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KSENIA ATAMALI. AZERBAIJANIS OUTSIDE AZERBAIJAN (Part 1)

Keywords: Azerbaijan; diaspora; diaspora organizations; migration; Azerbaijani diaspora; Azerbaijanis in Iran; Azerbaijanis in Türkiye; Azerbaijanis in Russia.

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Abstract. The article examines the life of Azerbaijanis outside Azerbaijan, the activity of Azerbaijani diasporas around the world, the activities of diaspora organizations, the history of migration and territorial distribution. Of the fifty million Azerbaijanis around the world, only one fifth of them lives in Azerbaijan itself. The article pays special attention to the Azerbaijani diasporas in Iran, Türkiye and Russia – the three largest ones in the world. Information on numerous Azerbaijani organizations, communities and cultural centers operating abroad is also provided.

Historical Background

Today, over 50 million Azerbaijanis live in 70 countries around the world, with less than 10 million in Azerbaijan itself [1]. The majority, about 40 million people, live outside of Azerbaijan. This is due not only to migration, but also to historical changes in borders, when historical regions became part of another state as a result of certain social and political events. Thus, without the fact of migration, ethnic Azerbaijanis reside in the border regions of Iran, Georgia and Russia.

The formation of the Azerbaijani diaspora is directly linked to historical events. Although Azerbaijanis moved abroad in ancient times, this process became systematic in the first half of the 19th century due to political and military conflicts, the Russo-Persian wars, as well as forced migration in the Caucasus region. Following the Treaty of Turkmenchay, signed in 1828, the historical Azerbaijani territories were divided, and the northern Erivan and Nakhchivan khanates were ceded to the Russian Empire. On the one hand, this gave impetus to decentralization of peoples, but on the other hand, it triggered the emigration of those dissatisfied with the Tsarist policies [2].

In the 20th century, the emigration of Azerbaijanis spiked against the backdrop of two world wars, radical changes in Northern or Southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan, and social and political revolutions. Emigration took place in waves until Azerbaijan gained independence at the end of the century [2]:

1) The Russian Revolution of 1905, the movement led by Sattar Khan in Iranian Azerbaijan;

2) The First World War, the emergence and collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) between 1918 and 1920, the Khiabani movement, the revolution in the South of Iran;

3) The Second World War, the formation and collapse of the Azerbaijan National Government in South Azerbaijan between 1945 and 1946;

4) Economic migration of Azerbaijanis living in Türkiye to Europe in the 1950–1960s;

5) Voluntary migration from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic to the Union republics in the 1970–1980s, migration following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, political migration from South Azerbaijan to Europe.

Since 1995, the migration of Azerbaijanis has been purely due to economic reasons.

As mentioned above, about 40 million Azerbaijanis live outside of Azerbaijan, with the bulk (32 million) living in Iran. Türkiye ranks second (more than 3.3 million), and Russia is in third place (2 million).

We should especially note the high cultural and political solidarity of Azerbaijanis scattered all over the world. They zealously protect their national identity and support the political stance of their historical homeland. The goal of the Azerbaijani diaspora is to increase the influence of Azerbaijan in the political arena, raise awareness of the world community about the Armenian aggression and achieve a fair settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This requires a high degree of coordination of Azerbaijani communities, organizations and associations around the world. For this purpose, an initiative to convene the “Congress of World Azerbaijanis” was put forward in 1992. The congress gathers and considers the opinions of delegates from other countries, numerous ideas and proposals, and discusses the socio-political, economic and cultural problems of Azerbaijanis around the world [3]. To date, there have been

five congresses: the first four, in 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016, took place in Baku, while in 2022 the events were held in Shusha.

Azerbaijanis living abroad as of 2015 [1]

Country	Population	Country	Population
Australia	8 000	Netherlands	20 000
Austria	3 000	New Zealand	2 000
Belarus	7 000	Norway	3 000
Belgium	3 000	Poland	2 000
the UK	17 000	Russia	2 000 000
Hungary	10 000	Northern Cyprus	1 000
Germany	280 000	Syria	45 000
Georgia	500 000	the US	450 000
Denmark	6 000	Tajikistan	5 800
Israel	77 000	Turkmenistan	48 000
Iran	32 000 000	Türkiye	3 300 600
Spain	5 000	Uzbekistan	68 000
Italy	2 000	Ukraine	280 000
Kazakhstan	90 000	Finland	3 000
Canada	170 000	France	75 000
Kyrgyzstan	20 000	Czech Republic	2 000
China	30 000	Switzerland	4 000
Latvia	4 000	Sweden	30 000
Lithuania	1 500	Estonia	1 800
Moldova	6 000	Japan	10 000

In 2002, President Heydar Aliyev signed a decree “On state policy towards Azerbaijanis living abroad”, which was supposed to get people to coalesce around national interests. In the same year, the “State Committee on Work with Azerbaijanis Living Abroad” was established. In 2008, it was transformed into the “State Committee on Work with Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, which is still functioning [4].

Various Azerbaijani communities around the world actively participate in the social, political and cultural life of the countries where they are located. Diasporas have their representatives in legislative and executive bodies, and in various local governments; they offer language courses and open Sunday schools in places of compact residence of Azerbaijanis; they have

their own television and radio channels, as well as websites; they publish numerous newspapers and magazines; and they also organize events aimed at popularizing Azerbaijani culture [2].

It is also worth mentioning that International Solidarity Day of Azerbaijanis (December 31) has been celebrated since 1991. On this day in 1989, border fences between Soviet Azerbaijan and Iran were dismantled.

Azerbaijanis in Iran

The territory of modern Iran is a traditional area of settlement of Azerbaijanis. There is ambiguous data on the number of Azerbaijanis in Iran, population estimates provided by different sources vary greatly, but most sources put the number between 30 and 32 million, which is about 37 per cent of the country's total population [5]. Azerbaijanis are the largest ethnic minority in Iran. They live mainly in the northwest of the country, in Iranian Azerbaijan (West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil and Zanjan), where they constitute the majority. In total, about 9.5 million ethnic Azerbaijanis live in four provinces. A significant number of Azerbaijanis also live in such provinces as Hamadan, Qazvin, Markazi, Gilan and Kermanshah [6]. Also, according to expert estimates, the Azerbaijani community in Tehran may make up a third of the city's population (approx. 4.5 million). Iranian Azerbaijan has a developed agriculture and is often called the "breadbasket" of Iran; the four provinces together have 43 seats in the Islamic Consultative Assembly [7].

Iranian Azerbaijanis are predominantly Shiites (Ja'fari madhhab), with a very small number of Sunnis also present [8]. Ever since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Bahá'ís have been discriminated against and subjected to constant persecution [9]. As for language, most Iranian Azerbaijanis are bilingual and are fluent in Persian. Although the multi-million Azerbaijani population of Iran tends to use their native language in everyday life, Farsi is the only official language in the country. Currently,

more than 130 Azerbaijani newspapers and magazines are being published in Iran, and television and radio are broadcasting programs in Azerbaijani [10].

Separately, it is worth noting that the Azerbaijanis contributed greatly to the Iranian Revolution, and Tabriz in the East Azerbaijan became one of the main revolutionary centers. People there were dissatisfied with the Shah's policy, which suppressed their national culture and infringed on their rights, including economic ones. In addition, family members of many Azerbaijanis suffered after the fall of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1946, formed on the territory of Iranian Azerbaijan with the assistance of the USSR [11]. Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the main leader of the Islamic Revolution, was an ethnic Azerbaijani, as is the current Supreme Leader of Iran, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Nationalist sentiments are strong in Iranian Azerbaijan. In 1991, a separatist organization, the South Azerbaijan National Liberation Movement (SANLM or CAMAH), was founded. Its founder, writer Piruz Dilanchi, was forced to flee abroad and now lives in Canada. In 2002, Professor Mahmudali Chehregani resigned as head of the SANLM and, together with his followers, founded a new nationalist organization, the Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (SANAM or GAMOH). Unlike the SANLM, which advocated the separation of Iranian Azerbaijan from Iran, the SANAM advocates federalization of Iran, promotes the right to self-determination for Iranian Azerbaijanis and the idea of secularism, as well as advocates for the protection of Azerbaijani cultural and linguistic identity [12]. From time to time, mass demonstrations break out in north-western Iran, for example after a cartoon depicting the Azerbaijani language was published in 2006 [13] and an offensive TV show aired in 2015 [14].

Azerbaijanis in Türkiye

There are no clear statistics on the number of Türkiye citizens of Azerbaijani origin. Some estimates put their number at 800,000, while the Azerbaijani diaspora in Türkiye reports 4.5 million people, which is rather questionable [15]. There are large Azerbaijani communities in the city of Iğdır and Kars Province in the eastern part of the country.

The number of Azerbaijanis in Türkiye increased significantly in the early 19th century amid the Russo-Persian Wars. Following the Russo-Turkish War in 1829, some Azerbaijanis immigrated to Türkiye, settling in the east of Anatolia (especially in the provinces of Erzurum and Ağrı) [16]. Mass resettlement of Muslims from a non-Muslim country to a Muslim one is called *muhajirism*. It is worth noting that Erzurum dialect was strongly influenced by the Azerbaijani language. Also, in the early 19th century, Azerbaijanis from Karabakh moved to the south of Afyonkarahisar; despite significant assimilation, the “Karabağlı” are still considered a separate ethnic group. At the same time, a group of Sunnis from Shirvan settled in Amasya, where they became known as “Şirvanlı”. In 1894, a unique Şirvanlı Mosque in the Baroque style was erected there. Their descendants still retain their Azerbaijani ethnic identity. In addition, the Terekeme people (the Karapapakhs) live in the north-eastern part of Türkiye (Kars and Iğdır); they are a sub-ethnic group of Azerbaijanis. They speak a dialect of the Azerbaijani language and are mainly Sunni (unlike the Iranian Karapapakhs who are Shiite) [17].

After the collapse of the ADR, many Azerbaijanis fled to Türkiye, escaping from Armenian nationalists (the Dashnaks) [18]. Many Azerbaijani aristocrats, industrialists and members of the overthrown government of the ADR settled in Istanbul, Bursa and Ankara. At that time, the Azerbaijani diaspora in Istanbul published a large number of newspapers and journals, for example, *Yeni Kafkasya* (1923–1927), *Azeri Türk* (1928–1931),

Bildiriş (1929–1931), etc. From 1947, statesman and political figure Mahammad Rasulzade was the head of the Azerbaijani National Center in Ankara; in 1949 he founded the Association of Azerbaijan Culture [2].

By the early 1990s, about 400,000 Azerbaijanis lived on the Türkiye side of the border between the USSR and Türkiye [19]. In 1990, an international congress of Azerbaijani societies was held at the Atatürk Cultural Center, attended by representatives of the Azerbaijani diaspora from England, Germany, France, Sweden, Norway and other countries. At the congress, it was decided to create regional centers of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Istanbul, Baku and Hamburg, as well as to establish the Union of Cultural Centers of Azerbaijan [2].

In the early 1990s, a new wave of emigration occurred when tens of thousands of citizens of newly independent Azerbaijan left for Türkiye for economic reasons. We should also note the high level of integration of Azerbaijanis into Türkiye society due to cultural closeness between the two peoples. However, there are some significant differences: Azerbaijanis are mainly Shiites, while Turks are Sunnis. Among Türkiye Azerbaijanis, there are a large number of successful businessmen, athletes and cultural figures. For example, in 2023, Sinan Oğan, a politician from Iğdır, a member of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye and an activist of the Azerbaijani diaspora, ran for president of Türkiye [20].

There are many diaspora organizations in Türkiye. In the 1990s, Azerbaijani houses and cultural circles were established in Izmir, Manisa, Bursa, Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Kocaeli, Adana, Edirne, etc. In 2004, the Federation of Azerbaijani- Türkiye Circles (TADF) was founded in Iskenderun, uniting Azerbaijani diaspora organizations in Türkiye. The Federation promotes the interests of Azerbaijan in the region and is engaged in coordinating the activities of diaspora organizations. The circles take an active part in the social, political, economic and cultural life of the country.

Also, since 2004, the circle in Istanbul has been publishing the “Azerbaijan’s World” journal [21].

Azerbaijanis in Russia

The exact number of Azerbaijanis residing in Russia is difficult to determine: some estimates put their number at over 2 million people [1]; however, according to the 2010 Russian census, only 603 thousand Azerbaijanis are officially registered in the country. According to the census, the bulk, almost 131 thousand people, live in Dagestan, making up the majority (58 per cent) of the population of Derbentsky District and a third of the population of the city of Derbent. Since 2000, they have been included in the List of Indigenous Peoples of Dagestan, and Azerbaijani is recognized as one of the official languages of the Republic. The remaining Azerbaijanis are scattered throughout the regions and make up communities in large cities, mainly in Moscow (57.1 thousand) and St. Petersburg (17.7 thousand). A significant number of Azerbaijanis also live in Tyumen Region (43.6 thousand), Saratov Region (14.8 thousand), Samara Region (14 thousand) and Sverdlovsk Region (14.2 thousand), as well as Stavropol Territory (17.8 thousand) and Krasnoyarsk Territory (16.3 thousand) [22]. The history of the settlement of Azerbaijanis in Russia and the ethnogenesis of Azerbaijanis in Dagestan stretches back into the depths of time and spans several centuries. As for the 20th century, during the Soviet era, many Azerbaijani specialists worked at various enterprises in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and stayed there even after 1991. It is worth noting that the flow of migrants increased sharply with the beginning of the Karabakh conflict.

The Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia is one of the largest in the world and is actively supported by Baku through the embassy. There are numerous diaspora organizations operating throughout the country. Established in 1999, the Federal National Cultural Autonomy of Azerbaijanis in Russia (FNCA AzerRos) is

the largest and most influential public organization that united fragmented Azerbaijani organizations. AzerRos provides legal protection to citizens of the Russian Federation of Azerbaijani nationality; works to strengthen the role of the diaspora in the social and political life of the country; protects national culture, language and traditions; and forges ties between the diaspora and its historical homeland. The organization was formed on the basis of the Azerbaijan Cultural Center and the Compatriots Society in Moscow. At that time, national and cultural autonomies were also established in other cities and regions of Russia: in St. Petersburg, Tver, Yaroslavl, Kostroma, Kaluga, etc. They were united into a single federal structure, which held its first congress in June 1999. FNCA AzerRos closely cooperates with Russian ministries and departments, defending the interests of the Azerbaijani community. Since 2000, the organization has been publishing the “Azerbaijanis of Russia” newspaper [23].

We should also mention the All-Russian Azerbaijani Congress, established in 2001. The Congress had branches in 73 constituent entities of the Russian Federation; it was comprised of numerous national societies and communities, such as the Ojag Cultural Center (Moscow), the Azerbaijan Society (Moscow), Ozan (Chelyabinsk), etc. The Congress contributed to the development of friendly relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. It also supported the work of several newspapers and a television and radio company broadcasting in the Azerbaijani language. In the 2010s, some regional branches faced criminal charges related to their long-term illegal activities, including trade. In 2017, the Congress was liquidated by a decision of the Supreme Court of Russia. [24]

Azerbaijanis in Russia are active in business, primarily in the services and trade sectors. Among Azerbaijanis in Russia, there are famous figures of culture and art, athletes and scientists; for example, singer Muslim Magomayev and oil geologist Farman Salmanov. In Derbent, there are the Azerbaijan State Drama Theatre, numerous Azerbaijani newspapers and magazines, and

schools with teaching in the native (Azerbaijani) language. The Azerbaijani diaspora also regularly holds national events, holidays, exhibitions and festivals [25] in various cities of Russia.

In conclusion, there are five times more Azerbaijanis living around the world than in Azerbaijan itself. The diaspora is remarkably close-knit; there are numerous diaspora organizations that are working to preserve the national community, traditions and ties of Azerbaijanis with their historical homeland. In this article, we examined the three largest Azerbaijani diasporas in the world (in Iran, Türkiye and Russia) and also made an attempt to outline the historical background, identify the main waves of migration of Azerbaijanis and highlight the activities of diaspora organizations.

The second part of the article will examine the Azerbaijani diasporas in Europe, the US, the CIS countries and other states with a significant proportion of Azerbaijanis.

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