

The Development and Establishment of Political Identity in the Republic of Azerbaijan

by Yusuf Özcelik, EuroKaukAsia, Bonn-Berlin

Abstract *There is no doubt that the Azerbaijani people have experienced a very unsteady history for at least two centuries, which has had a deep impact on their national identity. Many times the country has faced a situation of radical changes between self-determination and foreign dominance, consequently leading to mass cultural influence and modernization, but also manipulation and destruction. Against this background, Azerbaijan looks back at a very rocky and tedious process of nation-building. As shown in this essay, the developments are still ongoing. However, the Republic of Azerbaijan has managed to finally reach a balance with regard to its political identity and culture.*

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the Azerbaijani people have experienced a very unsteady history since the beginning of the 19th century. This essay aims to reflect on this highly variable period, which has had an enormous impact on the development of the political identity of the population, by exploring external signs of political identity such as titles, languages and flags.

EVENTFUL HISTORY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AZERBAIJANI IDENTITY

The signing of the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828 heralded the beginning of Russian rule over the territory of contemporary Azerbaijan and with it a period characterized by paradoxical developments. On the one hand, Russian rule initiated an ominous era of massive cultural influence, manipulation and dominance, while on the other hand, the period was marked by modernization and westernization, which led to greater cultural and social prosperity for both Azerbaijan as well as the surrounding predominantly Muslim territories. As a result of the colonization, the country came under the influence of western and modernist ideas.

Previously, the Azerbaijanis played a decisive role in the development of Iran over several centuries. In fact, a form of Turkish

closely related to “Azerbaijani” was even established as the (diplomatic) language of the Persian Empire under Shah Ismail I. in the early 16th century, while Azerbaijanis were generally referred to as “Turks” or “Turkmeni” (Efendiyev 2007, p. 36). However, in the Russian Empire they were referred to as “Tartars”. Although the Russian administration dealt with the terms Azerbaijani and Turk very restrictively, Azerbaijani intellectuals resisted this perceived injustice. The national awakening, which affected the Turkic areas of the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire as of the late 19th century, was based on a pan-Turkish national movement, in which Azerbaijani intellectuals played a crucial role. Already in 1891 Mehmed aga Shakhtakhtli wrote in an article in the newspaper “Kaspi” entitled “What should the trans-Caucasian Muslims be called” that the Turkish-speaking nation consists of Azerbaijanis (Muradaliyeva & Aziz 2010, p. 136). Upon the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, the term “Turk” emerged, which was enforced in the Soviet Union as the sole term used for Azerbaijanis, while all things “Turkish” were oppressed and eradicated. These “terminological tensions” did not subside until 1992 when the country regained its independence and “Azerbaijani” asserted itself as the only formally correct term. However, the national identity is no longer limited exclusively to the “Turkish” family of cultures (Alakbarov 2012).

The etymological origin of the term “Azerbaijan” has not yet been fully clarified. The most prominent explanation is derived from Atropathene, which in turn can be traced back to the Satrap Atropates under Alexander the Great, who also served in the Persian Empire. The term Atropatene essentially described the contemporary province of Azerbaijan in Iran, which is also known as Southern Azerbaijan. In ancient times, the territory of the contemporary republic was called “Albania” and thus named after the ancient Caucasian people known as Albanians, who had nothing to do with the contemporary Albanians (Shkipetars) in the Balkans except for the common foreign appellation. During the late antique period during the Persian Sassanid Empire, the word Atropatene developed into Aturpatakan, while under the Arab rule as of the 7th century it evolved into Azerbaijan under the influence of Arabic (Gink & Turanszky 1980, p. 11).

By majority, the contemporary population of Azerbaijan can be categorized as part of the Turkic family of peoples. Under the rule of the Turkish Seljuqs which began in 1025 and due to the immigration of Turkish tribes from western Central Asia, in particular, the ethnic composition of the territory rapidly changed (Gink & Turanszky 1980, p. 16). Even though the earlier migration of Turkic tribes above all from the contemporary Southern Russian steppe is well documented, such early waves of migration did not have a formative impact (Qeybullayev 1994, p. 8).

When Russian rule was established in the early 19th century based on the Treaty of Turkmenchay, the Azerbaijani *intelligentsia* became an integral part of the Turkish national movement between Istanbul and Tashkent. This had far-reaching consequences for politics, the territory of Azerbaijan, contemporary Turkey, the Crimean Peninsula, the Ural region and

Central Asia. The national movement was a modernist movement, which was largely driven by European ideas. With the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijani in 1918, which occurred nearly simultaneously with the establishment of the Georgian and Armenian Republics during the chaos of the October Revolution in the Russian Empire, the Turkish nationalists asserted their demand for independence (Resulzade 1993, p. 40). Shortly afterwards, voting rights for women were introduced as a sign of modernization. However, the young republic only survived for two years before it was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

The name Azerbaijan did not result automatically as the denomination of the young republic. The naming of the republic was preceded by discussions, during which – besides Azerbaijan – “Turkey” was also considered, as the Republic of Turkey did not yet exist (the neighbouring country was still formally the Ottoman Empire) (Resulzade 1993, p. 47, Alakbarov 2012). The founding father and President Memmed Emin Resulzade was able to assert the name “Azerbaijan”), because in his view “Azerbaijan” referred to the Azerbaijan-Turks as an ethnic denomination (Resulzade 1993, p. 48). The nation was constituted by Azerbaijani Turks and the language was Turkish, but it is important to note that this was the Azerbaijani variation of the language.

With the establishment of the republic in 1918 a red flag with a crescent and eight-edged star based on Ottoman flag of the 19th century was introduced. Later on, the Azerbaijani national activist Ali Bey Huseynzade added the colours blue and green to the red in order to represent the Turkish heritage (i.e. “Turkdom”) and Islam (Aliyev & Maharramov 2008, p. 14).

THE AZERBAIJANI SSR (1920-1991) AND SOVIETIZATION

The incorporation of Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union initially masked the national question. Initially, under the leadership of the Azerbaijani revolutionist Nariman Narimanov the establishment of Soviet power was constituted in a smooth manner. However, with the increasing stabilization of the Union and the ongoing cultural revolution, severe changes were imminent in the cultural identities of the Muslim peoples, in particular, which had a significant impact on the following dimensions.

First, at the linguistic level, the denomination of and later the content and substance of the official language became a central issue of power politics. For those peoples, who did not yet have an own standard language as a language of literature and culture, the development of the standard and literary language on the basis of their local dialects became a requirement. For example, this was the case with the Central Asian peoples who used Chagatai (Turki, Eastern Turkish), which is the linguistic “forerunner” of contemporary Uzbek. This created an artificial barrier between the linguistically related peoples.

This also applied to Azerbaijani, as the targeted language policy led to its alienation from Ottoman/ Anatolian Turkish and the other Turkic languages. This policy involved not only a list of forbidden words, which corresponded with the common vocabulary of these languages. The Soviet authorities also promoted the targeted construction of neologisms and borrowed words from Russian, which in turn facilitated a decade-long “linguistic estrangement” up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Alakbarov 2012).

The second dimension was the policy

regarding the written language. While the Christian peoples neighbouring Azerbaijan – the Georgians and Armenians – were allowed to maintain their century-old alphabets, the Azerbaijanis and all other Muslim peoples in the Union had to replace their also century-old alphabets based on Arabic first with the uniform Latin alphabet and several years later with a Cyrillic alphabet with partially different letters (Fenz 2003, p. 113).

For many ethnic groups this was praised as cultural progress with the trivial and dubious justification that they did not yet have their own language of literature. However, this explanation cannot be accepted at face value. As described above, since there was previously no need for an own standard language based on a local dialect, this function was generally fulfilled by passed down standard languages such as Chagatai (Turki, Eastern Turkish) in Central Asia or Turkish (Azerbaijani variant) in the Caucasus. The consequence of the change in alphabets was that the Soviet leadership now had come to control the fundamental issue of identity and was able to dilute all previously strong ties between neighbouring Muslim peoples.

The additional changes affected the identity and the historical self-conception of the Azerbaijani nation. The national realignment practically took place over night. While during the early years of the Soviet Union the designation “Turk” was printed as the nation of the Azerbaijanis in their personal identity documents, this was changed to “Azerbaijanis” in 1937. From that point on, it was not only frowned upon to call Azerbaijanis Turks or the language Turkish, but also forbidden (Mikayilov 2009). This also had an impact on the censorship policy. Even the famous Azerbaijani poet Samad Vurgun was affected by censorship. He began his translation of “Yevgeni

Onegin", a work by the great Russian author Pushkin, with the words "I have translated the masterpiece of Russian poetry into the language of the Turks for the first time". Due to the ban on the term "Turk" for Azerbaijanis, he had to convert the introduction "into the language of Vaqif", an Azerbaijani poem and prime minister of the Azerbaijani Khanate of Karabakh from the 18th century, who was acknowledged to have written poetry in "Turkish" (Hilal qizi 2011).

The Soviet government first introduced a flag based on the Turkish flag with a crescent and star. However, it was already replaced in 1921 by a new flag based on the Soviet communist flag which was then modified several times under Soviet rule.

The development of the issue of identity was to be substantiated by historical events. Here the so called "Median hypothesis" was put forward that the Azerbaijanis were only Turkicized Medians, an antique Iranian people which settled in modern-day southern Azerbaijan.

Last but not least, the Stalinist terror regime proved to be a severe incursion into societal discourse in Azerbaijan. Nationalist poets such as Huseyin Djavid were deported to Siberia after 1937 if they were not murdered beforehand.

REGAINED INDEPENDENCE (1991)

The new independence of Azerbaijan in 1991 was characterized by the conflict with the Armenians. In this phase under the leadership of Ayaz Muttalibov, the identity-related status quo was maintained to a great extent. However, opposition movements such as the People's Front were able to largely assert their demands vis-à-vis official state policy. Once Muttalibov was forced to resign as a result of

the massacre of Khodjali, in which civilians were killed by Armenian fighters, the path to power had been paved for the People's Front.

Azerbaijan's independence was preceded by mass protests starting in 1988, which had been organized by the People's Front in particular. During this phase, the old flag of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan from 1918 re-emerged for the first time in decades. Already in February 1991, thus eight months before formal independence, the old flag was again officially introduced.

After Azerbaijan regained independence in 1991 and under the leadership of the People's Front headed by Ebülfez Elçibey, the name Azerbaijan was not a subject of debate. It was widely accepted in society and had established itself as the designation of the Azerbaijanis as the titular nation. Instead, the debate raged with regard to the designation of the language. For the People's Front, Azerbaijani was a variation of Turkish in the tradition of the founding father Memmed Emin Resulzade. Subsequently, Turkish was defined as the language of the country in the constitution. Simultaneously, the People's Front pursued a linguistic and cultural convergence with Turkey, by aligning the alphabet with the modern Turkish alphabet based on Latin and by imposing a language policy similar to that of Turkey. Also, the Median hypothesis was ultimately discredited.

However, these policies were ridden with conflict potential. They were not preceded by an open political discourse, so that Azerbaijanis of other ethnical origins indeed felt blindsided, leading to increased social tensions (Babayev 2007, p. 61).

4.1. STABILIZATION UNDER HAYDAR ALIYEV (1993-2003)

The rule of the People's Front did not last very long and was terminated by a military coup in 1993 led by colonel Surat Huseynov, the later Prime Minister. In this time of political chaos Haydar Aliyev was able to assume the presidency and stabilize the country and bring it back from political crisis with a more balanced approach. He essentially further pursued the national policy of his predecessor Ebülfez Elçibey. In view of the lasting conflict with neighbouring Armenia over Nagorny-Karabakh and an increasingly unpleasant "sandwich position" between the two pro-Armenian governments of Russia and Iran, he also felt compelled to sustain the strategic western orientation of his predecessor. In this regard, he proved to be a rather skilful "balancing actor" between the powerful Russian neighbour and western allies (Bagirov 2011, p. 182).

When he assumed power, the constitutional modification introduced by the Elçibey administration, according to which the language of the republic was "Turkish", was re-modified in 1995 to make "Azerbaijani" the national language. The titular nation is no unambiguously designated as Azerbaijanis. Other terms such as "Turks", "Azeris" or "Az-eri-Turks" are now entirely absent in official language usage (Alakbarov 2012). This had the effect that the domestic political discourse was somewhat relaxed and ethnic tensions dismantled.

At the same time Aliyev attempted to uphold the "bridge to the western brother country" Turkey, by speaking of two countries and one nation during numerous visits to Turkey. This policy is being further pursued by his son

Ilham Aliyev.

The new Azerbaijani alphabet on the basis of the modern Latin-based Turkish alphabet became more widespread under Aliyev. The long-term rule of Aliyev also resulted in a strong focus on the national issue, whereby the term Azerbaijani corresponds with a broad social consensus. In internal and external discussion there is no doubt regarding the national denomination: all parties and societal groups have come to accept the term Azerbaijani for the people and language as an expression of their national identity, however the societal discourse is still ongoing (Babayev 2007, p. 67).

OUTLOOK

Azerbaijan looks back at a very rocky and tedious process of nation-building. The developments show that the process is still ongoing. However, it is apparent that the choice for Azerbaijan as the name of the country was constructive for the still young nation. The term, which at that time was perceived as ethnically neutral, was able to give many representatives of smaller Muslim ethnic groups, such as Avars, Kurds, Ingiloy and Tats, the sense that they are part of the overarching titular nation (Alakbarov 2012). This process of homogenization is not yet entirely complete, but already very advanced.

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About the author:

YUSUF ÖZCELİK has obtained his diploma degree in Business Administration and master's degree in Regional Sciences - Central Asia and the Caucasus. He is founding member and board member of the academic association EuroKaukAsia e.V., specialist in Psychology of Ethnic Conflicts. Recent publications: Özcelik, Y., 2009. Ethnische Vielfalt in Kaukasien, *Eurokaukasia.de*, [online] Arbeitspapier, Juni 2009; Özcelik, Y., 2009. Psychologie ethnischer Konflikte. Historische Wurzeln und psychologische Mechanismen ethnischer Konflikte am Beispiel Kaukasiens. *Eurokaukasia.de*, [online] Arbeitspapier.
e-mail: yusuf.ozcelik@t-online.de