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PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: AZERBAIJAN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ACTIVITIES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

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Abstract
A significant portion of Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States and the Non-Aligned Movement coincided with the intense period of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, which caused serious socio-economic consequences on a global scale and turned into a major public health crisis, was addressed by Azerbaijan through preventive measures at the national level to keep the process under control and manage it from a unified center. At the same time, as the chairing country of international organizations, Azerbaijan also took global-level actions. In particular, the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement allowed Azerbaijan to play an active global role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the speed and scale of the spread of the disease required a global approach, Azerbaijan launched initiatives aimed at coordinating the activities of world countries and international organizations. It became a platform for global discussion and dialogue and promoted the strengthening of international cooperation and solidarity through its practical steps. Under the extraordinary conditions caused by the pandemic, Azerbaijan pursued an active diplomatic policy and continued to apply its soft power strategy. Reactive public diplomacy activities driven by reality came to the forefront and mostly covered the humanitarian field.

Keywords
Azerbaijan, pandemic, COVID-19, public health crisis, public diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The recognition of the new type of coronavirus disease - which was identified in the last days of 2019 in the city of Wuhan, China and had a high transmission rate - as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) signaled that the infection had already become unmanageable on a global scale and turned into a disaster for the world. Azerbaijan was among the countries that took timely and effective measures against the pandemic.

The disease, which lasted for approximately three years and kept the world in a tense state during that time, caused serious socio-economic consequences and also exerted significant pressure on healthcare systems. COVID-19, which placed an additional burden on healthcare institutions, also tested the governments' responses to emergency situations and their flexibility in decision-making.

This article examines Azerbaijan's public diplomacy activities during the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of its chairmanship of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (CCTS) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The

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aim is to explore the changes in public diplomacy activities during emergencies in the context of a public health crisis.

Measures against the coronavirus pandemic in Azerbaijan

The infectious disease, which was first recorded in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, rapidly spread to almost all countries within a short period of three months and turned into a global public health crisis causing international concern. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the rapid spread of the disease caused by the new type of coronavirus as a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020, named the disease COVID-19 in February and declared it a pandemic on March 11. The pandemic lasted for nearly three years and in May 2023, WHO announced the end of the pandemic status of the disease.

The first case of COVID-19 infection in Azerbaijan was recorded on February 28, 2020. The disease also created a new situation and challenges for Azerbaijan, becoming one of the most discussed and pressing issues due to the restrictions it imposed on people's daily lives. Responding swiftly to WHO's pandemic call and maintaining close contact with the organization, Azerbaijan took active steps both domestically and internationally. On February 27, 2020, in order to prevent the threat posed by the virus in the country, to carry out preventive and urgent measures in an operative manner and to ensure the protection of people's lives and health, an Operational Headquarters was established under the Cabinet of Ministers consisting of heads of relevant state bodies and institutions. From March 24 onwards, a special quarantine regime was declared in the country and a number of preventive measures were taken to bring the disease under control. As response measures to the crisis, strict quarantine regimes and various restrictions were applied, just like in most countries. Measures were also implemented to strengthen and increase the resilience of the healthcare system, as well as to support the economy, entrepreneurship, employment and social welfare (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020b). Alongside all this, it should also be noted that Azerbaijan joined the COVAX project (the centralized mechanism for the production and distribution of vaccines against COVID-19) in partnership with the WHO and began the vaccination process in January 2021, one month after Europe (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021b).

Azerbaijan's chairmanship of ınternational organizations during the pandemic

Azerbaijan chaired two international organizations during the intensive period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first of these was the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, also known as the Turkic Council and the second was the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, established among Azerbaijan, Turkiye, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through the Nakhchivan Agreement signed on October 3, 2009, in the city of Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan, was renamed the Organization of Turkic States during the 8th Summit held on November 2, 2021. Azerbaijan chaired the organization from 2019 to 2021 and handed over the chairmanship to Turkiye at the above-mentioned summit.

A significant part of Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, of which it became a full member in 2011, also coincided with the intense period of the

spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the second-largest political organization in the world after the United Nations General Assembly, the Non-Aligned Movement was established during the Cold War to prevent some countries from being drawn into confrontation between the two political-military poles. Although Azerbaijan's chairmanship was initially intended for a period of three years, it was extended by one more year with the unanimous decision of member states, thus covering the years 2019-2023. Azerbaijan handed over the chairmanship to Uganda in January 2024. During its chairmanship, Azerbaijan declared that it would be guided by the Bandung Principles. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that these principles - including respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, protection of mutual interests and promotion of cooperation - overlap with the fundamental principles of Azerbaijan's foreign policy (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2019).

Azerbaijan's global ınitiatives in the fight against the pandemic

It can be stated that Azerbaijan structured its chairmanship of both the Turkic Council and the Non-Aligned Movement in a way that adequately responded to the challenges of the pandemic and functioned effectively. During a highly complex period for the international relations system, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, made a number of important initiatives in his capacity as the chair of both international organizations to mobilize global efforts against the disease. The implementation of these initiatives laid the groundwork for turning the qualitatively new social and economic behavioral environment created by the pandemic, as well as numerous pressing challenges, into new opportunities for cooperation.

At the initiative of Azerbaijan, extraordinary summit meetings of the Turkic Council were held in April 2020 and of the Non-Aligned Movement in May 2020. The Extraordinary Summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States on the topic "Solidarity and Cooperation in the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic" was held via videoconference on April 10, 2020 and resulted in the adoption of the Baku Declaration of the Extraordinary Summit of the Turkic Council. This summit went down in history as the first international event dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of international organizations and also the first summit-level meeting of heads of state focused on the pandemic. At the summit, the parties were instructed to fully mobilize their scientific, innovative, technological and medical potential in the fight against the pandemic. Principles of cooperation in economic, social and humanitarian fields, the measures taken, the protection of safety and health, as well as steps to be taken for post-pandemic economic recovery, were discussed. To implement the decisions made by the heads of state and to coordinate efforts in combating the coronavirus pandemic, a series of videoconference meetings were held: on April 28 - a meeting of the health ministers of the Turkic Council, on April 30 - a meeting of ministers responsible for transport, on May 6 - a meeting of economy ministers and heads of customs administrations, on May 7 - a meeting of heads of state agencies responsible for migration (The Azerbaijan State News Agency, 2020). It is commendable that during Azerbaijan's chairmanship, new mechanisms of cooperation were established at the level of responsible ministers and heads of institutions in the above-mentioned fields among Turkic states and the Council expanded its membership. Uzbekistan became a full-fledged member of the Turkic Council and Turkmenistan acquired observer status.

The Summit Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement Contact Group dedicated to the fight against coronavirus was held via videoconference on May 4, 2020. As a practical outcome of the Summit on the theme "United Against COVID-19", a database covering the main humanitarian and medical needs of the member states of the Movement was created. The World Health Organization (WHO) referred to this database in providing support to Non-Aligned Movement member states during the pandemic. This, in turn, helped WHO to plan and forecast its assistance more effectively (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021a).

It is worth noting that during this summit, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, proposed the holding of a special session of the United Nations General Assembly at the level of heads of state and government dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020a). This historic and significant session, which demonstrated Azerbaijan's active participation in global processes, was held on December 3-4, 2020 (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020c).

It should be especially emphasized that resolutions of the United Nations regarding equal and universal access to vaccines and their fair distribution for all countries were adopted upon Azerbaijan's initiative during this period. On March 23, 2021, within the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council, a resolution titled "Ensuring equal, affordable, timely and universal access to COVID-19 vaccines" was co-sponsored by 137 countries. Another resolution on ensuring equal, fair, timely and universal access to COVID-19 vaccines for all countries was adopted at the UN General Assembly on December 16, 2021, with the support of 179 countries (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). These documents were proposed by Azerbaijan on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement as a response to the "vaccine nationalism" policy of developed countries and the unjust and indifferent approach toward developing countries, aiming to eliminate the growing inequality in vaccine access.

In addition, as an act of solidarity and to support the fight against coronavirus, Azerbaijan provided financial and humanitarian assistance to nearly 80 countries, either directly or through the World Health Organization and donated vaccines to five countries (President of the republic of Azerbaijan, 2025). Azerbaijan also made two voluntary financial contributions to the World Health Organization, totaling 10 million US dollars. It is also worth mentioning that the WHO named Azerbaijan as a model country in the fight against the pandemic (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020c).

One of the significant events of the Movement during Azerbaijan's chairmanship was the summit held in Baku in March 2023, dedicated to post-pandemic recovery. At this summit, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan announced two global calls to support post-pandemic recovery in Africa and in small island developing states and Azerbaijan became the first donor, allocating 1 million US dollars for both initiatives (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023).

During its chairmanship, Azerbaijan not only pursued a policy aimed at restoring the Movement's previous influence in the international relations system but also attached special importance to its institutional development. On Azerbaijan's initiative, the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network was established in 2021 and the Non-Aligned Movement Youth Organization in 2022. In 2023, the idea to establish a Non-Aligned Movement Women's Platform was also supported by member states (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023). Azerbaijan's chairmanship also contributed to sectoral cooperation within the Movement: meetings of ministers responsible for labour,

healthcare, education and information and communication technologies were held, along with the first meeting of think tanks.

The above-mentioned points allow us to argue that Azerbaijan demonstrated considerable global initiative in response to the challenges of the pandemic period, at a time when the international community was in a state of confusion over how to respond to COVID-19. This is because Azerbaijan not only fought the virus at the national level, but also made a significant contribution to international cooperation and coordination to increase the effectiveness of this fight. Through an active policy, Azerbaijan convened virtual summits of the Turkic Council and the Non-Aligned Movement and proposed the convening of a Special Session of the UN General Assembly on the COVID-19 pandemic, thus demonstrating that replacing a policy of self-isolation with cooperation and solidarity could lead to more effective outcomes. This Special Session of the UN holds historical significance, as only 31 special sessions have been held in the history of the organization and only three of them were convened at the request of member states. On the other hand, despite the pandemic lasting for nearly a year, the UN - the world's largest international organization - had not held a large-scale event to bring the world's states together in response to COVID-19. During this period, the UN remained a passive observer, not playing an active role in the pandemic process. The world's leading and developed countries remained silent, focusing instead on protecting their own security and combating the virus within their own borders. However, the pandemic did not threaten just individual countries - it posed a danger to the entire world and an effective outcome required a joint global response. In this context, Azerbaijan, through its initiatives and practical actions, took a central role in mobilizing global efforts to combat the pandemic. These initiatives, active diplomacy and practical efforts demonstrate that Azerbaijan continued its public diplomacy activities even during the pandemic, thereby contributing to enhancing the country's international visibility, appeal and diplomatic standing, as well as fostering social and cultural ties among nations, playing a bridge-building role in inter-civilizational relations.

Reactive and proactive approaches in public diplomacy activities

The concept of public diplomacy, a term of American origin, was first adopted as official policy in the United States and entered scientific discourse in the 1960s. During the Cold War period, the term was used to describe the propaganda and media activities of the United States. It is argued that the term, in its modern sense, was first used in 1965 by Edmund A. Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, in reference to the international flow of information and ideas (Dilanova, 2023).

Although various definitions of the concept of public diplomacy can be found in academic literature, it generally encompasses the activities of states that seek to gain strong influence in the international arena to ensure national interests. It is implemented using various technologies and methods by identifying points of contact with the international audience and focusing on short-, medium- and long-term goals. The process occurs in the form of efforts to influence unofficial international actors through the promotion of language, culture, historical heritage, sports, tourism, gastronomy, lifestyle, political values, implementation of humanitarian aid-oriented projects and programs or the use of media (Dilanova, 2023).

Although it does not entirely replace traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy supports and complements it. In addition to providing information about a country and

creating its positive international image, it also contributes to the establishment of friendly relations between peoples. Another distinctive feature is that it is addressed to both official and unofficial actors and is carried out through both formal and informal channels.

In public diplomacy activities, which primarily target citizens and peoples of foreign countries and require working with an international audience, there are two main models or approaches: reactive (hard) and proactive (flexible). Activities planned to be implemented in the short term are classified as reactive public diplomacy, while projects and programs focusing on long-term goals are examples of proactive public diplomacy (Sancar, 2012). Based on this, it can be stated that the purpose of the reactive approach in public diplomacy is to influence the thoughts and behaviors of the international community through information and propaganda. In this approach, newspapers, journals, radio, television, social media and various media events are used and political information efforts that enable faster results are carried out. Humanitarian projects and programs can also be included in this category. The purpose of reactive activities, which are used in sudden and unexpected crisis situations, is primarily to minimize damage in a short time. The reactive approach has a corrective nature and uses monologue speech in delivering the message to the other party. On the other hand, the proactive approach, which is based on mutual dialogue, has a preventive nature and is oriented toward long-term goals, aims not only to react to events but also to anticipate, guide and manage them. For this purpose, soft power tools such as language, culture, science, education, political values and investment are more frequently used.

Just like other newly independent states that emerged in the post-Soviet space in the 1990s, Azerbaijan, during its integration into the international system, chose the path of building a democratic society and a market economy as its main direction and confidently stepped toward legal and secular development. In order to be recognized as a reliable partner of the international community in the future - and thus receive international guarantees for the country's independence and security - Azerbaijan turned to public diplomacy, a supportive mechanism of foreign policy and employed various technologies and elements of this approach (Dilanova, 2024). The restoration of Azerbaijan’s independence on October 18, 1991, was tested over a long period by various problems and challenges. In the early years of independence, Armenia’s territorial claims and its military aggression against Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territories deepened serious political and economic problems, placing significant tasks before the country’s diplomacy. Preventing Armenian separatism in the mountainous part of Karabakh, eliminating the severe consequences of the occupation and securing international support for the resolution of the now historical Karabakh conflict within the framework of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and international legal norms made it necessary to pursue an active public diplomacy along with a foreign policy course grounded in national interests (Dilanova, 2024).

Two organizations play an active role in the international recognition of Azerbaijan, the formation of its positive image and the attraction of attention to its culture and history. One of the main directions of the multifaceted activity of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, established in 2004, is the promotion of Azerbaijan’s cultural heritage and national spiritual traditions and values worldwide. As a non-governmental and non-profit organization, the foundation carries out numerous projects and programs that serve the international recognition of Azerbaijan. It plays a major role in conveying the truths about

Azerbaijan to the world and also operates in many countries as part of its humanitarian mission.

Established in 2016, the main goal of the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre is to ensure the preservation of tolerance and of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity in accordance with the ideology of Azerbaijanism. The Centre also aims to promote Azerbaijan as a hub of multiculturalism on a global scale and to study and promote existing multicultural models. In pursuit of these objectives, the Centre organizes conferences, round tables, meetings, summer and winter schools, publishes books and journals and implements various projects and programs not only within the country but also abroad. It is worth noting that multiculturalism, being one of the key directions of Azerbaijan's domestic policy, also contributes to the effectiveness of its foreign policy. From this perspective, the Centre's activities support Azerbaijan's international visibility and the correct formation of its image abroad, thereby functioning as an integral part of public diplomacy efforts (Dilanova, 2024).

The Azerbaijani government also strives to build a positive international image by organizing various large-scale events of both regional and global significance. These include the Eurovision Song Contest (2012), the First European Games (2015), the Fourth Islamic Solidarity Games (2017), the 74th International Astronautical Congress (2023), COP29 (2024), the "Baku Process", which began as a regional initiative in 2008 and turned into a global movement in 2010, as well as a range of high-profile sporting and cultural events such as the Formula 1 Azerbaijan Grand Prix.

In addition, the launch of the "Haber Global" television channel in Turkey in 2018 by Azerbaijani entrepreneurs and the establishment of "ANEWZ" - an international English-language TV channel headquartered in Baku in 2024 - illustrates Azerbaijan's steps into the field of media diplomacy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Committee on Work with Diaspora, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the State Tourism Agency and other governmental bodies also possess significant potential in the sphere of public diplomacy. Studying their efforts would make a valuable contribution to the relevant academic literature.

Although not the main subject of this research, it is worth noting that during the challenging period when the entire world was fighting the pandemic, Azerbaijan liberated its territories, which had been under Armenian occupation for nearly 30 years, through military and political means. In response to yet another provocation by the Armenian armed forces along the line of contact on 27 September 2020, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces launched a counteroffensive operation. This 44-day operation, later referred to as the "Iron Fist", entered academic, political and military literature as the "Patriotic War" or the "Second Karabakh War". The Patriotic War ended on 10 November 2020 with a statement signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation, officially recognizing Azerbaijan's victory. The signing of the 10 November statement marked a major turning point in the resolution of the now historical Karabakh conflict.

Located in a geopolitically tense and complex region, Azerbaijan managed to gain full control over its state borders 29 years after restoring its independence. During this period, the country utilized various tools and elements of public diplomacy to inform the international community about the occupation of 20% of its territory by Armenia and the severe war crimes committed during the occupation (Dilanova, 2021). Public diplomacy efforts were implemented with a focus on both short-term and long-term objectives. Even

during the Patriotic War, Azerbaijan did not overlook public diplomacy, prioritizing informative and awareness-raising activities.

In general, during Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the Turkic Council and the Non-Aligned Movement, several lines of public diplomacy activities were established in the context of the pandemic. These included promoting global solidarity instead of isolationist policies, advocating for vaccine equity, providing financial contributions, material aid and implementing humanitarian operations - all of which primarily fall under the reactive model.

In addition, it should be noted that Azerbaijan's membership and chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement brought significant international support in its struggle against Armenia's military aggression. The Non-Aligned Movement supported Azerbaijan's position regarding the former Karabakh conflict in its official documents. A clear example of the political support Azerbaijan received from the Movement was the withdrawal of a draft statement prepared by the co-chair countries of the OSCE Minsk Group - permanent members of the UN Security Council - during the Patriotic War. Furthermore, biased initiatives against Azerbaijan proposed at the UN Security Council in 2020 and 2022 were also blocked by the member states of the Non-Aligned Movement.

2. Conclusion

Public diplomacy activities, which serve as a supporting mechanism in foreign policy and require activeness on the international stage, are of significant importance not only under traditional conditions but also during emergencies. During the period when the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed a serious public health crisis and challenged all world states, was spreading rapidly, Azerbaijan, chairing both the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States and the Non-Aligned Movement, ensured the effective functioning of both organizations and demonstrated responsibility not only at the national level but also in mobilizing the international community. When Azerbaijan's activeness and initiatives during this period, as well as its practical activities, are considered in the context of public diplomacy, it becomes clear that reactive actions came to the forefront and that the aim of finding points of contact with the international community to establish relations that serve to increase the country's international visibility, reputation and weight was successfully achieved.

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