

Brains for Hire

Education and Nation-building in Contemporary Azerbaijan

Forum >
Central Asia

In an attempt to fill the post-Soviet ideological vacuum and to consolidate power, the leaders of newly independent Azerbaijan turned to 'Azerbaijanism', pan-Turkic ideology, the idea of Western style civil society, and the Azerbaijani past. The war with Armenia, the socio-economic crisis, and indoctrination through the public education system all heavily influenced the new nation's shaping identity.

By Irina Morozova

In 1993, G. Aliyev, a former member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, became the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan. After consolidating the branches of power, Aliyev installed his clan to administer the country. Just before his death in 2003, his son Ilham Aliyev was elected president. Azerbaijani leaders and policy makers sought a uniting national idea that would strengthen the position of the Aliyev clan throughout the country. They commissioned the nation's intellectuals and educators to develop themes addressing 'the united Azerbaijani nation' and 'the territorial integrity of the Azerbaijani lands'. Those who remained employed in public education after the dramatic budget cuts had little choice but to comply. By the beginning of the 1990s, fundamental research was hardly distinguishable from populist agitation, leaving the Azerbaijani public without tools to distinguish fact from fiction.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Azerbaijani nationalism, which never seemed radical during the time of the USSR, broke out with renewed force after independence. The lost war against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-1994) provoked ethnic hatred and a desire for revenge. Defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh sharpened the defensive feelings of the small Azerbaijani nation, suppressed and divided in former times by its great neighbours Russia and Iran.

Suffering from low morale, the Azerbaijani people demanded new, comforting, and encouraging national concepts. Not only historians considered it their duty to write on the glories of the Azerbaijani nation. Intellectuals, publicists, scientists, and journalists from all sorts of backgrounds came together to furnish proof that Nagorno-Karabakh had belonged to the Azerbaijani people from time immemorial. The idea of 'the great Azerbaijan state' possessing territory in contemporary

Iran, Armenia, and Georgia gained great currency.

The most popular theme within numerous branches of academia became the national liberation movement in Azerbaijan at the beginning of the twentieth century. Researchers went back in time to rediscover the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict at the beginning of the twentieth century, re-interpreting the recorded thoughts and actions of Azerbaijani leaders to draw parallels to the present. The entire history of Azerbaijan came to be viewed as a long struggle for independence and recognition.

For the last thirteen years, history classes in the schools and universities of Azerbaijan have been taught from this avowedly nationalistic perspective. Consequently, the younger generation has grown up determined to regain the occupied lands of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹ So long as the key positions at the leading universities are occupied or controlled by Aliyev's clan, and intellectuals and educators are pressured to participate in the nation-building project, trustworthy research in the social and human sciences has little chance to appear.²

Between pan-Turkism and westernization

In the early 1990s Azerbaijani nationalism came under the influence of pan-Turkic ideology. Appealing to the Turkic origins of the Azerbaijani people, private Turkish charitable organizations set up a network of educational centres promoting Turkey's interests in Central Eurasia. They successfully recruited Azerbaijani youth to schools based on the Turkish academic system, winning converts to pan-Turkic ideology. These attempts faced few obstacles from the government, which considers Turkey a close and reliable ally. Attempts to consolidate Azerbaijan's Turkic identity did not, however, receive the unanimous support of the country's political and intellectual elite; many preferred a more distinct national identity for Azerbaijan. By the end of the 1990s, pan-Turkism had lost much of its popularity, although Turkish-sponsored

schools and universities were allowed to continue their activities.

Alongside the pro-Turkish institutes, there exist a number of pro-Western private universities that claim to be bringing Western education to Azerbaijan. The orientation of these universities corresponds to the official state ideology pertaining to democracy, civil society, and human rights. At the beginning of the 1990s, many Azerbaijanis assumed that abandoning Soviet communist ideology and its accompanying system of education would immediately lead them to the same level of democratic development as in the West. This, however, did not happen. Innovations introduced in the Western-orientated institutes remained superficial: despite the new administration, examination system, and Western-style diplomas and degrees, no essential changes were made to the content of education. Lec-

turers at these institutes were often state university professors who, due to budget cuts in public education, agreed to part-time positions in the private sector. By the end of the 1990s Azerbaijani policy makers were making greater efforts to preserve the positive aspects of the Soviet educational system such as free access to education and resulting high literacy rates, and the high level of secondary education.³

A new brand on the market

Periodically, presidential teams come out with new ideas. The concept of 'Azerbaijanism' was invented by G. Aliyev, and was partly based on an Azerbaijani interpretation of Americanism.⁴ According to its main idea, there is no special Azeri identity in Azerbaijan that should be developed into the national paradigm. The Azeri, accounting for 70-80 per cent of the population, should observe the constitution and laws on equal terms with the other nationalities of contemporary Azerbaijan.⁵ However positive the desire to maintain the legal structure and prevent the country from falling apart

along ethnic lines may seem, the main goal of this 'Azerbaijanism' is to strengthen presidential power across the territory of the Republic.

Pro-Turkish, pro-Western and pro-Soviet/Russian ideological streams in the education system have been tolerated by the former and current presidents of Azerbaijan – so long as they serve Aliyev's cult. Public and private schools do not succeed without the President's portrait in the director's cabinet. ◀

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- 1 During my field research in Baku in May 2003, I interviewed 100 Azerbaijani students, postgraduate students, and postdocs, aged 18 to 30. No less than 95 of them stated that they considered a military campaign to be the most probable solution to the Karabakh problem.
- 2 Practically every one of the 21 Azerbaijani doctors and professors I interviewed in Baku was unimpressed by contemporary Azerbaijani theoreticians in the social and human sciences.
- 3 Interview with Prof. Ramiz T. Humbatov of the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy, Baku, May 2003.
- 4 The central idea of Americanism can be described as the fulfilment of civil and military duties to the state and the president, respect for the US flag and anthem, and loyalty to American values such as freedom of speech, civil society, and free enterprise.
- 5 Interview with Prof. Parvin Gulam Darabadi, Department of International Relations of Baku State University, Baku, May 2003.