

Armenian identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet era

In the developed socialism era, in 1960, the Soviet propaganda machine continued to consolidate the Armenian model for the perception of the “us” image in the geopolitical context. The struggle for the national language ended in victory in 1978, and the national languages (Armenian and Georgian) remained official in these republics. The Centre had abandoned the “hard-line” Russification policy.

In the post-Soviet period, the discourse concerning the possibility of peaceful cohabitation between Armenians and Turks emerged, bringing into discussion an important aspect of Armenian identity – genocide, religion etc. Mass demonstrations took place in the nationalist circles in Turkey, anti-Armenian slogans were used, and aggressive claims were made. The law authorising the opening of foreign-language schools in Armenia amplified to a certain extent the anti-Russian sentiment in the society, as the Russian-language schools were planned to open first. A new anti-Azerbaijan wave emerged in the community, and the layer of Armenian anti-Turkish nationalism became more solid.

In conclusion, due to a pronounced and well-crystallised – long before modernisation – ethnic identity, based on “hard” markers (language, religion, territory), in the Armenian environment there is no room for an identity discourse.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: in Search of the National Identity

The drive of the Soviet leadership to strengthen its position and at the same time to decrease Turkey's influence in Azerbaijan created the need for a so-called “de-Turkification” of the public consciousness. This was the birth of the new Soviet-Azeri ethnic project, isolated from the Turkish identity.

The Azeri language (a dialect of the Turkish language) began to develop, and this became one of the main mechanisms in the assimilation of the ethnic minorities living in the republic. The representatives of the Soviet historiography school proceeded to transform into “Azeri ethnics” all the historical characters/important personalities who had ever lived on the territory of current-day Azerbaijan or of historic Atropatena, irrespective of how they identified themselves from a religious or linguistic point of view. The issue of ethnic identification in Azerbaijan's public discourse was brought back to light in 1990. Now the inhabitants of Azerbaijan had to decide: were they “Azeri” or “Turks”?

The second project for an ethno-national construction in contemporary Azerbaijan – the one that had been started in the 1930s – was Azerbaijanism. Following much debate on the name of the language in 1995, and as a result of a referendum, it was decided that the official language would be called „Azerbaijani“. Thus, the discourse around an appropriate name for the language apparently found a natural solution.

The essence of “Azeri universalism” lies in the fact that it is very difficult to distinguish within it a main ethno-cultural component. Thus, it is asserted that no one component is dominant in the Azeri identity, and therefore the incompleteness of the process of Azeri ethnic identity modelling is recognised. Unlike the case of Armenia, in the Azeri case, no “hard” identity markers were formed, and thus the discourse around self-identification in Azerbaijan erupted straight after the collapse of the Soviet Union and has not stopped to this day.

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