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The Problem of Human Trafficking in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Socio-Political Context

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The protection of human rights, particularly in the context of international relations, and domestic policy formation in the field of gender equality are the two most important social and political contexts, within which the questions and discussions regarding the issue of human trafficking in Azerbaijan are addressed. It should be emphasized that, as a significant problem requiring a serious response on the part of state institutions, the problem of human trafficking has been on the agenda since the early 2000s. This is due to the increasingly active participation of both government officials and NGO representatives in various international programs and agreements, as well as the assumption of a number of obligations at international level, etc.

In fact, the issue of the prevention of trafficking in persons was initially raised in the context of a much wider problem of violence against women. The most important aspect of this problem remains forced prostitution. It is in the context of the problems of prostitution that trafficking in persons (most often, women) is considered, also related to the issues of migration processes. One of the first large-scale discussions on human trafficking occurred at the conference on violence against women held by the Azeri NGO “Symmetry” and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)¹ in 2000 in Baku on violence against women. This, and other similar discussions and conferences, as well as the gradual formation of legislative and institutional frameworks have taken place under the direct influence of international organizations (e.g., the UN), the European Union and the United States. The actions of Azeri authorities should be seen as a move towards the gradual integration (both legal and institutional) with the EU, and a sign of co-operation with the U.S. in this sphere.

According to some experts from the United States, Azerbaijan is not only a source country for victims of trafficking, but also the territory of transit and destination for victims of sexual and labour exploitation. For the purposes of forced labour, men and children are sent into Russia. For the purposes of sexual exploitation, women and children are sent into the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Russia and Iran. These experts also point out that the government of Azerbaijan has yet to take steps in this direction and to address the problem of human trafficking.² In the context of combating violence against women and human trafficking, a new program amongst the police forces was launched in 2001, which was also later expanded to include officials in the prosecution offices and the courts. Various training sessions are being held. Since 2001, Azerbaijan joined the regional information campaign of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, “Life without violence.” In 2003, the recommendations of the Council of Europe on action against trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation were translated into the Azeri language.³

The actions of the Azeri authorities were inspired by the UN Convention “Against Transnational Organized Crime”, which was approved in Azerbaijan in May 2003, and the “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children,” and the “Brussels Declaration on Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings,” adopted on September 20, 2002.

The Presidential Decree of 6 May 2004 approved the “National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings in the Republic of Azerbaijan.” A responsible department was created within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, whose officers were trained in the EU countries and participated in conferences and seminars. For instance, “during the month of March 2006, the employees of the department participated in three conferences on combatting trafficking in human beings: twice in

¹ ODIHR is the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights under the OSCE – the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

² See: *Trafficking in Persons Report*. June 2012, Department of State, USA. Azerbaijan, p. 77-78: Available at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2012/, accessed on 04.03.2013.

³ For details, see: The Report of the State Committee on the Affairs of Women of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the questionnaire of the government regarding the implementation of the Pekin action platform (1995) and the resolutions of the 23 special Session of the General UN Assembly (2000). Available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/AZERBAIJAN-Russian.pdf>, accessed on 03.03.2013.

Austria and once in Georgia. In addition, they participated in a round table organized by non-governmental organizations on the establishment of “centres for the medical, psychological and social rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking” and of a “legal clinic.”

In Baku, with the assistance of the OSCE Baku Office staff and the International Organization for Migration, a shelter for the victims of trafficking was built and opened. The NGO “Chistiy Mir” (Pure World) is currently one of the most active non-governmental organizations co-operating with the government on the issues of human trafficking.⁴

In some senses, this activity can be seen as somewhat belated. Mass emigration of the population from Azerbaijan (labour migration, etc.) began already in the first half of the 1990s.⁵ In those same years, in fact, the trend to emigrate for purpose of finding work in the sex industry, as well as an associated tendency of sexual exploitation of immigrants (mostly female), became visible. This kind of migration was mainly directed towards Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and some other countries. There are not enough data on the situation in the 1990s to make generalisations about specific trends. According to Arif Yunusov, the problem of human trafficking becomes relevant only since 1997. Notable attempts to make statistical estimations of the number of trafficking victims date back to the early 2000’s. As Yunusov notes, “according to the estimates of numerous non-governmental organizations that deal with the problem of human trafficking, up to 1,000 females are trafficked from Azerbaijan every year by fraudulent means. Very few of them return.”⁶ A certain number of children are trafficked, as well as males, who are forced to work. However, the majority of observers agree on the fact that females between the ages of 18 and 35-40 constitute the vast majority of the victims.⁷

Statistics are as reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan. It is impossible to evaluate their accuracy.⁸ In general, the official statistics show a tendency towards reducing the number of victims from year to year. For example, in 2010, according to the reports by the Ministry of the Interior, more persons were convicted of trafficking (39 persons) than the number of victims of trafficking who were discovered (34 people). As for the victims, they were mostly young women with little education (9 of them have not even finished school). 23 victims were trafficked to Turkey, 4 to the United Arab Emirates, 3 to Iran, and the remaining 4 to other countries, including Russia.⁹

The recent statistics on victims of human trafficking look similar. In December 2012, the statistics on human trafficking were summarized for the past seven years (2006-2012). These official data were

⁴ For more see: The Department on Combatting Human Trafficking within the Ministry of the Interior of the Azerbaijan Republic. Available at <http://www.mia.gov.az/?ru/content/29503/>, date of access: 02.03.2013.

⁵ *International Migration*, 2010. Available at <http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/demographic/en/index.shtml#>, date of access: 31 May 2012; A. Yunusov, *Migration Trends and Tendencies in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* Available at <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2011/10/23/migracionnye-trendy-i-tendencii-v-postsovetском-azerbajdzhane.html>, date of access 03.03.2013.

⁶ For more, see: Yunusov, *ibid.*

⁷ Yunusov, *ibid.* *Gender Attitudes in Azerbaijan: Trends and Challenges*// Azerbaijan Human Development Report. 2007, Baku: UNDP, p. 72-73; *Migration in the republic of Azerbaijan: a country profile*. (2008). IOM, International Organization for Migration, p. 33-35; *Global report on trafficking in persons*. (February 2009). UNODC, p. 208; *Shattered Dreams. Report on Trafficking in Persons in Azerbaijan*. 2002, International Organization for Migration.

⁸ The accuracy of the statistics is under question due to the high level of corruption of both Azeri police forces and state officials. See: Global Corruption Report (2009). *Corruption and the Private Sector*. Transparency International, Cambridge University Press, p. 49, 115, 401; Wescott C., Desai R., Talvitie A., (2011). *Azerbaijan: World Bank Country-Level Engagement on Governance and Anticorruption*. Washington DC.

⁹ Azerbaijan Migration Center (2010). Annual report on combating human trafficking and forced labor migration in Azerbaijan Republic (for 2010). Baku, p. 5.

discussed in the media without garnering particular interest.¹⁰ The information was provided to the mass media at the International Conference in Baku. The declared aim of this conference was to strengthen international cooperation in this field. According to the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Vilayat Eyvazov (who leads the activity of the Ministry in this field), 473 persons fell victim to trafficking during the previous six years. Virtually all cases of human trafficking were connected to the sexual exploitation of victims.¹¹ In 2012, 89 victims of trafficking were referred to the support centres. The directions by country remain the same: 19 victims were taken to Turkey, 12 to Iran, 2 to the United Arab Emirates and 14 to Russia.¹²

Despite the official account of a reduction in the number of victims, it is difficult to judge the quality of the measures taken to combat human trafficking considering the high degree of non-transparency of the actions of the Azeri authorities in this regard. In the meantime, the Azeri authorities demonstrate a high degree of activity and a will to cooperate with international organizations in the implementation of measures to combat this kind of trade. This position of the authorities can be explained by the fact that combatting trafficking is one of the few areas of the human rights field that has not been politicized. Azeri authorities can be active in this field showing good will to cooperate with the EU, the UN or the US, without compromising the stability of the regime.¹³ Thus, this area can serve an example of a fairly successful collaboration with a number of international human rights organizations as well as with the UN and the EU, at least in projects that deal with changes in legislation and the formation of anti-trafficking public institutions.

¹⁰ At the moment of appearance of this information and in the course of the next 3-4 months, no more than 5-6 articles have been published on the issue of human trafficking, and these were mostly short news stories. The popularity of this topic is clearly inferior to that of discussions on migration into Azerbaijan or the process of Diaspora building. The latter topics have consistently seen a number of publications per week, including lengthy interviews with emigrants from Azerbaijan, analytical articles, etc.

¹¹ *Azerbaijan has released statistics on human trafficking for the past seven years*, Available at <http://www.trend.az/news/society/2095966.html>, accessed on 01.03.2013; *Azerbaijan has publicized statistics on human trafficking*, <http://news.day.az/society/370883.html>, accessed on 01.03.2013.

¹² *The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan has reported on combating trafficking in human beings*. Available at <http://www.trend.az/news/politics/2083256.html>, accessed on 02.03.2013.

¹³ The Azerbaijani authorities display less will to negotiate and to cooperate on the issues of political prisoners in the country. See, for instance, the Strasser Report on political prisoners in Azerbaijan produced contradictory evaluations (27.12.2012). Available at www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/217896/, accessed on 02.03.2013.