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Tourism as a Tool for Strengthening the “Soft Power” of Azerbaijan

Abstract

The relevance of this topic is due to the fact that tourism today is a powerful and effective tool of “soft power” in Azerbaijan. The current state, principles and main directions of state policy in the field of tourism are considered. The importance of an integrated approach in the field of tourism research is emphasized. Scientific novelty lies in the analysis of new aspects and trends in tourism development, the search for new solutions and approaches to improving the tourist experience, as well as the application of new methods and technologies for the analysis and management of the tourism industry. The article provides recommendations for the development of tourism in Azerbaijan, which contributes to the strengthening of “soft power”.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, tourism, soft power, infrastructure, investment

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Turizm Azərbaycanın “yumşaq güc”ünü gücləndirmək aləti kimi

Xülasə

Bu mövzunun aktuallığı onunla bağlıdır ki, bu gün turizm Azərbaycanda “yumşaq güc”ün güclü və effektiv vasitəsidir. Turizm sahəsində dövlət siyasətinin mövcud vəziyyəti, prinsipləri və əsas istiqamətləri nəzərdən keçirilir. Turizm tədqiqatları sahəsində kompleks yanaşmanın önəmi vurğulanır. Elmi yenilik turizmin inkişafının yeni aspektləri və tendensiylərinin təhlili, turizm təcrübəsinin təkmilləşdirilməsi üçün yeni həll yolları və yanaşmaların axtarışı, habelə turizm sənayesinin təhlili və idarə edilməsi üçün yeni metod və texnologiyaların tətbiqi ilə bağlıdır. Məqalədə Azərbaycanda “yumşaq güc”ün güclənməsinə töhfə verən turizmin inkişafı üçün tövsiyələr verilir.

Açar sözlər: Azərbaycan, turizm, yumşaq güc, infrastruktur, investisiya

Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamically developing industries in the modern world. Representing an effective tool for shaping a positive country image and strengthening international influence, tourism plays a crucial role in the context of soft power. It contributes to cultural exchange, the formation and strengthening of a country's image, economic development, the expansion of international ties and cooperation. Specific efforts and investments in tourism development can enhance a country's influence and promote its interests on the international stage (Casado, Pastrana, & Saavedra, 2023, pp. 66-80).

Research

Tourism plays a crucial role in shaping the image and reputation of a country on the global stage. For Azerbaijan, a nation with a rich cultural heritage and breathtaking natural beauty, tourism has emerged as a powerful tool for boosting its soft power and enhancing its influence in the international arena.

Moreover, tourism serves as a platform for intercultural dialogue and exchange, fostering greater understanding and appreciation between Azerbaijan and other nations. As tourists visit Azerbaijan, they engage with the local communities, interact with the locals, and gain insights into the country's customs and traditions. This creates opportunities for cultural diplomacy and helps to build bridges between different nations. Additionally, through cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions, Azerbaijan promotes its diverse cultural heritage to an international audience, reinforcing its soft power and fostering a positive perception of the country. In modern diplomacy, tourism serves as a powerful tool through which a state can effectively showcase itself to the world.

Azerbaijan possesses tremendous tourism potential due to its geographical location, beautiful and diverse nature, rich historical and cultural heritage, which creates broad opportunities for the development of various types of tourism.

Currently, the tourism industry in the country is one of the most sought-after and rapidly developing sectors of the economy. This sector not only serves as a source of revenue for the state but also as a means to increase national prestige and enhance the country's reputation on the international stage.

The development of tourism requires not only natural resources but also an effective tourism policy. The development of tourism in Azerbaijan, becoming an integral part of state policy, is considered as an important factor for economic progress and prosperity. The National Leader Heydar Aliyev, after coming to power in 1993 in response to the people's demands, correctly assessed this potential and implemented a series of comprehensive measures to overcome the decline and develop tourism, which required significant investments. As a result of the Great Leader's socio-economic policy strategy, based on a solid foundation and year-to-year improvement in Azerbaijan's financial capabilities, successful reforms in the tourism sector became possible (Turizm).

In Azerbaijan, the development of tourism is supported by a legislative framework that includes a series of laws and regulations aimed at stimulating and regulating tourist activities. One of the key steps in developing the tourism management system is the establishment of a specialized and competent authority responsible for coordinating and developing the tourism industry. This authority is the State Tourism Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (V Azerbaydzhane sozdayetsya Gosagentstvo po razvitiyu turizma).

The agency is responsible for shaping and implementing a unified state policy in the field of tourism. It carries out normative functions, state regulation, control, and coordination in the respective industry, with the aim of tourism development. The agency also conducts coordinated activities with other government agencies, enterprises, and organizations, as well as with individuals and legal entities, including international and non-governmental organizations. It organizes the targeted use of protected areas to ensure their preservation, as well as protects and promotes national culinary traditions (Gosudarstvennoye agentstvo po turizmu Azerbaydzhanskoy Respubliki).

The Tourist Information System (Tourist Register) has been launched in Azerbaijan. The main goal of the system is to increase the level of competitiveness of the tourism sector, transmit accurate and reliable information, promote the quality of tourism services provided in the country, support the process of branding and corporate development of business entities (V Azerbaydzhane zapushchen Turisticheskiy reyestr).

The Azerbaijan Tourism Board was created to support and develop the country's tourism industry as part of the State Tourism Agency of the Azerbaijan Republic. Its main goal is to support the development of Azerbaijan's tourism industry and promote the country's rich ancient cultural heritage among guests.

One of the key principles of tourism policy is to focus on the needs of tourists. Azerbaijan strives to provide tourists with high-quality service and meet the needs of different categories of tourists. The tourism infrastructure is being developed, new routes for visitation are being created, cultural and natural heritage sites are being improved, architectural monuments are being restored, service quality is being enhanced, and new hotels, catering, and service facilities are being built.

Stimulating investments in tourism. The second principle of Azerbaijan's tourism policy is to stimulate investments in tourism. The government creates favorable conditions to attract investments in the tourism sector, which allows for the strengthening of infrastructure development and the enhancement of the quality of tourist services to meet the growing needs of tourists. Additionally, investments in tourism can have a positive impact on the development of other sectors of the economy, such as construction, transportation, etc. When developing a management system for investment processes in the tourism industry, priority should be given to ensuring the efficiency of investment inflows (Olimovich, 2020, pp. 7-8).

The investment attractiveness of territories acts as a determining factor in selecting investment objects. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the investment potential of a region, programs are developed with the aim of increasing its attractiveness for investors.

Development of technology. The third principle of Azerbaijan's tourism policy is the development of technology in tourism. This includes the use of modern technologies to enhance hotel services, improve marketing efficiency, and promote tourism services, as well as the creation of convenient and accessible online platforms for travel planning and booking. Active efforts are made to promote and market Azerbaijan as a tourist destination, including international campaigns, participation in exhibitions and forums.

Ensuring Tourist Safety. The fourth principle of Azerbaijan's tourism policy is ensuring the safety of tourists. The government strives to create a secure and stable environment for tourists.

The diversity of the tourism product: the tourism potential of the Republic is enormous. It is located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, which attracts tourists to our country. Out of the 11 existing climate zones on the planet, Azerbaijan encompasses 9, ranging from subtropics to high-mountain alpine meadows. Its cultural heritage, ancient historical and architectural monuments, natural climatic conditions, rich fauna and flora, abundance of mineral springs, diversity of mud volcanoes, segments of sun and beach in the coastal areas of the country - all contribute to the development of various types of tourism in Azerbaijan (Akhundova, 2022, pp. 725-736).

Azerbaijan strives to attract different categories of tourists by offering a wide range of tourism types. This can include cultural tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, gastronomic tourism, wellness tourism, beach tourism, and other forms. It is worthwhile to promote gastronomic projects and routes under a distinct brand, as this is currently a very promising trend.

However, it should not be assumed that an attractive tourism image of a country will simply form itself based on existing attractions and information. In order to effectively compete in the tourism sector and achieve the desired positioning in target markets, tourism destinations must have the ability to develop and implement strategies and marketing initiatives.

Azerbaijan needs to develop a long-term tourism development strategy that will identify priority areas, goals, and objectives. This will allow for resource optimization, goal-setting, and delineation of paths to success. The strategy should take into account Azerbaijan's strengths in the tourism industry, such as its rich cultural heritage, diverse climate, and nature, and effectively utilize them to attract tourists.

Recommendations for improving tourism policy in Azerbaijan:

The first step to improve tourism policy in Azerbaijan is further development of high-quality tourism infrastructure. This requires continued investment in hotels, restaurants, and other facilities that attract tourists. Furthermore, it is necessary to improve the technical aspects of the hotel business to enhance service efficiency and convenience. Providing services that offer a good price-quality ratio is also crucial.

The diversity of transportation services is crucial in creating a favorable environment for tourism development. The establishment of an effective tourism transport complex, connecting key tourist destinations in the country into a unified network, plays an important role in the development of tourism and providing comfortable and convenient conditions for tourists' movement. An efficient tourism transport complex makes tourist sites more accessible to visitors. To attract more tourists, it is important to have reliable and convenient transportation routes, allowing tourists to easily travel and explore various tourist destinations.

Development of hotel infrastructure: investing in hotel infrastructure, including the construction of new hotels and reconstruction of old ones. The development of a wide range of hotel services and accommodation of different categories - from economical to luxury - will attract different categories of tourists. The hotel is the “core” of the tourist infrastructure, which accumulates the bulk of visitors coming for educational, entertainment, business and other purposes (Ovcharov, 2013, s. 253). From transport and accommodation to food and entertainment, every element of tourism must meet the most diverse needs of customers.

The second important aspect for tourism development is often the strengthening of marketing and promotion of the tourism industry. The government should stimulate advertising activities, attract tour operators and media to promote tourism routes. Furthermore, it is essential to create high-quality and user-friendly online platforms for selling tourism services and making travel bookings. Utilizing computer systems, web platforms, online booking, and other technologies allows for the automation of reservation processes, visitor flow management, marketing, and improving service quality. Conducting marketing campaigns, participating in international exhibitions and festivals helps to attract the attention of foreign tourists and investors.

Creating a well-planned marketing strategy and conducting market research will contribute to attracting the target audience of tourists to Azerbaijan. Analyzing trends, preferences, and needs of tourists will allow for the development of products and services, as well as identifying target markets for promotion and sales.

The entertainment industry is an integral part of tourism and has a significant impact on the attractiveness and competitiveness of a tourist destination. It complements other aspects of tourism, such as natural and cultural attractions, by offering a variety of options and creating unforgettable experiences for tourists. The entertainment industry serves as a strong appealing factor for tourists of different categories.

Favorable business environment: creating convenient conditions for the development of tourism enterprises and investments, reducing bureaucratic burdens, and simplifying procedures for opening and managing tourism businesses. Small and medium-sized businesses play an important role in tourism development. They are the driving force in the tourism sector, contributing to job creation, economic growth, and the diversification of the tourism industry.

Small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector play a crucial role in the development of local communities. They can contribute to the preservation and promotion of local culture, traditions, and crafts through the provision of services and products that reflect local characteristics. Small and medium-sized businesses contribute to tourism development in remote and less developed areas, helping to address imbalances in economic development and reduce regional disparities. Small and medium-sized businesses have a more flexible structure and the ability to quickly adapt to market changes. Moreover, they often have direct contact with tourists, enabling a more personalized approach and quality service.

Collaboration with other countries: developing tourism connections with other countries, including through the signing of mutual tourism agreements, to expand international cooperation and exchange experiences. Establishing partnership agreements and collaborating with popular tourism brands will help attract more tourists.

Stimulating domestic tourism: conducting campaigns to popularize domestic travel among local residents, providing incentives and discounts for domestic tourist trips.

Collaboration with travel agencies and tour operators: it is important to collaborate with travel agencies and tour operators to actively promote travel to your country. Offering special tourism packages, discounts, and other incentives can attract more tourists (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpușeanu, & Topor, 2019, pp. 654-669).

Simplifying the entry process: facilitating visa acquisition, providing visa privileges for tourists, and streamlining border procedures can create a more favorable and attractive environment for tourists, which can stimulate visitor flows.

Development of professional skills: training and equipping personnel in the tourism industry, including guides, translators, and hotel staff. Developing professional standards can help elevate service levels and improve the quality of the tourist experience.

Quality management: service quality is crucial in the tourism industry. Quality management technologies, including certification systems, customer feedback analysis, satisfaction assessment, and other tools, enable the improvement of service quality and enhance customer satisfaction (Foris, Popescu, & Foris, 2017, pp. 159-188).

Gastronomic tourism is becoming increasingly popular and appealing to travelers who want to explore new places with rich culinary heritage.

One of the key aspects of gastronomic diplomacy is the promotion of local products and dishes that reflect the national character and heritage of the country. This helps draw attention to the uniqueness and diversity of culinary achievements, generating interest in cultural traditions. Gastronomic diplomacy not only helps shape a positive country image but also contributes to the development of tourism and attracting investments. Unique dishes and products can become an impetus for visiting the country. "Food is the most important factor in human social, political, economic and cultural life. It forms the basis of international integration and globalization, it is both an ambassador of peace and culture, it is the easiest way to understand another culture and become imbued with its spirit" (Pavlovskaya, 2015, pp. 7-48).

Developing culinary routes that include visits to restaurants, culinary classes, and tastings can attract tourists and introduce them to authentic Azerbaijani dishes. Organizing gastronomic festivals dedicated to Azerbaijani cuisine can capture the attention of both locals and tourists.

Nature and cultural heritage conservation: actively preserving natural and cultural landmarks, developing eco-tourism programs, and protecting historical sites.

Enhancing safety: ensuring the safety of tourists by improving law enforcement systems and establishing an information center that provides up-to-date information on the country's safety.

Building a tourism community: creating associations and unions that contribute to the development of the tourism industry, exchange of experiences, and enhancement of professional skills among industry workers. Developing tourism in regions can be beneficial for all stakeholders, promoting economic growth, preserving cultural and natural heritage, improving the quality of life for local communities, and creating a regional tourism brand. With the appropriate infrastructure, tourism in Azerbaijan can become a full-fledged sector of the national economy, contributing to the country's socio-economic system and ensuring the viability of economic structures.

Tourism shapes the country's image based on the personal experiences of tourists, transforming it into an "emotional component of soft power." Tourism, as a tool of soft power, represents an effective and attractive component of foreign policy influence. This approach to defining tourism as a public diplomacy instrument aligns with the principles of political realism, which consider national interests as the main motive of a state's external activities (Yang, 2019, p. 21).

From the world practice, it is known that for sustainable tourism development, it is necessary for the government to provide legal, economic, and other conditions. It is known that without a national mechanism that ensures comprehensive planning, legal regulation, stimulation, management, etc., the measures taken for tourism development cannot yield expected results. Therefore, the government must take measures aimed at a state tourist policy that excludes spontaneous development of this industry.

To fully realize the tourism potential in Azerbaijan, attention should be given to the development of infrastructure and tourist services, ensuring the quality of services, creating convenient and safe conditions for travelers, developing marketing plans, and attracting a larger international audience. Tourism is a powerful tool for promoting soft power and strengthening interaction between nations and countries. Through tourism, a country can present its values, traditions, and achievements to the world. This can help shape an attractive image of the country, enhance its prestige, and strengthen its position in the political space. It is true that the development of the tourism industry should start with creating the overall image of the country.

Management technologies in the tourism system are an indispensable tool for optimizing processes, improving the quality and efficiency of the tourism industry. They include various tools, methods, and approaches used for planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling tourism activities.

Tourism is an industry that involves a wide range of sectors in the economy, such as the hotel business, restaurants, transportation, retail, and entertainment. Increasing demand for tourism services leads to job creation and improving the lives of local populations. Additional workers are needed in hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, transportation companies, and other related industries. This is especially important for small towns and rural areas where tourism can become a primary source of income and development.

Expanding the range of tourism services ensures employment not only in the sector itself but also in related sectors (trade, domestic services, food, transportation, communication, agriculture, manufacturing consumer goods, etc.). It should be noted that tourism, in modern development conditions, plays a role as a connecting link in providing employment.

Conclusion

The development of tourism management systems is a key factor in achieving success in the tourism industry. Implementing these recommendations will help Azerbaijan create a strong and efficient system capable of attracting more tourists, meeting their needs, and improving the country's economic situation. Tourism is a powerful factor in strengthening Azerbaijan's soft power. It helps preserve and develop the country's culture, stimulates economic development, and improves the country's image in the international community.

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