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Vertical and Horizontal Nationalism in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

To build a common political identity and to integrate all of the groups in the state, the Azerbaijani government has developed vertical strategies to impose a top-to-bottom nationalist policy. The central government has not only imposed its own discourse about national integration but also restricted any alternative initiatives on the part of formal or informal local institutions. This paper argues that despite all attempts of the central government to impose nationalist policy from top to bottom, its effects are not the same in all parts of the country.

Introduction

Nationalist policy in Azerbaijan after the declaration of independence can be divided into two parts: the Abulfaz Elchibey and Haydar Aliyev periods. Abulfaz Elchibey supported the Turkic origin of the Azerbaijanis and implemented policies to strengthen ethnic identity. Initially, he renamed the national language from Azerbaijan to Turk and opened a debate on the name of the nation. He and his supporters insisted that every nation should be named according to its ethnic origin rather than the name of the place inhabited by its population (Mahmudlu, 2017). Elchibey's ethno-nationalistic policy resulted in the rise of conflicts with the two largest ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, Lezgyns and Talyshs.

When Haydar Aliyev came to power in 1994, he managed to handle separatism problems and attempted to unify the country under a new nationality policy. First, Aliyev changed the name of the language and the nation from "Turkic" to "Azerbaijani" to prevent the ostracization of different non-Turkic ethnic groups that had been involved in separatist movements. The Aliyev administration also adopted Azerbaijan's new constitution, which mentions that "people of Azerbaijan are citizens of the Azerbaijan Republic living in the territory of the Azerbaijan Republic and outside of it, who are subordinate to the Azerbaijan state and its laws, which do not exclude standards of international legislation".¹ Furthermore, Aliyev declared "Azerbaijanism" to be a state ideology.

Furthermore, "Azerbaijanism" has continued to be a main state ideology under Ilham Aliyev after he inherited power from his father Haydar Aliyev (Siroky and Mahmudlu, 2016). Ilham Aliyev has implemented a more active policy in the integration of some ethno-symbolisms, particularly cultural and historical heritage, into state policy. This kind of policy is described

as vertical, from top to bottom, and the main goal is to consolidate all different groups of the country under one civic identity. For this purpose, the government blocked almost all traditional alternative channels that could come from the bottom to prevent the dissemination of competing views and ideas.

Indeed, Azerbaijanism is a complex ideology that comprises permanent state policies that are strengthened with strict legislation due to security and identity concerns and supporting programs and projects, such as the organization of international events (Mahmudlu and Ehtibarli, 2019). In addition, Azerbaijanis have experienced some traumas, such as conflict with Armenians, that are also used as an important element for the consolidation of the nation against common enemies (Broers and Mahmudlu, 2021).

Top-to-Bottom Nationalism

Azerbaijan has a polyethnic society, and a number of ethnicities live in this country. They are related to three language groups: Turkic, Indo-European and Caucasian. However, there are different claims about the exact number of ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan; the State Statistic Committee only accounts for 17 ethnic groups, and the remaining groups correspond to the group of "others"².

The President's Act on the State Aid for the Development of Language and Culture of National Minorities and Protection of Rights and Liberties of Small Nations and Ethnic Groups Living in the Republic of Azerbaijan, which was adopted in 1993, is the only legislation directly protecting the rights of the minorities in Azerbaijan.³ In addition, the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan is the other main legislation that guarantees nondiscrimination and respect for the rights of all the ethnic minorities living in the territory of this country. In the Constitution, Article 11 provides for the develop-

1 See the Constitution of the Azerbaijan Republic (1995). Chapter 1, Article 1.

2 See State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/?lang=en> (Accessed: March 20, 2023)

3 See President Act on the State Aid for the Development of Language and Culture of National Minorities and Protection of Rights and Liberties of Small Nations and Ethnic Groups Living in the Republic of Azerbaijan (1993)

ment and preservation of the culture of the minorities, and Article 44 guarantees the maintenance of national identity⁴. Additionally, with the ratification of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2009, the Republic of Azerbaijan has expressed its willingness to promote and protect cultural diversity and cultural expressions within the territory of the country.

Moreover, legislation regarding education and official language mentions the possibility of carrying out education in different languages for minorities. In addition, the legislation of Azerbaijan allows ethnic minorities to establish their own cultural organizations. In fact, dozens of printed or electronic mass media of minorities are published and broadcast in the territory of Azerbaijan. The members of minority groups are widely represented in the administrative structures of the state. Particularly in local governance units, minority representatives hold leading positions (Mahmudlu and Ehti-barli, 2019).

However, although the legislation of Azerbaijan allows for the free gathering of people and the establishment of political parties, it is forbidden to form such organizations on ethnic and religious bases. In fact, there are no registered and officially recognised political parties on ethnic and religious bases in Azerbaijan. Such a situation makes it difficult to objectively measure the real level of participation of ethnic minorities in the public and political life of this country. In addition, in their observations, some researchers found some problems with social issues and ethnic identity expression (Kotecha, 2006).

The main problem is observed in the protection and development of the languages of minorities. However, the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic has adopted the curriculum for the teaching of native languages of minorities; in practice, it is partially implemented and not extended to the accepted level. On the one hand, weak interest from minorities are observed; on the other hand, there is a deficit of instructors of those languages. In fact, there is no higher education institution preparing instructors for the teaching of native languages. In addition, minorities complain that although they have printed mass media, there is no TV channel or program broadcasting in the languages of ethnic minorities.

Languages can play either unifying or dividing roles. While the spread of official language can form civic identity, the development of native minority languages can motivate the strengthening of ethnic identity. Generally, states in the phase of nation building might be

more interested in the development of an official language rather than in the support and strengthening of the native languages of ethnic minorities.

Considering all of the abovementioned factors, it can be claimed that the aim of the ethnic policy of the Azerbaijani government is to strengthen civic identity among all ethnic minorities. The government invested more in the use of the Azerbaijani language at all levels than in protecting the native languages of minorities. In this regard, the Azerbaijani language was redetermined as the only official language in the first Constitution of the independent Azerbaijan in 1995⁵. Later, in 2001, a decree about the compulsory use of “Latin scripts” was adopted, particularly by the media. The Latinization of the written media was a very important step in the nationalism process in Azerbaijan. In 2006, another decree that prohibited broadcasting TV programs in foreign languages was adopted. According to this decree, all the local nonnative television programs, even the programs in Turkish, had to be translated into Azerbaijani (Ismailzade, 2008).

The goals of the language policy of Azerbaijan are to unify all the people in the state under a single state language by reducing linguistic diversity, to disseminate national ideology through a national language, and to strengthen the context and status of the language to broaden its uniqueness.

The Azerbaijani government also instrumentalized religion to promote its nationalist policy. In fact, the majority of the population of Azerbaijan is Muslim, and recently, the influence of Islam has been raised. To control its influence, the government promoted its own version of Islam, “Traditional Islam” (TI). The Azerbaijani version of TI was introduced not only to protect Azerbaijani society from the influence of various foreign religious groups but also to unify the Muslim population of the country under the same identity (Bedford et al., 2021).

To increase the influence and impact of TI in Azerbaijan, the government implemented a series of measures. For instance, the construction of mosques was monopolized by the state, the creation of the Baku Theology Institute was funded, and the Foundation for the Protection of National Values was established.

Under the banner of ‘Traditional Islam’, the secular authorities in Azerbaijan are actively striving to establish an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative that is controlled and institutionalised by the state (Mahmudlu, 2020).

National security concerns are another important factor shaping Azerbaijan’s nationalist policy. On the

4 See the Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic, Article 11, 44

5 See the Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic, Article 21

eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan was involved in a conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which later developed into a war between the two states. As a result of the war, thousands of people died on both sides, infrastructure was destroyed, and Azerbaijan lost 20% of its territory and was forced to host approximately a million refugees and internally displaced persons (Yuksel et al., 2018; Mahmudlu and Ahmedov, 2014).

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict had a direct influence on the formation and strengthening of the national identities of both nations. In territorial conflicts, the claim of one party is identified by another as a threat to a collective identity and can be the main reason for the dispute (Koleman, 2001). After the I Karabakh War, the Azerbaijan government narrated the aggression of Armenia as a threat to the common interest of people of the country and was able to create an image of a common enemy. The image of a common enemy was also actively used in the construction of national identity (Mahmudlu and Abilov, 2018).

The effect of that policy was observed during the II Karabakh War in 2020. The Azerbaijani government was very successful in mobilizing all ethnic groups in the country to participate in the war and, as a result, liberated a significant part of its occupied territories.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are a number of scholarly works claiming that ethnic identity is still dominant among minority groups, despite the efforts of the vertical nationalism policy of the central governments. For instance, Frederik Barth (1969) claims that elite construction has a limited role in identity building. As he mentioned, in some cases, inter-

ethnic relations are more effective than the dissemination of ideas coming from the centre (Barth, 1969). In his study of Scottish nationalism, Anthony Cohen (1996) explored nationalism from the perspective of individuals' personal preferences. He maintained that nationalism is developed on a personal level, mainly by individuals using local history, language, traditions, folklores, music and some other ethno-differential factors, rather than through the imposition of state-centric policies.

In the case of Azerbaijan, despite all attempts of the central government to impose a nationalist policy from top to bottom, its effects are not the same in all parts of the country. However, the central government not only imposes its own discourse on national integration but also restricts the activities of formal and informal local institutions. However, it is impossible to restrict inter-ethnic, peer-to-peer or village-to-village communication, which leads to the emergence of horizontal nationalism.

In particular, vertical nationalism policy is not very effective in monoethnic rural areas or in the borderland regions of Azerbaijan. In their study of Lezgins and Talyshs, Siroky and Mahmudlu (2016) revealed that in the borderland regions of Azerbaijan, the discourse of the central government on official nationalism is less effective because the level of civic engagement is low in those areas. Naturally, the ethnic groups communicate more with each other and their kin ethnicities on the other side of the border rather than with other ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan. This allows them not only to protect their native languages, folklore, traditions, and even their version of Islam but also to develop those values further. In such a situation, against the imposition of top-to-bottom nationalism by the central government, those ethnic minorities horizontally strengthen their ethnic identity.

About the Author

Ceyhan Mahmudlu is a founder and president of the U.S.-based think-tank Caspian Research Institute (CASPRI).

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The Memory of the Second Karabakh War and the Future of the National Lack in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding, predominantly Azerbaijani-inhabited territories after the First Karabakh War formed a traumatic basis for the formation of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani national identity. The situation fundamentally changed after the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijan regained control over surrounding territories and even began articulating a new irredentist discourse. Based on a psychoanalytic approach, this study examines the reflection of these shifts in unofficial cultural artefacts, namely, *mevkhana*. The article analyses the celebration of the return of national territory, the glorification of veterans, and the mourning of fallen soldiers as three modes of memorialising the war in popular songs. The study also analyses the proliferation of antagonism in the same genre.

Introduction

The emergence of the national liberation movement in Azerbaijan in 1988 is closely connected to the interethnic clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region. Interethnic clashes transformed into nationwide antagonism, utilised by both the protest movement and the government. While the protest movement demanded the protection of the rights of Azerbaijanis expelled from Armenia and the retention of Nagorno-Karabakh within the sovereign borders of Azerbaijan, the government of Nagorno-Karabakh launched a passport-checking operation to identify Armenian armed guerrillas in late 1991, which essentially turned into an ethnic cleansing of Armenian villages (Murphy, 1992). Crisis and interethnic conflict evolved further after the massacre of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Khojaly in February 1992, after which the liberation movement's representatives, the Popular Front, came to power (De Waal, 2003).

The war intensified under their rule in the summer of 1992 when Azerbaijan took control over areas in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the growing power struggle with various warlords led to an internal crisis, which gave the Armenian forces a chance to restore control over Armenian-inhabited areas and occupy several strategic, Azerbaijani-inhabited areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian control led to waves of refugees from these territorial units. The occupation of Kelbajar in April 1993 was especially shocking, and the Popular Front declared a state of emergency (De Waal, 2003, p. 212). The internal crisis was solved after Heydar Aliyev's return to Baku in the summer of 1993, and he soon became Azerbaijan's third president. The first war officially ended in 1994 after both sides signed a ceasefire agreement.

The traumatic impact of the conflict essentially manifested in two events: the Khojaly massacre in 1992 and the loss of territories around Nagorno-Karabakh that formed the basis of antagonism in post-Soviet debates on