

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM  
AND THE STATE OF AZERBAIJAN

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*Introduction*

Since the 1970s, religion has been re-emerging as a powerful social, cultural and political force all over the world. "De-privatization" of religion, as described by Jose Casanova, means that in previously secularized societies religion is leaving a private niche and re-gains public resonance<sup>1</sup>. The religious revival frequently triggers a process of disconnecting religion from ethnicity. Some nationalistic movements change their rhetoric and incorporate religious symbols in their discourse. An increasing number of Muslims find a global identity of Islamic Ummah more attractive than a local ethnic or tribal attachment.

The deprivatization of religion presents a challenge to society, state, and religious communities. "Post-secular" societies deal with a rather unexpected comeback of religious discourse and practice in the public sphere<sup>2</sup>. This concept usually refers to the Western world, but it can be also applied to former communist republics that were forced in the previous century to adopt an atheistic model of renouncement of public religion. The notion "post-secular" is employed by Habermas to refer to a change in public consciousness – people in post-secular societies have to deal with a re-appearance of religious

norms and ideas in non-religious spheres (education, health care, law, etc.) and to debate the extent of religion that can be incorporated without undermining the core rules of modern and liberal state.

This article intends to contribute to the debate on religion in the public sphere and religious rights by focusing on the process of pluralisation as a part of the religious revival phenomenon. The analysis is based on ethnographic data from field research in Baku, as well as official documents related to religious policy in Azerbaijan, statements made by representatives of the political elite. The paper also relies on reports on religious freedom prepared by non-governmental organizations and research institutes.

I will argue that the concept of “religious rights” in Azerbaijan is used by the state in the following ways: (1) as a tool to build public image of a liberal democratic country which defends the freedom of conscience and religion; (2) as one of the main instruments of the state to cope with challenges of pluralism and competition in the religious field. This tool enables the Azerbaijani establishment to control the diverse area of religion, and to shape it according to its aim: to develop a national model of Islam, i.e. such an interpretation of Islamic religion that is compatible with national identity. It partially draws upon experiences of Azeri nationalist movements and the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–1920). In the contemporary context, religious rights are attributed to those believers who follow or accept the state’s model, while those groups which are not subordinate to or do not represent alternative religious traditions (e.g. Salafism, Nurcu Islam) are deprived of such rights and freedoms. The state strategies towards the problem of religious pluralism are shaped and put into practice at the three levels: in the legal sphere, in the public discourse, and by means of informal practices. Changes in the overall state approach to religion are visible at each level.

The case of Azerbaijan is interesting for a couple of reasons. It is one of the very few secular democratic states (at least according to the law) in the Muslim world. The analysis of the role of religion in that society can contribute to debates over Muslim immigrants and citizens in Europe and over Islam's relationship to democracy and liberalism. Like other Western countries, where religion was on the wane in the post-war period, Azerbaijan experienced a decrease in religious impact on society and politics. The seventy years of communist rule were accompanied by a cruel fight with religion. Soviet attempts at creating a new kind of society reinforced the process of laicization of the Azerbaijani people which began with Russian colonization in the nineteenth century. Another reason for interest in that republic is the ongoing process of Islamic revival which has been influencing the public side of religion and state religious policy. Finally, a diversity of Islamic models is clearly noticeable in Azerbaijan where it appeared unexpectedly and forcefully in the first years of independence.

Pluralisation refers here to a set of emerging public and private forms of religion propagated by particular Islamic traditions. Islam is understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon and as such it is composed of a number of religious patterns of practice and belief. With the end of a communist era then followed by liberalization of religious law, like other post-Soviet republics, Azerbaijan has attracted a large number of foreign missionaries. The most influential actors included: Iranian clergy, religious preachers and activists from Arab countries, Turkey and northern Caucasus, as well as various Christian groups and sects. It was also a time for Azeris to undertake theological studies abroad<sup>3</sup>.

Not all of these actors and their religious discourses turned out to be acceptable for political figures. Soon the global reform Salafi movement in Azerbaijan arouses

state objections. Although the majority of Salafis in Azerbaijan are moderate in their political outlook, there is a small group close to militant Salafism. Political elites in Azerbaijan officially combat that extremist trend, but unofficially use the “fundamentalist threat” to fight against the whole Salafi movement and to regulate the religious sphere according to their aims. By manipulating religious rights, the state aims at shaping the national form of religion, i.e. religion understood as a set of cultural norms and values compatible with the national heritage and interest (“traditional religion”). This model of Islam related to nationalistic ideas is, however, against other approaches developed by the global Muslim networks that are popular especially among the youth. Salafis’ refusal to conform to the state policy has led to discrimination of this movement under the labels such as “Wahhabi radicals”.

### *Responses of the post-secular state to religious pluralism*

The recent popularity of religious lifestyles puts post-secular societies and states in the need of finding adequate responses. There is, first of all, a question about the extent of religion acceptable in a secular state by its leaders and society. Among contemporary Western solutions or models of relations between religious and secular spheres there are: the French model of *laïcité*, freedom of religion exemplified by Sweden, and the model of multiculturalism adopted by Great Britain<sup>4</sup>.

Muslim immigration to the West underlines the second dimension of the problem. Despite the question about the extent to which democratic states shall accommodate religion, another issue is the nature of “public religion”. Muslims from different cultures intending to keep their customs call for recognition of their ways of life, but the spectrum of practices labelled as Islamic is enormous. The question of veiling raises hot debates also inside the

Islamic Ummah in the West. There is no agreement on the issue of whether a woman shall be covered or what kind of dress would be appropriate. The variety of cultural interpretations of Islamic norms makes the discussion on the public religion even tougher. For instance, hijab can be interpreted on the basis of specific regulations of the Islamic schools of law, it can be seen as a cultural norm that provides links between immigrant population and their home country and ensures the common identity for the group, or it can be reinterpreted as a purely ethical norm depending on a free choice of a woman.

The post-Soviet religious policy can be roughly divided into two periods: liberalization and then restriction of religion and religious rights. After regaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijani elites undertook liberal reforms which enabled a relatively free flow of religious ideas. New laws granted freedom of choice, practice, and teachings to citizens and religious actors from abroad and, subsequently, Azerbaijan attracted preachers, clerics, activists and missionaries, mainly from Muslim-majority countries. A widespread atmosphere of revival of religious life was felt all over the region. That general course as well as strategies used in religious policy were surprisingly similar to those found all over Central Asia.

After that initial period, political establishment began to transform its strategies towards religious actors. Having gained experience during the communist times, the President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003) quickly realized how serious the religious resurgence was. His strategies were thus based on a careful examination of threats and possibilities that can be brought to the political order by religion, especially the deprivatized religion. In the second half of the 1990s, the approach adopted by the state towards religious rights began to change in the direction of restrictions and control over the religious landscape.

### *Religious rights as an instrument in international relations*

On the international arena, Azerbaijan presents itself as a tolerant democratic state where all religions cohabit in harmony. This strategy is motivated partially by willingness of Azerbaijani political elites to establish closer links with the United States and the European Union. One of the main obstacles, apart from its communist legacy, is religion. Islam is generally viewed by Western societies with suspicion. For that reason, Azerbaijan has been craving at various levels an image of a country compatible with the perceived Western solutions and standards in the sphere of religion. Historical experiences of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–1920) are thus mentioned. On the other hand, willingness to balance international relations is visible in constant attempts of Azerbaijani elites to present their country as a bridge between the West and the East.

In the legal sphere, an initial response of the state to the deprivatization of religion and pluralisation inside Islam in the early 1990s was the implementation of two principles: the separation between church and state and freedom of religion. In Europe, the former principle took different forms in various legal systems. The premise for the Azerbaijani model of religious tolerance is included in the Constitution of Azerbaijan. Articles 24, 26, 28, and 48 of the constitution, along with the first article of the Act on Religious Liberty, form the legal basis for relations between the secular state and religious communities<sup>5</sup>.

According to Article 48 of the constitution, freedom of conscience belongs to the basic rights of citizens of Azerbaijan. It states that all religions can be freely practiced under a condition that they do not infringe public order<sup>6</sup>. The constitution also provides that “religion (...) is separated from state. All religions are equal before the law”<sup>7</sup>. In practice, it implies freedom of faith and religious

practices for Muslims (making up the overwhelming majority), Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and even a small Baha'i community, which suffers persecutions in Iran. All religions are equal before the law. Atheism and agnosticism are treated as any other religious denominations in regard to rights. Formally, all state institutions keep a distance towards religion. There are no religious classes in public schools. Moreover, religious communities are entitled to take part in public life like other social groups. And, according to a standard liberal rule: everyone has the right to engage in religious practices with the limits being the freedom of others and public morality.

With respect to participation of religious actors in political life, the law allows it, but with limitations. Article 85 of the constitution says that religious figures cannot be candidates for the parliament (*Milli Majlis*)<sup>8</sup>.

Although the formal legal arrangements guarantee the freedom of conscience to every citizen, Azerbaijani political leaders present themselves as active defenders of religious tolerance. The public discourse created by politicians constitutes the second level of implementing the state strategy to create a Western-oriented country. There are numerous speeches and documents directly referring to the concept of "religious tolerance" and "religious rights" as constituting the foundation of relationships between the state and religious groups.

The state's stance on religious freedom is supported by the official religious establishment. Both groups frequently point to religious tolerance as one of the main features of contemporary Azerbaijan. For instance, a Shiite *akhund* (a religious official in Azerbaijan) I talked to in Baku, stressed that one of the main challenges for his country is the unity and collaboration between people of different faiths. In his opinion, the *sheikh ul-islam* (the title of a religious superior in a Muslim country) has been implementing a strategy of creating comfortable condi-

tions for all religions (which is not really the case, as is shown in the next section).

The official state discourse of liberty and tolerance is also strengthened by participation of Azerbaijan in international organizations, including the United Nations, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. Azerbaijan has signed the basic documents in regard to human rights and religious freedom and established an institution of ombudsman to represent citizens' interests<sup>9</sup>. Azerbaijan promotes its model of a multireligious country with a peaceful Muslim majority. The lack of major Sunni-Shia tensions and a low level of religious radicalism and militant Islam is an asset, which officials use as a soft power tool in international relations. Although Catholic community is very small, relations with Vatican are important. In 2016, Pope Francis visited Baku, where he met with the President and *sheikh ul-islam*, and took part in interreligious meeting with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish representatives. The Pope appreciated religious diversity and tolerance in Azerbaijan at the time when religious minorities are being exterminated by the Islamic State. UNESCO also praised cultural diversity and intangible heritage of Azerbaijan<sup>10</sup>. These moves reinforce an impression that Azerbaijani elites are dedicated to the principles of human and religious rights. There are, however, critical voices from human rights organizations and independent religious communities that such declarations are merely a facade as the crackdown on independent religious activists continues<sup>11</sup>.

Azerbaijan also develops intense diplomatic relations with Muslim countries. Not only it presents itself as a modern, Western-type country, but also as a part of the global Islamic Ummah. The leaders of Azerbaijan constantly underline their attachment to Islamic heritage. Despite formal separation between religion and the state, political establishment in relations with Muslim



neighbours stresses the Islamic identity of Azeris. It was evident when in 2009 Baku was declared the capital of Islamic culture. This was organized in the framework of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) with 57 member states wishing to represent interests of the Islamic world. The opening ceremony as well as numerous project-related cultural events in 2009 were used to promote Baku and the whole Azerbaijan as an excellent example of an inter-civilizational dialogue, modernity and attachment to Islamic values. At the opening ceremony, President Ilham Aliyev called for cooperation between Muslim countries in various spheres, such as economy, politics, culture. He also underlined the ability of Azerbaijan to make contributions to cooperation between the Islamic states. Although Aliyev did not explicitly mention the issue of religious rights, he nevertheless expressed the idea of spiritual foundation needed for the country's development<sup>12</sup>.

The project of Baku being the capital of Islamic culture was highly promoted on Internet portals, on city billboards, buses and subway. Nevertheless, I was usually told in interviews that the cultural events and conferences were not directed at all the people concerned, but served as a promotional tool. The invited guests were from abroad and from local institutions close to the state apparatus, but average Muslims were not thought of as being participants. In order to take part one needed an invitation, and it was not easy to participate without the consent of the organizers.

The strategies outlined above have been successful to such an extent that Azerbaijan has received approval of its religious policy by some Western powers. By many Western commentators and analysts, Azerbaijan is seen as one of the very few Muslim countries that has found a balance between the Islamic values and modernity, and the country's leaders are praised as promoters of plural society<sup>13</sup>.

### *Religious rights as an instrument of regulating the religious market*

The second main application of the religious rights concept is in the sphere of regulation in internal politics. An increase in the fragmentation of Islam in the 1990s was a real challenge for the political establishment and for the whole society. Religious rights have thus been used as one of the main instruments of the state to cope with the new situation, as an ideological tool in a state-building process. Islamic culture is therefore regarded as a powerful bond to unite the nation around common values, norms, frame of reference. Politicians present themselves as defenders of religion and religious rights who successfully limit radicalism. To ensure the freedom of beliefs and religious practice, they argue, it is necessary to take all measures against those who want to destabilize society.

Although this strategy is typical of other post-Soviet governments, Azerbaijan's response has also some unique features. I think that the use of religious rights as an instrument of regulation turns out to be successful in regard to marginal presence of religious extremism. But at the same time, it contributed to the restriction of rights of many believers and led to social conflicts and to limiting the degree of deprivatization of religion.

The state strategies in regulating religion can be analyzed in terms of various dimensions. This paper refers to practices in the legal sphere, public discourse, and informal measures. At each of these levels, steps have been undertaken to use the principle of religious and human rights to control the process of pluralisation and shape the national model of religion.

#### *Legal instruments*

The liberal law of the early 1990s which guaranteed the freedom of religion and the rapid transformation process

in the country made it possible for foreign Islamic missionaries to set up their activities in Azerbaijan. Especially after 1993, there was an influx of religious preachers and activists from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar, the UEA, Kuwait and Jordan. New mosques were opened all over the country and foreign financial support was evident. That boom in religious activities was limited in the late 1990s when new legal regulations were introduced. This move was announced as a means to counter radical ideas and politicization of religion. Since the threat of Islamic radicalism continues, and is often evoked in the official discourse, religious law has been updated towards restrictions of religious freedom and subordination of religious communities to state control. Changes are regularly introduced as amendments to the 1992 Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief<sup>4</sup>. The Council of Europe criticized the restrictive measures (especially in regard to registration and liquidation of religious communities, to religious publications, proselytism) as being against international standards, and stressed "a vague terminology which may lead to arbitrary interpretation and implementation"<sup>15</sup>.

One of the fields in which the government extended its control is religious education, especially regarding religious training outside Azerbaijan. It has introduced a ban on religious proselytizing by foreigners and restricted foreign religious education. Since independence, the youth have been interested in pursuing their education in religious centres in Arab countries, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and in Dagestan<sup>16</sup>. Thousands of Azeris have foreign diplomas in religious studies or theology, many of them from prestigious Islamic universities. In the light of rising popularity of those religious preachers, the government took measures against them. The case of a Shiite imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is particularly well-known, as he was banned from heading the Juma mosque

in 2004. During an interview in 2009, he told me that even those who had been sent abroad by the government to study religious topics are now prohibited from working in mosques under state institutions control. He himself spent nine years in Iran, where he had been sent by the Azerbaijani Ministry to pursue his master's degree and doctorate studies. Recent amendments to the Law on Religious Freedom introduce restrictions for those people to lead religious communities or preach at mosques in Azerbaijan. Arguments for tight security measures involve the context of destabilization in the Middle East and religiously-inspired radical groups. For disobeying the rules new punishments were also proposed<sup>17</sup>.

Another sphere that the government has taken control of is the functioning of religious communities. There are a few legal regulations that make it compulsory for any religious community, organization or group to be registered with the government through the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRO). The law has been binding since 2001, but after the amendments in 2009, Article 12 of the Religious Law implies that unregistered religious activity is illegal<sup>18</sup>. The SCWRO was established alongside another official institution, the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), which is a successor to the Soviet Muslim Board of Transcaucasus. Both of them engage in controlling and regulating religious activities in the country in spite of formal secularism. They enable the implementation of legal provisions by working directly with religious communities. The SCWRO has a lot of power over the process of registration, including banning certain groups or suspending their activities.

Religious education and registration requirements for each religious group are only two examples of a much wider trend in the legal sphere of gradual increase in state interventions into the religious sphere. The main arguments used by the political and religious establish-

ment are the extremist threat, ongoing war on terror and destabilization of the Middle East. The soviet-era methods of control are regarded as necessary to ensure the rights of the majority. Public security and stability are stressed as priorities in public policies. In this process the religious sphere is increasingly under supervision of political actors, who invent new legal measures to achieve their aims. As it will be shown later, this process leads to favouring some communities of believers and discriminating against others.

### *Public discourse*

An attempt to control religious expression also takes place in public discourse. The most popular categories used in public discussions on religious situation are “Wahhabism”, “fundamentalism”, “radicalism”, and a division between “traditional” and “non-traditional” religions. These terms with certain connotations are used as a discursive tool of division between those who are, or should be, deprived of religious rights and those who deserve them. Traditionally-oriented Muslims are regarded in this framework as “liberal”, “tolerant”, “peaceful”, and “state-friendly”. Muslims labelled Wahhabis are portrayed as “backward”, “radical”, “integrist” or “terrorist”. Thus, Wahhabism is mostly regarded as a synonym of religious extremism or fanaticism<sup>19</sup>.

The war with Wahhabism is a common phenomenon for Central Asia and the Caucasus. In a new reality that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the sudden appearance of religious pluralism included the spread of radical Islamist ideas. To prevent this trend, the state has taken some measures which at the same time limit religious freedoms guaranteed by the law. Using the slogan of “war on terror,” governments seek to control religious symbols and institutions and to monopolize the

right to interpret Islam. Although radicalism is not a major problem for Azerbaijanis<sup>20</sup>, there was a terrorist attack in 2008 on the Abu Bakr Mosque in Baku, which at that time was extremely popular within the Salafi community. It served as a justification of arrests and restriction of activities of “Wahhabi communities”. In 2014, there were reports on Azerbaijani citizens who went abroad and became the ISIS fighters<sup>21</sup>. The official clergy and politicians argue that there is a rising tide of extremism. Independent religious communities claim that the state exaggerates the threat to mobilize local and international sympathy for its undemocratic measures taken against certain groups. Nonetheless, the public opinion has generally accepted this rhetoric and holds a negative view of Wahhabis.

An understanding of Wahhabis as radical Muslims is shared by virtually every citizen of Azerbaijan. In fact, most of Wahhabis are pious Muslims who do not fit into the state model of Islam. They try to adjust their lifestyle to the requirements of Islamic religion. To avoid the negative connotation of the term Wahhabism, they call themselves either Salafis (those who follow tradition of the first generations of followers of the Prophet Muhammad) or “just Muslims”. Salafism is a fast growing transnational Islamic movement which gives people a new religious model and a global point of reference. The majority of Salafi Muslims in Azerbaijan and their leadership are not radical and keep a distance from politics<sup>22</sup>. They represent the phenomenon of neo-fundamentalism in the sense of Olivier Roy<sup>23</sup>, i.e. Islam focused on family, morality and mosque practices.

The scheme presented above is employed in politics. The black and white framework divides groups into either dangerous or peaceful. The establishment underline the features of “proper” religion and way of practice that they favour. Religious values and norms should, first of

all, support the nationalist ideology and Islamic norms are to be understood as cultural norms. President Ilham Aliyev frequently expresses this idea, for example: "Our religion is Islam. We follow our religious and ethnic traditions, try to raise our young generations in the spirit of patriotism, in the national spirit"<sup>24</sup>.

In the early 1990s, Azerbaijani politicians discovered the value of religious capital. Soon a number of them, including the former communist president, began publicly presenting themselves as practicing Muslims. Islam was to reinforce the growing nationalism and help in creating strong identity. The alliance of official Shiite authorities and the political establishment regained its significance. They use similar arguments and ideas to promote the model of tolerant Islam in a secular and multireligious context. In their view, religion can form strong bonds in society, but only when it is under control.

To sum up, state leaders are trying to impose their interpretation of the religion of Islam and to deny pluralism inherent in it. New religious movements, which gained popularity with the opening of borders around 1991, are discouraged by political circles as not fitting into the state model of national Islam. In the approach adopted by the Azerbaijani establishment, Islam shall be understood as closely related to culture and national traditions. Those people who independently search for religious meanings and openly manifest it by introducing religion into the public sphere are treated as threatening the public order. The Wahhabi label is useful in pointing to "dangerous" Muslims who use Islamic symbols such as hijab, "Islamic beard," or shorter trousers typical of Salafis. State-supported "traditional" Muslims define their religious identity in ethical or moral frameworks. The freedom of religious practice is stressed as one of the key freedoms in modern Azerbaijan, but limited in scope to those who support the state's ideology.

### *Informal practices*

A lot of dynamism in the religious field has an informal character. There are obstacles and restrictions on the freedom of religion in the practice of law or outside the legal sphere. State officials endeavour to prohibit people from public expression of religiosity, such as praying, wearing special clothing or other symbols of faith. Earlier I have highlighted the legal means and strategies employed in the public discourse to regulate religious diversity, and now the focus of attention will shift towards less formal practices that restrict religious rights of some groups of Muslim believers.

There were in recent years pressures to limit the adhan. The orders "from above" called for restricting the use of loudspeakers for the Islamic call for prayers. There were no legal provisions or official documents, but state officials informed mosques about this rule. No one was responsible for the decision, but for many people it was a clear political move. Chairman of the State Committee for the Work with Religious Associations Hidayat Orujov commented on this issue using the following words: "Unfortunately, the issues of hijab and adhan are sometimes considered in Azerbaijan as a true essence of Islam. Using it, the external forces are trying to organize rallies"<sup>26</sup>. Indirectly, this criticizes revivalist movements for which such religious aspects are seen as requirements of their faith.

The closure of mosques is another area of conflict. Many Sunni places of worship were closed, while others were demolished. The SCWRO's arguments that were given pointed to the allegedly illegal activity of some mosques. In the words of Orujov: "the people who arrived in the country in the early 1990 from foreign countries built mosques in accordance with their thinking. Mosques must be built in accordance with the laws"<sup>27</sup>. In practice,



some of religious communities did not succeed in the registration process or were denied registration, which is a formal requirement to operate.

The problematic treatment of “non-traditional” religious groups is described in reports of human rights organizations such as Forum 18 – a Norwegian-Danish non-profit initiative. The 2014 Report presents a situation of a tiny Lezgi mosque in the Old City of Baku, popular with the Salafi community after their main Abu Bakr Mosque was closed. People unlucky to get inside used to pray outside, but the police tried to disperse the worshippers. According to the chair of the mosque Faiq Mustafa, there were attempts to close the mosque activities in the evening and not to allow the last prayers<sup>28</sup>.

Restrictions on religious freedom encompass all practicing Muslims, but there are groups particularly affected. Salafi believers are seen as dangerous opposition to the current establishment and a source of destabilization. The followers of a Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen have become a more recent target since the relations between Gülen and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erodgan drastically deteriorated. Since the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, organizations related to the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan, such as schools or media outlets, have been closed, and many people got arrested on charges of alleged links to the Turkish imam<sup>29</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

Religious diversity of the post-secular Azerbaijan is a great challenge for the state and society. Islam is now more complex and heterogeneous than a few decades ago and encompasses even contradictory ideas and practices. Dynamism in religion was so strong that political elites had to look for methods to handle this new situation and prevent emerging problems in new ways. In the paper, I

have analyzed the two main types of strategies employed by Azeri state officials to oversight the re-islamisation of society. The initial chaos in the country and liberal approaches were conducive for a large number of Islamic preachers to come to the the Caucasus to propagate their models of faith. Only after a few years, a gradual shift in religious policy was observed. Initial free market was restricted and regulations followed.

Politicians have taken advantage of the concept of religious rights to pursue their aims. It served as a tool of soft power in international relations. Azerbaijani elites to a large degree strive for international recognition and use every opportunity to present their country as a liberal democratic state where religious tolerance and the freedom of faith are among the most-protected values. Simultaneously, as the majority of Azerbaijanis are Muslims, the state presents itself as a member of the global Islamic community, but with a clearly moderate character.

Another sphere of state interference is internal religious situation. After a relatively liberal era of the early 1990s, which gave rights of practice and belief to every believer (and freedom for atheistic convictions), political elite changed its strategy and began to gradually look for measures to control and regulate religious activities in the country. The state-promoted national model of Islam, in which religion is perceived as part of cultural heritage, was granted privileges. It is presented as an antidote to Islamism and Islamic radicalism. Alternative or non-conformist Islamic traditions are discriminated against in the context of the “war on terror”.

State practices have visible effects on the religious situation. In comparison to other post-Soviet Muslim republics, Azerbaijan has had relatively little problems with Islamic extremism, although this may change with the developments in the Middle East. There are occasional news featuring arrests of small groups suspected of col-

laboration with international terrorist organisations. However, as suggested by human rights defenders, radicalisation among Azeris is not a widespread phenomenon, but this issue is used by the state to justify their restrictive means. Freedom of thought and practice is granted to “traditional” Muslims and those believers who keep religious issues in the private sphere. Those who are under the influence of revivalist Islamic movements, or are close to political version of religion, are often denied their rights. The process, which can be observed in the legal sphere, public discourse and in unofficial practices of state officials, may paradoxically lead to radicalisation and increased political engagement of some religious groups of the Azerbaijanis.

#### NOTES

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3. International Crisis Group, *Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State*, Europe Report no. 191, March 25, 2008.
4. See: G. Brahm Levey, *Secularism and religion in a multicultural age*, Cambridge 2006.
5. A. Gafarov, “The Azerbaijani Model of Religious Freedom”, *Azerbaijan in the World*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2010, p. 3.
6. *The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan of 1995*, [http://azerbaijan.az/portal/General/Constitution/doc/constitution\\_e.pdf](http://azerbaijan.az/portal/General/Constitution/doc/constitution_e.pdf)
7. *Ibidem*, art. 18.
8. *Ibidem*, art. 85.
9. A. Gafarov, *op.cit.*, p.7.
10. L. K. Grandi, *The Baku Process: Azerbaijan’s Intercultural Turn*, 18 June 2013, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000022265>.
11. J. Yardley, “Pope Francis Notes Azerbaijan’s Religious Tolerance, Not Rights Abuses”, *New York Times*, October 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/03/world/asia/pope-francis-azerbaijan.html>.

12. S. Karimova, *At the Centre of the Islamic World*, <http://region-plus.az/en/articles/view/4169>.
13. R. S. Sobhani, "Model Azerbaijan", *Washington Times*, 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/mar/15/model-azerbaijan/>.
14. Monitoring of changes in legislation on religion and religious freedom is systematically done by Forum 18, and the reports are available at <http://www.forum18.org>.
15. OSCE/ODIHR, Joint Opinion on the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief of the Republic of Azerbaijan by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 92nd Plenary Session (12-13 October 2012), [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDLAD\(2012\)022-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDLAD(2012)022-e).
16. H. Hadjy-zadeh, *State of Religion, Religion and State in Azerbaijan after September 11. Third Midterm Narrative Report*, Far Center. Economic and Political Research, English version, 2005.; International Crisis Group, *Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State*, Europe Report no. 191, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/50180/191\\_azerbaijan\\_independent\\_islam.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/50180/191_azerbaijan_independent_islam.pdf).
17. US Department of State, *Azerbaijan 2015, International Religious Freedom Report*, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256377.pdf>; N. Orujova, *New Religious University May Appear in Azerbaijan*, *Azernews*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.azernews.az/nation/90576.html>.
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19. The anti-Wahhabi discourse is not unique to Azerbaijan. It characterizes e.g. the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia (D. Wiktor-Mach, *Competing Islamic Traditions in the Caucasus*, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009) or Kabardino-Balkaria in the North Caucasus (S. Bedford, E. Souleimanov, *Under construction and highly contested: Islam in the post-Soviet Caucasus*, *Third World Quarterly*, 37:9, p. 1568).
20. Some scholars argue, however, that jihadist groups in the South Caucasus might develop into a more significant force due to international situation (e.g. E. Souleimanov, M. Ehrmann, *The rise of militant Salafism in Azerbaijan and its regional implications*, *Middle East Policy* 20.3 (2013), pp. 111-120.)

21. See: A. Goyushov, "Azerbaijan", w: Scharbrodt, O., Akgönül, S., Alibašić, A., Nielsen, J., & Raciuc, E. (eds.). *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol. 7. Brill, 2015.
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