⁰

Utilising its geo-strategic location, Azerbaijan provides a safe conduit for the transportation of energy riches from the Caspian Sea to Europe, without having to pass through Russia or Iran. This geographical aspect helps the EU to secure and diversify its energy supplies from the East while improving the diversity and security of energy supply from its East. Considering its terrestrial proximity, cultural heritage, historical and ethnic linkages, regional integration, human rights conditions, legal or administrative traditions and gender equality, Azerbaijan stands out as a nation more of Eurasian nature than the Central Asian.

In 1994, Azerbaijan signed the “Contract of Century”³¹ that laid the foundations of existing economy of Azerbaijan. Exactly after 20 years in 2014, another landmark project, the ‘Southern Gas Corridor,’³² was launched by Azerbaijan, which ushered into a new era of economic prosperity and development of the country. Like all oil-producing countries,

²⁹ “Azerbaijan Declares 2016 Year of Multiculturalism,” *Azer News*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.azernews.az/nation/91533.html>

³⁰ “Speech at the 13th Summit of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO),” <http://en.president.az/articles/23020> -

³¹ “Contract of the Century,” <http://en.president.az/azerbaijan/contract> -

³² “The Southern Gas Corridor,” BP Azerbaijan, http://www.bp.com/en_az/caspian/operationsprojects/Shahdeniz/SouthernCorridor.html

Azerbaijan remains vulnerable to ‘Oil Curse or Dutch Disease.’³³ Due to heavy reliance on petro-dollars, the focus was initially placed on the oil industry while others were neglected. Consequently, non-oil sector growth does not correspond with the petrochemical industry. In a period of low oil prices, such a non-diversified economy gets roughly exposed. To offset this disadvantage, recently, the Azerbaijani authorities have started focusing on the growth of non-oil sectors. Initiation of broad-based economic reforms, the abolition of monopolised trade authorities and increased emphasis on socio-economic development are worth mentioning measure.

The authorities seem committed towards macroeconomic stability besides controlling inflation or unemployment. According to President Ilham Aliyev’s speech at Davos during the World Economic Forum-2016, “Azerbaijani economy is maintaining healthy growth rate. Over the past 10 years, the country’s economy has grown by 300 per cent. Poverty and unemployment decline have reduced sharply, currently staying at 5 per cent each. The growth of non-oil industry sector is at 8.4 per cent. Azerbaijan has been ranked as the 40th in competitiveness and the first in the CIS region during 2016, by the World Economic Forum.”³⁴ An export-oriented economic model equipped with modernisation of oil and gas industry; diversification of non-oil sectors; expanded use of renewable energy resources; development of the agrarian sector; strengthening of food security; boosting up of trade and services and composite measures to enhance foreign direct investment are elucidated as the priority areas of the ruling authorities.

Azerbaijan’s Rationale for Nation Branding

The perception of Azerbaijan negatively changes as the geographical distance widens. The Western European and the American citizens are not as well informed about Azerbaijan, as they are about Russia, Turkey, Iran or Georgia. To solicit global recognition, Azerbaijan has embarked upon an ambitious journey to prove international credentials and improve its global acceptability. A conscious effort has been undertaken to project Azerbaijan

³³ Dutch disease is the apparent causal relationship between the increase in the economic development of a specific sector (for example natural resources) and a decline in other sectors (like the manufacturing sector or agriculture).

³⁴ “The Future of Azerbaijan’s Economy,” World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/azerbaijan>

as the economic trailblazer in the CIS region. György Szondi argues that nation branding can help a transitional states distance themselves from the previous political system, such as the Communist Rule in the Azerbaijan's context, as well as help portray the country as a modern state and eligible member of a new world system, positioning the country as a central rather than the peripheral state.³⁵

Due to the available scope and ever-growing awareness about nation branding, Azerbaijan offers the best model as a secular, tolerant, forward-looking and an economically prosperous Muslim state that has regional as well as global aspirations. Azerbaijan regularly hosts mega events of international importance in Baku in order to maintain the country on the radars of regional, European and Islamic countries. The frequency of these events has particularly increased during the last five years:

- i. The Eurovision International Song Contest-2012.
- ii. The first and second Azerbaijan Defence Exhibitions (ADEX) in 2014 and 2016 respectively.
- iii. The Inaugural European Games-2015.
- iv. International Chess Olympiad-2016.
- v. The European Grand Prix Formula One Racing Round-2016.
- vi. The Seventh Forum of United Nations Alliance of Civilisation Forum (UNAOC) – 2016.

In 2017, hosting of the second round of European Grand Prix Formula 1 car race and the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games are some other international events held in Azerbaijan. The surge in tourism experienced during 2016 and 2017, can partly be attributed to the befitting conduct of above mentioned mega events. In pursuance of its nation branding objective, the authorities of Azerbaijan have launched number of initiatives like “Amazing Azerbaijan,” “Azerbaijan – The Land of Fire” and “Made in Azerbaijan” etc. Endowed with mesmerising natural beauty along with a vibrant economy and the elements of good governance, Azerbaijan is being successfully promoted as a brand across the globe. The states authorities aspire to support ‘Brand Azerbaijan’ initiatives through generous funding and state patronage.

³⁵ György Szondi, “Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences,” *Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, November 2008, 42.

Evolution of Azerbaijan's Nation Brands

As discussed earlier, despite favourable geography, efficient economy and secure domestic milieu, Azerbaijan does not have an active international visibility. The Government of Azerbaijan and the relevant authorities, therefore, have embarked upon a well meditated nation branding campaign to create a distinct national image of the post-Soviet state. The nation branding campaign also highlights unique history, culture, folklore, traditions, social and moral values, natural beauty and human capital of Azerbaijan to the world.

Azerbaijan has significant aspirations for international recognition that it wishes to manifest through nation branding efforts. Currently, insufficient national brands are available to support the ambitions. However, this deficiency is being made up with improved tourism conditions, soft power application and economic reforms. With the ongoing reforms and diversification of the economy, the situation is likely to improve. When a local industry is developed further, Azerbaijan will be able to produce products with a competitive advantage. Through apt nation branding techniques, sustainable competitive advantages can be accrued in the regional and global markets, resulting in further enhancing the Azerbaijani identity. At the moment, Azerbaijan is known for its tea, pomegranates, apples, carpets, wine, silk scarves, Mugam music, traditional dresses, customary jewellery and achievements in sports particularly Athletics. This tiny nation ranked 39th in Summer Olympics of 2016 and secured a total of 16 medals.

The State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) is one of the top Azerbaijani brands, whose expertise in the petrochemical industry remains laudable. The SOCAR is carrying Azerbaijani flag to the region and beyond with commitment and pride. This state oil giant is attempting to promote the Azerbaijani image in the UK, Russia, Turkey, Georgia and Central Asia in a praiseworthy manner. It is estimated that the "SOCAR intends [to] becoming the largest foreign investor in Turkey with an investment volume worth US\$17 billion by 2018."³⁶ Another example is of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation that holds cultural events internationally

³⁶ "SOCAR Announces Plans to Invest in Turkey," United States-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce, <http://www.usacc.org/news-a-publications/investment-news/688-socar-announces-plans-to-invest-in-turkey.html>

promoting the Azerbaijani image. Its contributions in terms of philanthropy and social welfare help cast a noble image of the country, well beyond the Azerbaijani frontiers. The Asan Khidmet (ASAN) is yet another signature brand of Azerbaijan providing superior quality and uniform communal services. The nine ministries simultaneously work under the same roof to afford one window facility to all the Azerbaijani citizens. The national flag carrier, the Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL) is another proud national brand of Azerbaijan. In the private sector, mega entrepreneurs such as the Pasha Group, Gilan Group and Azersun contribute in the promotion of the Azerbaijani brands, both inland and abroad. Recently, tourism has emerged as a distinction of Azerbaijan. The picturesque landscapes of north eastern regions of Azerbaijan and its capital city Baku, also known as the City of Winds, generate healthy prospects for the destination branding.

“Made in Azerbaijan” Campaign

The recently initiated “Made in Azerbaijan” campaign is a conscious attempt to convey a certain narrative of Azerbaijan to the international community and ensures good perception management. In a way, nation branding is being used as a tool for projecting soft nationalism. As the nation’s hierarchy realises the significance of soft image projection, its earnest urge to promote national brands, gaining global recognition and attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) remains evident. Projecting Azerbaijan’s business interests internationally, the initiative is aimed at achieving greater FDI, expand the tourist base and broaden the scope of Azerbaijan’s exports to the world markets. Such initiatives reflect an attractive face of Azerbaijan’s nationalism to the global audience. Posters featuring the “Welcome to Azerbaijan — The Land of Fire” logo and “Discover Azerbaijan,” “Lights out, Formula One Finally Races in Baku” and “Made in Azerbaijan” appear on billboards abroad and at the national airports quite often.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan draws strengths from its geographical location, demographic conditions, natural resources and financial capacity. An ever-growing quest for global recognition formulates a basis for the nation branding endeavours. Notwithstanding this, a relatively smaller size of the population, modest industrial wherewithal, over dependence on petro-

dollars and less familiarity with English and the other European languages may serve as impediments to nation branding. The long-standing unresolved issue of Nagorno Karabakh continues to be the most dangerous security threat that Azerbaijan confronts since its independence. Due to this issue, the country is compelled to divert huge sums from its economy towards defence expenditure, at times, at the cost of industrial or social development. The vulnerability of its economy to oil glut also calls for its immediate diversification, particularly in the non-oil sectors. However, the timely realisation of vulnerabilities and inefficiencies at the authorities' level resulted in a number of initiatives to improve the economic and industrial development. Given the development priorities of current authorities, nation's resolve for the global recognition, improved oil prices and the consequent impact on national economy, more opportunities can be found in the domain of nation branding to project Azerbaijan as a peaceful, prosperous and vibrant nation.

This study establishes that nation branding can help project the desired national image of a nation by using soft power tools. Such endeavours not only project a country's soft image but foster a deeper sense of nationalism amongst its masses, both inland and abroad. Nation branding can also help achieve greater FDI, expanding tourist base and broader scope of exports to world markets. It is not only practiced by developed nations, as developing and underdeveloped nations equally attempt to build and manage their desired soft images. Azerbaijan is a fast developing Muslim nation in the South Caucasus region that has joined the bandwagon and embarked upon a journey to improve its international credentials. Efforts are being put into projecting a soft image of Azerbaijan as a tolerant and multicultural society, which is an economic trailblazer in the Eurasian region. The recently initiated "Made in Azerbaijan" campaign manifests the Azerbaijani desire for the global recognition. It is an attempt to reflect a kindlier face of the Azerbaijani nationalism to the global audience.