

Soft Power in Russian Foreign Policy toward Azerbaijan

Jeanne L. Wilson

Abstract: *This article examines Russian attempts to project a positive image in Azerbaijan. The components of Russian soft power policy are examined. This includes a focus on the promotion of the Russian language, the recruitment of Azerbaijanis to study in Russian institutes of higher education, the activities of Rossotrudnichestvo, efforts to establish Russian funded civil society organizations, attempts to mobilize the Azerbaijani diaspora, and the use of the Russian media. Soft power policy is contrasted with the construct of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) and Eurasianism as alternative methods of attraction. I argue that Russian soft power strategy in Azerbaijan draws upon the Soviet legacy with some updating in the realm of the media.*

Introduction

Russia is generally considered to have had a fraught relationship with the former republics of the Soviet Union and the Russian relationship with Azerbaijan is no exception to this observation. Since the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991, Russia has sought through a variety of hard power tactics to exercise influence and exert control over the Azerbaijani state. These efforts have not been very successful and Azerbaijan is known for its independent foreign policy and its pragmatic strategy of balancing between Russia and the West. More recently in the 2000s, the Kremlin discovered—or to be more accurate rediscovered—the concept of soft power. A key goal has been to enhance the attractiveness of Russia in the post-Soviet space. This endeavor has also faced numerous challenges.