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HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION

BETWEEN RUSSIA AND AZERBAIJAN: SPIRITUAL-HISTORICAL TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

COOPERACIÓN HUMANITARIA ENTRE RUSIA Y AZERBAIYÁN: TRADICIONES HISTÓRICO-ESPIRITUALES Y MODERNIDAD

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ABSTRACT

In the international system, the diplomatic ties between Russia and Azerbaijan have a special and important place, and their growth is vital to regional cooperation and stability. Both countries' foreign policies and regional dynamics have been significantly impacted by the development of these connections, especially after Heydar Aliyev took office. Although certain facets of the relationship between Russia and Azerbaijan, such as information exchange and educational collaboration, have been examined, a thorough examination of the lesser-known facets of their bilateral interaction is still required. This covers the complex cultural, political, and economic interactions that have molded their collaboration over time. With an emphasis on the historical evolution and complexity of their relations since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992, this study seeks to analyze the little-known facets of cooperation and exchange between Russia and Azerbaijan. According to our results, Heydar Aliyev's leadership considerably reduced the early tensions in Russian-Azerbaijani ties. Because of his calculated strategy, Russia's position toward Azerbaijan changed, and a mutually beneficial cooperation was formed. The research highlights key milestones such as the "Contract of the Century" and the 1997 agreement on "Friendship, Cooperation and Security" as pivotal in strengthening bilateral ties. By providing insights into the elements that have influenced their current collaboration, this analysis advances our knowledge of the intricate nature of Russian-Azerbaijani relations.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Russia, Cooperation, Education, Culture.

RESUMEN

En el sistema internacional, los vínculos diplomáticos entre Rusia y Azerbaiyán ocupan un lugar especial e importante, y su crecimiento es vital para la cooperación y la estabilidad regionales. La política exterior y la dinámica regional de ambos países se han visto significativamente afectadas por el desarrollo de estas conexiones, especialmente después de que Heydar Aliyev asumiera el cargo. Aunque se han examinado ciertas facetas de la relación entre Rusia y Azerbaiyán, como el intercambio de información y la colaboración educativa, aún es necesario un examen exhaustivo de las facetas menos conocidas de su interacción bilateral. Esto abarca las complejas interacciones culturales, políticas y económicas que han moldeado su colaboración a lo largo del tiempo. Con énfasis en la evolución histórica y la complejidad de sus relaciones desde el establecimiento de lazos diplomáticos en 1992, este estudio busca analizar las facetas poco conocidas de la cooperación y el intercambio entre Rusia y Azerbaiyán. Según los resultados alcanzados, el liderazgo de Heydar Aliyev redujo considerablemente las tensiones iniciales en las relaciones ruso-azerbaiyanas. Debido a su estrategia calculada, la posición de Rusia hacia Azerbaiyán cambió y se formó una cooperación mutuamente beneficiosa. El estudio destaca hitos clave como el "Contrato del Siglo" y el acuerdo de 1997 sobre "Amistad, Cooperación y Seguridad" como elementos fundamentales para el fortalecimiento de los vínculos bilaterales. Al brindar información sobre los elementos que han influido en su colaboración actual, este análisis amplía el conocimiento sobre la intrincada naturaleza de las relaciones entre Rusia y Azerbaiyán.

Palabras clave: Azerbaiyán, Rusia, Cooperación, Educación, Cultura.

INTRODUCTION

The intricate dynamics between Russia and Azerbaijan stem from a deep-rooted historical context, encompassing political, cultural, and economic dimensions that have profoundly shaped the Caucasus region. The 19th century marked a pivotal period as the Russian Empire extended its reach into the South Caucasus, incorporating present-day Azerbaijan. This territorial expansion cemented through key treaties following the Russo-Persian Wars, established Russian hegemony over much of Azerbaijan, setting the stage for increased interaction between the two entities (Aliyev, 2023a). This period of Russian dominance fostered cultural exchange, with Russian influence permeating various aspects of Azerbaijani society, including its intellectual and administrative spheres. The resulting cultural synthesis reflected the intricate interplay between Russian and Azerbaijani traditions (Iskenderova, 2023; Liaman, 2021).

The 20th century brought significant political shifts, with Azerbaijan's brief independence followed by its incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1920. Soviet rule ushered in modernization but also tried to suppress Azerbaijani national identity (Suleymanli, 2021). Nonetheless, economic ties strengthened, particularly through Baku's oil industry, which became integral to the Soviet economy (Jabbarov, 2022). Azerbaijan's 1991 independence, following the Soviet Union's dissolution, marked a new era characterized by political instability and regional conflicts, notably the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Russia's role during this period was ambiguous, attempting to maintain regional influence while facing criticism for its approach to ethnic conflicts. In the post-Soviet era, Azerbaijan has sought to balance its relationships with Russia and Western powers, particularly in the energy sector, where Azerbaijani resources have gained strategic importance for European energy security (Valiyev & Mamishova, 2019; Yemelianova, 2023).

Subsequently, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained a central issue in Russian-Azerbaijani relations, with Russia's perceived favoritism towards Armenia, especially during the 2020 conflict, adding complexity to its regional role. However, contemporary Russian-Azerbaijani relations are characterized by pragmatic cooperation amidst underlying tensions, with both nations collaborating on military and economic fronts while navigating a complex regional landscape influenced by various international actors such as Iran. That way, the evolution of Russian-Azerbaijani relations through history reflects a trajectory

shaped by imperial expansion, Soviet domination, post-Soviet challenges, and modern geopolitical strategies, all of which continue to influence their current interactions and regional dynamics (Ghahriyan et al., 2024; Sahakyan, 2024; Uzer, 2024).

The current level of humanitarian cooperation within the framework of the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Russia undoubtedly indicates the continuity of the traditions of good friendship and cultural interaction between our peoples. After 1991, a fundamentally new stage began in the history of humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan, which can be divided into four periods depending on the general level of Azerbaijan-Russia relations: I. April 1, 1992 - October 1993; II. October 1993 - January 2001; III. January 2001 - July 2008; IV. From July 4, 2008 to now. Azerbaijani political scientists associate the beginning of the first period with the signing of the Protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan on April 4, 1992. In December 1992, the Agreement on Legal Assistance and Legal Relations in civil, family, and criminal matters was concluded. In October 1992, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Security between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan was signed in Moscow, but, unfortunately, it did not enter into force, which indicated that the relations between the countries were difficult.

Nowadays, examples can be seen in the process of sharing information between states (Mamedov, 2015) or in education fields (Yavar, 2023) but naturally, it is even bigger. For this reason and considering the aforementioned elements, the goal of this paper is to analyze the less-studied aspects of cooperation and exchange between Russia and Azerbaijan. For this purpose, a historical-logical approach was followed to appropriately elucidate the evolution and complexities of their relations through documentary analysis.

DEVELOPMENT

Although a number of documents were signed in the first half and middle of 1993 (Protocol on implementation of the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation in 1993 - 17.03.1993, Agreement on coordination of railway transport activities - 28.05.1993 and on the principles of cooperation in the field of transport and the conditions of relations - 14.07.1993, On the solution of the issues of foreign debt and assets of the former USSR - 07.09.1993), only after the first contacts of the President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev with the Russian leadership at the highest level did relations begin to change significantly.

In early September 1993, Aliyev visited Moscow, where he met with Russian President B. Yeltsin, Prime Minister V. Chernomyrdin, Foreign Minister A. Kozyrev, and Defense Minister P. Grachev. He assessed his visit as “correcting the mistakes made by the previous leadership of the republic in relations with Russia.” After the talks, Heydar Aliyev noted that the current level of relations between the two states should be given a higher status and that the self-isolation position of the previous leadership of Azerbaijan from Russia had caused the cooling of relations between the two countries. During the visit, Heydar Aliyev said that he was a supporter of Azerbaijan’s accession to the CIS, and already on September 20th, the Azerbaijani Milli Majlis passed a decision on the republic’s accession to the CIS (Sokolova, 2011).

After the election of Heydar Aliyev as the President of Azerbaijan in October 1993, the second period in the history of relations between Russia and Azerbaijan began. In the following years, the experienced politician Heydar Aliyev tried to establish a system of realistic relations between independent Azerbaijan and Russia, including restoring broken relations in the humanitarian field. Research has revealed two important forms of development of Azerbaijani-Russian cultural relations. The first form is the activity of both Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation in preserving the cultural heritage of both nations, as well as the role of the cultural and social associations of Azerbaijan and Russia. The second characteristic form covers the system of relations between the official bodies and organizations of the two countries, including at the level of government leaders.

The first form is of special interest for the activity of diasporas. It should be noted that in the 1990s, Azerbaijani organizations and public associations operating in Russia experienced a very tense period. The goals and tasks of these cultural organizations are to strengthen cultural ties between peoples and present a worthy representation of historical cultural traditions.

The Azerbaijani cultural society called “Ojak” was one of the first organizations in Moscow. It was officially registered by the Moscow City Council in October 1989 and started operating in December. Since April 13th, 1990, the society has published the independent newspaper “Ziya” and published articles on the cultural history of Azerbaijan.

Research shows that the number of societies and public associations that play an important role in Azerbaijan-Russia cultural relations started to increase after 1993. “Russian Community of Azerbaijan” was founded on the initiative of the People’s Deputy, President of “The Azerbaijan-Russia” society Mikhail Zabeli, and was

registered in the Ministry of Justice on March 25th, 1993. Its Charter states that the Russian Community of the Republic of Azerbaijan is a public organization of the republic’s citizens, uniting Russians within the framework of national-cultural autonomy, and setting itself the task of protecting the Russian language, Russian national culture, and traditions, expansion of relations with Russia, and protection of honor, dignity and rights of Union members. In addition, the Charter states that Azerbaijani citizens of other nationalities, along with Russians, can participate in the activities of the Community if they share the requirements of the community established by legislation. This situation emphasized the principle of openness of the Russian Federation. On January 11th, 1994, the participation of the President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev in the holiday concert organized by the Russian Community and the Orthodox Church on the occasion of the Christian holiday of the Nativity of Christ was an unforgettable event for the Russian citizens of the republic. The next important step of the Russian Community in expanding relations with Russia was the signing of an agreement between the All-Russian People’s Union and the Russian Community of Azerbaijan in Moscow (Ebel & Menon, 2000, p. 181).

The “Russia-Azerbaijan Friendship Society” led by N. Baybakov was established in 1993 as one of the specialized organizations for the development of cultural relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. The statesman and Minister of Oil Industry of the USSR, Nikolay Konstantinovich, was a resident of Baku. His memories, opinions, and conclusions related to the development of the oil industry and socio-economic changes in Azerbaijan, as well as the problems of strengthening friendship and cooperation between the two nations, were reflected in the book “My Country - Azerbaijan” published in 2001. During his 68 years of activity, including during his leadership of the Friendship Society between 1993 and 2009, Baybakov personally contributed to a large number of bilateral economic and cultural projects.

As he mentioned in his book, in the first two decades of the post-Soviet period (1992-2000), cultural relations between Russia and Azerbaijan remained an important factor in strengthening mutual understanding and trust between the two peoples. Within the framework of cooperation, many meetings and concerts were organized with the participation of Russian and Azerbaijani intellectuals. Thus, in 1997, a wide range of events were held in connection with the 100th anniversary of the birth of the People’s Artist of the USSR Bul-Bul, as well as the anniversaries of the People’s Artists of the USSR R. Behbudov and G. Garayev.

The Birlik society, which started its activity in Moscow in 1997, was one of the societies that united Azerbaijanis

in Russia. The society's greatest activity was supporting the diplomatic-political activity of national leader Heydar Aliyev in the formation of the Azerbaijani diaspora in the Russian Federation and the creation of lobbying traditions. It should be noted that a diaspora is a part of the people (ethnic group) living outside the country of origin, forming unified and stable ethnic groups in the country where they live, having social institutions to protect and develop their identity and community. Diasporas are considered a transnational geopolitical phenomenon.

"Birlik" Society has established regular relations with the state and government bodies of Russia since its foundation. As can be seen from the above information, the purposeful creation and expansion of activities of public associations and organizations had a great impact on the dynamics and development of cultural relations between the two countries. In this regard, the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Russian Federation and the Consulate of Azerbaijan in Moscow supported the activities of the organizations.

The Ahli-Bayt Foundation, which includes all of the above, was established in March 1998, and the Azerbaijan World Information Space Association was established in the summer of the same year. These organizations, which brought Azerbaijan's cultural development to the regions of Russia, played a special role in the development of interstate relations. The year-by-year expansion of cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Russia led to the adoption of official decisions in this direction. Back in 1996, with the decree of Russian President B. Yeltsin's "On the national-cultural autonomy of the peoples living in the territory of Russia", the Russian state took an important step to get to know Azerbaijan, its historical culture, and moral values more closely. This decree gave a new impetus to cultural cooperation. In this regard, the purpose of the Moscow National-Cultural Autonomy organization, established by Azerbaijanis in Moscow in 1999, was to develop cultural relations between the two peoples, including the promotion of historical traditions. Looking at the activities of the organization, it is clear that the main focus is on the level of relations between the two countries.

Studies show that the 1990s were not marked by any serious progress in Azerbaijan-Russia cultural relations. President Heydar Aliyev's first visit to the Russian Federation in July 1997 opened a new significant page in our history. The signing of an agreement on friendship, cooperation, and mutual security during the visit shows that, among other things, the foundation of a modern strategic partnership between the two countries has been laid. President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev emphasized during his official visit to the Russian Federation: "We

consider Russia a friendly country. Russia is a big country. We have learned a lot from Russia in recent years and appreciate it. We will strengthen and develop relations!" (Swietochocki, 1995, p. 69).

It was during this period that the good tradition of holding Culture Days of both countries was re-implemented. Thus, in the spring of 1996, the days of Azerbaijan in Russia were successfully held in Moscow, and in April 1997, the days of Russian culture were successfully held in Azerbaijan. In June of the same year, Days of Moscow Culture dedicated to the 850th anniversary of the founding of Moscow were held in Baku. At the meeting with the delegation from Moscow that came to the opening of the Days of Culture, the President of Azerbaijan once again recalled the facts of the long-term close friendship between the leading figures of literature and art of Russia and Azerbaijan. Fortunately, all these are preserved and play a very important role, and therefore it is necessary to use the opportunities of cultural relations to expand and deepen cooperation in general, and to strengthen friendship and interaction between Russia and Azerbaijan in particular.

At the end of April 1999, Days of Azerbaijani Culture were held in Moscow, and from June 26th to July 1st, 2000, the next Days of Culture of the Russian Federation and Moscow were held in Azerbaijan. During that period, Agreements were signed between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Azerbaijan on cooperation in the field of medicine and health care, scientific and technical cooperation, and cooperation in the field of certification of highly qualified scientific and pedagogical personnel. An Agreement was signed in June 1997 on the conditions for the establishment and operation of information and cultural centers. In November 1999, a long-term cooperation program in the field of culture, science, and education was signed between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2000-2002.

According to Azerbaijani politicians and experts, the new third period in the relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation began with the historic visit of V. Putin in January 2001. This was the first visit of the Russian head of state after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. This visit was the beginning of new constructive relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. Despite his busy schedule, Russian President V. Putin found time to meet with heads of public organizations representing the interests of Russian compatriots in Azerbaijan. Leaders of the Russian community, the Union society, the Kazakh community in Azerbaijan, and others took part in the meeting with the head of the Russian state.

Research shows that the early years of the 21st century have also been off to a strong start for cultural ties. In the Ulyanovsk, Tyumen, Irkutsk, Tula, and Saratov regions, as well as in a number of other regions of the Russian Federation, organizations coordinating cultural relations are increasingly appearing. In August 2001, together with the Ulyanovsk region and the Republic of Azerbaijan Television and Radio Company, these organizations prepared television shows and performances dedicated to Azerbaijani culture. In May 2003, the public organization "Russian Community of Azerbaijan" celebrated its 10th anniversary. This date was a significant event not only for Russians but also for the public of the republic. More than two thousand people gathered in the largest Republic Palace (now Heydar Aliyev Palace) to celebrate this date (Batalden, 1997, p. 98).

Over the past years, the Russian Community of Azerbaijan has become not only the largest but also the most organized and capable organization in the republic. Alongside it, the Center of Russian Culture, the Association of Teachers of Russian-Language Educational Institutions of the Republic, the Association of Russian Youth, the Center for the Protection of the Rights of Community Members, the Public Education Commission, the Council of Elders, the Commission for Work with War and Labor Veterans, the Commission for Social Affairs, charity, the Organization Commission, and the Women's Council were created and started active operations. On October 16th, 2004, the Russian diaspora, through its organization - the Russian Community of Azerbaijan, held its II Congress, which was regarded as a strengthened, influential, and efficient organization. A day earlier, members of the Republican Council of the Russian Community and representatives of the II Congress were received by the President of the Republic, I. Aliyev.

The growing influence of the Russian Community not only in the republic but also in Russia helped it in April 2007 when, with the financial support of the Government Commission on Support of Compatriots Abroad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, the Russian Community prepared and held a conference of compatriot organizations from the South Caucasus countries. Other public organizations of Russian compatriots have been established in Azerbaijan and are actively working.

During this period, "Birlik" Society held several events: the III Republican Literature Festival dedicated to the Year of Russia in Azerbaijan under the motto "A maple grows among the Caucasus mountains"; a scientific-practical conference titled "Russian language is a spiritual bridge between peoples" dedicated to the year of the Russian language; a "round table" dedicated to the 63rd anniversary

of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War on "Azerbaijan's services in defeating fascism"; and a meeting of representatives of Azerbaijani national minorities dedicated to the 85th anniversary of the birth of the national leader of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev (Aliyev, 2023b, pp. 56–57).

The Declaration of Friendship and Strategic Cooperation, signed on July 3, 2008, during the first official visit of Russian President D. Medvedev to Azerbaijan, marked the beginning of the fourth period. In 2009, due to the death of N. Baybakov, E. I. Pivovarov, Rector of the Russian State Humanitarian University and corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, became the president of the Russia-Azerbaijan Friendship Society. A new stage began in the history of the organization, marked primarily by the expansion of humanitarian cooperation and inter-university relations with Azerbaijan. According to E. I. Pivovarov, it is extremely important to convey the achievements of friendship between the two peoples, to show the advantages of preserving this rare cultural space for the new generations, the generations who grew up in the post-Soviet era. Thus, the biggest achievement of the Russia-Azerbaijan Friendship Society so far has been the holding of the annual Baku International Humanitarian Forum, which is a platform that brings together leading experts in science, culture, and education, as well as well-known public figures for constructive discussions. Year by year, the importance and scale of this event are increasing. In recent years, this society has been actively restoring Azerbaijani-Russian cultural relations, promoting national values, establishing cultural and social relations with Russian communities, and paying special attention to the organization of cultural events (Aliyev, 2016, pp. 36–39).

The First Azerbaijan-Russia Humanitarian Cooperation Forum, held in January 2010, demonstrated that relations between the scientific, educational, and cultural associations of the two states have entered a qualitatively new stage. This situation led to a new quality of cooperation in the humanitarian field between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. The Baku International Humanitarian Forum is held annually in Baku, the capital of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The initiators of the international forum were I. Aliyev and D. Medvedev. This decision was made at the 1st Azerbaijan-Russia Humanitarian Cooperation Forum held in 2010. In 2014, it was decided to hold the forum every two years.

On February 2nd, 2018, a solemn signing ceremony of the Agreement on cultural cooperation between the National Library of Russia and the Heydar Aliyev Foundation took place in the new building of the National Library of Russia. The Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Russian Federation, P. Bul-Bul oglu, the Consul General

of Azerbaijan in St. Petersburg, G. Osmanov, members of the St. Petersburg government, as well as representatives of the Azerbaijani diaspora, attended the signing ceremony of the agreement. On the occasion of the signing of the contract, books published by the Foundation were presented to the National Library, and a book exhibition titled "Pre-revolutionary and modern Azerbaijani literature from the National Library's collections" was opened.

The organizers of the event were the Consulate General of Azerbaijan, the Committee on Foreign Relations of St. Petersburg, the Representative Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, and the National Library of Russia. The signing of the agreement is a significant event in the life of the city and helps to strengthen cultural ties between Russia and Azerbaijan.

CONCLUSIONS

Strong people-to-people connections, alongside positive relationships between states, are crucial for fostering international understanding, peace, and collaboration. Cultural exchange and interaction offer valuable opportunities for individuals to appreciate diverse perspectives, traditions, and lifestyles, thereby reducing stereotypes and prejudices often rooted in ignorance or limited exposure. These connections build bridges of empathy and mutual respect, which are essential for addressing shared global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and conflict resolution. Additionally, intercultural relations fuel creativity and innovation by merging ideas and approaches, driving advancements in arts, sciences, and technology. Ultimately, strong people-to-people relationships contribute to a more cohesive and integrated world, where cooperation and solidarity across borders can thrive for the betterment of humanity.

In general, the analyzed examples of cultural relations established between Azerbaijani and Russian peoples have had a serious impact on all areas of social life in both countries. The promotion of Azerbaijani culture, traditions, and spiritual heritage to the Russian people, as well as the promotion of Russia's rich culture and traditions to the people of Azerbaijan, and the establishment of wide-ranging relations between these peoples and their socio-cultural heritage, have been successfully implemented by Azerbaijanis living in Russia and Russians living in Azerbaijan. The successful activity of such institutions has always been the focus of attention of the states, and their activity is supported at the highest level. It is an undeniable fact that the development of all these relations is closely related to the high level of personal relations between the heads of state. Cultural relations with the Russian Federation are a logical continuation of the policy

implemented by the heads of state of both countries. As is known, the political course purposefully carried out by the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation has ensured the official development of cultural relations.

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