

Social Capital in Azerbaijan: Does It Help to Build Democracy?

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of social capital in Azerbaijan. Conceptualizing social capital as trust and networking, the article examines popular levels of trust toward various governmental institutions. The author claims that bonding social capital is prevalent in the country while there is relatively little bridging capital. The absence of this bridging social capital both hinders the development of grass-root democracy and decreases voter turnout in municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections.

Social Capital as an Analytical Tool

In recent years, the concept of social capital became one of the most influential intellectual approaches in economics, politics, sociology and development studies. Popularized by Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam, social capital is often seen as a panacea for all the ills and problems of society. Political scientists tend to explain political and economic developments through the lenses of social capital. In Azerbaijan, unfortunately, few studies have been conducted linking the presence or absence of social capital with the development of the country. In this article, we will look at social capital in Azerbaijan and seek to understand its effect on development.

Before analyzing the situation in Azerbaijan, it is worth conceptualizing social capital and its key dimensions. There are many definitions of social capital in the literature. These works provide sometimes differing understandings of the term. For this study we will take the definition offered by Putnam and later adopted by the World Bank. Thus, social capital is considered to be “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.”

Social Capital as Trust

Trust, often used as synonymous with social capital, has become one of the central themes of research on institutional change. The general assumption of many social scientists is that trust in institutions in transitional countries is very low, making the decisions of the government illegitimate or increasing the cost of policies (for trust in institutions see Opinion Poll in this issue).

In Azerbaijan trust in governmental institutions varies significantly from institution to institution. Trust in the president was always high in Azerbaijan since the people tend to associate all positive changes or developments in the country with the leader. Thus, initiatives put forward by the president usually have a good chance of being approved by the general public. In contrast, the public associates most negative phenomena, such as injustices and unresolved problems, with other governmental agencies. For example, a large share of

the population either distrusts or is neutral toward the executive branch. This is a peculiar finding given the fact that the president, who is the head of the executive branch, enjoys a high level of trust. This outcome can be explained by the fact that most people tend to separate the presidency from the ministers who serve him.

Another explanation for such high trust toward the president and comparatively average trust in the government is that the Azerbaijani population has paternalistic views of politics in the country. For example, when asked about the role of the government, 67.4% of surveyed people agreed that the government should act like a parent toward its population while only 21% agreed that government should serve as an employer. Such an attitude toward politics could be detrimental for the development of democratic institutions since the result is that governmental agencies operate as families and become less accountable for their actions.

Local government is another institution that requires trust. Despite the fact that in Azerbaijan the share of respondents who trust their local governments is approximately 38%, a significant minority remains neutral. This outcome reflects the fact that this institution is still young and undergoing reforms. Meanwhile, many unsatisfied people tend to see municipalities as incapable of solving their problems. In addition, the local governments do not have many functions to implement since most power rests with the federal executive. Thus, we can see that people tend to trust the national authorities more rather than local governments since the presidency can, it is believed, really solve problems. Low trust in the local government also has a detrimental effect on democratic participation. The voter turnout in Azerbaijan for municipal elections is very low compared to other elections. Turnout for the 2009 municipal elections was 31.8%, while in previous national elections this figure was around 45%.

The legal system and courts have the lowest level of trust among all the branches. The problem is that the courts are often biased in making their decisions. Despite the fact that a large percentage of people in the country claim to trust the education and health sys-

tems, other data undermine these assertions. For example, researchers found that 60% of all surveyed school pupils, including 78% of pupils in 11th grade, were using the services of private tutors who prepare them for university exams. Such a high figure does not correspond with strong trust in the education system.

Overall, from the data above, we can conclude that except for the presidency, all state institutions suffer from relatively low levels of trust that makes the transition to democracy difficult and increases costs in the economy. As was mentioned earlier, the low level of trust in local government and the parliament lead to low voter turnout in elections. This environment creates political apathy and leads to low membership in political parties, associations and other civil society organizations. The absence of trust hinders the consolidation of liberal democracy in the country and the evolution of a truly civil society.

At the same time, the low trust in other institutions increases the cost of transactions in society and leads to corruption. For example, distrust in public education led to the creation of the private tutoring system, which puts an additional burden on parents while mistrust in the health care system forces people to turn to the private sector or pay additional fees to obtain better treatment.

Social Capital as Networks

Looking at social capital through the lens of networking, social scientists distinguish two dimensions—bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is defined as connections or networking between people who share a common trait—such as members of the same family, clan or any organization where membership is secured only through belonging by birth. Bridging social capital is characterized by networking between people of various backgrounds, ethnicities or professions, but united by belonging to a common association, party, or organization where membership is open to almost everyone.

In Azerbaijan, bonding social capital is quite prevalent. Individuals usually find jobs, gain promotions or score access to resources through family networks. This system was already in place during the Soviet era during the 1960s and 1970s. It led to a situation in which certain positions in the Soviet administration were filled only by the relatives of people who already worked in the system, preventing a regeneration of elites. Heydar Aliyev, the first secretary of the Communist Party in the 1970s even issued instructions prohibiting the children of judges, prosecutors and lawyers from gaining admission to the law departments of local universities. This act prevented the children of judges and prosecutors from entering the legal system since only legal edu-

cation allowed people to work in such positions. For a short period of time, such prohibitions allowed individuals with working class backgrounds or from the regions to obtain jobs in the higher echelons of power.

In independent Azerbaijan the system changed slightly. The regeneration of elites is taking place at a faster pace and with the inclusion of people from the outside. While at the early stage of independence, the elites relied on people from the same region or clan, that system became obsolete as time progressed. However, the system of patronage did not disappear, making bonding social capital the most important resource for the people. Connections through family networks allow insiders to acquire resources much more easily than outsiders.

The presence and prevalence of bonding social capital in Azerbaijan is easily explained. In a system which craves stability, character traits such as loyalty are valued more than professionalism. The person who offers another person a job wants to secure the loyalty of the newcomer and make him part of his circle. The job-giver becomes a kind of patron for the newcomer and seeks to ensure that the newcomer remains loyal. Given existing realities in Azerbaijan (as well as in many North Caucasian republics) people tend to rely on relatives, members of their clan, or residents from the same village or region. Such a system is beneficial for elites too, since the “circle of responsibility” ensures that no one rebels or goes against the system—the punishment for such actions would affect the “rebel” as well as all his relatives.

Such a high level of bonding social capital in the country has positive and negative aspects. The presence of bonding social capital allows more people to gain access to the system or acquire resources, whether they are jobs, preferences or something else. At the same time, due to rapid urbanization in the country, many people tend to migrate from regions to the capital where they settle close to their relatives or others from the same villages. Networks of these people allow newcomers to reduce transaction costs in terms of arranging for housing, finding jobs or solving immediate problems. Thanks to bonding capital, the phenomenon of homelessness, typical of big cities, is almost unknown in Azerbaijan.

However, bonding social capital plays a negative role too. In Azerbaijan reliance on bonding social capital prevents people who are not members of the family or group to gain access to lucrative positions, jobs or financial resources. Meanwhile, membership cannot be obtained unless you are born or marry into the right family (that is why marriage in very important tool for advancement in Azerbaijan). The closed nature of the system could also lead to dissatisfaction and even social protests.

Despite its copious bonding capital, Azerbaijan has very little bridging social capital. There are several rea-

sons for that, including cultural and political variables. Soviet rule created skepticism among Azerbaijani people toward all types of organizations. With unpleasant memories of party gatherings, May 1st demonstrations, trade union meetings and all other attributes of the Soviet bridging social capital, Azerbaijanis lost interest in joining all types of organizations. In addition, the people see little reason to join these organizations since they do not offer additional benefits.

Additionally, political life is largely restricted in the country. During the first decade of independence, political parties and political associations were the major elements of bridging social capital. For the last decade, however, political life—and party politics in particular—has been pushed off the daily agenda. Party membership shrank and the parties themselves stopped playing a role in public life.¹ It is not surprising that when asked whether citizens can form or join political parties without any restrictions, approximately 37% of respondents could not answer the question, while 17% said no. The data shows that people often are unaware of opportunities to participate in organizations. The 2008 World Values Survey (WVS) supported the claim that Azerbaijan has a very low level of social capital as measured by active membership in various organizations.

Another explanation for the low membership is the actions of the government. Citizens may be discouraged from seeking membership in political organizations because they fear playing a role that is too visible, which could cause potential problems with the government.

About the Author

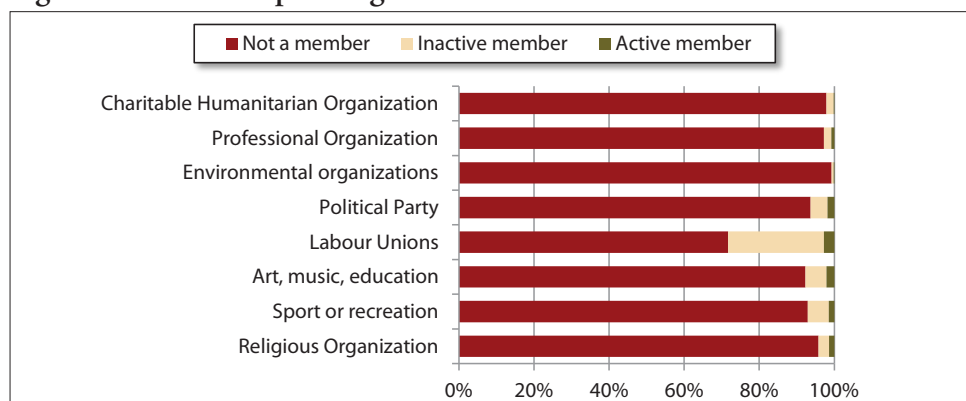
Anar Valiyev received his Ph.D. in Urban and Public Affairs from the University of Louisville in Kentucky, USA. His interests include the public policies of post-Soviet republics; democracy and governance; and urban development and planning. The statements made and views expressed here are solely the responsibility of the author.

Across all the types of organizations, active membership in Azerbaijan is very low. For example only 2.8% of surveyed people claimed active membership in trade unions. Meanwhile, only 0.8% of people actively participate in the activities of professional organizations. At the same time, despite being famous for their willingness to provide charity and philanthropy, only 0.2% of those surveyed actively participate in the activities of charity organizations.²

Conclusion

Many studies have proven the causal connections between social capital and the level of democratization in a society. In Azerbaijan, however, no significant research has been done on that topic. Nevertheless, using all available data we can say that the level of bonding social capital in the country is comparatively high, while trust in various government institutions is moderate. The level of trust in the country could be comparable to many central and eastern European countries. The missing link in Azerbaijan is the bridging social capital (Azerbaijan ranks at the bottom of all countries listed in the World Values Survey). The absence of bridging social capital leads to a low level of organization among people as well as the absence of organizations and associations. In turn, it has a detrimental effect on grass root democracy in Azerbaijan, leading to passiveness and low levels of participation in public life.

Figure 1: Membership in Organizations 2008



Source:
World Value Survey,
http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/index_surveys

1 This situation also can be attributed to the constitutional changes implemented in 2002 that abolished the proportional system of elections to the parliament based on party lists.

2 Most Azerbaijanis give charity at the individual level rather than through organizations.