



NATION-BUILDING IN 21ST CENTURY AZERBAIJAN: DISCOURSE AND NARRATIVES

Special Editor: Lamiya Panahova (Charles University, Prague)

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Nation-Building in 21st Century Azerbaijan: Discourse and Narratives

Introduction by Special Editor Lamiya Panahova (Charles University, Prague)

This year Azerbaijan is celebrating the “Year of Heydar Aliyev”, the 100th anniversary of the late president who is considered the founder of “Azerbaijanism” ideology. “Azerbaijanism” refers to a civic identity that unites all ethnicities in the country under one national umbrella and which became the basis of the nation-building process in Azerbaijan after Heydar Aliyev’s return to power in 1993. Unlike the previous ethnocentric approach which was based on the belongingness to Turkic roots, “Azerbaijanism” promoted the idea of the nation on the basis of citizenship. Being civic and secular in nature, the ideology has, since then, been imposed by the government top-down through education, culture, and media narratives as well as everyday practices, covering all segments of the society.

What is “Azerbaijanism” and how is it promoted? Is this identity observable in all parts of the country the same way? How has its nature changed since 1990s? What are the factors that shape it and what is the place of the Karabakh conflict in it? These are the questions this special issue addresses. It analyses the nation-building process in modern-day Azerbaijan in the light of the most recent developments, aiming to contribute to the literature on nation-building in the post-Soviet region in the modern context by analysing the sources of nation-building in the country, ethno-national (vertical) identity in peripheral regions, as well as the narratives promoted in the primary education system and via unofficial cultural artefacts.

This issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest covers the period after 2003, i.e., from the start of Ilham Aliyev’s presidency, with occasional references to earlier periods. Recognizing Karabakh as a significant factor in the national conscience of people in Azerbaijan by being a source of both collective trauma and glory, this issue gives special attention to its role in the nation-building and nationalist discourses in Azerbaijan.

Origins of Nation-Building in Azerbaijan

By Ayça Ergun (Middle East Technical University in Ankara)

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the origins of the nation-building in Azerbaijan focusing on the discourses of nation-building, role of religion in defining national identity, and multiculturalism. It argues that Azerbaijanism embraces a civic understanding of citizenship identity acknowledging Turkish roots with a particular value and importance to secularism, multiculturalism and tolerance. Azerbaijan consolidated both its nation and state-building processes after the Second Karabakh War in 2022 and is in the process of re-defining its place in a geo-political context challenged by security concerns over the last decades.

Introduction

Nation-building is an evolving process in the former Soviet region. Both statehood and nationhood have been challenged in the South Caucasus due to interethnic conflicts and wars, which have posed serious threats to the consolidation of both sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in particular has been a serious threat to the security and stability in the region, and it has had dramatic consequences. The aim of this article is to discuss the origins of nation-building in Azerbaijan by focusing on discourses on national identity, the significance of secularism and multiculturalism in shaping the nation-building process and the impact of the Karabakh conflict on Azerbaijani nationhood.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of nationalism was a driving force behind the establishment of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) as the political organisation asking for independence under the leadership of Ebulfez Elchibey. The Karabakh conflict was the major factor that paved the way to the reassertation of the Turkish identity and significantly contributed to the expression of the will for independence and regime change. The PFA's programme made a special reference to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's heritage, namely, its three colour flags representing modernisation, Turkism and Islam. The PFA considered the struggle with the Soviet regime not only as a quest for independence and democracy but also offered a new vision for defining nationhood on the basis of Turkism.

Nation-Building in the PostSoviet Period

In the early postSoviet period, Azerbaijanism and Turkism were the major discourses of government and opposition that shaped the discussion on how to define the nation and national identity. Under the presidency of Elchibey (1992–93), the Popular Front Government of

Azerbaijan sought to replace the name of the national identity from Azerbaijani to Turkish as a major priority for the recognition of Turkish origins. Since national identity constituted the main stimulus of the demand for independence, Turkism as an ideology became a tool for state building.

President Heydar Aliyev was a strong advocate for the discourse of Azerbaijanism. With the Azerbaijani Constitution (1995), Azerbaijani became the official name for the national identity, citizenship and language. Reaffirmation of the accustomed identity name from the Soviet times was believed to unify all ethnic groups and potentially prevent any disturbances. The main argument behind this was that the term covers all peoples living in Azerbaijan regardless of their ethnicity and left no room for disturbances among the ethnic minorities (i.e., Lezgins, Talishs, Udins, Avars, Tats, Ingilois, Kurds), aiming to realize the unification and cohesiveness of people living in the territory of Azerbaijan so that stability would be secured. The use of Azerbaijani does not deny the Turkish origins of the majority's ethnic identity, yet it does not particularly highlight it either.

Ilham Aliyev, who came to power in 2003, further embraced the notion of Azerbaijaniness with even more emphasis on secularism and the promotion of discourses on multiculturalism and secularism. The victory after the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and liberation of the previously occupied territories not only consolidated his rule as a leader and commander-in-chief but also increased his popularity. The existing understanding of sovereign, glorious and empowered Azerbaijan paves the way for increased patriotism among citizens who had to psychologically cope with defeat for almost 30 years.

Secularism and Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan

Secularism is an integral dimension of Azerbaijani national identity.¹ Both propagators of Turkism and

1 For an extended discussion, see Ergun, A & Citak Z, 2020, 'Secularism and National Identity in Azerbaijan', *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 464–483.

Azerbaijanism embrace secularism as an indispensable component of state and nation-building. The frequent reference to the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) (1918–1920) as “the first secular and democratic republic in the Muslim world” is not only a source of pride but also modern Azerbaijan’s preference for modernisation. The historical heritage of the ADR and the legacy of the Soviet Union resulted in an emphasis on secularism over religious or sectarian identities. Moreover, it is a choice of the political elite, both government and opposition, who are strong advocates of secularism and consider it a way of life and do not intend to integrate the religious dimension into their political agenda and discourse in either the preindependence or postindependence period. Issues related to the war over Karabakh were treated with reference to national rather than religious terms. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PFA portrayed the conflict as an ethnic one rather than religious one. Although Elçibey was known as a conservative believer, he purposefully chose Turkism as the core concept of national identity inspired by the ADR’s heritage. President Aliyev, an experienced Soviet leader, promoted secularism as an integral part of his state-building discourse. The continuum was secured under the presidency of Ilham Aliyev with a new touch: that is, the promotion of multiculturalism with reference to peaceful cohabitation of all ethnic and religious groups acknowledging diversity in heterogeneous Azerbaijan. Both Heydar and Ilham Aliyev reconsolidated and strengthened secular institutions and committed to the regulation of the state-religion relationship through the establishment of the Committee on Religious Affairs. What Bashirov called “Azerbaijani Islam” is a “part of secular identity of the Azerbaijani people”, reassuring “the supremacy of secular values over religious ones” (Bashirov, 2018:34). This also refers to “downplaying the Shi’a-Sunni differences” (Swietochowski, 1999:424). Thus, the idea of secularism has been one of the main pillars of both national and citizenship identities.

It should be noted that religion is not unimportant for Azerbaijani society, and one cannot neglect its cultural significance. Although some analytical accounts observe the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period as a time of religious revival (Bedford & Souleimanov, 2016; Jödicke, 2017; O’Rear, 2012), for others, it was religiosity rather than religiousness that was increased (O’Rear, 2012: 81). Along the same line, what Valiyev calls the “shallowness of Islamic revival” in Azerbaijan refers to the peculiar importance of Novruz celebrations, a pre-Islamic shamanic tradition, as a public celebration (Valiyev, 2005). Therefore Islam is an integral and important part of Azerbaijan’s cultural and historical heritage and constitutes a cultural component of national identity (Valiyev, 2005:5).

The promotion of secularism by the political elite also became an integral part of the discourse of multiculturalism and facilitated its internalisation in Azerbaijan. It can be argued that it is not ‘inserted’ since it has its roots in Soviet heritage. In 2014, Ilham Aliyev founded the service of the state counselor on multiculturalism, and the Baku International Multiculturalism Center was established (Azerbaijani multiculturalism, 2016). Acknowledging the fact that Azerbaijan “is a country of rich cultural and spiritual heritage and tradition of tolerance”, multiculturalism is argued to be not only a “state policy” but also considered an “invariable lifestyle of modern Azerbaijani society” (Azerbaijani multiculturalism, 2016). Moreover, the promotion of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan serves as a tool for its image building in the international arena, where “multicultural, tolerant and secular Azerbaijan” has been promoted particularly through hosting international events in Baku as part of national branding (Ismailov, 2012; Rojo-Labaien, 2018). The value attributed to secularism and multiculturalism is an important asset for Azerbaijan, which embraces a civic understanding of national identity through the discourse of Azerbaijanism.

Karabakh War as the Past Challenge to Nation-Building and Second Karabakh War as the Main Factor in Consolidated Nationhood in Azerbaijan

The Karabakh conflict was the biggest factor complicating both nation- and state-building in Azerbaijan. At the same time, it has a major role in the redefinition of national and citizenship identities to foster the sense of unity and solidarity for a consolidated nation and statehood. The importance of the Karabakh conflict for Azerbaijani domestic and foreign policy can be explained with reference to a number of factors. First, it was the main impetus for the nationalist independence movement and resulted in the expression of a need for a regime change. In other words, it not only paved the way to the rise of nationalism but also to the will of emancipation from Soviet rule and the will for a new regime type. Second, the conflict itself is the root cause of identifying the main “others” in terms of domestic and external friends and foes. Armenians and Russians emerged as the main foes in the entire process of the postSoviet period. Although the Russian Federation took the lead in signing the truce between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the 10th of November 2020, the Azerbaijanis still have suspicions for Russia’s intentions in the region. Third, the long-lasting conflict has seriously damaged the nation-state building process of Azerbaijan due to the violation of its territorial integrity by Armenians.

The Second Karabakh war and Azerbaijan’s victory paved the way to empowered state-building and con-

solidated nation-building processes. Frequent visits are occurring by officials, representatives of the state institutions and individuals to the formerly occupied territories of the Karabakh region. Diplomatic missions in Azerbaijan and representatives of foreign universities and think tanks are also invited to visit the region for various occasions. These have a symbolic importance in showing Azerbaijan's ownership of the territory and strong commitment to the reconstruction of the occupied territories.

Conclusion

After the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan almost restored its territorial integrity over its formerly occupied territories, consolidated its sovereignty and enjoyed the strengthening of its statehood. Fast reconstruction efforts in formerly occupied territories signify the desire for immediate reintegration and renewal of the region and the return of the refugees. The rise of patriotism with the feeling of glorified statehood is a significant pattern of creating a sense of solidarity and commitment to the national goal in the postwar period with a stronger sense of Azerbaijani citizenship identity. It can also be argued that the emphasis on ethnic origins, i.e., the Turkish

identity has also increased. Obviously, the signing of a peace treaty will not only contribute to peace and security building in the region but also contribute to regional connectivity allowing for strengthened economic cooperation and collective economic development. However, the persistence of historical memory along with hostilities and increased prejudices in both Azerbaijani and Armenian societies should not be neglected. Overcoming hatred is a major task for both governments to establish enduring stability in the region. Although Azerbaijanis and Armenians had the previous experience of living together under Soviet rule, this coexistence has been challenged by memories of the war. The Azerbaijani government's emphasis on multiculturalism and tolerance with high value and importance attributed to secularism provides a strong basis for a future reintegration of both communities. However, this requires a very strong commitment by not only political elites but also societal actors. Therefore, negotiations between leaders should be backed with two-track diplomacy where non-state actors, including civil society organisations, intelligentsia, the academy and media representatives, should actively be included in the process.

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Vertical and Horizontal Nationalism in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

To build a common political identity and to integrate all of the groups in the state, the Azerbaijani government has developed vertical strategies to impose a top-to-bottom nationalist policy. The central government has not only imposed its own discourse about national integration but also restricted any alternative initiatives on the part of formal or informal local institutions. This paper argues that despite all attempts of the central government to impose nationalist policy from top to bottom, its effects are not the same in all parts of the country.

Introduction

Nationalist policy in Azerbaijan after the declaration of independence can be divided into two parts: the Abulfaz Elchibey and Haydar Aliyev periods. Abulfaz Elchibey supported the Turkic origin of the Azerbaijanis and implemented policies to strengthen ethnic identity. Initially, he renamed the national language from Azerbaijan to Turk and opened a debate on the name of the nation. He and his supporters insisted that every nation should be named according to its ethnic origin rather than the name of the place inhabited by its population (Mahmudlu, 2017). Elchibey's ethno-nationalistic policy resulted in the rise of conflicts with the two largest ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, Lezgyns and Talyshs.

When Haydar Aliyev came to power in 1994, he managed to handle separatism problems and attempted to unify the country under a new nationality policy. First, Aliyev changed the name of the language and the nation from "Turkic" to "Azerbaijani" to prevent the ostracization of different non-Turkic ethnic groups that had been involved in separatist movements. The Aliyev administration also adopted Azerbaijan's new constitution, which mentions that "people of Azerbaijan are citizens of the Azerbaijan Republic living in the territory of the Azerbaijan Republic and outside of it, who are subordinate to the Azerbaijan state and its laws, which do not exclude standards of international legislation".¹ Furthermore, Aliyev declared "Azerbaijanism" to be a state ideology.

Furthermore, "Azerbaijanism" has continued to be a main state ideology under Ilham Aliyev after he inherited power from his father Haydar Aliyev (Siroky and Mahmudlu, 2016). Ilham Aliyev has implemented a more active policy in the integration of some ethno-symbolisms, particularly cultural and historical heritage, into state policy. This kind of policy is described

as vertical, from top to bottom, and the main goal is to consolidate all different groups of the country under one civic identity. For this purpose, the government blocked almost all traditional alternative channels that could come from the bottom to prevent the dissemination of competing views and ideas.

Indeed, Azerbaijanism is a complex ideology that comprises permanent state policies that are strengthened with strict legislation due to security and identity concerns and supporting programs and projects, such as the organization of international events (Mahmudlu and Ehtibarli, 2019). In addition, Azerbaijanis have experienced some traumas, such as conflict with Armenians, that are also used as an important element for the consolidation of the nation against common enemies (Broers and Mahmudlu, 2021).

Top-to-Bottom Nationalism

Azerbaijan has a polyethnic society, and a number of ethnicities live in this country. They are related to three language groups: Turkic, Indo-European and Caucasian. However, there are different claims about the exact number of ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan; the State Statistic Committee only accounts for 17 ethnic groups, and the remaining groups correspond to the group of "others"².

The President's Act on the State Aid for the Development of Language and Culture of National Minorities and Protection of Rights and Liberties of Small Nations and Ethnic Groups Living in the Republic of Azerbaijan, which was adopted in 1993, is the only legislation directly protecting the rights of the minorities in Azerbaijan.³ In addition, the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan is the other main legislation that guarantees nondiscrimination and respect for the rights of all the ethnic minorities living in the territory of this country. In the Constitution, Article 11 provides for the develop-

1 See the Constitution of the Azerbaijan Republic (1995). Chapter 1, Article 1.

2 See State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/?lang=en> (Accessed: March 20, 2023)

3 See President Act on the State Aid for the Development of Language and Culture of National Minorities and Protection of Rights and Liberties of Small Nations and Ethnic Groups Living in the Republic of Azerbaijan (1993)

ment and preservation of the culture of the minorities, and Article 44 guarantees the maintenance of national identity⁴. Additionally, with the ratification of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2009, the Republic of Azerbaijan has expressed its willingness to promote and protect cultural diversity and cultural expressions within the territory of the country.

Moreover, legislation regarding education and official language mentions the possibility of carrying out education in different languages for minorities. In addition, the legislation of Azerbaijan allows ethnic minorities to establish their own cultural organizations. In fact, dozens of printed or electronic mass media of minorities are published and broadcast in the territory of Azerbaijan. The members of minority groups are widely represented in the administrative structures of the state. Particularly in local governance units, minority representatives hold leading positions (Mahmudlu and Ehti-barli, 2019).

However, although the legislation of Azerbaijan allows for the free gathering of people and the establishment of political parties, it is forbidden to form such organizations on ethnic and religious bases. In fact, there are no registered and officially recognised political parties on ethnic and religious bases in Azerbaijan. Such a situation makes it difficult to objectively measure the real level of participation of ethnic minorities in the public and political life of this country. In addition, in their observations, some researchers found some problems with social issues and ethnic identity expression (Kotecha, 2006).

The main problem is observed in the protection and development of the languages of minorities. However, the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic has adopted the curriculum for the teaching of native languages of minorities; in practice, it is partially implemented and not extended to the accepted level. On the one hand, weak interest from minorities are observed; on the other hand, there is a deficit of instructors of those languages. In fact, there is no higher education institution preparing instructors for the teaching of native languages. In addition, minorities complain that although they have printed mass media, there is no TV channel or program broadcasting in the languages of ethnic minorities.

Languages can play either unifying or dividing roles. While the spread of official language can form civic identity, the development of native minority languages can motivate the strengthening of ethnic identity. Generally, states in the phase of nation building might be

more interested in the development of an official language rather than in the support and strengthening of the native languages of ethnic minorities.

Considering all of the abovementioned factors, it can be claimed that the aim of the ethnic policy of the Azerbaijani government is to strengthen civic identity among all ethnic minorities. The government invested more in the use of the Azerbaijani language at all levels than in protecting the native languages of minorities. In this regard, the Azerbaijani language was redetermined as the only official language in the first Constitution of the independent Azerbaijan in 1995⁵. Later, in 2001, a decree about the compulsory use of “Latin scripts” was adopted, particularly by the media. The Latinization of the written media was a very important step in the nationalism process in Azerbaijan. In 2006, another decree that prohibited broadcasting TV programs in foreign languages was adopted. According to this decree, all the local nonnative television programs, even the programs in Turkish, had to be translated into Azerbaijani (Ismailzade, 2008).

The goals of the language policy of Azerbaijan are to unify all the people in the state under a single state language by reducing linguistic diversity, to disseminate national ideology through a national language, and to strengthen the context and status of the language to broaden its uniqueness.

The Azerbaijani government also instrumentalized religion to promote its nationalist policy. In fact, the majority of the population of Azerbaijan is Muslim, and recently, the influence of Islam has been raised. To control its influence, the government promoted its own version of Islam, “Traditional Islam” (TI). The Azerbaijani version of TI was introduced not only to protect Azerbaijani society from the influence of various foreign religious groups but also to unify the Muslim population of the country under the same identity (Bedford et al., 2021).

To increase the influence and impact of TI in Azerbaijan, the government implemented a series of measures. For instance, the construction of mosques was monopolized by the state, the creation of the Baku Theology Institute was funded, and the Foundation for the Protection of National Values was established.

Under the banner of ‘Traditional Islam’, the secular authorities in Azerbaijan are actively striving to establish an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative that is controlled and institutionalised by the state (Mahmudlu, 2020).

National security concerns are another important factor shaping Azerbaijan’s nationalist policy. On the

4 See the Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic, Article 11, 44

5 See the Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic, Article 21

eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan was involved in a conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which later developed into a war between the two states. As a result of the war, thousands of people died on both sides, infrastructure was destroyed, and Azerbaijan lost 20% of its territory and was forced to host approximately a million refugees and internally displaced persons (Yuksel et al., 2018; Mahmudlu and Ahmedov, 2014).

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict had a direct influence on the formation and strengthening of the national identities of both nations. In territorial conflicts, the claim of one party is identified by another as a threat to a collective identity and can be the main reason for the dispute (Koleman, 2001). After the I Karabakh War, the Azerbaijan government narrated the aggression of Armenia as a threat to the common interest of people of the country and was able to create an image of a common enemy. The image of a common enemy was also actively used in the construction of national identity (Mahmudlu and Abilov, 2018).

The effect of that policy was observed during the II Karabakh War in 2020. The Azerbaijani government was very successful in mobilizing all ethnic groups in the country to participate in the war and, as a result, liberated a significant part of its occupied territories.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are a number of scholarly works claiming that ethnic identity is still dominant among minority groups, despite the efforts of the vertical nationalism policy of the central governments. For instance, Frederik Barth (1969) claims that elite construction has a limited role in identity building. As he mentioned, in some cases, inter-

ethnic relations are more effective than the dissemination of ideas coming from the centre (Barth, 1969). In his study of Scottish nationalism, Anthony Cohen (1996) explored nationalism from the perspective of individuals' personal preferences. He maintained that nationalism is developed on a personal level, mainly by individuals using local history, language, traditions, folklores, music and some other ethno-differential factors, rather than through the imposition of state-centric policies.

In the case of Azerbaijan, despite all attempts of the central government to impose a nationalist policy from top to bottom, its effects are not the same in all parts of the country. However, the central government not only imposes its own discourse on national integration but also restricts the activities of formal and informal local institutions. However, it is impossible to restrict inter-ethnic, peer-to-peer or village-to-village communication, which leads to the emergence of horizontal nationalism.

In particular, vertical nationalism policy is not very effective in monoethnic rural areas or in the borderland regions of Azerbaijan. In their study of Lezgins and Talyshs, Siroky and Mahmudlu (2016) revealed that in the borderland regions of Azerbaijan, the discourse of the central government on official nationalism is less effective because the level of civic engagement is low in those areas. Naturally, the ethnic groups communicate more with each other and their kin ethnicities on the other side of the border rather than with other ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan. This allows them not only to protect their native languages, folklore, traditions, and even their version of Islam but also to develop those values further. In such a situation, against the imposition of top-to-bottom nationalism by the central government, those ethnic minorities horizontally strengthen their ethnic identity.

About the Author

Ceyhan Mahmudlu is a founder and president of the U.S.-based think-tank Caspian Research Institute (CASPRI).

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The Memory of the Second Karabakh War and the Future of the National Lack in Azerbaijan

By Bahruz Samadov (Charles University, Prague)

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Abstract

The loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding, predominantly Azerbaijani-inhabited territories after the First Karabakh War formed a traumatic basis for the formation of the post-Soviet Azerbaijani national identity. The situation fundamentally changed after the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijan regained control over surrounding territories and even began articulating a new irredentist discourse. Based on a psychoanalytic approach, this study examines the reflection of these shifts in unofficial cultural artefacts, namely, *mevkhana*. The article analyses the celebration of the return of national territory, the glorification of veterans, and the mourning of fallen soldiers as three modes of memorialising the war in popular songs. The study also analyses the proliferation of antagonism in the same genre.

Introduction

The emergence of the national liberation movement in Azerbaijan in 1988 is closely connected to the interethnic clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region. Interethnic clashes transformed into nationwide antagonism, utilised by both the protest movement and the government. While the protest movement demanded the protection of the rights of Azerbaijanis expelled from Armenia and the retention of Nagorno-Karabakh within the sovereign borders of Azerbaijan, the government of Nagorno-Karabakh launched a passport-checking operation to identify Armenian armed guerrillas in late 1991, which essentially turned into an ethnic cleansing of Armenian villages (Murphy, 1992). Crisis and interethnic conflict evolved further after the massacre of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Khojaly in February 1992, after which the liberation movement's representatives, the Popular Front, came to power (De Waal, 2003).

The war intensified under their rule in the summer of 1992 when Azerbaijan took control over areas in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the growing power struggle with various warlords led to an internal crisis, which gave the Armenian forces a chance to restore control over Armenian-inhabited areas and occupy several strategic, Azerbaijani-inhabited areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian control led to waves of refugees from these territorial units. The occupation of Kelbajar in April 1993 was especially shocking, and the Popular Front declared a state of emergency (De Waal, 2003, p. 212). The internal crisis was solved after Heydar Aliyev's return to Baku in the summer of 1993, and he soon became Azerbaijan's third president. The first war officially ended in 1994 after both sides signed a ceasefire agreement.

The traumatic impact of the conflict essentially manifested in two events: the Khojaly massacre in 1992 and the loss of territories around Nagorno-Karabakh that formed the basis of antagonism in post-Soviet debates on

Azerbaijani national identity. Two discourses on national identity, one emphasising the ethnic Turkic background and the other referring to statism and patriotism, coexist and overlap in the social imaginary in post-Soviet Azerbaijan (Tokluoglu, 2005; Mamedov, 2017, p. 29). The inscription of national lack on the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and with Armenia were features of the nationalist social imaginary. The period between the 1994 ceasefire and 2010 was relatively calm. During this period, national antagonism toward Armenia became a sedimented part of Azerbaijani national identity, represented in school textbooks (Hakobyan, 2016) and cultural artefacts (Samadov and Grigoryan, 2022). The hegemonic rearticulation of socially accepted antagonism has become more evident in post-2010 Azerbaijan, where the authoritarian turn was accompanied by the “rescue” and public pardon of Ramil Safarov in 2012, who served eight years of a life sentence in Hungary for killing an Armenian soldier (de Waal, 2013, p. 3). The 4-day April war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016, which took the lives of more than 200 soldiers, was the first serious break of the ceasefire agreement (Broers, 2019, p. 1), materially proving the persistence of national antagonism.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War restored control over the areas around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and significantly changed the social imaginary. Victory transformed older narratives about the loss of and desire for Karabakh into enjoyment, presented in the form of national celebration. The analytical part of this study shows the affective function of songs in the national celebration of the imagined community of Azerbaijan overcoming its former loss.

Brief Theoretical Explanation

In psychoanalytically informed poststructuralist political theory, *lack*, *desire*, *fantasy*, and *enjoyment* are four categories of crucial importance (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006; Žižek, 2008; Stavrakakis, 2002). Lack is understood as a fundamental human experience that stems from the absence of stable foundations. According to the Lacanian approach, there is always a “certain fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack” (Žižek, 2008, p. 137), which forms collective identities and desires. Incompleteness is not only a feature of identities but also the symbolic order itself. Fantasy, realised in a narrative form, is thus necessary to cover the lack in the symbolic order, which organises and frames the desires of subjects (Žižek, 2008, p. 132).

Enjoyment, being a part of fantasmatic narratives, is imagined as an idealised state when there is no longer a valid lack. In nationalist narratives, the object of desire is presented as enjoyment stolen by an external enemy,

and nationalist political projects promise to get it back (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 152). From the Lacanian point of view, the national idea is a way to organise enjoyment through national myths (Žižek, 1993, p. 202). Identification with these collective myths grants the subject a sense of partial and momentary bodily enjoyment (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 157). The unofficial status is what makes such practices enjoyable. A more direct mode of such enjoyment is racist hate speech. By transgressing social norms and using a racial slur, the racist speaker obtains enjoyment by articulating offensive signifiers (George and Hook, 2022, p. 41).

In the case of Azerbaijan, national discourses placed the traumatic loss of Karabakh at the level of national lack. The national community was united by this shared loss and mutual experience of traumatic events. The 2020 war brought the historical chance to return lost lands and affectively experience the war and its outcomes. The study reveals the inscription of collective affects, such as celebration and mourning, in *meykhana* songs related to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Preference is given to *meykhana*, a relatively free-of-state-control rap-like national music genre, because this genre represents popular ideas and social narratives, including nationalism (Strzemżalska, 2022). Unlike officially sanctioned practices that only demonstrate enjoyment, the unofficial practices, e.g., rituals, customs, and dances, are more provocative in the celebration of national enjoyment and identification (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 157). Considering space limitations, only three *meykhana* songs, which have been watched more than 3 million times, are chosen based on a YouTube search for patriotic songs. The following framing does not limit the possibilities of other frames and interpretations of the war.

Celebration: “I Would Sacrifice Myself For You, Karabakh!”

In a viral patriotic *meykhana* (more than 5 million views), “We Are Coming, Karabakh” (“*Gəlirik Qarabağ*”) by Rövşən Binəqədili (2020), which was uploaded to YouTube on November 19, 2020, (11 days after the end of the war), *Karabakh* is repeated as a signifier in the context of sacred space (“May I sacrifice myself for you, Karabakh/I admire you, Karabakh”). This sacred space, Karabakh, has been finally reclaimed after “Armenians are chased out.” The emphasis on the act of “our return” designates the dominant national desire.

Karabakh is described as Azerbaijan’s lost paradise with a poeticised agency: “The hay field has missed us; the flowers have missed us.” Such an affective localisation of Karabakh with passive agency (it can *miss*) essentialises Karabakh as a space that morally belongs only

to Azerbaijanis. A paradisiac description of the land makes the fantasy of its return into a promise of total contentment, harmony, and completeness that the victorious nation deserves.

The song also mentions Khojaly: “Revenge has been taken, Khojaly!” (*Qanın alınır, Xocalı*). While the song has a celebratory tone, by reminding listeners of the most traumatic event in the national narrative, the author draws attention to the fact that complete victory only occurs with revenge for Khojaly.

Glorification: “Step Aside, the Veteran is Coming!”

Veterans’ social and psychological problems after the war have been the most pressing issue in Azerbaijan. Over 40 veterans have committed suicide (Aghayev and Shikhali, 2022). Many veterans publicly raised attention to unfulfilled demands for economic prosperity or unresolved health issues (Samadov, 2021). Slowly, the subject position of the veteran has become associated with injustice, increasing discomfort for some and raising empathy in others.

The song *Qazi gəlir* (“The Veteran is Coming”), performed by rapper Elvin Nasir and *meykhana* poet Aqshin Fateh (2021), pays tribute to the figure of the veteran. With 5 million views, the song describes the pain and memories of the veteran and is an explicit “diss” track targeting the entertaining music “Bashir is Coming.” This case reveals the tension among “sincere nationalists” and “consumerists,” who are resented by the former. While the Bashir video shows young people dancing and singing in downtown Baku, the veteran video depicts a one-eyed, disabled veteran who visits the graves of his brothers-in-arms. His bodily losses are meaningful: “He lost his hand, arm, legs/There is a whole area that is not given to the enemy.” Thus, the veteran’s bodily loss is justified by standing in for the national lack, as his health was “sacrificed for the nation.”

The lyrics tell us the story of the veteran, who was a refugee (“Once he left his home barefoot”), so his participation in the war was an act of successful revenge. This motive humanises the veteran but also mirrors the dominant narrative of resentment in Azerbaijani society after the loss of Karabakh, making it easier for the listener to identify and empathise with the veteran.

Mourning: “Those Days with You”

During the war, Azerbaijan lost more than 2900 soldiers. The glorification and commemoration of fallen soldiers (martyrs, *şəhidlər*) have become common, with an especially powerful affective force among the people. While glorification and remembrance are accepted forms of memory politics, the public mourning of human losses did not fit the narrative of overcoming national loss, and public media mostly avoided such stories. In

other words, mourning fallen soldiers was underrepresented in the official narrative of the victory and defeat of the enemy. The object of mourning, a fallen soldier, devalues the recently obtained national object of desire and potentially leads to melancholia.

A famous *meykhana* poet, Mahir, (2022) mourns the martyrs, “those who preferred the flag of the homeland as their shroud.” The video has been watched 8 million times on YouTube. The author remembers “those days with you” with a “broken heart.” Closer to the end, the listener can also hear a voice crying. The song is a rare example of mourning in the form of popular music without references to victory, heroism, revenge, and Karabakh. The high number of views proves that even if the practices of postwar mourning were excluded from national representation, the affective need for the act of mourning persisted.

The Future of Antagonism

According to the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, even if the community obtains the desired object, it does not solve the fundamental absence in the foundations. The impossibility of harmonious existence haunts human beings, causing further dissatisfactions and new demands. There can be different outcomes of antagonistic struggles, such as the transformation of antagonism into agonistic respect, “which is built upon the avoidance of physical and structural violence and on the recognition of all actors as operating within the same democratic, legal, and social sphere, without ignoring the diversity of their positions.” (Carpentier, 2017, p. 171). The analysed case shows that the victory of Azerbaijan has not transformed interethnic hatred. At the official level, President Aliyev blamed the Soviet decision to hand over “ancestral Azerbaijani lands” to Armenia and threatened to take these lands by force. This narrative has become “increasingly prevalent in Azerbaijani discourse” since the end of the Second War (Broers, 2021).

This discursive shift is articulated in *meykhana* rather occasionally. On the YouTube channel of the aforementioned popular *meykhana* writer, Rövşən Binəqədili, there are two songs related to this shift. In a *meykhana* song published on Binəqədili’s channel, “We are coming to Zangezur” (*Zəngəzura Gəlirik*), Vusal Khayal (2021) addresses Armenians, saying, “If you do not leave these areas peacefully/We will make you regret [your choices] again like dogs.” The intertextual reference to dogs should remind the listener of İlham Aliyev’s infamous speeches during the war, where he described Armenians as dogs that were chased away (Sahakyan, 2022). This dehumanising trope and the new irredentist focus show that Aliyev’s speeches have influenced popular discourse and prove that military victory did not end the antagonistic and exclusionary approach to

cross-border relations. After the war, the proliferation of antagonism and irredentist narratives materialised during the September clashes in 2022 in South Armenia. As a result, more than 100 soldiers died on both sides. In the same month, Rövşən Binəqədili (2022) released a new song, “We are coming to take it back” (*Almağa Gəlirik*, 200.000+ views), which refers to the imaginary capture of Zangezur, the land of “meadows and glades,” after the destruction of villainized enemies. Thus, the fantasy of reclaiming the stolen lands of Karabakh is transferred to capturing other historical lands. Notably, the relatively low number of views (32.000+ and 200.000+) and occasional articulation of the signifier “Zangezur” in unofficial discursive practices demonstrates that this irredentist shift in official discourse remains infrequent and does not affect national identity as much as the narratives on victory.

Conclusion

The First Nagorno-Karabakh War left deep injuries on the post-Soviet Azerbaijani national identity. The memory of the first war formed a specific social imaginary based on exclusive victimhood and antagonistic nationalism, which “identifies the other-foreigner as a radically different and inferior actor, which is a threat for the self.” (Carpentier, 2017, p. 231) Victory changed the narrative

of the victimisation of the national Self to the celebration of the return of Karabakh. However, what victory did not change is the dehumanising attitude and continued antagonism towards Armenians. The conflict has been transformed only to a still-contentious border dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the future of the Armenian-inhabited part of Karabakh remains unclear.

Three modes of remembering the war, celebration, glorification, and return, are revealed in popular *meykhana* songs. Celebration is connected to the fantasy of the return of lost territory, promising enjoyment and harmony for the future. Glorification reminds the national community that the return is possible due to the heroic acts of veterans and martyrs. While glorifying fallen soldiers is an officially accepted form of memorialisation, public mourning over them remains marginalised.

Finally, an irredentist shift in official discourse introduces a further object of desire: Zangezur as lost ancestral lands. However, the lack of public memory of the “second loss” has not allowed the further sedimentation of this shift, which is also occasionally reflected in *meykhana*. The absence of peace narratives and the popularity of dehumanising ideas remain major problems for transforming antagonistic nationalism in Azerbaijan.

About the Author

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The State, Primary Education, and Nation-Building in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This article explores the nation-building narratives in the primary education system in Azerbaijan in terms of existing legislation, everyday practices at schools, and the content of textbooks. To achieve this aim, legislative guidelines and regulations, everyday practices obtained through personal observations and social networks, and the “Azerbaijani Language” and “Life Knowledge” textbooks for the 1st–4th classes are explored. The article then divides the main narratives into categories such as the description of national characteristics and history, military element, and loyalty to the current government in power, analysing each of them. The study argues that rather than civic virtues, the volume of content that serves militaristic nationalism and regime consolidation is more significant in the nationhood narratives promoted through the primary education system.

Introduction

Unlike the earlier period of independence in the 1990s, the debate on the Azerbaijani national identity and competition between Turkism (an ethnocentric approach) and Azerbaijanism (a civic approach) (Tokluoglu, 2006) no longer dominates the national discourse in Azerbaijan. Instead, “Azerbaijanism”, which is a civic concept of the nation, is accepted as the main ideology of nation-building. Ergun (2020, p. 4) divides the evolution of nationalism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan into three phases, namely, as a defence tool, as a state-building tool, and as a democratization tool. Does nation-building still serve as a tool for democratization in this case? To address this issue, this study explores the nationhood narratives in the most recent school textbooks to discover the nature and pattern of these narratives.

It is known that school education and textbooks are important tools used to promote national narratives and bring up citizens who share the same identity. Podeh (2000, p. 66) calls Israeli textbooks “another arm of the state” and “agents of memory”, as they are loyal instruments for identity politics. In Azerbaijan’s case, such books are especially relevant due to the centralized education system with a uniform curriculum for all schools that requires everyone to use the same textbooks. This makes it easier to control the main narratives to which schoolchildren are exposed. Regarding school education and democratization in Azerbaijan, Wistrand (2020) performed a study focusing on civics education in which she argued that the education reform failed to prioritize civics education, which has resulted in consequences for citizens’ knowledge about democracy. Thus, what does the education system teach students about citizenship and nation? This study focuses on primary education, that is, the symbols used in classrooms and short stories about the homeland, exploring how they reflect affection for the nation and produce a shared commitment

among very young schoolchildren. The study, therefore, answers the questions below:

- In which images are the homeland, its history, and the nation introduced to students through primary education?
- What is the place of the military component in the primary school national narratives?
- What is the place of the current government in power within the nationhood narratives in school curricula?

Primary School and Patriotism: Legislation

The first 4 years of the 11-year school education in Azerbaijan provide a primary education in which 6- to 9-year-old students learn reading, writing, and basic math skills. Major school subjects such as history, geography, biology, etc., are not taught at this stage; rather, basic knowledge covering various fields is introduced to the students through “Azerbaijani language” and “Life Knowledge” classes. New subject curricula for schools were approved in 2010 in Azerbaijan, which introduced a brand-new curriculum for all schools. The new curriculum standards emphasize that “students must be able to recognize and introduce moral-traditional values of the Azerbaijani nation, Azerbaijan’s history, culture, art, and prominent people, as well as the ‘counterforces’ against their country” as one of the learning outcomes for primary school education. Accordingly, one of the requirements for the subject “Azerbaijani language” in primary schools is described as “introducing the language, history, moral values, art, and traditions of Azerbaijani nation to the students” (Cabinet of Ministers, 2010). In October 2020, the “Law on Education” was modified, and the goal of “to teach the students patriotism and respect to the values and symbols of Azerbaijani nation” was added to the list of the aims of primary schools (Aliyev, 2020).

As observed from the official guidelines, promoting patriotism and national values to students is taken seri-

ously as one of the duties of primary education. Meanwhile, primary school students are frequently involved in various patriotism and commemoration events, which have been scraped for this study from the website of the Baku City Education Department over the last 6 years.

Textbooks and School Events in Promoting National Narratives

The official requirements and guidelines mentioned above are implemented by real-life practices in primary education. A classic classroom for primary education displays the national flag and the coat of arms, the text of the state anthem, and the photos of former president Heydar Aliyev and current president Ilham Aliyev on the wall. The schoolchildren collectively sing the national anthem in the courtyard of the school before going to their classrooms. On the first page of each primary school textbook, there is a page-sized photo of Heydar Aliyev with the introduction: “Heydar Aliyev—Nation-wide leader of the Azerbaijani people”. In each book, there is a section “My Homeland” that describes Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani nation. The rest of this article will explore the narratives, which are divided into several categories, i.e., the description of the homeland and the nation, its history, military elements, and loyalty to the current government. While the importance of the first two categories is greatly acknowledged by nation-building literature, the last two have been found by the author to be specific to Azerbaijan’s case due to their prevalence, as will be explained further in the article.

Description of Homeland, Nation, and Its History

Azerbaijan is described as an ancient country located neither in Europe nor Asia but rather in Eurasia. Consequently, any special orientation towards Western, Eastern, or religious values is not prevalent. The Azerbaijani people are described as brave as an eagle, which is also the shape of the country’s map (Abdullayeva, 2019). The importance of moral values in being good citizens is emphasized, and losing these values is shown as being equal to losing one’s national identity. The most-often mentioned of these moral values are national music and culture, fearlessness and brevity, and hospitality.

Historical knowledge at the primary education level is not structured such that myths and real historical facts are both provided, often without a clear distinction. However, ancientness and owning larger territories in the past are emphasized. In the provided myths, Azerbaijan is called the “Land of Fire”, and its area is described as a large place between Mount Savalan (in modern-day Iran) and Mount Ararat (part of current-day Türkiye) at the beginning of the Arab invasion (Bayramova et al., 2022, p. 58–59). Javanshir, the king of the Caucasian Albanian state, is also presented as a brave hero of Azer-

baijan. Sevan (Goycha) Lake (currently in Armenia) is described as a historical Azerbaijani land that was only occupied by Armenians with the help of Russia 100 years ago. Another emphasized period is the history of the current Karabakh conflict, in which the Azerbaijani lands were occupied by Armenia and Azerbaijanis were forced to flee under gunfire (Bayramova et al., 2022).

Another concept that cohabits with civic nationhood in Azerbaijan is “multiculturalism”, which promotes ethnolinguistic pluralism (Cornell, Karavelli and Ajeganov, 2016). Religious pluralism is also prominent in the popular discourse, e.g., the exemplary Muslim-Jewish tolerance represented by the peaceful living of Mountain Jews in Quba (Jabiyeva, 2021). However, these concepts are not widely mentioned in textbooks where civic nationhood is the dominant concept. In the textbook the only context ethno-religious pluralism is emphasized are two stories. In the first one, a child has two friends, namely, one Lezgin and one Talish (both ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan), who together represent Azerbaijan in international competition (Bayramova et al., 2022, p. 34). Another story is about the friendship of a child with an ethnic Russian child (Abdullayeva, 2019, p. 57).

Military Elements of Nationhood

This element is hard to ignore, as it exists with a special emphasis in all textbooks from the 1st to 4th grades both before and after the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and was used as the main feature of a good patriot. The students are introduced to the honour of being a soldier and protecting the homeland. Stories about the heroism of Mubariz Ibrahimov, who passed a 1-km mined area to the Armenian side and killed their forces in an unequal fight during the ceasefire time in 2009, are prominent in the textbooks. The Khojali massacre, in which Azerbaijani civilians were mass killed by Armenian armed forces in 1992, and the symbolic importance of Shusha, which is a historical town taken back by Azerbaijani forces during the Second Karabakh War, are emphasized. To students is explained the importance of not giving a piece of homeland to anyone and protecting the borders.

The army is described as one of the most important components of the Azerbaijani statehood as it is among the world’s 50th strongest armies (Abbasova, et al., 2021, p. 62). Through different stories, it is endorsed that every child’s dream should be joining the army to show their love for the homeland. The textbooks for all grades include different stories and poems that describe how children at the preschool age level desire to join the army and make their parents proud, as well as proverbs such as “Show bravery, fight the enemy” or “The land is only a homeland when there is someone dying for it” (Abdullayeva, 2019).

The military component is prominent in the events held at schools as well. Every year, in the events com-

memorating Black January and the Khojali massacre, primary school boys wear military costumes. These military costumes are observed not only during these commemorations but also in other events such as “National Revival Day”, “National Salvation Day”, and other public holidays. After the Second Karabakh War, the events at schools celebrating the occasion were held more frequently. Nonmilitary events such as Novruz and International Women’s Day also took names in some schools such as “Victory-scented Novruz” and “International Women’s Day with Martyr’s Mothers” after the 2020 war. Primary school students are often asked to present essays and pictures about the achievements of the army (Baku City Education Department, n.d.).

Unlike the textbooks utilized before the new curricula implementation in 2010, the May 9th victory after the “Great Patriotic War”, which is a part of the country’s Soviet history, is not mentioned in the new textbooks. After 2020, a new “Victory Day” was added to textbooks and celebrated on November 8. Although May 9th celebrations were still taking place at schools in the form of events until 2020, they were replaced later by November 8 celebrations to mark the nation’s victory in the Second Karabakh War.

Current Government and National Identity

LaPorte (2014) defines Azerbaijan as “hegemonic authoritarianism” where rather than being banned, the opposition parties and groups are marginalized from society by being provided limited access to society and media. This is complemented by a stronger visibility of the current regime in the media and official discourse. The same pattern can be observed in the stage of education as early as primary schools as part of nationhood narratives. Apart from the portrait on the first page of the textbooks, Heydar Aliyev is presented as the national leader of Azerbaijani people and the greatest Azerbaijani patriot. He is also introduced as the founder of the “Azerbaijanism” ideology, which has united the nation and saved it from being divided. Based on his saying “I am proud that I am Azerbaijani”, students are asked to write an essay on why they are also proud of being an Azerbaijani (Abdullayeva et al., 2022, p. 43–44). Meanwhile, Aliyev’s name is mentioned in all events held at schools as the person who had the great success in protecting the sovereignty, uniting the nation, giving the necessary attention to historical tragedies of the nation, founding the “Azerbaijanism” ideology, bringing solidarity to the nation, and preserving the language. “National Salvation Day”, which is the day Aliyev became the Chair of the Parliament, is celebrated every year at schools and marked by primary school children reciting poems. The presentation of Heydar Aliyev in this way intertwines his personality with that of the “Azerbaijani nation”. Although the succes-

sors of the Musavat Party that established the first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918 are now in opposition, in the events celebrating both that occasion and the restoration of independence on 18 October 1991, Aliyev’s services in building the nation and gaining its independence are emphasized instead. After the Second Karabakh War, current president Ilham Aliyev’s role in liberating the territories was mentioned on every occasion as a force that gathered all Azerbaijani people together (Baku City Education Department, n.d.)

Conclusion

Promoting moral-traditional values and patriotism starting as early as primary schools is specified in the relevant legislation and is implemented through written uniform textbooks and commemoration events at schools. Azerbaijanis are presented as a brave and hospitable Eurasian nation with a very ancient history, who used to have bigger territories in the past and who have suffered over the course of history. Religious elements are lacking in the whole curriculum, making the narratives completely secular in nature. The militaristic element is the component that is most strongly emphasized, promoting the sacredness and necessity of fighting over the homeland to be a real Azerbaijani. The role of Heydar Aliyev in building the nation is also frequently mentioned in commemoration events at schools, with his name tied to all recent glorious events, including gaining independence, ensuring stability and solidarity, and protecting the native language from disappearing.

Meanwhile, the identity promoted through primary school education is focused solely on civic grounds with occasional references to the country’s ethnic Turkic roots. Although ethnic Turkicness is incorporated to it, “Azerbaijani” as a separate national identity is evident in both textbooks and events. In primary school narratives, civic nationhood policy still prevails over multiculturalism policy. The nature of “Azerbaijanism” is strongly militarized even for primary school students, which can be explained by priority investments in the military sector and the conflict over Karabakh. Military narratives are not only promoted but also directly imposed by declaring every Azerbaijani boy a future soldier who is ready to die for the homeland. The country’s Soviet past is also a topic left out of current primary educational narratives. The only event related to the Soviet time period, namely, the celebration of Victory Day on May 9th, was removed from the school curricula and events schedule after the victory in the Second Karabakh War. Current identity narratives focus solely on the independent period, with only episodic references to the distant past to demonstrate that the nation previously had larger territories.

The nexus of nation-building and regime-building is highly evident, which generates what Broers and

Mahmudlu (2022) call “civic dominion”, i.e., “the domination of a regime tradition, legitimated through the imagery and ideology of civic nationhood”. The primary school national narratives follow this route by intertwining the image of the ruling party with the description

of the nation through symbols and everyday classroom activities, textbooks, and celebration events, leaving little space for universal values related to human rights and democratization.

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