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Political parties and migration issues in Azerbaijan: Discussions about migration attractiveness of the republic and problems of compatriots abroad

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Political landscape of Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union comprises over fifty parties, various political associations and movements. Meanwhile, elections to the Parliament (Milli Majlis) demonstrate the growing trend towards gradual homogenization of the composition of this legislative body. After the former First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev returned to power in 1993, most seats in the Parliament were usually gained by representatives of the ruling party “Yeni Azərbaican Partiyası” – party “New Azerbaijan”, hereinafter referred to as YAP. The new president İlham Aliyev became chairman of this party after Heydar Aliyev's death. As a result of the latest elections control of the ruling political regime over the parliament came to its ‘logical’ conclusion. 72 out of 125 MPs are representatives of the ruling YAP. 5 MPs demonstrate the multiparty nature of the Parliament, representing pro-governmental parties Civil Solidarity Party (3 seats) and Motherland Party (2 seats). The remaining 48 seats were gained by the so-called independent MPs. Representatives of the leading and most famous opposition parties, such as Musavat (Equality) or Azerbaijan Popular Front Party did not gain any seats in the parliament for the first time¹.

Many experts point to imitative nature of democratic transformations in most of the post-Soviet space. Similar approach is also applicable to the description of the Azerbaijani political regime. Multiparty system and Parliament (and especially elections) play a key role in this policy of imitative democratization of political climate in the country. As a result MPs representing either the ruling party or pro-governmental parties and the so-called independent MPs in the Parliament do not introduce anything new to the debate on migration. Activities of the members of Parliament are mostly associated with approval of laws drafted by the government, the content of which as a rule is not seriously debated or criticized.

Migration policy is not in the focus of parliamentary discussions. During the time of the previous (third convocation) Parliament problems of migration were discussed only several times over five years. Most speakers made their contribution to the official discourse about economic prosperity of Azerbaijan. In fact, lately migration processes involving population of the country were all discussed from this perspective. Thus, for instance, in summer 2008 the Parliament discussed amendments to a number of legal acts associated with the law “On legal status of foreigners and stateless persons”. They talked about supplementing the law “On departure from the country, entry to the country, and passports”. These laws define the terms of stay of foreigners in the country (residence permit), their status (including the prospects of obtaining Azerbaijani citizenship), fines for those who violated the law etc.

Rabiyyat Aslanova, well-known member of Parliament (YAP) and chairperson of the Permanent Commission on Human Rights, claimed in the context of official ideological discourse that Azerbaijan was turning into an attractive country for foreigners and stateless persons and that it was necessary to observe their rights and create decent conditions for them. In her point of view, it is possible to create conditions in Azerbaijan that will be more attractive for immigrants than in some European countries. Panah Huseynov (Freedom bloc) on behalf of the opposition that in the parliament of the previous convocation was still represented by several MPs expressed concern about problems of foreigners – ethnic Azerbaijanis who are citizens of Georgia, Russia, other CIS countries, and Iran. He talked about the issue of granting them double citizenship and special status and suggested to discuss these issues during the next meetings². However, this discussion was not taken further. In fact, these statements of two MPs (representing the ruling regime and the opposition) demonstrate the whole range of issues that were discussed in the parliament.

¹ See information about the composition of the latest Parliament convocation in “New composition of Milli Majlis – a long forgotten reminder about Soviet times”, Downloaded from http://contact.az/topics_ru.asp?id=3747&pb=2&vr=ru&yr=2010&mn=11&day=8&mdn=1, on 30 March 2012.

² Meeting of the third convocation of the extraordinary IX session of Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan. Protocol No. 88, 24 June 2008. The meeting under the chairmanship of the first deputy speaker Z. Askerov, Downloaded from <http://www.meclis.gov.az/?/az/stenoqram/148>, on 30 March 2012.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that migration policy plays a crucial role in domestic political struggle and political discussions outside the Parliament. That is why one should not be surprised that migration policy issues are not touched upon in political party programs (both ruling bloc and opposition parties)³. And when problems are mentioned, they are usually issues associated with refugees and displaced persons, i.e. with the Karabakh conflict. In this context one can observe both solidarity of perceptions and serious divergences in positions of ruling parties and political opposition. On the one hand, both the former and the latter believe it necessary to constantly (on every occasion and all the more so at international events) mention this issue. As a rule both the former and the latter talk about a million or more refugees and displaced persons⁴. Both regard this problem as a key one for post-Soviet Azerbaijan. However party members representing authorities often mention this problem in response to criticisms with regards to authoritarian governance style. I.e. according to their version, refugees and displaced persons represent a serious obstacle for democratic transformations. One first needs to resolve the conflict and hence the problem of refugees and displaced persons and only after that real democratization will become possible. Opponents of incumbent authorities claim that the regime is only using this problem to justify its authoritarian governance style. In general, the problem of refugees and displaced persons is most frequently heard in populist discourse of both the leadership and political opposition.

The leadership represented by YAP members claims that Azerbaijan is developing so quickly that the country has turned from a migrant donor into the country attractive for labor migrants. Opposition sometimes mentions hundreds of thousands of emigrants from the country and asks a question that has become almost rhetoric: why do some many people leave the country in search of jobs, if Azerbaijani economy is flourishing? However, let us emphasize that the issue of migration is not the main focus of these discussions. Intensity of domestic political struggle is defined by the Karabakh conflict, problems of de facto reversal of democratization, as well as corruption of the ruling regime. In the course of these sometimes very heated discussions opposing forces do not have energy left for serious discussion of migration policy.

The main features of public statements of the members of Parliament or opposition party members who did not make it into the latest Parliament convocation are populist statements that ministers cannot afford. In such statements party members talk about previously mentioned issue of compatriots abroad. Here we are not talking about labor migrants from Azerbaijan. It is important to understand that in the context of post-Soviet nationalism contemporary Azerbaijan is described as part of 'historical home country' for Turkic people of Azerbaijani. In the context of this ideology significant

³ See, for instance: The Program of the New Azerbaijan Party, Downloaded from <http://www.yap.org.az/view.php?lang=en&menu=73>, on 30 March 2012. There are no special references to migration policy in the programs of pro-governmental parties.

⁴ According to Alovzat Aliyev: "At present there are over 300 thousand naturalized refugees and 760 thousand displaced persons in the territory of Azerbaijan" (see Aliyev A. (2008), Institutional Resources for Return of Displaced persons in Different Scenarios of Conflict Settlement in Azerbaijani Republic, in: *Problems and Prospects of Refugees' / Displaced Persons' Return to Conflict Regions of South Caucasus*, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Tbilisi 2008, 62-84, p. 87).

According to another version, that is voiced, for instance, by Irada Huseinova, "Today the international community is told that in Azerbaijan one million refugees and displaced persons. President, members of government, followed by politicians, members of the national parliament and some mass media all the time repeat this figure <...> But even if we sum up the number of refugees from Armenia and displaced persons, it will turn out that one million is an exaggerated figure. According to the latest official statistics, the number of displaced persons is estimated at 568,989 persons, refugees <...> 219,776, the total of 788,765 persons, but definitely not a million. Even if we add Meskhetian Turks, we will only get 850 thousand people. However, official data of Goscomstat <...> also raise doubt of many international organizations. <...> according to the data of UNHCR and International Organization for Migration, there are only 782 thousand refugees and displaced persons in Azerbaijan today" (see: Huseinova I. (2001), Refugees, their position and role in contemporary Azerbaijani society, in: ed. by D.E. Furman, *Azerbaijan and Russia: Societies and States*, Moscow, p. 323 – 336. Downloaded from http://www.sakharov-center.ru/publications/azrus/az_011.htm on 30 July 2012).

groups of Azerbaijani Turkic people residing in Georgia or Iran, are considered as ‘our compatriots’⁵, residing in ‘historical territories’ that did not become part of independent Azerbaijan due to ‘historical injustice’. ‘Their fate’ often triggers statements by various party functionaries.

Thus, for instance, in June 2009 the Parliament discussed working visa fees. Nasib Nasibli (opposition party Musavat), who took part in discussion of the new immigration laws, noted that the ‘one stop-shop principle’ had alleviated problems of foreigners.

“But due to these changes our compatriots residing abroad faced problems. First, the fee went up. A certain part of my voters come from Borchali [this is how Azerbaijanis traditionally refer to a number of regions of Georgia, now making up part of the region of Kvemo Kartli, *S.R.*], that is why I am familiar with the situation. I already brought this matter up during the previous sessions. Azerbaijanis coming from Borchali are mainly labor migrants, they are not highly qualified workers, and for them the sum of 1000 manats⁶ a year is very high, and so are other associated expenses. Let us assume that such a migrant invites his mother, then she must exit the republic every three months. We are not talking about granting them Azerbaijani citizenship, as far as they are labor migrants. The same situation is with those who come from Derbent (the city in Dagestan, Russia, where a large Azerbaijani community resides). In my point of view, approach to this problem ought to be fundamentally changed. In many countries of the world there are other categories of residents in addition to citizens. For instance, in the USA there are persons with residence permits and persons of the third category. In Turkey, along with a citizen of Turkey, there is a category designated as “Turks”. They have some advantages, in education, for instance. In Azerbaijan there are no such categories. I am putting forward a proposal to introduce into further discussions such categories as foreign Azerbaijani and Turkic foreigners and to recognize their advantages.

Speaker of the Parliament of this and the previous convocation who chaired this meeting Oktay Asadov responded that that “In the whole world there is a practice of visas no longer than 3 months. In Turkey, for instance. As for your proposal, one should take into account that there are ten times more Azerbaijanis residing abroad than Azerbaijanis residing in Azerbaijan”⁷.

Let me emphasize that it would be wrong to think (stemming from this cold response of the speaker), that deputies from the ruling party are not concerned about ‘our compatriots’. Thus, for instance, Zakhid Orudzh from pro-governmental Motherland party publicly stated on numerous occasions that Azerbaijanis in Georgia are a discriminated minority⁸. He also called upon Azerbaijani authorities to render assistance to ‘Azerbaijani diaspora’ in the neighboring republic.

Therefore, public expression of concern about the fate of ‘compatriots abroad’ is the main thing that distinguishes debates in the Parliament and party struggle from the statements voiced in the context of official state migration policy.

⁵ In February 2012 a proposal was made by the Member of Parliament H. Huseynquli to rename the republic into North Azerbaijan. In the republic it is common to use the name South Azerbaijan to refer to North-Western territories of contemporary Iran. This proposal did not meet any serious objections in the Parliament. See: “Azerbaijan or North Azerbaijan”, Downloaded from <http://www.contact.az/docs/2012/Analytics/02071410ru.htm>, on 30 March 2012.

⁶ Manat is a currency unit of Azerbaijan. The currency exchange rate is approximately 1.30 USD for 1 manat.

⁷ Meetings of the third convocation of extraordinary XII session of Azerbaijani Milli Majlis. Protocol No. 119. 30 June 2009. Under the chairmanship of the parliament speaker O. Asadov. For detailed information see: Downloaded from <http://www.meclis.gov.az/?/az/stenoqram/180>, on 30 March 2012.

⁸ Azerbaijanis in Georgia are subject to discrimination – Deputat, <http://www.georgiatimes.info/news/54920.html>, on 30 March 2012.