

On The Edge: Azerbaijan's New (And Old) Reality

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Throughout history, the current territories of Azerbaijan had always been on the periphery of different empires, ranging from Byzantium and the Sassanid, to the Arabs, Seljuks, Mongols, Ottomans, Safavids and Russians. Located on the cross-roads of different cultural and political centers, independent Azerbaijan seems always destined to make a difficult decision – to which center and to what extent to tie itself? When Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) was established in 1918, the red color in the three color flag of the republic was meant to symbolize “modernization” which the founding fathers saw in the example of Europe. With the restoration of independence in 1991, Azerbaijan faced the same question again – to which center and to what extent should it tie itself? Neither in the early twentieth century, nor now has this only been a question of foreign policy choice. Rather, it has been a factor strongly related with the essence of the state and the way the society is organized.

Nevertheless, before starting discussions on the integration track of Azerbaijan since independence, it is worth briefly considering analytical framework that will guide us throughout these discussions. Generally, four dimensions of integration can be distinguished:

- Integration of the state into intergovernmental structures; *political integration*;
- Access and membership to global or regional markets; *economic integration*;
- Integration into international or regional legal orders; *legal integration*;
- Establishing closer linkages with international or regional non-governmental, non-business, and societal

actors; *societal integration*

These are not mutually exclusive or unrelated dimensions. Rather, they are closely linked, and developments in one sphere can be reflected in other spheres. For instance, development of strong societal linkages with the democratic part of the world might eventually lead to intergovernmental integration with them. Or, integration at the intergovernmental level could positively affect economic or legal integration. Depending on local contexts, various forms of integration may work in different ways.

By the term of societal actor here is meant actors, regardless of their type and degree or size of organization and institutionalization, existing outside the governmental and business realms in the society. It is used as an analytical construct to avoid any potential normative weight that can be the case if replaced with, for instance, "civil society", or any indicative value like "civil society organizations" which presupposes a certain level of organization or institutionalization. Moreover, "societal ties" here are understood as ties between such actors of different societies.

The existing literature on European integration of Central and Eastern European countries, the Balkans and beyond are heavily dominated by the European Union (EU) enlargement and the EU external governance approaches which mainly focus on institutional integration, while the latter to a limited degree also recognizes the possibility of legal integration without institutional membership. However, this increased academic focus on institutional expansion has largely diverted focus away from the societal dimension of integration. In most of academic works, the societal dimension of integration as such and the relationship between this and other dimensions are overlooked and at the best addressed to a limited degree within the "European aspirations" or civil society frameworks. Such an institution biased approach to integration in academic works on European integration can at least partially be

attributed to the top-down nature of the EU enlargement and the very dominance of the EU focus itself. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* by Levitsky and Way^[i] is one of few works that attracts attention to the societal dimension of European integration (“societal linkages” in the terms of authors) and the relationship between the societal and political dimensions of integration. Thus far, this research horizon remains under-explored in general in the literature and in the case of Azerbaijan less than that.

Having identified this gap, this article first aims to explore the relationship between the societal and political dimensions of integration in the case of Azerbaijan since the independence of the country. At the end of the paper, I make some suggestions for further research into societal dimension of integration between Azerbaijan and Europe. In addition, I emphasize few practical recommendations to Azerbaijani and European non-governmental organizations and the EU, which can serve potentially to the strengthening societal ties between Azerbaijan and Europe as well as further integration of the former into the latter.

First Phase: Integrationist and Open Door Policies

With the restoration of independence in 1991, newly independent Azerbaijan began actively pursuing a policy of what can be called “integration into international structures” and opened doors to international organizations that were willing to operate in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan became a UN member and joined the World Bank in 1992. In January 1992, the Azerbaijani Parliament appealed to the Council of Europe to obtain a special guest status. On July 8, it accepted the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975 by the formal signing at the CSCE Helsinki Summit^[ii].

The Popular Front government under Abulfaz Elchibey’s presidency pursued a pro-western policy but much closer

relationship with Turkey. Azerbaijan relied on supports of Turkey for “establishing links with the world” as expressed openly by the then foreign minister Tofig Gasimov^[iii]. In this period, Turkey indeed actively supported this expressed request of Azerbaijan by using its membership in regional organizations. For instance, with the Turkish support, Azerbaijan became member of the Economic Cooperation Organization, jointly established by Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. Similarly, Turkey invited Azerbaijan to be one of the founding members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, a new regional multilateral platform established by the initiative of Turkey^[iv]. Obviously, the request for support expressed by Gasimov perfectly matched with Turkey’s increased regional activism following the collapse of the Soviet Union as it was expressed by Suleyman Demirel, the then Turkish prime minister, in a press conference in March 1992, which stated that Turkey was a “cultural center and historic magnet” for the newly independent republics and Turkey can “help these republics (...) in their long overdue attempt to integrate into the world”^[v].

International integrationist policies were particularly prominent during Heydar Aliyev’s presidency (1993-2003) during which he consolidated power after the war over Karabakh with Armenia and attempted coups d’état in the early 1990s. As part of this strategy, Azerbaijan, together with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the then most pro-Western countries of the post-Soviet area, established GUAM^[6]. The joint communique of the presidents signed on 10 October 1997, which

emphasized integration into trans-Atlantic and European structures as a way to reduce threats to European and regional security, lists democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights among its guiding principles.^[vii] The signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union in 1996, which entered into force in 1999,^[viii] and admission to

the Council of Europe in 2001 were the key achievements of Azerbaijan's integration into European structures. Similarly, Azerbaijan established relations with NATO through Partnership for Peace in 1994 and the PfP Planning and Review Process after three years. This integrationist policy continued into the mid-2000s but already more slowly: membership in Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (2004), inclusion in European Neighborhood Policy (2004), Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO (2004), and finally EU Eastern Partnership Platform (2009).

In parallel to these integration efforts, Azerbaijan opened the doors to many international governmental and non-governmental organizations working in diverse fields, from development to democratization. Soon, Western organizations were pouring into the country. In the beginning, there were mainly humanitarian aid organizations that came to support people displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions of whom many settled in tent camps in different corners of the country.

As with most of the other newly independent countries, this was a logical sequel to the restoration of independence. Such integrationist policy had four goals:

- To gain recognition for the newly independent state,
- To earn international legitimacy for the government,
- To receive financial support for state-building and economic development, and
- To establish a certain geopolitical stability through balancing between the Russian and the Western spheres of influence.

Integrationist and open-door policies of Azerbaijan in the first decade of its independence can also be partially attributed to the general political momentum for democracy promotion in the world that emerged with the fall of the Soviet regime. Opening doors to international government and

non-government organizations was also a sort of prerequisite for cooperation with Western states. Embassies of Western states were much influential in supporting non-governmental organizations coming from their countries to Azerbaijan.

Second Phase: Restrained and Peripheralizing

The fact that this integrationist policy should experience a certain stabilization in the 2000s was, to some extent, natural. Yet, towards the end of the 2000s, it was already clear to many, if not all, that Azerbaijan had no intention of continuing this policy like Georgia, Ukraine or Moldova. Therefore, since the mid to late 2000s, we have started hearing fewer references to “transatlantic integration,” “European values,” and “European standards” in the speeches of high level Azerbaijani officials. In parallel, there was increased emphasis on “national values” and skepticism of the West in official discourse, largely borrowed from ill-formulated and pseudo-intellectual discourses in Russia. Experts highlight that Azerbaijani reluctance in European integration existed even before the signing of EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan^[ix] and that it was Azerbaijani civil society that compelled the government to include European integration aspirations in the text of the Action Plan^[x]. So the last integrationist attempt was made in 2011 by joining the Open Government Partnership.

Having largely achieved all four goals of the first decade of independence, thanks to canny maneuvering and oil revenues, Azerbaijan switched the course in its second decade. The dashed hopes of the elections in the 2000s (that culminated with the kick-out of last major opposition members from parliament in 2010^[xi]) and worsening of an already poor human rights record, transparency and accountability indicators showed the limits of trans-Atlantic and European integration. Increasing criticism by the Western governments, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and international non-

governmental organizations of Azerbaijan's worsening human rights record at times brought about political tensions between the West and Azerbaijan. The Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the European Union was rejected as it was deemed asymmetrical^[xii]. Accordingly, Azerbaijan did not want to get in a kind of relationship where the EU could dictate or impose any policy reform on Azerbaijan. Since that, the sides have been negotiating a Strategic Modernization Partnership agreement which will be a non-binding document with a softer language on political reforms.^[xiii]

Baku then turned its attention to civil society. Starting in 2013, the government forced many national chapters and branches of international organizations and local NGOs to close and prosecuted many civil society leaders and activists, as reported by international organizations^[xiv]. It also severely restricted the flow of foreign funding to NGOs by making legislative changes in 2013 and made foreign grants subject to assessment on the basis of "socio-economic expediency." Failure of foreign donors to co-ordinate their actions meant that they could not make any credible aid suspension in reaction to the declining respect for human rights and civil liberties, and deteriorating conditions for civil society, let alone for the political opposition. There has been no significant progress since then. Instead, the government is currently pursuing a "coercion to co-optation" policy towards international donors and local civil society by limiting the sorts of projects they can fund and filtering recipient civil society actors. In October 2016, over the issue of civil society, Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative's Board (EITI) did not certify Azerbaijan's compliance with EITI's quality assurance standards. It recommended Azerbaijan to improve in a list of areas, including ensuring the independence of civil society members of the multi-stakeholder group^[xv]. Having found progress to be unsatisfactory^[xvi], the

Board suspended Azerbaijan's membership in March 2017^[xvii].

Similarly, upon receiving a complaint from three civil society organizations in 2015^[xviii], the Steering Committee of the Open Government Partnership launched the first stage of its Response Policy, which was deeper diplomatic engagement and technical support to the Government of Azerbaijan to improve conditions for civil society. Having achieved no results, the Steering Committee designated Azerbaijan's status inactive in May 2016^[xix] and reconfirmed its decision in June 2017^[xx]. It will be no surprise if there is a similar decision to the EITI case at the OGP's Steering Committee meeting in mid-2018.

Moreover, the Council of Europe is now threatening Azerbaijan with expulsion^[xxi] on basis of non-compliance with the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Ilgar Mammadov, the chairman of the Republican Alternative Party^[xxii]. The Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE has also issued another harsh resolution calling on Azerbaijan to begin "real and meaningful reforms."^[xxiii] Now, if the Court finds that Azerbaijan has failed to implement the judgement, it will send the case to the Council of Ministers which will decide what of type of measures should be taken in this regard.^[xxiv]

Thus, we see a clear reverse trend in Azerbaijan's international integration policies. In parallel to the state's fading political integration efforts, the growth of partnerships between different Azerbaijani civil society actors and their European counterparts – NGOs, universities, researchers, political groups, etc. – that blossomed in 2000s, has been reversed with the worsening political climate and restrictions brought in the legal framework. There are now very few examples of significant co-operation between Azerbaijani and European universities. Similarly, there are now ever fewer regional CSO projects involving an Azerbaijani partner. There is barely any exchange of academics between

Azerbaijan and Europe; one could talk more of their emigration from Azerbaijan. Contacts between NGOs, informal networks, and political parties in Azerbaijan and Europe remains insignificant. The recent crackdown on the NGO community has been a significant blow to not only its human rights and civil liberties records as such but also its societal linkages with the democratic part of the world.

For example, some German political foundations like Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) run several programs in Georgia and Armenia. However, KAS is struggling to re-register their offices in Azerbaijan (it was closed in 2014), while FES has been exploring the possibilities opening one with so far no success. While Georgia and Armenia are on the list of associate countries in Horizon 2020 – the EU research fund program^[xxv] – there is no prospect of Azerbaijan joining them any time soon. To give an example from a different field, Impact Hub – a global network of civic initiatives with its own interesting concept – which already exists in Yerevan and Tbilisi,^[xxvi] while it has only recently been heard of in Baku. While you can see European and Georgian trade unions issuing a joint call for workers' rights,^[xxvii] Azerbaijani trade unions are noticeable by their absence. Among Eastern Partnership countries, only Azerbaijan and Belarus do not have a seat in Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe, where all the rest have observer membership status. Like many other international NGOs, Oxfam International, an organization that not simply contributed to the development of the country but also linked local NGOs with their regional and European counterparts was kicked out of the country.^[xxviii] These are just randomly selected examples from diverse fields. Possibly, tens or hundreds of such examples could be provided. Individually, these cases might not mean much. However, considered all together, these cases suggest a marginalizing picture of Azerbaijan and its failure to integrate into European structures.

The discussions above attempted to show how international integration policies of the government of Azerbaijan changed over the past twenty. As we see in the cases with EITI, OGP and currently CoE, the influence between intergovernmental integration and societal integration is not one way. Restrictions brought by the Azerbaijani government to the operation of non-governmental non-profit organizations in the country affects the state's representation in intergovernmental structures. Similarly, Azerbaijan's rejection of Association Agreement with the EU which would put strong political reform commitments on Azerbaijan strengthened the government's hand against civil society and dissent. A non-binding Strategic Modernization Agreement with a softer language on political reforms could similarly reduce political costs for the Azerbaijani government in its harsh attitude towards civil society and dissent. As we see in these examples, there is a negative influence pattern between political integration and societal integration dimension, which means deterioration in one leads to the same in the other. Only in one example – Azerbaijani civil society's pressure on the government for inclusion of European integration aspirations in the EU-Azerbaijani Action Plan, a positive influence is highlighted. Yet, a deeper research in 1990s might find out more such positive influence examples.

Conclusion

Obviously, the argument here is not that Azerbaijan was once well integrated and that it is distancing itself now. Rather, through exploring the relationship between political and societal integration, this article tries to draw attention of researchers, policy-makers, political figures, international organizations, donor community, local civil society, and the general public to the increasing risk of further marginalization of the country as a result of political shift in the government's policies from a largely integrationist approach in 1990s and early 2000s, to an almost isolationist approach in last decade. Nevertheless, democratization

experiences of the last 20 years prove that strong societal linkages with the democratic world is key to democratization. As Levitsky and Way argue,^[xxix] successful democratization in Central and Eastern Europe can be attributed to these societal linkages that kept fledgling governments committed to democratic principles and values after a change of power. The failure of the Arab Spring can also be partially explained by the lack of integration of those Arab societies into the wider structures of the democratic world.

While these developments are usually considered in the context of democracy, societal marginalization is another conceptual framework that could offer a new perspective for public discussions, policy analysis, research and development projects. For instance, in the field of research, there is no structured data on transnational societal partnerships, and contacts between Azerbaijan and the EU. Mapping actors and factors in societal relations could be the subject of a large-scale research project. Similarly, it would be interesting to do a similar mapping in the economic-trade field and study the situation in the field of legal integration. Meanwhile, civil society actors can develop projects strengthening existing and building new societal ties between Europe and Azerbaijan. A small scale travel fund or research allowance program could contribute to the exchange of visits between researchers. Such criteria could also be included in the grant application calls of the European Union. In general, all European donors could encourage new societal ties between Europe and Azerbaijan by conditioning their funding on project components establishing and/or strengthening societal ties between Azerbaijan and Europe. In its turn, the EU could initiate a bilateral EU-Azerbaijan Civil Society Platform, similar to the one established in the case of Ukraine with EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.^[xxx]

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