

Current Trends in Education in Azerbaijan

Caspian Studies Program, Harvard University
A discussion with Professor Hamlet Isaxanli
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Summary by Emily Van Buskirk

On April 25, 2001, Professor Hamlet Isaxanli spoke about current trends in Azerbaijani education in a Caspian Studies Program seminar at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Professor Isaxanli is president and founder of Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan. Established in 1991, Khazar is one of the first private universities in the former Soviet Union, and the first in Azerbaijan. Khazar University (www.khazar.org) is dedicated to reinforcing the idea of an open, pluralistic, democratic, market-oriented form of social organization.

Professor Isaxanli, a mathematician by training, began with a lesson in Azerbaijani history. Before the division of Azerbaijan between the Russian and Iranian empires that occurred in 1828, he explained, there was basically one Azerbaijan, and its educational system was like that in much of the Middle East--most schools were religious. The main languages of instruction were Persian and Arabic. During the late Middle Ages Azerbaijani Turkic was

introduced in some schools. Starting in the 14th century Azerbaijanis began composing poetry in Azerbaijani, which vied with Farsi for dominance in Azerbaijani culture, progressively achieving the leading role. Around that time in Maragha, near Tabriz, a university, research and training center with an observatory existed that distinguished itself in non-Euclidian geometry, trigonometry, astronomy, physics, and ethics. However, a general decline in scientific research and education began in the Muslim world during the 14th century, just as religion became more central in school curricula. The number of high quality schools declined, and higher learning institutions continued to exist only in important urban centers of the Muslim East. Later, in the period of the Azerbaijani khanates (principalities) in the 18th and first decade of the 19th centuries the role of the Azerbaijani language became more visible in schools.

After the Turkmanchay treaty of 1828 between Russia and Iran, the northern section of Azerbaijan became part of Russia, and South Azerbaijan remained with Iran. Even now, said Isaxanli, the Azerbaijani people are divided between two countries, the Republic of Azerbaijan (or "North Azerbaijan") with a population of nearly 8 million, where speakers of Azerbaijani form about 7 million, and Iran, where there are 20-30 million ethnic Azerbaijanis (population estimates differ from source to source). The education systems in these two countries diverge. Isaxanli decided to focus

on educational development and trends in northern Azerbaijan, where the modern Republic of Azerbaijan is located today.

From 1828 to 1918, Russian policy sought first to increase the use of Azerbaijani to replace Persian and then to make Russian the primary language of instruction. Academic programs and curricula were developed in a cooperative effort between Azerbaijani intellectuals and Russian educators. The following types of schools arose:

- Religious, but with introductory courses in secular subjects;
- Secular, but with compulsory religious subjects;
- Russian-Tatar schools, secular and bilingual; these schools contributed to the rise of modern Azerbaijani intelligentsia.

For higher education, students would mainly go to Russia and Europe.

Azerbaijan's two year independence period (1918-1920) before becoming part of the Soviet Union was not long enough for it to develop a national system of education, but three things were established: 1) a strong presence of the Azerbaijani language; 2) minority rights education policy; and 3) Azerbaijan State University (founded in 1920). About one hundred students were sent to Europe for higher education.

The Soviet period brought rapid advances in literacy, which rose to 100% within 10-15 years. Under the Soviet Union, there were two types of higher-learning institutions: 1) universities offering 5-year programs terminating in something like an M.A. or M.S.--each Soviet Republic had at least one University, comparable to an American college of arts and sciences (in many cases with law); 2) specialized higher learning institutions (such as institutes of fine arts, economics, civil or petro-chemical engineering, pedagogy, etc.); some of these offered 4 or 5-year programs leading to something like a B.A. or B.S. After graduating from these universities and institutes, scholars could continue with a 3-year graduate program ("aspirantura"), leading to the Candidate of Science degree, akin to the American Ph.D.

One of the most important reforms of the Soviet period was the progressive language policy: any student could get educated from start to finish in her own language. A student with native Azerbaijani language in Georgia could attend school in Azerbaijani, study Russian as a second language, French as a foreign language, and have classes in Georgian, said Isaxanli from personal experience (being born in Georgia). The language of instruction in higher learning institutions in Azerbaijan was mostly Azerbaijani, with Russian in second place. For every 100 students majoring in Mathematics and studying in Azerbaijani, there would be a group of 25 or 50 math students studying in Russian. In the 5

Central Asian republics, in comparison, the language of instruction at higher education was primarily Russian.

The learning was otherwise uniform across the Soviet Union: there was one textbook in each subject for the entire country, and one curriculum for each course of study (physics, calculus, etc.). The positive aspect of this system was that the textbooks were of high quality and often updated. On the negative side, it was difficult to inspire initiative and impossible to make changes. According to Isaxanli, national identity was not reflected sufficiently in the curriculum. In the 1970s and 80s especially, corruption and bribery penetrated educational activities, for example entrance examinations.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan's education system has experienced changes, particularly in higher learning. There are now 28 state universities (with Soviet-like structures) and 17 private universities. State universities get about half their money from the state budget, and the other half from tuition. Private universities do not get any public funding. Isaxanli named several features of the current Azerbaijani situation that have a negative effect on education:

- An economy in transition, plagued by corruption and bribery;
- A poor tax system, at least as concerns the educational system;
- Poor libraries, weak access to knowledge and its development;

On the other hand, the globalization phenomenon has had a positive impact on education.

Finally, Professor Isaxanli discussed Khazar University and its conception. When Professor Isaxanli taught as a visiting professor in Western Europe and the United States, he wrote an article comparing different systems of education. At that time, it occurred to him that reform in Azerbaijan's system was necessary, and could be done in two ways: 1) by enacting step by step reform of the entire higher education system or 2) by starting from ground zero, establishing a small university with new models, as a kind of a synthesis between an international perspective and national values. Government officials liked the idea of starting a new university, and although the government could not offer money, it did give Professor Isaxanli permission to try.

Professor Isaxanli hired out of his own pocket 6-7 professors and opened the doors of Khazar (which means Caspian) to 20 students. He decided to establish English as the principal language of instruction so that his students could participate in exchanges, benefit from visiting professors, and use Western textbooks. He was searching for the appropriate model of education, and decided that the school should use a credit system (in comparison, in the Soviet system, a student that failed one class had to repeat the whole year). Khazar gets much of its funding from international foundations, including USIA. It has partnerships with many universities, in Europe and the U.S., including UCLA.

Discussion

- Q. What are the basic requirements at Khazar University?

- A: Students must take advanced English, Azerbaijani studies, and then they must fulfill distribution requirements in the social sciences, humanities, and sciences. It is similar to the American system, according to Isaxanli.

- Q. How many students are there? How are they funded?

- A. There are now about 1000 students at the university, 25% of who are graduate students (some from abroad). The school has need-based and merit-based scholarships. About 15% of students have financial aid.

- Q. Who are the teachers?

- A. Many are some of Azerbaijan's well-known professors (who teach at more than one University at once). Khazar also has many visiting professors teaching social sciences, which is advantageous compared to the state schools, where social scientists are mostly former Marxist-Leninists.

- Q. What is the admissions process?

- A. Even private universities cannot choose their own students. We have to sign up for central state exam system and request a certain number of students (and then sometimes bargain with the

government). The system breeds corruption, as some private universities pay for students.

- Q. What do Khazar graduates go on to do?

- A. Most are employed by multi-national companies; some are employed by the state. Some continue their education in the U.S. or Europe. The most popular degree at Khazar is the M.B.A.

- Q. Are there some subjects that it makes more sense to teach in Azerbaijani than in English, for example ones that depend on local context?

- A. Yes. For example, in the legal field, international law, human rights and humanitarian law are taught in English. Criminal law and other kinds of law that are more country-specific are taught in Azerbaijani.

- Q. Does Azerbaijan have a system of accreditation?

- A. Yes, but it is not well established, not independent. Universities can be accredited by the Ministry of Education or Council of Ministers but this process is not always standard. It's very important, according to Isaxanli, to have good partners in Europe, and the U.S., which may act also as external evaluators.