

Civic Nation and Ethnic Identity in the Context of Azerbaijan

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In modern political and legal theory, the concept of the nation was for a long time explained primarily through such factors as ethnic origin, language and cultural identity. However, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, as a result of the formation of the rule of law, the development of the institution of citizenship and the expansion of mechanisms of political participation, the concept of the nation increasingly began to be interpreted as a legal and political category. Within this approach, the notion of the civic nation, or civic nation, defines the nation not in terms of ethnic homogeneity but as a public community formed on the basis of citizenship, legal equality and a shared political will.

This article draws a principled distinction between two concepts: ethnic identity and national identity. Ethnic identity is a form of socio-cultural belonging formed on the basis of common origin, language, culture and historical memory. An approach that regards ethnic identity as the principal defining criterion of the nation gives rise to the concept of the ethnic nation, according to which an ethnic nation is understood as a social community composed of individuals who share the same ethnic identity. National identity, by contrast, denotes political (civic) and legal belonging formed on the basis of a legal bond with the state, citizenship status, loyalty to constitutional values and a shared political will. In other words, national identity does not possess an ethnic content and cannot be regarded as synonymous with ethnic identity. Within this conceptual framework, the civic nation is explained as the political

unity of citizens united by a legal bond with the state.

In contemporary Western political and legal discourse, the concept of the nation is used predominantly in the sense of the civic nation. Nevertheless, in the post-Soviet space, including Azerbaijan, the concepts of the ethnic nation and the civic nation are often not clearly distinguished from one another. As a result, the notions of the nation, national identity and ethnic belonging are presented at the same semantic level, which weakens the legal essence of the civic nation.

In the Azerbaijani context, this problem is particularly evident in the use of the term "Azerbaijani". In current official and statistical practice, this term is employed to denote both national identity and, incorrectly, ethnic identity. However, at least in official practice, the term "Azerbaijani" should express not ethnic identity but exclusively national identity. In official documents, for example in the census, the term "Azerbaijani" should refer not to a segment of the citizens of Azerbaijan but to all of them.

The Concept of the Civic Nation

The concept of nation can be divided into two main types: ethnic and civic. While ethnic nation is founded on common origin, language and culture, civic nation is formed on the basis of citizenship, legal equality and loyalty to political institutions. This distinction clearly elucidates the legal and institutional nature of the civic nation and differentiates it from ethnic identity.[\[1\]](#)

One perspective on the civic nation holds that a nation is defined neither by race nor by language or religion; rather, it is founded on a shared historical experience and a collective will to maintain that unity into the future. The nation thus emerges as a political and moral agreement that must be reaffirmed daily. This view presents the civic nation not as a static ethnic category but as a dynamic and legal

community.[\[2\]](#) Among the contemporary theories that give new substance to the concept of the civic nation is constitutional patriotism. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas proposes that national belonging should be based not on cultural or ethnic sameness, but on adherence to constitutional values, legal norms and democratic institutions.[\[3\]](#) This approach is particularly significant in justifying the possibility of forming a civic nation on an ethnically neutral basis in modern democratic states, and it is closely linked to the idea of the rule of law.[\[4\]](#)

The concept of the civic nation is not merely a sociological or ideological category; it also carries legal significance. From a legal standpoint, the civic nation is primarily constructed on the institution of citizenship.[\[5\]](#) Citizenship not only expresses an individual's legal bond with the state but also serves as the primary criterion for recognition as a member of the civic nation. In the formation of a civic nation, the principle of equal rights and responsibilities plays a decisive role. Legal equality is not merely a formal constitutional provision; it entails equality in political participation, the protection of rights and access to state institutions.[\[6\]](#) In this way, the civic nation is defined by the legal character of belonging to the state, a belonging established through the constitution, laws and relationships with political institutions.

International Examples of the Civic Nation

The civic nation model primarily emerges in multiethnic and multicultural societies in the context of the state's approach to ethnic diversity. For instance, in the experience of the United States of America, the concept of the nation is defined by adherence to the US Constitution and citizenship status.[\[7\]](#) The integration of different ethnic, religious and cultural groups within a unified political community is ensured through political participation, legal equality and the rights of citizenship. However, this approach has historically not

encompassed all groups to the same extent; in particular, the distinct historical experiences, collective identity formations, and social traditions of Indigenous peoples were not considered in the initial construction of the civic nation model. This demonstrates that the concept of the civic nation possesses an ideal-typical character and, in practice, encounters certain limitations.

The Swiss Confederation represents a classic example of the multilingual and multiethnic model of the civic nation. The Swiss civic nation is formed not on the basis of a common language or ethnic affiliation but through the federal structure, institutions of direct democracy and constitutional agreements.[\[8\]](#) The official status of German, French, Italian and Romansh, together with the broad autonomy of the cantons, constitutes a key factor in ensuring the inclusive character of the civic nation.

In Canada, the civic nation is founded on a policy of multiculturalism and the principle of legal equality.[\[9\]](#) The Canadian state formally recognizes ethnic and cultural diversity and integrates it as a component of its political and legal system. Multiculturalism is regarded not merely as a social policy measure but also as a constitutional and legal principle.

In the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the civic nation model exhibits both unified and regionally inclusive characteristics. The official state language is recorded as Dutch in official documents; from a philological perspective, this is the Hollandic language. The Dutch form the majority of the population, while the Frisians enjoy regional and secondary official language status for Frisian in the province of Friesland.[\[10\]](#)

By outlining these international examples, the aim is to demonstrate that a decisive factor in the formation of the civic nation is the state's approach to ethnic diversity. When

ethnic differences are regarded not as a threat but as a political resource, political unity can be maintained and a stable state structure established without requiring ethnic homogeneity. However, this approach has an ideal-typical character and, in real political practice, may encounter various historical, social, and institutional constraints.

Components of the Azerbaijani Civic Nation and Their Representation in Official Discourse

The territory of contemporary Azerbaijan has historically been a multiethnic and multicultural socio-political space. Turks, Talysh, Kurds, Lezgins, Avars and other ethnic groups have developed long-standing experiences of cohabitation and have collectively participated in defending the land and securing political independence. From the early nineteenth century onwards, resistance to the expansionist policies of the Russian Empire, as well as the events of January 1990 and the conflict over Karabakh, demonstrated broad public solidarity among Azerbaijani citizens, irrespective of their ethnic affiliation (with the exception of ethnic Armenians), in preserving territorial integrity. Such events indicate that Azerbaijan has formed not as the homeland of a single ethnic group but as a shared political and historical homeland of multiple ethnic communities.

Nevertheless, official statistical data do not fully reflect the multiethnic reality of Azerbaijan's population. According to the 2019 census published by the State Statistical Committee, 94,8% of the population identified as "Azerbaijani," while 5,1% were recorded as belonging to other ethnic groups.[\[11\]](#) Data were collected based on the question "What is your national (ethnic) affiliation?"[\[12\]](#) As the wording of the question shows, the state uses the concepts of national identity and ethnic affiliation synonymously.[\[13\]](#) The overwhelming majority of respondents answered "Azerbaijani." But the problem is that the term *Azerbaijani* is used to refer both to an ethnic group and to all citizens of Azerbaijan. As

a result, in official statistics, “Azerbaijani” is mixed both as an ethnic and as a citizenship category. This prevents an accurate reflection of the country’s ethnic landscape.

However, the automatic classification of this response as ethnic identity is methodologically and legally problematic. In the current context of terminological confusion, the answer “Azerbaijani” may be given by respondents to indicate national identity (that is, the civic nation as used in this article), yet in official statistics it is coded as ethnic identity. Consequently, census data present “Azerbaijanis” as an ethnic group comprising over 94% of the population. This creates a semantic mismatch between the content of the question and the responses, while also giving the impression that a pre-determined monoethnic outcome has been statistically confirmed. The fact that previous censuses recorded higher proportions[\[14\]](#) of other ethnic groups demonstrates that the wording of the question, the way respondents present themselves, and the census methodology all exert a significant influence on statistical results.

This approach also contradicts the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Article 1, paragraph 2 of the Constitution states that “The people of Azerbaijan consist of citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan living within and outside the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan who recognize the authority of the Azerbaijani state and its laws.”[\[15\]](#) From this perspective, presenting the concept of “Azerbaijani” as ethnic identity is inconsistent with constitutional logic. Thus, presenting the concept of “Azerbaijani” as an ethnic identity risks excluding ethnic minorities from the notion of the civic nation and places them outside the constitutional understanding of the “people.” According to the logic of the Constitution, however, all citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan are Azerbaijani in terms of national identity, and this status should be recognized for all citizens irrespective of their ethnic affiliation.

The practical manifestation of this issue can be observed in Lerik District, where the Talysh ethnic group resides compactly. According to official data from local executive authorities, the majority of the district's population is recorded as "Azerbaijani," with a smaller portion listed as Talysh.[\[16\]](#) At first glance, this distribution appears merely statistical; however, it raises certain legal and logical inconsistencies. In Lerik District, the entire population is Azerbaijani in terms of the civic nation. Therefore, presenting the concept of "Azerbaijani" as an ethnic identity introduces a methodological problem. The actual situation confirms this discrepancy. In most general education institutions in Lerik, the Talysh language is taught as a mother tongue, albeit formally with elective status. This provides social indicators demonstrating the widespread presence of Talysh ethnic identity in the area.[\[17\]](#) This contrast highlights the gap between the official statistical representation and real socio-cultural needs. In some cases, individuals of different ethnic backgrounds deliberately identify themselves as "Azerbaijani" in official statistics. This may stem not only from terminological confusion but also from social, political, and strategic reasons. Consequently, statistical data cease to be a neutral reflection of social reality and instead become a tool shaped within a particular political-narrative framework.[\[18\]](#) This undermines both the legal and political existence of ethnic minorities and the legitimacy of the concept of the civic nation.

In particular, as a continuation of this problematic approach, the Turkish ethnic identity has not been recognized as a separate category in censuses and is effectively subsumed under the designation "Azerbaijani." Thus, the Turkish ethnic group has been deprived of its official statistical name, with its ethnic existence replaced by political terminology. This has led to conflicting, and sometimes entirely unsubstantiated, claims regarding ethnic affiliation circulating in the country's socio-political discourse. These

claims not only generate intellectual confusion but also constitute one of the main obstacles to the formation of a cohesive civic nation.[\[19\]](#)

In the long term, such ambiguous and contradictory use of the term “Azerbaijani” may weaken public trust. The civic nation can only develop on the principles of legal equality, mutual trust and inclusivity. Limiting ethnic self-expression indicates not the strengthening of the civic nation but rather the intensification of administrative homogenization tendencies.

In sum, the formation of the Azerbaijani civic nation occurs against a backdrop of historical multiethnic coexistence and the tensions arising between this reality and official statistical and discursive practices. These tensions clearly demonstrate the legal and political consequences of conflating the concepts of civic nation and ethnicity, highlighting the sensitivity of the issue.

Civic Nation and Ethnic Rights

The claim that there is an inherent conflict between the concept of the civic nation and ethnic rights is not accepted in contemporary political and legal theory. On the contrary, international law and comparative state practice demonstrate that recognizing ethnic rights does not inevitably lead to separatism, whereas the systematic denial of such rights constitutes a primary socio-political source of separatist tendencies.[\[20\]](#) This is an empirically and legally verified conclusion, not an ideological assertion.

Under international law, the rights of ethnic and national minorities are not conceived as an alternative to the territorial integrity of the state but as mechanisms to ensure stability and political integration within the state. The relevant documents of the United Nations,[\[21\]](#) the Council of Europe[\[22\]](#) and the OSCE[\[23\]](#) establish minority rights on the basis of the following core principles: (1) the right to self-

identification; (2) cultural autonomy and preservation of culture; (3) rights to use one's mother tongue and access education in it; (4) the right to self-governance; and (5) equal opportunities for participation in public and political life.

None of these rights undermine state sovereignty or imply a requirement for political secession. On the contrary, they strengthen the relationship between individuals, ethnic minorities and the state on a legal and voluntary basis. People whose identities are recognized and protected are more likely to remain part of the state rather than seek to divide it.

Problems arise when ethnic rights are denied or presented as a threat. The negation of ethnic identity, restrictions on linguistic and cultural rights, and delegitimization of self-expression generate political alienation, distrust and a sense of isolation among individuals and ethnic communities. It is in such an environment that separatist ideas can gain social traction. In other words, separatism is not the result of ethnic rights but the product of their prolonged denial.

In the Azerbaijani context, ethnic rights are often assessed through a security lens.[\[24\]](#) In official discourse, even cultural or linguistic claims are frequently framed in terms of "separatist risk," "threats to statehood" or "foreign influence."[\[25\]](#) This approach is problematic both legally and politically because cultural autonomy, education in the mother tongue, self-identification and self-governance are recognized and protected rights under international law, and automatically associating them with political fragmentation is scientifically unfounded.

The continuation of such a discourse produces two dangerous outcomes. First, it weakens the legal and political integration of ethnic groups, leading them to view themselves not as equal participants in the state but as subjects of

suspicion. Second, it undermines the concept of the civic nation, which should be founded on equal rights, mutual trust and voluntary belonging, not on fear.

In conclusion, the recognition of ethnic rights is not an alternative to the civic nation but an integral part of it. A strong civic nation is formed not in a state that denies difference but in a state that recognizes and integrates diversity within a legal framework. Presenting ethnic rights as a threat does not strengthen the civic nation; it erodes it from within and ultimately harms the state itself.

Conditions and Prospects for the Formation of the Azerbaijani Civic Nation

The formation of the Azerbaijani civic nation is possible, but the realization of this prospect depends directly on changes in existing political and legal approaches. The civic nation is not a spontaneously emerging unity or one formed through ideological appeals. It is the product of a complex, long-term process built on legal guarantees, institutional mechanisms, political pluralism and an inclusive socio-ideological discourse. Without changes to current approaches, the idea of the civic nation cannot move beyond a normative and declarative level.

From a legal standpoint, the genuine formation of the civic nation requires that the concept of citizenship acquire substantive legal content rather than remain a formal status. The principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution should not be merely declarative; it must be accompanied by effective legal mechanisms that ensure its implementation. Ethnic, linguistic and cultural rights must be recognized as subjective legal rights, not as expressions of the state's goodwill. Without legal guarantees, the idea of the civic nation cannot become a legal reality and remains merely an ideological slogan.

Institutionally, the civic nation is not only an idea but a

construct reinforced through concrete governance and representation mechanisms. Transparent and reliable population censuses, the guarantee of freedom in ethnic self-identification, and the real representation of the components of the civic nation in both central and local government bodies are crucial in this regard. At the same time, legal equality cannot be ensured without the neutrality of the judicial system on political and ethnic issues. Without representation, a sense of belonging cannot develop, and the idea of the civic nation lacks social support.

From a political perspective, an authoritarian governance model hinders the formation of the civic nation. Pluralism does not lead to separatism; on the contrary, it is a fundamental condition for political integration. The civic nation requires not a strong, controlling state but a state that is legally just, politically open and participatory. Without political competition, freedom of expression and real opportunities for participation, the civic nation cannot transcend a formal unity maintained by administrative coercion.

Socially and ideologically, the unified "Azerbaijani" identity should be presented not in a way that denies ethnic identities but as an inclusive model that unites them within a legal framework. The education system, media and official ideology must move away from a monoethnic historical narrative, presenting ethnic diversity not as a problem or a source of risk but as social capital and value for the civic nation. Only in this way can a sense of shared and voluntary political belonging develop.

The formation of the civic nation is also directly linked to the terminology used to express it ideologically. How the concept of political unity is labelled is a key factor in shaping public perception of whether its essence is ethnic or citizenship-based. In this regard, while the term "Azerbaijani" should express the civic nation and citizenship

belonging, in practice it is frequently understood as an ethnic category. Since the term is used in official legal documents and the state context, it retains its role as a legal basis for the civic nation, but its application must be freed from ethnic connotations and normatively established solely as a political-citizenship category. The question of how the civic nation is named is therefore not only an internal ideological choice but a normative issue that must be assessed in light of legal obligations and comparative state practice.

The international context also plays an important role in the formation of the Azerbaijani civic nation. International organizations of which Azerbaijan is a member require the civic nation model at the level of legal obligation and view the recognition of ethnic rights not as an alternative to state sovereignty but as a mechanism that strengthens its legitimacy. Accordingly, the formation of the Azerbaijani civic nation must be based not only on historical heritage and declarative appeals but on legal guarantees, institutional representation, political pluralism and an inclusive socio-ideological approach. Without these conditions, the idea of the civic nation will remain merely an element of official discourse rather than a real political unity.

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