

THE COMPETITIONS

HELD IN KHANKENDI: A MESSAGE OF PEACE TO THE WORLD

LAS COMPETICIONES CELEBRADAS EN KHANKENDI: UN MENSAJE DE PAZ PARA EL MUNDO

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ABSTRACT

The liberation of Khankendi on September 20, 2023 became a milestone in Azerbaijan's history and a symbol of the restoration of the nation's sovereignty. But despite the depth and implications of this event, not much attention has been paid academically to the socio-cultural effects it brought about. Therefore, this study will analyze the implications of Khankendi's liberation, focusing on its role in fostering Azerbaijani national identity, promoting peace, and boosting regional development. In particular, the role of sporting events held in Khankendi is addressed to underline its new status as a source of peace and harmony. These events have had the impact of increasing the spirit of national pride and resilience, being a link in the reconstruction process to move towards development and stability in the region. The study brings forward the potential transformation that can be achieved by integrating historical milestones, cultural activities and strategic investments in building a harmonious and progressive future for Azerbaijan. Thus, the research highlights the importance of cultural and sports activities as instruments of unification and development in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Karabakh, Chronicle of Victory, Sporting events.

RESUMEN

La liberación de Khankendi el 20 de septiembre de 2023 se convirtió en un hito en la historia de Azerbaiyán y un símbolo de la restauración de la soberanía de la nación. Pero a pesar de la profundidad y las implicaciones de este evento, no se ha prestado mucha atención académicamente a los efectos socioculturales que trajo consigo. Por lo tanto, este estudio analizará las implicaciones de la liberación de Khankendi, centrándose en su papel en el fomento de la identidad nacional azerbaiyana, la promoción de la paz y el impulso del desarrollo regional. En particular, se aborda el papel de los eventos deportivos celebrados en Khankendi para subrayar su nuevo estatus como fuente de paz y armonía. Estos eventos han tenido el impacto de aumentar el espíritu de orgullo nacional y resiliencia, siendo un eslabón en el proceso de reconstrucción para avanzar hacia el desarrollo y la estabilidad en la región. El estudio presenta la transformación potencial que se puede lograr mediante la integración de hitos históricos, actividades culturales e inversiones estratégicas en la construcción de un futuro armonioso y progresista para Azerbaiyán. Así, la investigación destaca la importancia de las actividades culturales y deportivas como instrumentos de unificación y desarrollo en las sociedades posconflicto.

Palabras clave: Azerbaiyán, Karabaj, Crónica de la Victoria, Eventos deportivos.

INTRODUCTION

Sport is an organized kind of physical activity, mostly connected with competition, skill, and even collaboration since these activities include not just individual events but also team sports. More than an assemblage of physical exertions, sports are very much invested in cultural practices and social life, reflecting various groups' values and ambitions (Guttmann et al., 2024). In this regard, among the most critical functions of sport in society is its ability to bring communities together. Be it a local game or even global competition, such as the Olympics, sport plays out as a central point for shared identity and pride. But also, they break cultural, social, and political barriers, enabling people from different walks of life to come together for a common cause. A sense of unity in this aspect encourages identification and community spirit through allowing people to support their teams or representatives (Espedalen & Seippel, 2024). Sport also contributes much to the social functions of the promotion of cultural values and ideals. In many cases, sporting practices have direct links with the region or nation's cultural identity that reinforces tradition and social norms. For example, local sports can really represent the history and ideals of a location, while international competitions can portray the pride of a nation in an international arena (Moustakas & Wagner, 2023; Oh & Yoo, 2023).

The social impacts of sport are considerable. Cultural forms concerned with sport do tend to reflect social values and place great emphasis on teamwork, hard work, and fair play. But also, sports can be a platform to bring out social issues, advocate for inclusivity, and promote healthy lifestyles. Psychologically, sports do a great deal of good for individuals. Physical activity has been linked to improvement in mental health, stress release, and mood (Deck et al., 2023). Similarly, it is believed that team sports can offer emotional rewards because of camaraderie and support, which make the members of their communities feel appreciated and belong to them. Shared experience in sports teaches about triumphs and defeats; thus, resilience and ability to cope are crucially important life skills (Becheva et al., 2023). In that respect, sport is much more than entertainment: it constitutes part of society, building cohesion and mirroring cultural values while contributing to social and psychological well-being. It has the power to connect people and bring them together, making it an indispensable feature in human life: through it, individual and collective identities are molded (Moustakas, 2024).

Sports has throughout history proved to be one of the most powerful tools of reconciliation, acting symbolically for unity and triumph over conflict. Its capability of bringing people together makes it an effective way of peacemaking

and social cohesion. In our view, this is possible because sport surmounts cultural, social, and political barriers, putting people in a position where the rivalries transform into camaraderie. Therefore, this ability of uniting people has been used in several occasions for the healing of social wounds. For instance:

1. **The Berlin Olympics (1936):** Although originally held in a context of Nazi propaganda, the 1936 Olympics also served to show sport's capacity to unite nations in a time of great political tension. The performance of athletes like Jesse Owens, who challenged the regime's racial ideologies, became a symbol of resistance and unity (Rathbone, 2020).
2. **Rugby in South Africa (1995):** The Rugby World Cup was a milestone in post-apartheid reconciliation. Nelson Mandela, by wearing the Springboks jersey, symbolized acceptance and unity between races, showing how sport can be a vehicle for peace (Chuma, 2012; Van Der Merwe, 2007).
3. **Football in Colombia:** Football in Colombia has been one of the tools used in an effort to bring peace into communities torn apart by violence. The "Football for Peace" initiative brought young people from different backgrounds together to play, thus fostering understanding and reconciliation in a country that suffered decades of conflict (Hirsch, 2023; Nunez & Portela-Pino, 2024).

On the other hand, on September 20th, 2023, the ancient city of Khankendi of Azerbaijan, which was under occupation for thirty years, was liberated from occupation. Thus, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan were fully ensured. This is an unprecedented event in history and marks the beginning of a new era in the history of Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2023, p. 6). After that, the peaceful construction and restoration process began in the city. As part of the celebration, the city of Khankendi hosted a football match on December 23rd, 2023, and the Khankendi - Baku marathon on March 1st, 2024. These competitions are a clear message that separatism in the region has been eradicated and that Karabakh is Azerbaijan. The soccer match in Khankendi is a message of peace to the world. The victory won on September 20th, 2023, was the triumphant peak of the path of truth, which required great perseverance, determination, heroism and was full of hard trials, which the people of Azerbaijan and their state have gone through for decades towards their national goals. There is no doubt that this victory played an incomparable role in moving Azerbaijan to brighter eras.

On December 21st, 2023, the people of Azerbaijan witnessed another great historical event. At the Khankendi stadium, the teams of "Qarabag" of Aghdam and "MOIK" of Baku met in the eighth final round of the Azerbaijan

Football Cup. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva came to Khankendi stadium to watch the game. First, the national anthem of the Republic of Azerbaijan was played, and then the memory of the children of the motherland, who died for the independence and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, was commemorated with a minute's silence. The head of state made a speech at the Khankendi stadium before the game: "Dear friends, welcome to Khankendi! It is the first time that a football match is being held in the liberated territories. On this occasion, I heartily congratulate all the people of Azerbaijan. Today, the children and family members of our martyrs are with us. Let us all salute them together. Holding this football match in Khankendi has a great meaning. Khankendi is an ancient land of Azerbaijan. The foundation of this village was laid by Karabakh khan, and after that, a large city was created by Azerbaijani architects and builders at the expense of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, for 30 years, separatists had built a nest in this city. This city became a symbol of separatism. Armenia, which occupied our lands for 30 years, thought that it would be able to do so forever. We, the glorious Azerbaijan army, proved to them and the whole world that this is our historical, ancient land. We, the people of Azerbaijan, are the owners of these lands. We had to come back here and we have."

DEVELOPMENT

The recovery of Karabakh is a great historical event and this history will live forever in our hearts. The people of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis around the world will forever be proud of this Victory. We, the owners of these lands, are building and creating; extensive construction and improvement works are being carried out in the city of Khankendi, Khojaly, and other areas freed from occupation. This stadium was almost completely rebuilt and renovated in just two months. All writings depicting the symbolism of separatism have already been thrown into the dustbin of history. Like all other cities, Aghdam city is being rebuilt today. Additionally, after a few months, the reconstruction of the "Imarat" stadium in Agdam city will begin. Regardless of the results of today's game, the winner is clear: the people of Azerbaijan, the state of Azerbaijan! The match between "Karabakh" and the Central Army Sports Club in today's game, of course, has great symbolic meaning. The Karabakh-Army-People unity is the main source of our Victory.

Dear friends, four years ago in this stadium, some people said "Karabakh is Armenia and that's final." We proved to them that Karabakh is Azerbaijan! Most of the occupied lands were freed from the invaders three years ago

as a result of the Second Karabakh War. The Azerbaijani flag was raised in the city of Shusha, which is the crown of Karabakh. Three months ago - on September 19-20 - Khankendi, Khojaly, Askaran, Khojavend, and Agdara regions were liberated from the invaders. On October 15, I raised the Azerbaijani flag in all these cities. On November 8, the Victory parade was held in the central square of Khankendi. Today we celebrate this wonderful sports holiday together.

After the speech of President Ilham Aliyev, a video was shown about the great leader Heydar Aliyev's meetings with athletes and his views on sports. President Ilham Aliyev entered the Khankendi Stadium, met with the players and the referees who managed the game, and took a commemorative photo with them. After President Ilham Aliyev's symbolic touch of the ball on the Khankendi field, the match between "Karabakh" and "MOIK" began. The match, which featured an interesting sports competition, ended with a 1:0 victory for the "Karabagh" team. The goal by "Qarabag" player Nariman Akhundzade in the 5th minute of added time decided the fate of the game. With this achievement, N. Akhundzade went down in history as the striker who scored in the first football match held in the liberated territories after 30 years.

In 1991, after the historical name of the city was returned, it was renamed "Khankendi City Stadium". During the former USSR, the football club "Karabakh Khankendi" played its home games at the stadium. After the city of Khankendi was cleared of separatists, the stadium was repaired, and the seats in the colors of the so-called regime's "flag" were removed (Orujova, 2024, p. 1). Additionally, the light poles from the last century were removed, and the stadium was rebuilt to meet modern requirements. After a break of about 30 years - in September 2023 - the arena was returned to its owners, under the control of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Azerbaijan.

At 14:00 hours, the historic match in Khankendi began with the whistle of chief referee Ali Aliyev. Due to the artificial grass cover, the field created difficulties for teams like "Qarabag" who prefer fast and short passes. Both sides started the game with mutual attacks. The excitement and inexperience of MOIK football players was evident in their squandered opportunities. However, it's worth noting that several of the main staff members of the Aghdam club did not play. Despite this, the team from Aghdam had more possession, especially preferring to attack from the flanks. Despite all efforts, there was no goal in the first half.

"Qarabag" increased the pressure in the second forty-five minutes, creating scoring opportunities but failing to capitalize on them. In the final minutes, physical fatigue

lowered the players' work rate even in the game without the ball. Finally, the expected goal came in the last minute when Nariman Akhundzade scored the winner for Agdam. "Garabagh" won with a score of 1:0 and qualified for the 1/4 finals. After the game, the head coaches of the teams shared their impressions about this historic competition held in Khankendi (Mammadov, 2024, p. 131).

Gazanfar Abbasov, head coach of the Central Army Sports Club, expressed his gratitude to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief and the army for holding such a historic match in Khankendi, and prayed for God's mercy on the martyrs: "We are here in the ancient land of Azerbaijan, Khankendi, thanks to their heroism." Regarding the game, the head coach said: "Garabagh's strength and level of players are evident. We tried our best. I thank my players; they did what they could. Our players knew who we were playing against. We wanted to play a good game. We would like to play our home games in Khankendi. It would be an honor for me too."

The impressions of Gurban Gurbanov, head coach of Agdam's "Garabagh" football club, were as follows:

This is the first time a press conference has been held in Khankendi. I am beyond excited; everyone has been waiting for this for years. We did not believe that we would play our first game in Khankendi. We are here thanks to the bravery of our Commander-in-Chief and our heroic soldiers. As for the game, it was difficult to focus because everyone was talking and thinking about Khankendi and Shusha. MOIK also fought until the end (Ismayilov, 2024, pp. 1-2).

Regarding President Ilham Aliyev's announcement about the upcoming construction of the "Imarat" stadium, Gurban Gurbanov said that the head of state always behaves like a true Azerbaijani and takes ownership of our historical territories: "The head of state wants the 'Imarat' stadium to exist again. I hope that one day we will play there."

Samir Alakbarov, who in 1986 was the scorer of the local "Garabagh" team and the only Azerbaijani in the team, shared his impressions: "I am happy to be in Khankendi after many years. Our victory is very pleasing. I am not from Karabakh, but I miss the city of Khankendi very much. My biggest wish was that the city of Khankendi in Azerbaijan would be returned, a football club would be created here, and I would be its head. Before the war, such a club operated, but unfortunately, there was an Armenian conspiracy and only Armenians took part in the team. I was the only Azerbaijani... Thankfully, we stepped into the Khankendi stadium again. I am grateful to our

soldiers who gave us this experience. May God have mercy on our martyrs. I bow before their spirit..."

He remembered with pride what the head of state said in Khankendi, Azerbaijan's wealth, after the liberation of this city from separatists and terrorists:

The people of Azerbaijan have won such a Victory that both languages have memorized, and this Victory will be with us forever. This Victory will be forever in our history. Generations coming after us will forever and rightly be proud of this Victory. (Hilaloglu, 2023, p. 4).

On December 21st, 2023, during the break of the 1/8 final stage match of the Azerbaijan Cup between "Qarabag" of Agdam and MOIK of Baku at the Khankendi stadium, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev met with representatives of the sports community at a ceremony organized to celebrate the sports results of 2023. He delivered a profound speech:

Welcome to Khankendi! We are holding our traditional meeting with athletes this year in Khankendi, which carries great significance. First of all, I want to congratulate you on your achievements. Through your hard work, you have raised our state's sports glory to new heights, and the state of Azerbaijan has every right to reward you because you deserve it. Today, these awards, apartment warrants, and other honors are being presented to you during the break of this historic football match in the liberated city of Khankendi. I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. There have been many competitions, but today's event will remain forever in history - for our people, our state, and the world. There has never been such an example in the world where people liberate their lands that were occupied for many years, shed blood on the battlefield, give martyrs, and then after only three years, host a football match on these liberated lands, with citizens from Baku and other places coming to watch it and feel proud. We have written history, we are writing it, and as I said today, though Khankendi was liberated only three months ago, this Azerbaijani city lives and revives. I want to congratulate you again from the bottom of my heart. By inviting you here, I wanted to show you my attitude and respect. We could have held this meeting in Baku, but I thought it would be only fair to hold this meeting here and present these high awards in Khankendi. Congratulations again. (Babaoglu, 2010, p. 5).

After taking a commemorative photo with the winning athletes, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan continued his tradition of honoring our athletes. On December 20, President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on awarding individuals who have contributed to the development of sports in Azerbaijan. According to that Decree, one person

was awarded the “Honorary Diploma of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan,” and seventeen people received the “Progress” medal. Additionally, three people were awarded the honorary title of “Honored Physical Education and Sportsman” for their special services and high professionalism in developing sports in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, four people were granted individual scholarships from the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan for their long-term effective activity in the country’s sports development, and twenty-nine representatives of the sports community were given apartments (Aliyev, 2023, p. 6).

Khankendi-Baku Marathon

Along with the football competition held in Khankendi, these days we witnessed another significant historical event in Azerbaijani sports in that city. From February 29th to March 4th, 2024, for the first time in the country’s sports history, the Khankendi-Baku ultramarathon was held within the framework of “Sports Week” under the slogan “Forward with pride!” The start of the marathon in Khankendi, the ancient land of Azerbaijan, enhanced the significance of this historic day.

On February 29th, 2024, at the opening ceremony of the marathon jointly organized by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Azerbaijan Athletics Federation, and “Baku City Ring” Operating Company, the memory of our heroic soldiers who achieved martyrdom for the freedom of our lands was commemorated with a minute of silence.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, the President of the Azerbaijan Athletics Federation, Javid Gurbanov, emphasized that this was the first time an ultramarathon had started in the historical lands, in Khankendi, which is their Holy Land. Speaking about the marathon program, he noted that both local and foreign athletes were participating in the competition.

Elnur Mammadov, head of the sports department of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan, congratulated the participants on this historic moment. He noted that this was the first time a 380-kilometer marathon race had been organized in Azerbaijan. After the National Anthem of Azerbaijan was played, the historic ultramarathon began in Khankendi (AZERTAC, 2024, pp. 1–2).

The competition, organized by the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan together with the Azerbaijan Athletics Federation and the Baku City Ring Operating Company, was held in Khankendi within the framework of “Sports Week” and “Year of Solidarity for the Green World.” In total, 64 athletes from different countries participated in the ultramarathon, which started in the city of Khankendi and covered a distance of 380 kilometers.

Four athletes were from Mexico, five from Turkey, one from Moldova, and the rest from Azerbaijan.

According to the results of the first day of the Khankendi-Baku marathon, Elmir Askarov won the first stage. Agha Aliyev and Elman Abishov finished second and third, respectively. The first stage, which started from Khankendi and covered a distance of 83 kilometers to Yevlakh, was won by Elmir Askarov, with Agha Aliyev taking second place and Elman Abishov securing third place.

On March 1st, 2024, the second stage of the Khankendi-Baku ultramarathon took place. This stage, beginning in Yevlakh city with 36 participants, covered a distance of 84 kilometers and concluded in Ujar city. Among the 21 finishers, Agha Aliyev secured first place, followed by Elmir Askarov in second and Artyom Aliyev in third. Among the women, Svetlana Shepeleva from Moldova claimed first place, while Leyla Abidinova from Azerbaijan and Nataliya Vallek shared second place.

The third stage of the ultramarathon commenced in Ujar with 21 participants. This leg spanned 88 kilometers and ended in Hajigabul. In this stage, where 17 participants crossed the finish line, Artyom Aliyev from Azerbaijan took first place, followed by Yadigar Huseynov, also from Azerbaijan, in second, and Murat Kaya from Turkey in third. Among the women, only Svetlana Shepeleva from Moldova and Leyla Abidinova from Azerbaijan completed the race.

In the final stage of the event, athletes ran 55 kilometers from Gobustan to Baku, starting in Khankendi city, Azerbaijan. Artyom Aliyev emerged as the overall winner, finishing ahead of all his competitors. Yadigar Huseynov came in second, while Seymur Shahbazov secured third place. The ultramarathon concluded with an awards ceremony, where the Minister of Youth and Sports, Farid Gayibov, General Secretary of the National Olympic Committee, Azer Aliyev, and President of the Azerbaijan Athletics Federation, Javid Gurbanov, presented prizes to the top finishers. The first three places received awards of 8,000, 5,000, and 3,000 manats, respectively (AZERTAC, 2024, pp. 1–2).

Historical significance of the competitions held in Khankendi

The sports competitions held in the city of Khankendi, liberated from occupation, are far more than mere athletic events; they are powerful symbols of Azerbaijan’s resilience and its historic victory in the Patriotic War. These events send a clear message to those with hostile views toward Azerbaijan, showcasing not only the country’s strength but also its commitment to peace and its rightful claim

to these lands. As Commander-in-Chief Muzaffar declared while raising the national flag in Khankendi, this victory was hard-earned through immense sacrifice by the Azerbaijani people.

For Azerbaijanis, the competitions in Khankendi represent the resolution of a centuries-old conflict that deeply affected generations. These events honor the memory of martyrs, bring solace to veterans, and signify national pride and sovereignty. Watching the Azerbaijani flag wave in the heart of Khankendi, witnessing football matches in its stadium, and seeing the ultramarathon begin there are moments of profound joy and historical significance. They assert that Armenia and its allies must accept the undeniable reality: Karabakh is Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, these competitions, watched not just by Azerbaijanis but by the world, serve as a testament to the nation's sports achievements and reinforce the message of sovereignty over Khankendi and all of Karabakh. Under President Ilham Aliyev's leadership, marked by political determination and unwavering resolve, Azerbaijan has transformed from a nation under occupation to one of triumph. These events underscore the country's commitment to ensuring territorial integrity, eradicating separatism, and fully restoring its sovereignty over all its lands.

CONCLUSIONS

The liberation of Khankendi on September 20th, 2023, has become an important landmark in the history of Azerbaijan, as a symbol of restoration of territorial sovereignty. As part of the celebration, sporting events have been held in the city, such as football match or a marathon. These events are more than athletic competitions but serve as instruments of reconciliation and peace, fostering unity and sending a powerful message of renewal, both domestically and globally. As in other liberated regions, the reconstruction of Khankendi underlines the commitment of Azerbaijan nation to development through serious investments in infrastructure. It is expected this activities serve to lay the foundation for regional prosperity, strengthening national identity and pride as a symbol of the resiliency and determination of the Azerbaijani people. Together, victory in Khankendi and the development processes, currently under way, create a bright future wherein peace and progress go hand in hand. In this regard, undoubtedly sports play an important role once it is proven its ability in strengthening social cohesion and positive attitudes in society.

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