Migration and the Construction of the Ethno-National Diaspora in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

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In Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

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Introduction

Up to the end of the 1990s, the discourse around the phenomenon of mass emigration from Azerbaijan was mainly around the outflow of representatives of various ethnic groups (Armenians, Russian, Jews), mass deportations during the Karabakh conflict, or even more so around mass post-Soviet labour migration of that part of inhabitants of the country who were commonly viewed as the indigenous population of the republic (Azeris, Lezgis, Talyshes, etc.) In the latter case, Azeri abroad, particularly in Russia, were quite often portrayed as a discriminated minority. By virtue of force majeure circumstances, they had to leave their homeland, and everything possible needs to be done to get them back.

However, no mass re-emigration happened. On the contrary, the beginning of the new century was marked by intensification of the official policy of designing an ethno-national community, now habitually referred to as “Azeri Diaspora”, that was to include “our compatriots” living outside their official (“historical”) homeland. The latest significant event is one of the first decrees that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed after his re-election to the post in October 2008. This is the decree “On the establishment of the State Committee of the Azerbaijani Republic for Work with Diaspora”, which was signed on 19 November 2008. Naturally, everything was confined to the mere renaming of the already existing “State Committee for Azerbaijanis Living Abroad” (established in 2002).

Henceforth this term (“Diaspora”) gains an increasing popularity when referring to the ethnic Azeris living outside the Azerbaijan Republic (AR), and priority is now given not to the re-emigration of “compatriots”, but to designing a transnational diasporic community. In the context of the official post-Soviet nationalistic ideology “Azerbaijanism” (“Azərbaycançılıq”) and diasporic discourse, Azeris as members of the ethno-nation are endowed with the qualities of a powerful, fifty-million-strong community with clear borders whose members live across the world. Or, as I think, a bureaucratic simulacra, or an image of a real, homogenous group, having interests across the world, is being constructed. In the very same transnational space, in the context of the «Azerbaijani Diaspora» discourse, a deadly confrontation with the “consolidated Armenian Diaspora” is also imagined, and the local Karabakh conflict is transformed into some kind of large-scale worldwide confrontation. And these are only two main features of the official diasporic discourse.

The tangle of opinions, interests and expectations of intellectuals, all sorts of experts and politicians concerning Azerbaijanis abroad, is also shaped depending on the foreign policy preferences of the authorities and politicians in the official homeland (Azerbaijan Republic). Thus, an active involvement of the «Azerbaijani Diaspora» is presumed in the campaign for the recognition of injustice in the assessment of the events of 1915 in Anatolia, namely of the genocide claims put forward to Turkey, present-day major ally of Azerbaijan. The declared foreign policy priorities acquire a special meaning too (for example, orientation towards participation in European and Euro-Atlantic structures). It is within these contexts that an increasing popularity is gained annually by the ideas that present ethnic Azeris in Germany, the USA, Russia, or in any other country that has weight in world politics, as a certain significant political resource which the authority in the country of origin (homeland) can and should use to achieve certain political preferences. On the whole, at the level of declarations, this primarily means advertising «democratic transformations» carried out by the ruling regime in Azerbaijan, presenting the «young»
Azerbaijani community abroad, and also resolving the Karabakh conflict, which assumes, for example, also a certain «struggle with world Armenians», «which, in the opinion of President Ilham Aliyev, “we [i.e. Azerbaijanis of all the world] should oppose with unity and force». Given similar expectations connected to attempts to implement the project aimed at designing a transnational community, both representatives of the authority in the country of origin and ethnic groups in host countries aspire to represent Azerbaijanis abroad as a successfully developed, united and consolidated ethno-national «Diaspora».

However, without going into discussion about the legitimacy of the usage of the term «Diaspora», it is necessary to note that the emigration process, transnational migration network and communities of Azerbaijanis living outside their official homeland, should be investigated within the context of the discourse described. It is in the space of the discourse practice of the authorities that Azerbaijanis outside their political homeland acquire the features of ethno-national Diaspora.

These are, in my view, the general trends that can be marked out when examining migration processes in which many residents of Azerbaijan have been involved in the post-Soviet period. Further in the text, the structure of the article will be as follows: first, it will give the specifics of emigration connected with the ethnic composition of the population of the republic. Then I discuss emigration processes, which members of the dominating ethnic group (i.e. Azerbaijanis or Azeri Turks), and also representatives of those groups of the population that are referred to as “indigenous” (Talyshes, Lezgis, etc), joined. Finally, the report will be concluded by information on the process of the construction of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani Diaspora.

### Ethnic Composition of the Population and Migration

The official version (results of 1999 census), represents the composition of the population of the country by the largest ethnic groups in the following way (in thousands of people and in percentage of overall population) (Statistical Yearbook 2008, p. 77):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Population (in thousands)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijanis</td>
<td>7,205.5 – 90.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lezgis</td>
<td>178.0 – 2.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>141.7 – 1.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>120.7 – 1.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talishes</td>
<td>76.8 – 1.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avars</td>
<td>50.9 – 0.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatars</td>
<td>30.0 – 0.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>29.0 – 0.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turks</td>
<td>43.4 – 0.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakhurs</td>
<td>15.9 – 0.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgians</td>
<td>14.9 – 0.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>8.9 – 0.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above all, it should be stated that official statistics serves as a ground to present the country as homogenous to its maximum in regard to ethnic structure of the population (90.7% of the population are Azerbaijanis). However, ethnic activists often question data of the last population census (1999), and claim that the real number of a national minority has been decreased. At the same time mass media, as well as analytical expertise have tendency to assess the role of an ethnic minority not only on the basis of its number, but habitat too. For instance, Lezgis who are one of the biggest ethnic groups of the North Caucasian language family (official number is 178,000) populate the North of the country that is the border land with the Russian Federation (Gusar and other districts). The border with Russia divides Lezgis into two unequal parts (the majority lives in Russia). Such compact inhabitance in border lands is considered by Azerbaijani experts as unsafe for the country’s integrity. Such discourse is also related towards one of the biggest ethnic minority of Azerbaijan – Talyshes who belong to the Iranian Language Family (official number is 76,000). They populate the Southern parts of the country bordering with Iran (Masally, Lankaran and other districts). As in case of Lezgis, Talyshes might be considered as a divided ethnic group (the majority lives in Iran). As the majority of Azerbaijanis, Talyshes are also ascribed to Shiite Muslims.

At the same time, Lezgis and Talishes are often described as “indigenous” ethnic groups, i.e. not having “another” motherland (See, for example: “The Conception of National Policy of
Azerbaijan Republic” by Guseynov (2003), p. 3-4), unlike, for example, Armenians, Russians or Jews. As a result, there are no any credible statistics of emigration from the country of Lezgis or Talishes. One can only assert that a considerable part of the population of the southern districts of the republic, which are actually populated by the Talishes, has emigrated from the country. In the case with Talishes, one should also mention the appearance in the post-Soviet period of emigrants’ networks and Diaspora (ethnic) organizations. For example, the leader of the unrecognized Talish-Mugan autonomous republic (TMAR), Aliakram Humbatov, was released from prison and effectively stripped of citizenship of the Azerbaijani Republic and is in the Netherlands. In this country, in 2005, he became the head of an organization called “Talish national movement”. A number of similar organizations operated in Belarus and also in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Among other ethnic groups, Armenians and Jews almost completely and Russians to a considerable extent, also emigrated from the country during the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Karabakh conflict or in the post-Soviet period. The current composition of the population of the capital, where a considerable part of representatives of these ethnic groups lived or continues to live, can speak volumes about the scale of this emigration.

“According to the 1989 census, about 146,000 Armenians lived in Baku in that period, and counting the settlements around the city – about 180,000. At that, most Armenians lived in the centre of Baku. It was these areas that the main flow of refugees from Armenia (over 200,000) poured into in 1988-89…” (Yunusov 2000, p. 66).

The total number of Armenians in the republic was 390,000 in 1989. After the January 1990 pogroms, almost all of the Armenian population left the city. However, according to the Azerbaijan State Statistics Committee, 120,700 Armenians continue to live in the republic, almost all of them said to be in the Karabakh region, in which State Statistics Committee officials could not work. Probably because of some statements of President Heydar Aliyev, different figures were released by experts too.

For example, political analyst Rovshan Novruzoglu said that official data alone, voiced by the same Heydar Aliyev, put the number of Armenians outside Karabakh to 30,000. Ruud Lubbers, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees picked up this figure (2004). It should be noted that according to the 1999 census, only 645 people referred to themselves as Armenians. However, Arif Yunusov disputes this figure, too. He says that 1,393 Armenians lived in Baku by 1996 (Yunusov 2000, p. 66).

Concerning Russians – 392.3 thousands of them were living in Azerbaijan according to the 1989 population census. Now (1999 population census) official number is 141.700 people. Russians are still one of the biggest ethnic groups in the Azerbaijan Russian population is ever decreasing. The reason of such decrease is intensive emigration of Russians from Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Russian ethnic organizations (“Russian community in Azerbaijan”) are of the viable ones. There are compact settlements outside Baku (Russians in the village of “Ivanovka” of the district of Ismayilly). The population of the latter settlement is ethnic group in itself – Molokans. This is one of the most famous villages in the Republic (the last kolkhoz or collective farm, in the South Caucasus) with approximate population of 2000/2500 people. Moreover, in the village live about 500 Lezgis.

Azerbaijan is also one of the post-Soviet countries where one of the largest communities of ethnic Jews lived. According to the current leader of the community of European Jews, G. K. Zelmanovich (European (Ashkenazi) Jews community), (interview was conducted in May 2010), there were at least 100,000 representatives of this community in the 1970s in Baku and Sumgayit alone). These include, certainly, children born to mixed marriages (according to the official statistics – only 30.8 thousands in 1989). In the 1970s-1980s and in the post-Soviet period Jews population of the country is ever decreasing. Now by official statistics there are only about 8.900 Jews who are still living in Azerbaijan. There is the biggest compact settlement in the post-Soviet space outside Baku - Jews in Red Quarter in Guba city. A lot of Jews left country for Israel, Germany, USA or Russia after the Soviet Union collapsed. At the same time, it is also possible to
note that the number of Jews in Azerbaijan varies between 8,900 (census of 1999) and about 26,000 (figures provided by Jewish community chairman Moshe Bekker, 2000).

Post-Soviet Migration Processes

During the last two decades (1990-2009) 266.1 thousands of people arrived to the country for permanent living and 707.5 thousands departed from Azerbaijan by official statistics. According to the official statistics the balance of migration was negative for Azerbaijan (though not really considerable) almost all these years. But in the last two years more people arrived in the country than left it. On the grounds of these figures the authorities announced that Azerbaijan has become attractive for immigrants. President Ilham Aliyev’s phrase: “Number of foreigners intending to visit the Republic of Azerbaijan will increase while Azerbaijan is developing. This can be considered as a positive factor for our country. However in any case we must prefer the interests of our state, people, citizens and this must be the priority direction of our migration policy” on the home page of the Internet Site of the “State Migration Service of Azerbaijan Republic” in fact, is the official declaration of the changes in the situation of the migration process. These ideas have been set at the level of state law in “Decree by the president of the Azerbaijani Republic on the use of the principle of “one window” in the management of migration processes” (4th of March 2009).

As regards the emigration from the country, the primary concern of the authorities during the post-Soviet period was labor migrants oriented to Russia. There is no doubt, that this is the most numerous emigrant group from Azerbaijan, heading both for permanent place of residence and seasonal job (labor migration). In addition, the best part of the money transfer to Azerbaijan comes from the migrants living in Russia. As a result the Azerbaijan authorities (at least, after Heydar Aliyev came to the power in 1993) sought to a simplified (visa-free) regime between the Azerbaijan Republic and the Russian Federation (Seyidbayli 2009, p. 103-111). But generally, the state politics (especially from 2000s onwards) was aimed at the construction of the “Azerbaijani Diaspora”. The very diasporic politics largely defines the specificity of the construction of the statistics on the number of ethnic Azeris living abroad.

The criteria that can be used to identify who should be described as Azerbaijani living abroad are given in Article 1 of the current version of the “Charter of Solidarity of Azerbaijans of the World” headlined “The Ethno-Social and Philosophical Notion ‘Azerbaijani’”. In the opinion of the authors of the Charter, “Azerbaijans “are united by such ethnographic-cultural features as language, religion and spirituality”. The structure of the notion of Azerbaijans includes: first, Azerbaijans themselves (here the authors of the Charter apparently mean ethnic Azeris or, as it became commonplace to think in the post-Soviet period, Azeri Turks). Second, “Ethnic minorities who live in Azerbaijan and have merged with Azerbaijans of Turkic origin”; and finally, third, in the spirit of modern liberalism, anyone that regards themselves as Azerbaijani.

In the opinion of the authors of the Charter, “the fact that many Azerbaijans are citizens of various states must not prevent their ethnic unification”. The first (and the most important) reason why dispersion should not be an obstacle for unity is the existence of the independent Azerbaijan Republic. Other criteria are “Historical motherland etched in the ethnic memory of the people”, then follow traditions, language, religion, ethno-social outlook, ethno-cultural system of rules, ideology of “Azerbaijanism” (“Azərbaycançılıq”), and finally the fact that there is a “national leader” in the shape of the former president Heydar Aliyev.

The constructed official statistics of the number of ethnic Azeris looks somewhat contradictory. But on the whole, it can be demonstrated in the following way. On the official (governmental) site dedicated to the 1st Congress of Azerbaijans of the World (Gurultay), which was held in Baku on 9-10 November 2001, general information has been posted dedicated to the “Azerbaijani Diaspora”. In addition to everything else, it says that “According to rough estimates, about 45 million Azerbaijans live in 70 countries of the world, including Azerbaijan, today”.

By the time the 2nd Congress of Azerbaijans of the World (Gurultay) was to be held (16 March 2006) the then “State Committee for Work with Azerbaijans living abroad” prepared a
documentary with the eloquent title “We are a 50m-strong people”. Ever since, this film has been one of the mandatorily viewed ones at various official events linked to the implementation of the Diaspora project. And this is of course not the only film of this kind. The important ideological significance of such films for the ruling regime in the country becomes clear if one remembers that the opening of the 2nd Congress of Azerbaijanis of the World (March 2006) started with the demonstration of another one of them, entitled “We, Azerbaijanis”. This film aims to propagate within the “Diaspora” the activities of the former president (and the father of the incumbent), Heydar Aliyev.

Considering the special significance that is attached to statistics, it is natural that the compilers of the “Charter of Solidarity of Azerbaijanis of the World” dwelled upon the issue of the number of ethnic Azeris. The text of the Charter says there are as many as over 50m Azerbaijanis. According to “rough estimates” by the compilers of this document, four out of five ethnic Azeris live in their “historical motherland” and only one out of five outside it (10m of all ethnic Azeris).

All the official 10m ethnic Azeris that live outside their “historical motherland” in the context of Diaspora discourse become a united and homogenous ethno-national Diaspora, regardless of whether they previously were (or currently are) citizens of the Azerbaijan Republic itself, Georgia, Iran, or Turkey. The discourse and bureaucratic practices of construction of Diaspora

On the whole, the mechanisms of the implementation of the political project for the construction of Diaspora come down to two major and inter-related practices. **The first is the discourse practice.** Via discourse practice, all those whom ethnic activists and officials in the political motherland identify as ethnic Azeris are viewed as “Azerbaijani Diaspora”, quite often using statistics as a habitual “institution of power”. At that, the extent of the intensiveness of daily ties and contacts between actors, who are ascriptively viewed as a Diaspora community of Azerbaijanis, no solidarity of their political or any other interests is discussed. In the context of official diasporic discourse, all Azerbaijanis in all situations are a homogenous and united community (ethno-national Diaspora) that is invariably loyal to the construct of ideal political motherland-nation.

Yes, on the one hand, said the previous Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev in his speech at the 1st Congress of Azerbaijanis of the World, “We believe that every one of the Azerbaijanis living in various countries have settled their life in that country in the way they want. Every one of them is a citizen of that country, and must live by its laws and rules and go along the path selected”. However, this loyalty to the host country “must” (this imperative tone is also present in the text of the Charter – S. R.) be accompanied also by loyalty towards the political motherland, and “Azerbaijanis living outside Azerbaijan must today maintain closer ties with independent Azerbaijan”.

However, my observations make it possible to assume that the daily routine of many statistical Azerbaijanis living in Russia or Germany (or any other country), is to a much larger extent determined by how they ended up in one of this countries or from what country they emigrated, and not by the intensiveness of contacts with other representatives of the imaginary community or ties with their official homeland and intensive activities in the cultural and other spheres.

The routine, practically daily reminder in the media about the activities of the “Azerbaijani Diaspora”, constant interviews with ethnic activists, officials and various sorts of public figures talking about their successes in the implementation of the project for the construction of Diaspora, form the discursive effect of truth within the context of which “Diaspora” acquires the features of a true, large, joint and homogenous community united by common goals. **The second is the bureaucratic practice of the production of a hierarchically structured and co-subordinated organization structure.** A rapid bureaucratization of social networks of Azerbaijanis in the world occurs, as a result of which an organizational structure of Diaspora is constructed. Here I mean a process where increasingly more new Diaspora organizational structures
are produced within the context of actualization of contacts with political homeland. More and more often ethnic Azeris, who temporarily or constantly live in CIS and EU countries, USA or Canada and so on are referred to as “a homogenous group” - the “Azerbaijani Diaspora”.

Eventually, despite the active Diaspora policy of the Azerbaijani regime, the entire activity immediately in emigration comes down to the activity of a number of ethnic activists who for a variety of reasons participate in the work of organizations that they themselves created. However, such a low activity in emigration is not an obstacle for the increasingly numerous ethnic organizations to become a major element of the discourse within the space of which constructs of the ethno-national “Azerbaijani Diaspora” acquire the features of a real consolidated community.

All these diasporic organizations carry out the function of presenting the ever-growing organization and activities of “Azerbaijani Diaspora” within the diasporic discourse. Starting with organizations that apparently represent communities of cities (for instance, “Mainz-Azerbaijan”), and then communities of one or another EU country (for instance, “the Advisory Council of Azerbaijani Diaspora organizations”, operating in Germany, was founded in Mainz in July 2007). These organizations are increasingly more often divided into youth ones and not. All these structures operate with support from and/or under monitoring by the Azerbaijani Embassy in Germany. Then follows a body apparently uniting all Azerbaijanis of Europe (for instance, the Congress of European Azerbaijanis) and above them is an organization that apparently represents all Azerbaijanis of the world and coordinates their activities – “Coordinating Council of Azerbaijanis of the World”. This structure, which is uniform from local organizations up to those that represent all ethnic communities and which is constructed by the principle of state vertical of power, seems to be simple, clear, transparent and convenient to control. At the head of this structure there is “a minister for the Diaspora”, already subordinated, directly, to the pan-Azeri president.