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Urban Redevelopment from the Bottom-Up: Strengths and Challenges of Grassroots Initiatives in Baku

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Abstract

Grassroots initiatives have become primary setters of the discourse on facilitating participation of city dwellers in the urban development of Baku. Activities of these initiatives range from social-media based activism to small-scale interventions into public spaces. This contribution explores the strengths, promises and challenges of such initiatives in centralized governance systems such as Azerbaijan, primarily using the example of the “Urban Olum” project of urbanist civic initiative “PILLƏ”. The analysis can serve as a backdrop for the premises of urban activism in the context of Baku.

The Errant Winds of Urban Development in Baku

Baku’s development in the aftermath of oil revenue flow has been driven by the interests of political elites, with a very low integration of the population and a lack of mechanisms for city dwellers to participate in the urban development process. Given the concentration of most income generating industries in Baku, such as mining and construction, the flow of rural–urban migration has been high. All in all, urban policy has been largely defined by a political discourse focused on flamboyant construction projects and grand sporting and “cultural” events that, in theory, should stimulate the “beautification” of Baku. This corresponds with emerging ambitions to transform the city into both a tourist attraction and regional logistics hub (Valiyev 2014). As depicted by Harvey (2012), Lefebvre states that the “right to the city” is directly connected to what kind of social relations, lifestyle and aesthetic values we want to pursue. Therefore, it goes beyond an individual’s right to access the resources that a city offers and is a collective right to “change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2012). Nevertheless, the control of urban development processes in Baku has remained in the hands of a few (Koch and Valiyev 2015). In line with the proliferation of shopping malls, skyscrapers and grand venue spaces, Bakuivians were given very little space and ground for reclaiming their “right to the city”. A very basic example is that residents have no say in the demolition, dictated by the interests of property developers, of historic buildings or of certain neighborhoods.

Another aspect is that urban development processes in Baku are ongoing in the absence of an operational master plan for the city. The last approved operational Master Plan for Baku was finalized in 1986 and spanned the period until 2005. The latest attempt, carried out with World Bank funding, was completed in 2013 and presented by the State Committee for Urban Planning Architecture. However, it remains under review and is

awaiting approval. Farid Guliyev’s article in this edition further explores the gaps and incoherencies in the institutions responsible for urban development in Baku.

Who Said That No Urban Policy Means No Urban Activism?

In the absence of institutionalized mechanisms of urban development, it is informal grassroots initiatives that have come to initiate and sustain urban discourse. These voluntarily organized groups that come together around particular causes operate on a non-professional, informally organized basis. This brand of urban activism is shaped by the ideas and initiatives of the groups rather than the agenda set by the government. Integration of these ideas and inputs into policy making seems unlikely in the near future. In the meantime, these initiatives mostly aim to build awareness among city dwellers and provide a platform for training young professionals in urban development.

There is a social-media-based form of urban advocacy that can be presented in the example of “Transport for Baku”, which has been advocating alternatives to the transport and pedestrian routes of an increasingly congested city. This initiative is built and led by Huseyn Abdullayev and spreads news mainly through a Facebook page that is linked to a blog called “Baku4people”. Even if the main goal of the initiative is building awareness of possible alternatives to the inefficient transportation schemes of Baku, one of the long-term goals was to address policymaking in the field. Despite a solid social media following and good support, these suggestions did not go onto the table of decision-makers. As the result, *Transport for Baku* remains a social-media-based urban activism campaign. (Transport for Baku, n.d.)

Urbanist group *Pillə* [trans. the step] is the first and largest-scale grassroots initiative that was launched with an explicit urbanist agenda and with a more experimental and hands-on approach to urban activism. It was founded by a group of young architects in 2015 and has

been expanding its outreach through social media campaigns, interventions in the physical built environment and the organization of public events, ranging from lectures and urban/architecture workshops to movie screenings. The overarching goal of the members is to provide a platform for people to interact around urban questions, to stimulate new ideas about the use of urban space and to explore urban structures and public behavior patterns (*Pillā* n.d.).

The projects carried out by *Pillā* to date can be divided into the following two strands: 1) educational activities, such as workshops and public lectures, and 2) small-scale interventions in the built environment. The first type of activity aims to build interest in urbanism both among students and socially active young people. The longer-term goal is to encourage greater participation of a wider profile of city residents in urban development processes. The second type, the small-scale interventions, aims to set a precedent for city dwellers based on the philosophy that changes in public built environments can be carried out based on independent initiatives of the residents, not only led by the top-down policies of government bodies (Musavi 2017).

The first large-scale educational project of *Pillā* was the “Urban Furniture” workshop held in November 2016, where participants were trained in key skills before being tasked with designing urban furniture for spaces that have the potential to bring the community together. The participants were mostly drawn from local architectural students, two of whom subsequently joined the *Pillā* team. The event primarily served to expand the group’s network.

More recently, the “Urban Olum” project carried out in September 2017 focused on one of the neighborhoods in the Bayil district (Pic. 1). The name “Urban Olum” was inspired by an expression in Azeri to describe a person who can sacrifice everything to reach her/his goal. The overarching goal of the project was to inspire the same dedication in local residents to participate in shaping the public spaces of their neighborhood. The public spaces included a “pocket park” and a space in the entrance of a nine-story building with a panoramic view of the city. Four local and three foreign artists worked together with the Bayil community to make interventions in the public space that reflect the daily habits and needs of people living in the area (*Pillā* 2017). The community gardening project by Vahid Ali included the refurbishment, clean up and installation of urban furniture pieces in a “pocket park” located at the center of the neighborhood. As a result, the residents would have a public space for gatherings and a playground area. The residents were actively involved in the planting of herbs and plants in the community gardening project, which

facilitated their engagement in further nourishment of the area. One of the project organizers, Sabina Faxradin, said that she witnessed how locals were planting new herbs and watering already planted ones when she was visiting the neighborhood after the project. The “Vantage Point” by Monogroup architects from Minsk in an entrance of a nine-story building with a panoramic view aimed to create a leisure point and to rethink the use of vast public space in the entrance area. During the project, *Pillā* members organized meet-ups with local residents, including a “samovar tea” drink & talk, aiming to stimulate further use of the space for community gatherings. By engaging the residents in the transformation of the area organizers were aiming to stimulate a feeling of ownership among local residents.

The operational restrictions on this project provide an important backdrop to urban activism in Baku in general. One of the major challenges for the organizers in the early stages of “Urban Olum” was to disentangle which permissions and bureaucratic hurdles were needed to address interventions into public spaces. Due to the generally restrictive nature of engagement in public spaces, resolving this concern took some time, with a lack of structured information restraining the organizers from taking concrete actions. A second challenge came once the project was launched, concerning the involvement of local residents, most of whom opposed the idea, saying that this refurbishment of the area and installation of urban furniture was meaningless, since in a very short time, any refurbished and newly constructed objects would be demolished or stolen. Nevertheless, in time, the locals started showing support; this support ranged from elderly residents sharing tea and food to children being actively involved in the field work. Members of *Pillā*, Leyla Musayeva and Aygün Budaq, say that,

“It was inspiring to witness involvement of networking between the children in the neighborhood while they were doing refurbishment work. One could easily see that they were in dire need of activities beyond the ‘home and school’ routine. During the project, it was inspiring to witness the shifting attitudes of children and the increasing feeling of ownership towards public spaces. As for the elders, some of them approached us by the end of the project, saying that it was actually their responsibility to care for the public spaces in the neighborhood, and they are thankful to us for doing it instead of them”.

The group members say that all in all, the project was experimental, as it was the first time that they were directly engaged in a project with the community. In the long term, *Pillā* plans to use the intervention as a preced-

ent to encourage Bakuvians to carry out similar actions or for other actors to launch similar initiatives using the city's public space as a forum for experimentation.

Social Capital—A Backbone of Urban Activism in Baku

Grassroots urban activism in Baku has its own peculiarities—this is partly framed by the limited access to economic resources and the frustrating lack of mechanisms to influence government policies on urban development. Access to funds is limited due to restrictions on receiving foreign funding imposed by the Azerbaijani government in 2013. However, while on the one hand, this pressure has diminished the scale of institutionalized civic activism, on the other hand, it has led to the emergence of a raft of new grassroots initiatives focusing on specific causes and driven by long-term sustainability goals. Unfortunately, the missing step is in influencing policy and the decision-making processes that continue to shape the city in Baku.

However, in Baku, given the absence of communication channels between civic initiatives and government bodies, there are very limited opportunities for urban activists to advocate for their policy suggestions. This is influenced significantly by the absence of a clear and transparent institutional setting for urban development. It is also related to the resources of civic groups, most of

whom carry out their advocacy activity alongside full-time professional careers. As a result, the scarce human resources of grassroots initiatives become overly diluted, hindering the sustainability and long-term impact of these groups.

The literature would suggest that in the absence of these financial and institutional resources, voluntary groups tend to focus on “social capital”, which is built upon individual connections and common interests and objectives. The godfather of social capital, Robert Putnam (1995), describes social capital as those “features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”. This can act as a good framework for understanding the work of *Pillā* and other grassroots initiatives operating within the limiting environment of Baku, which demands more creative, cautious and networked responses to problems in the urban space. Members are connected by “bonding” ties, which unite groups of friends interested in the same cause (or vice versa, uniting people interested in the same cause and eventually leading to personal ties). This, combined with an aspiration for a long-term return, stimulates the continued operations of groups with limited resources. The research evidence suggests that evolvment and variation of ties within these networks will define whether the group is capable of not exhausting itself in the long-

Picture 1: Bayil Is a Settlement Of Sabayil District With Low-Rise Buildings Located On a Steep Landscape.



Source: Google Earth satellite photo with data from Digital Globe, retouched by Muslum Imranli from Pillā (reproduced with permission)

run and achieving its goals. However, within this set of conditions these groups have very few opportunities to develop “bridging” ties—to cooperate with other stakeholders in the implementation of their ideas.

Conclusion

Within the current set up, on the one hand, Baku’s urban development is driven by the income generating interests of a few. On the other hand, there is an emergent urban movement that tries to somehow spur participa-

tion of city dwellers in the process, mostly at a local scale. Given the current political situation, it is unlikely that these movements will have an enabling environment to expand the scope of their activities and influence urban policymaking in the near future. This threatens the continuity of the activities carried out on a voluntary basis. However, these groups have the potential to bring a sparkle into urban activism if they expand their outreach and succeed in stimulating the emergence of new groups dedicated to urban advocacy.

About the Author

Nazaket Azimli is currently working with the Eurasia Partnership Foundation as the Coordinator of the Baku IdeaLab-center for Social Initiatives. She is among the founders and organizers of *Equals*, an initiative advocating for gender equality, and of the *DokuBaku* International Documentary Film Festival. Nazaket works as a researcher and project manager with *Pillə*.

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