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The Slavic-Orthodox Community in Azerbaijan: The Identity and Social Position of a Once-Dominant Minority

Bruno De Cordier, Ghent

Abstract
Based on recent empirical findings and field observations, this article examines the Slavic-Orthodox community in Azerbaijan. Nowadays numbering about one and a half percent of the population, the main threat to its continuity is not persecution nor pressure to assimilate, but an ageing ethnic-demographic base which is not going to be kept up to level by either natural replacement or new adherents. Orthodox Christianity will nonetheless keep a presence in the country, yet its base of adherents will unavoidably become more heterogeneous.

Social Geography in Historical Perspective
Within the official contours of Azerbaijan, Slavic Orthodox Christians form the largest Christian minority in the country alongside the adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Since the latter are nowadays mainly concentrated in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh, they are cut off from the country's wider society however. Often colloquially called 'the Russians', the Slavic-Orthodox community, now around one and a half percent of the population, basically consists of three ethnic-social categories the limits between which are often fluid. First, of course, there are the citizens of Slavic background, more specifically Azerbaijan's some 140,000 ethnic Russians including some 1,500 of Cossack ancestry, Ukrainians, and Belarussians, among all of whom a form of Orthodox Christianity is historically and at least nominally part of their ethnocultural identity. Second come the 3,000 or so Molokans. Although officially, these are usually considered Russians, their distinctive identity and lifestyle centered around a sixteenth-century breakaway sect of Orthodox Christianity—reminiscent somehow of an Orthodox version of the Quakers—and a presence in the country that predates that of most of Azerbaijan's present-day Slavic groups, mean that they are locally often seen as a separate group.

And third, there are the people of mixed Slavic-Azerbaijani origin who identify to one or another degree with Orthodox Christianity and who are also often counted in censuses as Russians. What these have in common is the use of Russian as their primary language.[1] By far the largest portion of the country's Orthodox Slavs, and here we talk about around ninety percent, nowadays live in Baku and within a radius of thirty kilometers around the city. Beyond that, there are much smaller Slavic communities in Ganja, Mingaçevir as well as in rural districts like Ismaili (where the majority of the Molokans live), Xaçmaz (where there is a concentration of people of Belarussian and Cossack origin), Lenkoran and also some districts along the Azerbaijani–Georgian border. They do not form a majority in any district. Figure 1 on p. 6 below offers a historical overview of the shifting demographic share of Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians) in Azerbaijan between 1897 and the last national population census in 2009. As one can see, this minority's present population share is a fraction of previous levels including that of 1989. Historically, Azerbaijan's Orthodox Slavic community consists of several layers.

The permanent Orthodox Slav presence in what is now Azerbaijan goes back as far and the 1795–1826 period, when Cossacks and religious dissidents like the Molokans settled in the Mugan steppe and along the southern Caspian coast. Later, from 1860 onwards, an increasing number of Slavic peasant communities came into being in what were then the Baku and Elisabethpol governorates.[2] The industrialization drives which came with the first Baku oil boom (1870–90, up to 1910) and with the economic modernization and social transformation that took place in the Azerbaijani SSR (1930–60) formed further major channels of Slavic settlement in the country up to a zenith of more than 17 percent of the population in the year 1939. This gradually decreased due to higher birth rates among the majority groups and resettlement moratoriums after 1959, yet the most dramatic plunge came after 1989. The ethnically Orthodox Slavs, as a dominant minority in the republic, were not specifically targeted during the heavy political turmoil preceding and following independence in summer 1991.[3] The

1 This also includes ethnic Ukrainians and Belarussians who designate their respective national languages as their mother tongue in censuses and surveys, but who use Russian in everyday practice partly due to a lack of a critical mass of speakers of their national language in their surroundings.

2 For a more detailed account, see Sudaba Zeinalova (Судаба Зейналова), 'Этнодемографические изменения на Кавказе: формирование европейских этнических общин (XIX –начало XX вв.)', Кавказ и глобализация, 3(4), 2009: 108–121.

3 Between early 1988 and autumn 1993, the Azerbaijani SSR and independent Azerbaijan were affected by communal unrest in and around Baku and the 1990 Black January crackdown, the Nagorno-

disintegration of a USSR with which they strongly identified, the perspective of long-term chaos, and the rapid decline of the industries and social institutions in which they were economically active, were, however, perceived to be an existential threat.

The subsequent mass exodus which followed now seems to be more or less stabilized. In fact, 58 percent of the respondents declared not to want to leave Azerbaijan at all, while 3.7 percent decided to do so for good and 11.7 percent was in doubt. Either case, the community that remains today has a number of protruding social characteristics. First, although there are officially no separate population pyramids for minorities in Azerbaijan, observations and interaction with the community under examination as well as local academic sources suggest that, due to both the emigration of a sizeable part of its younger strata after 1988–93 and smaller families than those among Azerbaijan's Muslim majority, perhaps up to two-thirds of this community is over forty. Slightly over 28 percent in our research declared to be pensioners, which is more than double the national average.[4] In turn, this top-heavy age structure explains, be it in part, the second characteristic, namely the disproportional portion of women as compared to that in the general, national population pyramid.

Here again, observation and interaction, as well as some literature sources, suggest that up to two-thirds of the Orthodox Slav population in Azerbaijan is female, which is again in sharp contrast to the national average which shows a slight surplus of men.[5] Other explanatory factors related to the latter are, first, the higher longevity among women and, second, the number of women of Slav origin who came to Azerbaijan or stayed there after 1988–93 because of a mixed marriage, often concluded during the latter USSR era, with an Azerbaijani husband. Among our respondents, 23.3 percent declared to belong to this category. As a matter of fact, both of these social characteristics of the Orthodox community were quite visible to this author when he observed how the audience of liturgies and the active parishioners in Baku and Xaçmaz were overwhelmingly female and over fifty.

Karabakh War, a secession attempt in the south, and finally a factional coup in Ganja.

4 The survey was conducted among 300 respondents in Baku, Sumgait and Ganja in autumn 2015. For details on Azerbaijan's demographics, see The World Bank, 'Azerbaijan's demographic change. Implications for social policy and poverty', Human Development Sector Unit, South Caucasus Country Department, №63155-AZ, 2011: 17.

5 Silvia Serrano, 'Les Russes du Caucase du Sud: du malheur d'avoir un empire (et de le perdre)', Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest, 39, 2008, №1: 127 and Christophe Guilmoto, 'La masculinisation des naissances. État des lieux et des connaissances', Population, 70(2), 2015: 201–202.

Third, in terms of social position and occupation, besides a disproportionally large portion of pensioners, 23.7 percent of the respondents declared to be active in the private sector or self-employed and 16.3 percent declared to work in technical or so-called liberal professions. Russian companies and educational institutions and faculties where Russian is the language of instruction form specific employment niches, while Molokans are predominantly active in agriculture to an extent that some of their products lately obtained some sort of branding status as ecologically pure food. Finally, although some Orthodox Slavs do work for government institutions, their presence in that sphere is limited. This is due, first, to the requirement of fluency in Azerbaijani and, second and more importantly, because they have fewer connections among the patronage networks that are necessary to obtain positions in the state bureaucracy.[6]

Current Identity Characteristics

As one can see in Figure 2 on p. 7, an insignificant share of the respondents in our research identify themselves primarily in terms of their traditional faith, that is, as an Orthodox Christian. The majority consider themselves *in the first place* to be either Russian, Azerbaijani citizen of Russian origin or of mixed Slavic-Azerbaijani background. Again, the Molokans form an exception since the communal identity that sets them apart from Russians in general is defined in terms of faith. At the same time, three-quarters of the respondents declared to be followers of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. So, although active religiosity and regular practicing are definitely low in this community—3.7% said that they attend church on a weekly basis or more, 10.3 non-regularly and 37.3 percent occasionally, that is on major holidays or for life rituals—adherence to Orthodoxy is considered by many to be an essential part of a larger Russian identity, along with the Russian language and a strong association with the Russian greater space.

Belonging to the latter is defined, first of all, by the Russian language. Second, there are the predominantly positive to very positive memories of the USSR, prevalent among 63 percent of the respondents, either through direct personal experience, idealized memories or intergenerational lore. Third, there are the ties and interaction with relatives in Russia which 45.3 percent report to have. And fourth, there is the influence of information channels from Russia which 44 percent declared to have as their main source of information. Slightly over 90 percent has a very or rather positive view of Russia as a coun-

6 In a de facto arrangement of representation of ethnic and religious minorities, the Slavic-Orthodox community has one representative in the national parliament, who seats for the presidential party.

try and society and 64.7 percent strongly support a close association if not union between Azerbaijan and Russia.[7] A further characteristic in the identity pattern of Baku's Slavic community is, that a sizeable part sees itself, as does the Russianized Azerbaijani intelligentsia, as a component of a long-standing, multi-ethnic Baku identity. This identity is felt to be under threat with the departure of a large portion of the minorities and of Slavs and Armenians after 1988–91 in particular and the arrival of IDPs from Nagorno-Karabakh and internal migrants from the provinces.

Even if the near-disappearance of the Russian language from the public sphere and the predominance of the Azerbaijani language, which now 53 percent pretends to speak and write fluently or rather well and 41.7 percent in a limited way, remain issues, there is little perception among Orthodox Slavs that they are persecuted, or under pressure to culturally assimilate or to convert to either Shia or Sunni Islam. As Figure 3 on p. 7 reflects, the main societal challenges and threats identified by the Orthodox Slavs, not seldomly on the basis of personal confirmation in everyday life, are similar to those that generally come forward when one asks the same question to the Muslim majority population of Azerbaijan: unemployment, corruption including economic monopolies, the state of health care and education and, perhaps surprisingly to some, the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, especially because of the potential that the conflict may flare up again.[8]

Interestingly, one-sixth of the population of interest said that it followed other churches. This basically includes two categories. First, there are those who belong to other eastern churches, like Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Georgian Orthodox and followers of the Udi-Albanian Church, who turn to Orthodox parishes because their own denomination has no institutions or clergy in the place where they live.[9] And second, and more importantly, there are the adherents of the various Protestant and charismatic-Pentecostal denominations who came to Azerbaijan during the 1990s. Due to a number of circumstances and sociological reasons, they clearly attracted some following among the Slav minority and among métis in urban areas. Although their activity and growth seems to have stabilized if not stagnated in the recent 7 or 8 years, the Orthodox eparchy of Baku actively watches Protestant and Pentecostal groups. Individual priests also told me that countering the influence of non-traditional sects among the historically Orthodox population remains one of the tasks and raisons d'être of their ecclesiastical work.[10]

The Slavic-Orthodox and the Azerbaijani State

Since 2011, after the eparchy of Baku and the Cis-Caspian which encompassed Azerbaijan and Dagestan was reorganized, the Orthodox church in the country reports under the eparchy of Baku which is only responsible for Azerbaijan.[11] Headed since 1999 by Archbishop Alexander, a native of Yaroslavl who served in North Ossetia before, the Orthodox church has six registered cathedral churches and one chapel in the country. Four of these parishes are in Baku, one in Sumgait and one each in Ganja and Xaçmaz. A new parish is planned to be set up in the southern Caspian town of Lenkoran in 2016 or 2017. Inversely proportional to much of the followers' base—and compared to their Roman Catholic counterparts in Western Europe—the Orthodox clergy, which country-wide had some 30 ordained priests at the time of this research, is predominantly young, generally in its early thirties to mid-forties. Most of the priests are Azerbaijani citizens and have been trained, for lack of a seminary in Azerbaijan itself, at theological colleges in Saratov and Stavropol.

Rather than evangelizing, the Orthodox church's claimed mission is to support its existing historical community and to preserve the ancient Christian heritage in

7 In terms of very positive to rather positive views, Russia is followed by Georgia with 79.6 percent and Turkey with 73 percent which is surprisingly close to attitudes towards Turkey among Azerbaijani opinion in general. The survey was taken before the downing of a Russian warplane by the Turkish air force near Yamadi on the Syrian–Turkish border though. So it is not clear whether this has starkly affected public attitudes among the Slavic minority vis-à-vis Turkey, as it did in Russia itself.

8 One opinion that came up several times during the conversations was, that Slavs were also negatively affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh War, more specifically the Molokan villages in the area which were shelled (some of the inhabitants of which now live near Baku) and Stepanakert's small Slavic-Orthodox population which had to flee during the hostilities. Despite the assistance by Russian units or at least individual commanders to Armenian separatists at the time, only 2.6% of our respondents felt that Orthodox Slavs are perceived as pro-Armenian. A joint 65 percent of those questioned have a rather or very negative feeling vis-à-vis Armenia as a state.

9 Founded in 488, the Apostolic Church of Caucasian Albania, which has some 3,800 adherents, primarily among the Udi minority in Gabala, is the oldest surviving and officially recognized church in present-day Azerbaijan.

10 This actually fits into a historical pattern in which the Orthodox hierarchy in Moscow and the eparchy of the Trans-Caucasus considered the establishment of parishes among the Slavic settlers vital to counter the influence of schismatic Orthodox sects and Baptism. Fuad Agayev (Фуад Агаев), 'Строительство православных церквей в рамках переселенческой политики царизма в северном Азербайджане в конце XIX – начале XX вв.', Bakı Universitetinin Xəbərləri, №2, 2012: 153

11 An eparchy is the Orthodox equivalent of a diocese in Roman Catholicism. Officially, the eparchy of Baku and the Cis-Caspian which was founded in 1998, was reorganized and split-up for practical-organizational reasons. The government's unease toward supranational confessional entities might also have played though.

Azerbaijan. As per survey results, 9 percent among the Orthodox Slavic community, its main social base, seem to have a high level of trust in the church and its clergy. Although in the minority, this is far superior to the shares, amounting to an average of about one percent, who allot a high level of trust to political parties, local as well as international NGOs, and to judicial courts for example. An additional 23 percent has a rather high level of trust, 36 percent has a neutral stance, and a joint 24 percent a rather low level or no trust in the clergy and the church at all. Only a limited portion, slightly less than 7 percent, consider the Orthodox church to be an intermediary between themselves, the state and other ethnic-confessional communities.

Besides ecclesiastical work, through its social wing, it is involved in a number of charitable activities. Its clergy and volunteers thus organize administrative help, food packages and the facilitation of medical support for isolated pensioners, the ill and marginalized households. Other social activities include Sunday schools, the organization of 'open tables' on major Orthodox holidays like Easter, Trinity Sunday, Orthodox Christmas, the Epiphany and the Old New Year, and the organization of courses in the Azerbaijani language to promote bilingualism. Officially, the eparchy of Baku and its parishes and clergy are not funded by either the Moscow Patriarchate or the Russian government. They mainly depend on various kinds of private donations, elite philanthropy, in-kind support like the free availability of real estate, the return on own investments, a favorable fiscal regime and exemptions of payment for utilities.

The Orthodox church, in line with the official, secular community organizations and national-cultural centers, clearly keeps a legitimist stance vis-à-vis the state, the incumbent oligarchies and in the political realm in general, whereas among the grassroots, there is a relative acquiescence and political disengagement if not cynicism toward the latter. Both attitude patterns are not necessarily a reflection of ideological or personal sympathy with the current power elites. It rather reflects that these, shaped and partly Russianized as they were in the mold of the USSR and its policies of indigenization of the communist structures, are seen to embody some continuity with the USSR.[12] There is also a rather strong feeling, reinvigorated more recently by the psychological impact of the war in southeastern Ukraine and the predicament of Assyrian and Coptic Christians in crisis areas in the Arab sphere, that for all its ills, the secularist regime and the stability that it is seen to bring, at least leave room for the survival of an Orthodox Christian community in the country. Lastly, the presence and maintenance of an Orthodox community is an important element in the Azerbaijani government's diplomacy with Russia of course but also with Serbia and Belarus, and in its efforts to keep up the image of religious tolerance that is lately promoted in the regime's international public relations.

Concluding Remarks

Due to its size and population share, the Slavic-Orthodox community in Azerbaijan represents a paradigm quite different form that in, say, Latvia and Kazakhstan, where Orthodox Slavs form up to a quarter of the population. This is too small to form a real voting bloc or a base for a communal political movement. As can be seen in Figure 4 on p. 8, in the current conditions and despite its near-insignificant population share, Azerbaijan's Slavic-Orthodox community, especially in Baku where the critical mass of active Russian speakers remains much larger than in Ganja, for instance, feels that it can somehow sufficiently preserve its individuality. For its preservation, it moves in a space defined by a long historical presence in the country dating back generations, by the opportunities created during the years of economic growth, and by the modalities and conditions created by the official interpretation and practice of secularism and inter-ethnic and religious tolerance.

The presence of traditional eastern Christianity is not resented among Azerbaijan's Shia and Sunni Muslim majority, contrary to the activities of non-traditional Christian currents like Pentecostalism who also proselytize among Muslims. Also, Slavs are not popularly seen to be particularly privileged nor to control certain sectors of the economy or economic monopolies. And the fact that there is no Slavic concentration in a geographic area bordering Russia means that they are not considered potentially separatist or a threat to national unity either. The main existential threat to the Slavic population and hence Russian Orthodoxy in the country nowadays, is not persecution nor pressure to convert to the majority faith. It is an ageing ethnic-demographic base which is not going to be adequately replaced, especially not outside of Baku, by either natural replacement or new followers. One of the factors that retains its acceptance by the majority culture, that it does not actively try to gain converts or reverts beyond its traditional Slavic following, thus stunts its future presence in the country.

As for the Molokans, it remains to be seen whether the group can perpetuate its endogamous social order without compromising its identity. Russian Orthodoxy will not disappear. Even if in the future, Islam, moreover Shiism, could, and likely will, play a stronger role in both society and governance, this should not be an impediment for the perpetuation of an Orthodox community in the

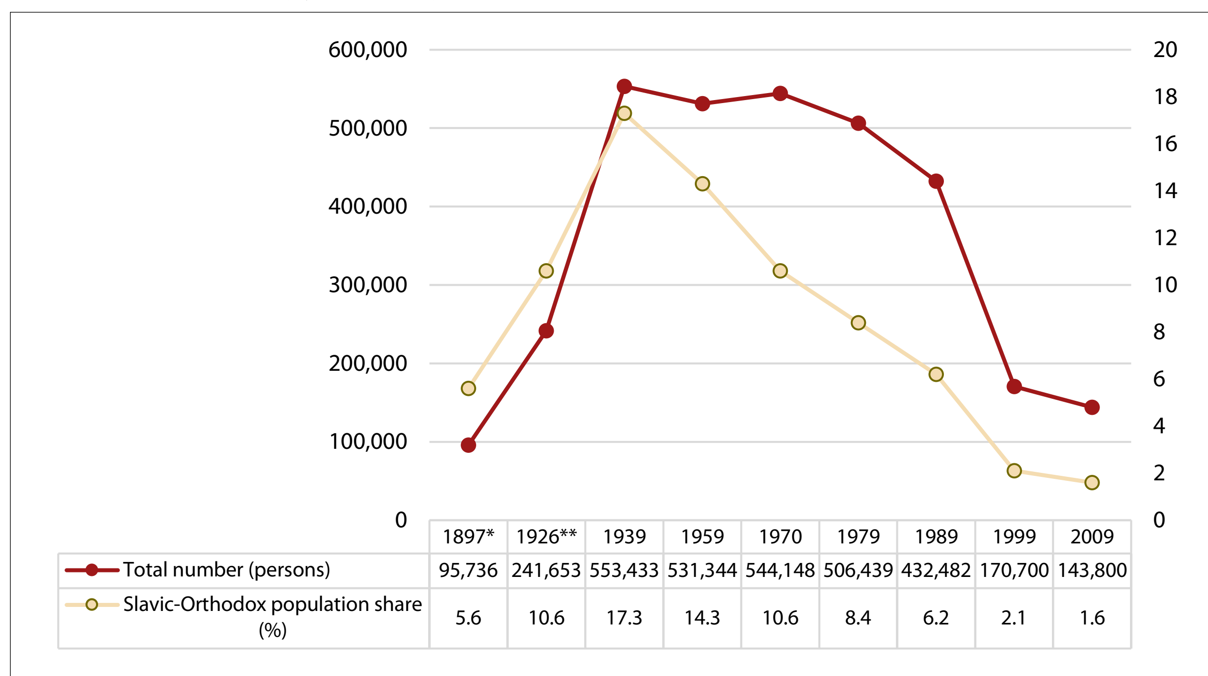
12 Viatcheslav Avioutskii, 'Les clans en Azerbaïdjan', Le Courrier des pays de l'Est, 2007/5 №1063: 67–79.

country. But its base will unavoidably become more heterogeneous if it is to perpetuate itself, not only consisting of the numerically smaller segments of younger Slavs, but also of expatriate Russians, of people of mixed origin or unclear ethnic-confessional identity—who might even become its most active adherents and advocates—and of adherents of smaller traditional-Christian groups which could be absorbed.

About the Author

Bruno De Cordier is a professor at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies under the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University. Before that, he worked for the international humanitarian aid sector, mostly for specialized bodies of the UN. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Islamic charities. Bruno De Cordier's thematic interests related to the Caspian-Central Asian space include social history, identity and social mobility, the social impact of globalization, the aid economy, and the social role and position of Islam, Christianity and of religious actors in general. He lived in Central Asia for several years.

Figure 1: The Evolution of the Number and Percentage of the Population of Slavs in Azerbaijan Between 1897 and 2009



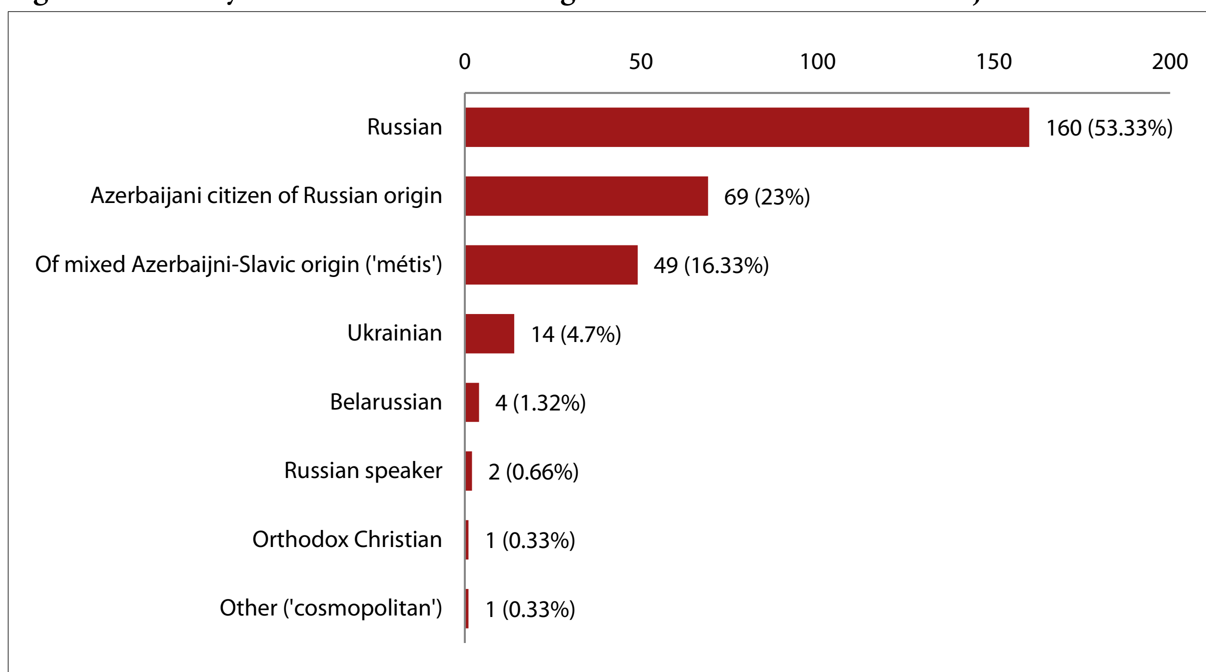
	1897*	1926**	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	1999	2009
Total number (persons)	95,736	241,653	553,433	531,344	544,148	506,439	432,482	170,700	143,800
Slavic-Orthodox population share (%)	5.6	10.6	17.3	14.3	10.6	8.4	6.2	2.1	1.6

Source: table created by the author on the bases of statistics from Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской Империи 1897 г. Распределение населения по родному языку и уездам Российской Империи кроме губерний Европейской России, Бакинская губерния, Елизаветпольская губерния, Всесоюзная перепись населения 1926 года. Национальный состав населения по регионам республик СССР, Закавказская СФСР - Азербайджанская ССР, Всесоюзная перепись населения 1939 (1959, 1970, 1979, 1989) года. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР, Азербайджанская ССР, *Demoscope, <www.demoscope.ru>, and the population censuses of 1999 and 2009, Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi (State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan), <www.stat.gov.az>.*

**Figures for the governorates of Baku and Elisabethpol, whose joint territory more or less encompassed that of present-day Azerbaijan. The figures comprise what was then called Greater Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians) and Belarussians.*

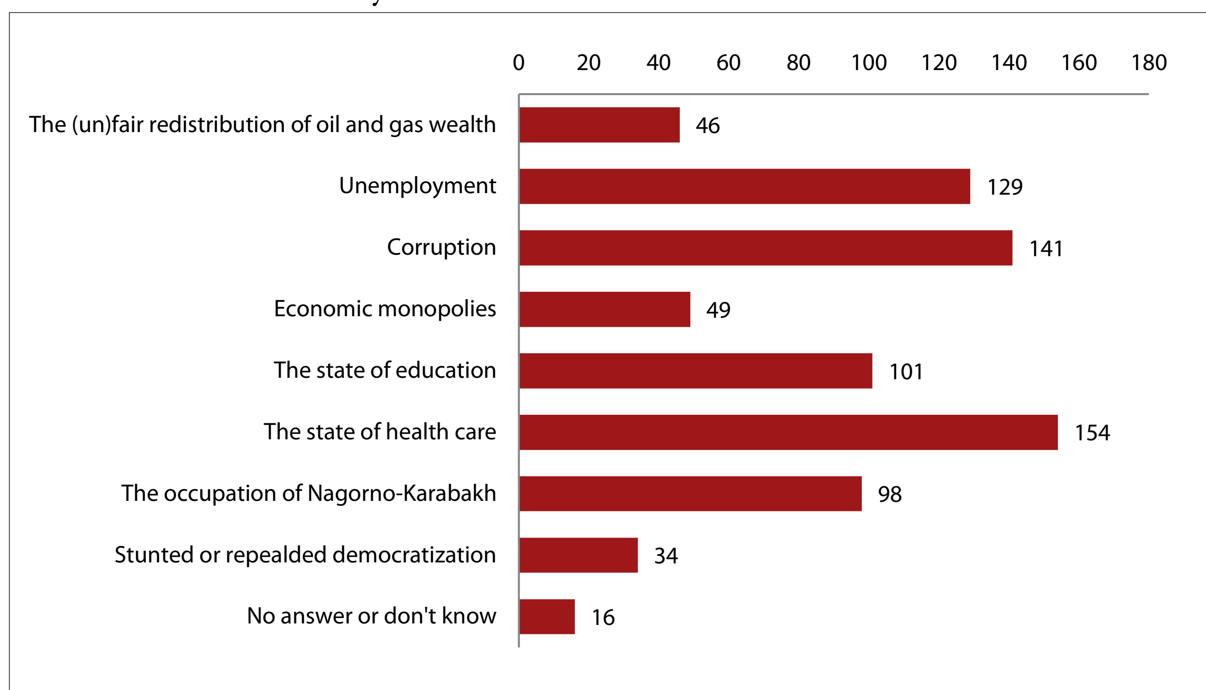
***Situation for the Azerbaijani SSR of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federative Republic.*

Figure 2: Primary Self-Identification Among the Slavic-Orthodox in Azerbaijan



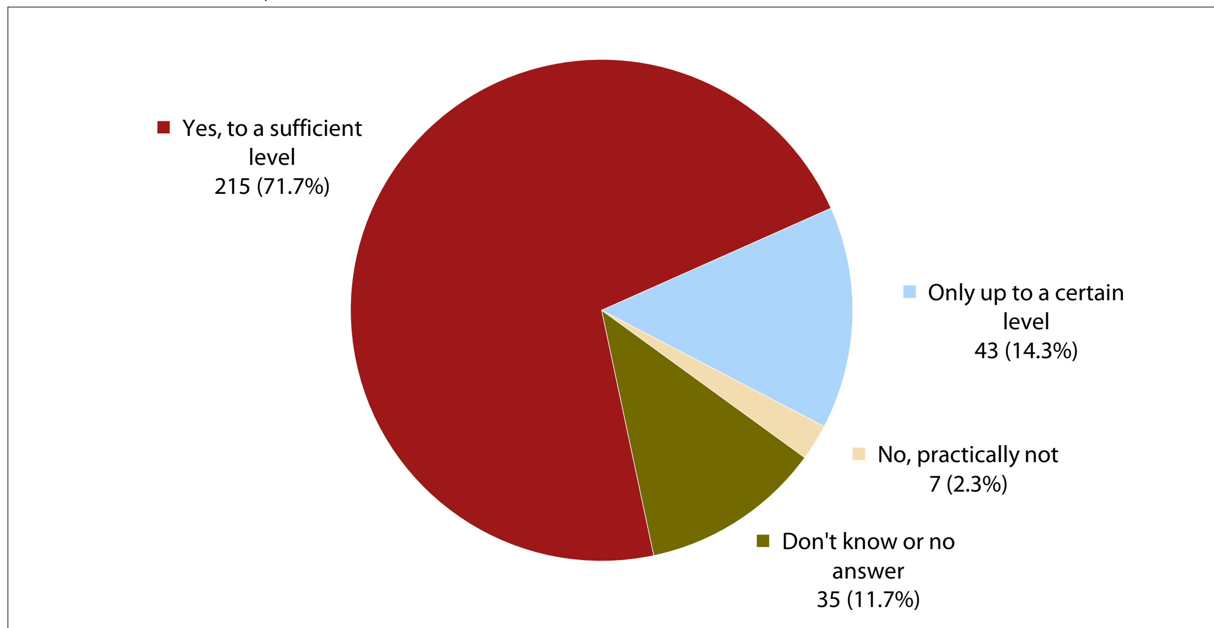
Source: extracts from the results of the author's opinion survey, autumn 2015

Figure 3: Main Challenges and Threats Affecting Azerbaijani Society, Including the Slavic-Orthodox Minority



Source: extracts from the results of the author's opinion survey, autumn 2015

Figure 4: Can the Slavic-Orthodox Community Preserve its Ethnic and Confessional Identity in Azerbaijan?



Source: extracts from the results of the author's opinion survey, autumn 2015

The Identity of the Caucasian Yezidi in the Wake of the Sinjar Tragedy

Allan Kaval, Erbil

Abstract

This article compares the social and identity development of the Yezidi communities in the southern Caucasus and in Iraq. It argues that since the 1990s, a Yezidi national identity that, first, borrows a number of elements from Armenia's national-commemorative narrative and that, second, could take advantage of the relative opening of borders and of modern information and communication technologies has developed among the Caucasian Yezidi. With the old Yezidi core areas in northern Iraq under existential threat by armed conflict and displacement, this identity could become the new framework in which a modern Yezidi identity will be able to sustain itself.

Who, in Fact, Are the Yezidi?

In summer 2014, the spate of atrocities by the Islamic Sate against Yezidi villagers and townspeople in the northern Iraqi district of Sinjar brought previously never seen international attention to this peculiar community and culture.[1] Nonetheless, the Yezidi's ordeal, which was the subject of media coverage for a while, did not really result in a better understanding of their history, confessional practices and their identity dynamics. On the contrary, the Yezidi, who tend to be associated exclusively with their ethnographic area in Iraq while omitting the Caucasian Yezidi, are often reduced to mere victims—the role they had when much of international public first came to know about their existence. Also, through the persecutions and atrocities of which they are the target, they are supposed

1 The original of this article was written in French and was translated by Bruno De Cordier.