

A NEW IDENTITY *for* A NEW AZERBAIJAN

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To be precise, the process of self-identification: the determination of a new identity in altered conditions of surroundings, searching for a new National Idea — is in fact continuous process following changes that constantly happens with all nations and in all the times.

The process is perpetual: just after constantly changing conditions of environment a nation begins to shape a new identity — searches for an answer to eternal questions on "who are we now" and "how to live further"? This process is particularly intensive for the nations, which like Azerbaijan, are at the turning point of their history — in Transition...

THE WAY WE WERE

Present Transitional period is obviously not the first one for Azerbaijan. One can imagine the change of Azeri identity when from the time of the Great Folks Transmigration (4-7th C.) the country had been started to be occupied by Turks, language and culture of which had become dominant in Azerbaijan to the 11-12-th Centuries; or when Zoroastrianism in the South of the country and Christianity on the North was replaced by Islam (8-9-th C.); or when Shia branch of Islam was declared as a State Religion (16-th C.); or when the North part of Azerbaijan fell under the power of Russian Empire (beginning of the 19-th C.) and European Enlightenment, capitalism, ideas of liberalism, social-democracy and the Nation State began to penetrate the country.

What was the Azerbaijani national mentality at the beginning of the 20-th Century? It's backbone was formed under the dominant influence of the medieval Turkic military-feudal code of honor, information on which is available in medieval Turkic epoch "The Book of My Grandparent Korkut (11-th C.) or "Keroglu" (16-th C.). According to the code: Winner takes all; Valor over profit; Defeat is worse than death; Request of help is disgracing; impulses of the soul, to any direction, found an understanding; Thrift is stinginess and prudence is cowardice. It is important, that serfdom, which as a rule has considerable impact on the national mentality, had never existed in Azerbaijan.

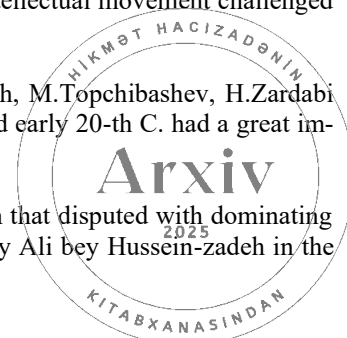
Another significant influence shaping the Azeri Turks was of course Islam, having covered for a period of 1000 years, much of social life and consciousness. "I am a Muslim" — in that way as far back as in 1890 an Azerbaijani peasant identified himself to a journalist of the local newspaper "Keshkul".

The Shia branch of Islam with its idea of an unjust world, based upon the defeat of Shia leaders in the struggle for power (7-th C.) and of a messiah, who will lead a victorious revolution of good and justice, also imposed an observable imprint on Azerbaijani identity (94% of the country population identify themselves as Muslims; 70% of them as Shia, and 30% as a Sunni).

With the colonization of Azerbaijan by the Russian Empire (1801—1828) a powerful intellectual movement challenged the traditional Muslim society lead to the fundamental cultural and political change.

Rationalism, liberalism and humanism advocated by A.Bakikhanov, M.F.Akhund-zadeh, M.Topchibashev, H.Zardabi as the way to escape from the universal crisis of the Muslim World by the late 19-th and early 20-th C. had a great impact on the intellectuals of the entire Middle East.

A big step on the way of changing of the identity was the doctrine of Turkic nationalism that disputed with dominating then Islamism. Formula for new identity — "Turkism, Modernism, Islam", advanced by Ali bey Hussein-zadeh in the



very beginning of the 20 C. was so popular that it was embodied in the three-colored banner of the independent Azerbaijani Republic (1918-1920), the first democratic State in the Muslim East, proclaimed after the collapse of Russian Empire. "Freedom to people, independence to nations" — under this slogan, raised by founders of the Republic, Azeris lived only for two years. It is difficult to say, what we would be like now if independence and democracy had existed for at least several decades, as was the case in the Baltic States...

HOMO SOVIETICUS

However, in 1920, the Russians returned... But they were another Russians — Bolsheviks, who were trying to spread their revolution and new lifestyle through the World. Bolsheviks in Azerbaijan began with a campaign of erasing from the public consciousness everything that did not correspond to their purposes.

Side by side with the bloody Class Struggle on the whole territory of the USSR a Cultural Revolution was going on, which was tasked, in the short term, to separate the people from their cultural roots, to silence their ethnic memory and to form a new person — a Soviet one.

Latin alphabet that was accepted in Azerbaijan at 1928 replaced by the Russian Cyrillic. Any mention of the independent Azerbaijani Republic was forbidden and the majority of its founders migrated to Europe and Turkey or were repressed. The people were forced to change traditional last names to Russian style. Religion was forced underground. Half-literate youth were burning books, written in the Arabic alphabet and tearing off the women's veils on the street.

Aggressive atheism went parallel with an even more violent struggle with "Panturkizm". Any mention of the Turkic roots of the population was forbidden. In Passports, in the section of ethnic origin instead of "Turk" from 1935 was written "Azerbaijani". Azerbaijanis were declared "Persians assimilated by Turks".

Identity of Azerbaijan non-turkic Moslem population was damaged too. Many representatives of such ethnic minorities as Kurds, Lezgians and Talishs were also recorded as "Azerbaijanis" — to assimilate these small ethnic groups in "Titular nations" of the USSR Republics, and afterwards to assimilate these nations in a new identity — Soviet Nation.

However, it is also hard to deny the positive sides of "Sovietization" and "Cultural Revolution", expressed in the successful struggle against illiteracy, and covering of the whole population by modern medical care service, initial and higher education, well sponsored, as well as controlled by the government, culture and art. Women Rights in Soviet Azerbaijan, in contrast with traditional approach, were considerably improved. The "main" communist poet of that time — Samed Vurgun — at the beginning of the 1930's, in his poem "Greeting to the Chieftain" (Stalin) has described the change in the Azeri woman's image in this way: "...Greetings to you from turkic girls without a veil and (unnatural) cosmetics".

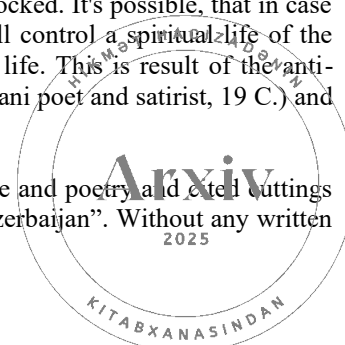
We can learn to what extent Azeri Turks were changed during the first 20 years of Soviet rule from the memoirs of the founder of independent Azerbaijani Republic Mamed Emin Rasul-zadeh, which for the first time, from a time of his emigration in 1920 encountered in Berlin Azeri people, who had as Soviet soldiers been captured by the German Army in the Second World War.

"...New generation", — wrote Rasul-zadeh, — "I may say, is completely literate (can read and write in native language). All of them have finished primary schools. Many of them have got secondary and higher education — physicians and teachers.

To my question, if there are today in Azerbaijan several hundreds of people with the higher education, which might be able to manage the Government, one of the prisoners answered: 'Oh, not hundreds, we have a thousand of such people...

Prisoners had an incomplete knowledge about the Soviet political system and completely no idea about religion. No one knew neither canons, nor the very basic religious rites. All churches and mosques were locked. It's possible, that in case of collapse of the Soviet regime religion will occupy its place in moral sphere and will control a spiritual life of the people. However religion will never be able to manage the public sphere and social life. This is result of the anti-religious propaganda, commenced by M.F.Akhund-zadeh and M.A.Sabir (great Azerbaijani poet and satirist, 19 C.) and continued by modern Azerbaijani intellectuals...

...Talking with these people, I found that all of them were properly aware of Azeri prose and poetry and cited cuttings from them in their speeches. In Berlin in 1943 they began to publish the newspaper "Azerbaijan". Without any written



sources in captivity, they published in the newspaper materials on the literature, quoting Azerbaijani authors by heart. New generation got a feeling of the national pride for their culture”...

Any way, but the Soviet system with the lack of feedback had collapsed and Homo Sovieticus by the end of the 1980's was transformed into cynical and totally corrupted creature without any idea about “who we are now? and how to live further”?

The impact of Communist rule on the self-consciousness of Azeris is still significant, however “Winds of Change” that began to blow from the end of 80-th over the Communist bloc has made us different, during a few years.

IN SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The double standards of Soviet reality caused a mass stress from the split of personality, longing to avoid of which became an operative power of change even in relatively successful society of 60-th and 70-th of former USSR. Even, Khrushchev's “thaw” revived nationalistic moods amongst intellectuals, which by the end of 1980's was transformed into a mass movement for self-determination and self-identification. Forgotten slogans of “Tukizm, Modernism, Islamism” and “Freedom to people, independence to nations” once again, after 70 years, have possessed our minds. This all-nation movement was headed by Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), which included all, without exclusion, groups of society in their aspiration to change. There was not yet doubts whether we should be an independent country and nobody did expect big problems with the democracy and free market. The only aim was to topple communists and establish a “Nation State”, which was largely accepted as a State that corresponds to the identity of the ethnic majority of population.

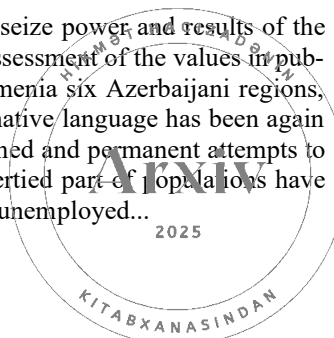
At that time there were not alternative ideas to observe. But I only remember a terrible oracle in 1990 proclaimed by Victor Polyanchko, II secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan that still echos in my mind. Blaming Democratic movements in Republics of the former USSR Polyanchko accused them of creating a chaos in the country, and expressed confidence that wise Azerbaijani people which has its particular culture — the culture of respecting seniors and authorities as such, would never support Democrats. But then the appeals “full of wisdom” of the Moscow satrap did not attract any attention.

With restoration of independence of the country in 1991 and take over of the power by the Peoples Front in 1992 the process of self-identification began to affect institutions. Parliament passed a draft on returning the Latin Alphabet. Azerbaijani language was returned its initial name — Turkic language. In the public sphere Azerbaijanis again were identified as Turks. Emigrant literature returned to the country from abroad. Scholars and authors wrote hundreds of researches, books and brochures on the forgotten past. New manual books on the Social Sciences came to the schools and higher educational institutions. All of them were written in the Latin Alphabet and reflect not the Soviet but the National as well as democratic approaches to the subject. Ministry of Justice registered hundreds of independent associations: political parties, NGO's, Religious communities and, of course, private business enterprises. Supreme Court canceled unconstitutional edicts of the President. Society had great expectations from capitalism, which was to come right after Parliament adopted the relevant acts. And I do not remember any negative response in free, then, mass media, to the decision of parliament not to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) dominated by Russia. However the visit of Margaret Thatcher to Baku sponsored by British Petroleum in Autumn, 1992 generated a storm of enthusiasm. And at last, after 200 years of occupation, Russian Army was withdrawn from Azerbaijan and to the common opinion that was the most important for independence.

Society unanimously considered the Iranian regime, as an exporter of a darkness. The majority of politicians and intellectuals were calling to unification of the 7,5 million Azeris of Azerbaijan Republic with the 25 million Azeris in Iran. A United Azerbaijan became one of integral parts of the national idea

THE MAN AMONG MEN

The fall of “National-Democratic Government” after the coup-d'etat in Summer, 1993, seize power and results of the rule of the strong authoritarian regime of Heydar Aliyev has brought to the shock and reassessment of the values in public opinion. Under Heydar Aliyev's government the country has lost in the war with Armenia six Azerbaijani regions, that resulted in more than 500 000 refugees; has joined CIS agreement, the name of the native language has been again changed from Turkic to Azerbaijani; the political censorship on mass-media was established and permanent attempts to set up tight control on any non-governmental activities have been observed; small-property part of population have lost State subsidies; 1/3 of the able-bodied population have left the country; 40% became unemployed...



Herein, Heydar Aliyev in public opinion polls remains quite popular. The explanation is that “He established tranquillity”. So, and so we are returning to the very beginning. Liberty was sacrificed to Stability. After all that happened, a few would not raise the questions: “who are we now? and how to live further?”

DOES DEMOCRACY SUIT US?

After removal from the power Democrats had enough time to understand the previous events. Debate on “Reasons of defeat of Democracy”, started in free press at the end of 1993, gradually developed into national debates on “National Idea” topic and lasted till the end of 1996, nearly at the same time with similar debates taking a place in Russia and others CIS countries.

“How to keep country independent? Liberty or Order? Does democracy suit us, or do we need a “Big Brother” (as Polyanochko affirmed)? Human rights or “National values”? How free should a market be? Is the formula “Turkism, Modernism, Islamism” applicable for today? Who is involved into the notion — “We”, “The Nation”? Modernization is necessary, but is Westernization necessary too?” As it is seen, circle of the questions is all same, as in other post Socialist countries.

One particularly fierce dispute was observed in the “Nationalistic” and “Liberal” drafts of the programs of the main democratic parties Musavat and Peoples Front.

The position of the “Liberals” in these debates was traditionally reduced to proclaiming superiority of the human rights, limitation of government interference into the social life and business, recognition of all the citizens regardless of their ethnic or other differences as “Azerbaijani Nation”. Position of the “Nationalists” was also well known: The goal is State; strong State; our state was born from the will of Azerbaijani Turks; not Liberalism and not Communism, but National solidarity.

The debates reached such a heat that could have led to the split of these parties. Very often, the front line passed not between the “Liberals” and the “Nationalists”, but right through the hearts of the ones involved in the debate. Doubts about applicability of democracy for today's Azerbaijan has paralyzed the debaters. Therefore the Popular Front refused to discuss the draft in its recent in turn congress and the Musavat party has passed the draft with compromised provisions, which any one could interpret as he wishes.

TOWARDS THE WEST

Anti-Russian and anti-Iranian moods, caused by continuous demarches of these countries against Azerbaijani political and economical independence, dominate public opinion. In a search for protection from new Russian-Iranian geopolitical axis — supporters of independence look to the West. Expectations of Western aid to the country's independence exceed suspicions that usually appear in the Third World countries about the Western neo-imperialism and, as S.Huntington argues, the Clash of Civilizations.

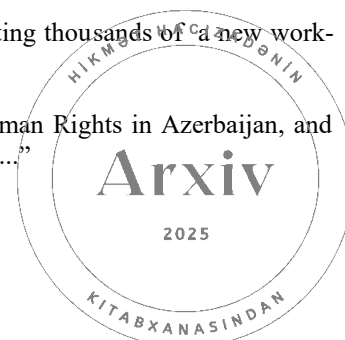
The Government as well as four main political parties in the country (ruling “New Azerbaijan” party, pro-governmental “National Independence” party, opposition PFA and Musavat), according to their program documents and practice, are tending to speed up the joining of the country in the Council of Europe and bring it closer to NATO. At the end of 1996 by the initiative of the democratic forces “The Association of Azerbaijan-Atlantic Cooperation” was founded, and in the middle of 1997 pro-governmental forces have organized “Azerbaijan — NATO the Center of Cooperation”, headed by the President of the Baku State University.

Requirements of democratization of the country imposed by the West for the full-scale cooperation, compels the government to be more careful in the Human Rights issue. Besides, to the greater pleasure of the “Liberals”, these requirements have become a strong argument in the dispute with “nationalists” on the compatibility of personal and political liberties with national security.

For last two years Western investments in the country have reached US\$ 2 billion, creating thousands of a new workplaces. Now it is hard to find a good job without speaking good English.

It might happen, that the West for the sake of it's oil interests will forget about the Human Rights in Azerbaijan, and then it will be recalled that “East is East and West is West and never the twine shall meet...”

RELIGION IS A PROBLEM OF MINORITIES



In general, situation with the Freedom of Conscience in the country is as follows: Following the collapse of the communist regime religion at once occupied an appreciable place in the society. In 1992 the Parliament passed a democratic law on "The Freedom of Belief" and nearly two hundred new religious organizations were registered. In the same year by a decree of the President worship buildings were returned to believers and religious education became free. The official persons began to participate in religious ceremonies, and politicians started to flirt with believers. Iran and the Gulf Countries also tried to use the religious factor. These countries are reported to have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in supporting of an Islamic regime in Azerbaijan. But religious Renaissance did not take place. Probably religion will return to society to influence the spiritual sphere, but, as it was predicted by M.E.Rasul-zadeh, because of the Soviet atheism, Sharia — will never do. Muslim legislation — is out of question. The constitution and programs of the main political parties preserve complete separation of religion from the State. The overwhelming majority of Azeris identify themselves as Muslims, but only a few follow strict Muslim instructions. It is less likely to meet a woman covered with a veil in the streets of Azerbaijani cities and villages than in London and, especially, Istanbul.

Religion is not a big social problem, however the problem that is widely discussed now is the problem of religious minorities. It has become clear, that society is ready to recognize only traditional religions accepted by the population — Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism. Regarding many of new Muslim as well as Christian religious organizations with many preachers, arriving from abroad, their activity is considered by society to be detrimental to the national identity and a threat to national security. Democratic law on the "Freedom of belief" accepted in 1992 has been exposed to constant criticism.

In 1996 the parliament adopted amendments about prohibition of activities of foreign missionaries to the law on the "Freedom of Belief". The local religious communities, according to the amendment, should be registered at the centers of traditional religious organizations (Mother Churches). Governmental, as well as independent newspapers because of the fear of "Iranian" or "Algerian case", and "the Western cultural imperialism" quite often accuse new religious organizations of anti-social activity.

The right of a man to unaccustomed life style or faith has become the next serious democracy test for our society. "I address both authorities, and the opposition — stated the leader of religious organization "Islamic Union" Hadji Azer in Spring 1997 in an interview with Azadlig newspaper, — "do not see us as evil, do not think that everyone who is not similar to you are your enemies".

MORALITY IS BACK

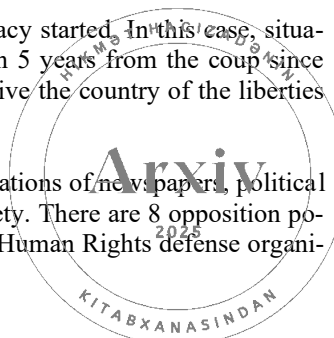
All that was written about the tragic state of a morality in the former Soviet Union completely concerns Azerbaijan. To live on the knees in the lie or to die — this requirement generated in minds intellectual corruption, that successfully justified lies, betrayal, corruption and robbery of the future generations. Morality was completely separated from the Law and to be friends means to be a partners in crime.

(Till now many of former Soviet citizens confidently argue that they lived right and honest life, dealing with their own business, never voiced excessive questions and now they, for sure, do not deserve current troubles.)

However, to the middle of 1980's with the weakening of the totalitarian regime a choice between good and evil appeared. Morality began to return. Its first steps were expressed in a mass negation of everything that was connected with Communist regime. During the parliamentary elections in 1990 (period of the former USSR) a 19-year-old student, the member of Peoples Front won, in one of the Baku's electoral districts against the Sheikh-ul-Islam (the Spiritual leader of the Azeri Muslims appointed by the government). Values and honesty became a popular topic in the public sphere and the main principle of Democratic Governments rule (92-93), which often because of this principle forgot about the Realpolitik. "Elchibey (in foreign policy) managed not as a president of a small developing country, but as a leader of the Great French Revolution" — wrote at the end of 1993 well-known Russian politologist Dmitri Furman. The military coup returned the accustomed immorality to society and doubts about the existence of human dignity revived.

However just at that time real and continuing struggle for moral renovation and democracy started. In this case, situation in Azerbaijan was the same as in Belarus under Lukashenka. It has been more than 5 years from the coup since democratic community has been successfully resisting attempts of the authorities to deprive the country of the liberties that were achieved before.

In spite of arrests of the democratic activists and journalists, closing and refusal of registrations of newspapers, political parties and NGOs, former communists in power could not restore the control on the society. There are 8 opposition political parties, over 20 free newspapers and journals, nearly 50 NGOs, including 7 active Human Rights defense organi-



zations (there are plenty of registered, but less active non-government associations). These people, in the absence of the enthusiasm in the majority of the population, display unknown for us before moral quality — civil courage and fortitude.

The exhausting five-year struggle for the expansion of Rights was crowned with great successes in 1998 (the year of the Presidential elections). This year, could proudly be called as The Year of Democracy in Azerbaijan. For the first time for the last five years the arrogant government has been obliged to begin a dialogue with the democrats; electoral legislation has been democratized; several trials against the opposition leaders were ceased; political censorship on mass-media was canceled; mass demonstrations for free and fair elections, which authorities could not suppress, occurred the country. The Constitution (shaped with the recommendations of UN experts and adopted in 1995) that has a comprehensive Bill of Rights became the most popular text to learn and to quote. In 1998 for the first time in five thousand long Azerbaijani history the man (poet Sabir Rustamkhanli) as a sign of a protest to repression of human dignity in the country returned the premium (Decoration of the Glory) to the Ruler (President H. Aliyev.) The struggle goes on and its operative power is an aspiration to the moral renovation, to life without lie and violence.

Contrary to the gloomy predictions, private property and free market have not corrupted and hardened people. Feedback, which market has restored, made many people more responsible and honest, though so far only between themselves, rather than between the people and the State, which is a rule for non-democratic regime. Organizations for protection of Consumers Right have emerged and most popular newspapers like “Azadliq”, “Ayna-Zerkalo” and others, despite a fear of financial losses, are constantly publishing theirs reports.

Rise of a private business and a public sphere free from governmental control have granted the new generation a unique, alongside the Soviet times, possibility — possibility to live, staying themselves.

Having noticed a group of young journalists, sitting till late in the cafe of Editorial office of one of the independent newspapers I, asked them with the joke: “Don't you have a place to go?..”, — “No, we don't...” — was the answer — “Don't You know what a moral environment has been settled behind these walls. Here only we feel free and just.”

Change has touched the family too. Authoritarianism in the family, which certainly is a base of authoritarian political regime, is being seriously damaged by changes. Youth, that quickly perceived the realities of the free market and ideas of self-determination becomes more and more the generation “X” for their still “Soviet” parents.

The attitude to the women who are less satisfied now with their silent role in the family and social life, is changing. There are 18 Women organizations, 3 active organizations on protection of the Women Rights. For instance 13% of the activists of Musavat party are women. Regrettably, the number of divorces (out of the number of marriages) is growing too, from 10,5% in 1985 to 14% in 1997. It is reported that some of divorces were made because of dissonance in political views. “We have been married for 20 years, have adult children, but 4 years ago we ceased to talk with each other” — speaks a hospital nurse about her husband, a policeman, — “my husband does not stop to scold the times of Democratic Government, he does not understand that at that time we, with each day, were growing morally pure.”

* * *

That is the way we are... On what point present active phase of the self-identifications process will stop one would see in the next 25-30 years, when the generation that was formed under the Soviet regime leaves the stage and transition period has terminated. But the process itself will be lasting and I would like to believe in the prediction not of Polyanichko but of Immanuel Kant on inevitable establishment of the government which will admit the universal rights cause it will be shaped by rational and moral people whom I portrayed here.

End of the Text

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