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The State, Primary Education, and Nation-Building in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This article explores the nation-building narratives in the primary education system in Azerbaijan in terms of existing legislation, everyday practices at schools, and the content of textbooks. To achieve this aim, legislative guidelines and regulations, everyday practices obtained through personal observations and social networks, and the “Azerbaijani Language” and “Life Knowledge” textbooks for the 1st–4th classes are explored. The article then divides the main narratives into categories such as the description of national characteristics and history, military element, and loyalty to the current government in power, analysing each of them. The study argues that rather than civic virtues, the volume of content that serves militaristic nationalism and regime consolidation is more significant in the nationhood narratives promoted through the primary education system.

Introduction

Unlike the earlier period of independence in the 1990s, the debate on the Azerbaijani national identity and competition between Turkism (an ethnocentric approach) and Azerbaijanism (a civic approach) (Tokluoglu, 2006) no longer dominates the national discourse in Azerbaijan. Instead, “Azerbaijanism”, which is a civic concept of the nation, is accepted as the main ideology of nation-building. Ergun (2020, p. 4) divides the evolution of nationalism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan into three phases, namely, as a defence tool, as a state-building tool, and as a democratization tool. Does nation-building still serve as a tool for democratization in this case? To address this issue, this study explores the nationhood narratives in the most recent school textbooks to discover the nature and pattern of these narratives.

It is known that school education and textbooks are important tools used to promote national narratives and bring up citizens who share the same identity. Podeh (2000, p. 66) calls Israeli textbooks “another arm of the state” and “agents of memory”, as they are loyal instruments for identity politics. In Azerbaijan’s case, such books are especially relevant due to the centralized education system with a uniform curriculum for all schools that requires everyone to use the same textbooks. This makes it easier to control the main narratives to which schoolchildren are exposed. Regarding school education and democratization in Azerbaijan, Wistrand (2020) performed a study focusing on civics education in which she argued that the education reform failed to prioritize civics education, which has resulted in consequences for citizens’ knowledge about democracy. Thus, what does the education system teach students about citizenship and nation? This study focuses on primary education, that is, the symbols used in classrooms and short stories about the homeland, exploring how they reflect affection for the nation and produce a shared commitment

among very young schoolchildren. The study, therefore, answers the questions below:

- In which images are the homeland, its history, and the nation introduced to students through primary education?
- What is the place of the military component in the primary school national narratives?
- What is the place of the current government in power within the nationhood narratives in school curricula?

Primary School and Patriotism: Legislation

The first 4 years of the 11-year school education in Azerbaijan provide a primary education in which 6- to 9-year-old students learn reading, writing, and basic math skills. Major school subjects such as history, geography, biology, etc., are not taught at this stage; rather, basic knowledge covering various fields is introduced to the students through “Azerbaijani language” and “Life Knowledge” classes. New subject curricula for schools were approved in 2010 in Azerbaijan, which introduced a brand-new curriculum for all schools. The new curriculum standards emphasize that “students must be able to recognize and introduce moral-traditional values of the Azerbaijani nation, Azerbaijan’s history, culture, art, and prominent people, as well as the ‘counterforces’ against their country” as one of the learning outcomes for primary school education. Accordingly, one of the requirements for the subject “Azerbaijani language” in primary schools is described as “introducing the language, history, moral values, art, and traditions of Azerbaijani nation to the students” (Cabinet of Ministers, 2010). In October 2020, the “Law on Education” was modified, and the goal of “to teach the students patriotism and respect to the values and symbols of Azerbaijani nation” was added to the list of the aims of primary schools (Aliyev, 2020).

As observed from the official guidelines, promoting patriotism and national values to students is taken seri-

ously as one of the duties of primary education. Meanwhile, primary school students are frequently involved in various patriotism and commemoration events, which have been scraped for this study from the website of the Baku City Education Department over the last 6 years.

Textbooks and School Events in Promoting National Narratives

The official requirements and guidelines mentioned above are implemented by real-life practices in primary education. A classic classroom for primary education displays the national flag and the coat of arms, the text of the state anthem, and the photos of former president Heydar Aliyev and current president Ilham Aliyev on the wall. The schoolchildren collectively sing the national anthem in the courtyard of the school before going to their classrooms. On the first page of each primary school textbook, there is a page-sized photo of Heydar Aliyev with the introduction: “Heydar Aliyev—Nation-wide leader of the Azerbaijani people”. In each book, there is a section “My Homeland” that describes Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani nation. The rest of this article will explore the narratives, which are divided into several categories, i.e., the description of the homeland and the nation, its history, military elements, and loyalty to the current government. While the importance of the first two categories is greatly acknowledged by nation-building literature, the last two have been found by the author to be specific to Azerbaijan’s case due to their prevalence, as will be explained further in the article.

Description of Homeland, Nation, and Its History

Azerbaijan is described as an ancient country located neither in Europe nor Asia but rather in Eurasia. Consequently, any special orientation towards Western, Eastern, or religious values is not prevalent. The Azerbaijani people are described as brave as an eagle, which is also the shape of the country’s map (Abdullayeva, 2019). The importance of moral values in being good citizens is emphasized, and losing these values is shown as being equal to losing one’s national identity. The most-often mentioned of these moral values are national music and culture, fearlessness and brevity, and hospitality.

Historical knowledge at the primary education level is not structured such that myths and real historical facts are both provided, often without a clear distinction. However, ancientness and owning larger territories in the past are emphasized. In the provided myths, Azerbaijan is called the “Land of Fire”, and its area is described as a large place between Mount Savalan (in modern-day Iran) and Mount Ararat (part of current-day Türkiye) at the beginning of the Arab invasion (Bayramova et al., 2022, p. 58–59). Javanshir, the king of the Caucasian Albanian state, is also presented as a brave hero of Azer-

baijan. Sevan (Goycha) Lake (currently in Armenia) is described as a historical Azerbaijani land that was only occupied by Armenians with the help of Russia 100 years ago. Another emphasized period is the history of the current Karabakh conflict, in which the Azerbaijani lands were occupied by Armenia and Azerbaijanis were forced to flee under gunfire (Bayramova et al., 2022).

Another concept that cohabits with civic nationhood in Azerbaijan is “multiculturalism”, which promotes ethnolinguistic pluralism (Cornell, Karavelli and Ajeganov, 2016). Religious pluralism is also prominent in the popular discourse, e.g., the exemplary Muslim-Jewish tolerance represented by the peaceful living of Mountain Jews in Quba (Jabiyeva, 2021). However, these concepts are not widely mentioned in textbooks where civic nationhood is the dominant concept. In the textbook the only context ethno-religious pluralism is emphasized are two stories. In the first one, a child has two friends, namely, one Lezgin and one Talish (both ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan), who together represent Azerbaijan in international competition (Bayramova et al., 2022, p. 34). Another story is about the friendship of a child with an ethnic Russian child (Abdullayeva, 2019, p. 57).

Military Elements of Nationhood

This element is hard to ignore, as it exists with a special emphasis in all textbooks from the 1st to 4th grades both before and after the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and was used as the main feature of a good patriot. The students are introduced to the honour of being a soldier and protecting the homeland. Stories about the heroism of Mubariz Ibrahimov, who passed a 1-km mined area to the Armenian side and killed their forces in an unequal fight during the ceasefire time in 2009, are prominent in the textbooks. The Khojali massacre, in which Azerbaijani civilians were mass killed by Armenian armed forces in 1992, and the symbolic importance of Shusha, which is a historical town taken back by Azerbaijani forces during the Second Karabakh War, are emphasized. To students is explained the importance of not giving a piece of homeland to anyone and protecting the borders.

The army is described as one of the most important components of the Azerbaijani statehood as it is among the world’s 50th strongest armies (Abbasova, et al., 2021, p. 62). Through different stories, it is endorsed that every child’s dream should be joining the army to show their love for the homeland. The textbooks for all grades include different stories and poems that describe how children at the preschool age level desire to join the army and make their parents proud, as well as proverbs such as “Show bravery, fight the enemy” or “The land is only a homeland when there is someone dying for it” (Abdullayeva, 2019).

The military component is prominent in the events held at schools as well. Every year, in the events com-

memorating Black January and the Khojali massacre, primary school boys wear military costumes. These military costumes are observed not only during these commemorations but also in other events such as “National Revival Day”, “National Salvation Day”, and other public holidays. After the Second Karabakh War, the events at schools celebrating the occasion were held more frequently. Nonmilitary events such as Novruz and International Women’s Day also took names in some schools such as “Victory-scented Novruz” and “International Women’s Day with Martyr’s Mothers” after the 2020 war. Primary school students are often asked to present essays and pictures about the achievements of the army (Baku City Education Department, n.d.).

Unlike the textbooks utilized before the new curricula implementation in 2010, the May 9th victory after the “Great Patriotic War”, which is a part of the country’s Soviet history, is not mentioned in the new textbooks. After 2020, a new “Victory Day” was added to textbooks and celebrated on November 8. Although May 9th celebrations were still taking place at schools in the form of events until 2020, they were replaced later by November 8 celebrations to mark the nation’s victory in the Second Karabakh War.

Current Government and National Identity

LaPorte (2014) defines Azerbaijan as “hegemonic authoritarianism” where rather than being banned, the opposition parties and groups are marginalized from society by being provided limited access to society and media. This is complemented by a stronger visibility of the current regime in the media and official discourse. The same pattern can be observed in the stage of education as early as primary schools as part of nationhood narratives. Apart from the portrait on the first page of the textbooks, Heydar Aliyev is presented as the national leader of Azerbaijani people and the greatest Azerbaijani patriot. He is also introduced as the founder of the “Azerbaijanism” ideology, which has united the nation and saved it from being divided. Based on his saying “I am proud that I am Azerbaijani”, students are asked to write an essay on why they are also proud of being an Azerbaijani (Abdullayeva et al., 2022, p. 43–44). Meanwhile, Aliyev’s name is mentioned in all events held at schools as the person who had the great success in protecting the sovereignty, uniting the nation, giving the necessary attention to historical tragedies of the nation, founding the “Azerbaijanism” ideology, bringing solidarity to the nation, and preserving the language. “National Salvation Day”, which is the day Aliyev became the Chair of the Parliament, is celebrated every year at schools and marked by primary school children reciting poems. The presentation of Heydar Aliyev in this way intertwines his personality with that of the “Azerbaijani nation”. Although the succes-

sors of the Musavat Party that established the first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918 are now in opposition, in the events celebrating both that occasion and the restoration of independence on 18 October 1991, Aliyev’s services in building the nation and gaining its independence are emphasized instead. After the Second Karabakh War, current president Ilham Aliyev’s role in liberating the territories was mentioned on every occasion as a force that gathered all Azerbaijani people together (Baku City Education Department, n.d.).

Conclusion

Promoting moral-traditional values and patriotism starting as early as primary schools is specified in the relevant legislation and is implemented through written uniform textbooks and commemoration events at schools. Azerbaijanis are presented as a brave and hospitable Eurasian nation with a very ancient history, who used to have bigger territories in the past and who have suffered over the course of history. Religious elements are lacking in the whole curriculum, making the narratives completely secular in nature. The militaristic element is the component that is most strongly emphasized, promoting the sacredness and necessity of fighting over the homeland to be a real Azerbaijani. The role of Heydar Aliyev in building the nation is also frequently mentioned in commemoration events at schools, with his name tied to all recent glorious events, including gaining independence, ensuring stability and solidarity, and protecting the native language from disappearing.

Meanwhile, the identity promoted through primary school education is focused solely on civic grounds with occasional references to the country’s ethnic Turkic roots. Although ethnic Turkicness is incorporated to it, “Azerbaijani” as a separate national identity is evident in both textbooks and events. In primary school narratives, civic nationhood policy still prevails over multiculturalism policy. The nature of “Azerbaijaniness” is strongly militarized even for primary school students, which can be explained by priority investments in the military sector and the conflict over Karabakh. Military narratives are not only promoted but also directly imposed by declaring every Azerbaijani boy a future soldier who is ready to die for the homeland. The country’s Soviet past is also a topic left out of current primary educational narratives. The only event related to the Soviet time period, namely, the celebration of Victory Day on May 9th, was removed from the school curricula and events schedule after the victory in the Second Karabakh War. Current identity narratives focus solely on the independent period, with only episodic references to the distant past to demonstrate that the nation previously had larger territories.

The nexus of nation-building and regime-building is highly evident, which generates what Broers and

Mahmudlu (2022) call “civic dominion”, i.e., “the domination of a regime tradition, legitimated through the imagery and ideology of civic nationhood”. The primary school national narratives follow this route by intertwining the image of the ruling party with the description

of the nation through symbols and everyday classroom activities, textbooks, and celebration events, leaving little space for universal values related to human rights and democratization.

About the Author

Lamiya Panahova holds a master's degree in international security studies from the University of St Andrews. She is currently a PhD student at the Department of Russian and East European Studies at Charles University, Prague. This article is supported by the SVV project of the Institute of International Studies, FSV UK, No. 260726.

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