



CARIM EAST – CONSORTIUM FOR APPLIED RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Co-financed by the European Union

Migration for the Purposes of Education in the Context of Modernization Ideas in Azerbaijan

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CARIM-East Explanatory Note 13/87

Socio-Political Module

June, 2013



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Introduction

During the Soviet period, Moscow and St. Petersburg (particularly, after the Second World War), were the centers of attraction for the young Azeri persons. In those years, thousands of persons from the Republic have taken advantage of the possibility to receive higher education in the most prestigious universities and institutions of the USSR. Amongst them was the current President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, who graduated from the most elitist Soviet institutions of higher education - the Moscow State Institute of International Relations¹. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, studying at the universities in the U.S., the UK, Germany or France is becoming increasingly prestigious. A “Western” diploma and the knowledge of any European language (most often, English) significantly increase the possibility of receiving prestigious employment in the major transnational companies or international organizations and foundations operating in Azerbaijan.

The members of the political and bureaucratic elite of modern Azerbaijan prefer to send their children to universities in Europe or the U.S. For example, both daughters of President Ilham Aliyev studied at the universities in Switzerland and the UK². In this case, a diploma of a European or an American university is not bound to the necessity of better employment, but it is associated with a higher status of “western” institutions of higher education compared to those existing in Azerbaijan. In addition, an increasing popularity of European and American institutions of higher education also implies the political orientation of the ruling regime in Azerbaijan towards the cooperation with the EU and the U.S.

Main Part

One can conditionally define three key aspects related to educational migration and its impact on the ideology of modernization of post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

The *first* aspect: specific tasks that are determined by those countries that receive students and/or potential immigrants.

The *second* aspect: the objectives of the authorities of the sending country (that is, the Azeri political regime) to run a state program to send students abroad. In other words, how the Azeri authorities intend to use the Azeri persons who are receiving (or who have already received) education abroad, especially those who have not returned to the country of origin.

The *third* aspect: to look at the situation through the eyes of those students or young professionals who have received education in the EU or the U.S., and have returned or have not returned to Azerbaijan³.

It should be understood that the current students and those Azeri persons, who have received their education abroad, do not represent a single homogeneous group. It is possible to refer to them as a

¹ Andrianov, V., Miralamov G. (2007). Ilham Aliyev. Moskva: Molodaya Gvardia, p. 27-29, 33-40.

² In addition to the UK, the eldest daughter, Leyla Aliyeva, has studied in the MGIMO in 2006-2008. Ibid, p. 331, 383. See also the official site of Leyla Aliyeva. Available at: www.leyla-aliyeva.az/en/biografiya/, date of access May 20, 2013.

³ It is important to emphasize that in the framework of this analysis modernization stands solemnly for the modernization of social and political spheres. In the framework of the official state ideology (as well as political opponents of the ruling regime), this is a question of democratic reforms and the formation of modern political institutions. Along the lines of modernization of Azerbaijan (or the utility of borrowing elements from the "Western model"), for example, speaks the chief of the official ideology of the ruling political regime in the country - a philosopher, an academic, and the head of the presidential administration – Ramiz Mekhtiyev. See: *Определяя стратегию будущего: курс на модернизацию* [Defining the strategy for the future: modernization]. Available at: http://www.1news.az/articles.php?item_id=20080110113244532&sec_id=6, date of access May 21, 2013.

group only in the categories of an analytical approach. The criteria for the classification as a group can be the following: 1) a similar experience (prolonged stay and study abroad); 2) self-identification. Thus, the citizens of Azerbaijan who received their education abroad identify themselves as “advanced” intellectual elite. Within this group, one can conditionally attempt to define some most common biographical trajectories⁴.

The main thesis to be put forward in the context of this analysis can be summarized as follows : Azeri persons who are receiving / have received their education abroad in the urban centers of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as in Europe and the U.S., in the last century and a half have actively participated in the construction of the discourse about their *imagined community*⁵, as well as about the state as the territory in need of some degree of modernization/ Europeanization/ "westernisation". This "tradition" has deep roots that go into the second half of the XIX - early XX centuries. At that moment, the ideas of nationalism and modernization appeared in the region and were paralleled by the formation of the initially numerically insignificant elite that had received European-style education⁶. During the period before the Sovietization, local intellectual nationalists who received European-style education expected to follow the same path of modernization as the "Western civilizations"⁷. Then Azerbaijan has become part of the Soviet national modernization policy⁸. In 1970-1980, according to the former first secretary of the Central Committee of the Azeri Communist Party and the former president of the country (1993-2003) Heydar Aliyev, he sought at all times to increase the quota allocated for the Azeri students in the leading universities and institutions of the USSR. As a result, thousands of young Azeri persons arrived to different parts of the Union for the purpose of obtaining higher education⁹. Many of them did not return to the country of origin, thereby forming, as far as I can observe, the backbone of intellectuals, who constitute the Azeri Diaspora in the post-Soviet republics.

In the post-Soviet years, the Soviet period was evaluated not as a period of modernization, but as a colonial period. Following this logic, the Soviet empire developed and enhanced the traditions of the colonial policy of its predecessor, the Russian Empire. As a result, the post-Soviet state ideology again encompasses the objective of modernization in the broadest sense of the term. First and foremost, this concerns the institutions of government. The policy of sending Azeri students to study in the EU, the U.S., etc. has become one key consequence of dissemination of these ideas. According to the latest data distributed by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, a government program for 2007-2015

⁴ The analysis is based on 20 interviews conducted by the author in 2007-2012 in Baku, St. Petersburg, Berlin and Paris. Informants were students or professionals who received higher education outside of Azerbaijan. Different kinds of texts (articles, media news, interviews with officials printed on the pages of newspapers, etc.) that reflect the policy of the sending country (i.e., Azerbaijan), were analyzed with the help of the critical discourse analysis method.

⁵ Anderson, B. (1998). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London & New York: Verso, p. 5-7.

⁶ Most accessible to the elite of that time were the urban centers of the Russian Empire (Moscow, St. Petersburg, etc.). Also, the young nobles and/or financially well-off families of the Azeri bourgeoisie went to study in European capitals (Berlin, Paris, London, etc.). For more see: Swietochowski, T. (1985), *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920. The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 14-27; Shaffer, B. (2002), *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, Harvard: The MIT Press, p. 28-31; Baberowski, J. (2003), *Der Feind ist Überal: Stalinismus im Kaukasus*, München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt; Altstadt, A. (1992), *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press.

⁷ See: Gellner, E. (1983), *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, New-York: Cornell University Press, p. 19-38; Hobsbawm, E. (2002), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, p. 101-130.

⁸ Slezkine, Y. (1996), “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”, in Geoff E. & Suny R.-G., eds., *Becoming National. A Reader*. New-York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 202-238.

⁹ The speech of President Heydar Aliyev at the opening of the All-Russian Azerbaijani Congress in Moscow. The newspaper "Baku Worker", June 28, 2000, p. 1.

stipulates that 5,000 students should study in the EU, the U.S., Russia, Japan and other countries¹⁰. What are the expectations of the host countries and the arriving students?

1. *The host country.* Student admission policy can be determined in this case by two factors. First, the possibility of attracting promising young professionals. Upon the completion of education, such young professionals can stay in the country of education and find employment in the EU and the U.S. Second, the leading democracies (the U.S., the UK, France, Germany, etc.) rely on a certain transfer of values, first of all, principles of market economy, democratic state organization and human rights. Numerous conversations with expats in Azerbaijan, staff members of various international foundations, organizations, a number of embassies in Azerbaijan and the colleagues from the EU, I can make the following conclusion: a number of the EU countries and the U.S. have strong expectations regarding the fact that the students (previous and present) who have received education and obtained experience of living in a democracy, will become agents of similar social organization in Azerbaijan. From this point of view, Azerbaijan is again considered a country in need of modernization.
2. *The sending country.* The Azeri political regime and the opposition have a wider variety of objectives on their agenda. A number of opposition parties, whose programs officially assume the orientation towards the political and economic (not cultural) values of democratic regimes, are hopeful that the transfer of these values will indeed take place with the help of returning experts. Although it is almost impossible to see such persons among the leaders of opposition parties, this fact does not preclude the existence of such expectations.

The ruling political regime in Azerbaijan, which is described by many experts as authoritarian¹¹, has certain expectations regarding the educational migration. With the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan launched Diaspora-construction policy. In the 2000s, this policy is being implemented exceptionally actively, and has acquired its current characteristics (institutional and discursive). In the context of the political project of constructing the Diaspora, present-day students, as well as Azeri persons who studied abroad and chose not to return to the country, are becoming an important resource for achieving the goals as set forth by the government. Thus, according to the Deputy Education Minister Gulu Novruzov, Azeri students are involved into the formation of Diaspora networks:

Due to the presence of Azeri students, very strong Diaspora networks have formed in a number of countries. [...] The Deputy Minister expressed his confidence that the number of Diaspora networks will grow, and the Azeri students will be better represented in the government structures of the countries in which they are trained. He also stressed that in addition to students studying under the scholarship programs, some young Azeri persons study abroad at their own expense. G. Novruzov underlined that, according to calculations, the number of Azeri students abroad exceed 10,000 people. 1,500 of them are receiving scholarships from the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, national programs and bilateral agreements signed in the field of education with foreign countries¹².

¹⁰“State Programme on education of Azerbaijani youth in foreign countries in 2007-15”. Downloaded from: <http://www.edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=ru&menu=256>, date of access August 30, 2013.

¹¹ Ottaway, M. (2003), *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment International Peace, p. 51-70; Abbasov, S. (2011), *Achievements and Missed Opportunities*. In: South Caucasus: 20 Years of Independence. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p.108-122, pp. 108.

¹² “Благодаря азербайджанским студентам в ряде стран формируются очень сильные диаспорские сети” [Azeri students help to form very strong Diaspora networks in a number of countries]. Available at: <http://www.azerbaijan.az/portal/newsru.html?action=GetFullNews&ldid=2005-07-26<id=21:42:12&ndid=2012-08-23&nid=7>, date of access May 21, 2013.

One cannot state that those Azeri citizens who hold diplomas from the EU or the U.S. universities constitute a significant share of public servants in the country. It is rather that the authorities count on their presence in the host countries where they may serve as a living representation of the "successes" of the Azeri political regime. In this context, the touristic advertising of the country smoothly transforms into a representation of the successfulness of the Azeri regime in its efforts to create modern economic and political systems. As a result, experts who can "speak the same language" with the officials from the European Union or the U.S., are used for the preservation of the Azeri regime¹³.

3. *Students abroad.* There are two main behavioral scenarios for those who leave the country to study abroad. Some (an absolute minority) prefer to return to Azerbaijan. This category of students often describes the "Western way of life" as unacceptable. The majority chooses the "West" and strives to find employment and remain permanently in the EU and the U.S. In the meantime, while staying abroad, many students are actively involved in the activities of the Azeri Diaspora.

Conclusion

What has changed in the post-Soviet period in the field of educational migration from Azerbaijan? The socio-political and cultural contexts are certainly quite different from those that existed, for example, during the Soviet years. In the meanwhile, the current situation is a direct continuation of the tradition of sending students abroad for "modern" knowledge. As in the previous years, a significant (if not the largest) share of intellectuals who were educated in the "West" prefer to emigrate rather than to return to the country of origin. In this regard, any hopes for a successful transfer of democratic values into Azerbaijan seem difficult to implement. The most obvious innovation of the post-Soviet period is the active involvement of young people receiving their education/educated abroad, into the policy of Diaspora-building. The latter is part and parcel of the policy of the Azeri political regime to lobby its interests in the EU, the U.S. and the countries of the former Soviet Union.

¹³ According to the observations of the author during interviews with students and young professionals who studied in the EU and the U.S., as well as the visits to various events organized by the embassies of Azerbaijan in France, Germany, etc., only those who are willing to act as partners of state authorities in the context of representation of policy successes of the ruling regime at the international level.