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## **THE MAINSTAYS OF THE MULTICULTURAL STATE POLICY OF AZERBAIJAN**

Over the last years, there has been a significant increase in viewing the socio-cultural issues in the light of philosophical, social, political and psychological studies. This is no coincidence. The modern age is defined by globalizing tendencies in various fields, an unprecedented development of means of communication and an establishment of an integrated cultural space. Revealing of further prospects for cultural development in specific countries and regions, an interaction of national cultures, and an establishment of new cultural universals are problems taking on particular significance in the current geopolitical situation.

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Stepping up the processes of globalization extends the levels of interaction between cultures, brings in new forms of a constructive dialogue. Alongside a potential establishment of global culture, there are concerns about a possible erasing of cultural diversity and a unification of national values. Many years ago, the dynamics of the cultural process was summed up by Mahatma Gandhi: “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows boarded up. I want the cultures of all lands to blow as free as wind about my house. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”

Aside from their historical, social and ethnocultural significance, national cultures need to be preserved because of a respect for human rights, as a national culture is a generalized way for people to manifest their rights for their own world.

The outstanding scholar and humanist *Dmitry Likhachov* firmly linked the preservation of national cultures, including the cultures of national minorities, with respect for

human rights. It should seem to be an unwavering truth and the defining principle for both the state policy in the field of culture, and the state policy in general. Unfortunately, in this day and age this fundamental truth is distorted, as the ideology of multiculturalism is deemed “bankrupt”.

To preserve the multifaceted nature of global culture in a globalized world is a sociopolitical problem, on top of everything else. In this regard, the policy of multiculturalism should not be dismissed; the smoke screen deliberately set up during the recent years to surround this incredibly important method of managing social and cultural processes, vital for the very existence of the human civilization, ought to be removed.

In this context, Azerbaijan’s experience seems quite indicative. Historically, the multinational and multi-religious population of the country used to define the prevailing cultural diversity, creating its many facets. Thus for many centuries, due to political, economic and cultural peculiarities of Azerbaijan, the mentality of its population was shaped by the atmosphere of tolerance and respect for cultures of the neighboring peoples. The historical memory of the Azerbaijani people, which preserves traces of passing through three religions (Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam), is also a critical factor in the establishment of well-balanced intercultural communications, both inside the country and on the international level.

For Heydar Aliyev, the long-time national leader of Azerbaijan, the fundamental principle of his political activity was the concept of “Azerbaijanity”, presuming both a unity of the Azerbaijanian nation and its variety. To put the ideas of national unity into practice in contemporary Azerbaijan is to live up to the ideals of Azerbaijanity. That the many ethnic groups making up the population of the country fully perceive the Azerbaijanity concept and its value is vital to a harmonious social and cultural development of the Republic. The Azerbaijanity concept is supported and successfully developed by the current President İlham Aliyev.

I would like to emphasize that the fundamental principles of the country’s national policy enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan provide for the equality of all citizens, despite their racial and ethnic backgrounds. It’s no coincidence that there are more than twenty different national cultural communities operating in Baku alone; of these, the Russian, Ukrainian, Lezghian, Kurdish, Talysh, Georgian and Jewish ones are the largest in scale. Such communities also exist in some other areas of Azerbaijan, where ethnic minorities are a dominant population group.

The danger inherent in the unification of cultures during the age of globalization is not that some cultural forms may disappear, but that cultural uniformity leads to uniformity in the people’s way of thinking and their worldviews. International organizations, such as the UN and UNESCO, expressed their concerns about the situation, which resulted in the adoption of a few well-known international acts aimed at supporting cultural diversity.

The globalized integrated culture currently in the process of formation would be a quintessence of *national* cultural values; it is destined to promote the spiritual well-being of every person, to harmonize the social life, and to provide for a stable social development. This culture is not artificially set up, but emerges naturally, which resolves the

problem of human disunity in space and time on our planet by stepping up human communication.

Comprehending the prerequisites and conditions of spiritual development of future humans and the ability to understand the value of the cultural diversity in the world take on a particular significance in this all-encompassing process, in order to provide a foundation for solving all the global problems of our age. It can be said that a need to discover internal values within national cultures and spiritual constants has increased significantly in a dynamically developing world. A tolerant paradigm for perception of diverse cultural communication is being formed. A new attitude to cultural values is being established under the influence of modern democratization trends, which is based on the recognition of an equal status of traditions and a plurality of tendencies in culture.

Azerbaijan is one of the few states where multiculturalism has become a state policy. According to the UN experts, it’s an incredibly humane and wise policy. Firstly, it reinforces the security of the country, by weakening the ideological basis for separatism; secondly, it integrates the spiritual and intellectual potential of different cultures, and motivates the population for creativity, including joint effective efforts to solve socio-economic problems; thirdly, it promotes the interests and immediate needs of all the peoples living in the country, thus creating an atmosphere of trust, and strengthening the social capital of the society.

Over the course of history, multiculturalism has proved its adequacy in multinational countries. A coherent policy of multiculturalism prevents ethno-cultural identity conflicts, creates a tolerant spiritual atmosphere in the society, and enables an appropriate perception of other cultures. The humanistic principles of multiculturalism make it possible to rise above narrow nationalistic interests, to curtail the dangerous displays of chauvinism and xenophobia.

The domination of unified national patriotic values in contemporary Azerbaijan is clearly defined by an interrelated history of all the peoples living in its territory. The culture of Azerbaijan used to develop due to a spontaneous interaction of different cultures on a heuristic principle. Heydar Aliyev, the nation-wide leader of the Azerbaijani people, repeatedly called attention to the three interconnected sources of the country’s culture, defined by a long-time interaction of Turkic, Arab-Islamic and European values. He considered priceless the cultural influence of Russia on Azerbaijan, exerted over the last two centuries.

I would like to emphasize a few key moments in the history of Azerbaijanian culture that prove its openness to external cultural influences and reveal the fundamental principles of Azerbaijanian multiculturalism.

Ancient history of Azerbaijan is closely linked with Zoroastrianism and Khurramism; this is where the sacred texts of the Avesta were created, to play a significant spiritual role in the pre-Islamic period.

Since the beginning of a new era, ideas of Christianity found fresh ground in the Caucasian Albania, a state which emerged during this period in the North of Azerbaijan. Devoid of ethnic limitations, with a set of moral values open to all, Christianity became a universal religion for all the peoples of the region.

Several centuries later, the ingression and gradual settlement of Turkic tribes added a new touch to the interaction of cultures in Ancient Azerbaijan. Following the Tur-

tic influence, the “Turanian strata” was reinforced in the multi-faceted culture of Azerbaijan. As time went by, the Turkic element formed the very foundation of the culture – its language.

In my opinion, the Turkic factor in the development of global culture is still largely underestimated. As seen by the European public view on history, “Turkic” typically spells hostility and aggression. Defining the negative aspects of this process as absolute is to overshadow its positive consequences that influenced the course of world development.

As Turkic tribes migrated across Eurasia, the cultural values of those inhabiting its wide open spaces went through a process of consolidation, introducing them to statehood, and ushering in the Eurasian culture. Geopolitical significance of the Ottoman Empire’s emergence aside, it can be said that for six centuries it was a liaison between Europe and the East, performing an important cultural and communicational function.

“Turanity” describes a number of essential features of the contemporary Azerbaijanian culture; it also serves to define the common grounds for mutual influence with Slavic cultures which also feature a Turanian element, although not as deep, and hardly touching their languages. Actually, it was this cultural interconnection of the Slavs and the Turks that gave birth to the “Eurasian” type of culture.

In the 7th century, the Arabic invasion resulted in an abrupt shift from Christianity to Islam for those inhabiting our territory, with Azerbaijan becoming an integral part of the Arab-Islamic world. The Islamic world absorbed the Ancient Greek cultural legacy, as well as many achievements of the other traditions, after processing them in accordance with its own needs.

As shown by Elisée Reclus, Watt Montgomery, James Claw and other researchers, the Renaissance would not have been possible in Europe if it were not for a flow of various Islamic and Turkic ideas that had changed the spiritual and intellectual climate of the Middle Ages. Azerbaijan played a notable role in this process. Suffice it to mention the names of such Azerbaijanian thinkers as *Nizami Ganjavi*, *Imadaddin Nasimi*, *Shah Ismail Khatai*, *Bahmanyar Al-Azerbaijani* or *Nasir al-Din al-Tusi*, whose ideas were treasured by the European cultural community at the time.

In the beginning of the 19th century, a milestone event took place in the history of Azerbaijan. After the Russo-Persian Wars, Northern Azerbaijan became a part of the Russian Empire. It led to a dichotomy of the Azerbaijanian culture. While the culture of Southern Azerbaijan remained archaic, the “European slant” of Northern Azerbaijan’s culture was becoming more and more obvious.

The 1917 political events in Russia led to the fall of the Tzarist monarchy, and laid the groundwork for proclaiming the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on May 28, 1918.

However, its existence was terminated in 1920, as Soviet power was established in the country. During the subsequent period, the development of culture in Azerbaijan was primarily defined by Marxist-Leninist ideology, as well as a cultural policy implicitly aimed at an “erosion” of national mentality. At the same time, positive aspects of the Soviet period in Azerbaijan may not be denied: it ushered in a drive for universal literacy, and made culture and arts accessible to all the population groups. Outstanding composers, artists and scientists, their names well-known across the world, made a creative contribution not only to the national culture, but to the global culture as well during the Soviet period.

Unfortunately, the end of the socialistic epoch turned out tragic for Azerbaijan. Since 1988, Azerbaijan was involved in a bloody armed conflict with Armenia; during the fighting, more than 20% of the country’s territory was occupied. A great number of cultural establishments, including museums, art galleries and architectural monuments, remained in the occupied territory along with industrial and agricultural facilities, to be vandalized and destroyed.

Today the culture of Azerbaijan is on the rise, and in the focus of a close attention by the state. New museums and cultural centers are under construction, theatres and concert halls are being restored, international festivals of modern and classical music are held, young specialists are sent abroad to study, and a whole lot of talented musicians from Azerbaijan have lately performed on stages of such legendary theatres as the Bolshoi Theatre, the Mariinsky Theatre, Metropolitan Opera, Vienna Opera and other best concert halls of the world.

Today Azerbaijan doesn’t merely accumulate the traditions of multiple cultures within its borders, but carries its culture outwards. Moreover, due to large-scale international symposiums and conferences held in Baku over the recent years, Azerbaijan has become a sort of a “trend-setter”, where humanitarian issues are being analyzed and solved, mapping out a policy of multiculturalism in particular.

Summarizing the above, it can be said that during the whole period of its existence, the culture of Azerbaijan was subject to various influences, absorbing the most valuable traits of other cultures. Many endeavors of philosophy, mathematics, arts and literature were initiated here, with the cultural achievements of both the East and the West and their synthesis serving as the foundation. At the same time, the culture of Azerbaijan did not lose its distinctive character – it still features its definite identity, its unique national spirit. Contemporary independent Azerbaijan looks ahead; the country has a great spiritual, intellectual and cultural potential for development, as well as an implementation of humanistic values and ideals of the highest order. This potential is certainly connected with the integrity of the Azerbaijanian culture, the multicultural policy pursued by the state serving as its foundation.