

From cosmopolitan Baku to tolerant Azerbaijan – Branding “The Land of Fire”

Abstract

Over the last years the Azerbaijani government made strong efforts to brand the country as a symbol of a century-long coexistence of different ethnicities and religions, while at the same time neglecting or even destroying the traces of what is remembered by elderly inhabitants as the “cosmopolitan” Baku of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The paper analyzes how the inhabitants of Baku are going “behind the branding strategy” as the branding expert Anbolt claims for good branding (Anbolt 2003) and at which points they refuse the new image of their city, which neglects parts of their own biography. The paper is based on print media, websites and videos issued by the Azerbaijani government and on interviews with Bakuivians between the ages of 20 and 70 from different social and ethnic backgrounds.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Baku, post-soviet city, nation branding, urban identity

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Holding the Eurovision Song Contest 2012 in Baku was just the highlight of many efforts made over the last decade by the Azerbaijani government to present the country, and especially the capital Baku, to a global audience. Place branding – either for the capital or the whole country – had become very important for Azerbaijan and the impact of these branding efforts on the identity of the population will be the primary focus of this paper. The aim is to brand Azerbaijan as a modern and well-off country with a multi-cultural history and a hospitable and tolerant population in order to attract tourists and foreign investors, as well as create an international environment of sympathy for a country that lost parts of its territory to neighbouring Armenia after the war over Karabakh in 1994. Even if nation branding is never only a part of economic policy but also of foreign affairs, the strong connection in Azerbaijan makes this case especially interesting.

While Karabakh is a part of the Azerbaijani branding strategies I will mostly focus on the nation and the city branding for Baku. I argue with Kavena (2012, 5) that nation branding intertwines nationalism and globalization on political, economic and cultural levels. Researching branding strategies and their reception outside and within the branded nation can lead to a deeper understanding of changing concepts of nationhood and identity for citizens of a newly independent nation who are also citizens of a world, where opportunities to travel and share ideas across national borders are increasing. Therefore, I analyse the concepts behind the branding strategies of the government and their perception by the local population of Baku, and focus especially on the branding of Baku and Azerbaijan as multicultural and tolerant. On the one hand this drafts a history where people of different ethnicities and religions live peacefully together, while on the other hand removing any traces of the Armenian community in Baku. Even if nation branding affects the whole country, and therefore the whole population of Azerbaijan, this paper focus on the changes the new strategy has produced for the city population of Baku, because it challenges Bakuvian identity in particular.

The disappearance of Armenians from the historiography of Baku is in contrast to the memory of elderly Bakuvians who describe “their Baku”, the Soviet city, often as “cosmopolitan”, as a city where Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Russians shared a common everyday life. The memories of the old Bakuvians and their feeling of having lost their city has already been researched (Grant 2010; Sayfutina 2010; Darieva 2011; Krebs 2011, 2013), but the parallel attempts to create new brands for Baku have not yet been examined. The study on changing presentations of Baku in guidebooks by Sevil Huseynova (2013) works with similar sources but does not analyse them in terms of nation branding.

In this paper, the primary sources for the branding efforts are print media, websites and videos issued by the Azerbaijani government to present the country to potential investors and tourists but also to raise the profile of the country in general. I also rely on interviews with officials in Baku about their vision for the city’s future, where the topic of branding was not an explicit part of the interview. Also, the interviews with Bakuvians between the ages of 20 and 70, from different social and ethnic backgrounds, were not specifically focused on branding. Here I concentrated on personal memories of the city as well as perceived changes after independence.

Nation branding

Nation branding arose in the last two decades as a strategy for “selling” a place like a commodity to a global market or audience in order to attract foreign investors and tourists, as well as the globalized creative class. A nation-brand, as the branding expert Keith Dinnie (2008, 15) defines it, is “the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audiences”. A brand can therefore be anything that is somehow connected with the nation’s own idea of its strength (typical examples are hospitality, freedom, a love for certain arts, etc.) and are often reduced to a slogan sketch and logo that is highly recognizable and easy to reproduce. The main problem of this definition is that it says “nation” but usually means “state”: a “nation’s brand” is usually coined for a state’s territory regardless of how many different nations its inhabitants feel they belong to. The brand has to be either something most people can agree on or primarily reproduce the image of the ruling group. It often transports and at the same time produces a stereotypical image of the country. Sometimes it goes back to images that are already connected with the country for an international audience, like the “Vampire branding” of Romania (Bardan and Imre 2012), the usage of the Pharaonic past in Egypt, or of orientalist images of colorful dancers in “Incredible India”. Countries, which cannot draw on established images (because they used to be unknown outside their region) have to find catchphrases that are recognizable. Essentially, they try to create the stereotypes they will be known for in the future. Examples for this are slogans like E-stonia (Jansen 2012), “Latvia – the country that sings” (Dzenovska 2011) or Azerbaijan’s “Land of Fire”. These examples already show that nation branding tends to reproduce existing stereotypes – often typical East-West-dichotomies (Bardan and Imre 2012; Saunders 2012).¹ Provided here is a short overview of the concept of nation branding and its implications for the branded community.

In contrast to nation building, which has been frequently researched since Benedict Anderson published his seminal “Imagined communities” in 1983, nation branding as a rather new phenomenon is still far less studied. Scholarship about the post-Soviet transformation in the Caucasus and Central Asia also used to focus on nation building. But for newly independent nation states the need to present themselves outside their geographical region is especially important, either to reject negative images or to make themselves known in the first place. Researchers working on nation branding for post-socialist countries agree that for these countries branding their nation usually has to do with rather negative, pre-existing, perceptions of Western audiences (Saunders 2012; Bardan and Imre 2012). Despite the strong branding efforts

the Azerbaijani government made during the last decade for the country and its capital, there is no research on branding and the effects on the self-perception and identity concepts of Baku’s population.

As a concept that affects the perception of a nation inside as well as outside of its borders, nation branding is much more than a slogan and a logo, “it seeks to reconstitute nationhood at the levels of both ideology and praxis, whereby the meaning and experiential reality of national belonging and national governance are transformed in unprecedented ways.” (Kaneva 2012, 4)

The branding expert Anholt distinguishes between brand image and brand purpose. Brand image is the perception of the brand by the target audience. It is formed by the brand identity but also by individual memories, experiences and associations connected with the product. It is the way the brand is perceived by individuals and groups of people outside the branded company (or nation).

Brand purpose describes the identity of the brand within the company. It can also be defined as “corporate culture”. In the best case, the virtues that should form the brand image are accepted and lived by everyone working in a corporation (Anholt 2007, 6–7). In nation branding both aspects of branding can be often seen as one: even if the initial target groups for creating a brand image are audiences outside the nation, and should receive a positive impression of the brand, a branding strategy that only focuses on the audience outside the country’s borders is very likely unsuccessful, because as Anholt (2003,123) explains “country branding occurs when public speaks to public: when a substantial proportion of the country – not just the civil servants and paid figureheads – gets behind the strategy and lives it out in their everyday dealings with the outside world”. Therefore it is also necessary to communicate the brand image to the nation’s citizens, especially, as for Anholt, it seems unimportant whether the branding strategy is built upon ideas that are already accepted by many citizens as part of their collective memory and identity, or tries to introduce completely new concepts of (a national) identity. The idea of a brand purpose in nation branding takes the nation branding ultimately away from the nation state, as we have known it, to a new concept of neoliberal governance. It becomes clear that nation branding means much more than just promoting or advertising a nation as a nice place to go on vacation or expand your business to – it can affect the image of the nation as a whole. In this regard, Kaneva (2012, 11) raises important questions about how branding changes notions of national sovereignty, citizenship and democratic governance.

Brand images can be perceived very differently by different global communities and by the citizens of a nation. Not every brand that can be “sold” to a nation’s own citizens is accepted by those outside. The Eurovision Song Con-

test 2012 held in Baku is a good example of this. In Baku itself, the branding, projecting an image of the city enjoyed by visitors from all over the world, was so successful that even elderly people who would usually complain about the government and glorify the Soviet era suddenly began praising the president for his wonderful work in Baku and for the city's regained international standing. In Germany, on the other hand, the Eurovision Song Contest led to many critical media responses, focusing on the destruction of old houses in Baku, the lack of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, as well as of the problematic conditions for homosexuals in Azerbaijan. In terms of branding Azerbaijan for German audiences, as an open and tolerant country that should be perceived at least as equal to Western European countries, the Eurovision Song Contest was a disaster. The public notion of Azerbaijan in Germany was mainly that of an authoritarian regime, while in terms of the citizens of Baku getting behind the branding strategy of their government it was a huge success.

Often, place branding is not accepted without criticism by the inhabitants of the branded place, especially when it comes together with gentrification and even the expulsion of the inhabitants of a particular city quarter. This often happens in formerly marginalized, working-class quarters with a high percentage of migrants (or marginalized groups who become interesting and attractive for others) that are branded as "cosmopolitan". These quarters become interesting for tourists and the creative class, who play an important role in developing the brand, while it often takes longer for the inhabitants of the place to get behind the branding strategy – if they do at all. In many cases the voices of people outside the branded community are more important for branding than the voices from the inside (Binnie 2006; Brown 2006). Branding of public places often evoke the protest of their inhabitants and artists alike (Baur 2013).

In Azerbaijan, open public debates over branding are nearly impossible, as are debates over new construction and city planning (Valiyev 2012). But that does not mean that inhabitants of Baku do not comment upon the changes within their city as well as the branding efforts of the government.

"Land of Fire" – connotations of a branding slogan

Looking through the various sources for nation branding of Azerbaijan it quickly becomes apparent that the image of a country with a long tradition of multiculturalism is the basis of Azerbaijan's branding strategy. It is notable that the important concept here is "multicultural" instead of "cosmopolitan," because the term "cosmopolitanism" is one of the most-used in branding slogans worldwide, especially for cities or certain urban quarters (Binnie

2006; Donald 2009). But for Baku the ascription “cosmopolitan” is a highly controversial one and leads one deep into the history of the city and the changes it underwent after independence. Cosmopolitanism is what Soviet Baku was famous for during the 1960’s and 1970’s, when, as elderly Bakuvians, the Bakintсы², recall nostalgically, people from all over the Soviet Union lived peacefully together in Baku’s Soviet backyards. These Bakintсы – whether they are Azerbaijani, Russian or Armenian – used to glorify the “Golden Times” of this special “Baku *kozmpolitanism*,” which in their eyes shaped the city’s unique culture, where the best jazz of the Soviet Union was played and musicians from all communist countries met (Grant 2010; Rumyantsev and Huseynova 2011; Krebs 2013). The term *kozmpolitanism* as it is used by the old Bakintсы when describing their city and life during the 1960’s and 1970’s should not be confused with the notion of cosmopolitanism and the discourse associated with it in the academic sphere (Krebs 2013, 2015).

Many elderly Bakuvians still announce proudly that in those days being Bakintсы was more important than the nationality indicated in one’s Soviet passport. The creation of a “nationality Bakintсы” was supported by the restricted Soviet migration policy that regulated the migration to bigger cities and privileged academics and technical specialists from other parts of the Soviet Union over Azerbaijanis from the countryside (Sayfuttinova 2009, 36–39). As a result, the urban population consisted mostly of a well-educated, well-off, urban middle class of people from all over the Soviet Union, with Russian as a common language and a common habitus that set them apart from the rest of Azerbaijan, as well as from other members of their respective nationality (Krebs 2013).

The “cosmopolitanism” changed dramatically in the late 1980’s and after independence in 1991, with the loss of the Armenian community in the pogroms of January 1990 and the emigration of Russians and Jews after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. This serious change in the Baku population also came from an increase in internal migration, as the Soviet restriction for moving into the cities was lifted and people from the countryside migrated to Baku in higher numbers. The internally displaced persons (IDP) from Nagorno-Karabakh formed a special group within the city of new urban dwellers. This way, in the last decades, Baku became a predominately Azerbaijani city for the first time since the first half of the 19th century, when it was not much more than a small port on the Caspian Sea. According to the 2009 census, the population consisted of 91% Azerbaijanis, 5% Russians and 4% “others” (UN Habitat 2013, 208). These new city dwellers are viewed with suspicion by the old Bakintсы, for whom the “Azerbaijanization” of the city indicates the city’s provincialization, and therefore its decay (Krebs 2015).

The official national branding slogan, “Land of Fire,” is often featured together with a logo of a flame and appears on tourist brochures, websites and on the tricots of the Spanish football club, Atletico Madrid, which is sponsored by Azerbaijan.³ For the Eurovision Song Contest 2012, the logo was a bit modified and the slogan was changed to “Light your Fire” (Figure 1). At first glance, it might seem connected to the natural fires that served as landmarks along the coast of Baku for centuries. The fires marked the oil and gas fields, which became the foundation of the city’s – and later the country’s – wealth, since the second half of the 19th century. The natural fires also attracted Zarathustrians (“Fire Worshipers,” in many Azerbaijani sources). Pilgrims and merchants from Persia, and even India, came to worship at their temple on the Absheron peninsula, near Baku. Therefore, the slogan is often explained as being connected to the first oil boom and its multicultural community in Baku, and to the old Zarathustrian temple near Baku, which was visited by pilgrims from Persia and India, over the centuries. Often the Ateşgah is mentioned before the natural fires, using it as proof for the long history of multicultural Azerbaijan. Excepting the pilgrims to Ateşgah, the first period that can legitimately be used for branding Baku and Azerbaijan as multicultural, is the First Oil boom, which began at the end of the 19th century.



Figure 1. The flames as the logo of the Eurovision Song Contest 2012 on the Maiden Tower in Baku. May 2012. © Melanie Krebs.

The Burning Oil – From the First Oil Boom to the “Dubai of the Caspian”

When the Russian Army seized the Southern Caucasus and destroyed the local Khanates in the early 19th century, Baku was not much more than a small port on the Caspian Sea, inhabited by Shiite Muslims, speaking a Turkish language. The rise of the city began when oil became more and more important as the fuel of industrialization and transport, in the middle of the 19th century. Baku’s expanding oilfields promised quick money for entrepreneurs and work for the impoverished rural population. The importance of the oil for the city’s development was represented in the Baku coat of arms, which was created in 1878, and shows three flames. It appears on many houses built during this time.

In only a few decades, Baku grew into a diverse – and very rich – city. According to the the Imperial Census of 1897, Baku had 182,897 inhabitants. Azeri Turks formed the largest ethnic group with 63,415 people, followed by Russians (45,510) and Armenians (22,233) (Altstadt 1992, 30). Other foreign communities were much smaller but did also shape the appearance of the growing city during this so-called First Oil boom (1870–1914). The facades of the late 19th-century Art Nouveau buildings, which are an important part of Baku’s self-representation as a modern European city, attest to this. The rapidly growing Christian communities became visible in the city through representative churches, like the Armenian Grigory Lusavorich Cathedral (built 1887), the Russian Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (built 1889, destroyed 1937) or the Protestant German church (built 1908). The churches and the Art Nouveau buildings attest to the multicultural influences Baku experienced during the First Oil boom.

The most important part of the city, in the early 20th century, according to Bakuvians, was the “Torgovaya” area (named after the main street of the Russian colonial city, the Torgovaya, today officially named after the medieval poet Nizami), which remains to this day the heart of the city. Together with the seaside promenade, the Bulvar, the Torgovaya area is an important part of the memories of Bakuvians. Interestingly, in the stories of elderly Bakuvians this area is especially linked to a Soviet modernity of the 1960’s and 1970’s when Azerbaijanis, Russians, Armenians and people from other parts of the Soviet Union lived peacefully together in Baku and enjoyed the summer nights and the jazz that was played in the clubs of the city center (Grant 2010; Rumyantsev and Huseynova 2011; Krebs 2013).

Maybe because of this perception in Baku’s population, this part of the city is ambivalently treated by the authorities – one part has been carefully

restored and presented in advertisement spots in and outside the country, the other part is to be destroyed by the new “Winter Park” and is less used for presentation in national as well as international media than other parts of the city. On the other hand, many new buildings and even old Soviet apartment blocks have been given the appearance of the First Oil boom mansions with facades of bright sandstone incorporating some distinct features on the plain facades. While not being the direct focus of branding strategies, the quarters looking like they were built around 1900’s are increasing in Baku, giving many inhabitants the feeling that this time period is highly valued, perhaps as the most important part of Baku’s history. Contemporary branding strategies often focus on the historical part of the Walled City, the old town, which is usually described as “medieval,” even though many houses there only date back to the end of the 19th century. Since 2000, this area, together with the Maiden Tower and the Shirvanshah Palace, has been placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

While for the builders of the First Oil boom it was enough to carve the symbolic flames in stone, the architects of the Second Oil boom aimed for a far more impressive landmark, demonstrating the importance of the oil. The three Flame Towers were designed by the architecture-engineering firm HOK, and built on the most prominent spot over Baku bay, the hill where one can find the Milli Meclis (the parliament) and the Martyr’s Alley, the resting place of the heroes of the new Azerbaijani State, those killed when the Soviet Army intervened in the unrest of January 1990, as well as the soldiers who died in the Karabakh war with Armenia. As new symbols of the city, they replaced the monumental statue of Kirov, which dominated the hill in Soviet Times, standing a bit taller than the towers today. The typical Baku postcard of the Soviet period showed the Kirov statue from behind looking down on the city and the bay. After independence, in 1996, a mosque was built by the Turkish State near the Martyr’s Alley, and now there are the Flame Towers. Today, more and more pictures appear with the perspective of looking up the hill, replacing the city with the Flame Towers as the main locus. The view from the Maiden Tower up the Asf Zeynalli Street, looking up one of the main axes of the Walled City to the Flame Towers, is especially popular⁴ (Figure 2).

The Flame Towers – containing one residential tower with 130 apartments spread over 39 floors, a hotel tower with 250 rooms and 61 apartments and an office tower – are not only architectural landmarks but also serve as the backdrop to the nightly light show displaying Azerbaijani national symbols over Baku: giant flames, the colors of the Azerbaijani flag, people carrying the flag. Thus, the Flame Towers perfectly combine the two aspects



Figure 2. View to the future: The Flame Towers on a construction fence in Sovietsky where the houses from 1900 were destroyed. March 2015. © Melanie Krebs.

of Azerbaijani nation branding: they are symbolically deeply rooted in nationalistic representation, but at the same time demonstrate the aspirations of the Azerbaijani government to make Baku the “Dubai of the Caspian,” full of post-modern architecture and malls full of famous global brands and fast-food chains. Valiyev discusses the problematic dream of Baku to become the “Dubai of the Caspian” and its implications for the development of the city. He comes to the conclusion that it is not possible, at least for the moment, to adopt the Dubai model for Baku, and suggests following the examples of European cities to preserve the cultural heritage of the city (Valiyev 2012, 639-640). Even if the idea of a “Dubai of the Caspian” is not very well known among the majority of Baku’s population, it is sometimes mentioned by young people as proof of Baku’s new era as a world city with skyscrapers, bars and malls, full of expensive foreign brands and fast food restaurants. In this, these young Bakuvians are not so far removed from the old Bakinty who also connect Baku’s *kozmpolitanism* with the availability of global music and Western commodities in Soviet times.

Many Bakuvians appreciate the new buildings as proof that the difficult period which followed the breakdown of the Soviet Union has passed, and are

not usually concerned whether the new buildings “look right.” Buchli (2007, 40) describes this rather uncertain attitude of Astana’s city dwellers towards the new buildings in their city. Nevertheless, there is a constant suspicion within the population of Baku that the Flame Towers were built too quickly and on ground that is not suitable for such large constructions, so that they could be in constant danger of causing a serious landslide that would destroy not only the towers, but the quarters beneath them as well. One of the interviewees, an elderly man (around 70) originally from Northern Iran, who has been living in Germany, cited the Flame Towers as the symbol of Baku today: “The whole new Baku thing is like these towers. Glittery, but with no basis, no roots, no reality. One day it will all crash and then there is nothing left of the old Baku.” In March, 2015 the suspicions seemed rooted in reality, when people claimed that the government had paid \$20 million to stabilize just one of the towers. Given that, at the time, oil prices were lower than expected, and inflation was increasing, it seemed as if the prophecy about the symbols of new Baku would become true sooner than expected.

Cosmopolitan Past – Tolerant Future

The often drawn connection between the “Land of Fire” and the Zarthustrian fire temple, the Ateşgah, where non-muslims from far away could practice their religion undisturbed by their Muslim neighbors, hints at the fact that in official Azerbaijani statements “multicultural” means “multireligious,” in general. The Christian and Jewish communities and their cultural heritage are far more often addressed and mentioned in official sources and tourist advertisements than ethnic and language based minorities such as Talysh, Lezgians, Ingeloyas or the remaining Russian community.⁵

The fact that the cohabitation of different religions is in particular an important argument in branding the multicultural Azerbaijan is made clear on the official website of the Azerbaijani president, www.president.az. This website includes press releases written not only in Azeri and Russian but also in English, clearly aiming at international readers (Azerbaijanis hear or read these statements in the media on a more or less daily basis anyway). Many press releases include statements on multiculturalism and tolerance. When, for example, the cultural center of the “Holy Myrrh Bearer” of the Russian Orthodox Church in Baku was opened in November 2013, the president of Azerbaijan used the event to stress the importance of multiculturalism in and for Azerbaijan in his speech:

Multiculturalism is a state policy of Azerbaijan. It’s also a way of life. ... Today Azerbaijan is already recognized as one of the world centers of multiculturalism. And we focus on these issues, because there are different approaches to the subject. ... In Azerbaijan, we believe that the politics and the state of the society prove that multiculturalism is alive.⁶

In the representation of the same event at the Russian Orthodox cultural center, the official website, www.president.az, offers a long chapter on the history of different religious monuments and their reconstruction after the Soviet Union. But even if religion and religious monuments are central to the web-article, its introduction clearly states that it is concerned not only with different religions but also with different nationalities:

Azerbaijan has always been a country where representatives of different religions and nationalities live in an atmosphere of brotherhood. In all periods of history, the Azerbaijani people showed the world an example of tolerance. ... The equality of all citizens before the law regardless of their religion and language, enshrined in the Constitution of the Azerbaijan Republic, is also a strong indication of tolerance in the country.⁷

Interestingly, the term that is stressed here is not “multiculturalism” but “tolerance”. Equality before the law is therefore not a human right essential for a democratic multicultural country but a special quality of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis, where “Azerbaijanis” denotes the country’s majority, the Muslim, ethnic Azerbaijanis. This quality is also communicated internationally through the project “Azerbaijan – the Address of Tolerance,” administered by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. The project includes an exhibition that was shown in Moscow, the UNESCO headquarters in Paris and at the UN headquarters in New York.⁸

Tolerance is clearly preferred by younger Azerbaijanis and people from other parts of Azerbaijan to Baku’s above-mentioned multiculturalism and, especially, cosmopolitanism. As one of my interviewees, a student who grew up in Baku but told me that he never really felt accepted by the “real Bakintsy,” because his parents came from the countryside, stated: being cosmopolitan means not to respect your own people. I am tolerant. I like everybody. They don’t like me. I think it is better to be tolerant than to be cosmopolitan (Student, 19).

This quotation shows that the discussion whether Baku should be (at least branded as) “multicultural”, “tolerant” or “cosmopolitan” is also a debate between a formerly elite urban class and an emerging new class in the city that does not want to forget its rural roots, and for whom the “nationality Azerbaijani” is more important than their belonging to the city. The praise for Azerbaijani tolerance mainly came from my younger interviewees, especially from those who were members of the official youth organizations. Quotations like the one above, extolling the long-standing and widely recognized tolerance of Azerbaijan came up frequently in interviews and conversations when students emphasized, that “tolerance is part of Azerbaijani national character”. Being tolerant is therefore part of the national identity of being Azerbaijani and a point of national pride. In this, once again the nation branding that aims to attract visitors and foreign investors and the nation building that wants to create an “imagined community” of Azerbaijanis connected by their tolerance come together.

When the old images of cosmopolitan Baku are not suitable for contemporary branding strategies, new images have to be found, but the absence of visibly diverse ethnic neighborhoods that would usually be used in branding to make a city attractive for Western visitors (such as ethnic restaurants, shops, events) make these images in the predominately Azerbaijani city hard to find. The proof of Baku’s still-existing openness to people from all over the world is seen in the 4% of the population, which is comprised of a diverse mixture of a well-off expatriate community from the United States and Europe, mostly working in the oil or construction business, on the one hand, and an increasing number of refugees or migrant workers from Afghanistan, the Northern Caucasian and the Central Asian republics, as well as Azeris from Iran and students from Turkey, on the other hand.⁹

The crucial difference between these groups and the Russian, Armenian and Jewish communities living in Baku during the Soviet Union is that they don’t see themselves as “Bakuvians”. The ones from Europe or the US are mostly sent to the city by their companies for a few years, living in gated communities, and hardly ever speaking Russian, not to mention Azeri. The contact with Azerbaijanis is therefore limited to their coworkers and a small group of Azerbaijanis who are also engaged in a transnational lifestyle, studying and working abroad, or going on holidays to Europe or Dubai. The refugees, migrant workers and students usually also don’t plan to stay, and even the Azeris from Iran consider themselves more of a transnational community moving between Iran, Azerbaijan and other countries than members of the urban community of Baku. Compared to the multiethnic Soviet backyards of the 1960’s and 1970’s, when people had a common Bakinty background,

belonging to the city more than to the nationalities written in their Soviet passports, foreigners today have no deep connection to the city. They do not create open cultural spaces representing their different cultures and multiethnic, multi-religious communities. The infrastructure of restaurants and bars that provide social spaces “just like home” for the well-off expat community in the city center is only accessible for a small group of young Bakuvians with enough money.

While the question of whether Baku is cosmopolitan, multicultural or tolerant is quite widely discussed, the problematic aspect of branding a country as “tolerant” was only mentioned to me by one interviewee, an academic who lived in Europe for ten years. He criticized the “tolerance branding” sharply:

They are so stupid. They have no experience abroad. If they had, they would know that “tolerance” is something foreigners hate. It just means “You are not at the same level with me. You are below me. But because I am so great, I tolerant you.” Who wants this? (Biologist, 35)¹⁰

History for the Future – the Future of History

The obvious connection with the burning oil and gas fields has problems for the nation branding experts: “land of fire” only directly refers to the area around Baku and excludes other parts of the country where there are no natural fires. Most examples of multicultural cohabitation also come from Baku and ignore other parts of Azerbaijan. The only exceptions are the former “German villages” around Ganca in Central Azerbaijan or the “Albanian church” in the village of Kiş, which in official Azerbaijani sources is directly connected to an important part of contemporary Azerbaijani historiography, the ancient Christian state on the territory of today’s Azerbaijan. Therefore, a new connotation arose, which is not just linked to Baku but to the whole country, claiming “Odlar yurdu” (“Land of Fire” in Azerbaijani) to be an ancient philosophical concept of the Azerbaijani nation. It is described on the Azerbaijani as well as English Wikipedia sites as a part of “classical Azerbaijani philosophy” which has “formed the basis for the world view of the Azerbaijani people and nations influenced by them since at least the Bronze Age”.¹¹ There are no classical Azerbaijani texts – and definitely none dating back to the Bronze Age – that prove the importance of this concept, and no Bakuvian I have spoken to has ever heard of it, but the political notion behind the idea of declaring the branding slogan to be a millennia-old philo-

sophical concept is very much in line with current attempts to anchor the Azerbaijani nation deeper in history – and even goes beyond the borders of the contemporary Republic of Azerbaijan to include the Diaspora and the Azeris in Northern Iran.

The notion of ancient history fits together with the focus on the oldest parts of Baku, in order to create a longer national history than the first national awakening in the 19th century. Until a few years ago, the most prominent landmark of Baku before the Second Oil boom, the Maiden Tower at the edge of the Walled City, was dated back to the 12th century. The discussion whether the foundation might be much older had already begun in Soviet times and resumed again around 2005 (Bretanitsky 1970, 28-30; Ibrahimov 2008). But while all of this research ultimately puts the construction time around the 12th century AD, new research now presented by Azerbaijani historians focuses more on branding. According to this research, the oldest foundations of Maiden Tower date back to Sumerian times.¹² At a conference in Berlin in November, 2014 the Azerbaijani participants insisted on dating the Maiden Tower at least to the 8th or 7th century BC, which is also claimed in the new information poster in front of the Maiden Tower. The connection to the excavation of Erebuni, the Urartian fortress, in Yerevan seems likely: if Armenia's capital can provide evidence for a settlement as long ago as around 800 BC, then Baku has to have at least the same age or – even older – 3,000 years of settlement history.

Another important part of creating a brand for the old multiculturalism of Azerbaijan is the recourse to the above-mentioned ancient state of Caucasian Albania, a political entity that existed in various political and geographical forms between the 4th century BC and the 8th century AD. As a Christian state since the 4th century AD, it is often cited to demonstrate a Christian history of Azerbaijan that has no connection to Armenian Christians. In fact, on the website of the Azerbaijani embassy in Germany, the Albanian Christians were described as “the ancestors of today's Azerbaijanis.” The Turkish heritage of Azerbaijanis is not mentioned at all.¹³

Even if the historiography of Caucasian Albania and its official usage in Azerbaijan is mainly concentrated on Azerbaijan's claims on Karabakh and the conflict with Armenia, it has also been used to deal with the last remaining relics of the Armenian past in Baku: the Armenian Cathedral in the center of Baku did not appear on maps for a while and has become less and less visible in the public consciousness. Even if older Bakuvians – Azerbaijanis, Russian and Armenians – still mention the cathedral in conversations about old Baku, as a symbol of the strength and self-assurance of the former Armenian community, the Cathedral as a material landmark within the city cen-

ter seems to be fading: directions towards this area tend to refer to the coffee shop on the other side of the street or the presidential library next to the cathedral rather than to it, directly. This could be observed in the Fall of 2014, on a map newly installed throughout the city center, whose labelling of the “Q̇dim Alban Kilise” (the old Albanian Church) transferred the 1887 built church to a mysteriously distant past. Interestingly, as of March 2015, the entry about the St. Georg Cathedral on the Azerbaijani Wikipedia, still speaks of the Armenian Church, without references to any Albanian heritage.¹⁴

Conclusion

Even if Baku, as the capital, is an important part of the national branding strategy the declared focus of this strategy is on Azerbaijan as a nation. The nation branding of Azerbaijan no longer regards Baku as a cosmopolitan city shaped by its unique population mixture, but brands Azerbaijan as multicultural and especially tolerant country because of its supposedly typical centuries-old tradition of tolerance towards foreign cultures and religions. The nation branding of Azerbaijan works with an internationally widespread idea of a vibrant community consisting of people from all over the world for the purposes of place branding, but avoids the even more frequently used notion of “cosmopolitanism” (Binnie 2006; Dinnie 2008). If there is any special branding of Baku, as a city, it is the attempt to create an image of Baku as one of the world’s great cities, but it is a only a small part within the nation branding strategy.

The branding concept of tolerance, proclaimed by the government and adopted by many of the younger generation, is based on a strong Azerbaijani national identity, which does not single out Baku as distinct from the rest of Azerbaijan. For many younger Bakuvians branding Azerbaijan instead of Baku alone feels natural, while the idea of branding Azerbaijan (or even belonging to the nation state as a whole) is still unusual for elderly inhabitants. With regard to this change from an urban to a national habitus, the shift demarcated is one from “cosmopolitanism”, which is used by the older Bakintsy to describe the Soviet-era belief that “nationality was not important,” to “multiculturalism” and “tolerance,” terms that instead stress the difference between nations, which might share an urban space, but which are not part of the same urban community. Here, and through the reconstruction of Baku as a postmodern city comparable to Dubai or Singapore, nation branding and nation building are inseparably intertwined. Videos and images of buildings like the Flame Towers or the Crystal Hall present Baku to an international audience, and send a mostly successful (if not completely unscrutinized) mes-

sage of the nation's strength and international reputation to the Azerbaijani population. The attempts to create a history of Azerbaijan that is much older than was taught in Soviet schools, seems to be much more difficult in gaining acceptance by Baku's population, maybe because it is much less visible in Azerbaijani media and everyday life in Baku, than the other branding attempts, which are directly connected to the changing appearance of the city and the identity of its inhabitants.

Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the problems of reproducing Orientalist and Cold War images of "the Other" in nation branding. It is also not possible to discuss here how place branding works in detail and whether it is ethical to treat nations (not only a country but all of its citizens) as a commodity, or to create successful brands for countries under an autocratic system.
2. "Bakinty" is a term that is usually used, not for all inhabitants of Baku, but for the Soviet middle class, which distinguishes itself clearly from newcomers who often are "not able to live in a city" as many interviewees explained.
3. The deal was not left uncriticized by European media. For example: <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/may/01/azerbaijan-sponsorship-atletico-madrid-spectacular-success>.
4. For older pictures see Darieva 2011, 166-176 (Figure 4 and Figure 5). As well as Huseynova 2012, 78 for Figure 2.
5. There are 34 press releases in which the Jewish community is either addressed directly or mentioned as proof of multiculturalism, and 42 press releases, which address or mention the Christian community, but only 4 mention the Lezgians as an ethnic minority living in the North of Azerbaijan, and 5 the Talysh people in the South; none addresses or mentions the Georgian minority or the Russian community. All information from: www.president.az (last accessed on March 2, 2014). Russians and Georgians are addressed only by their characterization as "Christians" but not as ethnic or language minorities. On the other hand, it is arguable that "Jewish" is still viewed, after the Soviet tradition, as a nationality than as a religion.

6. “Multiculturalism is a state policy of Azerbaijan.” In: News. Az, 16 November 2013. <<http://news.az/articles/official/84383>>.
7. “Ilham Aliyev attended the opening of the Orthodox Religious-Cultural Centre of the Baku and Azerbaijan Diocese” (15 November 2013), <<http://en.president.az/articles/10086>> .
8. <http://www.heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/content/blog/139/Azerbaijan-%E2%80%93the-address-of-tolerance> .
9. This group might be even larger than the recorded 4%, since official Azerbaijani statistics only show the number of people registered as living in the country permanently. They hardly reflect the real numbers of Azerbaijanis living abroad or foreigners living in Azerbaijan. <<http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/demographic/en/index.shtml#>> .
10. This quote comes from a private conversation about neoliberal policies and urban changes in Baku over the last decade. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.
11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Land_of_Fire The English and the Azerbaijani versions are quite similar. Notably, the first English version is from June, 2014, while the Azerbaijani version was written one month later. [http://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odlar_Yurdu_\(konsept\)](http://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odlar_Yurdu_(konsept))..
12. [http://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Q%C4%B1z_qalas%C4%B1_\(Bak%C4%B1\)](http://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Q%C4%B1z_qalas%C4%B1_(Bak%C4%B1))
13. <http://www.azembassy.de/index.php/geschichte>
14. [http://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BCq%C9%99dd%C9%99s_Qriqori_kils%C9%99si_\(Bak%C4%B1\)](http://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%BCq%C9%99dd%C9%99s_Qriqori_kils%C9%99si_(Bak%C4%B1))

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