Negotiating Cosmopolitan Culture – The Case of Baku

Taking Baku, the capital of the former Soviet Republic and now independent state of Azerbaijan, as an example of a cosmopolitan city seems quite unusual. Baku (and Azerbaijan) is not well-known for its cosmopolitanism – and actually not very well-known at all. At first glance, today's Baku is not a cosmopolitan city. It does not have certain quarters dominated by ethnic minorities who live and perform their own distinct cultures; in fact – if one does not regard the businessmen and oil engineers from all over the world, sent by their companies to live in Baku temporarily, as ethnic minorities – then there are not many visible ethnic minorities in Baku at all. Nevertheless, cosmopolitan discourses play an important role in the self-definition of the inhabitants, the *Bakintsy*, and in the way they deal with the rapid economic, social and political changes set in motion when Azerbaijan became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. This paper deals especially with the question how this cosmopolitanism in the cultural sphere is negotiated between different social groups in Baku today.

As these cosmopolitan ideas are deeply rooted in the changes the city experienced in the middle of the 19th century, I want to start with a short sketch of the last 150 years of Baku's history.

The First Oil Boom (1870-1915)

When the Russian colonial army seized the Southern Caucasus and destroyed the local Khanates in the early 19th century, Baku was nothing more than a small port on the Caspian Sea with a population that was not diverse at all, but dominated by Shii Muslims speaking a Turkish language.

The Russian conquest itself did not change this situation much. The important transformation occurred due to a resource whose existence nearby had been well known since medieval times: oil, which became more and more important in the second half of the 19th century as fuel for the quickly developing industry and transport sector in Europe and Northern America. Baku's oilfields promised quick money for entrepreneurs from the Russian Empire as well as from Western Europe. In only a few decades Baku grew into a multiethnic[1] as well as a very rich city. The oil fortunes – whether they were earned by local Muslims, Russians or Western Europeans – were represented in the "New Town," which quickly emerged around the old

[1] According to the Imperial Census of 1897 Baku had 182,897 inhabitants. Azeri Turks formed the biggest ethnic group with 63,415, followed by Russians (45,510) and Armenians (22,233) (Altstadt [1992: 30]).

Muslim town, and which consisted of buildings regularly planned and constructed by Western European architects. Some of these buildings are still important for the self-confidence of the *Bakintsy* today.

All these changes in the structure of the formerly Muslim city were implemented not only by foreign patrons for the use of a Western expatriate community, but also by Muslim oil millionaires, and the sites were used and accepted by at least parts of the local community. Regarding the cosmopolitan question, it is interesting that the classical distinction between "cosmopolitans" and "locals," where "cosmopolitans" are part of a mobile, usually well-off and well educated elite that travels the world, and "locals" are considered more tradition-bound and not as open to other lifestyles as the traveling cosmopolitans, cannot describe the Baku situation in the early 20th century. If we take Hannerz' most general definition of cosmopolitanism, "[*cosmopolitanism] is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences. A search for contrast rather than uniformity*" (Hannerz 1990: 239), then during this era of the first oil boom, we tend to find this cosmopolitan mindset among the so-called "locals," the Muslim oil millionaires, rather than among the Western or Russian entrepreneurs or representatives of the big companies who exported their Western culture to Baku without showing much willingness to "engage with the Other" – or at least, there is no documentation of such engagement.

The Muslim oil millionaires, who generally came from an urban working-class or rural background, seemed to be more open towards new cultural experiences, which they used to modernize (or "westernize") their own society. The best example is Zeynalabdin Taghiyev who founded and financed the first ever boarding school for Muslim girls, built an Art Nouveau department store in place of the local *bazaars* in the center of Baku, and imported the first printing press in order to publish a newspaper in the Azeri language.

All these examples already demonstrate that the interest the Muslim oil millionaires showed in Western culture came from a strong national awareness: The adaptation of some Western achievements such as higher education for women, media in the form of daily newspapers and printed books or theatre, was to help strengthen the national consciousness, all the way to establishing Azeri as a language of literature and a form of a distinct national identity. For the oil millionaires, cosmopolitanism was not a way of thinking "beyond the nation" but "for the sake of nation." Engaging with the "Other" was mostly done with the aim of strengthening one's own position against these others.

This "Other" the oil millionaires wanted to engage with or from which they wanted to distinguish themselves, was the West, Europe or (to a lesser extent) Russia. Relations with other Shia in Iran or with the Ottoman Empire, with whom Azerbaijanis (more or less) shared the same language, seemed to be less important for their own national and cultural development than the adaptations from Western culture – either because these bonds were taken for granted or regarded as the very reason why the emerging nation was seen as "lagging behind" the European nations.

The Golden Sixties and Seventies – Soviet Cosmopolitanism

The first oil boom ended with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. By the last months of the war, when British, Turkish and Russian troops were fighting around Baku and its oilfields, most of the Western European and Russian companies had left the city. After the war the Russian Revolution and the following civil war led to a short-lived independent Republic of Azerbaijan, which was quickly seized by the Red Army again in 1919. After the capture of Baku, the oil millionaires, including the native Azerbaijani ones, fled to Western Europe.

For the long period during which Baku was under Soviet control, there are no memories or physical reminders of the existence of cosmopolitanism[2] in the city, even if statistics show that the population remained diverse while the city was constantly growing.[3] In the urban narrative the second "cosmopolitan time" in Baku started in the 1960s, when, after Stalin's death in 1953 and the beginning of the Khrushchev Thaw in 1956, people gained a bit more freedom in their everyday lives and Baku's cultural life became more vibrant again. In the Soviet perception, the image of Baku in these days changed from an industrial port to "the southern city," a city by the sea with a famous promenade where people could enjoy a stroll

[2] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the complex problem of the different concepts of "kozmopolitanism" and "internationalism" in Soviet history. While "kozmopolitanism" was used under Stalin as an accusation that could quickly lead to condemnation as an "enemy of the people," the second one was the highly appreciated goal of "friendship among the nations" (Humphrey 2004, Grant 2010). For my paper it is important to note that Bakuvians today use these terms mostly synonymously when talking about this time, while "internationalism" tends to be connected with Soviet official policy and is therefore usually used less.

[3] According to the 1959 census the total population of Baku was 897,000, with 38% Azerbaijanis, 34% Russians, and 17% Armenians. By 1979, the number of people in Baku registered by the census had grown to 1.5 million, with 56% Azerbaijanis, 22% Russians, and 14% Armenians (Yunusov 2000: 65). The decreasing percentage of Russians and Armenians does not necessarily mean that these groups left Baku, but that a high number of Azerbaijanis migrated to Baku (and that the birthrate among them was much higher than in other groups). In the mid-1980s there were still 200,000 Armenians (or 10% of the population) in Baku (de Waal 2003: 87).

and a drink and some live music in one of the outdoor cafes in the daytime as well as on warm summer nights.

Music, especially jazz, played a particularly important role within this narrative, which declared Baku to be "the New Orleans of the Caspian." For Bakuvians, the best jazz of the Soviet Union was played and composed in Baku. A special kind of jazz was created that combined regular jazz and mugham, the classical Azeri music form. Many jazz festivals were held in the city during this time and people today still recall that performers from exotic places like Cuba, Indonesia or even African-Americans from the United States came to play in Baku, or that local jazz stars performed on Soviet television (Rumyansev/Huseynova 2011).

While jazz was a more upper-class entertainment enjoyed mostly by students and academics on special occasions, there was also a more private everyday kind of "kozmopolitanism" that took place in the yards between the typical Soviet apartment blocs, where people from all Soviet nationalities lived together. Because of the Soviet policy of restricting internal migration, people from rural Azerbaijan were not allowed to settle in Baku while engineers and other technical specialists from Russia, Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe were brought to work on the city's oilfields. Baku's population was therefore always different from other parts of Azerbaijan – a fact that also led to the special sentiment of being a *Bakintsy* that was shared by ethnic Azerbaijanis, Russians, Armenians, Jews as well as people from other Soviet Republics and the smaller minorities on the territory of Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, the frequent affirmations of how much everyone was alike (Grant 2010, Rumyansev/Huseynova 2011) does not alter the fact that everybody knew the nationality of their neighbors quite well. In the Baku backyards, it did not matter where someone came from, as anyone will state, but that person was still "the Other."

Most people who enjoyed the Baku cosmopolitanism of these days did not have much spatial mobility: some had the opportunity to study in the cultural centers of the Soviet Union like Leningrad, Moscow or Kiev, they might have traveled to other Soviet Republics or obtained some experience of "being abroad" while serving in the army in Eastern Germany or other parts of Eastern Europe, but those parts of the world they reached through jazz were generally out of reach for them. Nevertheless, they welcomed any chance to increase their cultural backgrounds and were proud to be part of what they saw as world culture: jazz and opera, cinema and fashion, theatre and. Once again, the direction of this interest was clearly aimed toward Europe and – maybe even more – to the United States. For the *Bakintsy* who today

recall the Golden Days of the cosmopolitanism of the 1960s and 1970s, the centuries-old contacts to countries like Iran and Turkey seemed not to matter any more – or only as negative examples of what "*we had already left behind us before independence and the nationalists came*" (Azerbaijani woman, 42).

Cosmopolitanism Today

The "kozmopolitanism of the backyards" ended abruptly in the late 1980s, and the woman I just quoted was not entirely wrong to blame the "nationalists" for this, even if the whole truth is much more complicated. The big national question was not connected with Baku or even with independence but was raised over the future of the Autonomous Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, then part of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, but mostly inhabited by Armenians, and a region which both Armenia and Azerbaijan had historically considered their own land. The hostility against Armenians increased between 1988 and 1990 and escalated in pogroms in January 1990 after which most Armenians had left Baku. Whereas the Armenians were the first ethnic minority to leave Baku, others followed after independence due to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh 1992-1994 as well due to the everyday hardships they faced after the collapse of the Soviet economic system.

Despite its forced end in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the "cosmopolitanism of the backyards" has not been entirely forgotten. The stories about how closely all ethnic groups lived together, how they shared the same Soviet lifestyle and how differences were marked only by different cuisine, festivals, wedding or funeral rites, are an important part of the urban narrative, especially among elderly people of these minority groups still living in Baku and among intellectuals of any age – even ones who can hardly remember these times. Stories like the one quoted above sometimes came up in the first minutes of a conversation with a foreigner (Ryumantsev/Huseynova 2011, Grant 2010: 129). And no matter what the speaker calls his (or her) mother-tongue, these stories were almost always told in Russian. They serve not only to explain how Baku has changed since theses days and to recall "the good old days" of cosmopolitan Baku, but also as a distinction between real *Bakintsy* and the Azeri refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh as well as other migrants from rural areas, who came to Baku in large numbers after the internal migration restriction was lifted. The departure of some ethnic groups, the decline of Russian as a common language, the fact that the Baku Jazz Festival is getting worse every year and the increasing prices for cultural events like theatre and opera,

are in the eyes of this group evidence for an increasing "provincialization" or even "Islamization" of Baku. Contemporary politics or almost any kind of Azerbaijani nationalist representations were also seen as signs of a backwardness that isolates Azerbaijan (and especially Baku) from the connections to the world this group enjoyed during the Soviet Union. They see themselves as people who lost more than they gained through independence, not only in terms of money but also in terms of opportunities to shape their own lives, pursuing a career or being part of an international (or in their idea) cosmopolitan cultural life.

The famous Baku jazz scene also changed with the political transformation: After independence, jazz (especially in its connection with traditional mugham music) became more institutionalized, for example, a modern state-financed "Baku Jazz Center" was built in the center of Baku, but it simultaneously lost its significance as an underground culture which served as a cultural marker for anybody who wanted to show his openness to new (Western) influences in Soviet times. While Ryumantsev and Huseynova (and other Baku jazz fans) interpret this as a step back from the cosmopolitanism of former times and as a turn to national roots or even Islamic values (Ryumantsev/Huseynova 2011), it can also be seen as a step into a new kind of globalized "world culture." The students today who are interested in new cultural influences are more likely to download videos from the US charts from YouTube or watch the Eurovision contest in some bars. This group – if it can be described as a distinct group – consists of younger people who have no memories of Soviet times and were in most cases happy enough that their parents had already become part of a more well-off new elite. They often (if not always) had and have the opportunity to travel, they communicate with each other in Azeri but speak English very well (and often better than Russian), and use any kind of modern media and communication systems to stay or get in touch with other people all over the world and to find inspiration for new kinds of cultural events they can employ in their city. Instead of jazz concerts, nowadays some of these students organize flashmobs in the center of Baku. They mobilize via social networks on the internet and spread their successful events by uploading very professional videos from their actions on YouTube shortly after the event. In some sense, in terms of their ideas, the organizers of the flashmobs resemble the Azerbaijani oil millionaires at the beginning of the 20th century: They seek to adapt new (Western) ideas and use new forms of media in order to renew their own society and present it to the outside world as open, modern and fitting Western standards.

So it is not unexpected that among the reasons for organizing flashmobs (besides having fun and meeting new people) is one that aims to show "that we can have something like that in Azerbaijan too".

The often discussed description of cosmopolitanism as a matter of new elites fits this group quite well, but a question that arises is where to draw the line between cosmopolitanism, where people engage freely with "the Other," and a globalized culture, where perhaps there is no distinct "other" anymore.

Conclusion

The case of Baku shows that spatial mobility and cosmopolitanism is not necessarily connected. Baku today also does not conform to what is described as new cosmopolitan quarters or cities in Europe, where an "old" local working class is pushed out of the city and its cultural life by a new spatially mobile and cosmopolitan middle or upper class. In Baku, it is an old and a new middle class with higher education and their own ideas of cosmopolitanism that negotiate and shape the city's cultural life and its representation to the world outside.

For the young flashmobbers, the jazz fans and the people who defend the Russian culture are nothing but a group of old-fashioned people nostalgic for Soviet times, while this group for the most part is not willing to consider flashmobs to be any type of culture at all. The contacts between both groups are therefore limited and real discussions rarely occur. But that does not mean that they are not aware of each other and they have at least one thing in common: Both groups regard "cosmopolitanism" as only connected with Western, i.e. European (and more and more US-American) influences while other influences, especially when they come from Muslim-majority states (or secular states considered Muslim) like Turkey or Iran, are mainly judged to be backward and provincial. Thus Ryumantsev and Huseynova established a distinction between "cosmopolitan Baku," referring to the Baku of the 1960s and the still existing jazz community today, and modern-day Baku, chosen as the "Capital of Muslim Culture" in 2009, a title which not only Ryumantsev and Huseynova interpret as a sign that Baku is going to be provincial instead of "open to the world."

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