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Image Policy of the Greater Caspian States: Factors and Challenges to Forming the Macro-Region Image

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Abstract. The formation of the country's image is one of the components of the national identity policy construction. The purpose of this study is to identify the substantive characteristics of the policy of the three Caspian states — Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan — within the formation of both the image of their countries and the macro-region. The concept of the 'discursive power' is applied; the empirical methods used are an online survey, focus group and expert interviews. The author characterizes the main groups of factors influencing the construction of the image in the countries under consideration, identifies the types of image policies, main strategies, and technologies. We focused on the problems and prospects of forming the image of the Caspian macro-region. According to the surveys of citizens conducted in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, the structural characteristics of the macro-region image are as follows: the ecosystem of the Caspian Sea and the common Soviet past. The main challenges to promoting the image of the macro-region are the lacuna of agencies in terms of institutions, general strategies and technologies, the uneven inclusion of the countries of the macro-region in the global and regional information space, the nature of center-regional relations in the countries of the region, the existing competition of macroregional projects. In the modern world order, the Caspian macro-region can be considered as a potential 'center of power', possessing enormous material and spiritual resources for development. The construction of its image, its promotion as one of the humanitarian components of the developing cooperation of the Caspian Five countries in the conditions of deglobalization and the creation of mega-regional projects that establish new standards and norms of interaction.

Keywords: Caspian macro-region, image, image policy, image strategies, communication barriers, discursive power

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Имиджевая политика государств Большого Каспия: факторы и барьеры формирования имиджа макрорегиона

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Аннотация. Формирование имиджа страны является одним из компонентов политики конструирования национальной идентичности. Целью данного исследования является выявление содержательных характеристик политики трех государств Прикаспия — Казахстана, Туркмении и Азербайджана — в отношении формирования как имиджа своих стран, так и макрорегиона. Используется концепт «дискурсивной силы», эмпирическими методами выступили онлайн-опрос, фокус-групповые и экспертные интервью. Автор характеризует основные группы факторов, влияющих на конструирование имиджа в рассматриваемых странах, выделяет типы имиджевой политики, основные стратегии и технологии. Основное внимание уделено проблемам и перспективам формирования имиджа Каспийского макрорегиона. По данным анкетирования граждан Казахстана, Туркмении и Азербайджана, структурными характеристиками имиджа макрорегиона могли бы стать экосистема Каспийского моря и общее советское прошлое. Основные барьеры продвижения имиджа макрорегиона — лакуна субъектности в части институтов, общих стратегий и технологий, неравномерная включенность стран макрорегиона в глобальное и региональное информационное пространство, характер центр-региональных отношений в странах региона, существующая конкуренция макрорегиональных проектов. В современном миропорядке Каспийский макрорегион можно рассматривать как потенциальный «центр силы», обладающий огромными материальными и духовными ресурсами развития. Конструирование его имиджа, его продвижение в качестве одного из гуманитарных компонентов развивающегося сотрудничества стран «Каспийской пятерки» становится важным в условиях деглобализации и создания мегарегиональных проектов, устанавливающих новые стандарты и нормы взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова: Каспийский макрорегион, имидж, имиджевая политика, имиджевые стратегии, коммуникативные барьеры, дискурсивная сила

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Introduction

One of the main functions of image is the construction of identity, and therefore image policy constitutes a substantive and institutional component of the state's identity policy. The countries of the post-Soviet space (including Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, whose image policies are discussed in this study) are faced with the challenges of constructing new national identities. “Each new state formation is created on the ruins of the former identity, as the Soviet state did in its time—a new one with its own characteristics. In each specific case, it constructs its own model, often without having a specific project with given parameters” [Romanova, Morozova 2023].

After the collapse of the USSR, the Caspian Sea region, from a practically internal area (with the exception of the border with Iran), turns into a geopolitical macro-region, whose importance is increasing in modern conditions. The region is attractive not only for the five “first-line” actors but also for more distant entities. The formation of both the domestic and international image of macro-regions is part of the sociocultural provision of their integrity and a factor in the successful implementation of economic and political projects [Milyukova et al. 2021; Russian Arctic 2016; Nazukina 2021a, 2021b].

Considering the growing importance of the Caspian macro-region in the context of modern geopolitical transformations and the request for a value-political project, the concept of “discursive power” as a theoretical basis is used. Semenenko defines discursive power as a set of strategies and mechanisms for promoting ideological attitudes, ideas, meanings, and the interests behind them in terms of political communications [Semenenko 2023]. The concept ITSELF has a long history, going back to the ideas of M. Foucault [Foucault 1971]. Today, non-Western civilizational projects compete for primacy in constructing images of the future, while the universalism of the Western liberal project is contested by theory and practice.

The study used approaches to the country image analyses proposed by Galumov [Galumov 2005], Semenenko [Semenenko 2008], Vasilenko [Vasilenko 2013], Andreenkova [Andreenkova 2022], and Fedotova [Fedotova 2018]. The state of image policy in individual countries of the Caspian macro-region is reflected in publications disproportionately: publications on Kazakhstan are presented in maximum and sufficient detail, then there is significantly less information on Azerbaijan and a minimum on Turkmenistan. There are a few quite fragmented papers that are of particular interest, devoted to the formation of the image

of the Caspian macro-region [Kuzina, Ryabtseva 2006; Kassamedinova 2022; Bocharnikova 2018].

Research methods

The empirical basis of the research was made up of materials from sociological studies conducted by employees of the Center for the Study of Problems of the South of Russia and the Caspian Region at the Astrakhan State University in 2022–2023 in Kazakhstan (700 respondents in an online survey, five focus group interviews, 9 expert interviews) and Azerbaijan (five focus group interviews, 300 respondents in an online survey). A survey of citizens of Turkmenistan (309 respondents) and five focus group interviews were carried out on the territory of the Russian Federation; the respondents were representatives of Turkmenistan studying at universities in Astrakhan, Krasnodar, and Maykop or working in these cities. These studies made it possible to draw conclusions about the perception of the country's image by the citizens themselves.

As for the external aspects of image, empirical data are limited partly to materials from our own focus group interviews but to a greater extent to statistics and sociological research conducted by external agencies. The study used materials from the International Non-Profit Association of Research Agencies “Eurasian Monitor”¹, international ratings, in particular the Global Soft Power Index².

Factors and strategies for forming the image of the Caspian states

The image of any state (region, city, or district) represents the unity of two sides. It is the result or consequence of many factors in the development of the state (historical, natural, economic, political, sociocultural, etc.). But at the same time, it is the result of the purposeful activities of political subjects, intangible development resources, and an active instrument of transformation, increasing the status and prestige of a given state and its attractiveness and competitiveness. Image plays a huge role in the formation of the national identity of the state, both among the citizens of the country and abroad. It was not possible for our research to evaluate models of activities to promote the image of states due to the inaccessibility of direct information (e.g., documents from government agencies); we focused on the factors of image formation instead.

Galumov identifies three groups of factors influencing the formation and promotion of images:

¹ *International Non-profit Association of Research Agencies “Eurasian Monitor”*. Retrieved December 09, 2023, from <https://eurasiamonitor.org/>.

² *Global Soft Power Index 2023*. Retrieved December 09, 2023, from <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/>

- 1) conditionally static, formed in the past, and barely changing (natural potential, cultural heritage, historical events, geopolitical situation);
- 2) conditionally dynamic sociological factors (socio-psychological moods, forms of social integration and solidarity, moral values, level of conflict, nature of social divisions);
- 3) conditionally dynamic institutional factors (main macroeconomic indicators and their dynamics, legal space and efficiency of power structures, level of corruption, balance of branches of government, and level of support for the leader of the state) [Galumov 2005].

The analysis showed that in all three countries, it is mainly the first group of factors that “works” in image strategies; it is quite difficult to use factors of the second and third groups due to significant social divisions and the low positions of countries in cross-country rankings. Conditionally static factors such as the vast natural resources (primarily hydrocarbons) and the historical past most influence the construction of country images. For example, the memory policy pursued in Kazakhstan offers ethnic symbolism, which is based on Kazakh cultural values of the ancient, medieval, postcolonial, and modern periods in the new history of Kazakhstan. There is an appeal to the so-called “positive” ancient layer of Kazakhstan’s history (Sakas, Huns, Turks, Kipchaks, etc.) with their archetypal personalities—warriors, commanders, batyrs (Atila, Bilge, Kutlyk, Kultegin, Tonyukok, Batyr Kanzhygaly Bogenbai, Karakerey Kabanbai, etc.), forming pride in their “alternative” historical past from school [Abdugulova, Kapaeva, Kenzhebaev 2012]. When answering the survey question, “What historical events are the people of your country proud of?”, respondents from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan put the acquisition of independence in 1991 in first place; among respondents from Azerbaijan, the acquisition of independence was in second place, and in first place, with the number of answers almost three times larger (17 and 45 percent, respectively), was the victory in the Second Karabakh War.

A fairly objective assessment of the state of the social sphere is provided by the Human Development Index (HDI), which is calculated annually by experts from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) together with a group of independent international experts. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a combined indicator characterizing human development in countries and regions of the world. The calculations are carried out in three main areas: health and longevity, measured by average life expectancy at birth; access to education, measured by the average expected years of schooling for school-age children and the average years of schooling for adults; and a decent standard of living, measured by gross national income per capita in US dollars at purchasing power parity. In 2023, in the ranking of countries by HDI, Russia took 52nd place, Kazakhstan took 56th, and Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan shared 91st place³.

³ *Rating of countries of the former USSR by standard of living in 2022*. Retrieved November, 20, 2023, from <https://top-rf.ru/places/122-rejting-stran-byvshego-sssr-po-urovnyu-zhizni.html>

In the same year, the average life expectancy was 74.15 years in Azerbaijan, 72.53 years in Kazakhstan, and 71.83 years in Turkmenistan⁴.

The study takes into account not only objective indicators (GDP per capita, employment, etc.), but also such indirect indicators of the state of society as the level of trust and generosity, as well as subjective assessments of well-being, such as the happiness index. In 2023, in the ranking of 100 countries according to the happiness index, Kazakhstan took 44th place, and Azerbaijan took 92nd place⁵.

Image policy is a set of decisions and measures of systemic influence aimed at a positive perception of a country or region by both its own population and the international community. We have identified and characterized the types of state image policy: reactive, proactive, and active, characterized by the degree of connection of image policy with the strategic priorities of the country's development. Reactive policy is characterized by the absence of a developed image policy strategy and the situational inclusion of individual subjects in events initiated from the outside and promoting the country's image abroad (the case of Turkmenistan). Proactive identity politics is a set of disparate measures based on the involvement of a number of subjects and institutional mechanisms of image policy, but without a common strategy, image diversification, or inclusion in strategic development projects of the country (the case of Azerbaijan). Active identity politics includes the perception by management subjects of the country's image as a development resource; there is a strategy and its institutional implementation; image policy is differentiated by area and is an integral component of the development and implementation of a state development strategy (Kazakhstan is closest to this type).

There are two main strategies of image policy: “umbrella” (Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan construct an image from different structural elements—natural, historical-cultural, industrial, and socio-political) and “nuclear” (Turkmenistan positions its neutrality in the foreign policy environment as the main element of its image).

The main technologies of image policy in the countries studied are holidays and special events, the use of monuments and public spaces, and the formation of the so-called “toponymic image”. In technological terms, symbols that are associated with the state in the internal and external environment play a major role. The main symbolic resources are natural and personalistic symbols. Thus, the respondents consider the main natural symbols of Turkmenistan to be cotton, Achalketian, and Alabay (races of horses and dogs raised in this country). Among the personalistic symbols were Oguz Khan (an ancient Turkmen ancestor), Mukhtumkuli (a great national poet), and the presidents of the state in post-Soviet times. In Kazakhstan, the personalist line includes not only the leaders

⁴ *Life expectancy in the world by country in 2022–2023*. Retrieved November, 20, 2023, from <https://visasam.ru/emigration/vybor/srednyaya-prodolzhitelnost-zhizni-v-mire.html>

⁵ *100 happiest countries in the world: ranking 2023, place of Russia*. Retrieved November, 20, 2023, from <https://top-rf.ru/places/548-rejting-stran-po-urovnyu-schastya.html>

of the republic in Soviet and post-Soviet times but also the classic of Kazakh literature, Mukhtar Avezov, the famous boxer Gennady Golovkin, and the young singer Dimash.

Image of the Greater Caspian macro-region and image policy challenges

Constructing the image of the Caspian macro-region as a whole, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of its formation as one of the humanitarian components of the developing cooperation within the Caspian Five countries due to the increasing role of the macro-region in the modern world.

The objective side of the process of identity construction includes identification markers (one or more may be dominant). In our case, we see two dominant identifiers: the Caspian Sea itself, perceived as a value by all people living on its shores, and the cultural diversity of the Caspian community. A questionnaire survey of Kazakh nationals showed that respondents consider the ecosystem of the Caspian Sea and the common Soviet past to be the common features uniting the peoples of Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. A fifth of respondents believe that there are common Caspian symbols, while four-fifths believe that there are no such symbols.

Table 1

**Bases for constructing a pan-Caspian identity,
per cent of total respondents**

The basis for association of the Caspian region residents	Kazakhstan	Azerbaijan	Turkmenia
Total territory of the Caspian basin	32.2	35.3	33.7
Common Soviet past	29.4	18.6	26.9
Language	7.3	3.1	4.2
Mentality	4.8	4.2	6.0
Culture	4.2	11.3	6.4
Religion	3.1	3.5	5.6
Cuisine	3.1	2.0	3.4
Economic well-being/difficulties	12.8	4.7	8.2
Other	0.3	0.7	–
Nothing in common	2.1	4.4	1.8
Difficult to answer	0.7	12.2	3.6

Source: Compiled by the author based on the outcomes of the research study.

The implementation of image policy at the macro-regional level is hampered by a number of challenges. First of all, it concerns the uneven inclusion of the countries of the macro-region in the global and regional information space due to the different state of digital inequality not only in intercountry comparisons but also in interregional comparisons within each of the Caspian countries. “Unfortunately, we often learn about Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and other neighboring countries through friends, acquaintances, news from social networks, and news resources that arrive irregularly, and the information space of the region itself is fragmented and subjective”.⁶

The nature of central-regional relations in each country creates certain barriers. As noted by an observer of the international media holding Euromedia Pokatilov, “of the five Caspian states, only Azerbaijan has a capital on the seashore, Baku. Many of the shores of the Caspian Sea, which have been inherited by other states, are either swampy or areas of deserts and semi-deserts in the absence of fresh water. The largest Iranian city on the Caspian Sea, Anzeli, is inhabited by a little over 100 thousand people. That is, off the coast of such a huge water area as the Caspian, in fact, when compared with many other seas or lakes, there are not so many people. At the same time, the main centers producing information—that is, the capitals—of four states are located quite far from the coast. As a result, Caspian problems are viewed as provincial, which does not contribute to the high role of information technology in the development of cooperation between the Caspian countries”.⁷

There is a significant socio-psychological barrier: weak cognitive motivation to obtain information about the lives of neighbors. It seems that the reason for this trend is not so much the language factor as a kind of “obsession” with narratives that substantiate a new national-state identity in the countries of the post-Soviet space. Analyzing the results of cross-country research by the Eurasian Monitor association, Byzov and Petukhov noted that “the majority of residents of the post-Soviet space lack deep interest in their former neighbors” [Byzov, Petukhov 2008].

At the same time, the increase in the geopolitical significance of the Caspian macro-region as a whole influenced changes in the assessments of the “soft power” of each country. In the Soft Power ranking, regularly conducted by Brand Finance, in 2023, Azerbaijan rose by 20 positions, taking 57th place out of 121; Kazakhstan rose by 9 positions, taking 79th place; and Turkmenistan rose by 25 positions and took 88th place.⁸

One cannot help but note the increasing competition between macro-regional projects. All three states are included in the sphere of interests of Turkey, promoting the “Great Turan” project, which is based on the idea of creating

⁶ Pokatilov, A.V. (2023). *Caspian media environment: how to make partnership real*. Retrieved November, 19, 2023, from <http://casp-geo.ru/kaspijskaya-media-sreda-kak-sdelat-partnerstvo-realnym/>

⁷ Same as above.

⁸ *Global Soft Power Index 2023*. Retrieved December, 9, 2023, from <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/>

a community adhering to the common Turkic roots of a huge array of multi-ethnic, multi-confessional peoples who have a common linguistic basis and in the past represented a great empire [Rakhmanaliev 2019]. Azerbaijan has the highest degree of integration into this emerging cross-border political space. Another competing macro-regional project is the community of Central Asian states, a macro-region that is “trying on” the role of the “Eurasian bridge” in new geopolitical conditions and finds itself in the center of attention of the foreign policy departments of the countries of the Old and New Worlds. In this project, Kazakhstan confidently plays a leadership role, which is determined primarily by objective reasons and indicators of socio-economic development.

An institutional deficit can be considered a challenge, expressed primarily in the absence of subjects of image policy at the macro-regional level. As a consequence, there is a lack of image diversification that takes into account the interests and values of the main target groups. In 2018, at the Fifth Caspian Summit in Aktau (Kazakhstan), the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed. As noted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Lavrov, “in the interests of increasing the efficiency of existing structures and mechanisms, it is advisable to build them into a single regional system. At the current stage, the optimal way to achieve this goal is the creation of a flexible five-sided forum—the Caspian Council”⁹. Potentially, the Council could become a key link in building a multi-subject identity policy in the macro-region, uniting the activities of national governments, regional authorities, and business.

Conclusion

Processing of empirical research materials will continue in 2024; sociological research will also be conducted in the Caspian regions of Russia. But the intermediate results of research carried out in 2022–2023 make it possible to formulate some proposals and recommendations for improving image policy in the macro-region of the Greater Caspian Sea. It is necessary to conduct an audit of the symbolic capital and image assets of each of the “Big Five” Caspian countries to justify the selection of common content components for constructing and promoting a positive image of the Greater Caspian macro-region. It would be advisable for the working bodies of the Caspian cooperation to consider the proposal to form a subject for constructing and promoting a positive image of the Caspian macro-region both in the countries of the “five” and beyond. The potential for interpersonal relations between citizens of the Caspian countries through “second track diplomacy” technologies (joint scientific events, academic exchanges, youth forums, creative industry festivals, and twinning relations between cities and rural settlements) will strengthen both

⁹ Statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov on the topic of cooperation in the Caspian region (September 20, 2022). *International life*. Retrieved November, 15, 2023, from <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/37062>

bilateral and multilateral cooperation. It is vital to give the most successful social and cultural projects initiated within the framework of bilateral relations between countries a Caspian-wide scale.

Tourism has enormous potential for developing cooperation in the macro-region. According to a study by the Eurasian Monitor, 51 % of respondents in Russia, 55 % in Azerbaijan, and 53 % in Kazakhstan are interested in the history and culture of other countries. At the same time, 6 % of respondents in Russia, 19 % in Azerbaijan, and 11 % in Kazakhstan visited any attractions in the territory of the former USSR republics over the past 2–3 years [Byzov, Petukhov 2008]. The start of cruise shipping on the Caspian Sea is scheduled for spring 2024¹⁰. The passenger ship “Peter the Great”, which is being built at the Astrakhan shipyards, will become the first passenger ship to carry out tourist cruises on the Caspian Sea, since such cruises have never been available before¹¹. Geographical proximity and favorable visa regimes for most countries allow us to predict an increase in tourist flows between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, and the Caspian regions of Russia. It is expected that the Caspian coast will be able to receive at least a million travelers a year. The planned route Astrakhan — Makhachkala — Baku — Nowshehr — Turkmenbashi — Aktau — Astrakhan includes visits to five countries: Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan.

In the modern world order, the Caspian macro-region can be considered a potential “center of power”, possessing enormous material and spiritual resources for development. Whether resources will be updated depends on many factors, both external (changes in the geopolitical position of countries, entry into other transnational political entities) and internal (factors related to the organization of Caspian cooperation, the institutionalization of bodies that coordinate joint activities, including in the sociocultural sphere) [Abdullaev 2021].

Modern states actively defend the right to adhere to their own political and value guidelines and assert leadership based on economic levers, including through the creation of mega-regional projects that establish standards and norms of interaction¹². The Caspian macro-region, with its unique economic potential and historical experience in managing civilizational diversity, is consistently building its mega-regional project. The actors of this political-value project are in a state of competition both on the world stage and within the macro-region, promoting their own “discursive forces”.

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¹⁰ The start of the Caspian cruise was first announced back in 2011 by the then governor of the Astrakhan region A.A. Zhilkin.

¹¹ *Website of the travel agency “Fortuna”*. Retrieved December, 6, 2023, from <https://fortuna-travel.ru/kruizy/cruise-caspian-sea/>

¹² *Fragmentation and regionalization of the international order*. Retrieved December, 7, 2023, from <https://issek.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/796097894.pdf>

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