

# AZERBAIJAN - VIVID EXAMPLE OF MULTICULTURAL HUMANISTIC VALUES AND TRADITIONS IN THE CAUCASUS

**T**he restoration of independence allowed the Azerbaijan Republic to confidently develop along the path of building a democratic, sovereign, law-governed and secular state. Both throughout its long

history and at present, Azerbaijan has been striving to maintain good neighborly relations with all states and give a new impetus to intercultural dialogue and dialogue of civilizations. Not only the historical past, but





also the modern, dynamic development of the country helps to deepen cooperation on key aspects of international humanitarian cooperation and develop new constructive ideas, projects and important initiatives in the fields of culture, science and education.

Belonging to the Caucasus region, the independent Azerbaijan Republic ensures the comprehensive development not only of its people, but also of all the neighboring sovereign states. The Caucasus is a very sensitive region, and historical, political and cultural events taking place here often become iconic on a global scale. The Caucasus has long been characterized by the richness of the cultural palette and represents a whole world of different ethnicities and religions which live together and share common traditions that produce excellent results of joint neighborly coexistence. Multiculturalism has been regarded not only as tolerance, but also as full-fledged friendship of peoples here. National leader Heydar Aliyev said: "Our greatest desire is

to achieve peace in Azerbaijan, in the Caucasian region and around the world. Azerbaijan, as a peace-loving state, desires understanding, good neighborliness and cooperation with all countries and peoples, particularly with its neighbors."

Multiculturalism, which formed as a phenomenon in the new society characterized by diversity and pluralism, is required by time and the need to promote tolerance between different cultures and freedom of culture and customs proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, other international documents and national legislation.

Dialogue between cultures and civilizations at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium became one of the most important and popular trends in the world. Today conferences, forums, events and summits held in the Caucasus are devoted to it, and each such meeting is a kind of dialogue in itself.



The phenomenon of multiculturalism has always been present in the historical area of the Caucasus region, but we want to draw attention to the factors that confirm the existence of this phenomenon specifically on the example of the independent Azerbaijan Republic and to demonstrate their importance for the region as a whole.

The independent Azerbaijan Republic became a regional leader and an outpost in the future positive development of multiculturalism.

The acquisition and strengthening of state independence imposes the particularities we mentioned above. At the opening of the Orthodox Religious and Cultural Center of the Baku and Azerbaijani Diocese in 2013, President Ilham Aliyev described the traditional and emerging particularities of the multicultural state strategy: "Multiculturalism is a state policy of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has always been a country where representatives of different religions and nations live in an atmosphere of fraternity. In all periods of history, the Azerbaijani people showed an example of tolerance to the world."

Modern Azerbaijan demonstrates a model of effective development of inter-ethnic relations to the world. It is obvious that there is never too much tolerance. Today, many of the countries that attribute themselves to "super-civilized ones" and to the "golden billion" and preach the dissolution of small nations in the titular nation failed in their policy of multiculturalism. Assuming that the phenomenon of multiculturalism "is the funeral procession of European nation states", they refused "to participate in their own funeral", thereby admitting their failure in the maintenance of multi-cultural traditions. Recent events in the world and particularly in Europe

(intensification of terrorist activities – I. H.) force the Western political elite to talk about the "totalitarianism of tolerance" - a phenomenon in which "excessive", as they say, political correctness and tolerance of ethnic minorities leads to violations of the rules they have imposed.

In this regard, it should be noted that the utopian nature of multiculturalism, which is imposed by some failed Western strategies, is aimed at suppressing the legitimate interests of ethnic minorities and is antidemocratic and destructive, is completely refuted by Azerbaijani experience, as evidenced by many experts on international ethnic problems. The rejection of the path of multiculturalism by the political elites of these countries is akin to the ideology of ignoring national and ethnic interests, from which the Caucasus region, as well as the entire Soviet community suffered for many years. In today's world it is important to find ways to combine tolerance with self-esteem and protection of ethnic identity. These methods really function in the independent Azerbaijan Republic.

Let's face it, Azerbaijan is the regional leader in the field of socio-cultural development. The republic, as the most rapidly developing independent state, which is globally recognized as an "island" of stability and sustainability, has hosted international meetings and events at various times - a conference of ministers responsible for culture in Europe and its neighboring regions (2008), a conference of ministers of culture of OIC member countries, a conference of ministers of culture of Turkic-speaking countries (2009), a summit of world religious leaders (2010) and so on.

In recent years, the country has played a leading role in holding events in the field of relations between cultures and civilizations, a major achievement of which was the "Baku process", which was remarkable for the whole world. In 2008, Azerbaijan hosted an international women's conference, which was attended by representatives of all continents. This conference adopted the Baku Declaration on the role of women in intercultural dialogue.

At the 65<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2010, Ilham Aliyev put forward an initiative to hold the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in Baku within the framework of which Baku was declared "the world capital of dialogue".

Among the most important events we can note the 7-9 April 2011 World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue organized by the government of Azerbaijan in coopera-



tion with UNESCO, the UN Alliance of Civilizations, the Council of Europe, the North-South Center and ISESCO. The forum was held on the basis of the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations of the United Nations General Assembly (November 2001), the **UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions** (2005), the ISESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2004), according to the declaration and plan of action of the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe Member States, the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (May 2008), the Baku Declaration on the Promotion of Intercultural Dialogue and the Global Agenda for Intercultural Dialogue. The slogan of the global forum was a “world without dividing lines”, which involves the promotion of intercultural understanding, mutual respect and cooperation among different civilizations through culture, art and cultural heritage. The Forum brought together some 450 representatives from 80 countries. The forum laid the foundation of the “5A Intercultural Cooperation Platform”, which symbolically unites the five continents, whose names

begin with the same sound in the Azerbaijani language.

Independent Azerbaijan, leading the region in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres, initiates and generates numerous agreements and treaties with the neighboring Caucasus republics. Among them are the Tbilisi Declaration on Peace and Cooperation in the Caucasus (1996), the Declaration on Friendship and Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Dagestan (1996), the Treaty on the Expansion of Project Activities in the Sphere of Youth Policy (2012), an agreement between the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy and the Russian company Lukoil on the training of personnel (2003) and a number of cultural projects. The fruitful activity of the Azerbaijan Republic in strengthening multilateral relations in the fields of culture, science and education has a positive and productive impact not only in the republic but also in neighboring countries. Moreover, Azerbaijan itself is a prime example of intercultural interaction.

In May 2012, the Azerbaijan Republic hosted the Baku International Humanitarian Forum in the traditionally established format of annual meetings, which was attended by representatives of more than 100 countries



and well-known figures in the field of culture, education and science. In his speech at the forum, the rector of the Russian State Humanitarian University, Y. Pivovarov, noted that "if we talk about a dialogue of cultures, tolerance, mutual support and consideration of differences, interests and characteristics of each other's lives, multiculturalism will not go anywhere from us and will exist in this world anyway".

Today active and fruitful regional cooperation is being implemented in the Caucasus in the fields of culture, historical knowledge, collaborative scientific research and the study of the characteristics of the cultural policy pursued by regional states. Numerous programs and projects are being carried out, and one of them is the project "Intercultural Cooperation in the Caucasus" (January 2011, Grozny). The project focuses on the preservation and promotion of the traditions of the peoples of the Caucasus.

Today the Caucasus is a region that supports its national state and the socio-cultural identity. Of course, no similarity to the West or East, or other civilizations, is expected or will happen - the state and societies of the Caucasus will not be able to "escape from geography and history" and, let's add, culture.

At the same time, today's world is experiencing processes of integration and globalization, the establishment of common universal standards in all spheres of life and, especially, in culture. In order to "survive" and preserve their purpose, national cultures, including Caucasian, are conducting extensive outreach activities in the global community. If 30-40 years ago the Caucasus was presented by the Soviet ideology as a single community with no significant differences in the culture of ethnic groups inhabiting it, today many nations, states and sovereign entities with their own history, mutual re-

lations, traditions and spirituality are open to the world.

Today, the peoples of the ethno-political Caucasus area (except for Armenia) constructively respond to the challenges of integration and globalization: regional mutual cooperation is actively developing, interaction with other cultures and civilizations is being implemented through the prism of the national spiritual development of the Caucasian community, the boundaries of the creative participation of civil society in the promotion of national cultural and historical heritage in the world cultural area are expanding, and comprehensive commitment to the roots, spirituality, morality and traditions is being maintained and cultivated.

Azerbaijani multiculturalism shows the country's commitment to democratic ideals of freedom and equality of cultures of ethnic groups living in it to such a degree that the OSCE is going to promote this experience in projects to support tolerance. Today, these freedoms are being reinterpreted in a new pluralistic context.

The state of society and public policy in issues of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan are going together. This is an indicator of the development of society and a way of life.

The 4<sup>th</sup> International Humanitarian Forum held in Baku turned Azerbaijan into an internationally recognized center of multiculturalism. Influential in the world political community, forum participants noted that "tolerance in Azerbaijan results from high culture. It has been, is and will be the case for centuries." Based on this, Azerbaijan has become a rallying point of intercultural dialogue on a global scale.

The 4<sup>th</sup> International Humanitarian Forum was another important step in the development of inter-ethnic communication. It served the rapprochement of peoples and their cultures in the context of new paradigms and socio-cultural trends. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said: "The Baku forum has become a platform for the formation of the international humanitarian agenda."

As a landmark event of outstanding representatives of the political, cultural and scientific elite of the world community, the forum brought together well-known public figures, laureates of the Nobel Prize and current or former heads of state. All participants noted that Azerbaijan is a unique country in terms of ethnic tolerance and a state with a growing reputation. Former Bulgarian President Peter Stoyanov said that "Azerbaijan, using the favorable geographical position and tradi-

tions of multiculturalism and presenting its cultural values to the world, has turned into an important center of dialogue in the world.” Secretary General of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States Halil Akinci appreciated the importance of Azerbaijan in terms of regional peace and security. The representative of the Kyrgyz people, former President of the Kyrgyz Republic Roza Otunbayeva, spoke about the significance of rich historical and cultural heritage for the world community. A member of the European Parliament and mayor of one of Paris districts, Rachida Dati, stressed that Azerbaijan, which is rapidly developing and is the initiator of regional projects, is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, in which representatives of various nations and religions live in mutual respect and understanding. The Declaration adopted by the forum states: “Traditionally held on the initiative of Azerbaijan, the Baku Humanitarian Forum is an important contribution to the development of multiculturalism based on humanistic practices as a basic value of the postmodern age. In recent years, a number of countries, including Azerbaijan, have made significant progress in the field of planning and managing processes of sustainable development, which is reflected in the indicators and reports of international organizations.”

In the context of the tolerance of the Azerbaijani people with regard to all peoples without exception, we must talk about an issue that is the most important for the people and the state today. As you know, for over 20 years, Armenia has been waging a war with the sov-

ereign Azerbaijan Republic with territorial claims to indigenous Azerbaijani lands, which are accompanied by their occupation, a huge number (about one million – I. H.) of refugees and internally displaced persons, the destruction of the historical-cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people and infrastructure, violations of international law and agreements on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan proclaimed by the international community. The political position of the independent Azerbaijani state rightly blames unprecedented crimes and genocide on the political elite of Armenia and its foreign sponsors ruling the Armenian state from outside, but not on the entire Armenian nation. This is evidenced by the stable residence of more than 30 thousand Armenians in the territory of Azerbaijan and the tolerant attitude to representatives of Armenia at international conferences, forums and sports held in Baku.

The existing format of the Humanitarian Forum in the field of international cooperation confirms the traditional commitment of the Azerbaijani people and the country’s leadership to ideals and principles of multiculturalism, as well as issues of ethno-cultural security. Obviously, at a time when the Western interpretation of multiculturalism has failed, the independent Azerbaijan Republic is becoming a real leader on the path of establishing humanistic principles of equality, identity, spirituality of national cultures and their positive coexistence. ❖

