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Diaspora-Building in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

Sergey Rummyansev

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, the policy of diaspora-building noticeably intensified under the influence of then Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev. The new president, Ilham Aliyev (2003), inherited established institutions and developed practices of constructing an ethno-national diaspora. At the same time, under the new president, the political project for the construction of an Azerbaijani ethno-national diaspora started to be implemented with an even greater intensity.

The aim of this policy is to form a united and hierarchically co-subordinated bureaucratic structure (pyramid) of diaspora organisations. At the head of this bureaucratic diaspora is the Azerbaijani president (who heads the Coordinating Council of Azerbaijanis of the World) and also (a step down) the head of the State Committee for Work with Azerbaijani Diaspora.

In this way, the Azerbaijani political regime strives to control, as closely as possible, the activities of diaspora organisations. The authorities of the country of origin believe that diaspora Azerbaijanis should tell “the truth about Azerbaijan”. This “truth” refers, in part, to the success of the political regime that rules the country. But there is also the need to lead the country out of the “dark zone”, i.e. from the situation where few people internationally know that Azerbaijan exists. These (and some other) goals behind diaspora-building are subordinated to the most important of them: the diaspora’s fight for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict in favour of Azerbaijan.

Diaspora-building in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

On 5 and 6 July 2011 a two-day event, the Third International Azerbaijani Congress, was held in Baku. The Congress gathered many delegates, representing the Azerbaijani nation. In fact, this meeting brought together 1272 deputies and guests from 42 countries. And this Azerbaijani Congress has once again demonstrated that its diaspora-building policy has developed its own traditions, established practices and institutions.

The leading role in the implementation of this policy belongs to the political authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan. It should be emphasized that Azerbaijan is not the origin country for all ethnic Azeris, who form one homogeneous nation and diaspora within the framework of contemporary official nationalistic rhetoric in Azerbaijan. Officially, the Azerbaijani diaspora embraces all ethnic Azerbaijanis living outside the ‘historic homeland’. The ‘historic homeland’ (‘historic Azerbaijan’) includes, in addition to the modern Azerbaijan, the North-West of modern Iran, parts of Georgia and Russia (Dagestan). Therefore, the diaspora connects Iranian, Georgian, and Turkish Azeris. Official data says there are 50 million Azeris in the world and 10 million are part of the Azeri diaspora. The remaining 40 million live in their ‘historical homeland’ in Azerbaijan, in Iran, in Russian and in Georgia. This data and approach is proposed by the authors of the “Azerbaijani People Charter”¹. Ethnic Azeri immigrant activists in all these countries are willing and ready to cooperate with the authorities of Azerbaijan.

It can be argued that the main author behind the diaspora reconstruction policy was the deceased Azeri President, Heydar Aliyev. After he regained power in 1993 as the President (rather than as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijan SSR), he established contacts with immigrants. Heydar Aliyev’s first visits to the EU, the U.S., Russia and other countries included meetings and talks with local ethnic Azeris (intellectuals, businessmen, ethnic activists). It was Heydar Aliyev, who prepared the ground for the Azerbaijani diaspora to come together as a bureaucratic

¹ The document in question aims to outline the Azerbaijani diaspora history, describe its official structure and diaspora-building ideology. At the moment the “Charter” is being drafted under the supervision of the State Committee on Azerbaijani Diaspora. I am referring to the draft “Charter”, which officials of the Committee have kindly shared with me.

institution, headed by him as a pan-Azerbaijani president. He was the one who invented the formula “One nation, two states” (meaning Turkey and Azerbaijan), in order to unite Turkish and Azerbaijani diaspora-building efforts.

In its current format, Azerbaijani diaspora-building is a political project, which had taken shape by the beginning of 2000s. In November 2001, following Heydar Aliyev’s initiative, the First International Azerbaijani Congress was held in Baku. The Congress finalized and formalized the idea of creating the State Committee for Working with Azerbaijanis living abroad. The Committee started operations in 2002 and Nazim Ibragimov became its undisputed leader. The First Congress also launched the Azerbaijani Coordination Council, headed by President Heydar Aliyev. The diaspora-building project’s efficiency is measured by the growing number of organizations and their progressive collaterally subordinated hierarchization.

Heydar Aliyev’s son and the current President, Ilham Aliyev inherited these already established institutions and developed practices of ethno-national diaspora-building. The only and rather symbolic novelty he introduced was that of renaming the State Committee for Working with Azerbaijanis living abroad into the State Committee on Diaspora in 2008. Ilham Aliyev succeeded as Head of the Azerbaijanis Coordination Council, and Nazim Ibragimov as the head of the State Committee on Diaspora. *De facto*, the single most important event for both, the country and its diaspora-building ideology, was Heydar Aliyev’s death in 2003. His idealized image as the “great national leader” has occupied central place in the remembrance policy, both in Azerbaijan and in among the diaspora. The Second International Azerbaijani Congress was held in 2006 in Baku and started with a screening of a documentary about the “great leader” (“We the Azerbaijanis”). Ilham Aliyev largely devoted his opening speech at the Third Congress, as is traditional at such events, to his fathers’ and the “national leader’s” deeds. He legitimately argued that it was Heydar Aliyev, who was the author and inspirer of diaspora-building.

In its present shape, at the base level of the Azerbaijani diaspora bureaucratic pyramid there are a variety of city and regional organizations. The next level is occupied by organizations, claiming to represent and coordinate activities with all Azerbaijanis abroad (German Azerbaijani Coordination Center, All-Russian Azerbaijani Congress and others). Further up, there are organizations, which allegedly coordinate Azerbaijani associations in several countries (European Azerbaijani Congress, Benelux Azerbaijani Congress) and worldwide (International Azerbaijani Congress). All these organizations, proliferating year after year, work closely with Azerbaijani embassies and the State Committee on Diaspora. These governmental institutions coordinate and guide diaspora organizations’ activities so as to comply with current domestic policies in Azerbaijan. As mentioned above, the International Azerbaijani Coordination Council is at the top of the pyramid and its members are elected during the International Azerbaijani Congress. The Council is headed by the President of Azerbaijan.

During the Third International Azerbaijani Congress the President assessed the efficiency of diaspora-building bureaucracy: “During the period since the First Congress, which is over 10 years, a lot of work has been done, the number of organizations has increased. Five years ago there were 336 diaspora organizations, today there are as many as 416. It is very important. But at the same time, numbers, perhaps, do not play a decisive role in this matter. I am very pleased that our diaspora organizations are reinforced and that quality-wise their activities have become more focused and efficient”².

Therefore, where it concerns political activities of the Azerbaijani diaspora organizations, if they are not headed, they are guided and coordinated by the political homeland. Remembrance policy and post-Soviet nationalistic ideology (“Azerbaijanism”) are applied to the diaspora too. Events, such as Azeris’ Genocide Day, a mourning date, commemorated by the diaspora on 31 March every year, have

² Ilham Aliyev’s speech at the Third International Azerbaijani Congress. Internet address, 5 July 2011. <http://ru.president.az/articles/2717>, 30 September 2011.

appeared in Azeri calendars in the post-Soviet period. Similarly the birthday of former President Heydar Aliyev (10 May) and the National Salvation Day (15 June) are celebrated. These dates are celebrated by the diaspora members, including those, who emigrated from Azerbaijan long before these holidays appeared on the calendar. The diaspora has also taken up the first holiday, officially adopted by Heydar Aliyev: International Azerbaijani Solidarity Day (December 31st). These dates and holidays have enriched diaspora activity, which previously focused on “Novruz” (Spring Festival) and Kurban Bairam celebrations.

Simultaneously, the Azerbaijani regime strives to control, as closely as possible, the activities of diaspora organisations. Azerbaijani authorities believe that the Azeri diaspora should, as noted before, spread “the truth about their country”. The “truth” implies the country’s ruling political regime achievements. And also the need to lead the country out of a ‘dark zone’ is declared, i.e. few people internationally know of Azerbaijan. These (and some other) goals behind diaspora-building are subordinated to the most important: the diaspora’s fight for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict in favour of Azerbaijan. To this end, various exhibitions and concerts, the days of Azerbaijani culture, as well as pickets and rallies are organized. As a rule, only a small number of activists are involved in these activities. And their impact on views in the EU and US is questionable. More likely, these activities mark an attempt to help the popularity of the ruling regime in the country. The political regime in Azerbaijan, in terms of diaspora-policy, becomes Azerbaijani-wide. In the best populist traditions, the regimes’ image is presented as carrying out the challenges and needs of all Azerbaijanis, as opposed to the spread of ‘Armenian rule’. Diaspora-building and cross-border Azeri unity are the most two important achievements of Heydar Aliyev that everyone should remember. And so that no one in the country forgets, the media constantly reports diaspora and diaspora-building achievements.