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**Javid Asadov**

nr album: 305764

## **Azerbaijan's Multicultural Policy**

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**Prof. dr hab. Marek Pietras**

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**Abstract**

This dissertation critically examines the factors, concepts, implementation, and prospects of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, with a specific focus on the official multiculturalism discourse promoted by Azerbaijani authorities over the past decade. The research investigates why has Azerbaijan adopted multiculturalism as state policy, and how does it manage ethnocultural diversity in practice. The main hypothesis posits that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan primarily functions as a state-driven strategy constructed to consolidate regime legitimacy, centralize governance, and enhance the nation's international image rather than effectively foster inclusive representation and cultural pluralism.

The methodological approach integrates qualitative research, theoretical analysis, and comparative methodologies. A significant empirical contribution is derived from 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with ethnic and religious minority representatives, political party leaders, think tank experts in Azerbaijan and independent scholars. These insights are supplemented by secondary data analysis, including statistical data, policy documents, speeches, legislative texts, and academic literature, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the factors, conceptual framing, and practical implementation of multicultural policy by Azerbaijan's state authorities and political actors. In terms of analytical frameworks, the study employs comparative analysis using the Multiculturalism Policy Index and a case comparison involving Switzerland's application of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The study also employs brief scenario-based forecasting to predict possible future trajectories of multiculturalism as a policy in Azerbaijan, exploring potential developments for both government strategies and ethno-cultural communities.

Findings indicate significant gaps between Azerbaijan's official multiculturalism discourse and ethnic and religious minority communities' lived realities. Despite institutional visibility and symbolic recognition, minority groups experience broad restrictions regarding rights to education in the mother tongue, linguistic rights, media rights, cultural expression, and political representation. The policy is primarily top-down, deliberately managed, and lacking the participatory elements typical of liberal democracies. Furthermore, the post-2020 period, influenced notably by the Second

Karabakh War, has led to a noticeable decline in multiculturalism discourse, raising concerns about the continuity and authenticity of the state's commitments.

Overall, this dissertation deepens the understanding of how multicultural policies function within authoritarian and hybrid political contexts and enriches scholarly literature by situating Azerbaijan's approach within broader post-Soviet transformations. It also offers practical insights and analytical clarity for policymakers, academics, and civil society representatives working to address challenges related to managing diversity and fostering inclusivity in similar political environments.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>DHPDMRI</b>	Department of Humanitarian Policy, Diaspora, Multiculturalism, and Religious Issues
<b>BIMC</b>	Baku International Multiculturalism Centre
<b>SCRA</b>	State Committee on Religious Associations
<b>SSC</b>	State Statistical Committee
<b>FCNM</b>	Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
<b>MCP Index</b>	Multiculturalism Policy Index
<b>MDS</b>	Most Different System Design
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
<b>ECRML</b>	European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages
<b>ECHR</b>	Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
<b>OSCE</b>	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>ODIHR</b>	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<b>RFoM</b>	Representative on Freedom of the Media
<b>HCNM</b>	High Commissioner on National Minorities
<b>ECRI</b>	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>ICERD</b>	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

<b>CEC</b>	Central Election Commission
<b>NCDF</b>	National Council of Democratic Forces
<b>FLNCA</b>	Federal Lezgin National Cultural Autonomy
<b>APFP</b>	Azerbaijan Popular Front Party
<b>NAP</b>	New Azerbaijan Party
<b>REAL</b>	Republican Alternative Party

*Every people [ethnic group] should have at least one office. If two rooms were allocated, the state would not become poor. If Lezgin national center had one office with two rooms what's wrong with that? It would generate more sympathy for the state. Without it, we are citizens here too. This is our home. You know how it is, it is a matter of having wealthy brothers and poor brothers. Everything goes to the wealthy brother, nothing to the poor brother, let them stay at the doorstep. We must not instill this feeling in people. We should not look down on minority people. They should be treated as equals, just like siblings in a family, they should all be treated equally. For example, if there are four of us, all should be treated the same way. It should not be like, as a poor brother, you should not participate in our assembly.*

(Interviewer E, Lezgin cultural employee)

## **Introduction**

Over the past decade, Azerbaijan has increasingly defined its approach to managing ethnocultural diversity through an emphasis on multiculturalism. Terms such as ‘Azerbaijani multiculturalism’ (*Azərbaycan multikulturalizmi*), ‘the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism’ (*multikulturalizmin Azərbaycan modeli*), and ‘the multiculturalism policy of Azerbaijan’ (*Azərbaycanın multikulturalizm siyasəti*) (Zheriborov, 2017; Abdulla & Najafov, 2018; Asadov, 2023b) have become central in official rhetoric, reflecting a broader ideological and policy shift. These references suggest that multiculturalism has come to represent not only a descriptive term for diversity but also a formalised framework for state policy or an ideologically framed political narrative. The fact that Azerbaijan is the only post-Soviet state, and one of the few in the region, to formally articulate multiculturalism in this way underscores the uniqueness of its approach and justifies the need for a focused analysis of its policy framework and political function.

It is important to note from the outset that in this dissertation, I use the general term *Azerbaijan's multicultural policy* to refer broadly to the state's overall approach to managing ethnocultural diversity since gaining independence. However, analytical focus in this study is primarily on the concept and narrative of *multiculturalism* that has become particularly prominent in Azerbaijani political and academic discourse over

approximately the past decade. This discourse is typically referred to in Azerbaijani as ‘*multikulturalizm siyasəti*’, often translated as *multiculturalism policy*. In English academic literature, a distinction is often made between the broader term multicultural policy, which includes various state strategies for addressing cultural diversity, and the more specific policy of multiculturalism, which implies an explicit ideological commitment to multiculturalism principles and theory (see Banting & Kymlicka, 2013, pp. 578–579; Modood, 2007; Ashcroft & Bevir, 2017).

Therefore, throughout this study, I mainly use *policy of multiculturalism* or *multiculturalism policy* when discussing Azerbaijan’s ideological framing, political rhetoric, and the theoretical language used by state institutions. In contrast, I use *Azerbaijan’s multicultural policy* (or the multicultural policy of Azerbaijan) when referring to the concrete implementation of laws, institutional arrangements, and practical policy measures. I believe that maintaining this distinction allows for stronger clarity when analysing both the symbolic and practical dimensions of Azerbaijan’s diversity management.

Azerbaijan, formally referred to as the Republic of Azerbaijan, is a sovereign state located in the South Caucasus. It has a population of approximately 10.4 million people (Azerbaijan Population, 2024). This is a presidential republic in which the executive branch holds significant authority. President assumes the roles of both head of state and head of government, whereas legislative and judicial authority are delegated to the National Assembly (*Milli Məclis*) and the courts, respectively.

It is widely acknowledged that the political institutions in Azerbaijan are characterised by a concentration of power in the hands of the president, resulting in nearly absolute rule. In this context, both the legislative and judicial branches of government are perceived to possess limited independence. It also implies that the president's decision-making holds greater significance in the execution of any public policy. Azerbaijan has also been widely recognised for its authoritarian attributes within its political system (Altstadt, 2017; Amnesty International, 2023; Freedom House, 2024). Western critics frequently characterise Azerbaijan as a ‘facade democracy’ (Andreas & Meissner, 2011, p. 2). For several decades, the political power in Azerbaijan has been under the

tight hand of the Aliyev family<sup>1</sup>, resulting in limited opportunities for opposition parties and civil society to function autonomously (Guliyev 2018; Ibadoghlu 2022). The imposition of media censorship and limitations on freedom of expression serves to reinforce the centralization of governmental authority and limiting of opposing viewpoints (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012; Geybulla, 2021).

The foundations of contemporary Azerbaijan's multinational and multi-confessional character are closely tied to how social and political developments on its historical territories have been interpreted and remembered across antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern era. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was the first independent republic established in these territories during the First World War (1914–18), emerging from the national liberation struggle of the Azerbaijani people against the Russian Empire. This state existed from 28 May 1918 to 28 April 1920, when it was annexed by the Russian SFSR and later incorporated into the Soviet Union. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan regained independence and underwent significant changes in its political, economic, and social spheres.

It is important to briefly mention the Soviet nationality policy, which had a major influence on how ethnic and religious minorities were treated across all Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan. One could argue that this legacy continues to shape how diversity is understood and approached in the post-Soviet region today. From the 1920s, Soviet authorities tried to manage the empire's ethnic diversity through a policy known as *korenizatsiya* (indigenisation). This approach aimed to support national identities while, at the same time, keeping them under control through loyalty to Soviet ideology (Legvold & Martin, 2002; Hirsch, 2005). In Azerbaijan, this meant official recognition of the Azerbaijani titular nation, as well as other minority groups such as the Lezgins, Talyshs, Kurds, and Mountain Jews. During the early Soviet period, national institutions were created, including schools and publishing houses in minority languages. These efforts were part of a broader plan to make ethnicity something that could be managed and organized by the state (Tabachnik, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Heydar Aliyev was president of the Republic of Azerbaijan from 1993 to 2003, and his son, Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded him in 2003 and was re-elected in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024, is expected to officially remain in power until 2031.

However, as Smith (2019) explains, the early structured policies around nationality eventually gave way to inconsistency and a growing push for Russification, especially from the 1930s. In Azerbaijan, this shift led to a double effect: on one hand, Azerbaijani national identity was promoted, but on the other, many minority groups were sidelined and lost meaningful cultural and political representation. At the same time, Soviet atheist policies further suppressed religion, limiting the public expression of any religion including Islam among both Shia and Sunni communities and others (Ro'i, 2000). Over time, this created a system that recognized ethnicity in name and form, but not in practice. This is what Terry Martin (2001) referred to as an 'affirmative action empire': a system that gave symbolic support to ethnic diversity but used it mainly as a way to control rather than empower. This dual legacy, state-sponsored multiculturalism combined with strict control over identity, continues to influence Azerbaijan today. It has shaped how the state manages diversity, encouraging symbolic inclusion while keeping firm control over any independent mobilization by minorities. As a result, ethnic and religious minorities in Azerbaijan are still often seen as 'cultural assets' to be showcased, rather than political actors with meaningful agency.

One can argue that the Soviet legacy of symbolic inclusion and state-managed ethnicity did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR but rather evolved into new forms in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Although the state formally adopted new frameworks to address ethnic and religious diversity after independence, these efforts largely operated within the structural and ideological constraints derived from the Soviet era. This continuity prompts an important question: does the adoption of *multiculturalism* signal a meaningful transformation in the protection of minority rights, or is it primarily a repackaging of earlier state strategies for controlling and managing minority identities? Following its independence, Azerbaijan found itself at the center of various interethnic conflicts, with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict persisting to some extent even today. This context raised the management of ethnocultural diversity as a priority in state policy. Several political actors took significant steps concerning the management of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan from the beginning of independence, which are analyzed in the relevant sections of this dissertation. Before the 2010s, Azerbaijan had institutional frameworks in place to preserve the cultural and religious values of minority communities; however, these efforts did not frame diversity through the lens of multiculturalism. It was only in 2011 that President Ilham Aliyev began referring to

multiculturalism in public speeches, and by 2013, he explicitly named it “our policy” (2013a). The creation of the State Counsellor on Multiculturalism, Interethnic, and Religious Affairs in 2014, followed by the Department of Humanitarian Policy, Diaspora, Multiculturalism, and Religious Issues (DHPDMRI) in 2017, signaled a more formalized state commitment to this agenda. The Baku International Multiculturalism Centre (BIMC) was also established to promote the so-called *Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism*. In 2016, multiculturalism was elevated further with the declaration of the *Year of Multiculturalism* (AZERTAC, 2016) and the introduction of multiculturalism courses and textbooks into educational institutions.

One can argue that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan has also served as a strategic component of the broader nation-building project that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan’s nation-building policies have consistently followed a ‘civic’ rather than an ‘ethnic’ approach (Kazimzade, 2024, p.15). In this context, official narratives have increasingly sought to unify diverse ethnic and religious communities under a shared national identity. Critics claim that multiculturalism discourse primarily serves to claim credit for inter-ethnic harmony that existed prior to the introduction of any formal state policies (Mutnansky & Huseynli, 2025, p. 8). This trend can also be seen as a continuation of the ideological framework of Azerbaijanism (*Azərbaycançılıq*), which will be critically examined in a subsequent section of this thesis. The framing of multiculturalism through this lens not only reflects a political effort to maintain internal cohesion but also reveals how cultural diversity is selectively mobilized to reinforce state legitimacy.

Despite these developments, questions remain about the real impact of multiculturalism on the everyday rights and experiences of ethnic and religious minorities in Azerbaijan. While constitutional provisions, international obligations, and domestic legislation offer formal protections, it is still unclear whether these frameworks translate into meaningful improvements. Has the adoption of multiculturalism discourse brought about tangible changes, or does it function more as a performative strategy aligned with Azerbaijan’s international image-making? These critical questions, along with the main research questions, will be addressed in this study through the formulation of specific research inquiries.

I may refer to this strategy as a ‘purposive experiment’ for the management of ethno-cultural diversity in post-Soviet and non-Western states. Based on my observations, as

I have already mentioned, I assume that the policy of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan, this particular approach to managing ethno-cultural diversity, has acquired its current designation especially since 2010s. By 2020, the popularity of multiculturalism had continued to rise. However, after the second Karabakh war in 2020, which lasted for 44 days, and in the years that followed, this approach received significantly less public attention. Yet, the governmental entities operating in this field have not been disbanded or renamed, which indicates that the strategy is still being implemented.

Before exploring Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, it is essential to first understand what multiculturalism broadly means and how it developed as a form of public policy in Western democracies. States like Azerbaijan, which did not originate this approach to ethnocultural diversity, often refer to Western models without developing conceptual or theoretical foundations that clearly define the so-called 'Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism.'

In analysing multiculturalism as policy, it is crucial to consider its **theoretical framework**, which emerged from debates between liberal and communitarian thinkers. Multiculturalism entered public and political discourse during the 1960s and 1970s, used to describe the growing complexity of modern, diverse societies (Rattansi, 2011, p. 7; Song, 2020). The term reflects a relatively recent phenomenon shaped by globalisation, migration, and cross-cultural interaction. At its core, it denotes the presence of ethno-cultural diversity within a state, rather than a fixed political programme. From a constructivist standpoint, its meaning is context-dependent, shaped by how states interpret and frame diversity (Hopf, 1998).

Multiculturalism is a broad term with various meanings, depending on context. Sociologically, it refers to the coexistence of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural groups within one society, often used interchangeably with terms like *ethno-cultural diversity* (Johansson, 2022, p. 2; Eagan, 2024). Politically, it describes how states manage this diversity. In liberal democracies, it has emerged both as a response to growing pluralism and as a corrective to historical injustice and exclusion (Meer, Modood, & Zapata-Barrero, 2016, pp. 1-4; Taylor, 1994). As a political ideology, it promotes equal treatment, tolerance, mutual respect, and justice for different groups. It also reflects broader democratic ideals, including equality and participation (Murphy, 2012, pp. 6–7). For Kymlicka (2010), multiculturalism represents a "celebration of

ethno-cultural diversity" (p. 98), and it calls for minority rights not as a threat, but as a condition of justice.

In general terms, multiculturalism supports the equal rights and opportunities of social groups to preserve and express their cultural traditions. Its goal is to build a society where diversity is valued and contributes to fair and peaceful coexistence. As Parekh (2000) argues, equality includes the freedom to be different, and justice must account for both shared characteristics and differences (p. 240). The theory has been strongly influenced by liberalism but also draws from communitarian thought (Kymlicka, 1996, p. 50). Multiculturalism as a philosophical position has gained relevance with increasing immigration and global interconnectedness. Leading thinkers, such as Kymlicka, Barry, Young, Parekh, Taylor, Kukathas, Walzer, and Modood, have examined its strengths and limitations, especially in immigrant and postcolonial societies. Their work links multiculturalism to deeper issues like discrimination, conflict, and social cohesion.

Despite its inclusive ideals, many scholars have raised concerns about how multiculturalism is applied. Barry (2001) argues it may undermine individual freedoms by supporting group rights that could develop inequality, especially within minority groups (p. 13). Rodríguez-García (2010) warns it can reinforce division and “parallel societies” if it overemphasises recognition without integration (pp. 255–256). Halse (2021) similarly observes that state-led multiculturalism may manage minorities symbolically rather than empower them (p. 6). Murphy (2012) reminds us that minority communities differ widely in their needs and expectations. A one-size-fits-all policy often fails to address this diversity meaningfully (p. 5). These critiques show that without constant reflection and reform, multiculturalism risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to correct.

Another key issue is who multiculturalism includes. Scholars differ on which groups it should cover. Most agree it encompasses indigenous peoples, national (ethnic), immigrant, and religious minorities (Iverson, 2015). Yet the policy has often excluded or marginalised other groups, such as LGBT+ individuals and people with disabilities. For example, although multiculturalism has advanced LGBT+ rights in some states, it has also been criticised for failing to include them fully in its frameworks (Yarhouse et al., 2018). Each minority-majority relationship is different and requires context-specific attention. In Azerbaijan, for instance, LGBT+ rights remain severely restricted, ranked

last in Europe (ILGA-Europe, 2024). However, this study does not explore these issues in detail.

The theoretical foundations of multiculturalism, along with its normative aspirations and criticisms, frame the analysis in this dissertation. These conceptual tools offer a way to study Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, even if the state's realities differ from the Western settings where the theory first developed.

Alongside normative theories, this research adopts a constructivist lens to examine how multiculturalism is framed and practised in Azerbaijan. From this perspective, multiculturalism is not a fixed or universal model but a context-dependent, discursively constructed policy shaped by historical legacies, political interests, and institutional power (Phillips, 2007; Brubaker, 2004). State policies do not merely reflect cultural realities; they shape them by defining who qualifies as a minority and under what conditions (Benhabib, 2002; Fierke, 2015). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how the Azerbaijani state uses multiculturalism not only to promote diversity but also to legitimise authority, centralise control, and enhance its international image. It also helps explain the gap between official discourse and the actual experiences of minority communities, a central concern of this research.

Regarding Azerbaijan's adopted multiculturalism policy, the question of which groups fall within its scope remains the most fundamental issue. Although national legislation refers to national minorities, it has yet to clearly define which specific groups are encompassed or protected by this term (Malloy, 2011, p. 9). In practice, this policy primarily concerns national minorities, often described as ethnic minorities or ethnic groups in Azerbaijani political and academic discourse, and religious minorities with historical roots in the state, rather than indigenous or immigrant communities. Although Azerbaijan has recorded a positive net migration rate since 2008 (Hosner et al., 2018), it has not seen a significant influx of new immigrant groups. As a result, the state's multiculturalism policy remains focused on historically rooted minorities. While small migrant communities from states such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China may exist, there is no official demographic data on them. All recognised ethnic groups in Azerbaijan either have long-standing historical continuity or settled centuries ago. Therefore, the state's multiculturalism discourse is not shaped by contemporary migration but by its constructed narrative of deep-rooted historical diversity.

Ethnic diversity is a defining element of Azerbaijan's multicultural landscape. Alongside the Azerbaijani Turk majority, numerous ethnic minorities contribute to the nation's cultural mosaic, including Lezgins, Talyshs, Russians, Ukrainians, Avars, Turks (Ahiska), Tats, Tsakhurs, Georgians, Ingiloys, Kurds, Tatars, Gryzs, Jews, Udis, Khynalygs, Budugs, Armenians, Khaputs, and others (Population of Azerbaijan, 2023, p. 21). These groups belong mainly to the North Caucasian, Indo-European, and Kartvelian language families, adding linguistic richness to the state. Despite this variety, the Azerbaijani language, from the Altaic language family, remains both the state language and the majority's mother tongue.

Religious diversity has also shaped Azerbaijan's cultural framework, reinforced by the historical spread of multiple belief systems. Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all influenced the region across different historical periods. Today, Article 18 of the Constitution guarantees religious freedom and equality before the law. Islam dominates among the over 900 registered religious organisations, followed by Christian, Jewish, Krishna, and Bahai communities (*Religious institutions: Statistical figures ...*, n.d.). While religious diversity is narrower than ethnic diversity, overlapping religious identities among ethnic groups often create a sense of cohesion, reinforcing shared customs and everyday practices. Many groups, such as Jews, Udis, and Armenians in Azerbaijan, belong simultaneously to both ethnic and religious minority categories.

From a demographic perspective, ethno-cultural diversity clearly exists in Azerbaijan. This diversity logically requires a state response. Over the past decade, the official response has been the adoption of a multiculturalism policy. However, as seen in the literature, multiculturalism is typically associated with liberal democratic contexts. It is highly questionable whether a state ranked low on most international indices for human rights and democracy, one where the situation continues to decline, can credibly claim to have implemented multiculturalism in any meaningful or inclusive way.

Regarding scholarly production in Azerbaijan on the state's multiculturalism policy over the past ten years, it has largely tended to reflect and reinforce official narratives. State-affiliated textbooks and edited volumes (notably Abdulla & Najafov, 2018) and some other works by Azerbaijani and certain foreign authors (see, for example, Zeynalov, 2016; Todorova, 2019; Karimli, 2023; Mammadov, 2025) present multiculturalism as a national achievement and as an element of both domestic and

foreign policy success; these works often emphasise harmony, tolerance, and cultural diplomacy rather than providing critical policy assessments. Some of these works are analysed in the subsequent sections of this thesis where relevant.

Independent and international scholarship in the last decade has taken a different shape. External researchers and some local independent analysts have focused on particular minorities (Talysh, Lezgins, Tats, Mountain Jews, etc.), language endangerment, and region-specific dynamics; these studies often address multiculturalism as one theme among many rather than as a self-standing state policy (see, for instance, Mahmudlu & Ehtibarli, 2019; Ergun, 2023; Sahakyan, 2022, 2024; Mutnansky & Huseynli, 2025). Recent contributions, for example, targeted studies and articles on Talysh activism, language politics, and post-2020 developments cited in relevant chapters of this thesis (see, for instance, Storm, 2023, 2024), demonstrate richer casework but still do not present a comprehensive, critical account of state multicultural policy as a single object of analysis.

Human rights organisations and international bodies provide another strand of literature: reports by Amnesty International, Freedom House, the Council of Europe, OSCE and the US Department of State review documents persistent gaps between official rhetoric and minority communities' lived rights (language education, media access, religious freedom, political representation) in Azerbaijan. These sources are important reference points for critical assessments because they systematically compare rhetoric with practice.

Taken together, two broad trends define the last ten years of literature: (1) a state-led, promotional literature that praises the 'Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism' (often produced or supported by official institutions), (2) international scholarly literature and rights-based reporting that highlight discrepancies between discourse and implementation. Crucially, as this thesis also notes, there is a comparative shortage of rigorous, critical scholarly studies that treat Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy itself as a coherent ideological project and instrument of state governance in a semi-authoritarian context, as the primary unit of analysis. This gap justifies the present study's explicit focus on the political functions, implementation mechanisms, and outcomes of the policy, combining diverse document analysis with original interviews to bridge the divide between promotional narratives and minority experiences.

My **motivation** to explore this topic comes from different sources. First, instructing the course *Azerbaijani multiculturalism* at Baku Slavic University gave me an initial understanding of the differences between state-led narratives and the real-life experiences of minority communities. Noticing this gap between official rhetoric and everyday reality increased my interest in better understanding the actual state of multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan. In addition, my professional experience helped me to better comprehend the complexities of multicultural societies, especially in the Azerbaijani context. Seeing the many layers involved, including political tensions, cultural diversity, and challenges in preserving it, highlighted for me the importance of critically studying how this policy is implemented and how effective it really is. By looking at the current situation in this field, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and outcomes of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy.

Therefore, the main **objective** of this study is to examine Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. The central **aim** is to understand the essence and specificity of this policy as articulated and implemented by the Azerbaijani state in its multicultural context. Accordingly, the study addresses the following **main research question**: Why has Azerbaijan adopted multiculturalism as state policy, and how does it manage ethnocultural diversity in practice? In response to this question the study proposes the following **research hypothesis**: multiculturalism in Azerbaijan primarily functions as a state-driven strategy constructed to consolidate regime legitimacy, centralize governance, and enhance the nation's international image rather than effectively foster inclusive representation and cultural pluralism.

To better comprehend the essence of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, the following **research sub-questions** attempt to answer:

- What are the determining factors shaping the specificity of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy?
- How is the concept of multiculturalism policy of Azerbaijan defined and understood?
- What are the mechanisms and processes involved in the implementation of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
- What are the potential prospects and challenges for Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?

Based on the sub-research questions, I propose the following **research hypotheses**.

- Azerbaijan's multicultural policy is shaped by multiple factors, including ethnic and religious diversity, regional conflicts, and international affiliations.
- The way multiculturalism is defined by the state affects the consistency and direction of the policy.
- The more clearly multiculturalism is implemented as policy, the more it may support social stability and intergroup trust.
- Long-term state commitment to addressing minority needs may strengthen inclusion and reduce potential tensions.

This study approaches Azerbaijan's multicultural policy primarily from the perspective of the state, with the **cognitive goal** of understanding how the policy is ideologically framed, politically motivated, and practically implemented. While the main focus is on state-level discourse and action related to multiculturalism, the analysis also considers the broader context, namely, historical and structural determinants, institutional strategies, and the international dimensions of policy projection. A central **assumption** guiding the research is that Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, despite its inclusive rhetoric, tends to align more closely with assimilationist practices. Government actions and official narratives often prioritise national unity and cultural homogenisation over the recognition and empowerment of diverse communities. This discrepancy between policy discourse and implementation raises critical questions about how diversity is managed in practice and what it reveals about the functioning of state power and legitimacy.

This dissertation is **limited** to examining Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, with a focus on ethnic and religious minority groups. The primary period under analysis covers approximately 2014 to 2024, when the policy became more prominent in official discourse and practice. This dissertation does not analyse any single ethnic or religious minority group in Azerbaijan in detail, except for a brief discussion of separatist tendencies in the cases of the Talysh and Lezgin minorities. Instead, all minority groups are treated as part of the overall analysis. The study is structured around two main perspectives: on one side, the Azerbaijani government and its actions related to the policy of multiculturalism; on the other, the views of selected representatives from ethnic and religious communities interviewed for this research.

Although some comparisons are made with neighbouring states or those with similar historical backgrounds, the dissertation does not carry out an in-depth comparative analysis based on specific indicators with neighbouring states. This choice is deliberate. In many regional states, the concept of multiculturalism is either absent or rarely used in state discourse on managing ethnic and religious diversity. For example, in post-Soviet states like Georgia and Russia, despite their high levels of ethnic and religious diversity, policy approaches tend to reflect a continuation of Soviet administrative legacies, combined with limited efforts to align with international norms. As for Türkiye, although it shares linguistic, cultural, and religious ties with Azerbaijan, the Turkish state does not officially use the term *multiculturalism* in its governance model. Instead, it frames diversity through national unity and often avoids recognising group-specific identities in legal or policy terms. For these reasons, this study refrains from using Türkiye as a comparative case, choosing instead to focus on the internal logic, narratives, and implementation of multiculturalism within Azerbaijan, except in areas related to its international commitments on national minorities, such as the implementation of the FCNM.

In particular, the **relevance** of this study is substantiated as follows.

- Azerbaijan is unique among post-Soviet states in formally adopting multiculturalism as a state policy. However, this designation remains experimental and requires further steps for effective implementation. Analysing Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is therefore essential. It can provide insights into both the challenges and opportunities of multiculturalism, helping to guide future policies that promote social cohesion and inclusivity.
- While many global studies focus on multicultural policies in different states, Azerbaijan's official adoption of multiculturalism has received limited scholarly attention. Despite this political stance, there is a lack of scientific research specifically addressing the multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan. No doctoral dissertations have been defended on this topic, either domestically or internationally. Only a few dissertation topics related to Azerbaijani multiculturalism are currently planned within Azerbaijani universities. Although some articles, textbooks, and books exist, there is still a notable gap in the exploration of the policy's conceptual foundations. More academic efforts are needed to deepen understanding of this area.

- The Second Karabakh War and its aftermath led to the restoration of Azerbaijan's internationally recognised territorial integrity and the detention of key figures in the self-declared Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. One of the most serious consequences of the war was the departure of over 100,000 Armenians from Karabakh, individuals who had lived in Azerbaijan for centuries and were de facto Azerbaijani citizens. This mass departure occurred between 24 September and 3 October 2023. A peace agreement is now expected to formally end the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The return of the Armenian population to Karabakh remains a topic of ongoing discussion. The findings of this research may contribute to building mechanisms for peaceful coexistence between the two communities in Karabakh, regardless of how events unfold.

The **methodological approach** integrates qualitative research, theoretical analysis, and the comparative method. The research design is a qualitative case study of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy that combines: semi-structured (elite) interviews as the primary source of empirical data; secondary document analysis (laws, official statements, reports); deductive, theory-guided testing of propositions; a small-N comparative component using a Most Different Systems Design (MDS) focused on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in Azerbaijan and Switzerland, supported by the Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP); and scenario analysis to explore plausible futures. Analysis proceeds through a qualitative, interpretive/thematic approach and triangulation across sources. Following Singer's discussion of the levels-of-analysis problem (1961), evidence is examined at the individual (interviewees and experts), state (institutions, laws, and official discourse), and international/systemic (norms and organisations) levels. While this design offers a strong fit for the research questions, it requires rigorous procedures to ensure reliability and validity and careful navigation of potential biases in interpretation.

For data gathering and analysis, this study uses qualitative research methods. This method's effectiveness derives from its distinctive ability, through comprehensive interviews and observation, to determine and comprehend the fundamental values of individuals and groups (Pierce, 2008b, p. 46). In this study, employing empirical data to examine a contemporary theory about multiculturalism through deductive reasoning holds significant importance. This method allows for the systematic testing of

hypotheses derived from existing theoretical frameworks (Azungah, 2018; Bitektine, 2007), thereby contributing to the validation or revision of established theories in the realm of multiculturalism, particularly within the context of Azerbaijan. However, it also presents several challenges, including the need for rigorous data collection and analysis procedures to ensure the reliability and validity of findings. Additionally, navigating complex societal dynamics and potential biases in data interpretation pose further challenges in accurately assessing the relationship between theory and empirical evidence. Despite these challenges, the use of empirical data and deductive reasoning offers a robust approach to advancing our understanding of multiculturalism and its implications in diverse contexts.

Within this research, **semi-structured interviews** serve as the primary method for gathering empirical data and evaluating the research assumptions. In academic literature, this type of interview is often referred to as elite interviews and is generally defined as “conversations with a purpose” (Pierce, 2008a, pp. 120–121). Semi-structured interviews have the potential to offer deeper insights into the significance of an individual’s experiences, thereby generating more reliable data (Halperin & Heath, 2020a, p. 313). Due to the limited availability of data about Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy, the critical literature on this policy analysis, and the effects of the policy on ethnic and religious minorities, this approach was especially important in the context of Azerbaijan.

The following primary directions for the interviews were intended to be in line with the study objectives:

- to interview the selected representatives of ethnic and religious minorities in Azerbaijan;
- to interview the selected members of Azerbaijan's official entities dealing with multiculturalism policy or a related field;
- to interview the selected members of Azerbaijan's political parties;
- to interview the selected members of think tank organisations in Azerbaijan;
- to interview local Azerbaijani and foreign independent experts.

The supplementary material (see *Appendix A* for detailed semi-structured interview questions) includes open-ended questions prepared and used for the semi-structured interviews. These questions are coherent with the primary directions and objectives of

the study, allowing a comprehensive exploration of the research topics. Four distinct sets of interview questions were created to speak with the individuals in the aforementioned five categories. Aside from the primary and supplementary questions listed for each category, further interview questions were posed based on the interviewees' responses during the actual interviews.

Since the majority of the interviews were going to be conducted in Azerbaijani, all questions were translated into Azerbaijani. The interview questions for the chosen representatives of ethnic and religious minorities were translated into Russian too, as Russian is the main language spoken by some representatives of these groups in Azerbaijan. Several of the interviews were conducted in Russian, only one in English, and most in Azerbaijani. Considering that the dissertation is written in English, only the English version of the questions is presented in Appendix A.

Regarding the ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, it is important to clarify how leadership is understood within these communities. Since ethnic groups are not officially registered in Azerbaijan, identifying key individuals for interviews required a flexible approach. Most participants held active or visible roles within their communities, though their exact status varied. For some groups, it was more difficult to identify such figures. Interviews also included selected representatives of non-Muslim religious communities. Due to the official recognition and registration of religious communities in Azerbaijan, it was easier to identify individuals for the interview. A total of 37 non-Muslim religious communities are officially registered in the state, representing a range of faiths, including Christian, Jewish, Krishna, and Bahá'í communities (*Religious institutions: Statistical figures ...*, n.d.). The intention was to reflect this diversity by including voices from different religious backgrounds.

Despite outreach efforts, interviews could not be arranged with representatives of several ethnic and religious minority communities in Azerbaijan. Individuals from the Russian, Georgian, Mountain Jewish, Georgian Jewish, Russian Orthodox, Tatar, Evangelical Lutheran, New Life Christian Bible, and Molokan communities were contacted but either declined or did not respond. For groups such as the Tsakhurs, Gryzs, Khynalygs, and Ingiloys, it was not possible to identify or reach any individuals who could represent the community in any form. Due to the political sensitivity of the conflict, no contact could be made with Armenian individuals, and there is currently no known organised community activity in Azerbaijan. In total, over 30 individuals were

contacted through various channels, with 16 interviews successfully conducted among minority communities: 10 with representatives of ethnic minority communities, 4 with representatives of religious minorities, and 2 with individuals from ethno-religious minority groups. Across all categories, the study conducted 26 interviews in total (see below).

Efforts to interview selected members of Azerbaijan's official entities involved in multiculturalism policy or related fields were unsuccessful. Despite attempts to contact representatives of the DHPDMRI of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the State Committee on Religious Associations (SCRA), and the State Statistical Committee (SSC) via email, interviews could not be arranged.

From the political parties, efforts were made to contact five major and popular political parties in Azerbaijan through various means. However, final agreements for interviews could not be reached with two of them, namely the ruling New Azerbaijan Party and the Republican Alternative Party. Nevertheless, successful interviews were conducted with three representatives from Azerbaijan's opposition political organisations. Interviews with political party representatives are cited openly, with consent received from Arif Hajili, the leader of the Musavat Party; Seymur Hazi, deputy chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party; and Jamil Hasanli, professor of history and leader of the National Council of Democratic Forces (NCDF) of Azerbaijan (see *Appendix C* for their full responses).

Out of the seven selected think tank organizations in Azerbaijan, interviews were conducted with representatives from five. Four interviews were with the heads of the organizations, and one was with a representative. Additionally, two independent experts were interviewed, one local Azerbaijani and one foreign. It is worth noting that finding independent experts in the field of multiculturalism, ethnic, and religious issues specific to Azerbaijan posed a challenge.

The difficulties faced while carrying out semi-structured interviews have been significant. The complexity derives from the challenge in accessing specific persons, some of whom view the subject as delicate, resulting in hesitancy to participate. This is intensified by the ever-changing political and social environment, making some individuals reluctant to express their views. The logistical challenges of organising interviews, especially with high-profile individuals, also presented substantial

obstacles. The sensitive nature of the topic required a nuanced and ethical approach to formulating questions and building rapport. Balancing the need for direct responses with interviewees' concerns required careful consideration throughout the process. Time limitations and scheduling further complicated the ability to conduct face-to-face interviews during my visit to Azerbaijan.

Despite these challenges, the significance of semi-structured interviews in this research cannot be understated. The depth and richness of qualitative data gathered through these interviews contributes significantly to the contextual understanding of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. These insights provide a nuanced perspective that goes beyond quantitative data, offering a comprehensive view of the challenges and potential recommendations within the domain of multiculturalism.

Between 3 November 2023 and 29 February 2024, I conducted 26 interviews: 18 were online via video, one was a written response, and seven were conducted in person during my field visit to Azerbaijan. All in-person and video interviews were recorded in audio format. These 26 interviews include the 16 conducted with minority and religious community representatives noted above, as well as interviews with political party representatives, think-tank organisations, and independent experts.

As part of ethical considerations, two consent forms were used for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). Open consent was requested only from political party representatives, while all other participants were asked to provide closed consent. To accommodate language differences, consent forms were translated into Azerbaijani. Some interviewees signed forms in both Azerbaijani and English, while others signed only in Azerbaijani. In line with these ethical agreements, the identities of representatives from ethnic and religious minorities, think tanks, and independent experts will remain confidential. Political party representatives are cited by name; all other participants are referred to using the word interviewee followed by an alphabetical identifier (e.g., Interviewee A, B, etc.) and a general description of their role (e.g., Lezgin cultural employee or Lezgin representative).

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using a qualitative, interpretive approach. Since the aim was to explore meanings, narratives, and perceptions rather than to quantify patterns, no specialised software was used. The analysis was carried out manually. All interviews with political party representatives

were transcribed and translated into English to ensure transparency and are included in Appendix C. For the other interviews, I listened to the recordings carefully, identified recurring themes and patterns, and translated into English only the parts relevant to the research questions. This flexible approach allowed me to stay close to the context and meaning of participants' responses, especially when dealing with culturally and politically sensitive issues.

Thematic analysis was guided by the main research questions and interview topics, but additional themes also emerged from the data, such as symbolic inclusion, state control over diversity, perceived hierarchies among minority groups, and the strategic use of multicultural discourse. Given the multilingual nature of the data – 22 interviews in Azerbaijani, 3 in Russian, and 1 in English – language sensitivity was essential. Care was taken to preserve the nuance of original responses in translation. Although this approach did not involve formal coding, it aligns with flexible, exploratory traditions that prioritise contextual understanding over rigid categorisation.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, **secondary data analysis** complemented the research findings. This involved reviewing literature, reports, and official documents related to multiculturalism, ethnic and religious diversity, and relevant political developments in Azerbaijan. The combined use of qualitative interviews and secondary sources ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

To explore the causal dynamics of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, I applied **analysis of causal factors**. In scholarly literature, cause and effect refers to the relationship between two phenomena in which one influences or determines the other (Pernia, 2023). Within this method, I examined the effect of hypothesised factors on the formation and direction of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy.

The **comparative method** is also used to identify differences and similarities between states' approaches to multiculturalism. Specifically, I compare the implementation of the Council of Europe's FCNM in Switzerland and Azerbaijan. This small-N qualitative comparison applies a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), which selects cases that differ in most respects but are similar on the key variable (Halperin & Heath, 2020b, pp. 238–239). Additionally, I use the Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP) developed by Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka to assess Azerbaijan's policy in comparative context.

To explore the future of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, I applied **scenario analysis**. This method is common in policy research where uncertainty is high and outcomes depend on multiple actors and factors (Horowitz, 2020, p. 68). As Kosow and Gaßner (2008) explain, scenarios do not predict the future but describe possible directions based on key drivers. In this study, scenarios were developed to outline possible future trajectories for both the Azerbaijani state and minority communities. The aim was to generate knowledge that could inform future decision-making and diversity-management strategies.

Finally, each chapter of the dissertation includes a brief explanation of the methodological tools used in that section. Starting with Chapter 2, the relevant interview questions are referenced and connected with the data-analysis techniques applied. This structure helps ensure clarity regarding the integration of empirical data throughout the dissertation.

The results of this study offer several **contributions** to the development of the discipline:

- This dissertation contributes to the literature on diversity governance in hybrid regimes by examining how multiculturalism can be ideologically adapted and politically instrumentalised within authoritarian contexts.
- Given Azerbaijan's demographic composition, with 94.8 per cent of the population being ethnically Azerbaijani Turks and 5.2 per cent belonging to ethnic minorities, the findings of this study are relevant for states with similar ethnic compositions. Thus, the results can serve as a basis for comparative research in states with dominant majority populations and politically marginalised minorities.
- The outcomes of this study will be particularly beneficial for scholars focusing on Azerbaijan, offering insights into multiculturalism and issues of ethnic and religious diversity and tolerance within the state. This research can deepen understanding and inform future studies on these topics.
- The theoretical and practical implications of the results can extend to further research in this field. Moreover, they can be integrated into educational curricula, benefiting students and instructors in higher education institutions by enriching their understanding of multicultural policies and practices.

- Additionally, the results of this study will benefit policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors engaged in multiculturalism initiatives. By offering evidence-based insights into how multicultural policies are implemented and received, the research provides useful knowledge for adjusting current approaches and designing more inclusive strategies to foster social cohesion.

The study consists of five chapters of analysis, as well as an **introduction** and a **conclusion**.

The analysis of multiculturalism as a social and political phenomenon, theoretical approaches to a policy of multiculturalism, and the characteristics of multiculturalism policies in Western liberal democratic states are defined in **Chapter 1** titled *The main characteristics of multicultural policies*. The *first subchapter* is titled *Theoretical frameworks and concepts of multiculturalism*, reflecting the essence of the policy of multiculturalism from liberal and communitarian approaches. The literature review mainly focuses on the development of multiculturalism policies within Western liberal societies. In particular, the works of such scholars as Will Kymlicka, Brian Barry, Iris Marion Young, Bhikhu Parekh, Charles Taylor, Chandran Kukathas, Michael Walzer, Tariq Modood, and others are discussed. Generally, this subchapter focuses on determining the essence, scope, and theoretical approaches of the study and on the basic concepts and ideas of multiculturalism, as well as making an attempt to define the place of the dissertation topic within the entire discipline of political science. The *second subchapter*, *Overview of State multiculturalism policies in selected states: Case studies*, examines multiculturalism policies implemented in different Western states, including Canada, Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, etc. The primary goal of this subchapter is to better understand what a state's essential obligations are, or which actions are important to take when it announces multiculturalism as a policy addressing existing ethno-cultural diversity. This chapter ends with a discussion of what elements in this area should be given particular attention by each state when addressing multiculturalism as a public policy on the basis of theoretical and practical considerations.

**Chapter 2**, *Factors of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy*, examines the internal and external factors that influence the formation of multicultural policy in Azerbaijan. The first subchapter, *Ethnic and religious diversity*, analyses Azerbaijan's ethno-cultural diversity as an internal factor, highlighting the objective conditions that underpin the development of a multicultural society. The second subchapter, *The membership of*

*Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe and the OSCE*, explores Azerbaijan's participation in these international organisations as a key external factor shaping its multicultural policy. The third and fourth subchapters, *Armenia–Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict* and *Separatist tendencies in Azerbaijan: Talysh and Lezgi disputes*, focus on separatist movements that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and assess their significance in relation to the state's multicultural policy. The primary objective of this chapter is not only to identify these key factors but also to assess their relative importance in shaping Azerbaijan's multicultural policy.

**Chapter 3**, *Concepts of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy*, explores how multiculturalism is defined, framed, and legitimised within Azerbaijan's political and intellectual landscape. It examines the ideological underpinnings and strategic interpretations of multiculturalism by state institutions, political forces, and expert communities, taking into account relevant theoretical perspectives. The first subchapter, *Specificity of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy*, offers a conceptual analysis of how multiculturalism is understood in Azerbaijan and identifies features that distinguish it from other models. The second subchapter, *Multicultural policy concepts of Azerbaijan's state authorities*, investigates legal texts, official doctrines, and institutional strategies adopted by the state since 1991, highlighting how multicultural policy has been framed and operationalised by state bodies. The third subchapter, *Multicultural policy concepts of Azerbaijan's political forces*, focuses on the discourse of political parties regarding the governance of ethnocultural diversity, paying special attention to the multiculturalism narrative. Finally, the fourth subchapter, *Multicultural policy concepts of think tank organisations*, analyses expert perspectives and policy recommendations produced by research institutions and analytical centres. Collectively, this chapter aims to map the discursive and ideological construction of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan.

Within **Chapter 4**, titled *Implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy*, the subject of analysis is the implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, i.e., the actions of this state. These activities were analysed at two levels: at the state level and at the level of the international system. The *first subchapter*, titled *Examining the Multiculturalism Policy Index for national minorities in the case of Azerbaijan*, uses the same tools as the MCP Index to analyse the multicultural policies in Azerbaijan. This is an attempt to assess how well Azerbaijan's multicultural policy aligns with the

liberal theory of minority rights, which is the most widely accepted theoretical approach to multiculturalism. In the *second subchapter* titled *Comparative analysis of the implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Switzerland and Azerbaijan*, an examination of multicultural policies in both states is conducted, drawing insights from official reports and relevant literature. The *third and fourth subchapters* analyses the implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy at the state level and international level. This chapter ends with the fifth subchapter titled *Analyses of Effectiveness of Implementation of Azerbaijan's Multicultural Policy*, which focuses on evaluating the real-world outcomes and limitations of the policy as perceived by various stakeholders. Based on empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews, this subchapter is divided into six thematic parts. The first, *4.5.1 Assessing multicultural policy in Azerbaijan: Voices from below*, explores the lived experiences of ethnic and ethno-religious minorities, focusing on issues such as language education, cultural participation, and access to institutional support. The second, *4.5.2 Religious and ethno-religious communities: Navigating multicultural policy in practice*, examines how these groups perceive their inclusion in the multiculturalism framework, including both recognition and challenges faced by less conventional denominations. The third, *4.5.3 Societal attitudes: Public perceptions and everyday experiences*, analyses how minority communities interpret the attitudes of the ethnic majority, including experiences of respect, misunderstanding, and informal prejudice. In *4.5.4 Political voices and critical perspectives on Azerbaijan's multicultural policy*, attention turns to the viewpoints of political opposition figures, many of whom question the authenticity, depth, and ideological foundations of the state's multiculturalism discourse. This is followed by *4.5.5 Expert assessments: Competing visions on Azerbaijan's multicultural policy*, which contrasts the perspectives of government-affiliated experts with those of independent analysts, revealing diverging interpretations of the policy's intent and execution. The subchapter concludes with *4.5.6 Discussion and concluding reflections*, which synthesises the findings.

In **Chapter 5**, titled *Prospects for Azerbaijan's multicultural policy*, the aim is to conduct a prognostic analysis regarding the future trajectory of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy. The chapter uses scenario analysis to construct possible futures based on the data and insights discussed earlier in the thesis. The chapter includes two

main directions of analysis, one focused on how the government might act, and one on how ethnic and religious communities might respond or position themselves. These scenarios are built on what the thesis has shown about the last decade of policy and the interviews conducted with people from different backgrounds. Together, they help open up the discussion about what kind of multicultural policy Azerbaijan could pursue in the years ahead.

The thesis content ends with general **conclusions**, allowing for the formulation of research results and the generalization of the gathered research material.

## **Chapter 1. Essence and specificity of state's multicultural policies**

As already mentioned in the introduction, social justice, equal opportunity, and democracy are ideals that underpin the idea of multiculturalism. Given that Azerbaijan cannot be classified as a democracy, the implementation of multiculturalism as a public policy is particularly contested. Before examining the factors, concepts, and implementation of multiculturalism in the case of Azerbaijan, it is first necessary to explore the theoretical foundations of multiculturalism. This enhances understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of multiculturalism, its related theoretical frameworks, and the process of formulating it as a policy. Therefore, the main aim of this chapter is to analyse multiculturalism as a social, political, and philosophical phenomenon, the theoretical approaches to multiculturalism policy, and the characteristics of multiculturalism policies in Western liberal democratic states.

The initial subchapter discusses the fundamental principles of multiculturalism as a public policy from various theoretical perspectives, while the subsequent subchapter reviews the implementation of multicultural policies in selected Western nations, providing a comprehensive understanding of their essence and practical implications. In connection, this section also discusses key concepts related to multiculturalism, such as minority, identity, and other relevant themes. This chapter employs a scholarly literature review methodology to explore the theoretical underpinnings and practical implementations of multiculturalism policy. Utilising a qualitative approach, various scholarly sources, including books, journal articles, and official documents, are critically analysed to provide the conceptual foundations of multiculturalism and its associated theoretical frameworks. Additionally, comparative analysis is employed to review multicultural policies in selected Western liberal democratic states, offering insights into their characteristics and practical implications. Through this methodological approach, the aim is to deepen understanding of multiculturalism as a social, political, and philosophical phenomenon, thus laying the groundwork for the subsequent examination of its application within the context of Azerbaijan.

### **1.1. Essence of states' multicultural policies**

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in liberal theories of multiculturalism, which emphasise the role of the state in recognising and protecting the rights of culturally distinct communities. Scholars such as Kymlicka (1996; 2007a), Parekh (2001), and Modood (2007; 2008) argue that in culturally diverse societies, justice and equality require more than formal neutrality, they require the institutional accommodation of minority identities through group-differentiated rights, cultural recognition, and participatory inclusion. Within this framework, multiculturalism is presented as a normative political response to diversity that aims to rectify historical exclusion and foster inclusive citizenship. Such approaches are particularly influential in democratic settings and are also reflected in empirical tools like the Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP), which this study uses as a benchmark for assessing Azerbaijan's policy performance.

As previously mentioned, the term 'multiculturalism' carries varying interpretations across distinct scientific disciplines. Jupp (2011) describes multiculturalism as a complex and contested concept, evolving over time and often confused with terms like integration or assimilation (p. 41). Multiculturalism can be seen either as a descriptive acknowledgment of diversity, such as in recognising modern Europe as a multicultural society, or as a normative social theory aiming to accommodate various group identities in policymaking (Petrzela, 2013, p. 1). In this domain, 'multicultural' refers to the visible presence of diversity, whereas 'multiculturalism' represents a normative response to this plurality. Multiculturalism is a policy that is based on the concept of accepting and celebrating pluralism (Raz, 1994; Loobuyck, 2005, p. 108; Kymlicka 2010).

The scientific fields where this phrase is used most frequently and creates heated arguments are largely sociology, philosophy, and the political sciences. Across these fields, the fundamental issues revolve around the coexistence and interaction of different cultural groups and their contributions to overall societal well-being. I tried to pose the following basic questions related to these fields and multiculturalism to enhance our understanding of their roles in connection to multiculturalism.

- What groups exist, and to what extent do they communicate with one another?

- How can diverse cultures, identities, and values coexist, interact, and contribute positively to societal harmony?
- What policies are necessary to facilitate the harmonious coexistence of these diverse groups within a given society?

Since in this dissertation, my primary concentration is on why Azerbaijan is addressing the policy of multiculturalism and how it manages the existing diversity, this places my topic more into political science, and more specifically into public policy. According to the definition of public policy, the main "research interest is on the analysis of the outputs of a political system, i.e., the decisions, measures, programmes, strategies, and courses of action adopted by the government or the legislative body (e.g., parliament)" (Knill & Tosun, 2022, p. 3). In this case, the last question posed is more relevant for this study. This emphasis on policy development serves as a guiding principle for understanding and addressing multiculturalism within these fields of study, making it a central aspect of this research. Nevertheless, it is crucial to establish clear parameters regarding the specific groups under consideration and to comprehend the conceptual aspects of multiculturalism within the realm of philosophy, particularly in the context of political philosophy, along with its central debates.

This thesis does not require a comprehensive explanation of the concept of a group, in my opinion. The concept of multiculturalism can easily shed light on the notion of group, wherein 'cultura' is defined as distinct groups characterised by elements such as language, traditions, religion, and other distinguishing features (Modood, 2008; Squires, 2008). It is noteworthy to acknowledge that multiculturalism places emphasis on minority groups. To provide further clarity, the focus of our discussion is on the challenges in facilitating the relationship between minority groups and the majority within a given state's territory.

It's important to give a precise understanding of 'minority group.' In the context of demographics, a minority group is typically smaller in number compared to the dominant group. According to the United Nations, a minority group consists of individuals who make up less than half of a state's entire population and share common cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics. Membership in such a group is voluntary and doesn't require citizenship, residency, or official recognition (OHCHR, n.d.-b). Minority status is often associated with a relative lack of power, influence, or representation within a society. Minority groups may face social, economic, or political

challenges, including discrimination, marginalization, assimilation and unequal access to opportunities and resources (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). The concept of minority can encompass various dimensions, and it can be understood in terms of numerical representation, socio-political status, or cultural distinctiveness (Seyranian et al., 2008). It is important to note that the designation of a group as a minority is context-dependent and can vary from one society to another.

The definition of minority can also evolve over time as societal dynamics change, and different groups may experience shifts in their relative status and representation within a given society. Numerous significant international treaties aim to safeguard minorities within nation-states from discrimination, marginalization, and assimilation. For instance, the first article of the UN (1992) Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities underscores the obligation of states to ensure the preservation of minority existence and their cultural, religious, and linguistic identity within their territories. Moreover, states are urged to create favorable conditions conducive to fostering and promoting the identity of these groups.

Regarding which minority groups are considered under multiculturalism, I already discussed this in the introduction, where I summarised that indigenous peoples, national (ethnic), immigrant, and religious minorities are the main focus. As per Azerbaijani reality, Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy primarily targets ethnic (or national) and religious minorities with historical roots in the state. Subsequent sections of the dissertation will analyse the state's approach towards these specific minority groups existing within Azerbaijan.

Understanding how various cultures, identities, and values can coexist, interact, and contribute to overall well-being within the framework of multiculturalism is currently a major challenge. In this first introductory section, I will therefore attempt to explain what multiculturalism means in political philosophy and what policies are necessary to guarantee coexistence. It can be asserted with confidence that the answer to this inquiry lies exclusively within the realm of political philosophy. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin with a definition of political philosophy. Political philosophy is a branch of philosophy that holds significant relevance in the field of political sciences. The practise of political philosophy dates back to the time when humans have viewed collective

arrangements as potentially open to change, needing philosophical justification (Miller, 1998).

“Political philosophy is a *normative* discipline, meaning that it tries to establish norms (rules or ideal standards)” (Wolff, 2023, p. 2). Political philosophy addresses various central questions, including: *state and government, justice and equality, rights and liberties, social contract, democracy and citizenship, political ideologies, international relations* (Strauss, 1988; Raphaël, 1990). Political philosophers draw upon historical and contemporary theories, including those of notable thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls. They engage in critical analysis, ethical reasoning, and conceptual clarification to develop normative theories and provide insights into political systems, structures, and practices. The aim of political philosophy is to deepen our understanding of the nature of political life, to critically examine existing political systems and institutions, and to contribute to the development of theories that guide our collective decisions and actions for a just and well-ordered society (Baier, 1989).

In political philosophy, multiculturalism refers to a set of ideas and policies that address the challenges posed by cultural diversity within a political community (Shachar, 2000). Tully (2002) argues that philosophers studying multiculturalism, multinationalism, indigenous rights, and constitutional pluralism have provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by constitutional democracies in recognising and accommodating cultural diversity. These struggles occur both within and across the institutions of these democracies, which are supposed to uphold principles of freedom and equality (p. 536-537). In the field of political philosophy, multiculturalism also delves into inquiries concerning identity (or identity politics), citizenship, equality, and the relationship between majority and minority cultures.

To start, it is essential to clarify the fundamental notions of identity and citizenship within the context of multiculturalism. One of the concepts that requires the first and possibly most crucial explanation is identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that identity, “tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)” (p. 1). Indeed, the notion of identity is unquestionably wide and complex. Within the framework of multiculturalism, the concept of identity holds significant weight. It is important to recognise that the notion of identity politics aligns more closely with the

principles of multiculturalism rather than being solely centred on identity. In the late 1960s, significant shifts in the US political landscape redefined discussions on social justice, particularly evident in the evolving African American and women's movements. While earlier efforts focused on legislative reforms to address racial and gender inequalities, a new generation of activists, characterized by a sense of urgency and distinct identity, emphasized broader societal transformation, leading to the emergence of what came to be known as 'identity politics' (Nicholson, 2008, p. 1-8).

Identity politics and multiculturalism are two interconnected concepts that address the recognition and inclusion of diverse identities within societies. Identity politics focuses on mobilising and advocating for specific social groups, acknowledging and addressing systemic inequalities faced by marginalised communities. Aims to advance the rights, representation, and social justice of these groups by highlighting their specific needs and concerns. (Heyes, 2020). Multiculturalism, on the other hand, promotes the coexistence of multiple cultural groups within a society, recognizing and valuing the diversity of identities, cultural practices, and traditions. Both approaches aim to create an inclusive and harmonious society, promoting cultural exchanges, supporting minority rights, fostering intercultural dialogue, and creating inclusive society. However, the challenge is that "identity politics involves members pursuing positive recognition for their own groups, while critical multiculturalism rejects one-to-one correspondence and views individual identities as multicultural" (Gutmann, 2001, p. 10177).

Citizenship and multiculturalism are also closely linked concepts that address the interaction between individuals and the broader society within the context of cultural diversity. Citizenship refers to an individual's legal and political status within a nation-state, encompassing rights, obligations, and advantages (Heater, 2013; Weinstock, 2017). Citizenship is frequently viewed as inclusive and pluralistic, accepting and honouring its members' varied identities and cultures. However, the relationship between citizenship and multiculturalism can also be complex and subject to debate (see Teo, 2021). Excessive focus on cultural diversity and multiculturalism can lead to the fragmentation of society or the creation of parallel communities, potentially hindering social cohesion or a shared sense of national identity. Balancing the recognition of cultural diversity with the promotion of common values and social integration is an ongoing challenge in multicultural societies. When discussing the

topics of multiculturalism and citizenship, it is crucial to address the notions of 'multicultural citizenship'. This concept is widely recognised and will be examined in the subsequent paragraphs.

The central question in this section arises: what does multiculturalism signify within the context of political philosophy? Multiculturalism, philosophically, is a wide-ranging concept, incorporating elements of liberalism, which prioritizes individual autonomy and equality of opportunity (Ball et al., 2024), and communitarianism, a social and political philosophy that stresses the importance of community in political functioning (Etzioni, 2013). By analysing multiculturalism from these perspectives, we may understand how it involves an intricate interaction between the rights of individuals and the ideals of communities. This interaction influences discussions on diversity, identity, and social harmony.

Multiculturalism generates debates in philosophical movements such as liberalism, communitarianism, egalitarianism, postmodernism, feminism, etc., where liberalism typically prevails. Despite the fact that various political ideologies have made significant contributions to the development of multiculturalism, the theory of multiculturalism derives primarily from liberalism and communitarianism. Given the significance of multiculturalism within the realm of political philosophy, it is important to examine the principal works and approaches built by the authors mentioned in the introductory section.

Within the framework of liberalism, multiculturalism can be viewed through the lenses of classical and modern liberalism. Classical liberal multiculturalism is characterized by tolerance towards opposing views, without granting special privileges or protections to any particular group. Kukathas (1996; 1997; 2004) advocates for little government intervention and maximal autonomy for individuals, specifically in relation liberty, within the context of classical liberalism or libertarianism, while addressing minority concerns and group rights. Kukathas (1992), as a liberal egalitarian critiquing group rights, argues:

*We give individuals rather than groups the rights because we seek to protect the interests of individuals rather than groups; if we are concerned about equality, it is about equality among individuals rather than among groups, and we then give all individuals the 'same' rights. (p. 675)*

However, some liberal theorists contend that this approach fails to adequately safeguard essential liberal values. Critics suggest that a liberal state must ensure that children are educated to prevent the indoctrination of non-liberal ideals by cultural or religious groups. Additionally, legislation should protect women's rights within the household and prevent discrimination against individuals leaving cultural minorities. Kymlicka (1992), a notable critic of Kukathas, argues that special rights, despite their initial appearance of discrimination, really adhere to liberal concepts of equality by distributing individual rights and political authorities depending on ethnicity (p. 140).

Kymlicka, among other liberal philosophers, supports the 'hard' form of multiculturalism, which stands in opposition to the 'soft' approach. Kymlicka (1991, p. 140) argues that in order to assist cultural groups in advancing their way of life while upholding fundamental civil rights, the liberal state should proactively supply them with resources, legal protections, and political safeguards. In contrast to Barry's (2001, pp. 117-118) advocacy for greater involvement in ensuring that cultural minorities conform to liberal values, both authors deny the 'neutral' position on minority issues advocated by classical liberalism. Furthermore, Kymlicka advocates for more demanding policies aimed at protecting the cultural autonomy of minority communities.

I will continue the discussion by focusing on the works of Will Kymlicka. Although I have already referred to his work, to emphasise his contribution to this issue, I shall go over some of his most essential multiculturalist ideals. Kymlicka is a well-known Canadian political philosopher recognised for his contributions to multiculturalism, nationalism, and minority rights. He defends multiculturalism as a means to address issues of cultural recognition and accommodation within liberal democracies. His liberal theory of multiculturalism encompasses several key aspects, such as the recognition of diversity, advocacy for freedom and equality, group rights, the distinction between external protections and internal restrictions, and the limits of tolerance.

One of his most influential works is *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. In this book, Kymlicka argues for recognising cultural group rights in liberal democracies, emphasising the importance of cultural identity and autonomy. The basis of his theory is the protection of liberal principles, which he sees as key to social stability and prosperity. Multicultural citizenship recognises and accommodates

diversity while maintaining shared citizenship and national identity (Kymlicka, 1996, pp. 173-175). It seeks to ensure that all citizens have equal rights and opportunities, regardless of cultural differences, encouraging an inclusive society where cultural identities are respected and practised alongside full political and social participation.

Kymlicka defines three main types of group rights:

- "Special group representation rights,
- Self-government rights,
- and Polyethnic rights" (1996, pp. 6-7).

These form the core of his concept of 'Multicultural Citizenship.' He also distinguishes between internal restrictions and external protections. Internal restrictions are imposed by a group on its own members, limiting individual freedoms for intra-group solidarity, which he opposes. External protections aim to shield vulnerable groups, especially national minorities, from external threats, and are justifiable from a liberal perspective (Kymlicka, 1996, pp. 36-38).

A clear example of external protection is Quebec's effort to preserve its French language and culture in relation to English-speaking Canada. At the same time, the rights of the Inuit and Amerindians who are minorities even within Quebec, are also protected to preserve their distinct cultures. By contrast, Kymlicka rejects internal restrictions, such as when Roma families prevent children from attending school in order to preserve cultural values.

Another example of internal restriction is seen in France, where some Muslim families restricted their daughters from attending school after hijab bans in public institutions. Notably, in such cases, external protections are not extended to Muslims. This may be due to perceptions that certain Muslim practices conflict with liberal democratic values. "Indeed, there is a widespread perception that Muslims are making politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable, or theologically alien demands upon European states" (Triandafyllidou et al., 2011, p. 14). Kymlicka argues that even when national minorities adopt illiberal norms, the goal should be to liberalise not assimilate them. Liberal minority rights should ensure fair integration for immigrants and protect national minorities' identities (Kymlicka, 2001a, p. 77).

Kymlicka views culture defined as a set of norms, values, and practices, as a valuable attribute requiring protection. Liberal justice, he argues, demands compensatory and

protective measures. He identifies two main group categories needing special policy: minorities incorporated involuntarily into states (e.g., the Welsh, Catalans, Francophones of Quebec), and immigrants, who move voluntarily and do not claim national autonomy. Immigrants deserve respect for their cultural roots and support for adaptation. Racial groups previously subjected to oppression are treated similarly. He cites Canada as a near-ideal model and suggests that liberal pluralism may offer solutions for post-communist states (Kymlicka, 1991, pp. 141, 190, 200).

In *Multicultural Citizenship*, Kymlicka emphasises that individual autonomy is central to liberalism, people must have the freedom to live according to their values and to revise them (1996, p. 59). He supports education and financial aid to promote liberal values, dialogue with minorities, and peaceful reforms. He advocates state support for minority cultural activities as a way to reduce disparities and increase societal stability. His multicultural citizenship model includes territorial autonomy, language recognition, representation in governance, public funding for minority education and media, recognition of multinationalism, and even international acknowledgment (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 101; 2007a, p. 589; 2007b, p. 622).

Kymlicka argues that liberal multiculturalism can effectively address the majority-minority relationship within states and broader challenges in Western states (2001b, p. 131). His recent work (2017) continues this line of thought, stressing that the state should ensure fair background conditions, including institutional support for language and culture, while allowing individuals the freedom to choose. The key is a balanced relationship between state and minorities, where both understand their mutual rights and responsibilities (pp. 81-82).

Kymlicka's liberal theory has drawn widespread attention and critique (see, e.g., Kukathas, 1997, 1998; Barry, 2001; Miller, 2011; Stjernfelt, 2012). Some scholars appreciate his emphasis on balancing individual rights with cultural preservation and his focus on state-minority relations. Others, however, question the practicality and applicability of his theory in diverse multicultural settings.

In his critical discussion of the theory of multicultural citizenship, Joppke asks a very important question for the topic: "Whatever the difficulties of justifying multicultural citizenship at the theoretical level, does it exist anywhere in the real world?" (2001 p. 438). He claims that in order to properly respond to this inquiry, it is essential to make

a distinction between implicit multicultural citizenship and explicit multicultural citizenship, the latter of which refers to diversity claims that have widely spread without receiving official state recognition. In his view, only Western nations like Australia and Canada have explicitly multicultural citizenship.

Parekh (1997a) raises several important critiques of Kymlicka's Liberal Theory of Minority Rights. First, he argues that Kymlicka's theory has limited applicability because it assumes that multicultural societies are also liberal, which is not always the case. This limitation means that Kymlicka's theory may have reduced relevance in non-liberal contexts, where the foundational principles of liberalism are not widely shared or institutionally embedded. Parekh also identifies a deeper problem in Kymlicka's approach: it assumes that minority communities share liberal values, when in fact many do not. This disconnect weakens the theory's relevance to real-world demands made by minority groups.

Additionally, Parekh points to a tension in Kymlicka's model regarding cultural membership and group stability. He questions how the theory handles situations where individual choices within a group are seen as threats to that group's cultural integrity. Finally, Parekh criticises the hierarchy of minority rights in Kymlicka's framework. He argues that it leads to unequal treatment between different minority groups based on factors like their nationality, historical background, and whether their migration was voluntary or not. Altogether, these critiques reveal the complexity and limitations of Kymlicka's theory (Parekh, 1997a, pp. 55-58, 60-62).

In *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (2000), Parekh further elaborates his own view, also seen in earlier works (Parekh, 1997b, 1998). He stresses the importance of recognising and valuing cultural diversity within societies. He supports a multicultural model based on dialogue, mutual understanding, and equal treatment of all cultural groups. Parekh envisions a society where cultural diversity strengthens unity through fairness, inclusion, and respect among different communities. Moreover, he argues that individuals in a multicultural society should feel a sense of loyalty and connection to the political community. This loyalty is not directed toward an abstract idea like the state or its bureaucratic structure, but rather to its core institutions, shared values, and political ideals (Parekh, 1999, p. 459).

Barry is another political philosopher who approaches multiculturalism from a liberal perspective. Barry's (2001) work has significantly shaped debates on justice, public policy, and multiculturalism. He is known for his scepticism towards multiculturalism that grants group rights or accommodations, arguing that such measures can undermine individual rights and equality. Barry contends that these policies risk establishing group-based inequalities and fostering social division. Instead, he supports policies that ensure equal treatment and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of cultural background (pp. 119, 124).

His work contributes to ongoing discussions about the balance between cultural diversity and social cohesion. In contrast to Kymlicka's group-differentiated approach to equality, Barry presents a strong critique of multiculturalism in *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (2001), where he argues for a universalist understanding of equality. He maintains that multiculturalism threatens equal citizenship by prioritising group rights over individual ones, potentially marginalising certain social groups. According to Barry, this creates a hierarchy of citizenship, where some groups are privileged based on cultural heritage. By contrast, he advocates for a model of equal treatment for all, believing this approach better reflects liberal values and can help reduce social tensions. He also argues that a universalist approach to equality is better suited to addressing inequality and injustice by focusing on individual rights and fair access to resources.

Barry (2001) criticises what he sees as the 'culturalisation' of group identities by theorists such as Young and Kymlicka. He explains:

*The consequence of this 'culturalization' of group identities is the systematic neglect of alternative causes of group disadvantage. Thus, the members of a group may suffer not because they have distinctive culturally derived goals but because they do poorly in achieving generally shared objectives such as a good education, desirable and well-paid jobs (or perhaps any job at all), a safe and salubrious neighbourhood in which to live and enough income to enable them to be adequately housed, clothed and fed and to participate in the social, economic and political life of their society. (pp. 305–306)*

Despite their differing positions, both Barry and Kymlicka emphasise the need to uphold liberal values in liberal societies. Barry argues that groups that diverge from

liberal principles should be limited to voluntary associations among consenting adults, and he opposes state support for any illiberal forms of such associations (Barry, 2001, p. 240). Kymlicka, by contrast, believes that all cultural minorities should receive support, as he views such assistance as essential for individuals to exercise autonomy, a core liberal value.

Young, a leading political theorist, offers a sophisticated critique of identity politics and multiculturalism. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), she explores how different forms of oppression, based on gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity, intersect and reproduce inequality. Her work examines the links between identity, difference, and power, aiming to build a framework for recognising and responding to social injustice. Young (1990) challenges the idea that justice movements are necessarily fragmented or self-interested. Instead, she argues that acknowledging group-based differences strengthens democratic life and helps create a more inclusive and just society (p. 82).

Young (1990) also critiques conventional multicultural policies for dealing mainly with symbolic or superficial aspects of diversity, while ignoring deeper structural inequalities. She highlights the problem of what she calls ‘cultural imperialism’, the imposition of dominant norms and values on minority groups. Rather than top-down inclusion, she advocates for a more participatory model of multiculturalism in which marginalised communities have real influence over the policies that affect them (p. 134).

Young is also critical of classical liberalism, especially its focus on abstract individual rights and freedoms, which she sees as detached from the real conditions of inequality. At the same time, she does not fully embrace communitarianism either, arguing that its emphasis on shared values and collective identity may obscure the lived realities of marginalised groups and reinforce existing hierarchies. Her work calls for a more grounded, relational understanding of justice, one that accounts for both structural injustice and the politics of recognition.

One of the leading voices in contemporary discussions on multiculturalism and secularism is Modood, who has extensively examined the role of religion in public life, especially in Western liberal democracies. He critiques strict forms of secularism that seek to exclude religious beliefs and practices from the public sphere. Instead, Modood

calls for a more inclusive secularism, one that acknowledges the public relevance of religion and permits its expression within reasonable boundaries. A significant part of his work focuses on the experiences of Muslims in Europe, particularly in debates on immigration, integration, and Islamophobia. He argues for recognising Islam as a legitimate and equal part of European public life and calls for stronger efforts to combat anti-Muslim discrimination (Modood, 2012). His broader aim is to challenge negative stereotypes and promote a more balanced understanding of Islam and Muslim identities in Europe.

Modood has also been a strong advocate for multiculturalism. In his words, “contrary to all those who think that the time to speak of multiculturalism is over, I think it is most timely and necessary, and that we need more not less” (Modood, 2007, p. 14). For Modood, multiculturalism is not only about diversity; it is essential for building social cohesion and ensuring equality in culturally diverse societies. He supports policies that allow different cultural and religious communities to preserve their identities while also engaging as equal participants in the public and civic life of the wider society.

More recently, Cohen-Almagor (2021) has proposed a framework of ‘reasonable multiculturalism’ that attempts to balance liberal democratic principles with cultural recognition. His work addresses difficult questions, such as whether liberal democracies should intervene in harmful practices within minority communities, and considers the broader impact of multiculturalism on democratic values, women’s rights, and security. He argues that reconciling liberalism and multiculturalism requires mechanisms like deliberative democracy and targeted protections for vulnerable groups.

Taken together, liberal theories of multiculturalism, shaped by thinkers like Kymlicka, Barry, Young, Parekh, and Kukathas, offer a wide range of views on how cultural diversity can be aligned with liberal democratic values. Kymlicka emphasises cultural autonomy and group-differentiated rights, while Barry insists on equal treatment through a universalist lens. Parekh and Young call attention to systemic injustice and the need for recognition, whereas Kukathas critiques multiculturalism’s potential to infringe on individual freedoms. Collectively, their ideas contribute to a vibrant and ongoing debate about how liberal democracies can engage with the realities of cultural pluralism.

In contrast to the liberal perspective, communitarians reject the notion that the individual takes preference over the group and that social goods can be solely measured by their impact on individual well-being. Communitarianism is a social and political philosophy that emphasises the importance of community in both political life and overall well-being. Emerging in the 1980s as a critique of liberalism's focus on personal autonomy and individual rights through state intervention, it holds that human agency and identity are shaped not in isolation but through dialogue and mutual recognition with others (Etzioni, 2014, pp. 620–621). In response, liberals argue that liberal theory is not necessarily opposed to community and can accommodate many communitarian concerns. They see the communitarian critique as often based on a misunderstanding or oversimplification of liberalism, and believe that many of its insights can be integrated into liberal thought (Neal & Paris, 1990, p. 420).

The communitarian approach to multiculturalism emerged in response to the challenges posed by cultural diversity in modern societies. In such contexts, different cultural groups often coexist, each with distinct values, beliefs, customs, and traditions. While diversity can be enriching, it may also lead to fragmentation and tension if not managed properly. Traditional multiculturalism tends to focus on celebrating and preserving cultural differences, sometimes without stressing common identity or shared values. Communitarian multiculturalism, by contrast, seeks a balance: it recognises and values diversity while also promoting solidarity and unity across the society.

A key contribution to this perspective comes from Taylor's influential work *The Politics of Recognition*. Taylor argues that human life is fundamentally dialogical, that dignity emerges through recognition by others. His work focuses on the struggles of various social and cultural groups for recognition, stressing that such recognition goes beyond legal rights or formal equality. It includes the affirmation of unique cultural, religious, ethnic, or gender identities (Taylor, 1994, pp. 32–33).

However, there is a potential risk in the politics of recognition, namely, that prioritising group identity could restrict individual autonomy. While people should be able to grow up within a cultural tradition free from discrimination, this does not mean individuals must preserve that tradition. Cultural reproduction should be a possibility, not an obligation. Otherwise, the very individual freedom that underpins recognition may be lost. This view aligns with Kymlicka's argument that individuals must have the freedom

to engage with, reflect on, and, if they choose, revise or reject their inherited values (Kymlicka, 1996, p. 92).

Taylor's contribution significantly shaped the development of multiculturalism as a theory. However, his ideas may be more relevant to conflicts among culturally related groups (such as the British and French in Canada) or among citizens with long-standing ties to a common political entity. Because Taylor emphasises the social nature of selfhood and the individual's responsibilities to their community, he is often described as a communitarian thinker. Multiculturalism shares some ground with communitarianism in its focus on the internal goods and shared values of communities.

A central principle that underlies all forms of multiculturalism is tolerance. At its broadest level, this means state tolerance for all minority groups within its borders. More specifically, it concerns relations between different groups, and even among individuals within those groups. As noted earlier, multiculturalism is based on the idea of tolerance. But what is tolerance? The concept has been extensively studied throughout the history of political philosophy. "European philosophy began to consider tolerance as a form of compromise after the religious wars that erupted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Rivera, 2018, p. 91). The most systematic theories of tolerance were developed by liberal thinkers like Locke, Kant, Montesquieu, and Mill. The liberal tradition forms the core intellectual foundation for the modern understanding of tolerance. Over the past decades, the concept has become central in national, international, and institutional discourses on cultural justice and peaceful coexistence (Verkuyten et al., 2019).

According to UNESCO's Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, "Tolerance is respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression, and ways of being human" (1995). In the context of multiculturalism, tolerance is its basis, the harmony of diversity. It is not only a moral duty but also a political and legal necessity.

However, tolerance and multiculturalism as practised in immigrant societies do not imply that all cultures can seamlessly integrate into every context. Multicultural environments typically develop where cultural groups have coexisted over long periods, forming shared psychological, cultural, and moral norms. Newcomers or foreign cultural elements may not always find easy acceptance. In some cases, cultural

clashes may lead to serious conflicts or the inability of certain communities to adapt or be accepted. Cultural psychology shaped by long-term coexistence may resist unfamiliar or significantly different values.

The concept of multiculturalism has undergone substantial evolution and now functions as an umbrella term. Its theoretical basis, influenced by both liberal and communitarian traditions, offers multiple frameworks for managing cultural diversity. But can a universal model apply to the regulation of cultural diversity globally? The answer is clearly no. No two states are alike. However, if we roughly divide the world into democratic and non-democratic states, we can identify patterns in how cultural diversity is managed across liberal democracies, Western states, and authoritarian regimes.

## **1.2. Specificity of states' multicultural policies**

After addressing the theoretical basis of multiculturalism and discussing the main ideas, new questions arise. I would like to mention two of the most important ones for my study: How do states, where multiculturalism moves from idea to practice, actually manage their cultural diversity? What steps should be taken by states that have adopted multiculturalism as public policy to govern existing diversity? The presence of cultural diversity has been observed to potentially give rise to both minor and major conflicts. In fact, finding peace within this diversity and managing it, especially at the state level, is not an easy task. The management of ethnic and religious diversity has become a pressing concern for many nations in an increasingly interconnected world. Various states have adopted multiculturalism as a policy approach to address the challenges and opportunities emerging from diverse populations within their borders. The aim of this section is to analyse the implementation of multiculturalism policies across different nations and examine the key components of such policies.

Managing ethnic and religious diversity effectively requires not only a clear strategy but also a public policy framework that promotes inclusion and social cohesion. Before focusing specifically on multiculturalism, it is necessary to look at other observable models of diversity management. These include assimilationist approaches that favour the dominance of a single cultural identity, as well as integrationist and pluralist models that seek to recognise and accommodate minority rights. Public policy plays a crucial role here, as it creates the legal and institutional structures through which diversity is

addressed. Multicultural policies, in particular, offer governments a way to express a public commitment to equality and the recognition of cultural differences, often through formal support for minority communities. For this reason, an understanding of the broader policy landscape is important before considering the specific opportunities and challenges associated with multiculturalism. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the classification used here is not comprehensive. A fully developed typology of diversity governance models is still lacking.

*Equality and non-discrimination:* The issues of equality and non-discrimination have been extensively explored in scholarly literature from various perspectives. Scholars have delved into these topics from legal, philosophical, sociological, and political standpoints, examining the complexities of achieving true equality and combating discrimination in diverse contexts (see, e.g., Heinze, 2003; De Schutter, 2006; Monaghan, 2011;). This approach promotes equal treatment and opportunities for individuals regardless of their ethnic or religious background. It emphasises fairness, non-discrimination, and equal access to resources, rights, and responsibilities. Policies and practises are designed to ensure that everyone is treated equally. The principle of non-discrimination is typically found in constitutional provisions related to equality and in various international human rights agreements. The non-discrimination approach has faced criticism for its perceived limitations and inability to effectively address the deeply rooted issue of inequality. In cases where there is a systematic exclusion of individuals with certain characteristics, simply providing equal treatment may not be enough to address the issue (Bell, 2003, pp. 93-94).

*Inclusiveness:* The inclusive approach also very close to multiculturalist ideas but focuses more narrowly on creating an environment where individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds feel welcome, included, and valued. It emphasises the importance of representation, participation of all individuals in decision-making processes (Cunningham, 2023). This model often involves initiatives like creating diverse and inclusive space, implementing flexible policies, and fostering a sense of belonging.

*Integration:* The integration model aims to integrate different ethnic and religious groups into a cohesive society or organization while maintaining their unique identities. It promotes social cohesion, mutual respect, and intergroup interactions. Efforts are made to bridge cultural gaps, promote shared values, and create opportunities for

collaboration and cooperation. The difference between integration and multiculturalism is that integration emphasises the merging of diverse ethnic and cultural groups into a unified society with shared values and goals. According to McGhee (2008) “integration as just another word for assimilation” (p. 88) as it often involves promoting intergroup interaction, and a common identity. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the coexistence of different cultures and values within a society, allowing for the preservation of distinct cultural identities. Examining the several models of diversity management, Berry (2011) makes the following statement.

*Assimilation when sought by the non-dominant acculturating group is termed the Melting Pot. When Separation is forced by the dominant group it is Segregation. Marginalization, when imposed by the dominant group it is Exclusion. Finally, for Integration, when cultural diversity is a feature of the society as a whole, including all the various ethnocultural groups, it is called Multiculturalism. (p. 7)*

The successful implementation of integration is dependent on the openness and inclusivity of the dominant society towards cultural diversity. Non-dominant groups can only choose and execute Integration effectively under such circumstances. It is significant that states with immigrant populations experience greater challenges with integration (Algan et al., 2012, pp. 261-262).

The key difference between the inclusive and the integration model lies in their approaches to diversity. The inclusive model aims to embrace and value diversity, promoting active participation and inclusion of individuals from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, the integration model focuses on incorporating diverse individuals into a dominant culture or society while seeking to minimize differences. Both models have their merits and potential challenges, and organizations or societies may adopt a combination of approaches based on their specific contexts and goals.

*Cultural relativism:* The cultural relativism approach acknowledges and respects the diverse cultural and religious practices of different groups. It emphasizes understanding and accepting these differences without making judgments based on one's own cultural or religious perspective. This model encourages tolerance and openness. 'Strong cultural relativism holds that culture is the principal source of the validity of a moral right or rule' (Donnelly, 1984, p. 401). The concept of cultural relativism pertains to

refraining from evaluating a culture based on our own set of moral or societal norms, values, and beliefs. It is important to approach the cultural practises of other groups with an understanding of their cultural context.

*Assimilation*: the concept of assimilation related to the process in which individuals or groups adopt the cultural norms, values, and practises of the dominant culture. This often results in a reduction or weakening of their original cultural identity (Pauls, 2024). The process of assimilation can be initiated by an individual's own choice or can be influenced by external factors such as societal norms and expectations. The process of assimilation is often viewed as a viable option for new immigrants who are looking to integrate into a new state. This is especially true when there is no pre-existing community of the same ethnic background in the state. In such cases, immigrants are faced with the choice of either integrating into the society or assimilating completely. However, it is important to note that this approach contradicts the liberal theory of minority rights discussed earlier in this chapter, particularly when applied to ethnic and national minorities with a historical presence in the state.

Critiques of assimilation theory argue that the effects of assimilation in today's context are variable rather than uniformly beneficial (Greenman & Xie, 2008). Promote cultural sensitivity, encourage dialogue, and foster understanding and appreciation of different cultures and beliefs. It can be asserted with a high degree of certainty that multiculturalism stands in obvious contrast to assimilation. However, the same cannot be definitively stated regarding integration and other comparable models, as there exist several shared characteristics between multiculturalism and these alternative approaches.

The aforementioned models of diversity regulation are not comprehensive list of the various approaches. These represent only a small selection. It's also important to note that these models are not mutually exclusive, and different aspects of each model can be combined and adapted to suit specific contexts. Additionally, effective management of ethnic and religious diversity requires ongoing commitment, open communication, and continuous evaluation and improvement of policies and practises. Even though multiculturalism seems to be a new approach to the control of ethno-cultural diversity, it is neither novel nor does it have a single form. One could argue that, depending on the context of the nation in which it is applied, multiculturalism gives rise to different models.

Canadian approach to multiculturalism stands out as a highly successful model of multicultural policy implementation and is considered a national policy (Paquet, 1989, p. 17). As previously noted, the notion of multiculturalism holds a significant place within Canadian identity (Forbes, 2019, p. 47). It is rooted in the concept of ethnic pluralism, often referred to as the ‘mosaic,’ originally proposed by American travel writer Victoria Hayward in 1922 (Raska, 2020). Subsequent authors popularised the term ‘mosaic’ and associated it with multiculturalism in Canada. Presently, the phrase ‘Canadian cultural mosaic’ is commonly used to describe the state's multiculturalism strategy. Canada's multiculturalism policy, grounded in the core values of equality, diversity, and inclusivity, has allowed the nation to celebrate its cultural mosaic and foster a thriving society that embraces individuals from various backgrounds. It has been stated that the objective of implementing a policy of ‘multiculturalism’ in Canada was to unite opposing cultures, the dominant cultural groups with minority cultures in the nation, particularly the English-speaking people with French-speaking people, who were a minority. At the same time the multicultural route of Canada can be linked back to its indigenous heritage and the arrival of immigrants from all over the world. Waves of immigrants have introduced their distinct cultures, languages, and traditions to Canada throughout its history.

The formation of Canadian society traces back to ethnically diverse British and French immigrants, alongside indigenous peoples, known as aborigines. Subsequently, Germans, Italians, Chinese, Ukrainians, and North American Indians contributed significantly to Canada's population. This ethnic diversity has only expanded further with modern migration trends over the past three decades. As outlined by Brosseau and Dewing (2009), multiculturalism is characterized both as a sociological fact, indicating the presence of individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and as an ideology encompassing a coherent set of ideas and ideals celebrating Canada's cultural diversity. Furthermore, at the policy level, multiculturalism involves the management of diversity through formal initiatives at federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels (p. 1).

In his research on multiculturalism in Canada Berry also notes three distinct definitions of this concept in Canada: “multiculturalism as demographic fact (the presence of cultural diversity in the Canadian population); multiculturalism as an ideology (the general desirability among Canadians for maintaining and sharing this diversity); and

as a public policy (governmental orientation and action towards this fact)” (2013, p. 664). The foundation of multiculturalism in Canada lies in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which defines key aspects of the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy. Since 1971, diversity, anchored in bilingualism, has been legally recognized. The inclusion of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Constitution in 1982 further solidified this commitment (see, *The Constitution Acts 1867 to 1982*). Subsequently, the adoption of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1985 elevated the ethnocultural mosaic to a cornerstone of Canadian society and national identity, reinforced by legislative and political actions.

The emergence of multiculturalism as a policy in Canada reflects a historical reaction to ethnic tensions and injustices against indigenous communities. It has been observed that this policy has achieved a considerable degree of success. The Canadian Multiculturalism Policy has yielded also numerous benefits for the state. It has attracted highly skilled immigrants, contributed to economic growth, and enhanced Canada's global reputation as a welcoming and inclusive nation. By utilising the strengths of a diverse population, Canada has gained cultural richness, innovation. However, challenges persist. Achieving true equality and overcoming systemic barriers remain ongoing tasks. As per Kymlicka (2015), multiculturalism in Canada remains relevant and efficient in dealing with diversity and inclusion, as its initial objectives and approaches still provide a solid foundation. Kymlicka recognises the necessity for continuous adjustment and expresses optimism for the successful development of multiculturalism. He supports this viewpoint by referring to its previous achievements as proof (p.17). Balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the need for integration can be complex. Ongoing efforts are required to address these challenges and ensure that the benefits of multiculturalism are enjoyed by all Canadians.

The presence of multiculturalism has been crucial in shaping Canada's social structure, effectively reducing domestic ethnic conflicts and creating a unique international image for the state. In addition, Canadians have skillfully employed multiculturalism as a means to promote their political and economic interests on the global platform. This strategy has served as a source of inspiration for other nations, such as Australia, the United States, Britain, and other developing states, leading them to implement comparable multicultural policies. Multiculturalism is widely supported by policymakers, liberal philosophers, and social advocates. It is considered a democratic

and humanitarian approach to meeting the needs of many minority groups, such as immigrants, Indigenous peoples, linguistic minorities, and religious communities (Srikanth, 2012, p.17).

Another instance of multiculturalism policy can be found in Australia. Following Canada's lead, Australia shifted its stance during the 1970s from the former White Australia Policy to embrace multiculturalism, reflecting its diverse society. Australia, as a multicultural nation, acknowledges the significance of managing diversity and promoting social inclusion through its multiculturalism policy. The historical origins of multiculturalism in Australia come from the period of post-World War II immigration and changes in the political sphere in the 1970s. The Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs was formed by an Act in 1979, and its first Director and Council were chosen early in 1980. The Institute had been established up with the main objective of offering advice to the government on all topics to do with multiculturalism (Sheldrake, 1987).

The Australian multiculturalism policy has played a significant role in shaping the nation's social structure. By recognizing and embracing diversity, Australia has made strides toward social inclusion and cohesion. Multiculturalism in Australia emphasizes settlement and integration rather than fostering separate ethno-cultural growth (Moran, 2017, p. 25). This unique perspective suggests viewing multiculturalism and interculturalism as complementary approaches to effective diversity governance (Elias et al., 2021). Unlike Canada, Australia lacks constitutional provisions for multiculturalism, with multicultural affairs managed by the Department of Home Affairs. Cities have ethnic affairs commissions overseeing minority-related laws, and numerous NGOs implement initiatives for ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities. However, ongoing challenges require continued dialogue, research, and policy development to ensure the policy's continued success.

It is crucial to briefly examine the governance of ethnic diversity in the United States, a state known for its significant multicultural population. The United States is known for its rich cultural diversity, with people from different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds contributing to its social structure. Joppke (1996) argues that multiculturalism in the United States is primarily a response to the nation's enduring race issues rather than recent immigration waves. It represents a weak challenge to the prevailing civic concept of nationhood, allowing for ethnic diversity alongside.

Originating within the context of America's civil rights movement, multiculturalism is framed as a pursuit of group rights for historically oppressed minority groups, often leading to complex interpretations of immigrant experiences and conflicts with established minority communities like Blacks (p. 454-455).

The 'melting pot' approach is an important to note concept when examining the United States. The melting pot theory has been used to describe societies that are formed by an assortment of immigrant cultures that eventually produce new hybrid social and cultural forms (Maddern, 2013). This term often used to describe the assimilation of diverse cultural and ethnic groups into a unified society. It suggests that different cultural identities merge to create a new and harmonious cultural identity. In the context of the United States, the concept of the melting pot has historically been associated with the idea that immigrants and their descendants would assimilate into the dominant American culture. This concept implies that individuals would adopt American values, language, and customs, leaving behind their original cultural identities.

The prevailing belief persists that the United States continues to uphold assimilation and the ideal of the melting pot (Citrin et al., 2012, p. 532). The melting pot idea has been criticized for its potential to suppress cultural diversity and discourage the preservation of distinct cultural heritages. Critics argue that it can lead to the removal of unique cultural practices and identities in favour of a homogenized mainstream culture. "A key shortcoming of the Melting Pot theory is that it ignores existing local contexts that influence the choices and actions of both dominant and minority groups, and the impacts of these on acculturation" (Berray, 2019, p. 144). In recent years, there has been a shift towards embracing cultural diversity and the concept of a 'salad bowl' or 'mosaic' instead of the melting pot. These metaphors recognise and celebrate the coexistence of different cultures, allowing individuals and communities to maintain their distinct identities while contributing to the larger society. It is important to note that the melting pot and alternative metaphors are concepts and perspectives used to understand and describe societal dynamics. The actual experiences of assimilation and cultural integration are complex and multifaceted, influenced by various social, historical, and individual factors. The United States does not have an official national policy of multiculturalism. However, the state's approach to diversity and inclusion can be seen as reflecting principles of multiculturalism in various ways. The contemporary

United States places significant emphasis on the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and integration as key components of diversity management.

The multiculturalism policy, initially successful in Canada, faced challenges when applied to culturally diverse European states like France, Germany, and Great Britain. Recent skepticism from European leaders, such as Angela Merkel, David Cameron, and Nicolas Sarkozy, reflects concerns about multiculturalism's effectiveness and its impact on national identity. European nations are reevaluating multiculturalism, grappling with issues of autonomy, separatism, and integration of immigrant groups (Asadov, 2022, p.16-17).

Despite failures in some states, successful continuation of multiculturalism is evident in states like Canada and Australia. Additionally, European nations such as Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark effectively implement multicultural policies. For instance, one of the key aspects of Switzerland's multiculturalism is its emphasis on multilingualism. The state officially recognizes four national languages (Federal Constitution, 1999), and this linguistic diversity is integrated into various aspects of public life, including education, administration, and public services. This fosters a sense of belonging and inclusivity for diverse linguistic communities. Switzerland is characterised as a multilingual nation, however not all its citizens possess multilingual abilities, as the majority are raised primarily speaking their mother tongue (Kuźelewska, 2016, p. 125-126). The Swiss government has also taken measures to protect minority rights and prevent discrimination based on ethnicity, race, religion, or language. Anti-discrimination laws (Federal Department of Home Affairs, n.d.) ensure that all citizens are treated equally and have access to the same opportunities regardless of their background. Furthermore, Switzerland actively supports cultural initiatives and projects that preserve and promote the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups. This commitment to cultural diversity enriches the state's social fabric and fosters a sense of pride and belonging among its citizens.

Finding a state that closely matches Switzerland's state structure, political system, and approach to governing ethno-linguistic diversity poses a considerable challenge. There are several primary factors that contribute to Switzerland's distinctiveness. The fact that this is one of the states where the oldest direct democracy system was established, along with the superiority of liberal democratic values, demonstrate that it is an essential component of the Western world. That is why Switzerland's approach to ethnic and

cultural diversity management is usually compared with that of Western states. The distinctiveness of Switzerland is also evident in the ongoing discussions over its categorization as a nation-state, multinational state, or alternative polity (Chollet, 2011, p. 752; see, also Stojanović, 2021). This issue explored in the scholarly work of Kymlicka (1995) too. His view may be summarised in the following statement: that Switzerland, as a multination state, is not a nation-state, as its common loyalty is a shared patriotism rather than a national identity (p. 14). “Many will agree that Switzerland is a non-nation-state (a non-unitary state)” (Ipperciel 2011, p. 805). The argument can be made that Switzerland's lack of nation-state status is the primary factor contributing to its success in achieving ethnic stability. Switzerland's multicultural policy is grounded in the principles of federalism, which allows for a decentralized approach to cultural matters, enabling individual cantons to tailor policies to their specific linguistic and cultural contexts. Switzerland's federal structure allows a considerable degree of autonomy to its cantons, enabling them to manage local affairs, including language and cultural policies while upholding the unity of the nation. Particularly, the implementation of FCNM in Switzerland and Azerbaijan will be examined in the subsequent section of this dissertation.

Multicultural policies can help to reduce interethnic conflict in a variety of ways, including recognising and valuing diversity, promoting equal rights and opportunities, encouraging intercultural dialogue, and understanding, protecting minority rights, peaceful coexistence, and social cohesion, and so on. It should be noted that the efficacy of multicultural policies in preventing interethnic conflict varies depending on state. Open and constant communication, community engagement, and regular review and modification of policies are required to ensure their success in resolving interethnic conflicts and maintaining long-term peace.

Measuring states' multicultural policies is a crucial tool for empirical and comparative analyses. Helbling outlines various indicators in his work, with a total of 9 identified (Helbling, 2013: p. 557). Among these, the Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP) index stands out as particularly significant for this study. Directed by Banting and Kymlicka, the MCP index monitors and evaluates multiculturalism policies across Western democracies, providing standardized information for comparative research and enhancing understanding of state-minority relations (MCP, n.d.-a). This index

encompasses measures for immigration groups, historic national minorities, and indigenous peoples.

While analysing MCP for each of three above-mentioned main types of minorities, we can observe that states like Canada, Australia, the United States, New Zealand and Denmark are more successful in the implementation of different type of multicultural policies. It is essential to note that the measurement tools utilised for MCP are founded upon the principles of the liberal theory of minority rights, which is primarily argued for by Kymlicka. As explained in the introduction for the measurement of multicultural policies applied in Azerbaijan, this study uses as an additional method and the same tools to analyse the implementation of multicultural policies in Azerbaijan over the past decade in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

One important point from the analysis of multicultural policies is the variety of models used by states to address cultural diversity. These include equality and non-discrimination, inclusion, integration, cultural relativism, assimilation, and multiculturalism itself. Each model offers different strategies for managing diversity, reflecting the complex nature of multicultural societies. While some prioritise assimilation into a dominant culture, others emphasise preserving and celebrating cultural differences. The types of multicultural policies in Europe and elsewhere may vary. A shared feature across these policies is the acceptance of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity within a state. However, recognition alone is not sufficient for a policy to be truly multicultural. Why? The following definition of Canadian multiculturalism policy may help clarify this: “The Canadian policy of multiculturalism intends to eliminate racism and discrimination in all walks of life and guarantee to the minorities the right to maintain and promote their cultural identities” (Srikanth 2012: p. 17). Emphasising the terms ‘guarantee’ and ‘promote’ in this definition shows the level of commitment expected from a government that adopts multiculturalism as an official policy.

From examination particularly multiculturalism as a state policy, I ascertain that multiculturalism serves as a strategy to uphold internal stability and bolster a state's global standing, safeguarding the rights and values of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. One can view it as a form of cultural diplomacy and a paradigm for ethnic and cultural policies. The cultural policy model choice is critical for a state's societal, cultural, economic, and political advancement. Conversely, inadequate policy

implementation may lead to actual and potential conflicts. Multiculturalism fosters societal cohesion while respecting the equality of all cultures. Integrating multiculturalism into national security frameworks is vital, as it constitutes a fundamental aspect of moral, spiritual, and ideological existence. Thus, ensuring multicultural security is essential for ethnically and religiously diverse states, akin to guaranteeing energy and economic security, requiring fairness, confidence, and continual improvement from the state.

Through a comprehensive review of literature, I have identified key steps that states should consider when approaching minority groups through multiculturalism.

- States must recognize and embrace the diverse nature of their populations as a foundational principle.
- It is imperative for the state to actively safeguard existing diversity by providing systematic financial support to ethnic, religious, and cultural organizations.
- Politically, the state must ensure equal treatment of all ethnic and religious groups and their members within society.
- Minority rights should be enshrined in legislation, ideally within the state's constitution, to guarantee their protection.
- States should incorporate the principles of international agreements on diversity into domestic law and foster open communication in this regard.
- States should offer special privileges to select members of minority groups to facilitate their participation in governance processes.
- Support for the preservation and enhancement of ethnocultural diversity should not only come from the state but also from society at large.
- If a state adopts multiculturalism as its approach to managing ethnic and religious diversity, it would be more appropriate to align this strategy with the principles of liberal multiculturalism theory.
- Policies and programmes alone are insufficient to create a truly multicultural society. Systematic implementation is required.

These steps outline how states can approach multiculturalism in a practical way that supports inclusion, equality, and respect for diversity. Looking at how different states manage cultural and religious diversity, we see a wide range of approaches. Some policies have worked better than others, depending on local context. Still, multiculturalism remains important, it helps maintain social harmony, protect minority

rights, and, in some cases, even strengthen a state's image internationally. What matters most is that governments take diversity seriously, treat all communities fairly, and encourage open, honest dialogue. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, but with the right commitment, multiculturalism can be a powerful tool for building a more stable and inclusive society.

While this chapter focuses on the normative foundations of multiculturalism, subsequent chapters adopt a constructivist lens to critically examine how these ideals are reinterpreted or instrumentalised in the Azerbaijani context. This combination allows the study to explore not only what multiculturalism should be, but also how it is used in specific political and institutional contexts.

## **Chapter 2. Factors of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy**

This chapter examines the factors that shape Azerbaijan's approach to multiculturalism, which is a one of the key aspect of this study's research question. It focuses on both internal and external influences that arguably contribute to the formulation and evolution of this policy. Preliminary observations suggest that ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan, its membership in the Council of Europe and the OSCE, the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and separatist tendencies (such as the Talysh and Lezgi disputes) play significant roles. Analyses in this chapter are a starting point for exploring what these factors are and how they may influence Azerbaijan's multicultural policy within a broader domestic and international framework, which will be continued and expanded upon in relevant sections of subsequent chapters.

While outlining the structural and historical background that led to the adoption of multiculturalism as a state policy, this chapter also remains consistent with the constructivist orientation of the study. It recognises that these factors are not neutral but are interpreted, framed, and prioritised through state narratives and ideological agendas. This perspective allows us to analyse how diversity itself becomes a political construct embedded in broader nation-building and legitimacy strategies.

The analysis of the factors outlined above seeks to trace potential cause-and-effect relationships influencing Azerbaijan's approach to multiculturalism. It assumes that multiple factors, domestic diversity, international affiliations, and regional conflicts, interact in shaping policy outcomes. Rather than providing deterministic explanations, these analyses explores how these factors are framed, prioritised, and narrated by the state. The analysis builds on the methodological foundation introduced earlier in the thesis, combining literature and document review with insights from semi-structured interviews. Although interview data were introduced in the general methodology, here I draw selectively on relevant responses, particularly to the first set of questions (see Appendix A), from representatives of ethnic and religious groups and where only relevant from some other interviews. The expert views and political voices on these factors will be analysed separately in subsequent sections of Chapter 3, particularly within the conceptual framework of political forces and think tanks. This approach follows the principles of causal inference in qualitative research, where emphasis is placed on contextual interpretation and process tracing rather than statistical generalisation (Maxwell, 2004; Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

## 2.1. Ethnic and religious diversity

After carefully analysing the theoretical foundations and practical implementations of multicultural policies discussed in the first chapter, it becomes clear that the main reason for any state to adopt multicultural policies is the diverse ethnic and religious composition of its population. As previously discussed, multicultural policies around the world exhibit both unique and common features. There remains ongoing debate regarding the specific minority groups targeted by these policies, with no definitive consensus reached. Theoretical frameworks often advocate for the inclusion of all minority groups in multiculturalism initiatives. However, in practice, these policies tend to predominantly focus on ethnic and religious minorities. Similarly, Azerbaijan's multicultural policy appears to align with this trend, primarily directed towards ethnic and religious minorities. Here, I would like to present a few important questions regarding this section: Which ethnic and religious minority groups are present in Azerbaijan? What are the distinctive characteristics of these groups? What distinguishes them from the dominant group? How are these characteristics maintained? Furthermore, the list persists.

To begin, I will provide a thorough analysis of the ethnic composition of Azerbaijan. Primarily, it is noteworthy to highlight that the State Statistical Committee (SSC) of the Republic of Azerbaijan is the only government organisation that officially documents and provides information about the ethnic groups in Azerbaijan. Every ten years, the SSC conducts a population census, which also includes information on the ethnic composition of the Azerbaijani population. Later in this section, I will try to discuss how they collect this information and whether representatives of minority ethnic groups agree with it.

According to the last Population Census in the Republic of Azerbaijan (2022) held in 2019, in addition to Turkic-speaking Azerbaijanians [Azerbaijani Turks], which make up 94.8% of the population, 19 minority ethnic groups are mentioned to live in Azerbaijan, namely: Lezgis [Lezgins], Talyshs, Russians, Ukrainians, Avars, Turkishs [Ahiska or Meskhetian Turks], Tats, Sakhurs [Tsakhurs], Georgians, Ingiloyes, Kurds, Tatars [Tatars], Kryzs [Grizs], Jews, Udins [Udis], Khynalygs, Budugs, Armenians,

Haputs,<sup>2</sup> and others, which is only 0.1% of the population. Overall, minority ethnic groups consist of 5.2% of the population (pp. 333-334).

**Table 1.** Ethnic composition of the population of Azerbaijan from 1979 to 2019

Millətlər və etnik qrupların adları	Min nəfər Thsd person					yekuna nisbətən, faizlə as % of total					Names of nationality and ethnic groups
	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019	
Azərbaycan Respublikası üzrə - cəmi	6026,5	7021,2	7953,4	8922,4	9951,4	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	Republic of Azerbaijan - total
<i>o cümlədən, millətlər və etnik qruplar üzrə:</i>											<i>including nationality and ethnic groups:</i>
azərbaycanlılar	4708,8	5805,0	7205,5	8172,8	9436,1	78,1	82,7	90,6	91,6	94,8	azerbaijanians
ləzgilər	158,1	171,4	178,0	180,3	167,6	2,6	2,4	2,2	2,0	1,7	lezgis
talışlar	...	21,2	76,8	112,0	87,6	...	0,3	1,0	1,3	0,9	talyshs
ruslar	475,3	392,3	141,7	119,3	71,0	7,9	5,6	1,8	1,3	0,7	russians
ukraynalılar	26,4	32,3	29,0	21,5	13,9	0,4	0,5	0,4	0,3	0,1	ukrainians
avarlar	36,0	44,1	50,9	49,8	48,6	0,6	0,6	0,6	0,6	0,5	avars
türklər	7,9	17,7	43,4	38,0	30,5	0,1	0,2	0,5	0,4	0,3	turkisks
tatlar	8,9	10,2	10,9	25,2	27,7	0,14	0,14	0,13	0,3	0,3	tats
saxurlar	8,5	13,3	15,9	12,3	13,4	0,1	0,2	0,2	0,1	0,1	sakhurs
gürcülər	11,4	14,2	14,9	9,9	8,4	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,1	0,1	georgians
ingiloylar	...	...	...	...	1,8	...	...	...	...	0,0	ingiloys
kürdlər	5,7	12,2	13,1	6,1	4,1	0,1	0,2	0,2	0,1	0,0	kurds
tatarlar	31,4	28,6	30,0	25,9	17,7	0,5	0,4	0,4	0,3	0,2	tatarsians
qızılər	...	...	...	4,4	2,1	...	...	...	0,04	0,0	kryzs
yahudilər	35,5	30,8	8,9	9,1	5,1	0,6	0,4	0,1	0,1	0,1	jews
udinlər	5,8	6,1	4,1	3,8	3,5	0,1	0,1	0,05	0,04	0,1	udins
xınalıqlar	...	...	...	2,2	3,5	...	...	...	0,02	0,0	khynalygs
buduqlar	...	...	...	...	1,1	...	...	...	...	0,0	budugs
ermənilər	475,5	390,5	120,7	120,3	0,2	7,9	5,6	1,5	1,3	0,0	armenians
haputlar	...	...	...	...	2,5	...	...	...	...	0,0	haputs
digər millətlər	31,3	31,3	9,6	9,5	5,0	0,66	0,46	0,12	0,1	0,1	other nationalities

*Note:* The table was taken from the publication of the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, ‘Population of Azerbaijan’ (2023, p. 21).

<sup>2</sup> I want to clarify that the names of some ethnic groups provided by the SSC in English differ from the forms accepted in academic literature and other English sources. For example, in statistics that provide ethnic groups' names in English alongside Azerbaijani, we find names such as “Lezgis,” “Turkisks,” “Sakhurs,” “Tatarsians,” “Kryzs,” and “Udin.” However, other sources generally accept these names as “Lezgins,” “Ahiska or Meskhetian Turks,” “Tsakhurs or Saxurs,” “Tatars,” “Udis,” “Grizs,” and I assume that this is a technical issue and may be a result of automatic translation. To further consider these groups, I will use the most commonly used versions of these names, as they appear in academic literature.

It is possible to obtain official information about the ethnic composition of Azerbaijani population from 1926 to 2019 in the publications issued by SSC of Azerbaijan in different years. In the latest official publication of SSC (Population of Azerbaijan, 2023, p. 21), we can track these data between 1979 and 2019. The information may be observed in table 1, which I chose to replicate exactly from the above-referenced publication. From my perspective, it will improve our visual perception of the changes happening in ethnic composition in Azerbaijan over several decades. For example, we can observe from the first table that, according to the statistical data of 1989 and 1999, the Jewish population of Azerbaijan significantly decreased between the 80s and 90s of the last century. The number of people of Jewish origin in Azerbaijan, which was 30.8 thousand in the 1989 census, has decreased to 8.9 thousand in the 1999 census. In my publication, *Jewish Communities in Azerbaijan: Past and Present* (Asadov, 2023a), I attempted to examine the situation of Jewish communities in Azerbaijan and the reasons for mass migration. I have concluded that this trend is evident from the statistical data and could be associated with factors such as the consequences of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's vulnerable economic and political situation in its early years of independence, or the willingness of Jewish people to move to their historical homeland, Israel (p. 74).

Table 1 also shows a significant decline in the population of Russians, Armenians, Tatars, Ahiska Turks, Ukrainians, and other ethnic groups in Azerbaijan over the past three decades. The significant decrease in the size of the Armenian population is being attributed to the absence of a census in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan for 2019. The issue here is that during the censuses of previous two decades, 1999 and 2009, the lands inhabited by the Armenian population of Azerbaijan were under occupation of separatist regime, but for the same periods, the SSC of the Republic of Azerbaijan presented the number of the Armenian population as approximately 120,000. Nevertheless, I will address the decrease in the Armenian population of Azerbaijan specifically in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in this chapter.

When it comes to other ethnic groups it may be similar to a decline in Azerbaijan's Jewish population or another phenomenon. I cannot definitively determine the reasons behind these observable phenomena, and I believe that each of them requires careful examination and separate study. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that this decline cannot be regarded as a positive development, particularly in light of

Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. One might also consider whether the narrowing of ethnic diversity, intentional or otherwise, has been discursively framed or institutionally reinforced as part of a broader nation-building narrative.

Before addressing other key issues in this section, it is important to clarify the ethnic groups classified as 'other nationalities,' as listed in Table 1 and represented in the statistical data. Who are they? According to the available statistics, there is no official information about these groups beyond the fact that their numbers more than five thousand. This was one of the questions I intended to ask representatives of the State Statistics Committee (SSC) of Azerbaijan. However, as noted in the introduction, numerous attempts to interview officials, including those from the SSC, were unsuccessful.

Based on a review of academic literature and other sources, one may make a reasonable assumption about the identities of some of these groups. For instance, scholarly works describe the Yergujs, Aliks, and Jeks (dzheks) as living in the villages around Shahdag in northern Azerbaijan, alongside other small groups such as the Khynalygs, Budugs, Haputs, and Griz, collectively referred to in the literature as the 'Shahdagh peoples' (Cavadov, 2000, pp. 182–184). I personally encountered these communities during a 2019 visit to the region for a blog post. During this field visit, I spoke with representatives of these groups and observed that they were spread across seven distinct villages (Asadov, 2019). From this, we can plausibly identify Yergujs, Aliks, and Jeks as ethnic groups not listed by name in the official census data.

The search could be extended further. For example, we know that descendants of Poles who came to Azerbaijan for various reasons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still reside there. According to the official website of the Polish community in Azerbaijan, there are over 100 registered members (*Wspólnota Katolicka w Baku*, n.d.). In my earlier work on ethnic diversity in Azerbaijan, I also pointed to the presence of Arabs, Persians, and Roma people, groups not formally recognised in the census, or simply categorised as 'others' without further clarification (Asadov, 2023a, pp. 52–53).

Among the ethnic groups not included in official records, the Roma minority stands out as especially visible in Azerbaijan, as indicated by their presence throughout the state, including the capital city, Baku. Despite their visibility, they are lacking official data and less academic research, despite the fact that the Azerbaijani press frequently

publishes informative articles about them. Unfortunately, many Roma people are involved with confrontations and small crimes, which contributes to a bad public view of this community in Azerbaijan. The Roma community in Azerbaijan predominantly resides in permanent settlements located in the Baku, Balaken, Yevlakh, and Shamakhi and other regions. In Azerbaijan generally people refer them as ‘*Garachi*’. The ‘BBC News Azərbaycanca’ (2016) reports that there are more than 2,500 of them in one street of Yevlakh alone, and many of them do not even have ID cards. According to a recent study, representatives of the three main divisions of the so-called ‘*Gipsies*,’ Dom, Lom, and Rom, reside in Azerbaijan (Marushiakova & Popov, 2020, p. 11). It is evident that the ‘other nationalities’ category, as shown in the statistical data with a count of around 5 thousand, is subject to inquiry, particularly regarding its numerical accuracy.

When we add these ethnic groups to the groups given in official statistics, we see that representatives of more than 25 ethnic groups live in a minority together with the majority of Azerbaijani Turks in Azerbaijan. Some of these minority groups are indigenous to Azerbaijan, while others have migrated and settled here due to various socio-political processes occurring at different stages of history. It is important to note that such classifications are not neutral but reflect the way identity and belonging are framed within national narratives. I want to initially divide these minority ethnic groups into two categories: groups that have relations with states that consist of the majority of the same ethnic groups, like Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews, and others, and ethnic groups that live compactly only in Azerbaijan or other states but do not associate with majority ethnic groups of other independent states, like Lezgins, Talyshs, Avars, Ahiska Turks, Tats, Tsakhurs, Ingiloy, Kurds, Tatars, Griz, Udis, Khynalygs, Budugs, Haputs, and others. Referring to literature, I can also add one more classification that is believed to define indigenous groups to Azerbaijan, like the Lezgins, Talyshs, Avars, Tsakhurs, Ingiloy, Griz, Udis, Khynalygs, Budugs, Haputs, and others (Qeybullayev, 1991; Buduqlu, 1994, p. 19; Cavadov, 2000).

In some cases, neighbouring or geopolitically engaged states act as *kin-states*, states that claim cultural, historical, or ethnic ties to minority communities residing within Azerbaijan. These ties are often based on shared language, religion, or identity narratives that transcend borders. Such states may offer symbolic recognition or material support to their co-ethnics, which can empower minority identities but also complicate national integration efforts. A clear example is the Russian community in

Azerbaijan, which maintains strong cultural and informational ties with the Russian Federation. Russian schools, media outlets, and religious institutions in Azerbaijan often receive backing, directly or indirectly, from Russian state agencies or cultural organisations. Similarly, the Jewish community in Azerbaijan has historical and cultural ties to both Israel and the broader Jewish diaspora, sometimes resulting in external forms of support or recognition. These relationships may be shaped as much by historical memory and imagined solidarity as by current strategic interests. As one independent expert remarked, certain states “identify with one or another minority and [have] at various times and to various degrees of intensity and success, provided support” (Interviewer, V).

In Azerbaijan, ethnic groups can also be categorised into separate groups based on their association with linguistic families or branches, religion, and other identifying attributes. One of the most crucial aspects of an ethnic group's identity in Azerbaijan is their language. Particularly for minority ethnic groups, safeguarding their national identity is important, and this often revolves around language preservation efforts. The forthcoming chapters of the dissertation will critically delve into the mechanisms employed to protect these rights and the institutional frameworks supporting them in Azerbaijan. However, here I want to focus on categorising ethnic groups in Azerbaijan based on the languages they speak.

Azerbaijan has a plural-language environment. People living in Azerbaijan are currently associated with several language groups and families, which can be preliminarily classified as follows:

- The Turkic language family is represented by two languages in Azerbaijan: Azerbaijani (Oghuz branch) and Tatar (Kipchak branch).
- The North Caucasian language family includes the following languages spoken in Azerbaijan: Lezgi, Tsakhur, Udi, Budug, Kryz, Khynalyg, and Haput (all considered part of the Lezgian subgroup of the Nakho-Dagestanian branch),<sup>3</sup> as well as Avar (Avar-Andic subgroup)

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<sup>3</sup> We can also include Jek, Elik, and Rutul, languages spoken by relatively small minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, in this list.

- The Indo-European language family is represented by several languages in Azerbaijan: Russian and Ukrainian (Eastern Slavic branch), as well as Talysh, Kurdish, Tat<sup>4</sup> (Iranian branch), and Armenian.
- The Kartvelian language family includes Georgian and Ingiloy (a dialect of Georgian) spoken in Azerbaijan. (Gudava, 1998; Мамедова, 2005; Kassian, 2015, p. 2).

The 2019 Azerbaijan population census (2022) lists only the following ethnic groups based on fluency in their mother tongue: Azerbaijani, Lezgin, Talysh, Russian, Ukrainian, Avar, Turkish [Ahiska], Tat, Sakhur, Georgian, Ingiloy, Kurd, Tatar, Griz, Jews [Judeo-Tat and Hebrew], Udi, Khynalyg, Budug, Armenians, Haput, and others, again without specifying who are the ‘others’ and what languages they speak. Additionally, it provides information regarding the foreign languages spoken by the overall population, as well as the urban and rural populations, along with other demographic groups. In table 2, I provide data solely on the population's proficiency in both the native language and the official language of Azerbaijan, which is Azerbaijani. Based on this data, doing a simple calculation enabled me to identify those who are not fluent in their native language and those who are not fluent in the Azerbaijani language. It should be noted that the information provided by SSC of the Republic of Azerbaijan is limited to population who are 3 years of age and older (pp. 430–443).

**Table 2.** Language fluency of ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>Number of Population</b>	<b>Not fluent in mother tongue</b>	<b>Fluent in Azerbaijani</b>
Azerbaijani	9 095 632	0,0%	100,00 %
Lezgin	161 461	14,8 %	96,14 %
Talysh	84 331	28,7 %	95,64 %
Russian	69 870	0,5 %	78,20 %

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<sup>4</sup> In Azerbaijan, mountain Jews speak a dialect of Tat known as Judeo-Tat or Juhuri.

Avar	47 019	1,2 %	94,05 %
Turkish	29 356	5,4 %	94,23 %
Tat	26 731	43,6 %	97,86 %
Tatar	17 234	10,7 %	89,38 %
Ukrainian	13 623	40,2 %	89,45 %
Sakhur	12 865	2,2 %	94,65 %
Georgian	8 279	1,6 %	90,45 %
Jews	5 019	2,3 %	93,54 %
Kurd	3 949	53,2 %	97,11 %
Udi	3 457	0,2 %	76,54 %
Khynalyg	3 334	25,9 %	98,08 %
Haput	2 362	29,9 %	99,70 %
Griz	1 982	61,3 %	99,65 %
Ingiloy	1 734	0,5 %	99,19 %
Budug	1 011	70,1 %	99,01 %
Armenian	178	67,9 %	92,70 %
Others	4 873	44,5 %	90,09 %

*Note:* The table was created by the author based on data provided by the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Population of Azerbaijan (2023, pp. 430–443).

From Table 2, it is clear that the languages of the Budug, Armenian, Griz, Kurd, Tat, Ukrainian, and ‘other’ minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan are under the greatest threat, since more than 40–70% of people who identify themselves as belonging to these

ethnic groups do not speak their mother tongue. The assessment of the Haput, Khynalyg, Talysh, Lezgin, and Tatar languages is more nuanced, as 10–20% of the population within these groups is not fluent in their native language. Less than 10% of Russian, Avar, Turkish, Tsakhur, Georgian, Ingiloy, Jewish, and Udi people in Azerbaijan are not fluent in their mother tongue, indicating a generally positive level of language retention. The most alarming situation is for the languages spoken by the Budug, Griz, Kurd, Tat, and Armenian peoples. The languages of these communities are facing a high risk of extinction in Azerbaijan. While Kurdish and Armenian languages are widely spoken in other states, the situation is extremely critical for the Budug and Griz languages, which belong to the North Caucasian language family, and the Tat language, which belongs to the Iranian language family and is only spoken in Azerbaijan. How the state protects and develops the languages of these endangered ethnic minorities, as well as the languages of all other minority groups, will be more clearly addressed in the upcoming chapters of the dissertation.

Table 2 also shows how fluently members of minority ethnic groups speak Azerbaijani, the language of the majority Azerbaijani Turks and the official language of the state. In general, the data suggests a positive level of Azerbaijani language proficiency among minority groups, particularly in terms of supporting communication and integration into broader society. It is clear that most of them speak the official language of Azerbaijan, which probably makes their everyday life as citizens of this society more manageable. However, the Azerbaijani language proficiency of Udi, Russian, Tatar, and Ukrainian people, reported as below 80–90%, may create some challenges for full participation in daily social interactions.

A visible pattern in the statistics suggests that individuals from these groups who are not fluent in Azerbaijani may depend on Russian in everyday communication. This opens a relevant question: how do they interact with the Azerbaijani-speaking majority? According to the 2019 Azerbaijan population census (2022), more than 50% of Azerbaijani Turks speak Russian as a foreign language (p. 430). Moreover, it is frequently observed that these ethnic groups are mainly concentrated in larger cities such as Baku and Ganja. One could argue that Russian may function as a common interethnic medium of communication in such big cities for these communities.

These data do not merely reflect objective demographic trends but also point to how language use is shaped by broader socio-political narratives and identity constructions.

From a constructivist perspective, the decline in native language proficiency among certain groups is not just a matter of loss, but also reveals how state structures, urbanisation, and interethnic hierarchies influence which languages are maintained or rejected. The importance of Azerbaijani as the official language and the functional use of Russian as a bridging language in urban areas highlight how linguistic practices are embedded within power relations, historical legacies, and perceived opportunities. Language, in this context, becomes not just a means of communication but a marker of belonging, adaptation, and sometimes, marginalisation.

There is a noticeable lack of comprehensive research on the history, culture, ethnography, languages, and socio-political dynamics of ethnic minority groups residing in Azerbaijan, particularly those considered indigenous. A review of the available literature shows that most existing studies are written in Azerbaijani, with fewer available in Russian and English. Notable contributors in this field include Vagif Buduqlu, Garamshah Javadov, Rauf Huseynov, Sevil Piriyeva, Muhammad Aliyev, Arif Mustafayev, Mehabbat Pashayev, Mammad Aghayev, Hashim Kalbiyev, Yagub Mahmudov, Aydin Balayev, Jeyhun Mahmudlu, Ceylan Tokluoglu, Christoph Zuerche, Daniel Müller, Lea Gerber, Kyle L. Marquardt, among others. This dissertation does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of each minority ethnic group in Azerbaijan. Instead, the following section will focus on the Lezgins, Talysh, and Armenians as prominent minority groups, with particular attention to how their presence has shaped the development and character of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy.

Religious variety, although less prominent than linguistic diversity, is widely understood to play a significant role in shaping the identity of ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan, especially among some minority communities. Since ancient times, Azerbaijan has been perceived as a focal point for the dissemination of religious beliefs and practices. These ancient beliefs have been interpreted and reimagined through the centuries, influencing cultural practices and everyday life in Azerbaijan. Over time, the state has experienced the widespread influence of various religions, including Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many of these faiths continue to shape the religious landscape of Azerbaijan today (Alizade, 2016; Nuruzade, 2016).

According to the Constitution of Azerbaijan, religion is separate from the state, and all religious beliefs are equal before the law. However, the state acts as a patron of religions

and creates conditions for the equal development of all religions (Article 18). All religious communities are required to go through a state registration process. According to data from the State Committee for the Work of Religious Organizations (SCRA), 994 religious organizations are registered: 957 Muslim and 38 non-Muslim, including 26 Christian, 8 Jewish, 1 Krishna, and 1 Bahai communities (*Religious institutions: Statistical figures ...*, n.d.). Although this data covers both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the focus of this study is on non-Muslim groups, which are especially relevant for analysing multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan. These include officially registered communities, with details such as names, addresses, and registration dates available. Official registration of non-Muslim religious communities began in 2009, with the most recent registration in 2020. There are no official poll results on individual religious affiliation, and the SCRA does not track how many people belong to each registered community.

This clearly demonstrates that, under the secular constitutional framework of the Republic of Azerbaijan, obtaining official information regarding the membership of religious communities and the religious beliefs of the general population appears to be nearly impossible. However, I believe that by collecting and analysing certain indirect data, it is possible to gain a general understanding of the population's religious composition, particularly the proportion of religious minority groups. It is generally known that the majority of members of the following ethnic groups, Lezgin, Talysh, Avar, Turkish, Tat, Tsakhur, Ingiloy, Kurd, Tatar, Griz, Udi, Khynalyg, Budug, and Haput, identify as Muslims. In contrast, Russians (including a small number of Molokans; for more on Molokans, see Lunkin & Prokof, 2000), Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, and some others are predominantly Christian. Jews follow Judaism, while it is difficult to assign clear ethnic associations to members of the Krishna and Bahá'í religious communities. Since the population numbers of all minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan are publicly known (see Table 1), we can reasonably estimate that less than 2% of the Azerbaijani population belongs to non-Muslim religious communities. The real situation of minority religious communities in Azerbaijan will be more clearly addressed through detailed analysis in the subsequent chapters.

I have already discussed the main characteristics, such as language and religion, of minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan using academic sources and data from various state bodies. It is equally important to explore these issues from the perspective of the

communities themselves. From semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 representatives of minority ethnic and religious groups in Azerbaijan here I focus solely on the first interview question, which explored what distinguishes these groups from the majority and how they perceive the preservation of their identity. For example, do children and young people show interest in maintaining their language, customs, or religion? Are they familiar with the data provided by the State Statistical Committee (SSC), and do they believe it reflects reality?

These interviews, though not fully representative of all communities in Azerbaijan, offered rich insights, especially on the initial questions analysed here (see Appendix A). Participants provided extensive information about the history, culture, language, religious beliefs, and other ethnographic elements of their groups. While this material could inform many research directions, I will highlight only the key points relevant to the current focus.

Nearly all ethnic representatives I spoke with emphasised language as the most important feature distinguishing their group from the dominant Azerbaijani Turks. Many also pointed to differences in customs and traditions. The sole exception was the Ahıska Turks representative, who noted only minor linguistic differences. When asked about this, they responded:

*We do not differ much, when it comes to Azerbaijan, we speak the Ahıska dialect very comfortably wherever we want, so we do not have any trouble with it. It can be said that the language of Azerbaijani and the Ahıska Turks dialect is 90 percent, and perhaps a little more, the same. (Interviewer, J)*

It should be mentioned that the Ahıska Turks, a Turkic-origin population, were deported from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944 by Stalin. After 1956, many resettled in Azerbaijan due to linguistic, religious, and cultural similarities. This background explains why they are not markedly different from Azerbaijani Turks today (Piriyeva, 2005, pp. 6, 15–17).

Some ethnic representatives, particularly from Ukrainian, Jewish, and Udi communities, identified religion as a second key marker of identity. Other officially listed groups, such as Russians, Georgians, and Armenians, though not interviewed, also fall into this category due to their distinct religious affiliations. Meanwhile, religious communities like the Bahá'í Faith, Krishna Consciousness, the 'Word of Life'

Church, and the Catholic Apostolic Prefecture are multi-ethnic and bound by faith rather than ethnicity.

The goal of identifying each group's most distinct characteristics is to assess how well Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy supports them. A general pattern emerges: for Muslim ethnic minorities, the preservation of language and cultural rights is central; for non-Muslim ethnic groups, religious, linguistic, and cultural rights are equally important; and for religious communities, the focus is on religious freedoms.

Another important point is how these communities themselves work to preserve identity, especially among youth. Many interviewees voiced concern that younger generations are not sufficiently invested in maintaining their group's language, culture, or religion. For example, one Talysh cultural employee says:

*The problem is that nobody comes to my house telling me whether I should speak Talysh language or not. Everyone's respect for their own language is crucial. It pains me greatly to say this, but I feel compelled to. In some villages, I've encountered people asking, 'Why do we need to learn Talysh language?'*  
(Interviewer, B)

Or another Talysh interviewer (A) expressed their stance on this issue saying "we are already betraying our own language". A interviewer from another major Lezgin ethnic minority group noted the importance of paying attention to two main perspectives on this issue. According to them, there is a difference in the situation between those living in rural and urban areas. In their observation, representatives of this ethnic group in rural areas tend to preserve their language and culture better than those living in big cities (Interviewer, D). Similar opinions were expressed by other research participants from Lezgin, Tat and Ukranian communities as well, indicating concerns about assimilation, acknowledging that sometimes we ourselves are to blame for not preserving our own language, acknowledging efforts, but stressing that everything starts from the family (Interviewees, E, G, I), and so on.

However, some research participants from ethno-religious minority groups note positively on the issue of the preservation of language, religion, and culture by the people themselves. One Udi cultural employee explains the reason for this as follows:

*Many nations [ethnic groups] are indeed melting within the Azerbaijani people today. This is a reality. Why is it a reality? Because the issue of religion plays*

*a significant role here. They can marry, there have are mutual marriges. This doesn't happen for us, we only marry within our own family, our own people. It can be said that we don't have mixed marriages. This also shows that we are not assimilating into other peoples within Azerbaijan. Religion defends us, because the surroundings are mostly Muslim and they also don't marry our girls.*  
(Interviewer, K)

From this, one can generalise that ethnic minority groups in Azerbaijan who are predominantly Muslim are especially close to the dominant ethnic group, Azerbaijani Turks, particularly in terms of religious customs and traditions. This closeness is further reinforced by intermarriage. The main element of the self-identity of these minority ethnic groups undoubtedly includes language, along with certain ethnographic features, customs, folklore, and more. However, it should be noted that, due to the broad similarity in ethnographic features, customs, and folklore among all peoples belonging to the Caucasian and Iranian language groups, as well as Azerbaijani Turks, the identity of Muslim minority groups in Azerbaijan is mainly shaped by language. From this, one may conclude that the loss of language alone can be sufficient for assimilation.

The last point I want to highlight is the opinions of representatives of minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan regarding the statistical data presented by the SSC of Azerbaijan about the number of ethnic groups. I should note that this issue relates only to ethnic groups. As mentioned earlier, while religious communities are officially registered in Azerbaijan, the state does not collect statistics based on religious affiliation. The question posed to these individuals was: Do they know the data provided by the SSC of the Republic of Azerbaijan about their group, and do they believe it accurately reflects reality? Eight of the people I interviewed disagreed with the numbers presented in table 1, especially those for the year 2019, while the rest said they couldn't comment. Those who disagreed gave different reasons for why they believe these numbers are inaccurate. It was notable that they were all familiar with the SSC data and openly expressed disagreement with it. In my view, this shows their interest in matters related to the situation of the ethnic group they represent in various ways.

One of the Talysh participants who disagrees with the numbers presented by the SSC of the Republic of Azerbaijan explains the reason as follows:

*Various reasons could be possible, of course. But I believe the biggest reason is the existence of an ethnic identity called Azerbaijani within the ethnic framework [They mean in a list provided by SSC of Azerbaijan]. And most people, out of ignorance, identify their ethnic affiliation as Azerbaijani. Of course, Azerbaijan is the homeland for all of us. People, in order not to discriminate, for solidarity, register themselves as Azerbaijani in statistics. And that Azerbaijani is later formalized as an ethnic affiliation in that statistic. That's the issue. Meaning, the Talysh people haven't yet understood whether Azerbaijani is an ethnic identity or just citizenship, citizenship affiliation. This isn't specific to just the Talysh people. Other ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan also have this kind of problem. [...] That's why such a contradictory statistic emerges. [...] Of course, there could be other reasons as well. Statistics can also be manipulated. (Interviewer, C)*

This research participant raises a particularly significant point that warrants further reflection. As seen in Table 1, the largest ethnic group in Azerbaijan, the dominant group, the Azerbaijani Turks, are officially referred to as ‘Azerbaijanis’ or ‘Azerbaijani’ in state documents, without using the word ‘Turk.’ At the same time, all citizens of the state, regardless of their ethnic background, are also referred to as ‘Azerbaijanis’ or ‘Azerbaijani.’ This is a widely accepted understanding, both in official usage and in daily life. In other words, a citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan is called Azerbaijani. However, during statistical surveys, especially when questions concern ethnic affiliation, it might appear normal at first for any citizen, whether Talysh, Lezgian, Avar, Russian, etc., to identify as Azerbaijani based on citizenship. Yet, as the participant highlights, a problematic ambiguity emerges. By doing so, they are not only recorded as citizens but also as members of the Azerbaijani ethnic group. Because in this context, the question aims to determine ethnic origin, not legal citizenship. This is why many international observers recommend allowing multiple options, i.e., the possibility to select two or more ethnic identities, during population censuses in Azerbaijan. This issue will be discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Another research participant, discussing the census of the population in Azerbaijan in 2019, raises similar objections. Talysh cultural employee states:

*These, so to speak, are transferred from paper to paper, and they write down whatever numbers they want. The 2019 census was conducted solely for the*

*purpose of embezzling money. In other words, it wasn't conducted. They received their salaries, so to speak, without knocking on any doors.*(Interviewer, A)

Since some interviewees from opposition parties who participated in this research also expressed this view, it would be appropriate to briefly refer to a few of them. Jamil Hasanli, professor of history and politician, leader of NCDF of Azerbaijan since 2013 during the interview for this research, while commenting on the issue of the number of ethnic groups and the population census conducted in Azerbaijan, expressed the following opinion:

*Now, for example, on the one hand, you promote multiculturalism, while on the other hand, you reduce the number of national-ethnic groups in the population. This doesn't fit together. For example, if we analyse the results of the censuses of 1897, 1921, 1926, 1937, and 1939, particularly the censuses conducted in the 1920s-30s, the ethnic national picture was more or less objectively depicted. Starting from 1959, after 1939, the next census was conducted in 1959, and after 1959 and 1979, if I'm not mistaken, in 1989 as well. And after 1999, in 2019 or 2020. Unfortunately, none of these statistics reflect the real reality. So how can you call yourself multicultural? For example, in 1926, a nation that had a population of 76,000 is shown to have fewer people in 2019. Was there no population growth in 100 years? The same goes for other nations. So, you see, Mr. Javid, do you know what the most interesting process here is? Assimilation happened in the numbers. It didn't happen in real life. That is, the Talysh remained Talysh, the Lezgi remained Lezgi, the Kurd remained Kurd, the Avar remained Avar, but those statistical numbers were artificially reduced.*

However, in addition to this, he noted that the claim by some representatives that the number of large ethnic minority groups in Azerbaijan exceeds 1.5 million does not reflect the truth. According to Jamil Hasanli, the number of the largest ethnic minority groups in Azerbaijan is likely to be approximately between 450,000 and 500,000 (for full interview, see appendix C).

Another interviewee, Seymur Hazi, a politician and journalist and the deputy of the chairman of the Azerbaijan People's Front Party, also mentioned that “as in all

government agencies, it is natural not to rely on their figures because there is no transparency in the statistics committee” (for full interview, see appendix C).

As I have mentioned before, my attempts to interview representatives of the SSC of Azerbaijan regarding the rules and methodology of the population census, particularly in relation to identifying the composition of ethnic groups, and to discuss the contentious issues raised by research participants, were unsuccessful. However, a person who took part in the population census conducted in Azerbaijan in 2009 informed me that, "Actually, we were supposed to enter every house for the census. At one point, I had entered all the houses. But we were instructed to fill out the information only with a pencil. We would hand over the documents later. Then, I don't know what happened” (R.A., personal communication, Baku, February 2024). It seems that even if a census were carried out properly and transparently in Azerbaijan, accurately determining the true number of minority ethnic groups would still be difficult. One important point is that these minority ethnic groups likely exist in slightly (if not significantly) larger numbers than those officially reported in the statistics, and the state should approach the accurate determination of their numbers with greater sensitivity. As this data may be politically influenced, demographic figures must be interpreted with caution.

Ethnic diversity in Azerbaijan is especially concentrated in border regions, where groups often extend into neighbouring states, posing challenges to national unity. Throughout Azerbaijan's modern history, separatist movements have emerged, reflecting the complexity of ethnic dynamics. The still unresolved conflict with Armenia, particularly regarding the Armenian population within Azerbaijan, highlights the ongoing need for inclusive policies. Analysing the structure and distribution of minority groups in Azerbaijan suggests that ethnic and religious diversity is not only a demographic fact but also a politically shaped and discursively framed phenomenon. These findings support a constructivist view of ethnicity, where categories are formed as much by institutional narratives and state practices as by community self-identification. From this perspective, one could argue that the multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan operates within a framework that both acknowledges and restricts diversity, simultaneously encouraging inclusion and assimilation depending on broader political interests. This theoretical perspective will guide the analysis in the following

chapters, as I examine the other factors influencing Azerbaijan's approach to multiculturalism.

## **2.2. The membership of Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe and OSCE**

Azerbaijan's membership in both the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been a significant development in the state's political and social trajectory. The membership has had a significant impact on Azerbaijan's relations with other states, allowing the state to play an important role in shaping regional and international policy. However, today it is very difficult to state that Azerbaijan's relations with these two international organizations continue in a positive and developing direction. The reasons for this are various, including the continuing increase in violations of human rights and freedoms in Azerbaijan, which contradict the main activities of these organizations; the inability of Azerbaijan to fully and continuously fulfill its obligations in accordance with the conventions to which Azerbaijan joined after entering these organizations; after solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through war, the mass exodus of the Armenian population of Azerbaijan; the failure to hold free and democratic elections; the failure to ensure political participation; the creation of artificial obstacles to the development of free media and civil society; etc. These observations determine the dynamics of the organization's recent relations with Azerbaijan in various formats. I will separately look at the relations between Azerbaijan and these two international organizations trying drive some insights for Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy.

The Council of Europe (n.d.-c), established in 1949, aims to promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law among its member states. It oversees the European Convention on Human Rights and provides a platform for dialogue and cooperation on these fundamental principles. The organization comprises 46 member states, including Azerbaijan. Before the state's admission to the Council of Europe, starting in 1992, Azerbaijan took significant steps in relation to this organization, the most significant of which was the abolition of the death penalty in the state in 1988 (Hood & Hoyle, 2009, p. 56). Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe (n.d.-b) began in 2001 and has been an important step in the state's efforts to integrate into the European community. Azerbaijan undertook significant measures to address the Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict, enhance the process of democratization, and address other crucial matters throughout its membership in the Council of Europe. However, it is difficult to claim that Azerbaijan's relationship with the Council of Europe has followed a consistently positive trajectory or that this partnership has led to meaningful progress in the protection of human rights and the development of democracy within the state (see, Knaus, 2015; Merabishvili, 2015; Gjestrum, 2024).

Within the framework of cooperation with the Council of Europe Azerbaijan has both signed and ratified 65 Treaties of the Council of Europe and has signed but not yet ratified an additional 7 treaties (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Among them, I will look at crucial treaties that is related to this study. One of them, adopted in 1992, is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), a treaty that aims to protect and promote the use of regional or minority languages in Europe. It establishes principles for preserving and fostering linguistic diversity, emphasising the cultural richness that these languages contribute to European heritage. For example, Articles 7, 10 of the treaty makes demands such as ensuring access to primary, secondary, and higher education in minority languages, requirement for regional authorities to publish their official documents in the relevant regional or minority languages, among other important issues (Council of Europe, 1992). The ECRML is an exceptional tool, being the sole international agreement dedicated exclusively to safeguarding and advancing less often used languages. Due to the wide range of linguistic circumstances in the member nations of the Council of Europe, the document is inherently complex (Woehrling, 2005, p. 17). However, this agreement is one of the most important documents in the direction of protecting the languages of minority ethnic groups.

Azerbaijan signed the ECRML in 2001 but has yet to ratify it (Chylinski & Hofmannová, 2011, pp. 23-29). One may reasonably ask why this is the case. Despite Azerbaijan's consistent public commitment to a multiculturalism policy for managing ethnic and religious diversity over the decades, this key legal instrument has remained in shadow. One possible explanation lies in the obligations imposed upon ratifying states and the presence of a robust monitoring system to ensure compliance. Ratification would require concrete actions to protect minority languages, something that might be politically sensitive or administratively demanding. Yet, this is precisely what makes the ECRML so significant. Language plays a central role in the identity of Azerbaijan's minority ethnic groups. For instance, among the Lezgins, Talyshs, and Avars, three of

the largest ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, language stands out as the primary feature distinguishing them from the titular ethnic group, the Azerbaijani Turks. The ECRML remains the most important convention capable of offering meaningful protections for minority languages, and its ratification would represent a significant step toward genuine multicultural policy implementation.

Another important international treaty that Azerbaijan signed and ratified within the framework of the Council of Europe is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) which is aimed at safeguarding the rights and interests of national minorities in its member states. Adopted in 1995, the FCNM reflects the Council of Europe's commitment to promoting minority rights and fostering a climate of inclusivity and diversity (1995). The Council of Europe has stated that this is the first legally binding agreement that focuses on protecting national minorities globally. The execution of this agreement is overseen by the Advisory Committee, which is the only international committee that is solely committed to national minority rights (n.d.-a). The FCNM provides a comprehensive legal framework for the protection of national minorities, emphasizing principles such as non-discrimination, cultural autonomy, and linguistic rights. Acknowledges the importance of cultural diversity and encourages member states to adopt policies that preserve and promote the distinct cultures, traditions, and languages of national minorities. The convention incorporates a monitoring mechanism that reviews member states' compliance with its provisions.

Despite the fact that the FCNM has unquestionably played a crucial role in protecting minority communities, it confronts a number of flaws and obstacles that demand a thorough analysis. The FCNM lacks the enforcement mechanisms necessary to ensure full compliance by member states. As a result, some states may neglect their obligations, leading to inadequate protection and marginalization of minority groups. Certain terms and provisions within the convention are open to interpretation, leading to contradictions in implementation (Craig, 2010, p. 312-313). The convention does not provide a specific definition for the concept of national minority, as there is no universally agreed upon definition among all member states of the Council of Europe. The convention grants states the authority to determine which groups they will recognise as national minorities. This diminishes is leaving many vulnerable communities without protection. Some critics argue that the convention's emphasis on cultural autonomy might deliberately foster separatism or restrict minority integration

into mainstream society. In contrast, others argue that it could lead to increased segregation and isolation of minority communities (Ringelheim, 2010, p. 126). One could argue that this is among the reasons why states like Iceland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Greece, despite being members of the Council of Europe, have signed but not ratified the convention, while France and Turkey have neither signed nor ratified it. The fact that there is no regulation for considering individual concerns is also one of the convention's many flaws.

Prior to its official admission to the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan signed and ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in 2000 (Milli Məclis, 2000). This can be seen as part of the preparatory process, or even as one of the conditions for joining the Council of Europe. As I analyse this process, it seems that Azerbaijan's ratification of the FCNM was done quickly and deliberately as part of its effort to gain membership. Since then, this agreement can be considered the most important international document related to the regulation of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan. Taking this into account, in the fourth chapter of this dissertation I will include a separate section that presents a comparative analysis of the FCNM's implementation in Azerbaijan and Switzerland, in order to better understand how it functions in the Azerbaijani context.

In addition, in the course of cooperation with the Council of Europe, in 2001, Azerbaijan ratified the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) and its Protocols (Milli Məclis, 2001). The ECHR, established in 1950, is a legally binding treaty aimed at safeguarding fundamental human rights and freedoms across Europe. It outlines principles for protecting individuals from abuses by state authorities, ensuring fair trials, and upholding rights such as freedom of speech and religion (Council of Europe, 1950). Since Azerbaijan has signed and ratified the ECHR, every citizen of Azerbaijan has the right to file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights. According to the provisions of the Council of Europe's Charter, the state that does not follow the court ruling has responsibility, which may result in suspension of membership in the Council of Europe and, if the decision is confirmed, exclusion. ECHR is an important international treaty but when we are discussing policy of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan the FCNM is more important international treaty for the protection of the rights of national minorities and providing the protection of the existence of national minorities, their culture, and

identity at the highest level. Such fundamental rights are also regulated by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1949). However, FCNM also defines guaranteed rights that apply only to national minorities.

As a member of Council of Europe Azerbaijan also works with the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). ECRI is a human rights body of the Council of Europe, tasked with combating racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance across its member states. ECRI (n.d.) monitors these issues through state reports, provides recommendations for legislative and policy changes, and promotes awareness and education on combating racism and intolerance. Azerbaijan has undergone four monitoring processes in collaboration with ECRI (n.d.), and the fifth phase is currently underway. In their report from 2016, ECRI states that for historical ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities, a monitoring mechanism was established under the Council of Europe FCNM. As a result, ECRI (2016) focuses on monitoring the social integration policies of this group of people (p. 25). Although the ECRI monitoring mechanism in Azerbaijan covers important issues related to civil society, LGBT+, immigrants, religious discrimination, racism, etc., However, issues related to ethnic and religious minorities are more clearly reflected in the FCNM's monitoring.

Another important organisation of which Azerbaijan is a member is the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), whose main mission is to promote stability, security, and cooperation across its participating states through dialogue, conflict prevention, and crisis management. It works to address various challenges, including political-military, economic, environmental, and human rights issues, with the goal of fostering peace and security in the region (OSCE, n.d.-b).

Azerbaijan joined OSCE (at the time CSCE) in 1992, which was the first European organisation joined by Azerbaijan, and signed its documents, including the Helsinki Final Act. I must highlight that OSCE's documents may not always have binding force in member states, but their significance lies in their role as guiding principles and standards for promoting stability, security, and cooperation across the region. Azerbaijan mainly cooperates with the OSCE's three primary institutions: the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss the Minsk Group, another OSCE institution that was in charge of the peaceful

resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Among the activities carried out by the ODIHR in Azerbaijan, the monitoring of the elections held in the state, preparation of reports, activities in the field of protection of democratic institutions, etc. RFoM's work in the field of freedom of expression and free media in Azerbaijan can be highlighted.

Within the OSCE, HCNM plays a significant role in addressing ethnic tensions and minority issues. The HCNM's engagement aims to prevent conflicts arising from ethnic divisions and promote stability and harmony. In Azerbaijan, the HCNM has worked on various fronts, including promoting dialogue between different ethnic groups, supporting initiatives to protect minority rights, and offering recommendations to the government for policies that foster inclusivity and respect for diversity (HCNM, n.d.).

The policy of promoting ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan, often framed as multiculturalism, has developed alongside the state's full integration into these two international organisations and the significant international agreements associated with them. Over the years, one could argue that Azerbaijan has not fully met the expectations set by the objectives of these organisations, as previously discussed. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan's engagement with these bodies, as well as its proclaimed implementation of multiculturalism policy, spans the entirety of Ilham Aliyev's presidency since 2003. In this context, it can be suggested that efforts by the political leadership to secure international legitimacy may also be a motivating factor behind the adoption and promotion of the multiculturalism policy as argue in this study.

In general, Azerbaijan's membership in these two organisations, especially its cooperation with the Council of Europe, appears most consequential in the context of ethnic and religious policy. In particular, Azerbaijan's ratification of the FCNM stands out as a key moment. However, one could argue that this step, while seemingly progressive, did not lead to a consistent or robust implementation of minority rights on the ground. Instead, when looking at the ongoing problems and criticisms regarding its implementation (see Chapter 4, Section 2), it seems that the government may have needed a new term or concept to cover up these gaps or distract from these unresolved issues. In this light, the adoption and promotion of the term multiculturalism may be understood not simply as a reflection of policy substance but also as a strategic narrative, an effort to construct an international image of inclusivity while deflecting attention from unresolved issues. From a constructivist perspective, such rebranding efforts are not merely rhetorical but serve to shape perceptions of legitimacy both

domestically and abroad. However, I am not rushing to make this conclusion yet, as the following chapters will also analyse the opinions of Azerbaijani political parties, think tanks, and independent experts, which will help to assess the connection between Azerbaijan's membership in international organisations and its multiculturalism policy.

### **2.3. Armenia – Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

The Armenia–Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, or simply the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, has been, and in some respects still is, a destructive issue of regional scale and global significance. Overall, the nature of this conflict suggests that it has deep historical roots. More specifically, its origins can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, well before the escalation of tensions in the 1980s and 1990s. However, making definitive claims about the historical background and primary causes of this conflict requires independent and objective research, and in my view, there is still a lack of notable scholarly work in this area (see, for example, Yemelianova, 2023; Gamaghelyan, 2010). In what follows, I will briefly examine the development of this conflict during Azerbaijan's independence period and explore how it may relate to the Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy.

We cannot simply assess the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a separatist tendency of an ethnic group within Azerbaijan against the central government. Armenia openly provided military and political support to the Nagorno-Karabakh separatists from the beginning of the conflict. This factor prompted the escalation of the conflict from a domestic dispute to a regional dispute, war between two states Armenia and Azerbaijan, and conflict (Halbach, 2013, pp. 44-47). Given that the conflict is regarded as partially resolved, the years 1988-2023 can be considered the most intensive periods of the conflict in modern history Azerbaijan and Armenia. This broad historical period includes both the First Karabakh War of 1988-1994, continuous clashes, as well as the Second Karabakh War (also called the '44-day war') and countless attempts at peaceful resolution of the conflict involving international organizations and various states on one side and Azerbaijan's declaration of pursuing multiculturalism policy on the other. Was there any connection between them? May the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict be a cause of the Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?

Before attempting to answer these questions, I believe it is necessary to provide a brief historical background, focusing on the modern period, which in this context begins around 1988. Perhaps the answers to these questions lie precisely within that historical period. In 1988, both sides began to strengthen their aggression toward each other, which escalated into a war in 1991 with the direct participation of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict resulted in over 30,000 deaths on both sides, and almost 1 million people became refugees or internally displaced, mainly in Azerbaijan. In 1994, Russia mediated the declaration of a ceasefire (Askerov, 2020, p. 55). The origins and consequences of the First Karabakh War, as well as the approaches taken to resolve the conflict thereafter, have been extensively studied in scholarly works (for example, see Melander 2001a, 2001b; Cheterian, 2008; Özkan, 2008; Geukjian, 2016; Abilov & Isayev, 2016). Despite the separatist Republic of Artsakh's full claim and partial governance of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, international recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity persisted. The main evidence of international recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity was UN (1993) Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884.

As a diplomatic initiative, the OSCE Minsk Group aimed to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Founded in 1992, the OSCE Minsk Group functioned as a mediation platform, with the United States, Russia, and France as co-chairs. Its primary objective was to facilitate negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict. This was achieved through diplomatic efforts, shuttle diplomacy, and mediation. The Minsk Group seeks to promote dialogue, ceasefire agreements, and confidence-building measures to achieve a lasting peace settlement in the region (OSCE, n.d.-a). According to critical view of Abilov (2018), the purpose of the OSCE 'Troika' was to uphold stability to safeguard their national interests in the region, rather than to act as a platform for continued negotiations and achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict (p.143).

When considering this issue through the lens of Russia's past role as a key and influential member of the OSCE Minsk Group and taking into account the perspectives that had been discussed at the time, it could be argued that Russia's primary interest was not in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Rather, it appeared that Russia aimed to maintain the conflict as a frozen one in order to further its own strategic

objectives. Specifically, Russia sought to assert its influence in the South Caucasus region, leveraging the unresolved nature of the conflict to sustain its power. This approach reflected Russia's broader geopolitical goals. The most obvious fact demonstrating the failure of the OSCE Minsk Group's efforts to resolve this conflict peacefully over the years is the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which claimed the lives of more than 10,000 people on both sides. As a result of the Second Karabakh War that began in 2020 and subsequent events, Azerbaijan regained its territorial integrity, the main leaders of the Karabakh separatist government were arrested, and more than 100 thousand people of Armenian origin left Karabakh to Armenia. The causes and many aspects of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War have been thoroughly examined in some scholarly works (see, for example, Yavuz & Huseynov, 2020; Gamaghelyan & Rumyantsev, 2021; İbrahimov & Öztarsu, 2022).

The current situation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict appears to have been resolved since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, with only the delimitation of the Azerbaijan-Armenia borders and the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia remaining as issues. All of this is likely to happen in the near future. However, the return of Azerbaijan's Armenian-origin population to live in their homes, and generally the reconciliation of these two peoples, seem very challenging in the near future against the backdrop of hatred that has developed between the two peoples over the past 30 years.

When analysing whether the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has influenced Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, one could reasonably argue that the connection is indeed significant. Fundamentally, multiculturalism as a theoretical and practical concept provides a framework for managing diversity and coexistence, even in contexts marked by historical tensions or ongoing disputes between different ethnic groups. As previously discussed in this dissertation's theoretical chapter, multiculturalism is essentially about structuring a society to accommodate multiple ethnic and religious communities, ideally facilitating peaceful cohabitation. Against this theoretical backdrop, it could be argued that Azerbaijan's use of multiculturalism serves to project an image of a tolerant and inclusive nation, capable of integrating diverse groups such as Lezgins, Talysh, Avars, Jews, and Udins, among others. From this perspective, the state's multiculturalism policy implicitly highlights the Armenian community's inability or unwillingness to integrate within this inclusive framework as problematic.

Indeed, the Azerbaijani authorities have often positioned the Armenian community as an exception, framing their separatist inclinations as incompatible with the peaceful coexistence fostered by the state's multicultural approach. For instance, precisely in the years when multiculturalism was raised to the level of state policy in Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev (2014b) in his speech to PACE has emphasized that Azerbaijanis have no incompatibility with any nation, implying that Armenians might have such issues, not only with Azerbaijan but also with others. He highlighted that Armenia is now a mono-ethnic state, with 99.9% of its population being Armenians, contrasting it with Azerbaijan's diverse society. This rhetoric, particularly the notion that the Armenian population in Azerbaijan cannot align with the narrative of a multicultural and tolerant Azerbaijan, might seem more reasonable if other ethnic minorities in the state appeared to be genuinely satisfied with the state's multicultural policy since independence. However, initial observations suggest the opposite.

However, it is important to acknowledge a critical limitation of multiculturalism policy, particularly during the periods when Azerbaijan actively promoted it. Due to the prolonged occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories by separatist Armenian forces, Azerbaijan could not practically implement its multicultural policy within these regions. As a consequence, the intended coexistence between Azerbaijani and Armenian communities under the banner of multiculturalism remained theoretical rather than practical. Nevertheless, the conflict itself became a significant driving force behind Azerbaijan's multiculturalism narrative. Arguably, the Azerbaijani government's promotion of multiculturalism served not only as a domestic strategy but also as a powerful international diplomatic tool, highlighting Armenian's non-compliance with the peaceful integration principles espoused by Azerbaijan. This multifaceted strategy underscored Azerbaijan's attempts to gain international legitimacy and moral high ground in relation to the conflict. Further exploration of this nuanced interplay between conflict dynamics and multiculturalism policy will be presented in Chapter 3, where insights from experts and political party leaders will provide additional clarity and depth on these issues.

#### **2.4. Separatist tendencies in Azerbaijan: Talysh and Lezgi disputes**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Azerbaijan's declaration of independence in 1991, separatist movements among the Armenian, Talysh, and Lezgi peoples residing within Azerbaijan gained prominence, however with very different degrees of intensity and impact. While the preceding section of this chapter focused on the long-lasting separatism of the Armenian population in Azerbaijan, this section will delve into the separatist tendencies among the members of the Talysh and Lezgi people in Azerbaijan. It's important to emphasise that the separatist aspirations expressed by certain periods of Talysh and Lezgin people's members, as well as the separatism by Azerbaijan's Armenian population, cannot be equated or judged in the same way as the separatism pursued by the Armenian population of Azerbaijan. It is worth noting that the separatist movements of the Talysh and Lezgin ethnic groups differed significantly, too. Primarily, the separatist aspirations of some Talysh activists garnered broader support and even led to a brief declaration of their own breakaway republic in Azerbaijan. However, this attempt proved unsuccessful. On the other hand, the involvement of Lezgi activists' certain separatist activities was not widespread. I will first provide a brief overview of these two groups and then analyse each separatist episode independently to gain a clearer understanding of the dynamics of these events.

The Talysh represent an Iranian-speaking minority in Azerbaijan. According to the latest census in 2019, 87,6 thousand Talysh live in the state, and this number has dropped significantly compared to the previous census (see Table 1). As mentioned earlier, some members of Azerbaijan's ethnic minorities, as well as Talysh people, disagree with this statistic data, and the accuracy of such statistics remains a subject of debate. The Talysh population is primarily concentrated in the southern districts of Lankaran, Astara, Masalli, and Lerik. The Talysh language belongs to the north-western branch of the Iranian group of the Indo-European language family (Cavadov, 2000, p.106). For the Talyshs living in Azerbaijan or in the Islamic Republic of Iran, there is no normative literary language. According to the 2019 Population Census (2022), of the 87,6 thousand Talysh, 60068 speak their native Talysh language in Azerbaijan, as well as 80653 Azerbaijani languages (p. 432). If we rely on these official statistics, we can conclude that approximately 20 percent of Azerbaijani Talysh people do not speak their mother tongue, and 80 percent of Talysh is bilingual, meaning they know both Azerbaijani and Talysh languages.

Cavadov (2000) claims that the history of the Talysh has not been comprehensively studied (p. 107). Most scholars believe that the Talysh first appeared in history under the name 'Kadusi.' Historians argue that the Kadusi, who lived in the southwest of the Caspian Sea, are the ancestors of the Talysh, and that the word 'Kadus' is the Greek form of the modern 'Talush' or 'Talysh' (Kəlbəyev & Kəlbizadə, 2007, pp. 50–53). They refer to themselves as 'Tolish' (plural: 'Tolishon'), whereas Azerbaijanis call them Talysh, as indicated in official documents (Rəcəbli, 2008, p. 17). Despite the lack of thorough studies on the history, culture, language, and ethnography of the Talysh people living in both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Azerbaijan, the available sources suggest that the Talysh are one of Azerbaijan's indigenous peoples.

The separatist movement that emerged among some representatives of the Talysh people in Azerbaijan during the 1990s is closely linked to the short-lived declaration of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic. The formation of the Talysh People's Party in 1991, shortly after Azerbaijan gained independence, marked the early signs of separatist sentiment among the Talysh. This development reflected growing demands for cultural recognition and political autonomy. Ağayev (2006) notes that although the Talysh People's Party publicly declared that it did not promote Talysh nationalism and instead stood for unity and friendship among all ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, its emergence as an ethnic-based party may have raised concerns. While the party claimed to support the idea of a united, indivisible, and independent Azerbaijan, some segments of the population may have interpreted its foundation as a signal of growing ethnic divisions (p. 57).

The proclamation of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic occurred during a particularly unstable and crisis-ridden period in Azerbaijan's history. This era included the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994), the June 4 Ganja uprising in 1993, the forced resignation of President Abulfaz Elchibey, and the rise of Heydar Aliyev to power. These events formed the turbulent backdrop against which the separatist initiative unfolded. De Waal (2013) provides a detailed account of these critical moments. In what follows, I will focus on the separatist developments themselves, rather than analysing each historical event individually.

On June 21, 1993, Colonel Alikram Hummatov, of Talysh origin within the Azerbaijani army, made an announcement declaring the establishment of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic in the southern region of Azerbaijan, encompassing seven

districts predominantly inhabited by the Talysh people (Столяров, 1993). The separatist movement led by Alikram Hummatov was short-lived, as it was defeated on August 23 of the same year, and Hummatov was subsequently jailed on August 24 (Kotecha, 2006, p. 33). Despite his release in 2004 and subsequent emigration to Europe, Humbatov continued to advocate for Talyshs rights. He also visited the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh in Azerbaijani territories, and the opening ceremony of the Talysh Studies programme held at the Yerevan State University in 2013. His visits were always covered by the government-controlled press in Azerbaijan with critical, and sometimes insulting, headlines (see, for example, Агаев, 2013).

The Lezgins were another ethnic group whose representatives expressed separatist intentions during the early years of independent Azerbaijan. Before delving into their historical context, it is essential to shed light on the identity of the Lezgin people. The Lezgins are an ethnic group primarily inhabiting the southern Caucasus region, with significant people residing in Azerbaijan and neighbouring Republic of Dagestan, Russia. They have a distinct language, Lezgian, which belongs to the Northeast Caucasian language family. The Lezgins have a rich cultural heritage, characterized by vibrant traditions, folklore, and customs, contributing to the diverse tapestry of ethnic groups in the Caucasus region and Azerbaijan. According to the 2019 Population Census (2022), of the 167,6 thousand Lezgis, 137,558 speak their native Lezgi language in Azerbaijan, as well as 161,461 Azerbaijani languages (p. 431, see, also table 2). First, these statistical data indicate that Lezgins are the largest and most significant ethnic minority in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, in comparison to the 2009 census, the population of Lezgins in Azerbaijan has witnessed a decline to a mere 12 thousand individuals. The Lezgin population in Azerbaijan is predominantly concentrated in the regions of Gusar, Khachmaz, Gabala, Guba, and Oguz, as well as in the cities of Ismayilli, Sheki, Baku, and Sumgayit. At the same time, some researchers claim that the number of Lezgins in northern Azerbaijan alone ranges between 250-260 thousand (Gerber, 2007, pp. 8, 14).

They call themselves *Lezgiyar* (Məlikməmmədov & Kərimova, 2013). According to many scholars, one of the ancestors of the Lezgins is the ancient Albanian tribes *Legi - Lekı* (Балаев, 2010, p. 40; Мамедова, 2005, pp. 534, 555-556) From the modern point of view, the 'Lezgin' ethnonym belongs to later periods. In the history and ethnographic literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the whole population of southern

Dagestan was called 'Lezgin' or 'Lezgins' in Russian where the modern version of name comes. They are Muslims according to their religious affiliation. The historical region on both banks of the Samur River, where Lezgins lived for centuries, served as a cultural and economic center, and it was referred to by them as Lezgistan. (Ризванов & Ризванов 1990, 4-5). In its narrower sense, Lezgistan refers to the homeland of the Lezgins, the proper geographical region where they formed as a distinct ethnic group and continue to exist today, maintaining their unique identity, language, cultural characteristics, economic traditions, physical type, and ethnic self-awareness. In a broader sense, Lezgistan encompasses the territory of settlement ethnic groups, and tribes belonging to the Lezgian language group. While the boundaries of Lezgistan have shifted throughout various historical periods, its core area (the heartland of Lezgistan) has preserved its enduring identity (Агаев 1996, 17-18).

It might be argued that minority groups subjected to securitization and assimilation pressures consequently engage in pursuit of separatism. For instance, in Azerbaijan, as a result, minority ethnic groups like the Talyshs and Lezgins began to be seen as a challenge from the early years of independence (Tokluoglu 2005, 737). Lezgins were most notably manifested through the Sadval movement, which emerged as a Lezgin national liberation movement in the final years of the Soviet Union and in the early years of the independent states. In 1990, the city of Dagestan saw the founding of the Sadval movement, which translates to 'unity' in Lezgi. Important events in the history of the organisation can be followed in the Minorities at Risk Project (2004). The organisation's initial goal was to establish a state known as Lezgistan at the expense of the Lezgins' home regions in southern Russia and northern Azerbaijan. Labeling an organization as a cohesive entity centered around a single ideal is highly difficult.

The organisation's ideological perspectives underwent multiple shifts during its tenure from 1990 to 1996. Since 1993, Azerbaijan has recognised this organisation as an extremist terrorist organisation and persecuted its members (Goff, 2021, p. 13). Matveeva and McCartney (1997, pp. 232-239), analyse in very detail the activities of Sadval organisations and generally this movement, and their important conclusion is that during the early stages of establishing a state, governments must carefully monitor the situation and be attentive to legitimate complaints from minority groups. However, in the context of Azerbaijan's nation-building process, the growing emphasis on Turkism during the Elchibey government (Geybaliyeva 2019, p. 330; see also Shaffer,

2004; Wasserman, 2023) and the subsequent shift towards Azerbaijanism under the Aliyev regime, alongside the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and separatist attempts by the Talysh people, significantly influenced the state's approach to ethno-political movements. At the same time, separatist movements in Russia, particularly in the North Caucasus, most notably in Chechnya, further shaped regional policies. As a result, the Sadval movement was pushed to the background, with both Azerbaijan and Russia disregarding its legitimate grievances, instead labelling it an extremist terrorist organisation in Azerbaijan, and restricting its activities in Russia.

Analysing these events Cornell (2015) states that Elchibey's rule faced escalating conflicts with ethnic minorities including the Lezgins and Talyshs. Lezgins formed Sadval, a nationalist movement, after refusing military drafts for Karabakh. Talysh colonel Alikram Humbatov announced his plan to establish a 'Talysh-Mugham' republic along the Iranian border in the south. It is unclear how popular these breakaway groups were, but the Talysh showed limited significant separatist movement (p.75). Nevertheless, in my view, it would be inaccurate to fully attribute these events solely to the Popular Front and the nationalist tendencies centred around Turkism. Prior to a brief and challenging political, economic, and military period in which the Elchibey government was in power, President signed a *decree on the protection of rights and freedoms and state support for the development of the language and culture of the national minorities, minor nations, and ethnic groups residing in the Republic of Azerbaijan* (1992). This decree remains in effect today, and all my study interviewees from ethnic minority groups in Azerbaijan, who are mostly cultural employees, have verified that all relevant organisations, including as cultural centres, newspapers, and similar entities, have been established in accordance with this decree.

Attempting to provide a broad evaluation of these short-lived yet significant events in the history of independent Azerbaijan, we can identify multiple factors. Lezgins and Talysh, large ethnic groups, were dissatisfied with the policies of the central government, and especially the minority policies of the state; they wanted more rights; the centralised government in Azerbaijan was not fully formed; Azerbaijani nationalism (around Turkism), which was united around the majority in the state, grew stronger; the First Karabakh War was underway; when these events occurred, Azerbaijan had not even adopted a constitution (this only happened in 1995); foreign forces, especially Russia, Iran and Armenia (see, Shafee, 2008), who wanted to take advantage of the

chaos in the state, were involved in these separatist tendencies and movements, etc. While it highlighted inter-ethnic tensions, Lezgins were not perceived as a primary threat, with Azerbaijani discourse focusing more on Armenia and Russia as external actors influencing the movement (Sayfutdinova, 2021, pp. 807-808).

Upon examining the current status of these two separatist movements, it is evident that the Sadval movement, which is affiliated with the Lezgin ethnic group, appears to have virtually vanished. As for its activities and active members, there is no serious group, etc., even in any foreign state. The Federal Lezgin National Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA), founded in 1999, remains one of the primary organizations advocating for Lezgins cultural rights in Russia. FLNCA focuses on promoting linguistic and educational initiatives, cross-border cooperation, and minority rights within the framework of Russian federalism (*General information*, 2013). Unlike the more radical Sadval movement of the 1990s, which pursued territorial unification, FLNCA aligns with the Russian government's broader multicultural policies while still advocating for the protection of Lezgi identity. In contrast, Azerbaijan's centralized political structure does not grant Lezgins comparable institutional support. While the government promotes a narrative of multiculturalism, people not only refrain from creating organizations to protect any Lezgi language and cultural rights in Azerbaijan, but they also hesitate to talk about past Lezgi movements (Goff, 2021, pp. 13-14). However, at the same time, the 'Samur' Lezgi National Cultural Centre is mentioned in state reports and other documents in Azerbaijan, but its activities are very limited.

However, active members of the Talysh-Mugan Autonomous Republic in exile continue to engage in advocacy from locations such as the Hague and Moscow. Among the media channels associated with this movement are "Free Talyshistan Television" (OTV, in Talysh: *Ozodə Toliştoni Vindəsədo*), which operates a YouTube platform, and "Free Talyshistan News Agency" (*Ozodə Tolişstani İnformasiya Agentəti*) through the website Tolishmedia.com. OTV is reportedly based in Moscow. These outlets produce content in Talysh, Azerbaijani, and Russian, and serve as important alternative spaces for the expression of identity, language, and political concerns that are often marginalised in Azerbaijani public discourse. It is also possible that other platforms or informal networks contribute to the wider circulation of Talysh-related narratives abroad.

Since 2005, Alikram Humbatov, operating from exile in the Hague, had positioned himself as a central table in the Talysh national movement. In 2018, he announced the formation of a government-in-exile for the Talysh-Mugan Autonomous Republic. After his death in 2022, this role was reportedly taken over by Boris Talysinsky, who has continued to voice political demands and calls for cultural recognition through the same platforms. The media resources mentioned above have published numerous appeals by both leaders (for example, see Hümmeztodə, 2020), addressed to the Talysh people and the Azerbaijani state.

While this dissertation acknowledges the existence and significance of these voices in exile, it does not seek to investigate the activities of separatist groups operating beyond Azerbaijan's borders. Instead, the research is grounded in interviews with legally operating organisations and individuals, as well as representatives of the Talysh ethnic group residing within Azerbaijan. This approach allows for a closer examination of the everyday realities and challenges they face, without conflating broader identity issues with the political objectives of actors in exile.

In conclusion, the separatist movements involving the Talysh and Lezgi populations in Azerbaijan during the early years of independence reflect the complex interplay of ethnic identity, political instability, and state-building challenges. While both groups expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the central government's minority policies, their trajectories and levels of mobilisation differed significantly. The Talysh movement was more visible and organised, culminating in the brief proclamation of an autonomous republic, while Lezgi activism, although present, was more fragmented and short-lived. These movements emerged in a period marked by war, weak state institutions, and competing nationalist ideologies, making the state's approach to ethnic diversity both reactive and heavily securitised. As this section has shown, the early separatist claims by these groups have had a lasting impact on how the Azerbaijani state frames and manages its multiculturalism policy. In particular, they seem to have contributed to the development of a top-down multiculturalism model, one that promotes cultural diversity rhetorically while maintaining strict control over minority activism. The next chapters of this dissertation, especially through interviews with political party leaders and experts, will explore how these historical tensions continue to shape contemporary attitudes and state policies towards ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan.

Chapter 2 has thoroughly examined the key internal and external factors shaping Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, highlighting the influence of ethnic and religious diversity, Azerbaijan's membership in international organisations such as the Council of Europe and OSCE, the enduring Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and separatist tendencies among the Talysh and Lezgi communities. Adopting a constructivist approach, the chapter emphasised how these factors are framed and utilised by state narratives to serve broader nation-building and legitimacy strategies. The complexity of these interconnected factors demonstrates how multiculturalism in Azerbaijan functions as both a genuine policy effort and a strategic political narrative. In the 3rd and 4th sections of Chapter 3 of this dissertation, when exploring the concept of multicultural policy among Azerbaijan's political forces and think tanks based on empirical material and upon examining information obtained from interviews with politicians and experts, factors of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy will be revisited.

### **Chapter 3. Concepts of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy**

Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, aimed at managing ethno-religious diversity, is a specific form of public policy. In political science, public policy generally refers to the set of guiding principles that direct government decisions and actions. It involves analysing how policies are created, implemented, and assessed, focusing on how institutional structures and political processes influence outcomes (Knill & Tosun, 2022, p. 3). Public policies can cover many areas, such as economic development, ecology, education, social welfare, foreign affairs, and security. Understanding how public policies are developed and implemented is crucial for understanding the government's role in shaping the sociopolitical environment and affecting citizens' well-being. As noted by Kraft and Furlong (2019), public policy is shaped by political complexities and decision-making frameworks that reflect broader ideological and strategic goals.

In this context, the central research question of this chapter is how multiculturalism is defined and understood as a policy in Azerbaijan. As outlined in the general introduction, this dissertation adopts a constructivist approach, viewing multiculturalism not as a neutral or descriptive label, but as a politically constructed and ideologically driven concept. This chapter therefore analyses how multiculturalism is shaped through institutional narratives, state strategies, and the perspectives of political actors.

The analysis draws on multiple sources, with the primary method being qualitative semi-structured interviews. The analyses in subsequent sections will be based on the insights of interviewees in response to the first and second questions from opposition party leaders (Musavat, APFP, and NCDF), five think tanks, two independent experts (local and foreign), and, importantly for this chapter, responses to the second question from interviews with representatives of ethnic and religious groups, which asked how they perceive the state's multiculturalism policy (see Appendix A). Alongside this, official documents, laws, and regulations related to multiculturalism in Azerbaijan are reviewed, as well as relevant academic literature and reports by international organisations. These sources together form the empirical foundation for assessing how multiculturalism functions as a state policy and political narrative.

### **3.1. Specificity of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy**

When a government develops a public policy, it usually starts by setting clear goals, basic principles, strategies, and plans for how the policy will be carried out, along with ways to review and adjust it if needed. All these steps are important for making sure the policy actually works, helping the government meet its goals while considering resources, legal rules, and the realities of society (Majone, 1989; Dye, 2013; Bardach & Patashnik, 2019). A big part of this process is recognising and defining the real problems that need government action. In this subchapter, I will look at how Azerbaijan's government follows these steps when it comes to its multiculturalism policy. How does the government formulate and approach its multiculturalism policy? How is this policy understood by Azerbaijani state institutions? How is the multiculturalism policy understood by the Azerbaijani ethnic and religious communities? I will organise this subchapter around these important questions.

In the context of Azerbaijan, where the majority population consists of Azerbaijani Turks, the existence of a large number of ethnic and religious minority groups presents an ongoing challenge for the state to regulate. As mentioned in the previous chapter, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in a newly formed state, there was one major separatist movement that led to the long-lasting Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, along with several other separatist tendencies that were already analysed. I can say that Azerbaijani state authorities, from the earliest days of the newly formed state, understood that ethno-religious diversity required special attention. Before the current Azerbaijani government began using the term multiculturalism in the 2010s to describe their approach to ethnic and religious diversity, we could already observe the adoption of legislative foundations to support minority ethnic and religious groups in Azerbaijan, starting in 1992. This legislative foundation will be analysed in the next subchapter. For now, one crucial question remains: apart from the challenges of Azerbaijan's transitional period (from Soviet rule to independence), was the state able to establish clear objectives for its multiculturalism policy in the 2010s, when the term multiculturalism began to be used more frequently in the government's approach to ethno-cultural diversity? I will begin by exploring the conceptual understanding of multiculturalism as a policy in Azerbaijan.

I believe we need to clarify one question at this point: when did Azerbaijan begin to refer to its approach to managing ethnocultural diversity as a multiculturalism policy,

and who was its main actor? As already noted in the introduction to this dissertation, under the authoritarian political system of Azerbaijan, power is concentrated in the hands of the executive authority, President Ilham Aliyev, and it seems unimaginable to initiate and implement any state policy without his approval. A thorough review of President Aliyev's public speeches shows that he first addressed this subject during his talk at the inaugural ceremony of the 2011 World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in Baku. In this speech, he underscores the strength of Azerbaijan's national and religious diversity, stresses the need for all states to adopt broad programmes related to this matter, and asserts that nations opposing multiculturalism should reconsider their stance (Aliyev, 2011a).

In the same year, a few months later, President Aliyev (2011b) spoke again about this topic at the opening ceremony of the International Humanitarian Forum '21st century: hopes and challenges' in Azerbaijan. Towards the end of the year, he further emphasised the topic in his interview with the ITAR-TASS news agency and Russia-24 TV channel (Aliyev, 2011c). This trend of discussing multiculturalism continued in his subsequent speeches. One speech highlights that multiculturalism has historically existed in Azerbaijan, and that it represents a way of life for the Azerbaijani people, that Azerbaijan has embraced this policy in modern times, even though the term itself did not historically exist in the state (Aliyev, 2012). It is also important to note that during this same period, several European states witnessed official statements rejecting multiculturalism (see, Weaver 2010; Falloon, 2011; NEWS WIRES, 2011).

It is evident that President Aliyev integrated the new term into the political discourse of Azerbaijan, and this coincided with a period of increased criticism of multiculturalism in Europe. Primarily, it was observed that he extensively discussed this topic during international events and in foreign media. Initially, when he introduced the concept of multiculturalism, he did not present it as an official policy of Azerbaijan. Instead, he emphasised that it was wrong to oppose multiculturalism in European states. He viewed multiculturalism in a broader sense, highlighting the presence of ethnic and cultural diversity in Azerbaijan. During his speech at the 2013 inauguration ceremony for his third re-election, he explicitly referred to multiculturalism and stated that "it is our policy" (Aliyev, 2013a). The actions undertaken during his third term as president provide strong evidence to assert with certainty that Azerbaijan had adopted a policy of multiculturalism to manage its ethnic and cultural diversity.

Najafov (2018) argues that Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy can be seen as a logical continuation of the Baku Process, initiated by President Ilham Aliyev in 2008 to promote intercultural dialogue (p. 368). The Baku Process, launched as a regional initiative, aimed to foster dialogue and cooperation between different cultures and civilizations, promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence globally. It included conferences, forums, exhibitions, and cultural exchanges designed to encourage interaction across cultural divides (Baku Process, n.d.). While the Baku Process has helped Azerbaijan position itself internationally as a hub for intercultural dialogue, it raises some important questions. To what extent has this international initiative translated into meaningful domestic change, particularly regarding the protection of ethnic and religious diversity within Azerbaijan itself? Although the Baku Process projects an image of tolerance and openness abroad, its actual influence on internal policies concerning minority rights and political participation remains open to debate.

Following this political shift, the institutional framework also began to evolve in line with the new multiculturalism agenda. With the beginning of the third presidency of Aliyev, the boom of multiculturalism and the boom of action in this field started in Azerbaijan. In 2014, the State Counsellor on Multiculturalism, Interethnic, and Religious Affairs was established in Azerbaijan, evolving from its predecessors<sup>5</sup>, and in 2017, the Department of Humanitarian Policy, Diaspora, Multiculturalism, and Religious Issues (DHPDMRI) of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan was formed based on this office (*Administration*, n.d.).

The DHPDMRI became an essential actor in the development and implementation of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy since 2014, under a new name and led by Kamal Abdulla (Azadlıq Radiosu, 2014). This department still operates and has had different chairpersons within the past 10 years. Subsequently, in 2014 the establishment of the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre (BIMC) occurred. BIMC, as a non-commercial legal entity, aims to preserve tolerance and cultural, religious, and

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<sup>5</sup> Established in 1992 as the State Counselor on Interethnic Relations to the President of Azerbaijan, it underwent changes, first renamed in 1993 to State Counselor on National Policies and later in 2005 to State Counselor for National Minorities and Religious Organizations.

linguistic diversity in line with the ideology of Azerbaijanism, represent Azerbaijan as a global hub of multiculturalism, explore and promote multiculturalism models, and perform other duties as outlined in its charter (2014), which was adopted by the President of Azerbaijan. The objectives stated on the BIMC's official website are consistent with its charter (*Our Goal*, 2019).

At first glance, the BIMC appears to be a state-owned think tank, but upon examining its activities, it becomes clear that, as the main leading body of the Azerbaijani state's multiculturalism policy, it operates under the direct supervision of the DHPDMRI of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and, one can argue, is involved not only in issues arising from its charter but also in the direct management of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan. This conclusion is based on interviews with participants in this study (as will be further clarified in subsequent analyses) and analysis of the organization's activities. We can also refer to the BIMC as a continuation or extension of the DHPDMRI of the Azerbaijani Presidential Administration. According to BIMC's charter (2014, para. 5), the center's activities are directed and supervised by an eleven-member Board of Trustees, including a chairman and an equally empowered co-chair elected from among its members, with other board members, including the Executive Director of BIMC as Deputy Chairman, appointed by the President of Azerbaijan.

The first Board of Trustees was established by decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2014 (Aliyev, November 19). One of the initial questions that emerges is: who are the eleven members of the Board of Trustees of BIMC, an organization charged with safeguarding and promoting the nation's ethnic and religious diversity? Since the establishment of BIMC, three Boards of Trustees have been formed by orders of the President of Azerbaijan in 2014, 2018, and 2022 (see *Orders*, n.d.). One member of this council, as mentioned, has always been the head of BIMC. But who were the remaining ten members?

Analysing the mentioned orders allows me to state that the heads of the DHPDMRI of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan, Kamal Abdullayev, Etibar Najafov, and currently Farah Aliyeva, have consistently been members of this board. This points to a strong connection between the DHPDMRI of the Presidential Administration and the BIMC. One member of the Board of Trustees of the BIMC throughout the entire period has been Leyla Aliyeva, the daughter of the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.

Leyla Aliyeva also holds the position of vice president of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. Interestingly, she has not been seen attending the Board of Trustees meetings of the BIMC, at least according to photographs published by the mass media (see BIMC, 2024). The remaining members of the Board of Trustees are well-known public and political figures, scholars, and artists from Azerbaijan, as well as several prominent individuals from abroad. For example, the former head of ISESCO, Abdulaziz bin Othman Al-Tuwaijri, is among them. Two additional names on the BIMC Board of Trustees are particularly noteworthy: Alexander Sharovsky, head of the European Jewish community in Baku and artistic director of the Azerbaijan State Russian Drama Theatre, and Mikhail Zabelin, chairman of the Azerbaijani Russian Community Public Union and a deputy of the National Assembly of Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2022).

My aim in detailing the individuals who have served over the past ten years on the Board of Trustees of the BIMC, which oversees issues related to ethnic and religious diversity, is to highlight that only representatives of two ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, Russians and Jews, are present. This raises an important question: on what basis is this selection made? However, it is impossible to find an answer to this question in any publicly accessible document. Members are appointed by decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and according to Article 5.9.2 of the BIMC Charter (2014), the decisions and proposals they make regarding the activities of the BIMC are submitted directly to the President. It is difficult to explain why representatives of other, numerically larger ethnic and religious minority groups in Azerbaijan, such as the Lezgins, Talysh, and others, are not represented. The representatives of the Russian and Jewish communities included on the Board are indeed well-known public and political figures in broader areas of Azerbaijani society. However, this does not imply that there are no equally prominent individuals from other minority groups. Certainly, there are, and one such representative of an Lezgin ethnic minority group expressed the following opinion during an interview for this study regarding the BIMC:

*I would very much like to see the tradition of multiculturalism change a bit in our country. For example, a multiculturalism centre has been established; it would be ideal for at least one representative from the Lezgin, Talysh, and Kurdish communities, among others, to work there. It would be beneficial to have someone from these communities in leadership positions, such as a*

*department head, because they understand the problems better. [...] Every people [ethnic group] should have at least one office. If two rooms were allocated, the state would not become poor. If Lezgin a national centre had one office with two rooms what's wrong with that? It would generate more sympathy for the state. Without it, we are citizens here too. This is our home.* (Interviewer, E)

I am confident that representatives of all ethnic and religious groups in Azerbaijan aspire not only to participate in the activities and various events organized by the BIMC, but also to hold leadership positions, become members of the Board of Trustees, and have a voice in decision-making processes that directly affect ethnic and religious minority communities in Azerbaijan. However, it appears that appointments to key positions within the largest organization created to promote multiculturalism are primarily made by the ruling elite, potentially favouring individuals perceived as loyal. The next chapter will explore this topic further from different perspectives.

As a result of the developments discussed in the previous paragraphs, the year 2016 was officially declared the ‘Year of Multiculturalism’<sup>6</sup> in Azerbaijan (AZERTAC, 2016). A plan of events, covering 49 different activities related to this declaration, was approved by the President of Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2016). Consequently, both the president and other key state authorities began to publicly affirm that Azerbaijan is actively pursuing a multiculturalism policy. The concept of multiculturalism became a topic of discussion in mass media and started to gain attention in academic circles.

It is worth noting that the events resulting from the ‘Year of Multiculturalism’ action plan, and the concept of multiculturalism more broadly, received extensive coverage in Azerbaijan’s mass media, particularly during 2016, the year officially dedicated to this

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<sup>6</sup> After the current president, Ilham Aliyev, took office in 2003, Azerbaijan established a tradition of naming and celebrating years with special designations by presidential decree. The president issues a decree announcing the theme and instructs the relevant governmental organizations to prepare an action plan. Based on this plan, local and international events are organized throughout the year. These designated years are often used for political purposes and are typically devoted to significant historical, cultural, or political events and figures. For instance, in connection with Azerbaijan hosting the COP29 conference in 2024, the year 2024 has been declared the "Green World Solidarity Year" (AZERTAC, 2023).

theme. However, it is almost impossible to observe what wider Azerbaijani society, ordinary citizens, actually thought about this issue through media outlets known for their close ties to the government and their generally positive tone when covering state policies. Nevertheless, two small public opinion street surveys conducted in 2016 by *Azadliq Radiosu* and *Meydan TV*, both known as independent media outlets in Azerbaijan, drew attention.

In *Azadliq Radiosu*'s (2016) street survey involving 18 respondents, 12 people said they had no idea what multiculturalism meant, one person gave an approximate definition, and three people associated it with tolerance and religious tolerance. Similarly, in *Meydan TV*'s (2016) street survey of 12 respondents, eight said they did not know the meaning of multiculturalism, one person linked it to Armenia, one foreign citizen understood the term correctly, and one respondent expressed it more critically, saying: "In my opinion, where there is no freedom of speech, there can be no talk of multiculturalism." Of course, these are small surveys without a scientific methodology. Nonetheless, they provide additional evidence that the concept of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan was not fully understood by society at large and that it appears to have been promoted as a top-down initiative.

One of the first steps taken in academic circles was the establishment of the Azerbaijani Multiculturalism Chair at Baku Slavic University (SCRA, 2015). Despite undergoing several name changes, the term 'multiculturalism' has remained part of the department's official name. Courses such as 'Introduction to Multiculturalism' and 'Azerbaijani Multiculturalism' were first introduced there (*The Chair of the Azerbaijan Multiculturalism*, n.d.). Over time, these courses grew in popularity and were incorporated into the curricula of all higher education institutions across the state.

Moreover, the teaching of 'Azerbaijani multiculturalism' has been organized, either temporarily or permanently, in numerous foreign universities through initiatives led by the BIMC (*Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 2019, p. 13). The BIMC has also taken an active role in offering specialized training for instructors teaching these subjects and has contributed to curriculum development. Alongside the DHPDMRI of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and the BIMC, other government institutions, such as the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SCRA), the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of

Azerbaijan, and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, have actively participated in promoting the multiculturalism policy initiative since its inception.

The steps taken to initially promote the idea of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan can be viewed as positive advancements. However, it is essential to recognise that discussions about multiculturalism, the inclusion of subjects such as ‘Azerbaijani Multiculturalism’ and ‘Introduction to Multiculturalism’ in almost all public universities, the celebration of the Year of Multiculturalism, and the organisation of numerous local and international events do not automatically guarantee the protection of ethnocultural rights for representatives of minority ethnic and religious groups. Many questions remain unanswered regarding how the introduction of multiculturalism into Azerbaijan's political discourse has impacted these communities. Ethnic and religious groups existed in Azerbaijan both before and after multiculturalism became a formal part of political discourse. How has this shift affected them? While constitutional foundations, international agreements, and existing laws aim to protect the unique characteristics of minority groups, has the introduction of multiculturalism brought about any tangible changes in their lives? Furthermore, although we already know what factors may have influenced Azerbaijan's decision to address multiculturalism as a public policy, the question remains: how is the multiculturalism policy understood by the Azerbaijani political establishment? Has the state managed to establish clear objectives, strategies, and concrete implementation plans?

Upon analysis, it becomes clear that although the Azerbaijan’s government has declared multiculturalism as an official state policy (as mentioned earlier, supported by the president's speeches and actions in this area), there is no definitive or clearly articulated concept for this policy. No official document has been adopted to conceptually explain the multiculturalism policy or to serve as its formal program. Such a document could have been issued, for example, in the form of a presidential decree as a non-normative legal act. For instance, the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted the National Security Concept in 2007, which provides a detailed framework for ensuring the state’s stability. In this document, particular attention is given to the threats posed by separatism, ethnic, political, and religious extremism, which are described as serious dangers to the fundamental foundations of the state and society (*National Security Concept...*, 2007, para. 3.3). While the National Security Concept recognises the risks related to ethnocultural issues, no separate comprehensive document has been issued that would

conceptualise multiculturalism positively as a policy direction, define its goals, or outline concrete strategies for promoting ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan.

Therefore, one can partially observe the concept of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan through the president's speeches, the activities of the DHPDMRI within the Presidential Administration, the initiatives undertaken by the BIMC, the president's decrees related to these activities, and references found in reports on international treaties to which Azerbaijan is a party. However, none of these sources fully clarifies or systematically explains what exactly the multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan entails.

In this context, I can make the following generalisation: the courses 'Azerbaijani Multiculturalism' and 'Introduction to Multiculturalism,' taught in all of the state's higher education institutions, especially public universities, along with the textbooks written for these courses, the charter of the BIMC, and a few other books and documents, can help us understand the ruling political elite's perspective on multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan. Starting in 2015, the textbooks *Azerbaijani Multiculturalism* and *Introduction to Multiculturalism* have been published for the teaching of these subjects, with multiple editions now available. The authors, and particularly the editors of these textbooks, are individuals working in leadership positions within state-created institutions tasked with promoting and implementing multiculturalism policy (mainly the DHPPMRI of the Presidential Administration and BIMC). Among these publications, it is crucial to closely examine the *Azerbaijani Multiculturalism* textbook. As previously mentioned, this textbook, available in several editions and translated into English, functions as a manifesto for Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. It acts as the main tool for promoting Azerbaijani multiculturalism both domestically and abroad. The main editors are Kamal Abdulla, a member of the Board of Trustees of BIMC and former head of the DHPPMRI of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan (2014–2017), and Etibar Najafov, who also led the same unit for a period. Both are professors in Azerbaijan. The Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan and BIMC are the organisations that published this book, which includes contributions from more than 40 authors, including Azerbaijani and foreign scientists and experts.

The editors state that "this textbook is the first resource to give a systematic presentation of the model of Azerbaijani multiculturalism" (Abdulla & Najafov, 2018, p. 13). The book's initial sections explain the essence of multiculturalism and its role as a policy

model for regulating ethnic and cultural diversity, primarily drawing from Western scholarly literature (pp. 16–20). It emphasises the state’s long-standing tradition of multiculturalism, rooted in its diverse historical, cultural, and religious heritage. The text highlights key aspects such as the philosophical foundations of Azerbaijani multiculturalism, its evolution over time, and its manifestation in contemporary state policies. It illustrates how Azerbaijan has institutionalised multiculturalism through legal frameworks and public policies, promoting tolerance and inclusivity among its various ethnic and religious communities. However, despite this thorough depiction, the ‘Azerbaijani Multiculturalism’ textbook has faced criticism for presenting an overly idealised view of social cohesion. It tends to gloss over existing ethnic and social tensions within the state, which can undermine the proclaimed success of its multicultural model. For example, when compared to Canada’s multiculturalism, significant differences emerge: Canada’s approach is underpinned by extensive anti-discrimination laws and proactive cultural preservation initiatives, while Azerbaijan’s model leans more heavily on state narratives and symbolic gestures, with less emphasis on robust legal frameworks and grassroots involvement (Filou, 2021).

This book can nevertheless be analysed separately because it touches on the understanding of multiculturalism by the Azerbaijani ruling elite and many aspects of the Azerbaijani multiculturalism model. Although it appears to function as a programmatic document for Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy, it lacks official status and, generally, I believe it can be characterised more as a propaganda tool, distancing itself from critical thought. Given these limitations, I will keep the analysis concise. However, it is important to note that both in this textbook and in the charter of the BIMC, the connection between Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy and the ideology of Azerbaijanism is explicitly emphasised, an important relationship that I would like to explore now.

The BICM charter (2014) states that “the main goal of the Centre is to ensure the preservation of tolerance, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity in accordance with the ideology of Azerbaijanism” (para. 2.1), and the above-mentioned textbook also repeatedly discusses and argues that the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism is based on the ideology of Azerbaijanism (Abdulla & Najafov, pp. 46-47, 62, 409). This raises the question: what is the ideology of Azerbaijanism, and how does the Azerbaijani state associate it with the policy of multiculturalism?

Azerbaijanism emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the context of the dissolution of the Russian Empire and the establishment of Azerbaijan as an independent republic in 1918. It transitioned from Turkism, whose main ideologist was Mahammad Amin Rasulzade (Sulaymanova, 2024, p. 5). The transition from the ideology of Turkism, based on Azerbaijani Turkic nationalism (Pan-Turkism), to the ideology of Azerbaijanism at the beginning of the 20th century, and continuing into present-day Azerbaijan, can be seen as a strategy to make Azerbaijan a safe place not only for Azerbaijani Turks but also for other ethnic groups living in the state. Today, as a main element of the nation-building process, Azerbaijanism is recognised as the state's formal ideology (Broers & Mahmudlu, 2022).

The ideology of Azerbaijani national identity, Azerbaijanism, is centred on fostering a sense of unity and national pride among the citizens of Azerbaijan, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds and “been imposed by the government top-down through education, culture, and media narratives” (Panahova, 2023, p. 2). This ideology promotes the idea that all people living within the borders of Azerbaijan share a common national identity and heritage. In my perspective, this term aligns well with the notion of citizenship. Askarova (2015) emphasises that citizenship is a fundamental component of Azerbaijanism as well (p. 428). The Azerbaijani government's association of this ideology with its multiculturalism policy appears to stem from this foundation: by integrating Azerbaijanism with multiculturalism, the government aims to create a cohesive society where diversity is seen as a strength and an integral part of national identity and citizenship.

While this approach aims to integrate diverse ethnic groups, it has been critiqued for marginalizing minorities such as the Talysh, who often feel excluded from the national narrative. The state's emphasis on a singular national identity can suppress the cultural expressions and political aspirations of these communities. Additionally, the instrumentalization of Azerbaijanism for regime resilience raises concerns about the authenticity of this unity and the potential for authoritarian consolidation. Critics argue that such an approach may undermine genuine multiculturalism and democratic inclusivity (Storm, 2024). Generally, this brings forward an additional important question: if the ideology of Azerbaijanism ensures the coexistence of different ethnic groups under a unified idea, why does Azerbaijan also pursue a separate policy of

multiculturalism? This question aligns closely with the main research question of this dissertation and will be explored in the following sections.

Now, I would like to address one more matter in this section: how is the multiculturalism policy understood by selected representatives of Azerbaijani ethnic and religious groups? One of the questions I asked my interviewees from ethnic and religious communities was, You probably know that the government of Azerbaijan pursues a policy of multiculturalism. What do you understand by multiculturalism policy, and how would you characterise it? The responses to this inquiry serve as the foundation for a viewpoint on the comprehension of multiculturalism as a policy by minority communities in Azerbaijan. As already mentioned, these 16 selected individuals represent a diverse cross-section of ethnic and religious communities in Azerbaijan, each offering insights based on their experiences and engagement within their respective communities.

One of the research participants, representative Catholic religious community expressed their view as follows:

*I would probably say that in Azerbaijan, this policy of multiculturalism, in my opinion, I could be wrong, yes, it is somewhat different from what is understood by multiculturalism in perhaps the same Europe. Why? Because in Azerbaijan, the policy of multiculturalism is, let's say, based on already existing and fairly deeply rooted traditions in society, the traditions of the Azerbaijani people. And these traditions imply, let's say, and contain, in a good sense of the word, a certain spiritual and cultural pluralism. That is, Azerbaijan has always been, so to speak, a multinational society. Azerbaijani society has always been a multinational, multi-confessional society, even before the policy of multiculturalism began, even before concepts such as multiculturalism and tolerance emerged at all. (Interviewer, P)*

This suggests that in Azerbaijan, multiculturalism is viewed by minority communities more as an extension of Azerbaijan's traditional societal fabric rather than a new or externally imposed concept. The response underscores the inherent inclusivity and diversity that have characterised Azerbaijani society over time.

Another participant, Udi ethno-religious community representative, describes multiculturalism as "the state's strategic policy" and emphasises that it is not only aimed

at protecting minority religious communities but also at serving as a model for the coexistence of the two branches of the Muslim community, Sunni and Shia, which, according to his estimate, constitute 97 percent of the state's population (Interviewer, K).

Krishna consciousness religious community representative notes, "I understand that if there is multiculturalism, then every religion in that state should be free to convey its teachings [doctrine] to society" (Interviewer, L). This idea also reflects a critical perspective on whether all religious denominations in Azerbaijan are truly free to propagate their doctrines. Although this is not the primary focus of this research, it is worth noting that incidents of discrimination and unfavourable treatment by the state appear to impact majority religious groups, particularly Shia Muslims, more than minority religious groups, compared to non-Muslim religious communities, since Shias, like in comparison with Sunnis, also constitute a minority in Azerbaijan (see, for example, United States Department of State, 2024; Corley & Kinahan, 2015).

The analysis of interviews with representatives of minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan reveals that although the question was about what multiculturalism is as a policy, some participants tended to explain multiculturalism more in terms of its direct meaning as cultural diversity. However, some of them also attempted to explain multiculturalism comprehensively and in detail as a policy. This indicates that some of my interviewees from ethnic communities representatives understand the importance of the state's role in implementing multiculturalism as a public policy. For instance, Talysh ethnic group representative responded in the following specific way:

*There is an accepted definition of multiculturalism. It refers to cultural diversity, a society where different religions and ethnic groups live together, generally a society where different cultures coexist. Azerbaijan, as a country, is naturally a multicultural country. The factors that condition multiculturalism here are also clear. For centuries, representatives of different peoples have lived in the same territory and in harmony. However, whether the state takes steps to preserve this multiculturalism or not is another question. And I think the steps taken by the state in this area are not sufficient. They are not enough. That's it. (Interviewer, C)*

This response demonstrates an informed understanding of multiculturalism, acknowledging it as both a unique characteristic of Azerbaijani society and a policy requiring proactive state support. The research participant highlights an important disparity: although Azerbaijan has historically been a multicultural society, the government's efforts to maintain and foster this diversity are deemed inadequate. This critique points to a gap between the normative ideal of multiculturalism and its practical application, emphasising the necessity for more robust and effective policies.

During the interviews with members of ethnic minority groups, an intriguing and unexpected moment occurred. Two of them (Interviewees, D, F) read the definition of multiculturalism as presented in the Azerbaijani multiculturalism course materials, which were popularised by BIMC as discussed earlier. Despite their recognition as members and representatives of their community, these individuals failed to provide an independent explanation of multiculturalism. This strongly suggests that their understanding of multiculturalism and their perception of what it means as a policy may be heavily shaped by official narratives.

Another participant from Kurd ethnic group noted that they see multiculturalism as a continuation of Azerbaijanism. They emphasised that they have a positive attitude toward both policies. They stressed that the Turkism ideology, which could have previously caused division in the state, has been replaced by Azerbaijanism, and that multiculturalism continues this policy in a new form (Interviewer, H).

When summarising the views of research participants from ethnic and religious minorities on the concept of multiculturalism, it becomes clear that the main narrative about multiculturalism stems from the state institutions operating in this field. While some participants describe multiculturalism merely as ethnocultural diversity, others explain it as a policy and particularly discuss the role of the state in its implementation. A few participants specifically attempt to describe the essence of the multiculturalism policy of Azerbaijan. This indicates that, despite the state's proclaimed commitment to multiculturalism, even notable figures from diverse ethnic and religious groups sometimes struggle to articulate a clear understanding of what multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan actually means.

When analysing the specificity of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, it can be seen that although the Azerbaijani authorities have adopted the term 'multiculturalism' in

line with international trends, their interpretation and use of this concept reflect the state's own political and historical realities. On the one hand, they seem to accept the general understanding of multiculturalism found in Western literature and international discussions; on the other hand, they reshape it into the so-called 'Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism' to fit local needs. This adaptation could be seen as an attempt to cover the inconsistencies and problems in the state's approach to managing ethnocultural diversity, compared to more established multiculturalism models. However, I am not rushing to this conclusion yet. According to the constructivist approach discussed earlier, it is important to remember that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan also serves as a tool for building a specific image of the state both inside and outside the state. Therefore, before making a final judgement, I will continue by analysing how multiculturalism is actually implemented in practice and how its implementation is evaluated by minority groups themselves. Only after this deeper analysis will I try to provide a more precise assessment.

### **3.2. Multicultural policy concept of Azerbaijan's State authorities**

This subchapter aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy by examining its formal institutional framework. Azerbaijan's state authorities have a central role in creating and implementing policies that shape the sociocultural landscape of the state. Here, I explore the institutional foundations of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, as articulated and implemented by key government institutions. The analysis in this section is primarily based on relevant laws and official documents related generally to multicultural policy in Azerbaijan. As previously mentioned, I attempted to interview representatives from state institutions responsible for multiculturalism policy, but unfortunately, no responses were received. Therefore, this subchapter focuses exclusively on examining the content and significance of official laws, regulations, and documents. By examining these formal institutional elements, I aim to clarify the key ideas and strategies underpinning the Azerbaijani state's approach to managing cultural diversity.

In exploring the institutional basis of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, the primary task is to determine whether there is a constitutional foundation for this public policy. Beyond the constitution, it's also important to identify other legislative acts that support

multiculturalism, as well as relevant international treaties that Azerbaijan has signed or ratified. As mentioned in the introduction, Azerbaijan's historical experience has significantly influenced its approach to multiculturalism, eventually integrating it into national strategy. According to official discourse, this strategic approach later evolved into an official public policy. In practice, managing ethnocultural and religious diversity, ensuring fair intergroup relations, and preserving cultural diversity necessitate a clear constitutional and legal framework.

On November 12, 1995, the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016) was adopted through a nationwide referendum. It was later amended in 2002, 2009, and 2016, also by national referendums. Even after the 2016 constitutional changes, the Constitution still does not directly mention the term *multiculturalism*, despite the fact that the government had already begun to actively promote a multiculturalism policy around 2013. Nevertheless, several articles in the Constitution provide a legal basis for protecting the rights and freedoms of national minorities and ethnic groups living in the state.

For instance, Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016) designates Azerbaijani as the official language but also protects the right to use other languages, thus supporting linguistic diversity. Article 25 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination, which lays the groundwork for an inclusive legal framework. Article 32 protects private life, implicitly covering respect for cultural and religious identities. Article 44 affirms the right to preserve national identity and cultural heritage, and Article 48 ensures freedom of conscience, including religious belief and practice. Additionally, Chapter IV of the Constitution addresses local self-governance, which may be relevant for enhancing cultural and ethnic rights in regions densely populated by minority communities. While these articles suggest a formal commitment to protecting *ethno-cultural diversity*, the absence of explicit reference to multiculturalism, or to minority protection as a state objective, limits the extent to which the Constitution can be seen as a strong legal foundation for the state's multiculturalism policy. This confusion may raise concerns about the consistency and depth of the state's commitments in practice, especially when political narratives are not always fully reflected in constitutional language.

Taken together, these provisions offer a formal legal basis for supporting *ethno-cultural diversity* and underpin the broader framework of multiculturalism. However, compared

to constitutions of some Western states, where Azerbaijan borrow the new term multiculturalism, known for more developed multicultural policies, Azerbaijan's approach reveals both similarities and limitations. For example, Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms affirms equality and celebrates diversity, further reinforced by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1985 (see Chapter 1). Belgium's constitution formally recognises cultural communities and guarantees the language rights of Dutch, French, and German speakers, illustrating a structured model of linguistic and cultural autonomy (The Belgian Constitution, 2017). Sweden's constitution similarly ensures cultural self-expression and protects the identities of minority groups through legal guarantees (The Constitution of Sweden, 1974).

When compared with the constitutions of other post-Soviet states in the region, Azerbaijan's constitutional framework appears relatively general in its protection of ethno-cultural diversity. For example, Georgia's 1995 Constitution, particularly Articles 14 and 38, explicitly guarantees the rights of ethnic minorities to preserve their cultural identity and use their mother tongue in public life, including education (Constitution of Georgia, 1995). Similarly, the Constitution of Ukraine (Article 11) mandates that the state promote the development of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identity of all indigenous peoples and national minorities (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996).

While Azerbaijan's constitutional framework includes comparable principles, such as equality, language rights, and religious freedom, the practical application of these provisions, the consistency of public policy, and the depth of minority engagement remain problematic. Of all the constitutional rights relating to ethnic and religious minorities, Article 25, ensuring equality, is arguably the most fundamental to Azerbaijan's multicultural policy. It is essential for protecting ethno-cultural diversity and securing equal legal treatment. Article 21, Section II, also states that "The Republic of Azerbaijan guarantees free use and development of other languages spoken by the population". However, this provision raises important questions regarding how actively the state supports minority language education and whether meaningful institutional measures exist to promote and protect these languages. As will be discussed in later chapters, the implementation of these constitutional guarantees often falls short of the standards and practices observed in many Western liberal democracies.

As I mentioned in the second chapter of this dissertation, before the first Constitution of independent Azerbaijan was adopted in 1995, the President signed a presidential *decree on the protection of rights and freedoms and state support for the development of the language and culture of the national minorities, minor nations, and ethnic groups residing in the Republic of Azerbaijan* (1992). It was aimed at developing interethnic relations, protecting cultural diversity, and providing for the free development of national minorities and ethnic groups in the state until the adoption of the first Constitution of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan. Though the preservation and development of religion, language, and cultural identity of national minorities and ethnic groups were undertaken by the state, including creating conditions for the development of folk arts and crafts and the free performance of religious rituals, there was still a need for their constitutional guarantee. This decree is a normative legal act and remains in force to this day. It held significant importance in a newly independent state that lacked a constitution until 1995.

During the interviews, participants from ethnic groups, especially cultural employees, emphasised that the establishment of their organisations was directly based on this 1992 presidential decree. In his interview, Jamil Hasanli, a historian, politician, and leader of the NCDF of Azerbaijan since 2013, confirmed this point. He also served as a political advisor to Abulfaz Elchibey, the second President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who signed the decree. He had the following to say about its importance:

*For example, in the fall of 1992, a presidential decree was issued on national minorities, and ethnic groups in Azerbaijan. Right? More than 20 cultural centers were established, and all of them were given offices in the center of Baku. Four of them had their own press organs, Talysh, Lezgi, Kurdish, and Avar cultural centers, all of which published newspapers. They received financial support from the Presidential Fund. A commission was also created under the state adviser, Hidayat Orujov, on national issues at the time which included the leaders of these ethnic groups. For example, Novruzali Mammadov, the editor of the Talyshi Sado (Voice of Talysh) newspaper, was a member. In addition to offices, their press was also funded by the Presidential Fund. Radio programs in four languages began on Azerbaijani radio. I remember this well.*

Following Jamil Hasanli's account, it's important to note that Novruzali Mammadov, editor of the Tolyshi Sado (*Voice of Talysh*) newspaper and a member of the commission under state adviser Hidayat Orujov, was later arrested in 2007 on charges of espionage for Iran. He was sentenced to ten years in prison in 2008. Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International (2009), considered the charges politically motivated, citing concerns over the fairness of his trial and his treatment in custody. Mammadov died in prison on August 17, 2009, under circumstances that raised further concerns about the Azerbaijani authorities' treatment of ethnic minority activists (*Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2009).

Another interviewee, Seymour Hazi, deputy chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, also confirmed importance of above mentioned decree:

*It was to create opportunities for the establishment of those cultural centres, to give them buildings, to provide them with equipment, to create opportunities for them to start radio broadcasting, and to take the first steps regarding their education.*

This decree, and the initiative in general, was one of the most important and positive steps taken during the one-year rule of the Azerbaijani Popular Front government in relation to ethnic minorities. That period is often credited with other major reforms, such as the introduction of the national currency (the Manat), the launch of a transparent university entrance test system, the liberation of some territories occupied by Armenian and separatist forces, the complete withdrawal of Russian military troops from Azerbaijan, the first steps toward building a new army according to NATO standards, the creation of media outlets in minority languages, and opening oil fields to international companies (Azadliq Radiosu, 2020). Against the backdrop of existing and emerging separatist tendencies, the signing of this decree in was a significant milestone in the central government's recognition of ethnic minority rights and laid the foundation for their later inclusion in the Constitution of Azerbaijan.

Besides the Constitution and the above-mentioned decree, I consider it important to briefly review other normative legal acts of Azerbaijan, particularly the laws that may be relevant to this topic. The legislation of the Republic of Azerbaijan reflects the constitutional provisions on ethnic and religious diversity and equality. It clearly states that racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation does not affect the principle of equal rights

before the law and the courts. The right to equality is one of the fundamental principles embedded in the Civil Code, Criminal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, Labour Code, the Law on Education, the Law on Culture, and other legislative acts of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Article 8 of the Law on Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2012) states that everyone has the right to preserve their national cultural identity, define their cultural identity, and freely choose their spiritual, aesthetic, and other values. This provides a legal basis for every representative of minority ethnic and religious groups in the state to protect their identity. According to Article 154 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan (1999), infringement of the equality of citizens based on race, nationality, creed, language, origin, property or official status, belief, or affiliation with political parties, trade unions, or other public associations, when it causes harm to the rights and legitimate interests of citizens, bears criminal liability. Articles 109 (Pursuit), 111 (Racial discrimination, apartheid), and 283 (Prevention of national, racial, social, or religious hatred and hostility) of the same Criminal Code also bear criminal liability and provide a legal basis for opposing discrimination and supporting tolerant coexistence in Azerbaijan.

In a state like Azerbaijan, where people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds live together, having clear and protective legal measures, like those found in the Criminal Code, is especially important. The articles mentioned earlier specifically criminalise discrimination and any actions that incite hatred based on race, nationality, religion, or other identities. These laws serve as a safeguard against inequality and help create the conditions for peaceful and respectful coexistence. They aim to ensure that everyone, no matter their background, can live with dignity and feel protected under the law.

The opportunity to get an education in one's native tongue is one of the most significant aspects of ethnic minority life. As stated in the second chapter of this dissertation, the primary determinant of identity for minority ethnic communities residing in Azerbaijan is language. According to Article 5 of the Law on Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2009), the state guarantees the provision of educational opportunities for every citizen, regardless of gender, race, language, religion, political beliefs, ethnic origin, social status, background, or health condition, and ensures that there is no discrimination. Additionally, Article 42 of the Constitution of the Republic of

Azerbaijan (2016) recognises every citizen's right to education, while Article 45 acknowledges everyone's right to receive education and training, and to engage in creative activities in their preferred language. Both the Law on Education and the Constitution of Azerbaijan do not prevent ethnic minorities from receiving education in their own languages. However, they also do not fully guarantee the implementation of this right, which means that ethnic minorities may face challenges in accessing education in their native languages.

Legal protections have been put in place to safeguard the use of different languages in court trials and criminal proceedings. According to Article 26 of the Criminal Procedure Code (2000), criminal proceedings in the courts of the Republic of Azerbaijan are conducted in the state language or in the language of the majority population of the respective area. Participants in the criminal process who do not know the language of the proceedings are entitled to use their native language, have access to a translator free of charge during investigations and court sessions, and make statements in their native language. These services are funded by the state budget. Similarly, Article 127 of the Constitution of Azerbaijan (2016) guarantees that court proceedings are conducted in the state language or the language of the majority, and ensures that participants who do not speak the language of the proceedings can fully understand the case materials, use a translator, and speak in their native language in court. This approach is meant to prevent language barriers from impeding access to justice and to ensure that all participants can engage with and understand the legal process. However, the real test lies in how these provisions are implemented in practice. Their effectiveness depends on the availability of adequate resources and proper administrative support to make sure the linguistic rights of minorities are genuinely protected.

The attitude of the state toward different religious communities and the relationship between those communities is regulated by the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Religious Belief (1992). While the general legal principles are outlined in the Constitution, this law defines the status, rights, and responsibilities of religious institutions, setting the legal framework for their activities. Article 5 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief (1992) declares the separation of religion and religious organisations from the state and affirms the principle of equality for all religious organisations before the law. In Azerbaijan, all religious organisations can operate as legal entities, provided they are officially registered. As I mentioned earlier, the SCRA

is the authority responsible for handling all registration matters concerning religious communities.

Another important law, the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Combating Religious Extremism (2015), was adopted to strengthen the state's efforts in countering groups that operate under the guise of religion. The purpose of this law is to prevent the misuse of constitutional guarantees related to religious freedom. In addition to this legislation, some of the decisions made by the SCRA are also relevant to this study. According to these decisions, the SCRA is responsible for overseeing the production, import, export, and distribution of religious literature, both in print and digital formats, as well as other informational materials. The committee also monitors the activities of courses or groups dedicated to studying holy books (*Legislation*, n.d.).

Azerbaijan has established a legal framework concerning ethnic minorities and religious communities, which are central to its identity as a multi-ethnic state. In this context, the state also cooperates with international organisations such as the United Nations, Council of Europe, OSCE, EU, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, UNESCO, and others. As noted in Chapter 2, Azerbaijan's commitments to the Council of Europe and the OSCE include several agreements that influence its obligations on minority rights and multicultural policy.

Since joining the United Nations in March 1992, Azerbaijan has ratified two key human rights treaties relevant to multiculturalism: the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (OHCHR, n.d.-a). These treaties require Azerbaijan to ensure that ethnic and cultural minorities can fully exercise their rights without discrimination. The Optional Protocol to the ICESCR allows individuals and groups to submit complaints to the UN Committee when their rights are violated. ICERD obliges states to eliminate racial discrimination and promote equality. Together, these treaties offer a framework supporting inclusion and accountability in minority protection.

Azerbaijan is also a party to the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities. This declaration, adopted by General Assembly Resolution 47/135, urges states to protect minority identity and ensure their participation in all areas of public life. It stresses the rights of

minorities to preserve and express their cultural, religious, and linguistic identity, both publicly and privately, and to maintain associations and cross-border ties with similar groups (UN, 1992).

One could argue that Azerbaijan's legal framework for protecting minority rights is extensive. The commitment is visible in domestic laws and international agreements. Relevant institutions, the Executive Authority, the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the SCRA, and the DHPDMRI of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan are formally responsible for implementation. But the key issue remains: how effective is this legal framework in practice? This question is closely tied to the broader human rights environment in Azerbaijan. As previously discussed, a constructivist approach asks how identities are recognised or shaped by state policies. Laws are only one part of the picture, their interpretation and implementation matter most. Rather than covering the entire human rights landscape, the next chapter will narrow its focus to empirical analysis of the educational and cultural rights of ethnic groups and religious practices of communities, based on interviews and fieldwork.

### **3.3. Multicultural policy concept of Azerbaijan's political forces**

In this subchapter, I examine how different political forces in Azerbaijan approach multicultural policy and their perspectives on managing ethno-religious diversity. Political parties play an important role in shaping public narratives and influencing state policies (Strøm & Müller, 1999; Shanahan et al., 2011) and their views on multiculturalism impact the broader sociopolitical landscape. Ideally, Azerbaijan's political field would reflect a range of parties with different ideologies and visions for the state's future, including varied approaches to diversity management. This section explores how these political forces understand and engage with multiculturalism and what their strategies, goals, and ideological positions reveal about their stance on this issue.

According to the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan (CEC, 2022), after Azerbaijan restored its independence in 1991, the number of political parties registered with the state was 59 as of 2022. However, by 2023, this number had dropped to 26 (CEC, 2023). This significant decline is related to the new Law on

Political Parties adopted by the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2022. Article 6 of the law (2022) requires that a political party must register with the state and have a minimum of 5,000 members. Since the law came into effect, all existing political parties in Azerbaijan had to re-register. Many parties failed to meet the new threshold and were not re-registered.

It is also important to mention that the re-registration process was not straightforward, even for major opposition parties like the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP). In contrast, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP) did not face such hurdles. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (2023) have jointly criticised the new law, pointing out several concerns. One of the main criticisms is the re-registration requirement itself. As they note, “The law not only makes it more difficult to establish new political parties but also imposes the obligation on already registered parties to undergo re-registration” (p. 15).

It’s also worth mentioning that Azerbaijan’s political scene has long been dominated by a single ruling party, while the opposition remains divided and relatively weak, a situation that poses ongoing challenges for democratic development (LaPorte, 2014). Since its founding in 1992, the NAP has held onto power tightly, leaving little space for real political competition. After gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan went through major leadership changes. It’s widely accepted that Abulfaz Elchibey, leader of the APFP, won the state’s first fairly contested presidential election in 1992. But his presidency didn’t last long, he was forced to resign after a devastating war with Armenia and what many describe as a Russian-backed coup. That crisis brought Heydar Aliyev back to power in 1993. While he restored a degree of order, he also weakened political pluralism and concentrated power in the hands of the executive (Altstadt, 2003, pp. 8–9). When Heydar Aliyev passed away in 2003, his son Ilham Aliyev took over the presidency. He went on to tighten control even further, most notably through a 2009 referendum that removed presidential term limits (*Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 2009). That change helped ensure Ilham Aliyev would face no serious challengers, effectively closing the door on meaningful presidential competition (Guliyev, 2012, p. 9; Altstadt, 2020, p. 168; Freedom House, 2023).

Main opposition parties, such as the Musavat Party and the APFP, have struggled to gain significant influence and have not been in power since the Popular Front's first and

last one-year government in 1992-1993. Elections in Azerbaijan have been also frequently criticized by international observers for failing to meet democratic standards (OSCE/ODIHR, n.d.). Since gaining independence, Azerbaijan has faced considerable challenges in establishing a stable and democratic political environment, with the ruling NAP's dominance contributing to the overall difficulties in achieving proper democracy.

The same problems around democracy also show up in how the National Assembly (Milli Məclis) function. It's a single-chamber parliament with 125 members elected for five-year terms. Since the early years of independence, parliamentary elections have regularly been criticised for things like fraud, lack of transparency, and pressure on the opposition (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020). In protest, the APFP and the NCDF boycotted the 2015 and 2020 elections, pointing to repression and unfair conditions (AzadlıqRadiosu, 2019). In this kind of environment, the government has often been accused of maintaining a fake image of political diversity through so-called 'pocket opposition' parties (Bedford & Vinatier, 2018). Today, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party dominates the Assembly, while the few other parties with seats, like the Civic Solidarity Party (VHP), the Motherland Party (AVP), the Democratic Reforms Party (DİP), or the Republican Alternative Party (REAL), are often seen as close to the government and not genuinely critical. According to Freedom House (2023), the parliament mostly backs what the executive decides, rather than acting as an independent power that could limit it.

This lack of real political competition is closely linked to how the state deals with dissent more broadly. Azerbaijan has received serious international criticism for its treatment of political prisoners, with many reports documenting the arrests of journalists, activists, and opposition figures on what are widely seen as politically motivated charges. Amnesty International (2024) and Human Rights Watch (2023), for instance, have pointed to several cases where people were jailed simply for expressing their views or taking part in peaceful protests. The government has often been accused of using the courts to silence critics by charging them with crimes like tax evasion, drug possession, or inciting unrest, charges that human rights organisations say are often fabricated. Even though there have been occasional releases, the overall situation remains tense. Many prisoners of conscience are still behind bars, and new arrests, such as those reported by Geybulla (2024), keep happening. All of this highlights how urgent

judicial reform is, and how far Azerbaijan still has to go in respecting basic human rights.

All things considered, Azerbaijan today can be described as a one-party state, with the NAP holding full control over the government. It also functions as a dynastic state, with the Aliyev family remaining in power for decades, what Magyar and Madlovics (2020) would call an autocracy in terms of political institutional systems. Unless serious changes are made, this situation is likely to continue until at least the next presidential elections in 2031, with little chance for major shifts. This dissertation does not aim to give a detailed analysis of the broader political party system or democratic challenges in Azerbaijan. Still, this brief overview helps to outline the general political setting that shapes the state's multicultural policy.

Taking all of this into account, I decided to approach four political parties and one political group for semi-structured interviews to learn about the positions of these political organisations in Azerbaijan regarding the multiculturalism policy claimed to be implemented by the state. The main aim was to understand their views on the regulation of ethnic-religious diversity in Azerbaijan and particularly about multiculturalism policy. Despite several attempts, two of them, the ruling NAP and the REAL, which is considered semi-independent and semi, 'pocket opposition', did not respond to the interview requests. Notably, interviews were successfully conducted with three prominent figures: Arif Hajili, the leader of the Musavat Party; Seymour Hazi, deputy chairman of the APFP; and Jamil Hasanli, a professor of history and leader of the NCDF of Azerbaijan.

I believe that among the many political organisations in Azerbaijan, the ones selected for interviews play a significant role in the state's political environment, even in a context of limited freedoms for political organisations. Regarding the ruling NAP, since its chairman is the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and his decisions, actions, speeches, etc., are extensively analysed throughout the dissertation, the inability to secure an interview with this party does not significantly affect the quality of the work. However, given that the APFP, the Musavat Party, and the NCDF of Azerbaijan operate under continuous pressure and repression, and that two of them do not even have websites or offices, having detailed conversations directly with their leaders was crucial to understanding their positions on the subject under research.

Thus, the views of the three opposition political organisations in Azerbaijan on the subject under investigation will be examined together. I believe their insights offer valuable contributions to a deeper understanding of the research topic and will help shape a more balanced outcome for this dissertation. In this section, alongside the first and second questions intended for political organisations (see Appendix A), key points from the interviewees regarding the overall political environment in Azerbaijan, as well as information about their own organisations, will be discussed.

The APFP, founded in 1989, has been a key political force advocating for democratic reforms and played a significant role in Azerbaijan's independence movement under the name Popular Front, from which several major opposition parties in the state have emerged (Heinrich, 2010, pp. 13–14). Seymour Hazi, a politician, journalist, and deputy chairman of the party, describes its ideological foundation as centrist, aiming to unite and synthesise various values, particularly social democratic and liberal ideals, within the APFP. In his words,

*In the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, you can be a nationalist, but not a fascist; you can be a liberal, but not a libertarian; you can be a social democrat, but not a communist; you can be religious, but not a fundamentalist.*

Additionally, he notes that APFP is a political organisation that avoids radical extremes and draws on the centuries-old culture and values of the Azerbaijani people.

The Musavat Party, first founded in 1911 and re-established in 1992, is the oldest political party in Azerbaijan, with a long-standing commitment to national independence and liberal democratic ideals. In our interview, the party's leader, Arif Hajili, spoke in depth about its historical roots, its re-establishment after Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, and its continuing role in the state's political landscape. He emphasised that the Musavat Party follows a liberal democratic national ideology, saying about its fundamental principles:

*These fundamental principles include our independence, freedom, Turkism, modernity, and other similar principles. Recently, we have also added the principle of dignity to these principles. [...] Our overall political line is centre-right. One of the fundamental principles of the Musavat Party is the principle of solidarity, which has been called solidarism during certain periods. This means that we advocate for a political line where there is not a great distance*

*between the right and the left, opposing both radical right-wing and radical left-wing ideologies.*

The NCDF of Azerbaijan, formed in 2013, is a coalition of opposition groups aiming to unite various democratic forces within the state to push for political reforms and transparency. Regarding the NCDF he leads, Jamil Hasanli, a professor of history and politician who has been the leader of the NCDF of Azerbaijan since 2013, responded as follows:

*The National Council, unlike political parties, is not purely a political organization. It is a socio-political organization. For example, the National Council has no local branches, while parties do. The National Council is a socio-political body that brings together a group of intellectuals, civil society members, political activists, and leaders to voice the people's rights and demands in socio-political processes.*

Each representative interviewed from the political organisations mentioned that their members, including themselves, face significant challenges and government repression, which impact their ability to operate freely and effectively within the Azerbaijani political landscape. In this regard, NCDF leader Jamil Hasanli stated:

*First of all, the scope of activities of opposition political and social organisations in Azerbaijan has been significantly restricted. If we say that Azerbaijan had an authoritarian regime before, now, especially after the Karabakh war, it has entered the stage of totalitarian rule. For a long time, I've been saying, right when the 'iron fist' was being shaken in the air, that today it's being shaken against the Armenians, but after the Armenian issue is resolved, it will be directed against the Azerbaijani people. In this regard, using the resources of the state, the government has created a monopoly on the political scene by limiting the activities of all opposition organisations. [...] I want you to know that those who express critical thoughts under Azerbaijan's totalitarian regime, those who take a real opposition stance, live not the life given by God, but the life limited by the Aliyev regime.*

Regarding the question about the logic and rationale behind multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan, it is evident that representatives from all three political organisations interviewed are aware of the multiculturalism policy that the Azerbaijan's authorities

claim to implement. They understand that the concept of multiculturalism has been adopted from liberal democratic Western states and are knowledgeable about its essence. Specifically, regarding the logic of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, the leader of the NCDF, Jamil Hasanli, states:

*I think this is more aimed at the external audience than the internal one. The Azerbaijani government needed to create a modern, humanistic image amid repressions, and they found that image in multiculturalism. Perhaps this is not true, but my view is that the Azerbaijani government's multiculturalism policy is completely artificial.*

On this point, Seymur Hazi, deputy chairman of the APFP, shares a critical view. He believes that the government has shaped its own version of multiculturalism, one that looks quite different from what is understood under universal democratic standards. In his view, claims of cultural freedom in Azerbaijan are misleading, since there is no real freedom of expression or political pluralism. As he puts it, “where there is no freedom of thought and expression, it is theoretically incorrect to talk about cultural freedom.” Hazi believes that cultural diversity in Azerbaijan is not the result of government policies but is rooted in the state's history. He criticises the government's tendency to present multiculturalism as a top-down achievement, arguing that while cultural pluralism is promoted, political pluralism is ignored, revealing a deeper contradiction in the state's overall approach.

The leader of the Müsavat Party, Arif Hajili, values tolerance in Azerbaijan but criticises the government's approach to multiculturalism policy. In his own words, his approach can be summarised as follows:

*In fact, a normal civil state should be multicultural, if we take the whole human direction. The Azerbaijani society itself is very tolerant, and this issue is not new. Representatives of various nationalities living in Azerbaijan were represented as members of parliament in the Azerbaijani People's Republic [Azerbaijan Democratic Republic], which existed from 1918 to 1920, and they defended the interests of their nations there. [...] So, there is no discrimination or bias against the native population or any other groups in Azerbaijan. [...] In later years, the Azerbaijani government also put forward its ideas regarding the promotion of multiculturalism policy. This was more of a campaign nature. [...]*

*We also view this only as a positive thing. That is, as the Musavat Party, we see it as a positive development. Even though it is often more declarative and propaganda-oriented, we still consider the fact that the state officially declared such a policy as a positive fact.*

The final issue I want to address is what factors the interviewed individuals believe influenced Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. Initially, their opinions on this matter were sought. If they did not touch upon factors such as Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe and the OSCE, the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and historical separatist tendencies like the Talysh and Lezgi disputes, they were specifically asked for their views on these subjects as well. However, it is not necessary that each of the three interviewees had expressed opinions on all of the factors that are the focus of my research.

On this matter, the NCDF of Azerbaijan leader Jamil Hasanli argues the following:

*Judaism. If you pay attention to the discussions about this policy and its impact on the international community, Jewish lobby organizations emphasized that there was a tolerant attitude toward Jews in Azerbaijan. Right? But tolerance towards Jews in Azerbaijan did not begin in 2014. It has existed for ages. First of all, Mountain Jews have always been permanent residents of this country.*

In general, summarizing Jamil Hasanli's views expressed throughout the interview, it appears that he believes Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy lacks connection to real life. According to him, the policy primarily carries a propagandistic character, aimed at creating a positive international image of Azerbaijan and legitimizing the Aliyev family's rule which supports the main argument of this study.

Arif Hajili, the leader of the Müsavat Party, shares the belief that there is genuine tolerance towards the Jewish community, an ethnic-religious group living in Azerbaijan. He emphasizes that Azerbaijan is one of the states in the world where antisemitism is absolutely absent. In response to the question about what factors may have influenced the state's multiculturalism policy, Hajili pointed to Azerbaijan's ethnic and religious diversity as an important internal factor. However, he believes that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be seen as separate from multiculturalism. He also notes that the separatist tendencies among some representatives of the Talysh and Lezgi communities in the 1990s were mostly influenced by foreign actors and are no longer

relevant today. Reflecting on that period, he said, “The 1990s were not only a time of rising nationalist separatist tendencies in Azerbaijan but also worldwide [...] there was a chaotic situation in Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine.” He explained that, particularly after 2000, oil revenues and institutional development helped strengthen the state, reducing the threat of separatism. Today, he believes there are no dangerous ethnic confrontations that could lead to serious national consequences.

Regarding the factors, Seymur Hazi, considers the state’s ethnic and religious diversity, as well as its commitments to the Council of Europe, as key influences behind the promotion of multiculturalism. However, he does not believe that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has played a role in shaping these policies. When it comes to the separatist tendencies that emerged in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, particularly among Lezgins and Talysh, he dismisses the idea of a genuine separatist threat. As he puts it, “these theses about mass rejection of statehood [...] are absurd and baseless,” noting that the process faded after one or two arrests and pointing out that “a whole people cannot be represented by one person.” Hazi believes these movements were externally orchestrated, saying they “originated from Russia” and were part of a wider provocation targeting not just minorities but also Azerbaijanis in general.

Jamil Hasanli, also connects the separatist tendencies of the 1990s with external interference. In his view, these were not driven by internal discontent but rather manipulated from abroad. “There are plenty of complaints and writings by Karabakh Armenians saying that Armenians from Armenia do not leave them alone,” he noted, adding that what happened “was a manifestation of external interference.” He pointed to examples such as Iranian TV openly promoting the Talysh issue and Russian media coverage of the Sadval movement as evidence that these separatist narratives were being pushed from outside the state.

Looking at the responses gathered from opposition parties in Azerbaijan, one thing becomes clear: these political forces work under very limited conditions. As parties not represented in parliament and without any financial support from the state, they rely almost entirely on their own resources, mainly membership fees, just to stay active. Given these conditions, their influence on state policies, including multiculturalism, is minimal. Even so, their views offer an important lens. All three opposition figures interviewed acknowledged the importance of multiculturalism for Azerbaijan, especially considering its ethnic and religious diversity. But they also expressed strong

doubts about how the state actually applies this concept. However, they are also sceptical of the way these values are put into practice. Their views reveal that the state's multiculturalism policy is often disconnected from the everyday challenges faced by minority groups and functions more as a symbolic character than as a driver of real inclusion or democratic change.

### **3.4. Multicultural policy concept of think tank organizations**

This subchapter looks at how think tank organisations in Azerbaijan understand and frame multiculturalism, particularly in relation to ethno-religious diversity. Usually as independent research bodies, think tanks often play an active role in shaping policy debates and offering input to decision-makers (Fraussen & Halpin, 2016). However, their role is not always neutral. Medvetz (2012), argues that think tanks can act as part of a larger network of corporate, financial, and political elites. From this perspective, they don't just produce knowledge; they also serve political interests, often aligned with the ruling elite (pp. 8–9). At the same time, there's an alternative view. The pluralist approach sees think tanks as just one actor among many in a crowded policy space, alongside trade unions, advocacy groups, social movements, and others, all trying to shape policy according to their own goals and resources (Abelson, 2018). These contrasting perspectives are useful in analysing how Azerbaijani think tanks engage with the state's multiculturalism agenda.

Think tanks began to grow in number in the United States and Canada during the 1970s and 1980s, and over time, this trend spread globally. Today, it is hard to imagine a modern state without them. However, the way think tanks function in the West and East differs significantly. In Western states, especially in the US and Europe, they tend to operate as independent institutions, offering research, policy advice, and advocacy across a broad spectrum of issues. Their funding, often a mix of private donations, state grants, and corporate sponsorship, gives them some autonomy and space to influence public debate (Rich, 2004).

By contrast, think tanks in more centralised political systems like China or Russia are usually tied closely to the state (Vendil Pallin & Oxenstierna, 2017). Rather than serving as independent actors, they tend to reinforce official policies. In Azerbaijan, think tanks follow a hybrid model. While some maintain a level of independence, many are closely

connected to the government, reflecting the state's broader political environment. These institutions often prioritise issues like national identity, regional security, and economic development, topics aligned with state priorities. Some, like the Social Research Centre established by presidential decree in 2019, are officially recognised as public legal entities and directly funded by the state (Charter, 2019).

This state funding limits competition and reduces the influence of such think tanks within society and internationally. Many claim to be independent, but when looking more closely at their leadership and activities, clear ties to the government emerge. In my view, the state establishes or supports these centres to legitimise its political agenda at home and abroad. Still, there are exceptions. A few think tanks in Azerbaijan are widely considered to be independent, with the Baku Research Institute standing out as perhaps the most important example, an assessment shared by Barberis (2024) and others, including myself.

Research on the activities, transparency, and overall independence of think tanks in Azerbaijan remains quite limited. Therefore, many of the points discussed above should be viewed as preliminary observations. It is also important to clarify that the aim of this study is not to investigate the operations of think tanks, but rather to understand their expert perspectives on the multiculturalism policy that the Azerbaijani government claims to implement. However, in order to assess the degree of closeness between the think tanks and the government or other influential actors, a preliminary review was necessary. Following this initial investigation, I reached out to two officially government-run think tanks, three believed to be close to the government, one considered independent, and one associated with an opposition political party in Azerbaijan. Two of the think tanks considered close to the government declined the interview request. Ultimately, interviews were conducted with five think tank representatives and two independent experts, making a total of seven expert interviews. In line with ethical standards, the confidentiality of all participants has been safeguarded. From this point forward, interviewees will be referred to as 'expert' in alphabetical order assigned for all confidential interviews in this study.

In this section, an analysis will be conducted around the first and second questions from the semi-structured interviews with the experts (see Appendix A). The remaining questions will be used for all other analyses in the subsequent parts of this dissertation. The questions we need to consider now are: Why does Azerbaijan pursue a

multiculturalism policy? How valid are the factors proposed as initial hypotheses in this dissertation according to the experts? What other factors, according to the experts, influence Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?

Additionally, as with all semi-structured interviews, other significant points raised by the experts will also be addressed. To compare and analyze the experts' opinions, I will classify them as follows:

- Experts representing think tanks established by the government
- Experts representing think tanks close to the government
- Experts representing independent think tanks
- Independent experts

When referencing them, I will generally mention them as *independent* and *government-affiliated experts*. As I mentioned in the introduction, the reason why experts' opinions are sometimes given in a broad form is to avoid distorting their reasoning on the mentioned topic.

Although the experts expressed some similar views in response to the questions in this section, their opinions differ considerably on many issues. This divergence is evident in their responses to the first question. When summarising and analysing the experts' views on that question, one key theme stands out: each expert, in one way or another, emphasises that the historical presence of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan plays a fundamental role in the state's decision to adopt a multiculturalism policy. Since there is broad agreement among the experts on this point, it becomes more important to focus on and explore the other significant themes where their views diverge.

I will now bring together the main themes that emerged in response to the question, "Why does Azerbaijan pursue a multiculturalism policy?" and link them with the second guiding question about the factors influencing this policy. But first, it's important to revisit the earlier analytical question: "How valid are the factors proposed as initial hypotheses in this dissertation, according to the experts?" Specifically, what do the interviewed experts think about factors such as the threat of separatism, Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe and the OSCE and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

Their views diverge significantly on these issues. While some experts fully agree with many of the proposed factors, others partially agree, and a few reject them altogether.

For instance, when it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the separatist movements of the 1990s, not all experts consider these to be core factors. One government-affiliated expert rejected any link between the Karabakh war and multiculturalism, stating:

*When you mention the Karabakh conflict, you should know that for a long time, what has Armenian propaganda in the media consisted of? They have tried to frame the Karabakh conflict either on a religious basis or an ethnic basis. They've portrayed it as a Muslim-Christian war or an Armenian-Azerbaijani war. This is absolutely not the case! We have repeatedly emphasized that the root of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as it was known back then, is a territorial conflict. It is a problem that arose from the illegal occupation of recognized Azerbaijani territories by unauthorized armed groups. The establishment of a multiculturalism policy has in no way been calculated based on this. (Expert Q)*

Another government-affiliated expert, research participant T, shared a similar view. However, several independent experts strongly disagreed. For example, one independent expert argued that the state's multiculturalism narrative directly responded to the Karabakh conflict:

*They [the Azerbaijani government] wanted to present Armenians [Armenia] as a mono-ethnic republic and Azerbaijan as the opposite. Let's say, a country mainly with ethnic minorities, and at the same time, they included issues like religious pluralism. They wanted to present it in such a way that if Armenians [Armenia] are a mono-ethnic republic and have completely cleansed their republic of [ethnic minorities], Azerbaijan, on the contrary, is a multicultural country. This is Azerbaijan's historical tradition. This is Azerbaijan's past that is being continued today. (Expert R)*

A similar view came from independent expert S, who explained that multiculturalism was used to counter claims that Armenians and Azerbaijanis could not coexist: "Azerbaijan made this issue [multiculturalism] relevant by highlighting that all nationalities live together here without significant problems [...] From this standpoint, the Azerbaijani government makes this topic even more relevant."

Three more experts, one government-affiliated and two independent (Experts U, V, and W), also described the Karabakh conflict as a partial factor. So, while clear differences remain, a majority of experts see at least some connection between the conflict and the rise of multiculturalism discourse in Azerbaijan.

On the issue of Talysh and Lezgi separatist movements in the early 1990s, independent experts S and W did not see this as relevant today. One government-affiliated expert, however, argued that the early separatist movements were among several internal and external pressures that shaped the political climate:

*Azerbaijan faced various forms of separatism at the beginning of its independence. Aggressive separatism and occupation policies were coming from Armenia. In one way or another, Azerbaijan encountered Talysh and Lezgi separatism, separatist tendencies supported from abroad [...] There was an ethnic trace in these terror acts [...] These mistakes led to the formation of Heydar Aliyev's Azerbaijanism ideology [...] The term multiculturalism began to be used later, but its foundation lies in the ideology of Azerbaijanism. (Expert T)*

Several other experts commented on foreign interference in separatist tendencies. One independent expert described how external actors shaped internal dynamics:

*The three countries, Moscow (Russia), Armenia, and Iran, all have co-ethnics, people they identify as co-ethnics, in Azerbaijan... each of those three countries identifies with one or another minority and has, at various times and to various degrees of intensity and success, provided support [...] And I think it's a fair comment that the so-called Republic [Nagorno-Karabakh] would not have happened without Russian support. (Expert V)*

Not all experts commented on the Talysh and Lezgi cases. Two government-affiliated experts avoided the subject entirely, while others saw it as historically relevant but now outdated. Overall, the consensus is that these separatist movements can be considered partial contributors to the development of multiculturalism policy, especially during the formative post-independence period.

Finally, regarding Azerbaijan's international commitments, such as membership in the Council of Europe or OSCE, one government-affiliated expert rejected the idea that these were key drivers. They argued that multiculturalism had already been embedded

in national laws before these memberships (Expert U). While four experts consider international commitments as partial factors, three do not see them as relevant. One government affiliated expert sees this in this way:

*In fact, I consider the organisation of this process itself to be a positive step. We do look at and read the recommendations on many issues. But I say this with complete sincerity, double standards, or even multiple standards, are being applied. You won't find any mention of the good things happening here in those reports. (Interviewer Q)*

For the last question in this section, “What other factors, according to the experts, influence Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy?”, it is important to highlight a few key points. First, I would like to note that when experts talk about Azerbaijan’s government-claimed multiculturalism policy, they often raise broader issues linked to tolerance, democracy, the general state of human rights, regime type, and governance. Many of these topics go beyond the scope of this research, but the insights gained from interviews could certainly inform future studies. Still, I believe it is important to briefly reflect on several themes mentioned by experts that may be relevant to understanding the drivers of Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy.

One recurring theme during the interviews is the idea that tolerance plays a foundational role in this policy. However, not all experts accept this narrative at face value. While some argue that Azerbaijanis, particularly as the titular ethnic group, have historically shown tolerance toward minorities, others are much more critical. The main disagreement on this issue tends to fall along the lines of government-affiliated versus independent experts.

For example, one government-affiliated expert framed tolerance as a deeply rooted aspect of Azerbaijani society:

*In Azerbaijan, multiculturalism, although a relatively new term, is not a new concept or creation. Azerbaijan has geographically, historically been rich in ethnic and confessional diversity. Relations between peoples in Azerbaijan have always been at a high level [...] There is a spiritual foundation for it, there is social desire, and society is socially prepared for it. Because when the society does not have a concept of self and others, this makes political will and legal level easier. (Expert Q)*

This view, shared by other government-affiliated experts, suggests that long-standing traditions of peaceful coexistence provide the social base for multiculturalism policy. In contrast, several independent experts rejected this portrayal. One put it bluntly:

*The main propaganda of the Azerbaijani government is that we are a tolerant country. Tolerance, tolerance, that's the main thing. But we have never been tolerant. There has never been tolerance here.* (Expert R)

This expert went on to challenge the idea that tolerance ever truly existed in Azerbaijani history, pointing instead to sectarian violence, ethnic conflict, and widespread repression. They argued that even today, state-promoted tolerance does not extend to all groups. For instance:

*The issue of multiculturalism should not only apply to ethnic minorities, religious minorities. Let's say there are other minorities [...] sexual minorities [LGBT+], how tolerant is Azerbaijan towards them?* (Expert R)

Another independent expert echoed this critique and emphasised the gap between theory and practice:

*If we examine multiculturalism from a theoretical perspective, we see that it aims to recognize more lifestyles [...] But here [in Azerbaijan], this is not the case. The focus is on ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversities [...] Are other identities, like LGBT+, recognised in Azerbaijan? Will they be in the future? Perhaps mentally, there is no groundwork for this.* (Expert W)

That said, not all independent voices rejected the concept entirely. One acknowledged the state's history of interethnic cooperation and saw it as an important basis for multiculturalism policy:

*There has historically been a reality of mutual tolerance and understanding among different peoples here in Azerbaijan. It has always been this way throughout history. In the modern era, this is reflected in state policy.* (Expert S)

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation does not seek to analyse broader issues such as the situation of LGBT+ people or the scope of tolerance in Azerbaijan. However, based on these expert interviews, it is clear that tolerance in Azerbaijan is often discussed in

limited terms, mainly ethnic and religious tolerance, while other dimensions are left out or denied altogether.

Another major theme, raised mostly by independent experts, that aligns with main research hypothesis of this study, is that multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan serves as a tool to project a positive image of the regime abroad. This can be described as a form of ‘nation branding’ or public diplomacy. All the independent experts, along with one government-affiliated participant, referred to this aspect in one way or another. One independent expert described the link between the Karabakh conflict, regime survival, and international image as follows:

*This [multiculturalism policy] is directly related to two issues. The first is the Karabakh issue, and the second is Ilham Aliyev using it to maintain his power [...] Let's say Azerbaijan needs to present something to the international community. So, what is it? That we are a tolerant country. And this tolerant country's explanation has always been very primitive. Why do we say we're tolerant? Because Jews live here. Is the idea that they wouldn't live here otherwise? [...] The government raises it, uses it, brings money, and organises events. But there is no serious basis for multiculturalism and tolerance [...] Let me give you a simple example. During the Second Karabakh War, in an Azerbaijani newspaper, the only official state newspaper, written by a deputy and the chief editor of that newspaper, the chief editor writes this. This person starts to analyse the characteristics of Armenian blood as a geneticist. He writes that when it's Armenian blood, these characteristics appear: two-faced, liar, traitor, and so on. Can you imagine this happening in a country that claims to be tolerant and holds events about this? I mean, this is from a state newspaper. Ordinary people can say something. But we are talking about a deputy of the ruling party, a very important government person, the chief editor of a state newspaper. Can he write such a thing? What does this have to do with tolerance or multiculturalism? (Expert R)*

Other experts, such as independent Expert W, agreed that the policy is largely symbolic, created more for international consumption than for domestic social transformation. In their view, multiculturalism was adopted at a time when Azerbaijan faced no serious domestic ethnic tensions and instead aimed to position the state as a regional model of peaceful diversity in the post-conflict period.

All independent experts also raised concerns about the state of democracy and human rights, linking these problems to the limited credibility of the multiculturalism policy. One independent expert summarised the contradiction clearly:

*There is no democracy in the country. People are afraid to make claims or strive for comprehensive rights[...] If a policy is associated with one person, and there is no proper official strategy or concept, how can it be credible? (Expert W)*

Another independent expert put it more sharply: “In an authoritarian state, a state where people are arrested unjustly every day, what kind of multiculturalism or tolerance can we talk about?” (Expert R).

Still, one independent expert offered a slightly different take, recognising that while the government is far from ideal, ethnic-based discrimination does not appear to be systematic:

*It is evident that the government's pressures and injustices are not based on ethnic affiliation. The same applies to all people, to the entire population. Whatever is good or unfavourable here affects everyone equally. (Expert S)*

Interestingly, one government-affiliated expert shared this idea, saying that problems exist but are not specific to ethnic minorities: “These are the same problems faced by everyone. Azerbaijanis. They are human rights problems, for example, economic problems” (Expert T). Lastly, another government-affiliated expert noted that Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy is an integral part of the state’s human rights obligations. However, they did not elaborate on how this fits with the broader human rights landscape in Azerbaijan (Expert Q).

This subchapter examined how think tank organisations in Azerbaijan interpret and frame the state's multiculturalism policy, particularly concerning the management of ethno-religious diversity. Interviews with experts revealed a hybrid nature of Azerbaijani think tanks, as expected, varying from government-affiliated institutions that align closely with official state narratives to more independent centres that offer critical assessments. However, when discussing other possible factors, significant differences appeared. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, for example, was seen in different lights. Although some government-affiliated experts ignored its significance, many independent voices underlined that the conflict was a key factor in presenting Azerbaijan as a tolerant, multicultural nation in comparison to Armenia.

Similarly, views differed on the impact of separatist tendencies in the 1990s, especially among the Talysh and Lezgi people. While some, particularly among government-affiliated experts, viewed these as irrelevant or minor issues, others identified them as important to the early development of multiculturalism as a stabilising policy instrument. The key point here is that government-affiliated experts view Azerbaijanism as the starting point of multiculturalism and tend to assess the issue from the perspective of developments since 1991. In contrast, independent experts place greater emphasis on evaluating the recent and current situation.

Another debated factor was Azerbaijan's membership in international organisations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE. While a few experts saw these commitments as encouraging the development of multiculturalism, others argued that such memberships merely aligned with pre-existing national laws. Independent experts, especially, were more likely to emphasise the impact of international image-making and human rights concerns. They suggested that diversity is a strategy for nation branding used to enhance Azerbaijan's image abroad and control external criticism rather than promote real inclusion. From this perspective, the policy is more of a diplomatic tool than a domestic reform program.

In conclusion, Chapter 3 shows that Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is more about political messaging than a clearly defined strategy. While the government strongly promotes the idea, especially through the speeches of President Ilham Aliyev and the work of state-sponsored institutions like the BIMC, there is no official document or law that fully explains what this policy means or how it should be carried out. Instead, the concept is mostly built around the ideology of Azerbaijanism and used to highlight the state's long-standing diversity. At the same time, this policy seems to serve two purposes: it helps promote a positive image of Azerbaijan abroad and maintains stability at home. However, the actual meaning of multiculturalism often remains vague for many citizens, including members of minority groups. Although the state presents it as a success story, this chapter shows that there is still a big gap between official narratives and the real experiences of people living in a diverse society. The next chapter will try to shed light on this gap by examining how multiculturalism is actually implemented and perceived on the ground.

#### **Chapter 4. Implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy**

The implementation of public policy, especially in the context of multiculturalism, involves translating policy decisions into concrete actions to achieve defined goals (Hill & Hupe, 2002). Multicultural policies aim to manage and support ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity within society, promoting social cohesion, equality, and the inclusion of minorities (Kymlicka, 2012). In Azerbaijan, the implementation of multiculturalism policy is expected to balance ethno-cultural diversity with national unity. This chapter examines the key mechanisms and processes involved in carrying out this policy at both state and international levels. By analysing these strategies, we can better understand how effective Azerbaijan's approach is and what impact it has had on the state's social and political landscape. In line with the constructivist perspective adopted in this dissertation, the chapter also considers how state narratives and identity-building efforts shape its practical outcomes.

The main objective of this chapter is to explore the second part of the overarching research question: Why does Azerbaijan pursue a multiculturalism policy, and how does it manage the state's ethno-cultural diversity? Here, the focus is on the practical aspects of implementing multiculturalism policy. The specific question addressed is: What are the mechanisms and processes involved in the implementation of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy? Since the thesis mainly concentrates on the last decade, during which the term multiculturalism became increasingly used, this chapter analyses key efforts and initiatives related to the implementation of the policy in that period. This focus remains consistent with the central aim of the thesis, to understand both the rationale behind the policy and the methods used to manage diversity in Azerbaijan.

As noted earlier, there is a lack of academic research on Azerbaijan's implementation of multicultural policies in recent years. As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation aims to help address this gap. Therefore, this chapter draws primarily on official documents, international organisation reports, and decrees and orders issued by Azerbaijani authorities. In practice, the number of government documents explicitly related to multiculturalism is limited, and many have already been discussed in previous chapters.

As already stated, this research relies heavily on semi-structured interviews as the main data source. In this chapter, findings from the third and fourth questions of all 26

interviews (see Appendix A) are used. These will be explored in particular in the fourth section. The analysis uses a comparative method, drawing insights from successful multiculturalism models in other states. This method is vital for identifying and understanding key differences and similarities between Azerbaijan and selected cases in terms of rules, standards, and implementation processes. Through this comparative lens, the study assesses strengths and weaknesses of Azerbaijan's policy and outlines possible scenarios for managing diversity. In particular, the second subchapter compares implementation of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in Switzerland and Azerbaijan. This small-N qualitative comparison uses a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), selecting cases that differ in most ways but share a key variable.

Additionally, the initial section of this chapter applies Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka's Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP) for National Minorities to assess the policy's effectiveness in comparative terms. To investigate Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy more thoroughly, I used a combination of semi-structured interviews, document review, and secondary data analysis.

#### **4.1. Examining the Multicultural Policy Index for National Minorities in the case of Azerbaijan**

Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka direct the MCP Index project, an academic research initiative that tracks the evolution of multiculturalism policies in Western states. It provides three indices: one for immigrant groups, one for historic national minorities, and one for Indigenous peoples. The project offers a standardised format for comparative analysis and enhanced comprehension of state-minority relations. Some Western democracies have moved away from assimilationist and marginalising policies in favour of a more accommodating approach to ethnocultural diversity, implementing multiculturalism policies for national minorities, Indigenous peoples and immigrant groups (*The MCP Index Project*, n.d.-a). The Index is a good tool for measuring the impact and evolution of multiculturalism policies across time and between nations. I must emphasise that Kymlicka's liberal theory of minority rights forms the foundation of the MCP Index's reasoning for three types of minorities.

This section is an attempt to evaluate how well Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy aligns with the liberal theory of minority rights, which is the one of the most widely accepted theoretical approach to multiculturalism. In this section, the focus is on how this academic project rates multiculturalism policies towards national minorities. The main reason I am focusing in how the project measures only national minorities is because Azerbaijan has neither known immigrant groups nor indigenous peoples. It is important to note that, although the terms 'ethnic group' and 'national minority' are primarily used in official documents in Azerbaijan, the term "indigenous peoples" is also used in Azerbaijani-language academic literature. As I mentioned in the previous chapters while examining Azerbaijan's ethnic and religious diversity, these academic texts refer to Caucasian and Iranian-speaking peoples, such as the Udi, Lezgin, Ingiloy, Talysh, etc., under the designation of 'indigenous peoples' (see, for example, Abdulla & Najafov, 2018, p. 87). However, when considering their lifestyles and other factors, there is a significant difference between the concept of 'indigenous peoples' in Azerbaijan and what is meant by the term in Western scientific literature. Therefore, to analyse Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policies in accordance with the MPC Index project, it will be done exclusively within the category of national minorities. This is because all minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan can be considered national minorities. This approach also aligns with the position of the Azerbaijani government, which, for instance, recognises minority ethnic groups in the state as national minorities in response to the Council of Europe's FCNM treaty (see, Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2011).

Firstly, I would like to provide some background information about the MCP index. The MCP Index for national minorities examines critically the implementation of six policies, suggested by Kymlicka and explored in the first chapter of this dissertation, as a novel form of multicultural citizenship:

- *federal or quasi-federal territorial autonomy;*
- *official language status, either in the region or nationally;*
- *guarantees of representation in the central government or on constitutional courts;*
- *public funding of minority language universities/schools/media;*
- *constitutional or parliamentary affirmation of multinationalism;*

- *according international personality (eg., allowing the substate region to sit on international bodies).* (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 101)

The project provides precise rules to measure and say ‘yes,’ ‘partially,’ and ‘no’ which in terms of point accordingly means ‘1’, ‘0.5,’ and ‘0’ on the multiculturalism policies provided above that are aimed at national minorities in the states that were studied. It's also important to note that the project focuses on large minority groups in the studied states and has set the minimum size for inclusion at 100,000 people, which may seem like a random number (The MCP Index Project, n.d.-b). When considering this methodological approach of the project, it is more appropriate to assess the indicators during the review of the six policies mentioned above in Azerbaijan, focusing only on the major minority ethnic groups such as the Lezgins, Talysh, and Russians (see Chapter 2, Table 1). Additionally, it is crucial to underscore the significance of research in providing concrete evidence during the evaluation of each condition.

The study encompasses a range of states, namely Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Japan, Spain, Great Britain, the United States, and Switzerland. These states are evaluated based on the same set of indicators and for the same period. Based on the 2020 indicator, Greece and Japan are ranked at the lowest position, each receiving a score of 0 points. Following closely behind are Canada and Great Britain, both obtaining a score of 6 points (The MCP Index Project, n.d.-c). The project does not explain why it chose states with very different multicultural policies, such as France, Greece, Japan, and Canada. However, looking at the results of the study, it becomes clear that the purpose is to show the significant contrast in multicultural policies among liberal democratic states. Although states like France, Greece, and Japan have national minorities, the results of the study clearly indicate that they actually pursue assimilationist policies.

If Azerbaijan were included in this initiative and evaluated, the result for 2020 would be as follows, according to my assessment: During the process of assessment, I attempted to provide proof of my claims by employing methods like those employed by the MCP Index. This involved referencing relevant constitutional provisions and regulations of the Republic of Azerbaijan as well as relevant international treaties to which Azerbaijan is a signatory. Additionally, I drew upon scholarly literature and other authoritative sources to support my arguments. And as I already mentioned, the main

focus is on large minority ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, such as the Lezgins, Talysh, and Russians.

*Federal or quasi-federal territorial autonomy:* No.

*Evidence:* According to Article 7 of the Republic of Azerbaijan's Constitution (2016), the state of Azerbaijan is a unitary republic with legislative, executive, and judicial powers. According to Article 95 of the Constitution, the legislative authority, the National Assembly (Milli Məclis), is responsible for administrative territorial division. The state is divided into 63 districts, the administration of which is directly subordinate to the president. This implies that the central state holds ultimate authority and does not transfer powers to subordinate regional entities, which primarily carry out administrative tasks. Within Azerbaijan, there is only one autonomous republic, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, but its borders do not coincide with the territories where national minorities like the Talysh and Lezgin people live in large numbers.

*Official language status, either in the region or nationally:* Partially.

*Evidence:* The Azerbaijani language is the official state language, according to Article 21 of the Republic of Azerbaijan's Constitution (2016). At the same time, the same article of Constitution states that the state guarantees the free use and growth of other languages spoken by the population. According to Article 45 of the Azerbaijan's Constitution, everyone has the right to use their mother tongue, to be raised and taught in it, and to express themselves, and no one can be denied this right. Furthermore, it should be noted that Azerbaijan signed the Council of Europe ECRML treaty in 2001; however, it is important to highlight that the state has not yet completed the process of ratifying this agreement (Chylinski & Hofmannová, 2011, pp. 23-29). As I already mentioned (see chapter 2, section 2), ECRML is the most important international treaty that is fostering the growth and recognition of minority languages. Although there is a constitutional basis at the state level for the free use of minority languages in Azerbaijan, the absence of official status for these languages at both national and regional levels has led to Azerbaijan being rated as 'partial' in this regard.

*Guarantees of representation in the central government or on constitutional courts:* No.

*Evidence:* The legislation of Azerbaijan does not explicitly control matters pertaining to the representation of national minorities in the central government or constitutional courts, as well as their involvement in the decision-making process. In Articles 25, 54,

55, 56, 85, 100, 121, 126 and 130 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016), in Article 27.1 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Civil Service (2000), in Article 3 of the Law on the Status of Municipalities (1999) there are no restrictions on the election (appointment) of citizens belonging to national minorities in state bodies. It is evident that there exists no formal prohibition on the inclusion of national minorities within the central government and constitutional court of Azerbaijan, nor is there any explicit assurance of such representation. This demonstrates the absence of guarantee for the representation of national minorities in Azerbaijan's central government and constitutional court.

*Public funding of minority-language universities / schools / media:* Partially.

*Evidence:* According to Article 7 of the Law on Education (2009) in Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani language is designated as the principal language of instruction in educational institutions. However, educational institutions have the possibility to offer education in other languages, if they adhere to the requirements set by the state. The Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017) fourth report to the Council of Europe FCNM reveals that among the 17 recognised ethnic groups as national minorities in Azerbaijan, only the Russian, Georgian, and Turkish national minorities receive instruction in their mother tongue for all subjects at the secondary school level. The educational curriculum in secondary schools includes the study of various mother tongues as independent subjects, catering to the linguistic needs of eight distinct ethnic groups and Lezgis, Talysh are among them (2017). The provision of comprehensive higher education in minority languages is exclusively available in the Russian language at the university level. In the fourth opinion of Advisory Committee on the FCNM (2017), we can also read that "Committee regrets that persons belonging to national minorities in Azerbaijan have only very limited access to print media, radio, and TV broadcasting in minority languages." (p. 23). The present analysis indicates that Azerbaijan provides public funding for education and media in minority languages; nonetheless, such support is characterised by limitations and inequalities.

*Constitutional or parliamentary affirmation of 'multinationalism':* No.

*Evidence:* According to Article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016), the people of Azerbaijan are united, and the official recognition of multi-ethnicity has not been approved either in the Constitution or in other laws. In the

speeches of both Heydar Aliyev, the previous president of Azerbaijan, and his successor, Ilham Aliyev, the phrase ‘multinationalism is our wealth’ (See, for example, Aliyev, 2013b; Şahverdiyev & Hüseyinov, 2016) has frequently been employed. However, it is worth noting that no formal acknowledgement of multinationalism has been officially undertaken.

*Accorded international personality:* No.

Evidence: According to Article 109 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016), the president has the authority to enter into interstate and intergovernmental international agreements. According to Article 110 of the Constitution, the vice president, members of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and other individuals designated by the president may be granted this immunity. The regions are not explicitly assigned any specific duty or obligation in this regard. Representatives of ethnic minority groups in Azerbaijan cannot independently be parties to any international treaty or be represented as an ethnic minority group in any international sports competition.

**Table 3.** Azerbaijan is included in the MCP Index for National Minorities scores for 2020

States	Total score (out of 6)
	2020
Canada	6
United Kingdom	6
Belgium	5.5
Spain	5.5
Finland	4.5
Italy	4.5
Switzerland	4

United States	3.5
France	1.5
Azerbaijan	1
Japan	0
Greece	0

*Note: The author created the table using data from the MCP Index Project (n.d.-c) for national minorities scores for 2020, and added an evaluation of the score for Azerbaijan.*

As shown in table 3, if we compare the result, I obtained for Azerbaijan on the MCP Index with the final 2020 results for 11 states, Azerbaijan will rank ahead of only Greece and Japan, with a score of 1 out of a maximum of 6. It should be noted that this result is based on the methodology of the MCP Index project and is subject to debate and further verification. This result can also be considered a relative one. None of the states where Azerbaijan could potentially improve its ranking on this index have ever declared multiculturalism as official state policy: specifically, Greece and Japan. At the same time, Italy, and Spain, which rank significantly higher on this index, have also never declared multiculturalism as state policy. However, it is evident that the national minorities within these states enjoy more rights and freedoms. As shown in this section, when Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is evaluated through the MCP Index framework, based on Kymlicka's liberal theory of minority rights, it becomes clear that the state performs poorly on most of the key indicators. Although Azerbaijan does declare multiculturalism as an official policy, this evaluation highlights a significant gap between the government's narrative and the actual institutional and legal frameworks that support minority rights.

#### **4.2. Comparative analysis of the implementation of the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Switzerland and Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan and Switzerland seem to be incomparable states at first glance. The primary reasons for this include government forms, economic indicators, variances in political stability, democratic indicators, etc. Among them, the primary and most obvious distinction between Azerbaijan and Switzerland is that one belongs to a democratic world, while the other belongs to an authoritarian one (See, for example, The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023). Azerbaijan has been widely recognised for its authoritarian attributes within its political system. This topic is widely addressed in the introduction of this dissertation. In contrast to Azerbaijan, Switzerland is frequently regarded as an example of direct democracy (Obinger 1998; Fossedal 2018), where citizens play an important role in decision-making processes. Through referendums and popular initiatives, this form of democracy enables Swiss citizens to actively participate in policymaking. The Swiss political system is a fascinating illustration of how a complex, multilingual, and culturally diverse nation can maintain political stability and inclusiveness through its distinctive democratic practises (Linder and Mueller 2022).

From my perspective, notwithstanding this, the demographic reality of ethno-linguistic diversity serves as a connecting factor among these nations. Both states have been ethnically diverse since the beginning of statehood. The presence of diversity necessitates action in diversity management by both states. Both Switzerland and Azerbaijan have implemented multicultural policies as a means of effectively managing their respective diverse populations. Switzerland places a greater emphasis on promoting multilingualism, while Azerbaijan has prioritised a policy of multiculturalism over the past decade. Both specifically target national minorities residing within their borders. This subchapter is limited in that it only examines the conditions and policies affecting national minorities in both states. In this regard, the two nations' participation in the FCNM is crucial for the study.

As previously mentioned, both Switzerland and Azerbaijan have officially announced their implementation of multicultural policies to address the existence of ethno-linguistic diversity within their respective territories. Switzerland predominantly uses the word *multilingualism* to describe this approach, while Azerbaijan refers to it as *multiculturalism*. In both states, as well as in many other European nations, the topic of

multiculturalism is currently receiving less attention in political discourse. This can be attributed, in part, to the migration challenges that Europe has faced in recent years. However, in light of these considerations, I hold the view that Switzerland's multicultural policies have the potential to serve as a positive example for ethnolinguistically diverse states such as Azerbaijan, particularly in relation to the treatment of national minorities.

The second section of this dissertation extensively analyses the ethnic and religious composition of Azerbaijan's population, while the first chapter examines Switzerland's multicultural policy, among others. To align with the objectives of this subchapter, it would be beneficial to briefly examine Switzerland's ethnic composition before delving into the analyses of implementation of FCNM in both states.

Azerbaijan and Switzerland have relatively similar population sizes, with Azerbaijan home to around 10.4 million people and Switzerland about 8.8 million as of 2024. Switzerland is widely recognised for its multilingual character, which stems from its federal system divided into 26 cantons and reflected in its four official national languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh (Federal Constitution, 1999). According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2021), the majority of the population speaks German, primarily in the central and eastern parts of the state, including cities like Zurich, Bern, and Lucerne. French is spoken by about 23% of the population in the western regions, especially in Geneva, Lausanne, and Neuchâtel. Italian is spoken by around 8%, mainly in the canton of Ticino in the south, while Romansh, the least spoken national language, is used by roughly 0.5% of the population, primarily in parts of Graubünden. In addition to these, about 23% of the population uses non-national languages such as English, Portuguese, and Albanian.

National language distribution has changed moderately over the past 50 years. French has increased while German, Italian, and Romansh have decreased. One of the important aspects of these statistics is that they provide information about the background of the permanent resident population. 59.3% of the population does not have a migration background while 39.5% of them has a migration background. The population for whom some relevant data are unavailable is 1.2%. More than one-third of population with a migration background are Swiss citizens, and the majority, more than two-thirds, are first-generation migrants (*Population by migration status*, 2021). When looking at the states of origin for individuals with a migration background, it

becomes evident that certain nations, such as Italy, Germany, Portugal, France, Kosovo, and Spain, among others, hold a prominent position. Switzerland exhibits linguistic diversity not only through its official languages but also through the presence of immigrant communities that communicate in their respective native tongues. English is extensively comprehended, particularly among the young population and in metropolitan regions, owing to its significance as a global language. With four official national languages, a significant number of citizens with migration backgrounds, and a permanent and temporary migrant population, the ethno-linguistic landscape of Switzerland is extremely complex.

Ethno-linguistic diversity poses both advantages and difficulties for governance in various states across the world. The effective governance of such diversity is essential for upholding social unity, mitigating conflicts, and promoting inclusive progress. Federalism and decentralisation are often employed as governance models to address ethno-linguistic diversity. In a federal system, power is divided between a central government and regional or state-level entities. Watts (2008, p. 178-179) argues that federalism can foster regional autonomy, enabling linguistic minorities to protect their language and cultural heritage. Switzerland is a notable example of a federal state where diverse linguistic communities have significant control over regional affairs. Federalism and direct democracy are widely recognised as significant factors that positively contribute to the governance of ethno-linguistic diversity in Switzerland.

Despite their many differences, in my view, Azerbaijan and Switzerland share a common characteristic in the form of ethno-linguistic diversity within their respective territories. Now, the importance lies in presenting a comparative analysis of the implementation of the FCNM in the two states being studied. Switzerland and Azerbaijan both ratified the FCNM in 1998 and 2001, respectively. The implementation of the FCNM encompasses a series of procedural measures aimed at safeguarding and advancing the rights and cultural identities of national minorities within the particular territories of the participating states. Each state that has ratified the Framework Convention shall submit a report to the Cabinet of Ministers of the Council of Europe every five years, and an expert group of the Cabinet shall examine this report and give an opinion. After the Cabinet's opinion, each government comments on that opinion. All phases of the supervision of the implementation of the FCNM finish with a resolution and follow-up dialogue by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

After joining the FCNM, Switzerland and Azerbaijan followed four such procedures, and a fifth is underway for both states. I will base my analysis of the FCNM implementation in Azerbaijan and Switzerland on the official fourth report submitted by both states to the Cabinet of Ministers and the subsequent communication (Cabinet opinion, government comments on that opinion, Cabinet resolution, and follow-up dialogue).

The fourth-term reporting procedure for Azerbaijan began in 2017 and finished in 2019, with the report showing that the reporting period covered the years 2010–2017. One of the first notable things in Azerbaijan's fourth report for the implementation of the FCNM is that it officially "considers the issue of protection of national minorities in the framework of its multiculturalism policy" (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2017, p. 2). When it comes to which groups Azerbaijan considers to be national minorities within the framework of this convention, the report makes it clear that all minority religious communities and minority ethnic groups listed in Azerbaijan's official state statistics are considered national minorities, and information about them is provided in accordance with the convention's articles. However, the Azerbaijani government declares that it is unable to meet any of the convention's standards in the Nagorno-Karabakh region due to the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for the reported period.

In the introductory section of the report and in reporting of the implementation of the provisions according to the articles of the convention, I believe that the state's multiculturalism policy, the bodies created to oversee the implementation of this policy, the proclamation of 2016 as the year of multiculturalism in the state, and the expansion of various local and international events are overemphasised. Because there are significant gaps in both the reporting of the proceedings and the execution of the protection of national minorities' rights, at least in line with the FCNM's criteria. Analysing all available documents on the fourth period reveals that the government of Azerbaijan and the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe disagree on numerous issues. The Advisory Committee (on the FCNM, 2017, pp. 1-2, 34) welcomes efforts to educate young people about cultural diversity and tolerance but is concerned mainly with general restrictions on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the state that influence all populations, including minority groups; an institutional framework dedicated specifically to the promotion and protection of minority rights;

the teaching of minority languages; conducting a transparent census that can provide for free and voluntary self-identification and the possibility to indicate multiple affiliations; and the adoption of close consultation with persons belonging to national minorities, and so on.

The committee also claims that the provisions of the FCNM of Azerbaijan have not been partially or fully implemented in many cases. For instance, the Advisory Committee (on the FCNM, 2017) also states there has been no action done to eliminate the barriers that prevent radio and television broadcasts in minority languages, and print media is still not supported. Other than Russian and Georgian, there are no chances to study minority languages at the university level (p. 8). In response, the Azerbaijani government claims that "the Advisory Committee went well beyond its mandate and the scope of the Convention by taking on some general questions, without establishing a clear connection between them and protection of national minorities" (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2019, p. 2).

Within the scope of this section, it is impossible to determine who provided the most accurate and impartial information, but I would like to focus on one example and elaborate on it. As previously discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, following Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, three major minority groups, ethnic Armenians, Talysh, and Lezgi, demonstrated separatist aspirations against the central authority. This thesis also previously analysed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a long-running dispute involving the Armenian ethnic minority. The government quickly suppressed the separatist efforts of the other two groups. Even today, many claims by the Talysh and Lezgi national minorities are viewed as separatist. A major source of this problem is that both groups are primarily settled in Azerbaijan's border regions. Multiple factors link the Talysh to Iran, the Lezgi to Russia, and the Armenians to Armenia. The Azerbaijani government often asserts that these separatist tendencies are fuelled by external actors (see, Shafee, 2008).

Karli-Jo Storm (2023) explains how the Azerbaijani government targets Talysh activists by portraying them as a threat to national unity and using harsh methods to silence them. Storm argues that by controlling their bodies and suppressing their cultural expression, the government effectively crushes any challenge to its authority and prevents minority voices from being heard. This concern was also noted by the Advisory Committee (on the FCNM, 2017), which clearly stated in its fourth opinion

on Azerbaijan that “persons belonging to the Talysh and Lezgin minorities, when exercising minority rights in community with others, run the risk of being perceived as questioning the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan” (2017, p. 5). There are many issues that need to be addressed, especially concerning the Talysh minority, and many of these were highlighted by the Advisory Committee in its observations. Despite being a large ethnic group (around 2 percent of the population), the Talysh were largely excluded from Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy. Their language was taught only as a separate subject in schools, sometimes even as an elective alongside foreign languages. There were also obstacles to opening Talysh cultural centres, editors of a newspaper published in the Talysh language were imprisoned (one of whom died under unclear circumstances in prison), and several Talysh activists were arrested, all as noted by the Committee (pp. 6, 8, 18, 19).

In relation to this matter, the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2019), commenting on the Fourth Opinion of the Advisory Committee, rejects these claims, emphasizing that "it is extremely important to acknowledge that the exercise of rights and freedoms under the Framework Convention shall in no way imply engagement in any activity against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the States, and any actions under the Convention shall not violate the national legislation of the state concerned" (p. 3) However, the Azerbaijani government did not provide the Advisory Committee with a detailed response to the specific points and cases mentioned.

In relation to the implementation of the FCNM by Switzerland, a primary aspect to be taken into account pertains to the definition of the specific groups that Switzerland acknowledges as national minorities within this convention. According to the fourth report Switzerland submitted to the Advisory Committee, it considers "national linguistic minorities, namely the French, Italian, and Romansh-speaking minorities, persons belonging to the German-speaking minorities residing in the Cantons of Fribourg and Valais, French-speakers in the Canton of Bern, Swiss Travellers, and members of Switzerland's Jewish communities" (The Swiss Government, 2017, p. 40) to be a national minority under this convention, which are the Swiss citizens.

The report also discusses the possibility of some Roma and Islamic communities being recognised as national minorities under this convention in the future but emphasises that this desire must come from the communities themselves and that they must meet certain criteria. The main challenges of Switzerland in the implementation of the FCNM

concentrate on accommodation for Yenish, Sinti/Manouches, and Roma, and especially their nomadic way of life; harmonisation of the teaching of national languages; combating racism and intolerance; tackling anti-Semitism, anti-Gypsyism, and islamophobia (Advisory Committee on the FCNM, 2018). However, in addition to these points, Switzerland's policy towards ethnic groups, mainly recognized as national minorities by the FCNM, is generally positively assessed by the Advisory Committee.

Taking the fourth reporting period of the FCNM implementation as a sample, certain points stand out in the attitudes of the two states towards the FCNM. There are big differences in the implementation of the Framework Convention in Switzerland and Azerbaijan. I consider it important to highlight the following main points for the fourth monitoring period, having analysed the data from documents for the period:

Azerbaijan emphasises that it considers the protection of national minorities within the context of its multiculturalism policy, whereas Switzerland emphasises the significance of human rights in the same context.

One of the first noticeable differences in the implementation of the FCNM between Switzerland and Azerbaijan is the establishment of communication with groups recognised as national minorities by Switzerland during the preparation of state reports, obtaining their opinions and including them in the report, which is not observed in Azerbaijan.

The most notable difference lies in how each state defines and recognises national minorities, as well as in the nature of the challenges they face, and the positive steps taken to address them. Therefore, Switzerland has a distinct understanding of which groups are recognised as national minorities. Although Azerbaijan asserts that it explicitly identifies and recognises religious communities that have passed state registration as national minorities, the same cannot be said for ethnic groups. The fourth report Azerbaijani government lists 17 ethnic groups and 9,506 individuals as other groupings, referencing the 2009 census. In this instance, it is unclear which specific groups Azerbaijan recognises as national minorities. For instance, the report contains no information about the Roma people in Azerbaijan, despite the fact that they exist as it was discussed earlier in this thesis. As discussed in the second chapter, the FCNM does not provide a specific definition of the concept of national minority, as there is no universally agreed-upon definition among all member states of the Council of Europe.

The convention grants states the authority to decide which groups they will recognise as national minorities. This gap leaves many vulnerable communities without protection. Azerbaijan clearly illustrates how states can exploit this loophole in the convention to the detriment of certain minority groups.

In Azerbaijan, only the central government controls the FCNM's implementation, whereas in Switzerland, the Federal Consul, and cantons where national minorities reside are responsible.

Independent NGOs are active in Switzerland, which is of great importance in protecting the rights of national minorities. At the same time, their opinion is considered in the reports prepared on the implementation of the FCNM, and the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe meets with them during on-site inspections. However, the mere existence of independent NGOs in Azerbaijan focused on national minorities is questionable.

The report from Switzerland provides a distinct analysis of the issues that were identified as requiring immediate attention in the previous resolution of the Advisory Committee. It effectively highlights the progress made during the current reporting period, as well as the challenges that persist in resolving these issues. Upon careful examination of the information pertaining to Azerbaijan, it becomes apparent that this nation has recently become a signatory to the FCNM. Since, in the fourth reporting period examined for the sample, Azerbaijan fails to offer a clear analysis of the concerns previously recognized as necessitating immediate attention in the Advisory Committee's prior resolution concerning the implementation of the FCNM.

The third cycle opinion was translated into Azerbaijani. Unfortunately, it was neither translated into minority languages nor published on a public website in Azerbaijan, which limits its dissemination within society. In Switzerland, on the contrary, the whole process is presented in four languages and widely distributed to the general public.

Switzerland's multicultural policies, particularly in relation to non-Swiss citizen immigrant communities, exhibit unresolved concerns that necessitate attention from the state. Nevertheless, when focusing on the specific groups that have been formally recognised as national minorities by Switzerland relation the implantation of the FCNM, as discussed in this section, it can be asserted with confidence that a significant level of success has been achieved.

In summary, although both Switzerland and Azerbaijan have signed the FCNM and followed comparable reporting processes, their implementation methods vary significantly. During the reporting period, Switzerland views the Convention as part of a larger human rights framework and keeps consistent communication with acknowledged minority groups. It guarantees openness, involves civil society, and addresses particular issues brought up in earlier cycles. However, despite its numerous achievements, Switzerland appears to avoid the potential challenges associated with the idea of multiculturalism by refraining from formally identifying its policy as such. Instead, the state's approach is grounded in the concept of multilingualism, which it perceives as a more manageable framework for addressing diversity and fostering inclusivity.

By contrast, Azerbaijan presents minority protection as part of its multiculturalism strategy but offers little information in its reports and usually avoids open engagement with minority populations. Moreover, the fact that Azerbaijan began explicitly linking ethnic and religious diversity to its multiculturalism policy starting from its fourth reporting cycle under the FCNM, and repeatedly highlighted activities in this field, is further evidence that the state uses the concept of multiculturalism as a way to align with international obligations. Many of the Advisory Committee's suggestions go unanswered; certain minority groups seem left out of significant protection. These variations draw attention to how the actual implementation of the same international convention is shaped by political context and governance style.

### **4.3. Implementation at the state level**

The state-level implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy involves a comprehensive range of actions aimed at fostering an inclusive and diverse society. As already mentioned, implementation at the state level should encompass various institutional frameworks, programmes, and instruments that have been established to promote multiculturalism and to manage ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan. However, many aspects of the implementation of Azerbaijan's declared multiculturalism policy, such as institutional frameworks and programmes, have already been analysed in previous chapters. Therefore, in this section, the focus will briefly shift to practical aspects of the current situation regarding education in mother

tongues, mass media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines) in minority languages, as well as religious ceremonies, mass cultural events, and related activities.

It is also important to note that, in Azerbaijan, official sources for tracking the implementation of multiculturalism policy at the state level based on these parameters are very limited. During the research process, it becomes clear that in order to understand the official state position, one is often left with no choice but to refer to the reports submitted by the Azerbaijani government for the implementation of the FCNM. These reports, in turn, provide clarity on the section dealing with FCNM implementation and serve as a key source of official data for analysis in this part of the study. The final subchapter of this chapter will provide a more detailed account of how these aspects are implemented in practice, based on findings from the 26 semi-structured interviews conducted for this study.

To begin, I would like to elaborate on one question that I asked all 16 representatives of ethnic and religious groups in Azerbaijan before discussing their views on the implementation of the multiculturalism policy. The question was: Did you or any other members of your community have any contact with government officials before the policy of multiculturalism was implemented? Were your opinions or suggestions sought? Out of 16 interviewees, one said they were not in charge at the time community issues and are new to this area, and another, one representative said they had always maintained contact with government officials and were aware that such a policy programme would be announced. The remaining 14 respondents stated clearly that neither they nor anyone else from their community had been contacted, informed, or consulted in any way before the policy was launched. This is yet another obvious example of the top-down approach adopted by government officials in this field.

As already discussed, Azerbaijan's legal framework provides ethnic minorities with the right to receive education in their mother tongues (see Chapter 3, Section 2). The Law on Education stipulates that, considering the wishes of citizens and the founders of educational institutions, instruction may be conducted in other languages in accordance with relevant educational standards (Law on Education, 2009, Article 7). In practice, minority languages are taught in public schools located in regions where these minorities reside in large numbers. As shown in table 4, typically, two hours per week are allocated for teaching minority languages. For instance, approximately 33,719 schoolchildren are taught minority languages such as Talysh, Lezgi, Tsakhurs, Avar,

Udi, Kurdish, Khynalygs, and Hebrew in 357 schools across various regions. Moreover, ten schools operate with Georgian as the language of instruction, of which six use Georgian exclusively, and 103,999 students receive education in the Russian language across 337 secondary schools in the state as mentioned in official reports (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2017a, pp. 1–3).

**Table 4.** Minority language education in Azerbaijan (2015-2016)

<b>Language</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>	<b>Number of Pupils</b>	<b>Teaching Format</b>
<b>Russian</b>	337	103999	Monolingual Russian and bilingual Azerbaijani-Russian
<b>Georgian</b>	10	1135	Monolingual Georgian and bilingual Azerbaijani-Georgian
<b>Talysh</b>	225	19010	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Lezgi</b>	98	12325	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Tsahur</b>	5	492	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Avar</b>	22	1489	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Udi</b>	3	183	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Kurdish</b>	2	42	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Khinalig</b>	1	109	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)
<b>Hebrew</b>	1	74	Taught as a subject (2 hours per week)

*Note:* The table was created by the author based on data provided by the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017a, pp. 1-3)

A critical examination of minority language education in Azerbaijan reveals significant disparities in access and quality among different ethnic groups. While the Azerbaijan has established legal frameworks supporting the right of ethnic minorities to receive education in their mother tongues, the actual implementation of these policies varies

considerably across different communities. As illustrated in table 1, Azerbaijan is home to a diverse array of ethnic minorities, including Lezgis, Talyshs, Russians, Ukrainians, Avars, Turkishs (Ahiska or Meskhetian Turks), Tats, Tsakhurs, Georgians, Ingiloy, Kurds, Tatars, Grizs, Jews, Udis, Khynalygs, Budugs, Armenians, Haputs and others. However, not all these groups have equal access to education in their native languages. Notably, Russian and Georgian minorities receive comprehensive education in their mother tongues. Russian is offered both in monolingual and bilingual Azerbaijani-Russian schools and continues through higher education, including university instruction. It should also be noted that not all individuals receiving education in Russian in Azerbaijan are ethnic Russians. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian language has continued to be regarded as a language of the elite among Azerbaijani Turks, particularly within urban populations. Some observers interpret this ongoing influence as an example of Russia's soft power in Azerbaijan (see, Garibova, 2019) Similarly, Georgian language education is fully available in ten schools, six of which operate solely in Georgian, in regions such as Gakh, Zagatala and Balaken (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2017a, p. 22; 2017b pp. 1-3). In strong contrast, languages such as Lezgi and Talysh, which have large populations (over 160,000 and 87,000 respectively), are taught only as a subject for two hours per week in primary school settings. Even though this information is based on official data, it is important to note that such data is questioned by both experts and minority representatives themselves (see Chapter 2, Section 1). This restricted access rarely promotes language preservation or exchange between generations.

Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to several other groups listed in table 1, such as Ukrainians, Tats, Ingiloy, Tatars, Kryz, Budugs, Haputs, and Armenians, and to consider why there is no formal education provided in their native languages. In the case of Ukrainians and Tatars, it is widely acknowledged that they primarily reside in major cities in Azerbaijan and typically receive their education in Russian and, for some, in Azerbaijani. However, it is worth noting that both communities make efforts to preserve their languages despite the lack of state provision. According to the Advisory Committee on the FCNM (2017, p. 28), both the Ukrainian and Tatar communities in Baku organise language courses on a voluntary basis, often through Sunday schools run by minority associations. These initiatives provide opportunities for both children and adults to learn their minority language and cultural heritage to

some extent. Additionally, Ukrainian language, literature, and history can be studied at Baku Slavic University (*Співробітництво...*, 2022), offering further access to cultural education. In contrast, such opportunities are not observed for Tatars; there is no indication of any institutional support or educational programming in the Tatar language in Azerbaijan.

When it comes to other groups and their mother tongue, the case of the Tat language stands out. Once widely spoken, Tat is now largely neglected in educational policy. For instance, compared to Ukrainian or Tatar languages, the situation of Tat is more sensitive. While both Ukrainian and Tatar are widely used in their respective kin-states, Ukraine and the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia, Azerbaijani Ukrainians and Tatars have access to scientific, literary, and media resources in their languages, which helps support language maintenance. In contrast, Tat, as part of the Southwestern Iranian language group, is spoken almost exclusively in Azerbaijan and has no external state backing. This makes local state support crucial for its survival. UNESCO has listed Tat among the languages under strong pressure from dominant languages like Azerbaijani and Russian (Moseley, 2010, p. 40; Suleymanov, 2023). Despite its historical and cultural significance, the Tat language continues to decline without adequate institutional measures.

When it comes to the absence of formal education in the Ingiloy, Kryz, Budug, and Haput languages, it is often argued that this is due to their linguistic similarity to other languages already present in the education system. For example, the Ingiloy language is considered very close to Georgian, while Kryz, Budug, and Haput are often grouped with Khynalyg due to shared linguistic features (see Chapter 2, Section 1). Similarly, the Ahiska Turk language is frequently described as being almost identical to Azerbaijani and, therefore, seen as not requiring separate educational support. But if language is not what makes these groups distinct, then what does? Why are they still listed as separate ethnic groups in official statistics, reports, and cultural classifications? I believe this logic of ‘linguistic closeness’ risks oversimplifying and ultimately erasing the rich cultural and historical identities of these communities. Even dialects or closely related languages can hold unique value and deserve recognition. Overlooking them in state education policy not only shows a lack of attention from the government but also puts their long-term survival at risk. As Grenoble and Whaley (2006) point out,

linguistic similarity does not remove the need for institutional support, especially for communities that already experience social or political marginalisation.

The case of the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan is particularly complex and politically sensitive. One of the key official sources for understanding this issue is the implementation reports of the FCNM in Azerbaijan. During the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan officially informed the Advisory Committee on the FCNM (2017, p. 2) that it could not implement the provisions of the FCNM in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and, by extension, could not apply its multiculturalism policy to this group. Following the second Karabakh war, nearly all Armenians who had previously lived in the region left the state. According to the most recent census data, their number has dropped dramatically, from nearly 120,000 in earlier decades to just 178 individuals. (Population Census in the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022, p. 334).

Moreover, even among those who remain, the situation is uncertain. As the Advisory Committee on the FCNM noted, Azerbaijani officials claimed that around 30,000 Armenians still live in Baku. However, the 2009 census recorded only 104 individuals self-identifying as Armenian in the capital. Authorities explain this discrepancy by suggesting that many are Armenian women married to Azerbaijani men and that their children consider themselves Azerbaijani. But this situation raises legitimate concerns about the actual freedom of self-identification, one of the core principles of the FCNM. As the Committee observed, individuals may refrain from declaring their ethnic origin due to fear of discrimination or social pressure (2017, p. 10).

Consequently, no minority language education exists for Armenian language in Azerbaijan, as confirmed in the Advisory Committee's fourth opinion report (2017, p. 29). The loss of Armenian language education clearly reflects how deeply armed conflict can undermine minority rights. Whether and how the Armenian community may return and reintegrate into Azerbaijani society remains an open and delicate question, one that will likely only be addressed meaningfully after a comprehensive peace agreement is reached between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has made some efforts to provide textbooks for minority language education, but these efforts remain limited and are often not supported by qualified teaching staff. While some coverage of textbook development has appeared in Azerbaijani mass media (see, for example, *Talış Dili Dərsləkləri Yeniləndi...*, 2023),

systematic and transparent official information on this topic remains largely unavailable to the public. In fact, the only consistent and verifiable source for tracking this issue is the reporting process under the FCNM.

According to the 5th State Report, textbooks have been developed for Avar, Lezgi, Tsakhur, Talysh, and Khinalug for grades I–IV, while Georgian-language textbooks are provided through cooperation with Georgia and used up to grade XI (Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022, p. 7). However, many other minority languages, for instance, Tat, Armenian, Ukrainian, Tatar, Kryz, and Budugh, still lack any formal instruction or educational materials in the public school system. In most cases, where minority languages are taught at all, instruction is limited to just one or two hours per week in early grades, with only Lezgi (up to grade IX) and Hebrew (up to grade XI) going beyond that level. This limited exposure makes it difficult for students to attain meaningful language proficiency. A key structural problem is the shortage of trained teachers. Many language classes being taught by generalist teachers who lack specific training in minority language education. Although the government has claimed that minority representatives were involved in the development of these textbooks, the Advisory Committee noted that no real consultation took place with the communities concerned when preparing the most recent report, raising doubts about whether the materials truly reflect their linguistic and cultural needs (Advisory Committee on the FCNM, 2024, pp. 8, 26–29). Without a coherent national strategy, properly trained educators, and genuine community engagement, these initiatives risk remaining symbolic rather than meaningful steps toward preserving Azerbaijan’s rich linguistic diversity.

Media in minority languages does exist in Azerbaijan, but its reach and impact are limited. According to the 5th State Report on FCNM, various initiatives are in place, such as state-supported radio broadcasts in Talysh, Lezgi, Kurdish, Georgian, Armenian, and Russian, with Azerbaijani Radio allocating over 15 hours per week to Russian and smaller slots to other minority languages. Additionally, over 15 newspapers and magazines in minority languages are reportedly in circulation, and five local TV and radio channels operate in regions with compact minority populations. Additionally, as reported by government of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2022) Television program titled *Multiculturalism* has been airing on AzTV since 2018,

featuring discussions with representatives of ethnic and religious minorities and offering policy suggestions to strengthen multiculturalism (pp. 30–31).

Despite governments claims, the Advisory Committee notes that programming remains largely insufficient, they are not television programs in minority languages except Russian, funding for minority-run media is lacking, and there is no legal guarantee for using minority languages in media or communication with state institutions and so on. The state-led narrative on Azerbaijani multiculturalism tends to highlight culture in a folkloric or religious sense rather than addressing substantive issues such as language preservation or minority rights (Advisory Committee on the FCNM, 2024, pp. 4-5, 15, 21-22). Moreover, new regulations such as the 2023 Statute on Media now require media outlets to seek permission to operate in any language other than Azerbaijani, raising concerns about further restrictions on linguistic diversity (Qayıbov, 2023). While newspapers like *Tolişon Sədo*, *Dodo*, *Samur* still operate, their reach is limited. These issues, particularly the real accessibility, funding, and freedom of minority language media, will be further explored in the following sections of this chapter, based on insights from interviews with representatives of minorities.

When it comes to religious ceremonies and cultural events, as was already mentioned, Azerbaijan's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and the right to practice religious ceremonies. In addition, the Law on Culture (2012) promotes the organisation of mass cultural events, such as festivals and exhibitions, to celebrate the diverse cultural heritage of the state's ethnic and religious groups. Nevertheless, some minority communities still face challenges in freely practicing their cultural and religious traditions. For example, members of the Talysh community were reportedly prevented from organising a child-focused event in Lankaran on International Mother Language Day, despite this region having a high concentration of Talysh residents (*Azerbaijan: Authorities Worry...*, 2023). Such incidents reveal inconsistencies between official policy and local practice and underline the need for more consistent support and protection of minority rights in both cultural and religious spheres. The perspectives of minority group representatives on these matters will also be discussed in the following sections, drawing on data gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Although Azerbaijan's legislation, particularly the Constitution and the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief, formally guarantees religious equality, these guarantees themselves contain restrictive elements. Moreover, the existing provisions are often not

applied consistently in practice. As a result, both Muslim and non-Muslim minority religious communities frequently encounter various obstacles. Numerous concerns about religious freedoms in Azerbaijan have been raised by reputable international observers (U.S. Department of State, 2023). These include significant restrictions embedded in the legislation itself, the use of legal provisions to deny registration to certain religious groups, the arrest of Shia religious activists who criticise the state's religious policy, often accompanied by accusations of espionage for Iran, and the existence of strict state control over religious literature, among others. As a result, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2023) included Azerbaijan to its Special Watch List.

When it comes specifically to non-Muslim religious minority communities, additional problems arise alongside the ones mentioned above. For example, although Muslim communities representing the majority also face certain pressures and restrictions, these kinds of limitations can, in the case of minority communities, threaten not just their activities but even their existence in Azerbaijan. The state's legal requirement for mandatory registration is the first major obstacle. This requirement was introduced as a result of major amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief (1992) adopted in 2009. According to Article 12 of the law, religious communities must be officially registered in order to operate legally. Unregistered religious communities cannot obtain legal entity status, open bank accounts, publish literature, or conduct public worship. Furthermore, Article 9.1 of the same law stipulates that a religious organisation is not allowed to operate outside the legal address under which it is registered. Since these amendments came into force in 2009, several non-Muslim minority religious communities have encountered serious obstacles related to registration and so on.

For example, problems have been observed with Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant communities. While Protestant groups have often encountered difficulties in obtaining registration, the issues faced by Jehovah's Witnesses are more complex and extend beyond registration. Male members of this religious group, based on their beliefs, refuse to perform military service or even touch weapons, asks for alternative to military service which has led to their imprisonment on charges of draft evasion. Several such cases have been brought before the European Court of Human Rights (2019), where the individuals were acquitted. There have also been instances where Jehovah's Witnesses

were denied passports and banned from leaving the state due to their refusal to serve in the military. Regarding registration, Jehovah's Witnesses have faced legal disputes in Azerbaijan. Although after lengthy legal struggles the community was officially registered in Baku in 2018, members in other regions of the state still cannot gather openly for religious ceremonies due to the restrictions set by the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief. Furthermore, recent reports of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2024, p. 16) continue to note cases where Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned for avoiding military service in Azerbaijan.

In Azerbaijan, financial support for religious communities is allocated based on decrees issued by the state's president. An analysis of these decrees from 2016 to 2024 reveals that, out of more than 30 officially registered non-Muslim religious communities, only five have received consistent annual financial support. These are the Russian Orthodox Church's Baku and Azerbaijan Diocese, the Mountain Jews Religious Community of Baku, the European Jews Religious Community of Baku, the Apostolic Prefecture of the Catholic Church, and the Alban-Udi Christian Religious Community.

Only since 2020 has funding also been allocated to the Fund for the Promotion of Moral Values, established under the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, for the purpose of supporting the remaining non-Muslim communities. Notably, in 2024, each of the five aforementioned communities received 350,000 AZN, whereas the other 32 officially registered non-Muslim communities collectively received the same total amount, 350,000 AZN, through the Fund (Aliyev, 2024). It is also worth noting that the state provides all registered religious communities with free gas within a defined limit. Observing the pattern of financial assistance over these years, one could argue that, regardless of the number of members, those religious communities with historical ties to the state, seen as more traditional, loyal, or aligned with strategic national interests, consistently receive much higher financial support. This points to a significant imbalance in the distribution of state aid. These limitations, while not always overtly repressive, function to restrict the visibility and institutional development of non-Muslim groups.

The last point I want to address in this section concerns local self-governance, which I believe could play an important role in strengthening the protection of minority rights, especially in regions where ethnic and religious minorities live in significant numbers. In Azerbaijan, local self-governance bodies (*Bələdiyyələr*) are, at least in theory, well-

positioned to contribute to the implementation of multicultural policies. According to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Status of Municipalities (1999), these bodies are tasked with addressing a range of local socio-economic, cultural, and community needs. This framework gives them the potential to respond directly to the specific cultural and social concerns of minority communities within their jurisdictions. Their close proximity to local populations means they could tailor initiatives more effectively to the needs and expectations of those communities.

However, in practice, the role of Azerbaijani municipalities in implementing any policies, including multicultural policies remains underdeveloped and limited. One of the major challenges is the weak institutional and financial capacities of self-governance (see Vöhringer & Dickson, 2021), restricting or even making impossible their ability to independently support cultural initiatives or minority language education programs and so on. The main problem is that, locally elected municipalities are overshadowed by state-appointed local executive authorities, which remain under presidential control and frequently override municipal decisions (Aliyev, 2022). As a result, local self-governance is largely symbolic, with real executive power held centrally by officials who lack genuine autonomy. If properly empowered, local self-governance could potentially play a more active role in promoting local languages, supporting minority media initiatives, and facilitating inclusive participation in cultural and religious practices, thereby significantly enhancing the overall effectiveness of multicultural policy implementation in Azerbaijan.

While Azerbaijan has established a legal framework to support the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in education, media, and cultural practices, its implementation faces practical challenges. Issues such as insufficient resources, legislative changes, and occasional restrictions on cultural and religious practices indicate the need for ongoing attention and improvement. The analyses drawing on the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study in a subsequent section of this chapter will shed light on the effectiveness of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy implementation at the state level.

#### **4.4. Implementation at the international level**

Azerbaijan has attempted to actively promote its multiculturalism narrative globally via strategic diplomatic initiatives, participation in international organizations, and cultural

diplomacy efforts. In the last decade, the Azerbaijani government has deliberately and visibly incorporated multicultural themes into its foreign policy, portraying the state as both a historical crossroads of civilizations and a modern advocate of intercultural dialogue. This strategic orientation not only enhances Azerbaijan's global reputation but also fulfils its diplomatic and geopolitical objectives. This section briefly reviews the foreign applications of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy and critically examines their actual effects and contrasts with domestic realities (see Chapter 4, Section 5).

At the diplomatic level, Azerbaijan thoroughly highlights its multicultural standards in both bilateral and multilateral settings. The government has positioned multiculturalism as a core component of its international brand, often emphasizing the state's religious tolerance and ethnic diversity as key assets in foreign relations. President Ilham Aliyev and other officials frequently emphasize that Azerbaijan is home to many ethnic and religious groups living in harmony, in implicit (and sometimes explicit) contrast to neighboring Armenia's homogeneity. For example, in a 2017 address to the UN General Assembly, President Aliyev raised Azerbaijan as "one of the world's recognized centers of multiculturalism," noting that "representatives of all ethnic groups and religions live in Azerbaijan in peace and harmony", contrasting it to Armenian homogeneity and highlighting "where there are almost no national minorities, which is a mono ethnic state and where xenophobia is a state policy" (Aliyev, 2017). He reminded the international community that 2016 was declared the Year of Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan, followed by 2017 as the Year of Islamic Solidarity, initiatives aimed at exhibiting the state's commitment to cultural diversity and interfaith unity on the global stage. By raising such themes at the United Nations, Aliyev linked Azerbaijan's domestic policy to its international persona, implicitly presenting state as a model of how a predominantly Muslim nation can acknowledge pluralism and coexistence.

Azerbaijan have boosted this narrative across various international platforms. They often portray the state's history as evidence of a naturally tolerant national character, citing centuries of peaceful coexistence among Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others in Azerbaijan. This was also highlighted in a recent speech, where President Aliyev (2024) described multiculturalism not as a mere policy but as "how we live, it's our lifestyle". Such rhetoric serves a clear soft-power purpose. By branding itself as a tolerant, 'multicultural nation', Azerbaijan aims to gain moral authority and goodwill

in international relations. Observers note that such attempts are part of a broader effort to promote Azerbaijan's image abroad in order to attract tourists, investors, and diplomatic support (Filou, 2021).

However, this diplomatic engagement is not without strategic calculation. The promotion of multiculturalism also serves Azerbaijan's political interests. By casting itself as a tolerant multicultural society, Azerbaijan seeks to develop sympathy from foreign governments and international organizations, especially in forums where its long-standing conflict with Armenia is discussed. The subtext often suggests: if Azerbaijan is a model of diversity and Armenia a 'mono-ethnic' state (as official rhetoric frequently claims), then international opinion should favor Azerbaijan's stance in regional disputes. This linkage was made explicit in Aliyev's 2017 UN speech discussed above.

Azerbaijan's diplomatic engagement on multiculturalism operates on two levels, normative (sincerely advocating for intercultural understanding as a global good) and instrumental (using its multicultural image to bolster soft power and political leverage). The balance between these motivations can be debated, but there is no doubt that multiculturalism has become a prominent theme in Azerbaijan's foreign affairs outreach in the period under study.

Azerbaijan actively engages in international and regional forums, utilising organizations such as UNESCO, UNAOC, and the Council of Europe to further its multicultural narrative. One of the branding initiatives is the 'Baku Process,' launched in 2008. This was an Azerbaijani-led effort to create a dialogue between the member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Council of Europe, effectively a bridge between Muslim-majority states and Europe on cultural matters. The Baku Process quickly gained support from the UN, and three years later it gave rise to the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue. Since 2011, Azerbaijan has hosted forums in Baku biennially (except during the COVID-19 restriction), in partnership with UNESCO, the UN, UNAOC, ICESCO and other international organizations.

These forums, held in 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, and most recently 2024, have become a flagship of Azerbaijan's international cultural diplomacy. For example, the 6th World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in May 2024 convened delegates from over 100 states, underscoring how the Baku Process has grown into "a very important

international platform to address the issues of intercultural dialogue,” in President Aliyev’s words (see also Chapter 3, Section 1).

Subjects at these forums go beyond simply cultural diversity; the 2024 agenda, for example, addressed talks on cultural diversity, interreligious dialogue, post-conflict peacebuilding, climate change, migration, and even artificial intelligence, all viewed through the prism of intercultural cooperation. By hosting and co-organizing such wide-ranging global conversations, Azerbaijan positions itself as a hub for international discourse on tolerance. UNESCO’s leadership has explicitly acknowledged this role; attending the 2nd World Forum, UNESCO’s then-Director General Irina Bokova praised the initiative and echoed President Aliyev’s reminder of “the vital importance of multiculturalism [...] as an essential factor for peace and stability”. Bokova noted Azerbaijan’s “long history of rich cultural diversity” and affirmed that intercultural dialogue “has never been so vital” (UNESCO, 2013) for global peace. Such endorsements from UNESCO and UNAOC lend international legitimacy to Azerbaijan’s efforts, reinforcing its identity as a convenor of dialogues between civilizations.

It is important to note, however, that Azerbaijan’s global cultural diplomacy has not been free from controversy. Investigations have revealed that during Irina Bokova’s tenure as UNESCO Director-General, her husband received payments linked to the so-called ‘Azerbaijani Laundromat’ (OCCRP, 2017), a \$2.9 billion money-laundering and lobbying scheme used by Azerbaijani elites to secure international influence and favourable narratives abroad. According to *The Guardian*, which was among the outlets publishing the findings, millions of dollars were channelled through UK companies to curry influence, including within international organisations such as UNESCO (Harding et al., 2017). One such example is UNESCO’s endorsement of the ‘*Azerbaijan: Land of Tolerance*’ exhibition in Paris, an event that critics argue reflected this influence campaign. Although no direct legal accusations were made against Bokova herself, the revelations raised serious concerns about Azerbaijan’s use of soft power and financial leverage to shape its international image. This case illustrates the complexities and contradictions underpinning Azerbaijan’s multicultural branding efforts in global forums.

In addition, Azerbaijan regularly organises and participates in significant multilateral cultural diplomacy events, such as the Baku International Humanitarian Forum and the

Summit of World Religious Leaders, significantly enhancing its international cultural standing. Notably, during the 2019 Summit of World Religious Leaders, President Aliyev promoted Azerbaijan as an international model of multicultural coexistence, directly associating the state's national identity with broader global values of peace and dialogue and again pointing out that “multiculturalism is a way of life and a state policy in Azerbaijan” (Aliyev, 2019).

Another dimension of international implementation is Azerbaijan's participation in global and regional legal frameworks related to cultural diversity and minority rights. As discussed earlier (see chapter 2, section 2; chapter 3, section 2), Azerbaijan has ratified a number of key international conventions that underpin its multicultural policy, thereby aligning itself with internationally recognized standards.

For example, Azerbaijan is a State Party to the UN ICERD, since 1996, which legally binds it to prohibit racial and ethnic discrimination. It has also acceded to UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), with formal accession. Regionally, upon joining the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan ratified the FCNM in 2000 (see Chapter 4, Section 2 for an overview of these commitments). Additionally, Azerbaijan is a party to UNESCO's World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions, and a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's cultural statutes, all of which interact with its promotion of cultural heritage and diversity. These treaty commitments provide a formal international context for Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, they signal the states's willingness to be evaluated against global norms on minority protection and cultural rights. Indeed, officials often cite these accessions in international forums to demonstrate that Azerbaijan is meeting its obligations (for instance, aligning domestic laws on anti-discrimination to ICERD, or supporting minority language education in the spirit of the FCNM).

In addition to formal diplomacy and treaties, Azerbaijan's international multiculturalism policy is carried out through concrete cultural diplomacy projects and partnerships. These efforts, often coordinated by the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and organizations like the Heydar Aliyev Foundation or the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre, seek to build intercultural bridges on a people-to-people level. They range from bilateral cultural exchange programs to participation

in global cultural events, and they serve to showcase Azerbaijan's diverse culture abroad while fostering mutual understanding with other nations.

A standout example is the introduction of the subject 'Azerbaijani Multiculturalism' in universities abroad. Initiated in 2015, this course has since been implemented in more than 15 universities around the world, including Charles University in Prague, Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Sarajevo, Hokkaido University in Japan and so on. These academic programs aim to introduce international students to the historical and contemporary aspects of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism model, and they are often accompanied by BIMC produced textbooks and teaching materials that were mentioned in previous chapters of this study. Through such programs, Azerbaijan hopes to foster a new generation of scholars and professionals who are familiar with and sympathetic to its national approach to cultural diversity (*Teaching*, n.d.).

This educational diplomacy is further supported by seasonal schools organized by the BIMC, such as the International Summer and Winter Schools on Multiculturalism. These events, hosted annually in Baku (until paused during the pandemic), bring together students and young researchers from diverse states to engage with Azerbaijan's cultural landscape and ethno-religious communities. Participants attend lectures by Azerbaijani academics and visit cultural sites representing various ethnic and religious traditions in regions such as Quba, Sheki, and Lankaran (*Summer and winter schools*, n.d.). BICM also opens branches and representatives (n.d.) in states such as the USA, Germany, Russia, and Italy to promote the so-called Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism.

Azerbaijan's international promotion of multiculturalism has undoubtedly boosted its soft power. Foreign delegations, particularly Jewish and Christian leaders, have often praised Azerbaijan as a rare example of a Muslim-majority state where religious minorities feel safe and respected (Rudee, 2019). High-profile events like the World Forums on Intercultural Dialogue and Baku-hosted religious summits have added to this reputation, and honors such as Baku being named the Islamic Culture Capital by the OIC in 2016 have helped reinforce Azerbaijan's identity as a bridge between cultures (Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). These acknowledgments are frequently heard in government narratives to legitimise the multiculturalism policy and present Azerbaijan as a 'model' to others.

In conclusion, the international level of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy implementation has been one of ambitious outreach and diplomatic branding. It has brought Azerbaijan international acknowledges and a distinct voice in global cultural affairs. Yet, this global perception remains contingent: to sustain and strengthen the positive image, Azerbaijan will need to ensure that its domestic realities align more closely with its international rhetoric. The coming years will be critical in observing whether Azerbaijan can consolidate its role as a genuine 'global centre of multiculturalism' by advancing minority rights and cultural pluralism at home, or whether the dissonance between image and reality widens. For now, Azerbaijan's international multiculturalism drive stands as a fascinating case of a state employing cultural policy as a form of diplomacy, with notable achievements in fostering dialogue, as well as notable criticisms that call for a transparent evaluation of the policy's depth and sincerity on all fronts.

#### **4.5. Analyses of effectiveness of implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy**

This section provides a thorough assessment of the implementation of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, utilising direct insights from a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives of ethnic, religious and ethno-religious minority communities, political party leaders, and independent experts from both state-affiliated and independent think tanks. The analysis examines the policy's practical manifestations across various domains through diverse perspectives: the lived experiences of ethnic communities regarding language and education rights in mother tongue, cultural production, and public engagement; the views of religious minorities on societal attitudes and institutional support; and the varying assessments from political actors and expert analysts regarding the policy's credibility, depth, and strategic motivations.

Each segment explores achievements, challenges, and fundamental contradictions, providing a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of how multiculturalism is both implemented by the state and negotiated, challenged, and experienced across Azerbaijani society, specifically by ethnic and religious minorities. As noted in the introduction, the findings do not claim to represent the views of all ethnic and religious

minority communities in Azerbaijan. However, the interviewees include members of many large and well-established minority groups, offering a broad and informative cross-section.

#### **4.5.1. Assessing multicultural policy in Azerbaijan: Voices from below**

This part is based on analyses of data gathered from semi-structured interviews with representatives of different ethnic communities in Azerbaijan. The central interview question guiding this section was: You know that this policy has been actively discussed in Azerbaijan for a decade and that the authorities claim to implement it. As a member of the community, how do you feel about the implementation of this policy? (See Appendix A for supplementary questions).

A recurring theme across interviews is the lack of continuing financial and institutional support for minority-language media. While some ethnic community newspapers have survived for decades through grassroots effort and community donations, the absence of state financial support has prevented their sustainability. An interesting and concerning point is that some newspapers affiliated with ethnic minority groups not only do not receive any state support, but attempts by private individuals to provide financial assistance to these publications are also deliberately prevented. To express it in the words of one Talysh cultural employee:

*The newspaper is published solely through donations and revenue from sales... There were times when we published weekly [...] Then things changed, and we started facing a lot of pressure, both from the state and the relevant institutions. Gradually, they began cutting off the newspaper's funding, closing the taps, so to speak. The people who were helping were also threatened and intimidated in different ways. Eventually, the newspaper's funding was almost entirely cut off, and it had to switch to a monthly publication. For example, this year, only three or four issues have been published. If you divide that by the months, it barely comes out once every two to three months. (Interviewer, A)*

The cultural employees from ethnic minorities repeatedly described how informal pressures and systemic neglect have left them underfunded or entirely unsupported, forcing many newspapers into digital-only formats or closure. These obstacles are not

merely technical; they are a indication of a more extensive exclusion from official multicultural discourse. As Lezgin cultural employee noted:

*We have not received a single penny from the state. Never. We submitted applications, and we wrote multiple times to the Press Council. But we did not receive a single penny from anywhere [...] We published the newspaper for 26 years, from 1997 to 2023. But last year, we realised that we no longer had the strength to continue printing it on paper. So, we transitioned solely to the online version. Now, we publish the newspaper digitally.* (Interviewer, E)

It should be noted that, compared to other ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, the expansion of internet access has enabled Lezgins, Avars, and some other communities to access media outlets in their native languages from neighbouring states, for example, Lezgins and Avars can follow content from Russia's Dagestan. However, for older generations in Azerbaijan, particularly those without internet access, the situation is more difficult. The discontinuation of print editions, such as *Samur* in 2023, which now exists only online, has made access to Lezgi-language print media virtually impossible.

Related to minority media, the lack of institutional infrastructure, such as dedicated office spaces, public grants, or integration into state cultural programming, was frequently cited too. Another cultural employee, while initially praising state-run institutions like the BIMC, also pointed to the side-lining or even discrimination they experienced:

*It would be good to establish a dedicated branch for multiculturalism focused on the peoples living in Azerbaijan. I know what the Tsakhur wants, what the Budukh wants, what the Ingiloy wants. These people want nothing [...] At this point, the interviewee sings a traditional song from their own ethnic group] This is all they want, nothing else. But instead, the moment someone speaks up, they are labelled as a separatist. This is what upsets me. I haven't been to the Multiculturalism Centre [BIMC] for a long time. I've even told them the reason. I no longer like going there because someone who once called me a separatist has been given a seat there [at the BIMC].* (Interviewer, B)

This reflection points to a common concern shared by several interviewees. Although BIMC is officially presented as a platform for cultural dialogue and support for diversity, it is also seen as a tool of state control. Since the BIMC is directly linked to

the Presidential Administration (see chapter 3, section 1), it promotes multiculturalism mainly at a symbolic level. According to these accounts, it does not fully involve communities in shaping or expressing their cultural needs. Instead of encouraging open and equal participation, the Centre seems to reward loyalty and discourage critical voices. As a result, many see Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy as something designed and managed from above, rather than a genuine, community-driven approach.

When it comes to the minority media newspaper in other minority languages, some of them, for instance, Avar, Tat and Kurdish cultural employees, mention that they used to have a newspaper in their languages. It is no longer being published now, but they hope to restore it. Kurdish cultural employee adds that their newspaper called '*Kürdün Səsi*' (The Voice of the Kurds) and used to be published but was later discontinued (Interviewees, F, G, H).

From the point of view of minority communities, television and radio programmes in their native languages very limited and difficult to access. Some interviewees noted that Lezgi-language programmes are said to be broadcast two or three times a week, but in practice, people struggle to find them, with one Lezgin cultural employee saying, "No one knows where they are actually being aired" (Interviewer, D). In the case of Kurdish-language radio, there is a half-hour slot twice a week, but only a small part is used for news and culture, with most of the time focused on general state updates (Interviewer, H). As it was discussed in the third section of this chapter these examples show that even when such programmes officially exist, they do not always meet the needs or expectations of the communities. For some groups, like the Meskhetian Turks, this is less of an issue because their language is very close to Azerbaijani (Interviewer, J), but for others, access to native-language media remains an important but largely unfulfilled need.

A major indicator of multicultural policy implementation lies in education, especially in the teaching of mother tongues. The data shows mixed results. In some cases, textbook development and limited instruction in grades 1 to 4 represent casual achievements. However, this is insufficient for meaningful language preservation or transmission. Speaking on the challenges of minority language education, one cultural employee explains the situation in clear language. In many cases, minority language classes are offered only once a week, one teaching hours (normally 45 minutes), while

official state reports states two hours, and not in all schools, even in regions where these communities live in compact settlements. The Talysh interviewee points out the irony:

*The reality is that there is only one hour of lessons per week, and it is not available in all schools. There is a lack of teaching materials. There are no teachers, and no teacher training programmes exist for it. To put it simply, teachers are trained to teach Azerbaijani, so there should also be trained teachers for Talysh. But instead, for example, they tell a physical education teacher to go and teach the Talysh language. Just as there are Azerbaijani language and literature teachers, there should be proper teachers for Talysh. If it is to be taken seriously, it is a rich language. (Interviewer, A)*

This information illustrates that while policies may exist on paper, their implementation often lacking in practice. Assigning unqualified staff to teach minority languages not only undermines the quality of education but also signals a lack of genuine commitment to preserving these languages. Minority language education risks becoming a symbolic act without focused support, such as teacher training and proper materials.

Additionally, one Talysh activist sharply criticised the limited nature of the state's efforts, noting:

*Let's put it this way, the policy they talk about [multiculturalism], I don't really understand what policy they mean. We don't see any concrete action. What comprehensive measures have been taken? As a representative and member of the community, I don't feel it personally. I also don't observe anything like this happening around me. (Interviewer, C)*

While the recent update of primary school textbooks is acknowledged, the activist argues that this is not enough. "It does not mean that Talysh-language schools actually exist in Azerbaijan," (Interviewer, C) they explain, stressing that a real commitment would require full secondary education in Talysh.

Similar issues were voiced by other communities. Some communities, like the Lezgins and Avars, benefit from textbooks and limited teaching hours, but their reliance on Soviet-era teachers educated in Dagestan highlights the lack of institutional investment within Azerbaijan:

*Currently, Lezgi language lessons are being taught in approximately 86 schools across the country. These mother tongue lessons are conducted from grades 1*

*to 4, although according to the curriculum, they are supposed to continue up to grade 9. Right now, we are working together with the Multiculturalism Centre [BIMC] as well as other state institutions. After all, these textbooks need to be written, and specialists are needed for this. Today, most Lezgins live in Dagestan, where the study and development of the Lezgi language's philology take place within relevant institutions. In Azerbaijan, there is a Linguistics Institute within the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. However, we have raised the issue that a Lezgi language department should be established there. (Interviewer, D)*

Another Lezgin cultural employee also points out with regret that there has never been a Lezgi language and literature teaching programme in Azerbaijan. Neither Baku State University nor the Pedagogical University has ever offered such a specialisation. The training of such specialists has taken place in Dagestan (Russia). There was, for a short time, a branch of Dagestan State University in Baku, where a Lezgi language specialisation was available. However, it was later closed down, and to this day, none of the diplomas issued to graduates of that programme have been officially recognised (Interviewer, E).

In the case of the Tat and Kurdish communities, the complete absence of textbooks and educational programmes highlights a significant disconnect between policy rhetoric and actual implementation. As a representative of the Tat cultural community puts it:

*First and foremost, there must be textbooks for education. These textbooks do not exist. If they did, Tat teachers, even if not specialised in the subject, who teach Azerbaijani language and literature could also teach the Tat language and its alphabet. They have promised to publish the textbooks, but haven't given a clear timeline. (Interviewer, G)*

The interviewee also notes, highlighting that Tat language instruction is feasible in areas where Tats live in compact communities, such as Rustov in Quba region, nearby villages, as well as regions like Shabran, Siyazan, and several villages around Baku. A similar concern was expressed by a Kurdish cultural employee, who points out that, unlike some other ethnic groups, Kurds are dispersed across the state rather than concentrated in one area. This, they explain, has contributed to the near-total absence of Kurdish-language instruction in Azerbaijan: “As a result, there is virtually no

education in the Kurdish language. Unlike with other ethnic groups, there are not even a few weekly Kurdish language lessons being held” (Interviewer, H).

Interestingly, while some interviewees praised the state’s symbolic recognition of diversity, others critiqued the insufficiency of these actions. The contrast is especially sharp between more assimilated or institutionally connected groups, such as the Ukrainian or Ahıska Turk communities, and those from more marginalised or politically sensitive backgrounds, such as the Talysh, Lezgi, Tat, or Kurdish communities. “I am completely satisfied with the implementation of this policy. All the necessary conditions have been created for us to preserve our culture, traditions, and language. We organise various cultural events, thematic gatherings, and exhibitions,” noted one Ukrainian cultural employee (Interviewer, I). Similarly, an Ahıska Turk cultural representative stated, “The state truly does care for us. Our state strives to preserve diversity” (Interviewee, J).

The representative of the Ukrainian community shared an overall positive picture of cultural life, but their own words reveal deeper issues that raise questions about the actual support for Ukrainian identity in Azerbaijan. As they put it:

*There is no formal education in the Ukrainian language, but there are Ukrainian Sunday schools. Ukrainian TV channels are available, although newspapers and magazines are not currently published, there was a time when Ukrainskiy Vesnik was in circulation. In today’s world, printed publications are a debatable issue anyway. The Ukrainian community has an official website and active pages on social media. Various cultural events are held regularly. Days of Ukrainian Culture are also celebrated in Azerbaijan, of course, we would like to see them take place more frequently. (Interviewer I)*

This account highlights the absence of formal language education and Ukrainian-language media, which are basic elements of cultural preservation. The speaker tries to downplay the lack of print publications by calling them “a debatable issue,” which may reflect either limited expectations or an effort to avoid criticising the authorities. One possible reason for the relatively visible presence of Ukrainian cultural activities could be kin-state support from Ukraine, similar to the kind of backing seen in the case of Russian community initiatives. However, a key difference is that most Ukrainians in Azerbaijan commonly use Russian in daily life, which weakens the role of Ukrainian

as a living minority language in Azerbaijan. It is also understandable that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine may have influenced greater cultural visibility or solidarity efforts. Still, the symbolic presence of Ukrainian culture may not translate into deeper language preservation or community mobilisation.

Cultural infrastructure is another critical area where change is expected. Several interviewees described how once-active cultural centres have become inactive or disappeared entirely. These centres, which were meant to serve as hubs of community life and cultural continuity, now exist mostly in name, or not at all. Many cultural employees expressed a desire for renewed state investment, not only financial but also logistical, including the allocation of physical space. As one Lezgin research participant framed it, “every people [ethnic group] should have at least one office. If two rooms were allocated, the state would not become poor” (Interviewer, E) and that without such spaces, community life is suppressed and fragmented. Others expressed frustration that no real efforts are made to support cultural programming or facilitate public events in minority languages. As one Talysh activist explains, while symbolic initiatives such as cultural events and televised performances are appreciated, they are not enough to ensure the survival of a language or cultural identity:

*As for other matters, the anniversaries of a few poets have been celebrated, which can also be seen as a positive development, specifically for those poets who write in Talysh. Regarding radio and television programmes, for example, the Kharibulbul festival was recently held in Shusha. Performances in the Talysh language were included, and they were introduced as members of the Talysh community. Of course, as a Talysh individual, as a child of the Talysh people, it is pleasing to watch these things on television. These are positive moments. But overall, and I must repeat, I do not believe that these efforts alone are sufficient to preserve a language, an ethnic group, or its culture.*  
(Interviewer, C)

Several interviewees pointed out that ethnic communities themselves also bear responsibility for preserving their language and culture, stressing that internal motivation and engagement are equally important. A Tat cultural employee also highlighted this aspect when discussing the preservation of Tat culture. The interviewee noted that there are folklore ensembles in both Lahij and Shabran districts, performing songs and dances in both Azerbaijani and Tat languages. These groups actively take

part in local and international cultural events, and their leaders are from within the Tat community. Still, the interviewee emphasised, “The community needs to be active, but there is a lack of such activism within the community, and that’s essentially where the problem stems from.” (Interviewer, G)

A Lezgin interviewee also highlights the importance of cultural ensembles such as ‘*Lezginka*,’ ‘*Suvar*,’ and ‘*Chikityar*,’ noting that these groups have opened dance schools and regularly organise concerts. According to him, these ensembles have also played a key role in reviving traditional *Dam* (Dəm) evenings, events that reflect Lezgin customs and social practices. In his own words:

*What is Dam? In village weddings, young people would always gather in the evenings behind the zurna and drum players, in large gatherings. There would be girls, boys, and their family members. Through dance, they would get to know each other. [...] We try to organise such Dam evenings in large restaurants today. And after every event like this, we notice that five or six couples end up forming families.* (Interviewer D)

These kinds of gatherings not only help maintain a sense of community among ethnic groups but also act as quiet expressions of cultural preservation in the face of assimilation. Even with limited support and resources, such efforts reflect the determination and flexibility of minority communities to sustain their identities and traditions despite broader challenges.

One more theme across several interviews is the lack of direct financial support from the state for public unions and cultural initiatives related to ethnic minority groups. For instance, one cultural employee, clearly states: “There has been no financial support from the state for the cultural centre either. If there had been, they would have at least provided an office” (Interviewer A). Similarly, some other cultural employees also mention lack of office space for their cultural centres.

Political inclusion also emerged as a key demand. Ethnic minority members called for greater representation in state structures, not in the form of symbolic quotas, but through genuine inclusion based on active engagement with their communities. This includes advocating for parliamentary and municipal representation as well as involvement in executive institutions. As one participant explained, “We have many capable young people, some educated abroad, others here in Azerbaijan [...] It would be good to see

representatives of our people included in governance structures as well” (Interviewer, F).

Representatives of ethnic minority communities across Azerbaijan articulate a range of expectations that go beyond symbolic recognition toward substantive cultural inclusion. A recurring themes are the demand for meaningful support for education in minority languages, support for media outlets in minority languages, support for cultural events and so on. While some steps have been taken, such as publishing textbooks for early grades, community leaders insist that these measures are insufficient and poorly implemented. Participants repeatedly called for the training of specialists to teach in minority languages, alongside improved educational materials and other matters.

What emerges is a fragmented landscape: some ethnic minority communities enjoy relatively higher visibility and access, while others face marginalisation, suspicion, and institutional inaction. This lack of equality raises questions about how fair and consistent multicultural policies are being put into place for different groups. Overall, these voices reflect a desire for multiculturalism to be practiced not only as a principle but as a functional framework embedded in state institutions and policies.

#### **4.5.2 Religious and ethno-religious communities: Navigating multicultural policy in practice**

The implementation of Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy is not only measured by ethnic representation but also by the degree to which minority religious and ethno-religious communities can practise their faith freely, sustain their institutional structures, and participate in public life. Interviews with these community representatives reveal that, while the state has succeeded in promoting an inclusive image and offering some support, access to funding, legal recognition, and infrastructure remains unreliable and often tied to political visibility or community status.

As with ethnic groups, the analysis in this section considers diversity within the communities themselves. As of 2024, 38 non-Muslim communities are officially registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (*Religious institutions: Statistical figures* .... n.d.). All of these groups, in relation to Azerbaijan’s Muslim majority, are considered minorities. This section is based on interviews

conducted with representatives of six such community representatives. The selection aimed to reflect the diversity within the non-Muslim communities, for instance, one of the several existing Jewish communities was included, as well as one Protestant community, among others.

Among the most frequently mentioned dimensions of multicultural policy were legal recognition and financial support. In general, communities that have long-established ties with state authorities, particularly the Jewish and Catholic communities, expressed high satisfaction and reported meaningful institutional access. Others, however, especially Protestant groups, highlighted legal challenges and financial marginalisation. As one Protestant cultural employee puts it:

*In 2010, we had to take the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations to court because they had refused us registration [...] After about a year and a half of court proceedings [...] the Committee registered us as 'Word of Life.' Then we began gathering documents for the registration of the Azerbaijan Bible Society. Although the process was somewhat tense at times, in the end, we received state registration without any issues. (Interviewer, O)*

Despite eventually gaining recognition, the interviewee noted that Protestant communities remain excluded from direct state funding, unlike other denominations:

*Most Protestant communities primarily rely on donations they collect themselves. As for the state, in Azerbaijan, the government provides direct financial support to certain other religious communities - for example, Jewish, Orthodox, and others. Unfortunately, Protestant communities are not included in that list. The assistance Protestant communities receive from the state is very minimal and usually comes indirectly through the Fund for Moral Values [the Moral Values Promotion Fund of Azerbaijan], which distributes the funds allocated by the state. (Interviewer, O).*

In contrast, as previously discussed other communities such as the Udi Christians and Catholics receive regular state assistance. The Udi case is a great example of how religious identity that is sponsored by the state is usually associated with ethnic heritage. Udi cultural employee highlights that for over 10 years, their religious community has been receiving financial support from the state. This funding is used to

maintain the community's activities, celebrate religious holidays, and participate in international events (Interviewer, K).

The Catholic Church similarly expressed appreciation for both symbolic and material support from the state, noting the importance of policy in countering isolation. In the words of a representative from the Catholic community:

*One of the most significant outcomes of the multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan is that the process of what I'll try to describe correctly as ghettoisation of religious communities was blocked. There was a risk that religious or ethnic communities might completely isolate themselves - we see this happening in other countries. But in Azerbaijan, this process was halted. I believe this was specifically due to the multiculturalism policy. (Interviewer, P)*

This view shows how official recognition and regular interaction with state institutions can help religious communities feel included and supported. But it also points to a broader pattern: while some communities, like the Catholic Church, seem well integrated and visible, others, especially smaller Protestants or other groups, do not always enjoy the same access or visibility. This difference raises questions about how the benefits of multiculturalism are shared and whether inclusion still depends on a community's public profile or political ties.

Multiculturalism's implementation is further reflected in the educational and media access granted to these communities. When it comes to mother tongue education, the discussion concerns Jews and Udis, who are considered both religious and ethnic minority communities in Azerbaijan. These two communities share both similarities and differences when it comes to education in mother tongue. Jewish schools, for example, are allowed to operate under the Russian educational sector, teaching Hebrew as a foreign language. As described by a Jewish religious representative:

*Today in Azerbaijan, we have a Jewish school, and there is also a Jewish section within a state school. So, one fully functioning Jewish school and one Jewish section inside another school. In Jewish schools in Azerbaijan, lessons are primarily taught in Russian, as it is the main language of instruction - they belong to the Russian sector. Hebrew is taught as a foreign language, but all other subjects are taught in Russian. (Interviewer, N)*

Meanwhile, Udi language education currently exists at the primary level and is generally viewed positively by community member. As shared by a cultural figure from the Udi community:

*We don't have any problems. A teacher who has completed a philology degree teaches the class. And we don't face many issues also because the Udi people know their language very well. We have some issues when it comes to the Azerbaijani language. (Interviewer, K)*

This suggests that, at least in the early grades, there are qualified teachers and a strong base of language knowledge among Udis themselves. However, the same interviewee also expressed concerns about expanding Udi-language education too much. While they support teaching the mother tongue, they are worried it could limit children's future opportunities:

*Udis mostly study in the Russian-language sector but also speak the state language. However, there are now cases where some individuals are failing state service entrance exams due to insufficient proficiency in the state language. In my opinion, teaching Udi in grades 1 to 4 is sufficient. If Udis were to study all subjects and all grades in the Udi language, it would hinder their future careers. (Interviewer, K)*

This reflects a common belief that, apart from Russian, using a minority language alone is not enough to succeed in Azerbaijani society. Without strong Azerbaijani language skills, young people may struggle to access higher education, public sector jobs, or other opportunities later in life.

While both the Udi and Jewish communities lack media content in their respective heritage languages, Udi and Jewish, representatives expressed different perspectives. The Udi interviewee noted that their community does not need a dedicated radio station or newspaper, as they already access information in Russian and Azerbaijani, and consider their current online platforms sufficient (Interviewer, K). In contrast, the Jewish representative simply stated that there are no newspapers, magazines, or television programmes in Hebrew in Azerbaijan (Interviewer, N). These examples suggest that while media access in minority languages is limited, some communities rely on dominant or international languages to stay informed.

When we look at smaller and less traditional religious communities like the Bahá'í and Krishna groups, their experiences generally reflect satisfaction and suggest that Azerbaijan's multicultural policy has created space for peaceful religious practice and community development for these small groups. The cultural employee from Baha'i community generally expresses a positive view of the multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan. The interviewee also notes that their community is primarily funded through donations made by Bahá'ís to international Bahá'í foundations. In certain years, they even declined financial support offered by the Azerbaijani government. However, the interviewee explains that this decision was not due to any issue with the Azerbaijani government, but rather related to the principles of the Bahá'í faith, which holds that activities should be funded solely through contributions from within the community. Nevertheless, in order not to appear different from other communities in Azerbaijan and to avoid misunderstandings in society, they eventually agreed to accept the state's annual financial support through the Foundation for the Promotion of Moral Values, on the condition that it is used exclusively for the community's social projects (Interviewer, M).

The Krishna community member, too, acknowledged the symbolic and diplomatic recognition they receive, despite limitations in state funding: "We are very satisfied with our state and its policies. Since the day our head of state began promoting this policy, students and guests have been coming here" (Interviewer, L). Adding that: "Of course, it's not possible to sustain ourselves for a whole year on the financial support allocated by the state [...] Members of the community, as well as other individuals, provide us with financial support" (Interviewer, L).

These accounts show that while the government provides some support, smaller or newer religious communities still often depend on their own networks or international connections to stay financially stable.

One of the more frequently praised aspects of the multiculturalism policy was its promotion of interfaith harmony and public inclusiveness. Multiple respondents credited the state with helping build bridges across faiths and ethnicities, framing Azerbaijan as a model of religious coexistence. As one Jewish religious representative puts it: "The state has always cared for minority communities, including the Jewish one [...] the main measure of success should be the interaction between our communities and broader society, and that relationship has always been positive" (Interviewer, N).

Similarly, the Catholic Church noted that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan successfully mitigated the risk of societal isolation for minority communities:

*Why? Because within the framework of this policy, interfaith events are held regularly and quite frequently, at the highest levels: presidential, governmental, and even interstate. This has a significant impact on public education and upbringing [...] [and] helps the population recognise that the country is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional.* (Interviewer, P)

The Krishna community also described how foreign guests, including international political figures, recognised the tolerant environment: “A member of the Canadian parliament once visited us [...] He mentioned that while in some other countries there may be strict attitudes toward religious denominations [...] in your country, the approach is very soft and broad-minded.” (Interviewer, L).

One could argue that, from the perspective of minority religious communities, one of the strongest parts of Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy is how it builds a positive international image and promotes peaceful coexistence. At the same time, some feel this focus on visibility and diplomacy does not always translate into everyday support for their needs.

While many religious and ethno-religious groups in Azerbaijan express appreciation for the general environment of tolerance, their reflections on the future reveal concrete expectations for more meaningful engagement and institutional inclusion. Some of the most pressing demands involve the need for proper worship infrastructure, particularly among Protestant communities. As one Protestant interviewee explained, “Not all Protestant communities have their own prayer houses” (Interviewer, O).

Others stressed the importance of correcting public misperceptions and increasing awareness about lesser-known faiths. A Krishna devotee expressed the desire for “educational institutions [to] create opportunities for us to provide information about our own religion,” adding that their only wish is for people “to have accurate information about us” (Interviewer, L). Similarly, the Albanian-Udi Christian community underscored the importance of promoting correct identity narratives, emphasising the need for awareness campaigns to clarify that Udis are distinct from Armenians, a misunderstanding that carries sensitive implications due to the political context (Interviewer, K).

Beyond visibility and infrastructure, there were calls for more active participation in broader civic life. A Bahá'í representative noted that while their community has good relations with state religious authorities:

*The only thing I could mention is that, when it comes to broader societal topics - you know, as Bahá'ís, we do not engage in politics, it's prohibited by our faith - but we would like to have the opportunity to be more actively involved in discussions on social issues and public discourse. Sometimes you feel that the invitation isn't there. This isn't related to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, they always invite us into their space and environment. The issue is with other institutions. (Interviewer, M)*

This feeling of exclusion from mainstream platforms limits their ability to express their perspectives and contribute to national debates, even as they remain committed citizens. The expectations voiced by these communities highlight that institutional equality, public recognition, and inclusive dialogue are central to the future of multiculturalism as lived by Azerbaijan's religious minorities.

Another point raised by the Udi community is the impact of economic migration. Udi interviewee explained that many people from their village, Nij, have moved to Russia for work, and this trend continues despite the war and economic difficulties in Russia:

*If you look at the regions of Azerbaijan, most people have already migrated to Russia for work, you know how it is. This also applies to Nij. The situation in Nij isn't any better; it's the same as elsewhere. But for us, it's a heartbreaking reality. A large portion of the Udi population has moved to Russia. Now, whenever there's a chance, they leave. For example, girls who finish school, when they get married, they don't even marry local boys. This is a big problem in Nij today. Russia is currently at war, in a difficult situation, as you know, and yet people still go there. (Interviewer, K)*

This quote shows how economic conditions and lack of opportunity at home are causing people, especially young ones, to leave. For small ethno-religious communities like the Udis, this kind of emigration creates a serious risk for their future, as it weakens local ties and reduces the number of people who remain to carry on the community's traditions and identity. It should be noted that the village of Nij in Azerbaijan's Qabala

district is the primary settlement where the Udi community lives in a compact and concentrated.

In contrast to ethnic communities, representatives of religious and ethno-religious minorities generally describe a more positive experience under Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. While ethnic groups often emphasise the lack of institutional and financial support, several religious communities, especially those with long-standing recognition like the Jewish, Catholic, and Udi groups, report more consistent state engagement. Legal registration, symbolic visibility, and even limited financial support appear more accessible to religious communities. One could argue that religious minorities, particularly those seen as less politically sensitive, benefit from better conditions overall, though gaps in education and media remain for both groups.

#### **4.5.3. Societal attitudes: Public perceptions and everyday experiences**

While state-led multiculturalism initiatives are often formalised through policies and institutions, the success of such efforts also depends heavily on the attitudes of society at large. This section explores how representatives of minority communities assess the general attitude of Azerbaijani society towards them, based on the question: "Protection and development of ethnocultural diversity should be supported not only by the state but also by society. How do you assess the attitude of the majority in Azerbaijan towards your community?" To understand this better, participants were also asked if they had witnessed discrimination or unpleasant situations affecting their communities. The findings indicate that, even though direct or open discrimination is not commonly reported, many smaller or less well-known communities still experience indirect challenges. These include being misunderstood by the wider public, facing subtle forms of bias, and being subject to stereotypes that limit their full inclusion in social and cultural life. Also, it is important to note that some aspect of societal attitudes of majority to minority groups were presented in previous two section too.

Most respondents indicated that social relations between ethnic and religious groups are peaceful and friendly, aligning with Azerbaijan's national self-image as a multicultural society. Interviewees often underscored a deep-rooted tradition of interethnic coexistence. In the words of a Talysh community representative "I believe that all peoples in Azerbaijan have mutual respect for one another. Historically,

different ethnic groups have always lived together in an atmosphere of peace and respect. The attitude of Azerbaijani Turks is warm and normal” (Interviewer, C). One Lezgin participant described the situation as follows: “No, I have not observed any cases of discrimination” (Interviewer, D). These sentiments were shared by others, including religious minorities: “I believe that all Jews live very peacefully in Azerbaijan and have good relations with Azerbaijanis. I have never seen any problems” (Interviewer, N).

Such views were particularly common among other long-established communities like Avars, and Ukrainians, Ahiska Turks, Kurds, Jewish, Udis, and others who described their integration as smooth and mutually respectful.

However, several participants noted persistent issues of social perception, especially when it came to identity recognition, religious understanding, and negative stereotypes. For instance, the Tat representatives described societal disbelief or denial of their identity. Critically reflecting on the situation, a Tat respondent said:

*We have connections with one another. We have relationships. However, there are still certain individuals who hold negative attitudes. Some even go as far as to say that the Tat people don't exist. There are people who make such claims publicly. But the Tat people do exist, there is a Tat language, a Tat culture. How can anyone deny this when all of it clearly exists? (Interviewer, G).*

Such denial of identity presents a minor but significant barrier to the expression of cultural rights. Similarly, within the Talysh community, assimilation by former members of the group is seen as a complex issue, often associated with internal bias. One Talysh interviewer comments on this broader concern:

*In Azerbaijan, there are Turks and then there are the so-called 'false Turks' - those who have converted from Tats, Kurds, Talysh, or Avars. These 'false Turks,' the ones who have assimilated and no longer speak their original language but still claim to be Turks, even though their parents were Talysh, Avar, Tat, or Kurd, are different. Compared to them, ethnic Turks are much more progressive people. I've noticed this myself - when they hear that the newspaper is struggling, the Turks come together, contribute money, and help get it published. But sometimes, I observe that someone who has converted from Talysh or Kurd, for example, has an even more negative attitude towards their*

*own people. Just because you don't speak the language doesn't change the fact that it is still your own nation. (Interviewer, A)*

This suggests that ethnic identity in Azerbaijan is not only shaped by majority-minority dynamics but also by internal community hierarchies and assimilation narratives.

There aren't many reports of open discrimination, but some leaders from religious communities said that the public doesn't know much about lesser-known faiths, which can lead to minor bias or misunderstandings. This was particularly significant among Protestant and Krishna communities. One Krishna interviewee raised a key issue, explaining that:

*Of course, in our country today, people's way of thinking is not yet at the level where, for example, if I say I am a Krishnaite, a follower of Krishna consciousness, it wouldn't trigger a negative reaction in someone. The first thought that often comes to mind is, 'This person follows a different religion.' People may have such thoughts, and the root of this, I believe, lies in a lack of awareness [...] Yes, it has happened. Sometimes stones are thrown. Once, someone threw a stone and broke our window. Of course, these are usually teenagers. There have been other similar incidents. But it's not on a large or widespread scale [...] There are people who like us, and there are people who don't. That exists in every society. There are also those who are indifferent to us - whether we exist or not makes no difference to them. (Interviewer, L)*

One Protestant respondent expressed frustration, saying that public attitudes toward their community are often shaped by limited understanding of Christianity:

*Aside from state institutions [...] there's also the general public, whose mentality is still shaped by a predominantly Muslim worldview. And their understanding of Christianity has largely been formed through the lens of Orthodox Christianity. So, when they encounter Protestants, they often say, 'You're different, aren't you? Why don't you cross yourselves? Why don't you have any crosses?' [...] their perception of Christianity is based on only one part of it [...] so when they meet other denominations, it can be confusing for them [...] We do experience some discomfort from certain individuals who hold such views. (Interviewer, O)*

These accounts underscore that multiculturalism as state policy does not automatically translate into deep societal understanding. In some cases, religious communities have even been targets of theological misinformation:

*We know that there are extremist groups in Azerbaijan who incite hostility even among other Muslims [...] Christians generally have a unified view. But some Muslims claim the Bible has been rewritten [...] the Quran does not say a single word about this. But I wouldn't say that Muslims in general are extremists [...] the majority of Azerbaijan's population is very kind and loving toward us. For example, when we bring them books like the Wisdom of Solomon, they recognise figures like the Prophet Noah [...] They take the book, kiss it, and say, 'This is a beautiful book. (Interviewer, O)*

While not widespread, such views create discomfort and underscore the need for public education initiatives to bridge interfaith knowledge gaps. Another layer of complexity arises from the digital sphere, where anonymity often gives strength discriminatory speech. Even though such situations are not common in daily life, they still cause emotional discomfort and help keep negative stereotypes alive. As described by a representative of Catholic group:

*It is very upsetting that members of our community, my brothers and sisters, Azerbaijani Catholics, do not encounter any serious problems in practice regarding their faith. However, from time to time, we read offensive or negative comments on social media. This happens simply because people do not feel a sense of responsibility for what they write online. (Interviewer, P)*

Despite these challenges, several interviewees highlighted that these incidents rarely escalate into real-world conflict, indicating a distinction between online rhetoric and offline behaviour. Many representatives of minority communities in Azerbaijan express overall satisfaction with the absence of discrimination in everyday life, yet they simultaneously reveal subtle patterns of exclusion, misunderstanding, and discomfort that point to deeper societal issues.

Across both ethnic and religious lines, respondents called for efforts to promote greater societal empathy, cultural curiosity, and solidarity. Several participants proposed state-supported awareness campaigns, media programming, and inclusive public education as ways to strengthen mutual understanding among different segments of society. One

ethnic representative used a powerful familial metaphor to illustrate the needed shift in mindset:

*You know how it is, it is a matter of having wealthy brothers and poor brothers. Everything goes to the wealthy brother, nothing to the poor brother, let them stay at the doorstep. We must not instill this feeling in people. We should not look down on minority people. They should be treated as equals, just like siblings in a family, they should all be treated equally. For example, if there are four of us, all should be treated the same way. It should not be like, as a poor brother, you should not participate in our assembly. (Interviewer, E)*

Such views reflect a widely shared expectation: that multiculturalism should be not only a matter of law and policy, but of lived experience, grounded in mutual respect and solidarity across all communities.

#### **4.5.4. Political voices and critical perspectives on Azerbaijan’s multicultural policy**

While many community representatives acknowledge the symbolic and practical benefits of Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy, opposition political figures paint a far more critical picture. Their insights add another analytical layer by assessing the ideological underpinnings, structural weaknesses, and historical inconsistencies in the state’s approach to multiculturalism. This section brings together these perspectives to highlight the tensions between state rhetoric, societal reality, and political critique.

This will generally be a short section. Because the contributions of interviewed political actors to this study already been analyzed mainly in section 3 of Chapter 3 of this dissertation, and partly in other sections. And as explained there, this includes the perspectives of only three opposition political leaders, since it was impossible to get views of other actors, especially from government side. The main question here is: “You know that this policy has been actively discussed in Azerbaijan for the last 10 years and that the authorities claim to implement it. How have you assessed the implementation of this policy in Azerbaijan?” In their responses, interviewees also reflected on what specific measures the government takes to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, for example, schooling in the mother tongue, radio and television broadcasts in minority languages, religious rituals, cultural events, and so on, and how they assess the situation in this area. Since the views shared by these

interviewees are open, the full versions of the interviews can be found in Appendix 3 at the end of this dissertation.

One of the most striking criticisms came from the opposition politician and journalist Seymur Hazi deputy chairman of APFP. His analysis rejects the idea that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan is genuinely institutionalized, arguing that it functions more as a performative narrative rather than a democratic practice:

*I do not believe that the Azerbaijani government genuinely implements a multiculturalism policy [...] The government's main argument here is that there is supposedly cultural freedom in Azerbaijan [...] However, another fact immediately disproves this thesis: there is no pluralism in Azerbaijan, no freedom of thought and expression [...] In the absence of democratic values, especially pluralism and freedom of expression, the government uses another illustration, an illusion, to show that there is diversity [...] The tolerance built on these historical roots is not something driven by state policy [...] The government wants to present this natural, unrefined multicultural base as its industrial creation.*

Hazi's remarks challenge the authenticity of government's multiculturalism narrative by emphasizing the lack of democratic infrastructure, which he sees as a precondition for genuine cultural pluralism.

This theme is expressed similarly by NCDF leader Jamil Hasanli, who situates Azerbaijan's tolerance within historical traditions of coexistence, separate from any modern state-led efforts. He dismisses contemporary multiculturalism discourse as being selectively instrumentalized, especially in foreign policy contexts:

*When did we ever see anything related to the rights of other peoples during that multicultural propaganda? The entire idea was built on the notion that Jews were treated with tolerance in Azerbaijan. There were no other aspects to it [...] there's a difference between actions and propaganda. What are you actually doing in practice? It's necessary to preserve the existence of these languages and cultures [...] If any of these languages disappear, a part of that culture will be lost.*

For Hasanli, the multiculturalism promoted by the government lacks substance, systemic policy backing, and authenticity, which undermines its legitimacy and risks cultural decline rather than preservation.

By contrast, Arif Hajili, leader of the Müsavat Party, offers a more balanced, though still critical, perspective. While acknowledging unresolved promises and shortcomings in education and cultural autonomy, he commends the direction of recent developments, even if slow:

*Changes have been made in education and other fields, such as television, radio, and others [...] However, multiculturalism is an issue that has no boundaries. Even the most democratic states in the world have not fully resolved these issues. What concerns me most personally about democracy in Azerbaijan is that the processes in the country are not moving towards the development and expansion of democracy, but rather towards the restriction of democracy and the gradual elimination of democratic freedoms. But in the field of multiculturalism, although the process may be very slow, it is moving in a positive direction.*

Hajili points to ‘the 44-day war’ as an important moment when people of different ethnic backgrounds came together. He suggests that shared national experiences can help build unity, even if official policies are not strong.

Leaders from across Azerbaijan’s political spectrum offered a critical yet varied set of perspectives on the state’s current multiculturalism policy and its future direction. They emphasised that legal frameworks alone are insufficient and must be backed by democratic reforms, transparency, and functional state institutions. It could be said that all three interviewees shared a similar concern: the rights and freedoms of both ethnic and religious minorities and the broader population are not adequately protected in Azerbaijan. As Arif Hajili put it,

*[...] violations of rights in the country are not only related to national minorities or as a result of a national discrimination policy. In general, the rights of Azerbaijani citizens, such as the right to freedom of assembly, the right to freedom of speech and expression, and the right to vote and to be elected, are grossly violated. There are no independent courts in the country, and the fundamental issue lies in the absence of the rule of law [...] In many cases, for*

*instance, general violations of rights in the country are interpreted by representatives of individual national ethnic groups as national discrimination against them. However, these issues, such as violations of rights, apply to every Azerbaijani citizen, regardless of nationality.*

Seymur Hazi expressed a similar view, saying, “I think the root of asking for freedom in X region is that there is no freedom throughout the state, and there is no freedom for anyone”. Jamil Hasanli also pointed to the broader limitations on civil rights under the current political system. Together, these statements highlight that the issue is not limited to minority rights but reflects a wider concern about the overall lack of political and civil freedoms in the state.

One point made during the interviews regarding the representation of national minorities in the Azerbaijani parliament was a scepticism of symbolic gestures or quota-based representation, with participants instead arguing for authentic integration through fair electoral systems and merit-based political inclusion. Seymur Hazi rejected the idea of designated parliamentary seats for minorities, stating that such a model would “suppress both the ethnic majority and minority” by turning identity into a political tool. Instead, they advocated for proportional systems and free elections where representatives “should represent all the people in their region”. This view promotes a civic-national approach over an ethno-political one and places the responsibility for multiculturalism within the framework of democratic representation rather than managed diversity.

At the same time, political actors recognised the dangers of top-down, controlling approaches to multiculturalism. Some were critical of policies that fail to consult minority communities or include them in the policy-making process. Others underscored the need to protect cultural rights such as education in the mother tongue, access to media, and support for community institutions, calling these ‘natural rights’ that stem from one’s identity rather than privileges to be granted or denied. These insights reflect a desire to move beyond rhetoric toward systemic change, where multiculturalism becomes an embedded principle of governance, supported by transparent institutions, and not simply a promotional slogan.

#### 4.5.5. Expert assessments: Competing visions on Azerbaijan's multicultural policy

In this section to understand how implementation of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is perceived beyond minority ethnic and religious community representatives and politicians, the insights of the experts from both state-affiliated and independent think tanks will be discussed. Different views of interviewed experts on other issues related to Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy discussed in relevant sections of this dissertation. Here focus is only on the implementation of this policy on which their insights offer divergent interpretations, with "state-aligned experts emphasising achievements" and "independent analysts raising concerns over authoritarian control, symbolic measures, and selective inclusion".

Experts from government-affiliated institutions strongly defended the state's commitment to cultural and religious pluralism. They praised initiatives in education, heritage preservation, and event organisation, often referring to Azerbaijan's high level of religious tolerance. According to an expert from a state-affiliated institution:

*The state itself is interested in ensuring that the diverse cultures and religions within its territory can preserve their distinctiveness and not disappear [...] Textbooks are being published in this regard, books are being printed, projects are being implemented [...] religious monuments belonging to all faiths are being restored by the state [...] Religious tolerance in Azerbaijan is at a high level. (Interviewer, Q)*

This expert further claimed that multiculturalism is being "implemented in practice", suggesting that if any issues arise, they are minimal or case-specific: "Nowadays in Azerbaijan, you will not see any disagreements between any ethnic group or religious denomination. And if there is even a single example, show it to us, and we will look into what it is related to" (Interviewer, Q).

Other state-aligned voices expressed similarly, highlighting practical measures such as mother tongue instruction and minority access to media and justice. One state-linked expert highlights:

*The concept of a 'problem' is such that if you focus on any area, you can find issues there. However, having access to media in one's own language, receiving education in one's own language, being able to speak in court in one's own*

*language, and other similar matters, in my opinion, are widely recognised and implemented. There are no problems in this regard. (Interviewer, U)*

Another government-aligned expert pointed to media economics and audience demand as reasons for limited programming in minority languages, rather than state neglect. In the words of an expert respondent:

*Yes, when it comes to radio, television, and so on - there is some weakness, I can feel it. But you know, that also stems from demand. TV channels want to make money, and very few people would watch such content. The state could perhaps introduce a quota to ensure such programmes are produced. As far as I know, there are radio broadcasts, but their quality isn't particularly high. As for print media, again, as I mentioned, there are books and certain newspapers, but they are not at the level that the people working in those institutions would like. There are both objective and subjective reasons for that. (Interviewer, T)*

These assessments frame multiculturalism as a technical challenge or ongoing development, rather than a political or systemic deficit. In contrast, independent experts particularly those unaffiliated with state structures, offered critical assessments, suggesting that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan is often performative and driven by external image management. As independent expert points out:

*There has been a widespread process of the destruction of religious freedoms in Azerbaijan over the past 10–15 years. Just as all other freedoms have been eroded in the country, so too have religious freedoms. More precisely, the aim seems to be to bring it under full control, to turn it into a managed situation - perhaps something that could be called 'managing multiculturalism' - but it is not natural. (Interviewer, R)*

This view highlights a deeper contradiction: while multiculturalism is promoted in public discourse, it is often weakened in practice by an authoritarian system where ethnic and religious activism is viewed with suspicion. As the same expert mentions: “In the southern region, Talysh identity, and in the northern region, Lezgi identity, are perceived as a threat [...]. In general, it's unrealistic to expect anything different from an authoritarian country” (Interviewer, R).

Another independent expert supported the idea that the policy lacks strategic clarity and is poorly trusted by minority communities. Expert reflects that:

*Neither the communities trust this policy, I can see that clearly from public opinion, nor do people really understand what is actually happening, what is expected of them. And the authorities themselves haven't outlined a clear direction, a step-by-step plan saying: 'We will do this, then this, then that. (Interviewer, W)*

The same expert commenting of legal frameworks of multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan note:

*On the other hand, they say this policy is based on constitutional provisions. Fine, let's take a look. For example, when we look at the issue of language, there are still limitations, like how many hours per week mother tongue lessons can be taught. Or certain publications are restricted, including periodicals, and so on. Why should there be such tight control over this? Or take the matter of religious freedom, again, we see that so-called non-traditional communities cannot obtain licences. Or they receive them temporarily, and then the licence is not renewed. (Interviewer, W)*

This statement reflects a critical position commonly voiced by independent experts. While the government claims that multiculturalism policy is grounded in constitutional principles, this expert questions how that works in practice. They point out real restrictions that minority communities face, like very limited hours for teaching in their own language or difficulties publishing cultural materials. The expert also highlights how religious groups outside the 'traditional' ones often struggle to get official registration or have their licences cancelled. This view suggests that constitutional guarantees alone are not enough if the system still tightly controls what minorities can or cannot do.

International analyst gives a mixed view. They recognised that Azerbaijan shows a level of tolerance in some areas but warned that the state should not rely too much on surface-level actions or become too comfortable without making deeper changes. This expert described multiculturalism as a strategic foreign policy tool:

*I believe that Azerbaijan has gotten relatively good notices in the West, or at least better notices than it would have had otherwise. Because of its professed commitment to multiculturalism [...] But I would be very surprised if Baku were*

*going to give enough money to minorities that have a history of ties with Iran, Russia, or Armenia. (Interviewer, V)*

They went on to frame the feasibility of minority cultures in terms of demographic scale and state interest:

*When the ethnic groups are big, are able to self-finance in a way, a lot of the media, the education, whatever. When they're small, or as they become very small, they can only do that if the government is involved. When Azerbaijan recovered independence, there were a much higher percentage of non-Azeris [non-Azerbaijanis] in the population than there are now. The smaller those groups become, the more the state is going to have to play a role, or they are going to be marginalized. That's just the way it is [...] And the fact that that they need such funding is one of the ways in for outsiders, Iranians, Armenians, Russians, to influence what goes on. (Interviewer, V)*

This additional quote from the same international expert further expands on the underlying logic behind selective state support for minority communities. According to them, the state's approach often depends on whether a particular group is perceived as 'integrated' or potentially influenced by foreign powers. They argue that groups with perceived ties to states like Iran, Russia, or Armenia are less likely to receive generous support, as their identities are seen as more politically sensitive or externally manipulated. These decisions, they notes, are rarely made at the highest political levels but rather within lower levels of the bureaucracy. The expert links this pattern to a broader national shift towards Azerbaijani ethno-nationalism, shaped by demographic changes and historical legacies. In their view, recent conflicts and the rise in the Azerbaijani share of the population have made it easier for ethno-nationalist ideas to gain ground, even if not always openly acknowledged (Interviewer, V). This insight reflects how multiculturalism is not just a domestic issue but a strategic frontier of geopolitical alignment and national security, influencing who gets support and why.

One independent expert commenting on the implementation of multiculturalism policy expressed a more moderate and cautious view, stating:

*The situation here is such that it can never be said that everything is 100% in order. There is always room for greater attention to be paid to national minorities, to their needs, calls, and aspirations. From this perspective, I believe*

*more can be done [...] On this topic, more attention should be paid to what national minorities themselves have to say.* (Interviewer, S)

The view that minority's opinion is much more important was shared by one government affiliated expert too: "The communities themselves can provide the most accurate insight into the effectiveness of the implementation of multiculturalism policy" (Interviewer, Q)

Additionally, one independent expert points out that even among opposition groups in Azerbaijan, people who speak up about ethnic or religious rights are often quickly labelled as separatists (Interviewer, R). This shows that the problem is not only with government policy, but also with the wider political culture. Many are afraid to support minority rights openly, which makes it hard to have honest discussions or build support for real change.

Experts from both government-affiliated think tanks and independent institutions shared divergent, often contrasting, visions for the future of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy. Yet a unifying theme emerges across these perspectives: the need for reform that moves beyond symbolic promotion toward structural change. Independent experts strongly emphasised democratisation as the foundational requirement for any meaningful multiculturalism. An independent expert suggests:

*Firstly, the most important requirement here is the democratisation of the country. Democratisation is the key issue. Prioritising human rights is essential. Once human rights are prioritised, the rights of minorities will inevitably become a priority as well. If these are ensured, if democratisation takes place, then we must transition from rhetorical multiculturalism to real multiculturalism.* (Interviewer, R)

Institutional transparency and real community participation were also highlighted as areas in need of urgent improvement. One independent expert called for increased engagement with minority voices, noting that communities should be given freedom to express themselves and manage their affairs independently, without rigid oversight or gatekeeping by long-standing leaders. To put it with critical experts' own words:

*There are real problems, and these problems exist on the ground, people are living with them. Unfortunately, community leaders often don't reflect this reality. I don't know if they don't feel safe, or what interests they serve, it's even*

*a big question for me why the same person remains a community leader for years, sometimes until death. There must be an interest behind it, someone is supporting and keeping that person in place as the face of the community.*

(Interviewer, W)

It is important to clarify one point the expert made regarding community leaders: when it comes to religious and ethno-religious communities, the reference is to the leaders of officially registered communities; whereas in the case of ethnic communities, it refers to cultural centres that are registered and operate as non-governmental organisations. Building on this observation, it becomes clear that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan functions not only as a state-led image policy aimed at promoting tolerance internationally, but also as a strategic arrangement between the government and selected leaders of minority communities. These leaders often act as intermediaries or symbolic representatives, but without necessarily reflecting the real needs or voices of their communities. This points to a deeper issue: instead of enabling genuine community participation, the state appears to support a controlled and selective engagement that serves its own political goals.

Even those experts more aligned with the state's vision called for more responsiveness to local demands and greater care in avoiding artificial or imposed solutions. One expert warned that:

*You know, this is such a sensitive issue that even if something new and highly effective is implemented, if it's artificial and imposed from above, opposition will form against it. It would be better if state structures responded to the wishes of local organisations and local people [religious and ethnic groups]. This isn't like a state programme for industrial development, where it's written into a plan that within three years this and that must happen, with everything laid out and measured. This is not an issue that can be measured with numbers [the regulation of ethnic and religious diversity]. Here, people's mood and sentiment need to be taken into account. The main goal is to ensure that civic identity and other sub-identities do not come into conflict, that they coexist comfortably.*

(Interviewer, T)

Calls were also made for reviewing and adapting international models carefully, not to copy them, but to identify elements that could improve Azerbaijan's own system.

Across the ideological spectrum, experts converged on a central message: for multiculturalism to succeed in the long term, it must be deeply rooted in democratic institutions, inclusive governance, and in dialogue with minority groups themselves.

#### **4.5.6. Discussion and concluding reflections**

The analyses in this section highlight a gap between Azerbaijan's stated multiculturalism policy goals and the practical experiences of ethnic and religious minority communities. While official rhetoric promotes cultural diversity and tolerance, representatives from various communities consistently emphasise ongoing issues, such as inadequate support for minority-language media and education. Cultural employees note systemic obstacles, including financial neglect, institutional exclusion, and informal pressures, which severely limit their community activities. The difficulties faced by minority newspapers, such as funding restrictions and intimidation of private sponsors, illustrate these structural challenges clearly. This situation significantly prevents meaningful preservation of minority languages and cultures, especially for ethnic minority groups like the Talysh, Lezgins, Tats, and Kurds.

Educational initiatives, often highlighted as multicultural achievements by state officials, emerge as symbolic rather than substantive according to community voices. Many interviewees stress that the limited teaching hours, inadequate training of teachers, and lack of appropriate educational materials prevent effective language preservation. For communities without any formal educational programmes, such as the Tats and Kurds, the disconnect between multicultural rhetoric and practical reality is especially sharp. The absence of educational infrastructure for minority languages not only undermines cultural identity but also sends a clear signal about the state's superficial commitment.

Religious communities, meanwhile, generally described a climate of tolerance, especially in interfaith relations and freedom of worship. Yet, smaller, or less conventional denominations noted obstacles such as limited registration rights, societal misunderstanding, or inadequate state support. This points to a tiered system of recognition, where established or geopolitically advantageous communities receive more consistent backing, while others navigate marginalisation or bureaucratic indifference.

Political voices and independent expert assessments critically reinforce these observations, emphasising that genuine multicultural inclusion requires deeper structural changes beyond symbolic gestures. Political interviewees unanimously indicate broader governance issues, suggesting that the lack of fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens, minorities, and majorities alike, underpins the inadequate implementation of multicultural policies. While government affiliated experts generally praised state's approach, independent experts similarly to political voices stress the need for authentic engagement with minority voices and institutional transparency, criticising the current top-down, controlled approach.

Overall, the data presented reveals a policy environment marked by symbolic multiculturalism and selective engagement rather than comprehensive inclusivity. The experiences articulated by community representatives and independent analysts underline a clear message: meaningful multiculturalism in Azerbaijan requires not only consistent financial and institutional investment but also genuine, grassroots community participation and structural openness.

## **Chapter 5. Prospects for Azerbaijan's multicultural policy**

This chapter delves into the prospects of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, combining insights from previous analyses and incorporating qualitative data from all semi-structured interviews conducted for this study. By employing scenario analysis, I aim to project potential trajectories for the Azerbaijan's approach to ethno-cultural and religious diversity in the coming years. As described in the methodology section, scenario analysis is a useful tool in political science that helps explore uncertainty by constructing different 'what-if' narratives based on current trends and stakeholder expectations (Turoff & Hiltz, 2002). In this context, I use it to look ahead, not to predict one fixed future, but to understand the range of possible developments and their implications.

These projections build on what has been learned from analysing the last decade of multicultural policy implementation in Azerbaijan under the umbrella term of multiculturalism. One of the elements in this discussion is the impact of post-conflict processes. For instance, the potential return of Armenian communities to their former homes could significantly reshape the policy environment and require a new approach to managing diversity. By sharing these scenarios, the chapter takes a realistic but hopeful look at how Azerbaijan might continue to deal with the challenges and opportunities of cultural diversity.

In the first section, which focused on the Azerbaijani government, the first scenario reflects the current model and trajectory as it exists today, while the second proposes what would need to change to make multicultural policy more inclusive, balanced, and responsive to the actual needs of minority communities. The second section focuses only on one scenario, what ethnic and religious communities could do to contribute to this development.

### **5.1. Scenario for the government of Azerbaijan**

This section looks at how the Azerbaijani government might approach multiculturalism in the coming years by offering two possible directions. The first reflects the current situation, a top-down, state-managed model where diversity is partly recognised but controlled, and in some cases even suppressed. The second considers what would need to change for multiculturalism to become more inclusive, transparent, and democratic

in Azerbaijan. These scenarios are based on normative theories of multiculturalism, previous analyses in the thesis, interview data, and how state institutions have handled multicultural policy so far. Together, they help us think through both the continuity and the potential transformation of the government's role in managing cultural diversity.

The first scenario is built on the continuation of authoritarian governance structures, wherein multiculturalism serves primarily as a tool for nation-building, Azerbaijan's international image management, and social control over the ethnic and religious minorities. As argued throughout this thesis, Azerbaijan's model contrasts with a Western liberal-democratic multiculturalism. It instead reflects a more instrumentalist approach aligned with state-centric governance. Drawing on Kymlicka's (1996, 2001, 2007a) (see Chapter 1) distinction between liberal multiculturalism and top-down cultural recognition regimes, Azerbaijan's multiculturalism is likely to remain performative unless there is a political liberalisation.

Interview responses from representatives of political opposition (see Chapter 4.5.4) reflect a consensus that the state's current policy framework lacks transparency and important democratic engagement. Yet even opposition actors, such as Seymur Hazi of the Popular Front Party, acknowledge the symbolic importance of recognising ethnic and religious diversity while warning against the risks of 'amorphous' policy implementation. Such statements reinforce the likelihood that any future development in the state's multiculturalism policy will be shaped more by national unity concerns than a commitment to pluralism.

Additionally, the implementation analysis (Chapters 4.5.1 and 4.5.2) shows that current organisations like the BIMC and the DHPDMRI of Azerbaijan's presidential administration are not set up to encourage independent involvement from minority groups. Rather, they act as pipelines for state narratives. Therefore, unless these institutions undergo structural reform, their function will likely remain propagandistic.

However, one area of possible progress lies in post-conflict integration policy. The government's potential role in facilitating the peaceful return of Armenian populations to the Karabakh region, within the framework of a broader peace process, may necessitate a resetting of multiculturalism policy. If managed inclusively, this development could challenge the current top-down model and require the state to adopt more pluralistic language policy and institutional guarantees. This shift could also

happen because the possible return of Armenian refugees currently living in Armenia to Karabakh will likely attract much more international attention than the current situation of ethnic and religious minorities already living in Azerbaijan. However, analyses show the current Azerbaijani leadership tends to see any form of minority mobilisation as a potential threat, such a policy change may remain temporary or symbolic.

More critically, the state's approach to minority language education, as revealed through interview data, remains symbolic rather than substantive. Across several communities, including Talysh, Lezgi, and Avar, minority language lessons are often reduced to one hour per week with no sustained efforts to train qualified teachers or standardise teaching materials. Participants in this study repeatedly highlighted that these lessons are frequently assigned to non-specialist teachers, such as physical education instructors, which compromises their quality and educational impact. Even when textbooks are developed, as in the case of the new Talysh-language materials for grades 1 to 4, there is no accompanying teacher training programme, curriculum monitoring system, or higher education pathway for aspiring educators in these languages. This reflects a broader pattern of bureaucratic neglect that contradicts the state's rhetorical commitment to multiculturalism. The notion that minority mother tongues can be meaningfully preserved through just one or two hours of instruction per week, without offering any career prospects, is highly unrealistic.

In terms of media and civil society engagement, the state's approach remains highly selective. Newspapers like *'Talışon Sədo'* and *'Samur'*, despite serving as vital platforms for linguistic and cultural preservation, operate under severe financial constraints. State support is absent, and in some cases, cultural employees claim that funding streams have been deliberately prevented. Also, surveillance by law enforcement and accusations of separatism make cultural expression more difficult. This securitised lens through which multiculturalism is policed contradicts any genuine vision of inclusive cultural pluralism.

Finally, Interview data also highlight a clear imbalance in state financial support among minority groups. Religious communities such as Jewish and Udi receive consistent government funding for their registered organizations, but most ethnic cultural centres are financially unsupported and do not have permanent facilities. This inconsistent support structure maintains inequality and reinforces perceptions of selective

multiculturalism, reflecting a broader lack of systematic, needs-based policy planning. In conclusion, this scenario anticipates the continuation of multiculturalism as a state-led strategy that preserves centralised control while selectively accommodating diversity for strategic purposes.

Unlike today's reality, an inclusive and democratic multicultural policy in Azerbaijan would require significant structural changes, addressing both legislative frameworks and practical policy implementation. First, substantial reform of state institutions or departments responsible for multicultural policy, such as the DHPDMRI of Azerbaijan's presidential administration and closely connected bodies like the BIMC, as well as relevant units within the SCRA, the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Culture, and the State Statistical Committee, would be necessary. Analyses of this thesis and interview data in Chapter 4 revealed strong criticisms of these institutions, especially regarding their propagandistic approach to multiculturalism, transparency, limited practical relevance and lack of genuine engagement with minority communities. For instance, if the BIMC continues to function as a central public institution overseeing ethno-religious diversity policy in Azerbaijan, even beyond the scope of its original charter, it is essential that at least one representative from a major minority group be included within its internal structure or in its Board of Trustees (see Chapter 3, Section 1).

Although the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the existing legal framework offer somewhat sufficient rights to ethnic and religious minorities, interview data clearly show that many of these legal provisions do not work in practice. One of the most critical among them, also key to driving other processes, is the right to education in one's mother tongue. While this right is implemented to some extent, it still requires significant improvement. Local self-government, guaranteed by the Constitution and regulated by the Law on the Status of Municipalities, gives municipalities the formal right to manage local affairs independently. However, in practice, they lack the real authority, funding, and capacity to take meaningful action, especially when it comes to multicultural issues. To make local governance more effective, municipalities need more resources and decision-making power. This could include giving them a role in supporting education and cultural programmes in minority languages, creating community-level platforms for participation, and involving them directly in decisions about cultural diversity. Strengthening municipalities in this way

would make multicultural policies more practical and better suited to the needs of different local communities across the state.

When it comes to international commitments on the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, Azerbaijan must show stronger and more consistent commitment to the FCNM. Although the state has ratified the convention, its practical implementation remains limited. The monitoring reports of FCNM highlighted several key problems, such as restrictions on minority-language media, lack of meaningful access to education in minority languages, and limited consultation with minority communities. Azerbaijan also needs to clearly define which groups are officially recognised as national minorities under the FCNM. It should be made transparent how many minority communities are recognised, and if some are excluded, this should be clearly explained. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the Roma community, despite being visibly present, is not officially acknowledged within this framework. To address these shortcomings, Azerbaijan should establish clear mechanisms to ensure proper enforcement of the FCNM's principles. In addition, a transparent population census that allows individuals to freely and voluntarily self-identify, including the option of multiple ethnic affiliations, would significantly improve the visibility and representation of minority groups in national policy planning.

As discussed in Chapter 2, another important step towards international commitment would be the ratification and effective implementation of the ECRML. Regardless of Azerbaijan signed the ECRML in 2001, it has never ratified it. This legal instrument provides concrete measures for protecting and promoting minority languages in education, media, cultural life, and public administration. If Azerbaijan were to ratify the ECRML, it would be required to ensure the use of minority languages in pre-school, primary, and secondary education; support their presence in both public and private broadcasting; and make them accessible in public services and official communications at the local level. Ratification would also oblige the state to provide adequate teacher training, educational materials, and support for cultural expression in these languages. Implementing these commitments could significantly strengthen the status of minority languages in Azerbaijan, moving beyond symbolic recognition towards real institutional support. It would also directly respond to long-standing concerns raised by minority communities in interviews throughout this thesis, particularly around the lack of quality education and media content in their native languages. Ratifying the ECRML

would thus mark a serious step toward aligning Azerbaijan's multicultural policy with European standards.

If the Azerbaijani government wants to continue its multiculturalism policy in a meaningful way, it must move beyond slogans and symbolic narratives toward a clear, structured policy framework. As discussed in Chapter 3, while multiculturalism is regularly promoted through speeches and international events, there is no official strategy or concept document guiding its implementation. Just as the state has adopted a National Security Concept, it should also develop a dedicated 'Multiculturalism Strategy' or 'Concept of Ethnic and Religious Diversity,' outlining specific goals, responsibilities, funding mechanisms, and legal commitments. Such a document would give direction to institutions, create accountability, and demonstrate that multiculturalism is a policy priority, not just a promotional tool.

Furthermore, there must be openness to the establishment of independent civil society organisations and NGOs, particularly those representing ethnic minorities, their interests, needs, and protection. As made clear in the discussions in previous chapters, in Azerbaijan, NGOs related to ethnic minorities, along with civil society organisations and any form of grassroots mobilisation, except for state-allowed or state-created cultural centres of ethnic minorities (which are also registered as NGOs), face strong restrictions. In general, repression of civil society activists in Azerbaijan (see Gogia, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2022) also creates barriers for minority activism. Any move toward liberalisation or the end of authoritarian rule would positively affect ethnic and religious minorities by fostering the creation of NGOs that actually reflect and serve their needs. If a more open environment exists for establishing such organisations, the next important issue will be funding. This could be addressed by creating mechanisms within government institutions, such as open grant competitions, to support minority-led initiatives.

In conclusion, this scenario outlines realistic and practical steps for turning Azerbaijan's multicultural policy from a tightly controlled and largely symbolic project into a more open and democratic model. Implementing international minority rights commitments like FCNM, ratifying ECRML, institutional reforms ensuring minority participation, independent civil society support, comprehensive educational programming, genuine media freedom, and stronger local governance would represent substantial steps forward, including ending the practice of treating minority

mobilisation or initiatives, especially those related to Lezgin and Talysh communities, as a threat to national unity. Together, these changes could ensure a multicultural policy that is genuinely inclusive, transparent, democratic, and responsive to the realities faced by Azerbaijan's diverse ethnic and religious communities.

## **5.2. Scenario for the ethnic and religious communities in Azerbaijan**

In considering how ethnic and religious communities in Azerbaijan can contribute to the development of a more inclusive and effective multicultural policy, one realistic scenario emerges: strengthening local community participation and organisational development. This does not suggest that minorities bear primary responsibility for structural change, which must come from the state, but it recognises that proactive community action can increase visibility, legitimacy, and ability to affect government policies. Despite numerous institutional and legal obstacles discussed in previous chapters, there remains room for communities to strategically strengthen their position.

First, it should be emphasised that members of ethnic and religious minority communities need to show more interest in actively participating in the work of their existing community organisations. Even within the limitations set by the state, they should try to support these organisations in any way that helps preserve the existence of their community. This support could take different forms: financial contributions, direct involvement, or volunteering. Based on interview data, it is clear that such participation is currently far from sufficient. One could argue that, in the face of state-led assimilation efforts, one of the most accessible ways to resist is by supporting the limited, state-allowed organisations that still operate.

However, it should be noted that the level of participation in existing organisations may vary across ethnic and religious communities in Azerbaijan (with the exception of ethno-religious communities like the Udis or Jews). One important point to consider here is the difference in how community belonging is formed. For ethnic communities, identity often begins with speaking the mother tongue, which is a core component of ethnic identity. In contrast, for religious communities, unity is usually based on rational choice and active participation in community life, especially in religious ceremonies. Interview data shows that communities like Protestants, Bahá'ís, Krishna devotees, and others follow this pattern. That means, although many religious minority communities

may face challenges such as such as obligatory formal registration, limited funding or problems with access to worship spaces, they tend to function more consistently over time than ethnic minority organisations. In short, for religious minorities in Azerbaijan, the key to survival is keeping active members and securing financial resources, while for ethnic communities, preserving identity is more complicated and depends on a wider range of factors.

According to this scenario, ethnic minorities can take small steps toward positive change by focusing on the preservation of core elements of their identity, such as their language, literature, folklore, and so on. As noted by several ethnic group representatives and shown in earlier chapters of this thesis, there are no specialised teachers, standardised textbooks, or philological institutions dedicated to minority languages in Azerbaijan. Moreover, cultural events are often subject to strict state control and even bans. While these issues require state support, ethnic communities can still take initiative under current conditions. For example, they can collect oral folklore, publish books aimed at protecting and developing their languages, design informal educational materials, and promote them through online platforms. They can also collaborate with linguists in the diaspora or neighbouring regions, this could be particularly relevant, for instance, in developing a literary form of the Talysh language. Such efforts, though limited in scale, can play an important role in keeping cultural identity alive while broader structural reforms remain absent.

Some communities have already pointed out that they make limited use of diaspora support or voluntary donations. Expanding these practices could help strengthen cultural resilience even in the absence of substantial state backing. For instance, the fact that newspapers belonging to the Talysh and Lezgi communities continue to operate, despite limited activity, through personal donations and subscriber contributions, can serve as a model for other ethnic groups like the Kurds, Avars, and others. At the same time, considering the widespread use of social media, especially among younger people, active members of all ethnic communities could take the initiative to create various forms of content as a way of preserving their languages. This approach could be particularly suitable for small-numbered ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan today, such as the Tats and others.

It is especially important to highlight that, throughout the interviews, concerns were repeatedly expressed about the assimilation of younger generations due to weak

opportunities for education in minority languages (see Chapter 4). Communities could take the initiative to create informal educational networks, such as weekend schools, cultural events, youth seminars, and online learning resources, which could help partially compensate for the gaps in official state education. These initiatives would not only support the preservation of minority languages and cultural traditions, but could also foster a new generation of community leaders and activists committed to multicultural advocacy and community development. Observations suggest that such community activism is more visible within the Talysh community, and this has already shown some positive outcomes, such as maintaining cultural activities, media presence, and language visibility. This example indicates that similar efforts could be developed by other ethnic minority groups as well, especially if supported by dedicated individuals and informal networks.

It should also be noted that cultural centres representing ethnic groups need to place more focus on participatory governance. Each of the ethnic minorities such as the Talysh, Lezgi, Tat, Avar, and Kurdish communities currently have just one cultural centre, and these centres should become more meaningful spaces for cultural self-expression. Observations and findings in this dissertation suggest that in many cases, these centres are largely symbolic, they are mentioned in state reports, but many have no physical office, budget, or regular programmes. The leaders of these centres should work on increasing transparency, involving more young people, and introducing some basic reforms to make their work more effective. Strengthening these community-based organisations through more open leadership and active involvement could help build a stronger foundation for participation and representation. This would also make it easier for communities to voice their needs and maintain more constructive relations with state institutions.

When it comes to religious minority communities, interview data show that Azerbaijani society often lacks a clear understanding of groups such as the Bahá'ís, Krishna consciousness, and Protestant communities. This lack of awareness sometimes leads to instances of discrimination based on misunderstanding. While community representatives noted that they have taken certain steps to address these issues, they also emphasised the need for broader public education to challenge stereotypes. Awareness-raising efforts initiated by minority communities themselves could help

shape public opinion and show that diversity is not a threat to national unity, but rather a contribution to it.

Finally, community-led initiatives should also aim to monitor how multicultural policies are actually being implemented on the ground. As many interviewees pointed out, formal state commitments, especially in the fields of education and media, are often not fulfilled or remain only on paper. In this context, minority communities can take small but effective steps to document gaps and inconsistencies. For instance, they can track whether minority language classes are really being offered, whether qualified teachers are involved, and whether minority newspapers or broadcasts receive any real support. This kind of basic monitoring does not require large resources, simple tools like reports, photo evidence, or community surveys can help. If shared regularly through social media or community networks, these findings could build public awareness and pressure for change. Over time, this would allow communities to shift from individual complaints to collective, evidence-based advocacy rooted in everyday experience.

In conclusion, this scenario suggests that Azerbaijan's minority ethnic and religious communities need to adopt a more structured, strategic, and collaborative approach to protecting their identities and playing an active role in shaping multiculturalism. While these efforts cannot replace the need for deep institutional reforms, they can create pressure points, build partnerships, demonstrate cultural resistance, and strengthen solidarity across communities. Even if the political space remains narrow, agency and resilience within that space still matter. Most importantly, such efforts can send a clear and powerful message: we exist, and our differences are not a threat to national unity, they are a source of richness.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation has critically examined Azerbaijan's multicultural policy, with a particular focus on the state-driven political narrative constructed under the umbrella term of multiculturalism over the past decade, approximately between 2014 and 2024. Disclosing a complex interaction between official discourse, practical implementation, and the lived experiences of ethnic and religious minority communities, I have analysed why Azerbaijan adopted multiculturalism as a state policy and assessed its effectiveness in managing ethnocultural diversity by drawing on both qualitative empirical data and secondary sources, as well as theoretical insights and comparative analysis. By positioning Azerbaijan's state-led approach to ethno-religious diversity within the broader theoretical landscape of multiculturalism and the specific socio-political dynamics of Azerbaijan, an authoritarian regime, this thesis aimed to understand the essence of this policy as articulated and implemented by the Azerbaijani authorities.

At the core of this dissertation lies the research question: Why has Azerbaijan adopted multiculturalism as state policy, and how does it manage ethnocultural diversity in practice? The findings indicate that Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is not merely a domestic strategy but also a geopolitical and ideological tool serving dual strategic purposes. Domestically, it functions as a top-down mechanism for controlling diversity within a centralised political system; internationally, it helps construct a favourable image of tolerance and inclusivity, particularly in engagement with bodies such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, to gain legitimacy and soft power. However, the implementation of this policy is far from uniform. Azerbaijan selectively empowers certain religious minority communities, such as the Jewish, Udi, Catholic and Russian Orthodox groups, whose visibility supports its external image of harmony. In contrast, other minority communities, especially ethnic minorities, such as Talyshs and Lezgins, with political sensitivities, are often marginalised or excluded from meaningful participation. Rather than fostering equal pluralism, the policy often restricts minority rights to symbolic or cultural expressions that align with state interests. This supports the main hypothesis that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan primarily functions as a state-driven strategy constructed to consolidate regime legitimacy, centralize governance, and enhance the nation's international image rather than effectively foster inclusive representation and cultural pluralism.

Addressing the first research sub-question, what are the determining factors shaping the specificity of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy? Research identifies a combination of internal and external influences. Internally, the ethnic and religious diversity of Azerbaijan forms the foundational rationale for any form of diversity management. The legacy of unresolved conflicts, especially the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and the memory of separatist threats from groups like the Talyshs and Lezgins have led the state to adopt a cautious, highly centralised approach to identity politics. Moreover, the influence of the Soviet model, marked by symbolic inclusion and state-managed ethnicity, continues to shape how diversity is perceived and controlled in Azerbaijan. For example, there is deep mistrust regarding the statistical data on the number of minority ethnic groups. This is evident not only among representatives of ethnic groups themselves, but also among experts and political voices. The arguments they present are not without basis and suggest that the state deliberately manipulates data about the number of minority ethnic groups. Officials fail to explain why, in a state that claims to pursue a policy of multiculturalism, the numbers of almost all ethnic groups, including major minorities such as Lezgins, Talyshs, Russians, and Ukrainians, decreased between the 2009 and 2019 censuses (see Table 1), with the known exception of Armenians due to the mass exodus after the Second Karabakh War. This pattern points to a deliberate trend, an assimilation process that begins with the manipulation of numbers.

Externally, Azerbaijan's commitment to international organisations and conventions encourages the official adoption of multicultural principles, even if they are often implemented only superficially. For instance, the desire to improve relations with the Council of Europe and OSCE has played a notable role in shaping multiculturalism as a diplomatic strategy. In particular, Azerbaijan's ratification of the FCNM stands out as a key moment. However, one could argue that this step, while seemingly progressive, did not lead to a consistent or robust implementation of minority rights on the ground. Instead, when looking at the ongoing problems and criticisms regarding its implementation, it seems that the government may have needed a new term or concept to cover up these gaps or distract from these unresolved issues. These findings confirm the hypothesis that Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is shaped by multiple factors, including ethnic and religious diversity, regional conflicts, and international affiliations.

The second sub-research question explores how the concept of multiculturalism is defined and understood in Azerbaijan. The analyses shows that the state's definition of multiculturalism is not based on legal guarantees or minority rights but is instead constructed through presidential discourse, symbolic acts, and selective visibility of certain groups. Official speeches often repeat phrases like 'tolerant Azerbaijan' or 'centuries of coexistence,' but offer no clear explanation of what multiculturalism actually means in policy terms. When summarizing the views of research participants from ethnic and religious minorities on the concept of multiculturalism, it becomes clear that the main narrative about multiculturalism stems from the state institutions operating in this field. The study also finds that state institutions often use historical references and patriotic narratives to frame multiculturalism as a unique Azerbaijani tradition, continuation of Azerbaijanism, which serves as a form of civic identity, rather than a liberal value that consider inclusion of all minority ethnic and religious group. At the same time, institutional structures, such as the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre, contribute to promoting a curated image of diversity, but without substantial policy inclusion. BIMC plays a central role in exporting this narrative internationally, while domestically, the understanding of multiculturalism remains vague and top-down.

This is especially visible in the state's strong focus on promoting religious minorities such as Mountain Jews and Udis, groups frequently mentioned in official speeches and shown in promotional materials. These communities are used to demonstrate harmony and tolerance, especially in interactions with foreign delegations. At the same time, ethnic groups like Lezgins, Talysh, and Avars, although larger in number, are barely referenced, especially when it comes to issues like language use, education in mother tongue, local governance, or access to public media.

This selective definition creates a serious imbalance in how multiculturalism is implemented too. As the analyses around second sub-question highlights, groups that align with the state's image-making strategy are showcased and funded, for example, through state-organised conferences or the inclusion of BIMC in international forums, as well as in BIMC Board of Trustees and so on. Meanwhile, groups perceived as politically sensitive are excluded from these platforms. The analyses also notes that there is no consistent legal framework or minority policy, and that multiculturalism is not institutionalised in a way that could guarantee rights or participation. While the

Constitution contains general guarantees of equality and cultural rights, there is no dedicated conceptual document or strategic framework outlining what multiculturalism means in Azerbaijan or how it should be implemented. Instead, it is applied on a case-by-case basis, often shaped more by image-making concerns than by real efforts to manage diversity. This confirms the second research hypothesis: the way multiculturalism is defined by the state affects the consistency and direction of the policy. In Azerbaijan's case, the definition is shaped to serve the state's political needs, which results in an unbalanced and symbolic practice of multiculturalism that leaves many minority communities invisible or marginalised.

Addressing the third research sub-question, I explored the mechanisms and processes of policy implementation. Firstly, findings drawn from the Multiculturalism Policy Index (MCP) and comparative analysis with Switzerland showed significant gaps in substantive minority protections. When Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is evaluated through the MCP Index framework, based on Kymlicka's liberal theory of minority rights, it becomes clear that the state performs poorly on most of the key indicators. Although Azerbaijan does declare multiculturalism as an official policy, this evaluation highlights a significant gap between the government's narrative and the actual institutional and legal frameworks that support the rights of major national minorities: Lezgins, Talysh, and Russians. Although both Switzerland and Azerbaijan have signed the FCNM and followed similar reporting procedures, their implementation differs greatly. Switzerland treats the Convention as part of its broader human rights system, involving civil society and maintaining regular dialogue with minorities. Despite its notable successes in implementing the FCNM, Switzerland avoids calling its policy multiculturalism and builds its official rhetoric around multilingualism. In contrast, Azerbaijan links minority protection to its multiculturalism policy and avoids open engagement, often ignoring key recommendations from the Advisory Committee.

Particularly analyses on implementation of Azerbaijan's multicultural policy at the state level rely heavily on official reports like those submitted under the FCNM, as public data remains limited. While Azerbaijan's legislation guarantees education in minority languages, according to official data, most communities receive only two hours per week, and groups like Tats, Kryz, and Budugs have no instruction at all. Minority-run media and religious activity face similar gaps, often depending on selective state

support and tight regulation. Internationally, Azerbaijan actively promotes multiculturalism through the Baku Process, global forums, and university courses abroad, using it as a diplomatic tool. Yet, this outreach often contrasts with domestic inconsistencies, raising questions about the depth of the policy.

Empirical findings, particularly from interviews with minority community representatives, indicate that this implementation is limited in scope and depth. While symbolic recognition exists, meaningful political inclusion, institutional representation, and language rights are lacking. Minority community members consistently criticised the weak implementation of multiculturalism policy. A recurring themes are the demand for meaningful support for education in minority languages, support for media outlets in minority languages, support for cultural events and so on. While some steps have been taken, such as publishing textbooks for early grades, community representatives insist that these measures are insufficient and poorly implemented.

For instance, Talysh cultural worker explained that their newspaper now only appears irregularly due to state pressure and threats to donors. A Lezgin cultural figure said they had never received any funding despite repeated applications for newspaper. Tat, and Kurdish communities pointed to discontinued newspapers. Related to minority media, the lack of institutional infrastructure, such as dedicated office spaces, public grants, or integration into state cultural programming, was frequently cited too. In contrast to official state reports view of minority communities show that television programs in their native languages almost completely non-existent and radio programmes in their native languages very limited and difficult to access.

Related to education, especially in the teaching of mother tongues the data shows mixed results. In some cases, textbook development and limited instruction in grades 1 to 4 represent casual achievements. However, this is insufficient for meaningful language preservation or transmission. Interviewees described one-hour weekly language classes instead of the officially claimed two, often taught by unqualified staff, like PE teachers. There are no textbooks or teacher training for Tat and Kurdish languages, and Kurdish-language instruction is entirely absent. Lezgins and Avars rely on Soviet-era-trained teachers from Dagestan, as no Lezgi-language programme exists in Azerbaijani universities. An analysis of data on education in the mother tongue, one of the most crucial factors in preserving the identities of minority ethnic groups, shows that groups associated with kin-states such as Russia, Georgia, and Israel (namely Russians, Jews,

and Georgians) enjoy broader rights. In contrast, minority groups without such kin-state support, such as Lezgins, Talysh, Avars, Tats, Kurds, and others, have access to only very limited educational opportunities. Additionally, when considering that these minority ethnic groups are Muslim in terms of religion and Muslim minority groups are culturally close to the dominant Azerbaijani Turks, for them, language becomes the main boundary of identity, and its loss may lead to assimilation. This clearly demonstrates a key point: Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy serves more to advance the strategic interests of the state than to ensure the well-being of its minority communities.

While ethnic groups often emphasise the lack of institutional and financial support, several religious communities, especially those with long-standing recognition like the Jewish, Catholic, and Udi groups, report more consistent state engagement. Legal registration, symbolic visibility, and even limited financial support appear more accessible to religious communities. However, even within these groups, concerns were raised, for example, about the risk of losing Udi in Azerbaijan due to migration or limited Azerbaijani-language proficiency among younger members. Religious representatives from Protestant described delays and obstacles in registration and financial marginalisation.

When it comes to the relationship between the Azerbaijani Turk majority and minority communities, as well as minority-to-minority dynamics, at the social level, patterns of interaction appear largely peaceful, but not without deeper challenges. The findings indicate that, even though direct or open discrimination is not commonly reported, many smaller or less well-known communities still experience indirect challenges.

Political opposition leaders offered strong criticism. Seymour Hazi described the multiculturalism policy as an illusion, used to replace real pluralism and freedom. Jamil Hasanli said the policy only highlights Jewish inclusion, with no serious protection of other groups, calling it pure propaganda. Arif Hajili acknowledged minor progress but stressed that the broader context of reduced democratic space undermines any genuine multicultural initiative. Experts gave sharply contrasting views. State-aligned experts claimed there were no real problems, while independent voices spoke of destroyed religious freedoms, poor legal clarity, and selective support, especially for groups like the Lezgins and Talyshs seen as politically sensitive. One international analyst warned that state support depends on a group's ties to Russia, Iran, or Armenia. Others

questioned the credibility of ‘community leaders’ who stay in place for decades without representing real demands. The central view across independent experts and political voices was that multiculturalism is not only poorly implemented but also distorted by political calculations and the lack of democratic governance.

These gaps confirm the research hypothesis that the more clearly multiculturalism is implemented as policy, the more it may support social stability and intergroup trust. In the Azerbaijani case, the lack of legal clarity, structural equality, and long-term strategy means that multiculturalism remains superficial, leaving many minority groups uncertain, disengaged, or mistrustful of the state’s intentions.

Looking ahead, what are the potential prospects and challenges for Azerbaijan’s multiculturalism policy? Azerbaijan’s current approach to diversity appears uncertain and depends heavily on whether structural changes are made or if the current model continues. If things stay as they are, the policy will likely remain tightly controlled, mostly symbolic, and centred around the state’s political interests and international image. While the government may maintain selective support, especially for religious groups seen as loyal or under control and uncontroversial, ethnic communities will likely continue to face limited support in education, media, and institutional access. Basic issues like one-hour language classes without trained teachers, or minority newspapers struggling without funding, are unlikely to improve under the current conditions. Even the return of Armenian communities to Karabakh, which could pressure the government to reshape its approach, may end up being a temporary or image-driven adjustment rather than a real shift.

At the same time, there is room for positive change, both from above and below. A more democratic and inclusive policy would require the state to reform key institutions like the BIMC, SCRA, and DHPDMRI, or to build an entirely new body that would provide consistent legal, financial, and educational support across all communities. On the other side, ethnic and religious minorities also have a role to play: by actively participating in community life, preserving their languages and cultures, and organising around shared goals, they can slowly push for more visibility and influence. These bottom-up efforts, like running weekend or online schools, publishing in minority languages, and monitoring policy implementation, may not change the system overnight, but they are important acts of resistance and self-preservation. Ultimately, this analysis supports the last hypothesis of this research: long-term state commitment

to addressing minority needs, combined with community participation, may help build genuine inclusion and reduce future tensions.

Theoretically, this dissertation makes a contribution by examining how multiculturalism, a concept mainly shaped within liberal democratic thought, can be selectively adapted and reinterpreted by non-democratic states. By drawing on key ideas from scholars like Kymlicka, Parekh, and Modood, the study critically contrasts the ideal goals of multiculturalism with the real-life practices observed in Azerbaijan. The findings clearly show the challenges that emerge when multiculturalism, typically linked to democracy, participation, justice, and equality, is carried out through a top-down, state-led model. The Azerbaijani case shows how these same ideas can be used for external image-building and nation-branding, while serving internal goals of control and assimilation.

Methodologically, the application of a constructivist lens has been key to uncovering how multiculturalism in Azerbaijan is not a fixed policy model but a flexible, context-dependent discourse shaped by power dynamics. Building on theoretical distinctions between liberal, communitarian, and instrumentalist approaches, this research shows that the 'Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism' serves as a case of what Parekh warned against, a multiculturalism without shared democratic values or mutual recognition. More critically, the study tests and extends existing theory by exploring how multiculturalism behaves under authoritarian regimes: not simply as a failed imitation of Western models, but as a distinct strategy of governance. In doing so, it advances the field by offering a nuanced understanding of how multicultural discourse can be both a tool for cultural diplomacy and a mechanism of soft authoritarian control.

Empirically, this research is grounded in 26 semi-structured interviews with minority representatives, political figures, think tank analysts, and independent experts. Their voices bring nuance and depth to the discussion, offering insight into the lived experience behind official narratives. Many participants welcomed symbolic recognition and some material support for their communities, but also pointed to deep structural inequalities, marginalisation, and the limited space for minority-led activism. Especially striking were the stories about unmet needs, lack of real political influence, and the feeling that the state's engagement was mostly just for show.

This dissertation, while offering a critical and original analysis of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Direct access to state officials was limited, which made it difficult to triangulate official perspectives with those of minority representatives and other actors. Moreover, the research covers approximately the 2014–2024 period, yet both regional dynamics and domestic politics may shift beyond this timeline, impacting how multiculturalism is practised. This study focuses primarily on ethno-religious minorities with historical roots in the state; future research could expand to explore immigrant communities or intersectional identities, such as gender within minority groups, which remain understudied in the Azerbaijani context. While this work critiques the state's instrumentalisation of multiculturalism, it also recognises the agency of minority actors and the potential for grassroots mobilisation, which opens space for further bottom-up studies focusing on exploring everyday community efforts and local initiatives. Methodologically, the reliance on elite interviews limits the everyday lived experiences of ordinary community members, suggesting a need for future research that employs participatory or longitudinal fieldwork. Further studies should also explore comparative contexts with other post-Soviet states to identify patterns and deviations in diversity management practices more comprehensively.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that labels matter less than genuine commitment and concrete action. Azerbaijan's approach to diversity whether called multiculturalism, Azerbaijanism, or anything else, the primary goal must be to protect and develop ethnic and religious minorities, particularly those whose languages and cultures are endangered. Investing resources into the real development and empowerment of minorities like the Talyshs, Lezgins, Avars, Tats, Budugs, Kryz, and others, whose voices currently remain marginalised, is not only ethically right but strategically wise. If Azerbaijan redirected the significant funds and effort it spends on international forums and symbolic gestures towards genuinely supporting minority education, media, and cultural preservation, this would serve as a far more authentic and effective form of national branding. True multiculturalism must start from within: listening sincerely to minority voices, respecting their unique identities, and creating effective policies to ensure their survival and growth. By shifting its focus from symbolic performances to meaningful grassroots support, Azerbaijan could transform its rich diversity into genuine social cohesion and long-term political stability.

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## **Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions**

### **The first series of open-ended questions for representatives of ethnic and religious minorities:**

1. How would you describe the community to which you belong?
  - What are the characteristic features of your community (ethnic or religious group)?
  - What distinguishes them from the dominant group?
  - How do you think your group maintains these characteristics? For example, are children and young people interested in learning and continuing your mother tongue, certain customs, or religion?
  - Do you know the data the State Statistics Committee has provided about your group? Do you believe they accurately reflect reality?
2. You probably know that the government of Azerbaijan pursues a policy of multiculturalism. What do you understand by multiculturalism policy and how would you characterise it?
  - Were you or other members of your community contacted before the government implemented the policy of multiculturalism? Were your opinions or suggestions sought?
  - Have you ever asked yourself why the state pursues such a policy, or are you interested in it?
3. You know that this policy has been actively discussed in Azerbaijan for a decade and that the authorities claim to implement it. As a member of the community, how do you feel about the implementation of this policy?
  - What changes have you observed in attitudes towards your community since this policy was implemented?
  - What advantages and disadvantages can you identify?
  - Education in the mother tongue, radio and television in the mother tongue, newspapers and magazines, religious ceremonies, mass cultural events, and so on: how would you assess the situation of your community in this respect?
4. Protection and development of ethnocultural diversity should be supported not only by the state but also by society. How do you assess the attitude of the majority in Azerbaijan towards your community?

- Have you observed discrimination or unpleasant circumstances regarding members of your community in Azerbaijan?
- 5. What would you like to see change in the attitude of the state towards your community?
  - Do you have any other expectations of the state?

Thank you for your time. Are there any questions you think I should have asked but did not? Can you recommend other people to whom I should talk?

**The second series of open-ended questions was for representatives of Azerbaijan's official entities:**

1. For every public policy there is an argument or justification. We can also call it rationale. Following this line, I would like to ask you: in your opinion, what is the justification of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
  - Why does Azerbaijan pursue a multiculturalism policy?
2. We know that a variety of factors influence public policy. How different these factors are depends on the particular policy of the state. What factors determine the specificity of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
  - In your opinion, are ethnic and religious diversity and the dangers of separatism, Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe and the OSCE, the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other separatist tendencies in the past such as the Talysh and Lezgi disputes can be factors in Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
3. How have you assessed the implementation of this policy in Azerbaijan?
  - What special measures does the government take to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities? For example, schooling in the mother tongue, radio and television broadcasts in the mother tongue, religious rituals, cultural events and so on. How do you assess the situation in this area?
  - How do you assess the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Azerbaijan?
  - I'm aware that the State Statistics Committee's population censuses are the only sources of official data on ethnic groups. If this is the case, in your opinion, what is the rationale behind the absence of an official registration system for ethnic groups? For instance, we are aware that religious organisations are officially registered.

4. What measures do you suggest the government take in the future with regard to this policy?

Thank you for your time. Are there any questions you think I should have asked but did not? Can you recommend other people to whom I should talk?

**The third series of open-ended questions was for representatives of Azerbaijan's political parties:**

1. There is an argument or justification for every public policy. We may also refer to it as rationale. Following this line, I would like to ask you: in your opinion, what is the justification of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
  - Why does Azerbaijan pursue a policy of multiculturalism?
2. We know that a variety of factors influence public policies. The distinct nature of these factors depends on the particular policy implemented by the state. What factors determine the specificity of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
  - In your opinion, are ethnic and religious diversity and the dangers of separatism, Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe and the OSCE, the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other separatist tendencies in the past such as the Talysh and Lezgi disputes can be factors in Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
3. You know that this policy has been actively discussed in Azerbaijan for the last 10 years and that the authorities claim to implement it. How have you assessed the implementation of this policy in Azerbaijan?
  - What special measures does the government take to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities? For example, schooling in the mother tongue, radio and television broadcasts in the mother tongue, religious rituals, cultural events and so on. How do you assess the situation in this area?
4. Could you please explain your political party's position on the regulation of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan?
  - Do you think that the full implementation of the policy of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan could possibly have unfavourable consequences?
5. What measures do you suggest the government take in the future with regard to this policy?
  - Is it possible for the state to achieve a satisfactory outcome for all concerned?

Thank you for your time. Are there any questions you think I should have asked but did not?

**The fourth series of open-ended questions is for representatives of think tank organisations and independent experts:**

1. There is an argument or justification for every public policy. We may also refer to it as rationale. Following this line, I would like to ask you: in your opinion, what is the justification of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
  - Why does Azerbaijan pursue a policy of multiculturalism?
2. We know that a variety of factors influence public policy. How different these factors are depends on the particular policy of the state. In your opinion, what factors determine the specificity of Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
  - Do you think that ethnic and religious diversity and the dangers of separatism, Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe and the OSCE, the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other separatist tendencies in the past such as the Talysh and Lezgi disputes can be factors in Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?
3. You know that this policy has been actively discussed in Azerbaijan for the last 10 years and that the authorities claim to implement it. How have you assessed the implementation of this policy in Azerbaijan?
  - What special measures does the government take to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities? For example, schooling in the mother tongue, radio and television broadcasts in the mother tongue, religious rituals, cultural events, and so on. How do you assess the situation in this area?
4. Could you please explain your own position on the regulation of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan?
  - Is it possible to implement the models of multiculturalism policies applied in liberal democratic western states in Azerbaijan?
5. What measures would you suggest the government take in the future with regard to this policy?
  - Is it possible for the state to achieve a satisfactory outcome for all involved?

Thank you for your time. Are there any questions you think I should have asked but did not? Can you recommend other people to whom I should talk?

## Appendix B. Employed consent forms for the semi-structured interviews conducted with research participants



### Consent for participation in the interview

I consent to taking part in Javid Asadov's PhD research project at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. I understand that this interview is being conducted to gather information about the multiculturalism policy of Azerbaijan.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time.
2. During the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation entails an interview with the aforementioned researcher. The interview will last approximately 30–45 minutes. I allow the researcher to take notes during the interview. I also allow the recording of the interview on audio tape.
4. I understand that the researcher may openly identify me by name in reports or publications using information obtained from this interview. My participation and contributions will be acknowledged openly in the research. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies, ensuring the protection of other individuals' and institutions' anonymity and privacy.
5. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
6. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

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**Signature**

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**Printed name**

**For further information, please contact principal investigator:**

Javid Asadov, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

javid.asadov@mail.umcs.pl

+48506687150



### Consent for participation in the interview

I consent to taking part in Javid Asadov's PhD research project at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. I understand that this interview is being conducted to gather information about the multiculturalism policy of Azerbaijan.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time.
2. During the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation entails an interview with the aforementioned researcher. The interview will last approximately 30–45 minutes. I allow the researcher to take notes during the interview. I also allow the recording of the interview on audio tape.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies, which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
5. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
6. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

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**Signature**

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**Printed name**

**For further information, please contact principal investigator:**

Javid Asadov, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

javid.asadov@mail.umcs.pl

+48506687150

## **Appendix C. Interview transcripts with political party representatives**

### **I**

**Interview with the Chairman of the National Council of Democratic Forces of Azerbaijan, Professor Jamil Hasanli, on December 20, 2023.**

**Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview, Mr. Jamil. My first question is that we know you have been the chairman of the National Council of Democratic Forces since its establishment in 2013. How would you characterize the current activities of the National Council? We know that presidential elections are approaching in the state. Although the presidential elections are not directly related to my research, the main purpose of my question is to understand the activities of the National Council. How would you characterize its current state?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** First of all, the scope of activities of opposition political and social organizations in Azerbaijan has been significantly restricted. If we say that Azerbaijan had an authoritarian regime before, now, especially after the Karabakh war, it has entered the stage of totalitarian rule. For a long time, I've been saying, right when the 'iron fist' was being shaken in the air, that today it's being shaken against the Armenians, but after the Armenian issue is resolved, it will be directed against the Azerbaijani people. In this regard, using the resources of the state, the government has created a monopoly on the political scene by limiting the activities of all opposition organizations. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered a past phase globally, but it is artificially maintained in Azerbaijan, and the quarantine regime is still being applied. What does the quarantine regime mean? The quarantine regime is essentially a small model of a state of emergency. Political activities have been restricted, mass gatherings are prohibited, and protests, rallies, and demonstrations are banned. This prohibition has been in place for four years now in Azerbaijan. The land borders are kept closed, which is another attempt to create a closed society. In these conditions, we operate under heavy restrictions. I want you to know that those who express critical thoughts under Azerbaijan's totalitarian regime, those who take a real opposition stance, live not the life given by God, but the life limited by the Aliyev regime. At any time, a brick may fall on your head when you enter an alley, or a random car might hit you while crossing the street. You could be poisoned at a cafe or a restaurant at any time. For example, if someone calls me on the phone and asks about

something that has nothing to do with politics, that person is summoned by the police and questioned about why they called me and how they know me. People who like my posts on social media are reprimanded, especially if they work in a state institution. If I have a meeting with someone, the law enforcement agencies are there before me. For instance, whether it's a police car or a private car, special groups with special equipment are already present before the meeting, with listening devices included. All our meetings are monitored, our phone conversations are listened to, and our homes are under surveillance. If we go to the doctor for any reason, the police appear at the clinic or hospital shortly after to interrogate the doctor about why we visited and what the problem was. What is this? This is totalitarianism in practice. Despite this, the National Council continues its activities. The National Council, unlike political parties, is not purely a political organization. It is a socio-political organization. For example, the National Council has no local branches, while parties do. The National Council is a socio-political body that brings together a group of intellectuals, civil society members, political activists, and leaders to voice the people's rights and demands in socio-political processes. There is no one in the leadership of the National Council who is not persecuted. For example, Gultakin Hajibayli was fined 91 manats without any legal basis. Vidadi Mirkamal's pension was cut off. In other words, everyone in Vidadi Mirkamal's position receives a pension according to state regulations, but he is denied this right. Another example is Tofiq Yagublu, who is currently in prison. He was in prison yesterday and the day before as well. In other words, the National Council is essentially a target of the government. The members of the National Council's leadership make speeches on social media and internet television, providing the public with alternative information about government policies. For example, after the tripartite declaration was signed on November 9, 2020, when Russian troops were deployed to Azerbaijan, the National Council issued a strong statement against this. This statement was widely disseminated. Ilham Aliyev was extremely angry because, during that period, artificial demonstrations were held with Russian flags in the country, despite the pandemic. But we were against this. For example, we officially appealed to the country's Prosecutor General's Office [of the Republic of Azerbaijan] regarding the corruption activities of the ruling family. Although there were no results, we still did it. We approved what we considered right and criticized what we considered wrong.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Jamil. I want to clarify a question regarding the National Council. You mentioned that it is a socio-political organization. Should such organizations be registered in Azerbaijan, or not? If they should, is your organization registered? What is the mechanism in this area in general?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** Generally speaking, it would be better if it were registered. However, the National Council has not been officially registered. Because, as you know, registering organizations that were not created by the government or with the government's consent is a difficult issue. For example, the ADR party, at one time, eight parties were registered, but it was not. But even without registration, there is a mechanism for the activities of socio-political organizations. For instance, in 2013, the National Council participated in the elections. It was registered as an election bloc by the Central Election Commission [of the Republic of Azerbaijan]. To be honest, now, for example, according to the latest law on political parties, it is forbidden for political parties to operate without registration. But there is no such prohibition for socio-political organizations.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Jamil. I would like to move on to the first question related to my topic. When I researched, I saw that your National Council was established in 2013, coinciding with the presidential elections when Ilham Aliyev was re-elected. My observations show that in 2014, the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre was established, and the name of the department for humanitarian issues under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan was slightly changed to include the word 'multiculturalism.' In other words, the state's multiculturalism program, as observed, seems to have officially started in 2014, even if there is no official information about it. I would like to know what you think is the reasoning behind the state's turn to the term 'multiculturalism' and this approach to regulating ethnic and religious diversity. What do you think is the rationale behind this?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** I think this is more aimed at the external audience than the internal one. The Azerbaijani government needed to create a modern, humanistic image amid repressions, and they found that image in multiculturalism. Perhaps this is not true, but my view is that the Azerbaijani government's multiculturalism policy is completely artificial. When did multiculturalism emerge? Multiculturalism, especially after World War II, arose due to large-scale migrations. The first approach was that these

immigrants should assimilate into the culture of the country they came to and become part of the local culture. However, this did not work out. The differences were so significant that the assimilation process did not prove successful. When this failed, the idea of a tolerant approach to different cultures emerged. But in Azerbaijan, the national minorities, ethnic groups, who are subjects of multiculturalism are not newcomers. They have lived on this land for thousands of years. There has never been any threat, mass extermination, or pressure against them due to religious or ethnic discrimination at any point in history. In fact, before this multiculturalism policy was introduced in 2014, these peoples lived together in a neighborly and harmonious environment, 100 years ago and even 500 years ago. You know, newcomers bring different cultures with them. But the local people are already part of the common culture. Here, for example, there are differences in language and belief, but the ethics, lifestyle, and economy are the same. They have shared the benefits or harms of any event in the country. For instance, the Mountain Jews, the Lezgins, the Talysh, the Avars have always lived together, intermarried, and supported each other in the most difficult times. To be honest, no one ever really thought about the fact that someone might belong to a different ethnic group or religion. And there has always been religious unity. Most of these national and ethnic groups have belonged to the same religion. In Tsarist Russia, religious affiliation was always more important than ethnic affiliation. For example, if you look at censuses or descriptions of provinces or regions, called 'opisani' in Russian, you will see that people were categorized more by religion than by ethnicity. For example, instead of writing 'Russian,' they wrote 'Orthodox,' or 'Muslim' instead of something else. Later, the term 'Tatar' appeared. But when the term 'Tatar' emerged, most non-Orthodox people in the Caucasus were referred to as Tatars. So there was no clear boundary. Therefore, or take the Jews, for example. Undoubtedly, the Azerbaijani government's idea of multiculturalism was primarily built around Judaism. If you pay attention to the discussions about this policy and its impact on the international community, Jewish lobby organizations emphasized that there was a tolerant attitude toward Jews in Azerbaijan. Right? But tolerance towards Jews in Azerbaijan did not begin in 2014. It has existed for ages. First of all, Mountain Jews have always been permanent residents of this country. Do you know what's even more interesting? Baku was the third industrial city in Russia in terms of economic power, after Saint Petersburg and Moscow. When there were pogroms against Jews in Russia, a large influx of Jews began to Baku. This happened at the end of the 19th century and the

beginning of the 20th century. For example, when Uzeyir [Hajibeyov] created the Conservatoire in the 1920s, he invited Jewish musicians from Saint Petersburg and Moscow to Baku. They came here, and it was they who became the teachers of the later powerful generations, such as the generations of Gara Garayev, Fikret Amirov, Rauf Hajiyev, Javad Hajiyev, and Sultan Hajibeyli. For example, Reinhold Glière wrote the opera 'Shahsnam,' didn't he? Or there was Eldman, who was a professor at the Conservatoire. He played a significant role in the development of Azerbaijani composers. At that time, there was no term like multiculturalism, nor was there a multiculturalist idea. But this tolerance existed without them. The majority of those working in Azerbaijan's healthcare system were Jews, as were the majority of those working in the service sector. Or, for example, a significant portion of those working in the field of culture were Jews. In other words, we didn't need to introduce a multicultural idea for people to start treating each other with tolerance after this multiculturalism. These are all nonsense. This is just an attempt to artificially create an image. So, it shouldn't be done. You see, that centre was also abolished, and the department's name didn't justify itself. I'll say it bluntly, perhaps a bit harshly: The Azerbaijani government uses these kinds of games to try to fit its rough shell into an international framework. People, like the Udis, have lived here for thousands of years and still live here. Or if the events in Karabakh hadn't happened, Armenians would still be living here. They lived in a neighbourhood. For example, there were many mixed families, and if it weren't for those nationalist calls, things would have continued in the same way. Now, for example, on the one hand, you promote multiculturalism, while on the other hand, you reduce the number of national-ethnic groups in the population. This doesn't fit together. For example, if we analyse the results of the censuses of 1897, 1921, 1926, 1937, and 1939, particularly the censuses conducted in the 1920s-30s, the ethnic national picture was more or less objectively depicted. Starting from 1959, after 1939, the next census was conducted in 1959, and after 1959 and 1979, if I'm not mistaken, in 1989 as well. And after 1999, in 2019 or 2020. Unfortunately, none of these statistics reflect the real reality. So how can you call yourself multicultural? For example, in 1926, a nation that had a population of 76,000 is shown to have fewer people in 2019. Was there no population growth in 100 years? The same goes for other nations. So, you see, Mr. Javid, do you know what the most interesting process here is? Assimilation happened in the numbers. It didn't happen in real life. That is, the Talysh

remained Talysh, the Lezgi remained Lezgi, the Kurd remained Kurd, the Avar remained Avar, but those statistical numbers were artificially reduced.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Jamil. Mr. Jamil, before moving on to my next question, a very important question has arisen for me here. As you know, I also speak with selected representatives of ethnic groups. For example, I can tell you that these include editors of newspapers and magazines representing ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, Lezgi, Talysh, Udi, etc., as well as their active members and others. There's an idea being expressed, and I would like to learn your opinion on it. This is closely related to what you mentioned earlier. The issue is about numbers: these representatives disagree with the statistics. Specifically, larger ethnic groups, such as the Lezgins and Talysh, claim that their populations are higher than reported. For instance, one of my recent interviewees stated that the Talysh population is 1.6 million according to their calculations. However, the statistics provided by the government were around 120,000 in 2009 and approximately 80,000 in 2019, indicating a decrease. When I asked why they believe this discrepancy exists, they mentioned that the State Statistics Committee lists 'Azerbaijani' as the first option for the question regarding national identity. Subsequent options include Lezgi, Talysh, Avar, Udi, etc., and the argument is that a Talysh individual, for example, might mistakenly identify as Azerbaijani first, leading to an incorrect classification. What do you think causes this issue? Additionally, the government mentions in its multiculturalism propaganda that this is carried out within the framework of the ideology of Azerbaijanism. I see a strong connection here, and I'm wondering if you think there's a need for any correction to prevent this misunderstanding when representatives of these ethnic groups identify themselves? Some of my interviewees from the government side have also mentioned that if someone wants to feel Azerbaijani, this is not due to assimilation imposed by us. It's their choice not to express their secondary identity and instead identify with their citizenship. How do you view this issue, Mr. Jamil? I apologies for the lengthy question.**

**Jamil Hasanli:** First of all, regarding the figure you mentioned at the beginning of your question, if I'm not mistaken, you said that the leaders of Talysh ethnic organizations claim a population of 1.6 million. Let me assure you that this is not confirmed and is not accurate. Let's put it this way: in addition to my involvement in socio-political

activities, I am also a historian. I have had discussions and even some debates with them on this topic. You know, regarding the ethnic landscape, we should consider one of the censuses conducted in the 1920s and 1930s as accurate. For example, do you consider the 1921 census to be more accurate? Or the 1926 census? Because back then, there was no assimilation policy, and people were registered as they were. Or should we accept the 1939 census? We need to accept one of these. Comparing those figures with the overall population growth rate in the country, we can say that the Talysh population is between 450,000 and 500,000. It's certainly not the 80,000 figure as currently shown. Although there is emigration, which affects not only the Talysh but also the Turks and others, there is significant emigration. For example, if we compare the number of emigrants per 10,000 people, the rate is higher among the Talysh population. This is related to population density, forms of livelihood, and other factors. So, the figure is between 450,000 and 500,000. Let's take, for example, the 1926 census. If the population of the republic has increased three or four times since then, it's not possible for the Talysh population to have increased 13-14 times. There's a reasonable point we need to focus on. Our Talysh activists often consider this based on territorial principles. For example, they claim that everything up to the Kura River is Talysh territory. But this is not true. For instance, in the 1926 census, Boradigah was recorded as a separate administrative region, while Masalli was another. In Boradigah, Talysh made up over 90% of the population, but in Masalli, they were only 1%. These realities need to be taken into account. For example, the area extending to Salyan and the Kura River includes Bilasuvar, Jalilabad, and parts of Saatli and Sabirabad. This is a bit of fantasy, so it doesn't have much basis in reality. The same approach should be applied to other ethnic groups. If we consider the overall population growth, we should also remember that there was significant migration to Azerbaijan from Armenia between 1948 and 1953 when Armenians of Turkish origin were resettled by the state. This increased the number of Turks in the population. Later, during the 1970s and 1980s, although there was no official resettlement, it was known that Armenians of Azerbaijani origin would move to Azerbaijan if they had the means. They would come to hold positions here, bring their relatives, and settle them. Thus, approximately half a million people came after the war until the collapse of the Soviet Union, increasing the proportion of the Turkish population in the overall demographic makeup. Regarding the question of identifying as Azerbaijani, I must say that both the state and the ethnic minorities bear some responsibility here. I'm not talking about all ethnic minorities, but

their leaders. I remember the 1990s, when the name 'Turk' was restored for those living in the country. Ethnic activists reacted negatively to this, positioning the issue as 'If you are Azerbaijani, we are with you; if you are Turk, we are not.' I don't know if you recall this. Although ethnic activists criticize that period today, it was somewhat different. For example, in the fall of 1992, a presidential decree was issued on national minorities, and ethnic groups in Azerbaijan. Right? More than 20 cultural centers were established, and all of them were given offices in the center of Baku. Four of them had their own press organs, Talysh, Lezgi, Kurdish, and Avar cultural centers, all of which published newspapers. They received financial support from the Presidential Fund. A commission was also created under the state adviser, Hidayat Orujov, on national issues at the time which included the leaders of these ethnic groups. For example, Novruzali Mammadov, the editor of the Talyshi Sado (Voice of Talysh) newspaper, was a member. In addition to offices, their press was also funded by the Presidential Fund. Radio programs in four languages began on Azerbaijani radio. I remember this well. A good poet was appointed as the head of the Talysh language editorial office. In the Lezgi language, Kelenter Kelenterli, a poet, was appointed head. Arif Hapoe, head of the Kurdish National Center, was appointed head of the Kurdish editorial office. The fourth one I don't recall. They were allowed to broadcast in their native languages on the radio. These editorial offices operated throughout the Elchibey government's tenure. They were funded, and the editorial offices were improved. If the government had continued, this might have been extended to television as well.

**Mr. Jamil, at that time, were you the Adviser to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on General Affairs?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** Yes. Yes. I met with many of them. It was about the allocation of those spaces, the funding of the newspapers, the editorial offices. I can even tell you that something interesting happened. Editorial offices were provided on the radio for broadcasting in their native languages. But one day, it was discovered that one of those editorial offices was using its native language to spread propaganda against the government that had granted them this right. Such situations occurred. However, even in this case, it was not shut down. It wasn't closed; there was a certain level of tolerance, a tolerant multiculturalist approach, as we might term it from a post-2014 perspective.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Jamil, for the detailed and valuable information. Mr. Jamil, I have another question for you. I would like to move on to the next question**

regarding certain factors. You've mentioned many of them already, and I've taken notes. You see the attempt to create an artificial image, the presence in international arena, as the main factors in Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. However, if I were to mention some additional issues, could you share your thoughts on them? For instance, the Azerbaijan-Armenia Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the separatist tendencies in the 1990s, the Talysh and Lezgin disputes, Azerbaijan's accession to the Council of Europe, the signing and ratification of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, and the requirement to report to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers every five years. Do you think these factors could play a role in Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, or not? What is your opinion on this matter?

**Jamil Hasanli:** In Azerbaijan, multiculturalism had no connection with real life. It wasn't about the harmonious coexistence of different peoples within the country. It was, frankly, just a way to take advantage of the Jewish lobby. When did we ever see anything related to the rights of other peoples during that multicultural propaganda? The entire idea was built on the notion that Jews were treated with tolerance in Azerbaijan. There were no other aspects to it. For example, in 1992-93, we prepared textbooks for national minorities. Some of these textbooks were published, and teaching hours in those languages were increased. The process of learning the mother tongue gained importance in the course of teaching. Intellectuals from each ethnic group were involved in the preparation of these textbooks, and overall supervision was led by Deputy Minister Adalat Tahirzade. You see, Mr. Javid, there's a difference between actions and propaganda. What are you actually doing in practice? It's necessary to preserve the existence of these languages and cultures. They are part of the overall history and culture of the Azerbaijani people. If any of these languages disappear, a part of that culture will be lost. The richness of this culture lies in the fact that it includes contributions from all the different peoples here, all of whom have played a role. They weren't treated as foreign elements. For example, there are tens of thousands of mixed families. No one has ever faced a dilemma about marrying a Talysh to a Turk, or a Turk to a Lezgin, or a Kurd, or anyone else for that matter. This tolerance wasn't related to government policy. Regardless of what the government said or did, this was a tradition rooted in history. These peoples didn't come from foreign lands. They were part of the local culture, and what's now called multiculturalism was a

charade in Azerbaijan. So, to suggest that this government came to power and suddenly ensured the rights of different ethnic groups, as if before them these groups were at each other's throats, is misleading. When the Azerbaijani Parliament was established in 1918, representatives of all national minorities were included. This was a historical issue. In general, to put it this way, in 1919 and 1920, for instance, when the Armenians committed massacres in Baku in 1918, who came from the north to help? Ziziksky's unit was a cavalry group mainly composed of Lezgins who came to assist their Muslim brothers. Or let's say, if you look at the documents of 1918, the Armenian nationalists treated a Turk, a Lezgin, a Talysh, or anyone else the same way, killing them all for being Muslim. There are even interesting dialogues. For example, someone trying to save himself might say, 'I'm not Turk,' and they would reply, 'Being Muslim is enough for me.' So, you were to be killed just for being Muslim. Someone might say, 'I'm a Bolshevik,' and they'd reply, 'What difference does it make? You're still Muslim.' There are many such historical examples. Therefore, what I'm trying to say is, for example, one group was heading north while Bolshevik units were moving south towards Lankaran. They treated the people there the same way they treated those in Baku. Whether in areas inhabited by Lezgins or Talysh, they made no distinction. They didn't spare anyone based on whether they were Talysh or Lezgin. One of the false outcomes of this multiculturalism narrative is the museum that was opened in Quba. The whole purpose of that museum is to claim that Armenians, along with Azerbaijanis, also killed Jews. But this is not supported by history. Half of the Bolsheviks were Jews. On the contrary, the forces sent to subdue the population in these areas, the forces of the Baku Soviet, included many Jews among them. They also played a role in committing those massacres. So, today, in an effort to establish relations with Israel, they're putting forward things that are not supported by historical facts.

**Thank you, Mr. Jamil. When you put forward your candidacy for the presidency as the Chairman of the National Council in 2013, I'm sure you had a platform. Did your platform include any specific points, thoughts, or discussions on how to manage ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan? I also know that before that, you served two terms as a deputy in the National Assembly of the Republic of Azerbaijan. You were part of the government in 1992 and a member of the Azerbaijani Popular Front Movement. Taking all of this into account, your role in history and as a political actor, how did you personally, and the National**

**Council, approach the regulation of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan in a way that would satisfy all sides and avoid any problems?**

Firstly, I should say that during our election campaign, we addressed issues concerning minority peoples and ethnic groups. You can find this on the internet; it was even circulated as a video. So there is visual material available. Our stance on minorities and ethnic groups is clearly reflected there. Secondly, both as the National Council and as an individual, we must approach the national and ethnic identity of these people with respect. A nation might be small in numbers, but regardless of size, every person has the right to take pride in their national and ethnic identity. For example, today a Talysh can officially register their Talysh identity, and a Lezgin can register their Lezgin identity. But why is it prohibited for someone to register as a Turk? It's somewhat absurd. What does 'Azerbaijani' mean? In Azerbaijan, the term 'Azerbaijani' encompasses all, the Turk, Talysh, Lezgin, Avar, Tsakhur, Kurd, and so on. But where's the contradiction? For example, a Talysh is both Azerbaijani and Talysh; a Lezgin is both Azerbaijani and Lezgin, and so on. But those who belong to the Turkic ethnic group are only Azerbaijani. As you say, the state plays with the term 'Azerbaijani.' But the biggest harm from this manipulation is done to the Turkic ethnic group, as it loses its name in this process. And you ask how your approach? Regarding your question, a few years ago, the name 'Talysh Khanate' was removed from school textbooks and replaced with 'Lankaran Khanate.' I publicly opposed this in the media, pointing out that all historical sources refer to it as the Talysh Khanate. In the 19th century, a comprehensive collection of documents called 'Кавказские археологические акты' (Caucasian Archaeological Acts), spanning 11 or 12 volumes, was published. It included all the correspondence related to the Caucasus, districts, provinces, local administrations, and so on. If you analyze it, you'll see that the term "Talysh Khanate" appears about 1,000 times. Isn't that the reality? How can you claim to be multicultural if you change it to 'Lankaran Khanate'? Multiculturalism shouldn't allow altering the history of one of Azerbaijan's indigenous peoples. We must respect these cultures. All of them together enrich Azerbaijani culture, and there's nothing to fear in that. Another unpleasant aspect is that sometimes these issues are used as a political tool to pressure the state. For example, the figure of 1.6 million [a reference to the number of a specific ethnic group] was often cited in the complex events of the 1990s, and it was used as a means of exerting pressure on the state, for getting positions, seats in parliament, and

so on. Therefore, the group most harmed by this government is the Turks. Today, the majority of those falsely accused of drug-related crimes, subjected to political persecution, or arrested under the pretext of resisting the police are Turks. We cannot separate these based on ethnic identity. But to answer your question, at any rally held by the National Council, if you look at the portraits of political prisoners raised there, you will see Turks, Russians, Talysh, Lezgins, and so on. This isn't just about democracy; it's about rights and justice. If someone is wrongfully imprisoned, what role does their national or ethnic identity play in this? How can a person live with such a mindset in the 21st century? What I'm saying is that we need to approach these national minorities with a bit more respect.

**Mr. Jamil, I know that you have very valuable writings related to the history of that period. In the Encyclopedia of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic about 1918, I read that in that period, the nations represented in Azerbaijan had their own places in the parliament. I don't remember the exact numbers, but you probably know better than me how many Jews, Armenians, Russians, and other nations represented in the parliament in that period. How do you think the situation is today in this area in Azerbaijan? Because we observe that although a deputy of the National Assembly might have an ethnic identity such as Talysh or Lezgi, this does not mean representation of the Lezgi people in the parliament. In your opinion, if your political movement were to come to power, would you support such representation, ensuring that it is not based solely on ethnic identity but rather on named representation, so that any steps related to the rights of that people could be taken?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** Mr. Javid, you see, the matter is that in recent years, during the Aliyev era, the parliament, so to speak, does not reflect the will of the people. Whether ethnic or non-ethnic, the parliament is not based on the voice of the people. It is not elected by the people's vote; it is appointed. In 2015 and 2020, in the first case, 22 days prior, and in the second, 12 days before, I published the list of the deputies who would be elected to parliament in the media. You probably remember. Out of 125 deputies, 121 were correct; the remaining four did not make it due to some circumstances, such as Mehman Huseynov in Surakhani district revealing certain facts about Evez Guliyev, forcing him to withdraw. If it hadn't been for that, it would have been correct as well. Whether ethnic or non-ethnic, there is no question of people's representation. They do

not have more authority than a sector of the Presidential Administration. They cannot do anything for the people or on behalf of the people. They serve those who gave them the list. And if we go back to 1918, representation was given to non-Muslims. For example, it was given to Jews, to Russians, to Armenians, to Poles, etc. The remaining Muslims, despite the fact that there were representatives from all regions with national and ethnic minorities in the parliament. For instance, Bayram Ali Bey, or let's say the Ahrar party had more representatives from the Avar and Lezgi minorities like Qarabayov, Ibrahim Heydarov. So, among non-Muslims, there was no ethnic discrimination. They were all represented with the same purpose and goal. For example, you can see what kind of discussions were held in the Azerbaijani parliament regarding the events in Lankaran. The Molokans in Mughan had risen up, slaughtering the local Muslim population, and just as they were punishing Turks, they were doing the same to Talysh, and it is recorded in the documents of that period. I even wrote an article on this subject, which was published by Turan Agency. If I remember correctly, it was called 'Mughan and Lankaran are on Fire,' and it is clearly shown in the documents that both Talysh and Turks were targeted equally, and they fought together. And some activists, even going further, declare that Talysh were more aligned with the Russians who were slaughtering them rather than with the Turks who were defending their lives alongside them. This is unacceptable; this is a distortion of history. At the very least, during that period, for example, Rasulzadeh visited that region, met with people, with intellectuals, explained the aims of his party, and writes about the dinners that are held in the houses where he stays in the evening. And in this respect, compared to 1918, the situation is somewhat different now. We must take into account that Azerbaijan is a unitary state. Even today, representatives of the peoples living in ethnic areas are represented in parliament based on their ethnic identity. But they can never bring up the problems of the people they belong to. For example, when I was in parliament, I raised a question: there are districts in the south of Azerbaijan where all four key positions are held by people with no connection whatsoever to the local population. The head of the executive authority, the prosecutor, the police chief, the judge, I asked for an explanation as to why all four of these individuals come from the same district, but a different one. In other words, they have no link to the district where they work, which leads to localism. This, in turn, causes distortions in their attitude towards the local population. Incidentally, I should note that after my speech, they were all reassigned. That's how it was.

**Mr. Jamil, this actually raises a big question. In local governance, I am also researching, and I feel that the heads of the executive power in regions where ethnic groups form the majority are never from those regions themselves, for instance, they might be from Kurdamir or somewhere else. What is the reason for this, in your opinion?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** But there are also people from those regions who work in other districts. Yes, Mr. Jamil.

**Jamil Hasanli:** That also happens.

**What is the problem then? Why does the government, let me reformulate my question, do you think the government is still afraid of separatist tendencies, or not?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** You know, the biggest reason for this is that the Azerbaijani government does not want to make the elected bodies a functioning mechanism. In fact, the municipalities [local governments] have been crippled. The municipalities are of no use. The municipalities are for show. Because the Azerbaijani government had an obligation to create municipalities, and they did. But in fact, they have no authority. Appointed positions are preferred because it is easier to manage appointed positions. But if there were elected bodies, the people living in that election district would elect those who govern them, and this would be a functioning mechanism. The biggest job of the municipalities is to number graves in the cemetery. This stems from unemployment and helplessness. But I believe that there will be changes in this direction. In any case, this ‘iron fist’ atmosphere will not be permanent. In any case, elected governance must come sooner or later.

**Mr. Jamal, I know I have tired you a lot. I would like to ask my last question. This also requires some clarification. If you were to predict the future, if a democratic, liberal, democratic Western-model government were established in Azerbaijan and maximum rights were given to ethnic groups, do you think this could have negative consequences?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** You know, the whole country must be ready for this. We have a past that is not very encouraging in this regard, and the Karabakh events have left a very bad mark. For example, I have somewhat dealt with this issue. By all accounts, the situation in Karabakh was better than in other regions of Azerbaijan. This was not related to

socio-economic conditions. For example, by the number of schools per 10,000 people, by the number of hospitals, cultural centres, and hospital beds, the situation in Karabakh was better not only than in other regions of Azerbaijan but even better than in Armenia. But there was never dissatisfaction on socio-economic grounds there. The dissatisfaction was always on nationalistic grounds. For example, they say that the population decreased in Nagorno-Karabakh compared to a certain year. But they don't mention that the population that decreased in Karabakh moved to places like Dashkesan when it was founded, or to Mingachevir when it was established, or to Sumgayit. That is, the population decreased in Nagorno-Karabakh, but the proportion of Armenians in the country did not decrease. There are such subtle issues. Therefore, we must approach all of this in detail. And this has been influenced by Armenian ideology since the 1920s, and there are plenty of complaints and writings by Karabakh Armenians saying that Armenians from Armenia do not leave them alone. In reality, this was not a reflection of internal contradictions within the country. It was a manifestation of external interference.

**Thank you very much.**

**Jamil Hasanli:** Or, for instance, if you watch Iranian TV, you can see the Talysh card being openly used. Or, for example, in the 1990s, what wasn't written in the Russian press about the Sadval movement? That's why this issue should not be viewed solely from within the country.

**Mr. Jamil, thank you very much. I would like to ask a small clarifying question. How do you evaluate the scholarly literature? Could you give a short answer? I know I've tired you a lot. Specifically, regarding the study of the history of ethnic groups. For example, I've read Javadov's book and found some other sources to use in my dissertation. Can you recommend any other sources? And also, as a historian and professor, how do you evaluate the study of the history of ethnic groups in Azerbaijan?**

**Jamil Hasanli:** Of course, there have been certain achievements in the study of the history of ethnic groups. Javadov was an ethnographer, and his research in the 2000s was quite thorough. For example, there was someone who wrote about the history of the Talysh Khanate, a very good historian. By the way, if I'm not mistaken, the work was published in the 1980s or in 1992. Regarding the northern people, for instance,

Vagif Piriyeu conducted excellent research on the Qrız people. Ahad Muxtar Bey, who I mentioned earlier, was the head of the Talysh editorial office. He was also a poet I greatly admired. He was from Astara and had a very beautiful body of work. For instance, there was Shakar Aslan or Zulfuqar Əhmədžadə in the 1920s and 1930s. I believe that Zulfuqar Ahmədžadə played a significant role in the life of the republic. He even served as the First Secretary in Armenia, that is, the First Secretary of the District Party Committee or the Chairman of the Executive Committee. Our Talysh activists try to confine him strictly within the Talysh region, but he was a prominent Azerbaijani intellectual. He should be viewed from that perspective. He wrote works in the Talysh language as well as in Turkish. So, he should be considered within a broader geographical and cultural context. For example, Niyazi was a great composer, wasn't he? In the 1930s, he went and collected all the Talysh folk songs, transcribed them into musical notation. Similarly, Avar and Lezgi songs were transcribed. Uzeyir Bey used to send all the young people to gather this folklore. What was wrong with that? Now all those works remain in Niyazi's collection, preserved at the Museum of Music Culture. In this respect, you know, choosing one's own people should not be directed against another people. This is a very important point in national relations.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Jamil. I know I have tired you, but you have provided very valuable information. I will conclude the interview here.**

## II

**Interview with the Chairman of the Musavat Party, Arif Hajili, on 28 January 2024**

**Mr. Arif, thank you very much for the interview. I appreciate it. Mr. Arif, my first question is about the Musavat Party. We all have some knowledge about the history of the Musavat Party, but could you please provide me with an overview of the party's activities during the period under your leadership? And also, what forms the ideological basis of the Musavat Party?**

**Arif Hajili:** I have been a member of the Musavat Party since its restoration in February 1992, and since 1994, I have been in the party's permanent leadership. I have served as the party's deputy chairman, secretary, and led various election campaigns. At the same time, I was the head of the Musavat Party's executive apparatus. From 2007, I was the

head of the executive apparatus, and since 2014, I have been the chairman of the Musavat Party. My period as chairman coincided with a particularly challenging time for Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the changes in both the legislative field and human rights have generally been reactionary and negative. Political freedoms in the country have been restricted, and the conditions for equal political competition have effectively been eliminated. Freedom of speech and expression has also been threatened. I have been imprisoned multiple times, and many members of the Musavat Party, more than a thousand, have been sentenced to prison at various times and for various durations. During the Aliyev administration, the Musavat Party has always been in opposition and has continuously faced pressure and repression. The Musavat Party has managed to preserve its structure throughout the country. Local branches of the Musavat Party operate in almost all regions of Azerbaijan and in many villages. We participate in elections regularly. In the parliamentary elections of 2000, we actually won under the proportional system, but because of this, a referendum was held a year later, in 2001, to abolish the proportional electoral system altogether. In 2003, then chairman of the Musavat Party, Isa Gambar, who was the candidate of the Our Azerbaijan Bloc, actually won the elections. In the subsequent period, we participated in elections within the Azadliq Bloc [Freedom Bloc], together with the Azerbaijan Popular Front and the Azerbaijan Democratic Party. The Azadliq Bloc achieved significant results in the 2005 parliamentary elections, but unfortunately, the election results were falsified. In 2013, we nominated Jamil Hasanli, the chairman of the National Council, as our candidate. The National Council was an organisation established during the election campaign by the Musavat Party and other parties. Although the Musavat Party and many other parties are no longer represented in this body, the Popular Front Party is still represented there. The Musavat Party also cooperates with the National Council. The Musavat Party has had several successes in foreign policy and has serious connections with international organisations. The Musavat Party is a member of the ALDE group, and we have recently expanded our activities within this group significantly. We actively participate in the events, congresses, and conferences held by this organisation. Being part of this organisation helps us establish relations with many parties in Europe and the post-Soviet space, particularly liberal democratic parties. The Musavat Party has close ties with political parties in Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey, and Europe, and we participate in many international events with them. The Musavat Party also cooperates with the German NAMO Foundation and regularly participates in the events organised by this

foundation. Although the Musavat Party is not allowed to participate in elections within the country and is no longer among the parties funded by the state budget, it still enjoys considerable influence among the public. This is partly because it was founded under the leadership of the great Mammad Amin Rasulzade, who rendered unparalleled services to the statehood of Azerbaijan, and partly due to the consistent ideological and political course pursued by the leadership of the Musavat Party and the quality of the individuals within its structures since its restoration. The Musavat Party's regional leaders have significant influence in the regions. The individuals in the party's leadership have been at the forefront of the struggle for the independence of the country. The presence of these individuals in both the leadership and the structures of the Musavat Party increases its influence. Despite all difficulties, the Musavat Party has certain activities in the press and information fields. The BASTA [Alternative Information Portal] provides political support and information support to the Musavat Party. Additionally, we use social media sites like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to spread our propaganda, communicate our speeches, and convey our ideological and political line to Azerbaijani society, and we have tens of thousands of followers on these platforms. These followers have the opportunity to be informed about the policies pursued by the Musavat Party on various issues. The Musavat Party is the only party in Azerbaijan that holds weekly meetings of its Board, which is the governing body between assemblies, and this Board meets weekly to discuss political, economic, and geopolitical issues relevant to both Azerbaijan and the region. The Musavat Party's stance on these issues is communicated to the Azerbaijani public every week. We hold meetings of our assembly, which is our supreme body between congresses, every three months. We hold our congresses regularly. The Musavat Party is the only party in Azerbaijan where neither the chairman nor the regional leaders can be elected consecutively to the same post more than twice. They can be elected consecutively twice but not a third time. This rule was adopted in the post-Soviet space only later by the Yabloko organisation in Russia, and in recent years, they have also included in their charter a clause limiting the re-election of a person as chairman to two consecutive terms. This is a unique case; no other party adheres to such rules. The Musavat Party conducts all its elections in secret. All elections are conducted with alternative candidates. In the last elections for the chairman of Musavat, we even organised TV debates. Although we are not allowed on the republic's television channels, we invited all the channels to participate in the debates through internet television, and the debates

among the candidates for the chairmanship were broadcast live. We have applied all the conditions that we demand from the Azerbaijani government, such as the holding of free elections and the procedures for changing the government through elections being clear and transparent. All matters within the Musavat Party are resolved collegially. One of the features of the Musavat Party is that it is the only party in Azerbaijan where a 25% quota is reserved for women in the governing bodies.

**This is also in your charter, if I'm not mistaken, a quarter of the members?**

**Arif Hajili:** More women can be represented, but a minimum of 25% of the governing bodies must be composed of women. Regarding the ideological and political line of the Musavat Party, according to the second chairman of the Musavat Party, Mirza Bala Mammadzade, the Musavat Party is a political party based on liberal democratic national ideology. For us, the Musavat Party has fundamental principles. These fundamental principles include our independence, freedom, Turkism, modernity, and other similar principles. Recently, we have also added the principle of dignity to these principles. These are the fundamental principles of the Musavat Party. These issues were also reflected in the party's previous programmes. At the party's second congress held in 1936, there were extensive discussions on these issues, and certain changes were made to the programme. Later, at the end of the 1990s, the Musavat Party held a special congress on the programme, and at this congress, we adopted the general programme of the Musavat Party. This programme is a political line that strives to ensure the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, to establish a democratic state, a free state, and a system of governance based on democratic principles that respects human rights. The Musavat Party is a political organisation fighting for the establishment of a legal state and a free society in Azerbaijan. Our overall political line is centre-right. One of the fundamental principles of the Musavat Party is the principle of solidarity, which has been called solidarism during certain periods. This means that we advocate for a political line where there is not a great distance between the right and the left, opposing both radical right-wing and radical left-wing ideologies. From this perspective, the ideological and political line of Musavat is a great political and ideological line founded in Azerbaijan by the great Mammad Amin Rasulzade and his comrades, and we continue this policy in Azerbaijan and strive to establish a state and a society that operates on these principles.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif, for your detailed information. Before I move on to the questions related to my research, I would like to clarify a couple of brief points. You mentioned that you are not funded by the state budget. I'm curious to know whether your party has been officially registered under the new law on political parties.**

**Arif Hajili:** Yes.

**And what component is missing for you to receive funding from the state budget? I want to understand why you are not funded by the state budget.**

**Arif Hajili:** This issue was not resolved at the legislative level in Azerbaijan for many years. Until 2010, the Musavat Party was always represented in the Azerbaijani parliament in one way or another. However, in 2010, they did not allow even a single representative of the Musavat Party or anyone else into the parliament, and certain changes were made to the law on political parties that year. A provision was included in the law that political parties would be funded based on the seats they hold in parliament, and only the political parties represented in parliament receive funding from the state budget. Other political parties, like the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, which are the leading and main political parties in the country, do not receive state funding. The rule, in fact, was specifically determined for the Musavat Party and the real opposition parties in the country. We participated in the last elections as well. The most recent parliamentary elections were in February 2020, four years ago, and the Musavat Party participated in those elections as an opposition party. We nominated candidates in 88 constituencies out of 125 in the country. Our candidates were registered in 60 constituencies, but none of our candidates were allowed into the parliament. That is, during the election period, they did not allow a fair competition environment, the election commissions were completely under the control of the authorities, and in many polling stations, the votes were not counted at all, and falsified numbers were added to the protocols. The Musavat Party was once again not allowed into the parliament, and for this reason, the Musavat Party does not receive funding from the state budget. We have minimized the financial expenses of the Musavat Party. These include the utility expenses of our central headquarters located in the central city of Baku, current expenses, and expenses related to our trips to certain regions. But these expenses are covered by the membership fees paid by the members of the Musavat Party. However, the chairman of the party and the employees of the party's central

apparatus, as well as the leaders of the local organizations, contribute to the activities of the political party only through unpaid labour.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif, for the detailed information. My second question is related to the press organ. You mentioned the BASTA website, I was aware of this, that it provides press support to the Musavat Party. That is, it helps you in communicating with people. What is interesting here is whether you have had a printed press organ. After the restoration of the Musavat Party, I mean after the restoration in the 1990s, if there was a printed press, during which periods was it active, and why did it stop? Could you please provide information about this?**

**Arif Hajili:** There are press organs close to the Musavat Party. In the 1990s, the ‘Musavat’ newspaper was considered a press organ close to Musavat, and it provided an opportunity for the dissemination of our political line, speeches, and propaganda in the country. Until 1998, the ‘525-ci qəzet’ [525th newspaper] was one of the most popular newspapers in the country. This newspaper also provided information support to the Musavat Party. The ‘Musavat’ newspaper, its founder being the former chairman of the Musavat Party, Isa Gambar, had its editorial office located at the Musavat Party headquarters and provided information support to the Musavat Party. The ‘Musavat’ newspaper could not maintain its former influence due to the general policies against the independent press in the country and the economic difficulties it faced, and it was no longer able to operate as before. The ‘525-ci qəzet’ and ‘Yeni Musavat’ newspaper changed their political lines. For a certain period, the ‘Musavat’ journal was published in Russian, and this magazine also provided information support to the Musavat Party, and our information was published through that journal. In Turkey, there is a magazine called ‘Azerbaijan’, published by the cultural centre. It is still being published today, although not as regularly as before, but it is still being published from time to time, and it also informs both the Azerbaijani and Turkish public about the ideological and political line of Rasolzade, the old Musavatism, the modern Musavatism, the current activities of the Musavat Party, and other issues. Regarding the issue of newspapers, in general, the newspaper as a cultural form has almost been eradicated in Azerbaijan. That is, there is no newspaper in the country that has, for example, 1000 readers. Newspapers have practically disappeared due to the closure of newspaper kiosks and the elimination of opposition and independent press organs. As a result, people almost do not read newspapers, and if newspapers are sold, they are sold in very small

quantities. The main source of information in Azerbaijan today is social networks. Facebook is particularly popular, and many of Azerbaijan's politicians, public organization representatives, civil society representatives, bloggers, and journalists try to communicate their opinions to the public through Facebook, Instagram, and recently also TikTok. That is, the main public discussions are conducted on these platforms.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. I would like to move on to questions related to my research. I am very grateful for the detailed information you provided about the activities of the party. Mr. Arif, we know that approximately from the time you became the chairman of the party, from 2014, the government in Azerbaijan has adopted a new approach to regulating ethnic and religious diversity, calling it a multiculturalism policy. According to my research, this has been the case since around 2014. I would like to know what you think the rationale of the government is. That is, on what basis did the state start pursuing a multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan? Why did the state start this policy?**

**Arif Hajili:** In fact, a normal civil state should be multicultural, if we take the whole human direction. The Azerbaijani society itself is very tolerant, and this issue is not new. Representatives of various nationalities living in Azerbaijan were represented as members of parliament in the Azerbaijani People's Republic, which existed from 1918 to 1920, and they defended the interests of their nations there. Even representatives of the Dashnaktsutyun party were represented in that parliament. Religious tolerance is also at a high level in Azerbaijan. There are churches in the country, mosques, Sunni mosques, and Shia mosques. In addition, there are synagogues, and in this regard, religious tolerance in Azerbaijan is quite high. I have heard from people of Jewish nationality many times that Azerbaijan is perhaps the only country in the world where there is no anti-Semitism, not only from the government but also from the society, and such an ideological concept does not exist in Azerbaijan. And therefore, Israel's positive attitude towards Azerbaijan and its ideological and political support during the 44-day war is one of the reasons for this. That is, the Azerbaijani society itself is a multicultural society. I was born in the Zagatala region. Representatives of 20 nationalities live there, and there has never been any national discrimination or national confrontation. Each nationality strives to develop its language and culture, and actually, in line with the principle of Azerbaijani identity, this is one of the fundamental principles of the Musavat Party. For example, in the country, there have been two major wars. The

number of martyrs in the wars is more than 20 thousand, and among the martyrs, alongside Azerbaijani Turks, there are Lezgins, Avars, Talysh, Russians, Jews, and representatives of other nationalities. For instance, a Jewish man, Albert Agarunov, is a national hero of Azerbaijan. He heroically died in the battles for Shusha. He was a tank driver, and the Azerbaijani people know him. A large monument to him has been erected in Baku. Streets in Baku and other cities are named after him. So, there is no discrimination or bias against the native population or any other groups in Azerbaijan. Often, no one even discusses which nationality someone belongs to. In later years, the Azerbaijani government also put forward its ideas regarding the promotion of multiculturalism policy. This was more of a campaign nature. During Elchibey's government, a decree was signed concerning national minorities, which provided for the cultural autonomy of national minorities, the development of their languages, the opportunity to receive education in their own languages, and other issues. In the subsequent stages, in line with the general atmosphere in Azerbaijani society, the state announced the implementation of multiculturalism policy in the country. We also view this only as a positive thing. That is, as the Musavat Party, we see it as a positive development. Even though it is often more declarative and propaganda-oriented, we still consider the fact that the state officially declared such a policy as a positive fact.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. Mr. Arif, we also know that when the state announces any policy programme, certain factors must influence it. I am taking notes of what you have said, and I see that you consider the existence of ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan as a factor for this policy. If I list additional factors, could you share your thoughts on them? For example, the separatist tendencies present in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, these can also be referred to as the Talysh and Lezgin disputes. The Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan's accession to the Council of Europe, and the adoption of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by the Council of Europe in 2001. Do you think all these factors could have influenced the state's policy? What are your thoughts on this?**

**Arif Hajili:** I believe these issues should be distinguished from the Armenian separatism in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. These are different matters. Unfortunately, during its existence and even before it became a state, Armenian anti-Azerbaijani and anti-Turkish propaganda has played a dominant role in Armenian society, and they have

always been distinguished by these separatist positions. They have expressed claims not only to Azerbaijani territories but also to Turkish, Russian, and Georgian territories from time to time. In 1918-19, there was even a war between Armenia and Georgia related to territorial issues. Relations between Turkey and Armenia have not improved, and there are no diplomatic relations between these countries. In Azerbaijan, Armenian separatism has always been one of the main factors hindering the country's development. However, despite all these behaviours, the Azerbaijani people and society have never approached the Armenian population with hatred or a particular national discrimination perspective. That is, the Azerbaijani society's response to Armenian separatism has always emerged as a reaction to the separatist tendencies put forward by the Armenian population, and now, after the conclusion of the war and Azerbaijan's assurance of its territorial integrity, I personally feel a certain progress in Armenian society. It seems that the 44-day war has served as a cold shower for Armenia and the Armenian people, and currently, many Armenian scholars and intellectuals are talking about the necessity of ending Turkophobia and establishing normal relations with Azerbaijan. Relatively democratic elections are being held in Armenia, and it is very interesting that individuals who propose ending Turkophobia and normalising relations with Azerbaijan are also being elected to various positions. This means that the possibility has arisen for these ideas to be voiced within Armenian society, and I can confidently say that before 2020, we had certain contacts with Armenian politicians and political parties in various international forums. They also stated that in Armenia, the possibility of voicing proposals to improve relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, establish friendly relations, end enmity, abandon the idea of a Greater Armenia, and the genocide narrative was impossible in society. However, certain changes have occurred, and inevitably, after the war, certain changes have also occurred within Azerbaijani society. Currently, I believe that the majority of people in Azerbaijan support the idea of improving relations, signing a peace agreement, opening communications, and other similar issues. As for other matters, this is more related to Russia's and, to some extent, Iran's tendencies to create tension within Azerbaijan during certain chaotic periods. For example, you touched upon the topic of separatism in connection with the events that took place in the southern region during the summer of 1993. The local population of that region prevented separatism at that time. In other words, the Azerbaijanist rallies held in the city of Lankaran resulted in the end of separatism. Similarly, in the northern regions of the country, although there were no processes as advanced as in the southern

region, the number of people with separatist tendencies decreased, their influence among their own people significantly diminished, and their impact became limited. You know, the fact that representatives of all nations living in Azerbaijan fought from a unified position during the 44-day war, such as the Talysh, Lezgins, Avars, Tsakhurs, Kurds, who fought alongside Azerbaijani Turks without any discrimination, participated in this war, and became martyrs for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, has become one of the factors leading to national unity within Azerbaijani society. If our martyrs are common, and if the children we lost for our territorial integrity are not distinguished by any national discrimination, then this naturally becomes a factor that serves to bring the nations closer together. Moreover, throughout history, there have been different periods of upheaval. The 1990s were not only a time of rising nationalist separatist tendencies in Azerbaijan but also worldwide, as old formations crumbled, and new governance systems were being established. There was a chaotic situation in Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine, and in some Eastern European countries during that transition period. Against the backdrop of that chaotic situation, especially due to Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan, certain forces, especially those fuelled by Russia, and Iran's policies, created a situation where all levers necessary for the overthrow of the national Elchibey government in Azerbaijan were activated. During the 1990s, during the Elchibey government's rule and before that, with the collapse of the old system and the emergence of a new system, the weakening of state governance occurred. From around 2000 onwards, with the influx of oil revenues and the creation of certain financial opportunities, the process of strengthening state structures gradually took place, and naturally, the strengthening of state structures and the formation of a new governance system also led to a decrease in separatist tendencies. Currently, there are no dangerous confrontations in the country that could lead to serious consequences on a national basis.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif, for your answer. Before moving on to the next question, I would like to clarify one thing. Mr. Arif, if the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh decides to return to Azerbaijan, as you know, the peace agreement preparation process is ongoing. This is on the negotiation table. If this happens, do you think there could be any problematic situation here? In other words, my question is, do you think that within Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, the Armenian population of Azerbaijan can live and exercise their rights**

**just like other ethnic minority groups? Or do you think there could be any problematic situation? What is your view on this matter?**

**Arif Hajili:** You used the term ‘decision of the population’ very correctly. That is, the departure of the Armenian population from the Karabakh region occurred based on their decision. I don't know where this decision was made. It could have been made by diaspora organisations, or perhaps by some unknown structures of the Armenian people. In any case, the decisions were voiced by the individuals leading the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh at that time, and they left the territories based on those decisions. In other words, it did not happen as it is often portrayed, as if it was a process of ethnic cleansing or forced removal. And now, if a decision is made for them to return, what is required from the Azerbaijani people and government? They must accept Azerbaijani citizenship, hold an Azerbaijani passport, agree to live under the Azerbaijani flag, integrate into Azerbaijani society, and finally, give up territorial claims against Azerbaijan. None of these demands contradict constitutional or international law norms. Of course, if the population accepts these decisions, and at the same time, if the same symmetric rights are applied to the Azerbaijani population forcibly removed from Armenian territory, the return of the Armenian population to Azerbaijan, as well as the return of the Azerbaijani population to Armenia, could be possible if a comprehensive decision and agreement are reached, and a peace treaty is signed. The Azerbaijani people have always been able to live peacefully alongside all nations, and they will continue to do so. It is Armenia that has carried out a complete ethnic cleansing policy and has become the only monoethnic state in the Caucasus, a region with a high level of ethnic diversity. The Caucasus, whether in the North or South, is a region where many nations live together, but only Armenians live in Armenia, and nearly 100% of the population consists of Armenians. However, I hope that over time, the Armenian society will adapt to the current rules and realities. I believe that the return of the Azerbaijani population to Zangezur and their living there as Armenian citizens under these conditions is also possible.

**Thank you, Mr. Arif. My next question is about the implementation of multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan. The period I am researching coincides with the period when you were the chairman of your party, roughly from 2014 to 2024. My question consists of several components: how do you evaluate the implementation of multiculturalism policy in Azerbaijan over the past ten years?**

**But I will tell you the directions that interest me so that it might be easier for you. I would like to know your opinion on education in the mother tongue, radio and television programmes in the mother tongue, religious rites, and the holding of cultural mass events and the activities of cultural centres. Of course, we are talking about ethnic and religious minorities. How do you evaluate the situation in these four areas, education, radio, media, religion, and culture?**

**Arif Hajili:** I believe that there is no particular problem in the religious sphere. People of any religious faith have the opportunity to perform their religious rituals without any obstacles and to propagate them freely. Changes have been made in education and other fields, such as television, radio, and others, as you mentioned. However, multiculturalism is an issue that has no boundaries. Even the most democratic states in the world have not fully resolved these issues. Are you living in Poland? I know that, for instance, there is a certain anti-migrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Caucasus, and anti-Arab sentiment in Poland itself. In an ultra-democratic country like the Netherlands, a person who openly promoted Islamophobic policies was elected as the Prime Minister. Of course, after being elected as Prime Minister, he has made some changes to his rhetoric. However, this problem is gradually developing here in Azerbaijan as well. I know that the decree on national minorities, adopted during the Elchibey government, has not been fully implemented. That is to say, certain promises related to the education system and other cultural autonomy issues have not been fulfilled to this day, and representatives of various nations have expressed their dissatisfaction from time to time. However, the process is moving in a positive direction. What concerns me most personally about democracy in Azerbaijan is that the processes in the country are not moving towards the development and expansion of democracy, but rather towards the restriction of democracy and the gradual elimination of democratic freedoms. But in the field of multiculturalism, although the process may be very slow, it is moving in a positive direction. Particularly during the 44-day war, the solidarity between representatives of all religions and all nations living in Azerbaijan strengthened further. I believe that, based on this foundation, it is necessary to develop multiculturalism in the country, while ensuring that national minorities in Azerbaijan preserve their national identity, have the opportunity to speak their native language, receive education in their native language, and have access to information in their native language and the ability to disseminate that information.

**Mr. Arif, I would like to clarify one more thing related to this field. We know that the Framework Convention on the Rights of National Minorities is one of the most important international documents that Azerbaijan has joined, and every five years, Azerbaijan reports to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on this document, which is then inspected on-site. This is a mechanism, and contacts are made with representatives of national minorities. I would like to know, does your party, if it is not a secret, cooperate with the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe on the implementation of the Framework Convention? And also, does your party have any structure or authorised person who monitors the problems and situation of ethnic and religious minorities in Azerbaijan and reports to you as the party leader? And has your party cooperated with the Council of Europe on the implementation of the Framework Convention?**

**Arif Hajili:** If we are offered cooperation within this Convention, we are ready to do so with great pleasure, and we cooperate with international organisations, especially European organisations, on almost all matters if they make any requests to us. For example, although the presidential elections are currently taking place in the country and the Musavat Party is not participating in these elections, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw is operating in Azerbaijan. During this campaign, I have already met with their representatives twice at their request. However, unfortunately, the representatives of the Convention you mentioned have not offered us any cooperation, and we do not have any significant or any cooperation with them at all. The Musavat Party itself is a multinational party, represented by various nationalities. Representatives of different nationalities are included in the leadership and lower structures of the Musavat Party. That is, the Musavat Party's position on these issues is accepted as a tolerant and liberal democratic position in Azerbaijan, and we have occasional internal discussions on these issues. However, we do not have a specific structure dedicated to national issues.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. As you mentioned earlier, multiculturalism has no boundaries. We know that multiculturalism policies implemented in liberal democratic Western states combine many components. For example, this includes women's rights, LGBT rights, immigrant rights, etc., with the rights of ethnic and religious minorities being fundamental. My next question is: Do you think the**

**implementation of multiculturalism policies that exist in liberal democratic Western states in Azerbaijan could lead to any negative consequences?**

**Arif Hajili:** I do not think that any negative situation will arise in society in connection with these issues. A certain gradual process is already ongoing and unstoppable in any direction. Particularly, women's rights issues are among the most seriously discussed issues in Azerbaijan. As I mentioned, we are always proud of the fact that the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, under the leadership of Musavat Party's then-leader Mammad Amin Rasulzadeh, granted women the right to vote and to be elected, even before many democratic Western countries, including the United States of America. However, this does not mean that women's rights are not violated in Azerbaijan. In many cases, violations of women's rights in Azerbaijan are attempted to be justified by national traditions and national mentality. However, there is no basis for this. There is no obstacle in Azerbaijan to the full equality of women and their participation in public life. However, unfortunately, some religious groups express their views against women's freedom and pursue policies that hinder women's freedom. In some regions of Azerbaijan, there is a problem where female students are not allowed to attend school beyond the lower grades, and I consider this to be one of the most serious problems for Azerbaijani society. At the same time, there are cases where girls under 18 are married off by their parents without even asking for or learning their opinions, and these marriages create serious problems for gender equality in Azerbaijani society. As the Musavat Party, we try to bring these issues to the attention of Azerbaijani society within the limited opportunities we have. Naturally, respect for liberal democratic values in Azerbaijan lags far behind Western standards. However, the reason for the problems caused by this situation is mostly not related to Azerbaijani society, but to the Azerbaijani government. That is, if there are no independent courts in the country, if there are no free elections, if there is no democratically formed local self-government system, and if the vast majority of civil society, the press, and even political parties are under government control, then it is impossible for liberal democratic values to fully establish themselves here.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. My next question combines two questions. I have highlighted your statement, 'It depends on the Azerbaijani government.' So, my question is: What is your party's position on regulating ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan? Do you think that multiculturalism should be the model,**

**or should there be another model? What changes should be made in Azerbaijan so that a policy that fully satisfies all sides is pursued for ethnic and religious groups, with no concerns remaining? I can provide an example that, in my research for this work, I have conducted interviews with representatives of ethnic and religious groups, and they mentioned certain obstacles, particularly in education, radio, television, newspapers, and mass events, and some ethnic groups even faced certain difficulties in conducting religious events. There have also been some political arrests among them, and so on. Given this, you yourself observe society, and I am sure you are aware of all the processes. What is your party's position? What needs to change so that the state and all sides are satisfied with ethnic and religious groups in Azerbaijan?**

**Arif Hajili:** The Constitution of Azerbaijan and many of its laws are flawed. But the problem of Azerbaijani society is not related to these flaws. Because both the Constitution and the laws are written in accordance with certain international standards, and if they are fully implemented, the rights of citizens in Azerbaijani society would be much better protected than they are now. The biggest problem, the key to solving all problems, is precisely the establishment of a legal state in the country. That is, Azerbaijan is not a legal state. There are no independent courts in Azerbaijan. Violations of rights in the country are not only related to national minorities or as a result of a national discrimination policy. In general, the rights of Azerbaijani citizens, such as the right to freedom of assembly, the right to freedom of speech and expression, and the right to vote and to be elected, are grossly violated. There are no independent courts in the country, and the fundamental issue lies in the absence of the rule of law. If a system of governance is established under the rule of law, for which the Musavat Party is fighting, then the rights of all people, both Azerbaijani Turks and national ethnic minorities, as well as the local population belonging to other confessions, will be incomparably greater than they are now. In many cases, for instance, general violations of rights in the country are interpreted by representatives of individual national ethnic groups as national discrimination against them. However, these issues, such as violations of rights, apply to every Azerbaijani citizen, regardless of nationality. Therefore, I can say that if a legal state and a democratic society are established in the country, it will be a very serious step forward in the direction of multiculturalism. The

Musavat Party's programme contains separate chapters on national ethnic minorities and freedom of conscience, and we always keep these issues in focus.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. A question arose for me from this discussion. Do you think it is possible for the representatives of national minorities to be known and represented in the future in the Azerbaijani parliament? Because we know that there are representatives of various national minorities in the Azerbaijani parliament. However, they do not act in the interests of the national minorities they represent. They are just known by their ethnic identities. Some are not even recognized. We know that in the state established in 1918, based on the ideas of Musavatism, representatives of national minorities were given recognized representation in the Parliament. How do you think? Should recognized representation be given to representatives of national minorities in the future in Azerbaijan, representing their interests? Should a quota be allocated in the Parliament or not?**

**Arif Hajili:** At present, as you mentioned, representatives of national minorities are represented in the Azerbaijani parliament, albeit not proportionally. In the years 1918-1920, there was a completely different social environment and political situation in Azerbaijan. That is, there were military forces of foreign countries in the country. The country had not yet formed as a state. It was a newly created situation. Neighboring states that claimed various regions of Azerbaijan existed. Naturally, in such a situation, allocating quotas for national minorities might have been necessary. However, I believe that Azerbaijan is on a completely different path of development now. In many Western countries, there are no specific laws regarding the allocation of special quotas for national minorities, and I think that allocating special quotas in Azerbaijan would not contribute to national solidarity in the country, but rather serve the opposite process.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. I have one last question for you. As you mentioned, we also read in scientific literature and the press that the ideologies of Turkism and Azerbaijanism dominate in the ideology of the Musavat Party, and that the party's foundation was built on the ideologies of Islamism, Turkism, and Azerbaijanism. Sometimes the ideology of Turkism and Azerbaijanism is associated with assimilation, and some representatives of ethnic groups interpret it as such. I want to know, in your opinion, could this ideology, which is the core**

**of the party, create a conflict situation with religious-ethnic groups and national minorities if your party comes to power?**

**Arif Hajili:** This ideology comes from previous periods, that is, from the history of Azerbaijan. Specifically, it was crucial for the Muslims and nations that existed within the Russian Empire to understand themselves based on this ideology and to form their identity in this way. At that time, for example, one of the slogans was from ‘Ummahism to Nationalism, from Nationalism to Democracy.’ There are various interpretations. For instance, some people sometimes interpret Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's expression ‘How happy is the one who says I am a Turk’ as a kind of ethnic discrimination. However, this statement was made in a completely different context. At that time, when citizens of Turkey were asked, ‘What is your nationality? What is your identity?’ they used to respond by saying, ‘I am a Muslim.’ They would say, ‘Islam is your religion, but what is your nationality?’ and people would answer, ‘I am Ottoman.’ In the name of raising awareness of a new national identity, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk made the statement, ‘How happy is the one who says I am a Turk.’ That is to say, not ‘I am Muslim,’ not ‘I am Ottoman,’ not ‘I am from Diyarbakır, Mersin, or Anatolia,’ but ‘I am a Turk.’ How happy is the one who says that. So, the expression was used in this context. At that time, in the Russian Empire, there was a very serious Islamophobia. You are young, but in our time, when we were studying in both middle school and university, we read a lot of writings and articles about Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism. There was a scientific direction that Soviet peoples should not recognize their identity, should perceive themselves as Soviet citizens, speak Russian, forget that they were Muslims, forget that they were Turks, and forget that they were representatives of any other nation. This ideology was formed based on these principles and in the context of that time and is still to some extent relevant today. Again, I return to the slogan ‘from ummahism to nationalism, from nationalism to democracy,’ which explains a stage of transition. This ideology is also reflected in the flag of Azerbaijan. The blue colour represents Turkism, the green colour represents Islam, and the red colour represents modernity. And this ideology, this triad, is actually accepted as an ideological basis for Azerbaijani society. In the new program of the Musavat Party, an explanation of Turkism is provided. The Turkism we envisage does not mean the superiority of the Turkish nation over other nations or that this nation has superior rights. On the contrary, the program directly states that the fact that the majority of the Azerbaijani population is Turkish creates a

responsibility for Turks to ensure the cultural and national development of other nations, to preserve their national identity. This is how it is explained. There is also an Islamic component. This is also considered one of the factors coming from Azerbaijan's culture and ancient history, determining its uniqueness. The Musavat Party, I reiterate, according to Mirza Bala Mammadzadeh's expression, is a party based on a liberal democratic national ideology. From the time of Ali Bey Huseynzadeh, that is, Ali Bey Huseynzadeh generally interpreted modernity as Europeanization. Ahmed Agaoglu interpreted it as Europeanization. That is, national self-awareness and religious self-awareness are accepted as a continuation and culmination of integration into the civilized world, into Euro-integration, and the Musavat Party also conducts its activities on these ideological bases. Naturally, some individuals who do not understand the essence of these issues express their dissatisfaction with the term Turkism. However, I believe that we should rely on our national traditions. The fact that about 90 percent of the Azerbaijani population is Turkish and that our exit to the modern world is largely through Turkey, the emergence of Turkish unity, which is of great importance for the future development of our people, as well as the creation of conditions for the development of other nations living in Azerbaijan within the overall Turkish community, I consider it necessary to maintain this fundamental principle. And especially considering the recent developments, the existence of the Turkey-Azerbaijan Union during the 44-day war, as well as the support given by our compatriots living in South Azerbaijan, who even engaged in propaganda that was dangerous to their lives and freedom, the waving of the Azerbaijani national flag in Kazakhstan, a member of the CSTO, and other such factors, the Turkish unity, the model of unity among Turkish states, has a positive impact on the development of our state and people. I believe this fundamental principle should be preserved.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. I do not want to limit the interview only to my questions. My final question is whether there are any additional points you think I should have asked about ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan but did not, or any other points you would like to mention?**

**Arif Hajili:** No, there are no special points. I would very much like the tolerance present in Azerbaijani society to exist in other countries as well. For example, we know that in Armenia, this is clear, but let's take neighbouring states. In Russia, a completely Russophile and chauvinistic policy is being pursued. In Iran, there is a very serious

policy of Persian chauvinism. In many Western countries, we see the development of radical right-wing ideologies and their gaining power in recent times. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, there are serious problems related to rights and freedoms for the entire population of Azerbaijan, all 10 million people. There are very serious problems, and these problems do not only affect Azerbaijani Turks but also the religious and ethnic minorities living in Azerbaijan. That is, if there are general violations of rights, representatives of ethnic minorities are not excluded from these violations. But as a society, I believe that the Azerbaijani society, the Azerbaijani people, are among the most tolerant peoples in the world, and there has never been a time when chauvinism has taken root, or significant events such as massacres or ethnic cleansing have occurred. Our people have repeatedly faced such events, especially from Armenia and Russia. Currently, about 40 millions of our compatriots live in Iran without any protection of their cultural and national rights. In fact, they are not even a minority. The number of Azerbaijanis living in Iran is greater than the number of Persians. So, they do not constitute a minority as there are other nations as well, but still, the number of Azerbaijanis is greater than that of Persians. And if we consider that millions of Turkmens and other Turkish nations live there as well, Turks make up the largest ethnic group within the Iranian population, but they are forced to live in very difficult conditions. There was also a very serious anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani policy in Georgia in the 1990s. Especially during the time of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, there was such tension. But during Saakashvili's period, this situation completely changed, and now, although the multicultural environment is not as strong as it was during Saakashvili's time, compared to the 1990s, relatively normal mutual relations have been established. Azerbaijanis are being appointed to certain positions. Although the percentage of Azerbaijanis participating in the local self-governing system is not sufficient, it still exists. That is, if the world is going through a process of globalization as a whole, and if any state wants to develop, it must be a multicultural state. It should adopt a tolerant approach to the religions and peoples, nations living within the country, and must achieve national solidarity, equality of rights for every individual, regardless of their nationality, religion, or gender. And as the Musavat Party, we are fighting for the establishment of such a state, that is, a legal state and a free society.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Arif. I am concluding the interview here. I am grateful for your valuable time.**

### III

#### **Interview with Seymour Hazi, Deputy Chairman of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, 12 January 2024**

**Thank you very much, Mr Seymour, for agreeing to this interview. My first question is, can you provide me with general information about the political party you represent? I am particularly interested in the ideological foundations of your party - what ideology does your political party adhere to?**

**Seymour Hazi:** The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party held its congress at the end of 2023, where it adopted its programme document. In the first chapter of the programme document, we have clearly stated that the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party is a centrist, and the people party that values diversity of beliefs. That is, we are a centrist organisation that unites and synthesises all values, including social democratic and liberal values within the Azerbaijani National Movement. Our principles are as follows: in the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, you can be a nationalist, but not a fascist; you can be a liberal, but not a libertarian; you can be a social democrat, but not a communist; you can be religious, but not a fundamentalist. That is, the Popular Front is a political organisation that stands outside radical extremes, embracing the centuries-old culture of our people and the values formed on this foundation. It is a centrist political organisation, and our view is that in the modern world, human-centred politics should be the priority, and the main object of our politics is the Azerbaijani citizen and human being. Therefore, our worldview is fundamentally based on human-centred politics.

**Thank you very much, Mr Seymour. You mentioned the 2023 congress and quoted from your programme document and charter. Has this programme document been published anywhere?**

**Seymour Hazi:** Yes, it has been published, and I can send it to you.

**I would like to ask another question. Does your political party have an official website to publish its programme documents, charters, or any other announcements?**

**Seymour Hazi:** Unfortunately, our website has been hacked repeatedly, and the government's policies do not allow us to maintain it. However, I can send you the PDF version.

**My intention here is to clarify how the public can access these documents?**

**Seymur Hazi:** They can find this information on our Facebook page. We have posted it there.

**So, you use Facebook to publish such documents and notifications?**

**Seymur Hazi:** Yes, the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party has a Facebook page where these documents are published. They were also published after the congress.

**I'm curious about the website situation - apologies for asking so many questions - have you tried to restore the website, Mr Seymur?**

**Seymur Hazi:** We tried to restore it the first time. Frankly, we could not maintain the website. The government spent significant resources on this, including hackers and other methods. We were unable to keep the website operational.

**I see, Mr Seymur. Thank you very much. I would like to move on to the main topic. As you know, the primary purpose of this interview is to learn your opinion on Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. Mr Seymur, as you know, every state policy has an argument or justification. Based on this logic, I would like to ask you: What do you think is the argument or justification for Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?**

**Seymur Hazi:** I do not believe that the Azerbaijani government genuinely implements a multiculturalism policy. I think the government announces this policy, but what they declare does not align with the theoretical foundations of multiculturalism. Science, as you know, can never be local. That is, if there is a scientific issue anywhere in the world, it is universal. The essence of science is that it is not local. For example, if you recall, Ramiz Mehdiyev once introduced the concept of 'sovereign democracy,' and now the Azerbaijani government seems to have created a local version of multiculturalism, which does not align with the universal values of multiculturalism. The government's main argument here is that there is supposedly cultural freedom in Azerbaijan, and this cultural freedom is the result of the government's policies, manifesting itself in this way. However, another fact immediately disproves this thesis: there is no pluralism in Azerbaijan, no freedom of thought and expression. Where there is no freedom of thought and expression, it is theoretically incorrect to talk about cultural freedom. If we do not recognise people's rights to express themselves, how can we know what culture they represent or what ideas they embody? I believe the situation is such that in the

absence of democratic values, especially pluralism and freedom of expression, the government uses another illustration, an illusion, to show that there is diversity. In reality, where true diversity should exist, it is veiled, and an illusion is presented elsewhere, showing that we have created some kind of diversity and that there is pluralism here. They claim there is a blending of cultures, but in reality, this is not the case. Over time, the government has tried to cover up such issues, but conflicts between religious denominations and other issues still arise. The actual situation is that the Azerbaijani people indeed have a long history, and this centuries-old coexistence of different cultures has created, I wouldn't say something new, but certainly an important picture. What is this picture? It is the historical traditions of coexistence. This is not linked to any state policy. For example, in the north-west of Azerbaijan, you can see that different ethnic groups of the Caucasus live together. Turks, Ingiloyts, Avars, and Lezgis live together, and in parts of Baku and the Khizi region of Azerbaijan, various small Iranian-speaking peoples live together. They are commonly called Tats. But they have merged and blended with Azerbaijanis, Turks, and Talysh. They have no problems living together. No one harasses anyone because of their ethnicity. In the southern region of Azerbaijan, Talysh people live alongside Turks, and in some parts of Karabakh and Nakhchivan, small numbers of Kurds live, particularly in the Lachin, Kalbajar, and Gubadli regions and parts of Nakhchivan. Here, people mix and mingle, and again, there are no problems with coexistence. These people have fought together at various times for the territorial integrity and independence of Azerbaijan. All these are the historical roots of coexistence, the common value of Azerbaijan, and the government wants to present this natural, unrefined multicultural base as its industrial creation. However, this is a primitive form, there is no refined, polished, or supported development process. In other words, state policy is not visible here. Our people are the ones dealing with this. When have you ever heard that two ethnic groups had a conflict, and the state intervened or implemented a programme to reconcile them? I have never come across such news. The tolerance built on these historical roots is not something driven by state policy. For example, in Azerbaijan, particularly in Baku, in various regions, there are churches belonging to different branches of Albanian Christianity, and they go there to worship. This has never caused any conflict in Azerbaijan, nor has it become a source of conflict. Religious or sectarian differences have not turned into a conflict. Until recent years, traditional Shia and Sunni Muslims lived together very harmoniously in Azerbaijan. However, when these processes became politicised due to

certain wrong policies, we saw some minor groups within these sects where conflicts arose, ideological conflicts, but they never turned into practice. This issue was also artificially created. It has no natural basis. In this context, I would say that the Azerbaijani government wants to stand on the logic that true diversity exists here, that pluralism exists. They claim that they have not suppressed or destroyed everything. We only repress some groups or communities when state interests demand it, to protect state interests. However, I do not see this as a matter of state interests. In other words, I see the main thesis here as the suppression of democracy, the overall suppression of the democratic landscape in the country, and presenting an illusionary illustration of something unrelated to political freedoms as an alternative.

**Thank you very much, Mr Seymour, for your answer. My next question is that we know that state policy, I understand that you are critical of this policy, but still, if this policy exists, it must be influenced by some factors. There is no policy without factors. What do you think are the factors that influence the Azerbaijani government to pursue such a policy and call it multiculturalism? As you know, this is a new term. It entered the political lexicon around 2014. What factors do you think influence the state to start such a policy?**

**Seymur Hazi:** If you notice, this term has largely receded. It is no longer the main line of policy. However, at a certain historical period, say, the period up to five years ago, from 2014 to around 2020-21, this policy played a central role. The main reason for this was the commitments Azerbaijan has made to the Council of Europe. What are these commitments? They relate to freedom of expression, political organisation, various religious confessions, and ethnic groups, in general, to the country's national diversity. Especially at the forefront of this issue are political freedoms, meaning Azerbaijan has taken on political freedoms as an obligation. What were the main obligations of 2001? A media representative can conduct filming without showing credentials. While filming and preparing a report, they are not obliged to present any documents. The law allows a media representative to perform their work. However, the Azerbaijani government has brought this to a level where even a person with credentials cannot film anymore. But as the government suppresses these obligations, it starts to promote multiculturalism as if saying that there is diversity here. Diversity does not mean that everyone should talk about politics or express political opinions; it means that a certain family group can sing well, or that some ethnic groups can sing songs in their own

languages on the radio but cannot criticize. They can sing in their own languages, and that is what diversity is. In other words, they have fabricated a cultural pluralism to counter political pluralism. The main thesis, in my opinion, is this: political pluralism should not exist, and this fabricated cultural pluralism should take its place. However, theoretically, a cultural pluralism without political freedom is impossible. It is clear that when the government is compelled to fulfil some of its political obligations, it resorts to speculation. But today, the government does not feel obligated to do this. Especially since 2020, the government no longer feels obliged and does not even promote multiculturalism. It says, 'We are now victorious,' meaning 'victory' has triumphed over multiculturalism. I believe that this 'victory' is also an illusion, just like multiculturalism. Victory can only be over an opponent. If victory turns into power over the people, then it is a defeat for the people, not a victory. The people should feel the victory in their lives, in their behaviours, in various issues, but this is not present. This, too, is an illusion that has been replaced by another illusion as if there is something here.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Seymour. Earlier, you mentioned ethnic and religious diversity, and you even listed the regions where they live. So, you consider ethnic and religious diversity a factor in Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy. You also mentioned the Council of Europe and Azerbaijan's obligations towards it. I'm interested in some specific points. Do you think the Talysh and Lezgin disputes in the 1990s, the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and Azerbaijan's accession to the Council of Europe in 2000 and joining the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities could be additional factors influencing Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy?**

**Seymur Hazi:** You know, of course, it can be considered as a possibility, as a variant. But the theses about the mass rejection of statehood and inclination towards separatism by Lezgins and Talysh in the early 1990s in Azerbaijan are absurd and baseless. They are baseless because after one person was arrested, the process subsided. A whole people cannot be represented by one person. Later, it became clear that this was a policy originating from Russia, a provocation carried out by an agent network that included not only Talysh and Lezgins but also Turks. In other words, it was not an uprising against statehood by any national minority or a process of secession. We did not see this. But what did we see after that? We saw that Alikram Humbatov went to Europe,

then to Armenia, and so on, and his people in Russia set up a serious propaganda machine, starting to speak on the airwaves. They expressed that they supposedly wanted to divide Azerbaijan. However, in 2020, there was a war. Citizens from all regions of Azerbaijan, including the northern and southern regions, all national minorities fought for Karabakh as if they were protecting their own villages, their own families. They became martyrs, their blood was spilled. For us, of course, this is not a subject of politics; this is a great value, that when we fought for this land, the blood of Lezgins, Turks, Kurds, and Talysh mixed together in the soil of Karabakh. No one can separate this anymore. This is just a policy that the Azerbaijani government has been cultivating like a bogeyman for decades. In our worldview, after pluralism and democracy are restored in Azerbaijan, after freedoms find their place, after serious municipal reforms are carried out, after local self-government is established, and after the functionality of central authority is determined, such problems cannot find a place in Azerbaijan. The reason is that the environment is murky and there is no transparency, making it easy to accuse someone of something, to set up certain games, to create illusions with agent networks and separatist groups. But the solution to all these problems lies in transparency, political freedoms, and seeing the perspective of a clear worldview.

**Mr. Seymour, do you think the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could play a role? We know that when this policy program started, the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was ongoing, and Azerbaijan had not yet liberated its territories.**

**Seymour Hazi:** I don't think so. Why? First of all, if you remember, Heydar Aliyev said several times during his rule that 30,000 Armenians live in Azerbaijan, meaning there are Armenians living in Azerbaijan. I actually believe this. For example, I had a neighbour in the village of Jeyranbatan. She was a woman of Armenian descent. She passed away. She had children and was well-regarded by the neighbours. She had good relations with all the neighbours. One of her children participated in the Karabakh war, and so on. I think such facts exist around Baku and in different regions. These facts are normal to me. However, I view the Karabakh issue as a Russia-related issue. The Karabakh issue, along with other problems in the region, is a Russia-related issue. I also view the Abkhazia and South Ossetia issues as Russia-related. By 'issue' here, I mean a problem. The Karabakh problem equals the Russia problem. The Abkhazia and South Ossetia problems equal the Russia problem. These are smaller equivalents of the Russia problem in the region. They are its projections. Putin often states in his speeches that

the war between Azerbaijanis and Armenians is not a territorial war. He says this is a national issue, and this national issue is rooted in the violence committed by Azerbaijanis against ethnic Armenians in Sumgait in the early 1990s and the subsequent retaliation by Armenians against local Azerbaijanis in Armenia. The essence of Russian state policy is that Azerbaijanis, meaning not just ethnic Turks, and Armenians are national enemies who have shed each other's blood. At this point, it becomes clear that the Karabakh issue, created by Russia, is viewed through the lens of national enmity. We can similarly explain Russia's attempts to pit other ethnic groups against Azerbaijan in this context. All these issues are interconnected. Therefore, I believe that if the Azerbaijani government views the multiculturalism issue also in the context of Karabakh, it should distance itself from Russia. If you are close to Russia, if you are closer to Russia than others in terms of security, economy, political methods, the values transmitted to society, the main paradigms in society's governance, then you cannot place the multiculturalism policy in the context of resolving the Karabakh issue. Because Russia is actually pursuing an anti-multicultural policy here. Russia is engaged in cultural clashes. Russia is involved in national clashes, and there is a concept of 'ethnic engineering' that has been coming from the Soviet era. This ethnic engineering, in quotation marks, involved moving ethnic groups out of their homelands, relocating different groups to different places, causing conflicts, creating clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, creating clashes between Meskhetian Turks and Uzbeks, moving Meskhetian Turks out of Georgia, and causing massacres here. In Azerbaijan, it meant exiling people and so on. This is essentially a policy of clash. Later, it became clear that Russia created a concept of the Union of Unrecognized States, recognized the independence of some territories separated from Georgia, and formed a coalition of them. This is an anti-multicultural policy, meaning they have no intention of reconciling cultures. In this context, I do not consider the government's arguments valid, even if they claim otherwise.

**Mr. Seymour, thank you very much. My next questions are related to the implementation of this policy over the past 10 years. I am speaking with representatives of ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan, such as the Talysh, Lezgins, Udis, Avars, etc. The people I speak with include of chairman of cultural centres, editors of newspapers, journal editors, and community leaders. I am curious about a particular question. I would like to learn about the position of your political**

**party and your personal stance. Many community leaders claim that the data provided by the State Statistics Committee on their population numbers are incorrect. Do you monitor such issues yourself? That is, do you have a working group or a person in your political party dealing with this area? Do you think the numbers provided by the State Statistics Committee reflect the truth, or not? For example, if we take specific groups like the Lezgins, Talysh, Udis, Avars, they might be recorded as 10,000 in the statistics, but their claim is that their numbers are half a million, a million, or even more. What do you think about this?**

**Seymur Hazi:** First of all, let me say that the body responsible for conducting the census is the State Statistics Committee, and no non-governmental organisations have the authority to carry out an alternative count. There is a law in Azerbaijan because it is considered a relevant executive authority, and one cannot assume its powers. Of course, just like all other state bodies, there is no transparency in the Statistics Committee, and it is natural not to rely on their figures. Furthermore, the methodology of the State Statistics Committee, well, you yourself, as a researcher, know this. In any case, it is impossible to determine an exact count. They use selective methods to calculate. Therefore, it is impossible to rely on an absolute figure here. But there are two contexts here. One is that, for instance, the Azerbaijani Statistics Committee may say that 5,000 people of a certain nationality live here. Let's assume that these are Turks. Let's say that 5,000 Azerbaijani Turks live here, but their actual number is 15,000. The declared number does not affect the population count. That is, the number announced by the government does not affect the population. Those people still exist. Let's say there is no policy to eliminate them in any way or physically destroy them. But what I think is problematic is not the issue of the census but the stimulation of culture. The issue of national minorities in Azerbaijan is not a statistical one. In Khynalyg, the number of people is small; I believe this is a matter of cultural stimulation. If there is no cultural stimulation, it doesn't exist for anyone. For example, what was one of the first actions of the one-year government of the Azerbaijani Popular Front? It was to create opportunities for the establishment of those cultural centres, to give them buildings, to provide them with equipment, to create opportunities for them to start radio broadcasting, and to take the first steps regarding their education. Isn't that, right? I believe this issue is important: regardless of the scale of these cultures, how do they live, how do they develop? Democracy is not just the rule of the majority but also a

space where the minority's right to initiative, to exist, and to live is possible. That's the main issue. The fight over numbers causes difficulties for everyone. You know, it is impossible to clarify these numbers anyway. In my opinion, this is similar to the argument over Dolma. I compare this to the argument over who sang a particular song first. This is not the correct issue. The correct issue is whether there is freedom in the region overall. It is a matter of human rights. It is a matter of democracy overall. Once this is resolved, it becomes a matter of transparency and freedom. Once these are in place, there will be no disputes about other issues. You see, we want the government to say that the Turks make up 100%; other nations want the government to say that the Talysh make up 100%. They want the government to say that all cultures originate from the Lezgins. This is not the right approach; it is a challenge to existence. But what should be our main approach? There should be transparency, there should be freedoms, there should be opportunities for self-expression, there should be opportunities for self-development, and these opportunities will already reveal everything. A space where these opportunities reveal everything is needed. I believe this environment is more valuable than all statistics, all official and unofficial figures. That environment will be the true multicultural environment. All these number disputes serve that mirage; they become elements of that mirage. That's what I think.

**Mr. Seymour, thank you very much. You almost answered my next question throughout all your answers. But I will still ask that question. We know that Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy is a policy of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party government. If the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party comes to power tomorrow, what will its policy be? That is, what is your approach, how does your party view it? How will you regulate the existing ethnic and religious diversity in the state, especially regarding minority groups? What is your programme regarding them? What do you think, how will you manage this diversity?**

**Seymur Hazi:** Look, I will give you an example. In Baku, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party has two large district organisations. Sabail is the central district, as you know, and Binagadi is considered the largest district. The chairpersons of both are representatives of ethnic minorities. And those who elected them are both Turks and others. That is, the majority are Turks, but for instance, Ceyhun Novruzov, who is of Talysh origin, was elected as the chairperson of the Sabail district organisation. Ramid Naghiyev, a former officer of the Armed Forces who is ethnically Lezgin, was elected

as the chairperson of the Binagadi organisation. We view this issue as a natural process. That is, there is no veto saying that a Lezgin cannot be elected, a Talysh cannot be elected, a Turk, a Kurd cannot be elected. There is no such thing. For us, the main principle is that democracy functions, freedom of expression functions, and after this process, if any difficulties arise, administration comes into play to solve them, not to create problems, but to solve them. For us, the red line is the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the unitary structure of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the constitutional structure of the Republic of Azerbaijan, that is, as long as freedoms within the framework of Azerbaijan's constitutional structure, unitary structure, and territorial integrity are not under threat, we do not see any restrictions on freedoms. No restrictions at all, and as I said, there are examples of this in our experience. That is, these individuals were elected from among several alternatives, and I think that once strong municipal structures are formed in Azerbaijan, many of these problems will be resolved.

**Mr. Seymour, in your opinion, is it possible to grant cultural autonomy to those ethnic groups in the areas where they live en masse in the future or not?**

**Seymur Hazi:** The concept of cultural autonomy is expressed in two ways in political lexicon. The first is that you give them this freedom within a certain boundary. There is no region in Azerbaijan where only one ethnic group lives. The Talysh live in large numbers both in Sumgait and Lerik. The Lezgins live in large numbers both in Gusar and in Baku. Azerbaijan is already quite mixed in this respect. Therefore, doing this within the framework of any region does not solve the issue. This would be a mistake. But in general, cultural autonomy is about the culture itself having unrestricted opportunities; this is possible and is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. That is, autonomy is also freedom, isn't it? Today, the freedom that is theoretical will be made functional tomorrow. Once this functional freedom exists, how can someone say, 'Give me freedom specifically in X region' when you already have freedom throughout the country? I think the root of asking for freedom in X region is that there is no freedom throughout the country, and there is no freedom for anyone.

**Mr. Seymour, I would like to ask a question based on this. I sense that you monitor and are aware of the situation regarding freedoms, political arrests, and we see from your social media accounts that both your party leader and you actively share in this area. I am curious, do you monitor issues related to ethnic and**

religious diversity? For example, the right to education in the mother tongue, the functioning of newspapers and journals. Because we know that many ethnic groups face certain artificial obstacles in publishing their newspapers and journals, and at the same time, they face obstacles in education in their own languages. This is not just my word; it is also mentioned in international reports. For example, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities is monitored by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe every five years. I can quote a sentence from there, which notes that when members of the Talysh and Lezgin groups advocate for any cultural rights, they are labelled as separatists. They are accused of separatism. Of course, we are not talking about political rights, no autonomy, etc., but rather education in the mother tongue, newspapers, journals, television, and radio programmes in their languages, and of course, holding mass events. I have spoken at length, but I would like to formulate the question. What is your view on the current situation? Do you monitor the mass events held by ethnic and religious groups, such as education in the mother tongue, newspapers, radio, journals, etc.?

**Seymur Hazi:** Undoubtedly, we monitor these issues, and the main point here is that the government doesn't really care if a person is Lezgi, Talysh, or Turk. When it comes to political activity, the government restricts everyone, imprisoning them regardless of their background. For example, we recognized Hilal Mammadov as a political prisoner. His name was on the list of political prisoners in 'Azadlıq' newspaper, and it was also included in our reports. Do you know how this issue is resolved? As I mentioned earlier, as long as there is no threat to the constitutional structure or territorial integrity, these issues should not be restricted. During the period of the Popular Front's rule, we actively expressed our views on issues like radio, television, and cultural autonomy. Today, the Chairman of the Popular Front Party, who was then the Deputy Speaker of the Supreme Assembly of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, Ali Karimli, attended the openings of those buildings as the State Secretary. Today, there are radios, and there is some level of official education. However, the dissatisfaction among people is related to the lack of transparency. To put it bluntly, you can't determine whether the buyer or the seller is right with a broken scale. If the scale doesn't work properly, you can't tell who's right in a dispute over the weight. Our main thesis is that the criteria must first be corrected. If the scale is fixed, then we can address the subsequent issues to determine who is right

and who is wrong. What does this criterion consist of? Freedom, transparency, democracy, these are key to solving a large part of the problem. Only then will it become clear who, for example, wants cultural autonomy, who wants to make a film, who wants to produce a music video, or who wants to read. It will also become clear who wants to divide the country. Transparency will reveal all this, and I believe that maintaining the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is a red line for everyone. But the rights of people to write, read, and engage in cultural activities in their mother tongue, as I mentioned earlier, are natural rights. These are rights people are born with, just as carrying the values of one's ethnicity is a natural obligation from birth. As long as it doesn't pose a threat to others or to living together as a whole, there should be no restrictions. Our program also covers these issues. For example, there are two lines regarding this. The Popular Front Party sees joining the Istanbul Convention as essential and believes that Azerbaijan should join it. Secondly, the issue of national diversity should be viewed not in the context of national diversity but in the context of national wealth. For us, this is a national wealth, and it cannot be promoted with an amorphous value and amorphous policy. In Azerbaijan, musical groups cannot represent nations in general; that would be amorphous. If nations want to diversify their cultures, this is an extremely important issue. We want to see our films, our theatres, our cinemas, where cultures intertwine, but not artificially. The problem should be addressed naturally, leading to a cultural solution.

**Mr. Seymour, you spoke about the broken scale. I assume you're referring to democracy, right? If the broken scale you mentioned, transparency and democracy, were restored in Azerbaijan, do you think the multiculturalism policies applied in liberal, democratic Western states could pose any danger to a state like Azerbaijan?**

**Seymur Hazi:** You know, transparency is never a danger. Why would it be? Today, while there is a policy of preventing something by administrative means in Azerbaijan, do the peoples not live together peacefully and culturally? On the contrary, transparency, democracy, and especially good education will significantly solve these problems. This is the main solution to the problems, and if good education is provided, Azerbaijan's education problems will be resolved. These issues are about the state fulfilling its primary duties. Once these primary duties are fulfilled, problematic issues will become short-term and minor. If there is a separatist group with unpleasant

demands from the state, I don't believe it will have a long life. It will be quickly and accurately identified, and the treatment process will be easier.

**Mr. Seymour, my next and last question may seem a bit utopian, but I still want to ask it. If in the future, democratic parliamentary elections were held in Azerbaijan, and everything was transparent, do you think representatives of ethnic groups should be represented in parliament in a known way? I mean, should they have a chance to represent their ethnic groups and protect their cultural rights in the National Assembly?**

**Seymur Hazi:** I reject this concept from the outset. Why? Today, there are people in the Azerbaijani parliament who are unofficially from the same quota, and this policy is abnormal. This is to suppress those peoples. Bringing in 2-3 people from their midst and placing them in parliament as a quota is to suppress both the ethnic majority and minority. If the system is proportional, a Talysh or Lezgi who wants to join the Popular Front will become a member of the Popular Front, a person who wants to join Musavat will become a member of Musavat, and a person who wants to join YAP [New Azerbaijan Party] will become a member of YAP and will be in parliament. If it's majoritarian, and if there is democracy, people will vote, and they will be able to come to parliament and represent everyone. What is the most serious problem? It's wrong to imagine a deputy who has received votes only from the Talysh, only from the Turks, or only from the Lezgis. A member of parliament must want to get votes from all the people of the region they represent. What does someone who wants to become president say? They don't say, 'I only want Turks to vote for me, but not Talysh, not Lezgis.' No, they want votes from everyone. Normally, it should be the same for a deputy; they should represent all the people in their region. When they represent all the people in their region, multiculturalism will prevail. When they represent everyone, a more just political organization will be possible. But separating them into quotas is the main source of fuel for separatism. This issue should not be assigned to any particular minority group by quota. It shouldn't be tied to ethnic minorities in any way, such as saying, 'This is the deputy for the Talysh, and this is for the Turks.' Otherwise, they'll fight each other in parliament. How could that be? A member of parliament is the representative of the entire nation, without any conditions, and they must represent everyone in the area they were elected from, all groups and communities, and work to solve all problems. Whether it's communal issues, political issues, freedom issues,

legislative issues, only then can we achieve true multiculturalism, true diversity, and the majority rule where the rights of minorities are protected. Otherwise, separatism will continue to thrive politically through quotas.

**Thank you very much, Mr. Seymour. You've answered almost all my questions. My final note is, when examining Azerbaijan's multiculturalism policy, is there any question or idea that you think I should have asked but didn't? If so, could you ask and answer it yourself?**

**Seymur Hazi:** Of course, this is a scientific work, and scientific work should be based on various sources, references, and opinions. I think you're doing that. However, the main thesis, in my opinion, is to compare the existing situation with the practices in other countries. Not only studying diversity in Azerbaijan but comparing it with the world. For example, there are countries close to us. In Georgia, the issue of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity is similar to that in Azerbaijan. I think we should look at this as an example within the post-Soviet space. They also allocate two parliamentary seats for the entire Borchali region. Do you believe that if those two parliamentary seats were from the opposition, the government wouldn't give them? If they are from the government, the opposition wouldn't give them, so there can be two Azerbaijani MPs in parliament, no more. They clarify this for themselves. This is state policy: one from the opposition and one from the government. Two are enough. The approach to this issue is the same throughout the post-Soviet space. It is in the context of ethnic engineering. Therefore, I think we should not only prepare this for the scientific community but also present this research to our people someday. Because you are Azerbaijani, and our academic community should also see your work and at the same time, it should also see the example from around the world.

**Mr. Seymour, thank you very much. I deeply appreciate your valuable time, your valuable insights, and for sharing both your thoughts and your party's stance on certain issues. I'll conclude the interview here.**