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ry. In view of this, and also due to forced cessation of rail and road communications with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (blockaded for 20 years) and of corresponding transit traffic, Azerbaijan's budget annually loses colossal amounts.

C o n c l u s i o n

The past year was a period of even more active (compared to previous years) implementation of concrete plans and programs designed to ensure macroeconomic stability with rapid economic growth, carry out structural reforms, improve the business climate, attract investment into the non-oil sectors, increase the country's export potential (primarily through oil), accelerate production growth in the non-oil sectors, and significantly increase real household income. On the whole, Azerbaijan has created all the necessary conditions and prerequisites for further dynamic development of the economy and a solution of social problems.

By many criteria, Azerbaijan can be ranked among the most attractive investment destinations. The strategy of socially oriented market transformation pursued by its authorities has created conditions enabling the country, in cooperation with other friendly countries and international financial institutions, to accelerate economic development and successfully integrate into the world economy.

RELIGION

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Stability in the religious sphere and the state's readiness to talk to the believers bred hope that 2007 would be a year of consistent and predictable developments. The year 2006, which went down in history with the "cartoon scandal" and insulting remarks of Pope Benedict XVI, two events that caused an upsurge of religious feelings in the Muslim world, demonstrated that Azeri society could control the religious processes fairly effectively. The disagreements between

the State Committee for the Work with Religious Associations and the Caucasian Muslims' Board, the country's religious center, that has been on the religious agenda for nearly five years, were finally settled. On the whole, the relations between the government and the religious organizations were conducive to a dialog and joint efforts to settle legal and organizational issues.

The year 2007, however, was not marked by discussion of the amendments to the laws on free-

dom of conscience or further improvement of the system of religious enlightenment and education. The unexpected developments bared deep-cutting

contradictions in the relations between the state and religion and added urgency to problems that called for profound investigation and balanced approaches.

Religion-State Relations: Facts and Figures

According to official sources, 96 percent of the country's population is Muslim; the remaining 4 percent are followers of the Russian Christian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Mountain Jews, etc. A small part of the republic's population is genuinely religious: people choose their religion for cultural and ethnic reasons. About 70 percent of the Muslim population are Shi'ites, and about 30 percent comprise Sunnis. The Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and the Mountain Jews belong to what are described as traditional religions.

The State Committee for the Work with Religious Associations (hereafter the Committee) set up in 2001 to carry out the state's religious policy is the central structure of the republic's executive branch. Its functions are varied, ranging from registration of religious communities and offering expert opinions about the imported religious literature to coordination and control of what executive structures at all levels are doing in the religious sphere.

As of 1 January, 2008, 426 religious communities completed the process of state registration (compared with 370 by the end of January 2007). There are 31 non-Islamic communities among them: 13 Protestant; 4 Christian Orthodox (including 1 Albanian-Udin); 3 Molokan; 3 are comprised of Mountain Jews; 3 of European Jews; 1 of Georgian Jews; 3 Bahai; and 1 Krishna's Conscience.

The mono-ethnic Armenian population in the territory of the illegally self-proclaimed "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" (where the Armenian Apostolic Church enjoys a privileged position) is Monophysitic. Periodically, several of the European human rights organizations report on encroachments on freedom of conscience in Nagorno-Karabakh and persecutions of the Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses.¹ The Muslim Azeri population driven from Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenia-occupied territories of Azerbaijan cannot return to their native lands.

Under the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Freedom of Conscience of 1992, the Caucasian Muslims' Board (CMB) is the historical core that unites all the Islamic communities in the country. The law demands that the registration proceed on the strength of CMB written permission; the process takes a lot of time yet practically none of the community heads complains.

In 2007, the Committee, together with the heads of the executive structures of the republic's cities and districts set up commissions for religious affairs to act as mobile groups. In 2007, the state structures functioning in the religious sphere worked harder and more efficiently; consequently, religious communities across the country demonstrated better results. In July-December, the Committee organized 138 training seminars in Baku and the republic's regions to encourage religious tolerance and explain the details of the existing laws on freedom of conscience. For the first time in the country's independent development, the republic acquired a map of the religious facilities on its territory.

Between November 2007 and November 2008, on the basis of an agreement signed between the Committee and the republic's Ministry of Justice, the institutions of the penitentiary system will work

¹ [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=866].

together to organize educational training seminars in Baku. An agreement was reached with the Ministry of Education to organize training seminars on the role of religion in secular society in the country's educational establishments.

In 2007, the Committee checked 750 religious publications and prevented the import of 140 publications promoting religious intolerance and religious discrimination. According to official data, in 2007, the number of religious books imported into the country increased compared with the previous years.

The state remains resolved to oppose religious extremism, intolerance, and abuse of religion for political means. This is not an easy task because the country lacks an efficient system of spiritual and moral education rooted in the traditional religious values. So far religious education remains a spontaneous process in which nontraditional groups supported from abroad by all kinds of Islamic and non-Islamic centers play the main role. The official clergy remains passive; it is not actively involved in the educational sphere, thus allowing the nontraditional trends to catch the state's and public's attention: their activities are closely supervised by the law-enforcement structures and relentlessly criticized by the official clerical circles.

There are public associations engaged in educational projects designed to inculcate the principles of an inter-religious and inter-cultural dialog. The Azerbaijanian Association of Teachers of English and the U.S. Embassy in Baku pooled forces to start free English-language lessons for religious children and teenagers from all corners of the country.²

Late in April, the country received more confirmation of the high level of religious tolerance: a Catholic church was consecrated in Baku; the first stone of a new Jewish educational Chabad Or Avner center was laid, the ceremony was attended by First Lady, deputy of the Milli Mejlis, and President of the Heydar Aliev Foundation Mehriban Alieva and President of the Federation of CIS Jewish Communities, President of the International Or Avner Foundation L. Levaev. The new complex will occupy 15 thousand sq m and will include 11 administrative and other buildings and a two-story synagogue.³ The first Jewish school in Baku was opened in 2003 with the support of late President Heydar Aliev.

The incident at the Georgian St. George Church in the Gakh District cannot be described as typical for Azerbaijan. Its priest Georgian citizen I. Janbazashvili was given a month to register as a citizen of Azerbaijan to be able to continue his clerical duties when his temporal official registration as a Georgian citizen in Azerbaijan had expired. According to official information, the priest misinformed the Georgian Patriarchate about the closure of the church, thus causing misunderstanding between the Azeri and Georgian sides. As soon as the situation was clarified, the priest was recalled to Georgia to be replaced with Georgi Abasashvili.⁴

The Caucasian Muslim's Board: Changes are Imminent

Having settled all the differences in relations with the Committee, CMB Chairman Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade strengthened his position: wider cooperation with the Committee helped the CMB to bring the Islamic communities together, achieve better understanding between the state and the believers, and improve the situation in the religious sphere. In 2007, the CMB joined forces

² [<http://www.express.com.az/second.asp?id=80561>].

³ [<http://russian.fjc.ru/news/newsArticle.asp?AID=525681&scope=4242&NewsType=228967>].

⁴ See: 525-ci qozet, 30 October, 2007.

with the Committee and the local executive structures to organize meetings in the Sheki-Shirvan (Sheki, Gakh, Zakataly, Belakan), Northern (Siazan, Devechi, Kuba, Kusary, Khachmaz), and Southern (Biliasuvar, Jalilabad, Masally, Lenkoran, Lerik, Yardymly) zones.

At the same time, not all politicians, members of the intelligentsia, and journalists were completely satisfied with the CMB's performance. Indeed, the professional level of most of the mullahs and their behavior (they took payments for religious rituals—a practice strictly forbidden by the Shari'a) left much to be desired and undermined public trust in the Muslim clergy as a whole. The number of people dissatisfied with the organization of hajj grew by the year together with the number of pilgrims. Early in 2007, one of the groups did not return home on time: the failure received wide media coverage and caused a lot of ill feelings in society. As a follow-up on 5 March, the head of the CMB dismissed A. Bagirov, who was in charge of the CMB department of international relations, and several other CMB employees from their posts.⁵

Late in May, public attention was once again riveted on the Muslim clergy: the CMB banned the reading of the azan over public address systems. The faithful and the intelligentsia were puzzled by the attempt to restrict one of the most attractive Islamic traditions. The mosques on the whole obeyed, but the Muslims remained convinced that the national cultural tradition would be restored.

They proved right. A week after President Ilham Aliiev's personal intercession—he pointed out during his personal meeting with the CMB head that spiritual values and traditions and the rights of the faithful should be respected—the ban was lifted. At a press conference, A. Pashazade explained that the ban had been instituted on the request of G. Abutalybov, head of the executive power of Baku.⁶ Today, the sound volume is lowered near hospitals, schools, and other similar institutions.

While the public was discussing the volume of the azan, the religious situation in Azerbaijan and some other neighboring states was discussed at the Parliamentary Assembly of NATO that met in Portugal on 25-29 May. Dutch deputy Bert Middel, who spoke at the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security on State and Religion in the Black Sea Region, criticized the CMB as a "corrupt institution."⁷

The CMB responded with a press release in which the Muslim leaders expressed their surprise at NATO becoming an "expert in religious affairs." The document pointed out that the CMB's activities were repeatedly highly assessed by government delegations of many states (some of them NATO members), while religious tolerance in Azerbaijan was often recommended as a pattern to be followed in other countries.⁸ Many of the republic's religious and state figures sided with the CMB. On 19-22 September, a delegation of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly paid a regular fact-finding visit to Azerbaijan to familiarize itself with the religious situation and assess its impact on regional security.

The May events eclipsed, to a certain extent, the fact that the leaders of Russia recognized the merits of Sheikh-ul-Islam A. Pashazade with a Friendship Order awarded on 22 May for his contribution to friendly ties between the peoples of Russia and Azerbaijan. His international activities deserved this high appraisal: in 2007, he paid more than ten visits to foreign countries and attended several international conferences and symposia. In mid-August, he was elected Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Muslims of the Caucasus set up with the active participation of the CMB and the International Islamic Mission to improve interaction between the spiritual administrations of the Muslims of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, and other CIS countries.⁹

⁵ [<http://www.dayaz.com/news/society/72559.html>].

⁶ *Ekho*, 30 May, 2007.

⁷ [<http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=1164>].

⁸ See: *Həftə içi*, 5 June, 2007.

⁹ See: *Zerkalo*, 16 August, 2007.

Some experts, however, believed that the CMB's activities were not free from shortcomings that called for radical changes. Indeed, it had neither a periodical nor an Internet resource; it was practically excluded from mass charities; it was not prominent in religious education, or in drafting curricula and teaching aids in Azeri. The CMB officials kept away from the media, they rarely commented on the country's religious life and the threat of nontraditional faiths; their criticism of the violations of laws by the Americans in Iraq was not prominent enough.

In fact, the structure needs qualified Islamic theologians, historians, and philosophers, as well as specialists in religious studies. What it did to assess the level of knowledge of the local mullahs did nothing to improve the level of their training. There are fears that the invitation (formulated in the middle of 2007) to discuss replacing the traditional funeral feast in tents erected in courtyards or in the middle of the street with ceremonies limited to special rooms in mosques¹⁰ will do nothing to improve the situation: it will merely create a monopoly on the ritual services.

The CMB leaders are working hard to boost the authority of the traditional clergy: people are shifted from one post to another; new people are appointed to some of the mosques. In mid-July, akhund of the Sultan Ali mosque A. Nagiev was removed from his post, allegedly due to ill health. According to the media, he was removed because he had been too lenient toward the foreign missionaries who paid for renovation of the mosque.¹¹ It was in this mosque that the faithful refused to obey the CMB ban on the use of the public address system.

Nontraditional Trends: What Sort of Islam do We Need in Azerbaijan?

In 2007, the country's leaders were consistently pursuing the policy of "equidistance" of all religious groups from the government. There is no division into traditional and nontraditional religions in the legal sphere, but in recent years it became clear that the state should extend at least some support to the traditional religions. Some of the religious ideas that penetrated Azerbaijan in the last two decades threaten personal and public security; some of the religious groups promote a hazardous way of life that leads to self-isolation of their followers and undermines their psychic health. Bans practiced by certain other faiths limit the range of acceptable medical services, thus endangering the physical health of their followers and their families. Some of the Protestant communities preach evasion of military service: this cannot be accepted in a country, 20 percent of the territory of which is occupied by Armenia.

When the Protestant communities extended the range of their influence in 2007, the government still remained riveted to the three most active Islamic trends: the radical Shi'ites (who want to turn Azerbaijan into an Imami state), the Sunnis (including moderate Salafites and radical Kharijites known across the post-Soviet expanse as Wahhabis), and the Nurculars (followers of 20th-century Turkish thinker Said Nursî).

In April, information appeared (it emerged from time to time) that in Sumgayit, Devechi, and Ganja the Committee confiscated books about Said Nursî and his teaching in order to conduct an experts' examination of them. This trend has remained in the center of attention since the early 1990s and was recently heated by the Nurculars' obvious achievements in education and business. As followers of

¹⁰ See: *Ekho*, 30 August, 2007.

¹¹ See: *525-ci qəzet*, 21 July, 2007.

the Hanafi madhhab, they avoid political involvement and profess moderate religious ideas. As distinct from the followers of other nontraditional Islamic trends, the Nurculars are well-organized; this cannot but cause concern among the experts who cannot exclude the Nurculars' future involvement in politics.

The pressure on the pro-Turkic religious trend in Azerbaijan coincided with the pre-term parliamentary election in Turkey, which was won, with a wide margin, by the Justice and Development Party known for its sympathies toward Islam. Simultaneously, the followers of Said Nursî had to cope with similar problems in the Russian Federation: on 21 May, the Koptevo District Court of the Northern Administrative Region of Moscow banned 14 philosophic books of the Turkish ideologist, which were added to the federal list of extremist literature.¹²

Throughout the year, the media reported from different corners of the country that officials of the law-enforcement structures were detaining bearded Muslims and forcing them to shave. The largest number of complaints came from the Zakataly District. Late in October-early November, the trend reached Baku. The local newspapers responded with articles entitled "The Wahhabis Hunt" (*Ekspress*, 30 October) and "The Barbers of the Police" (*Ekho*, 9 November).

On the whole, in 2007 much was done to institute new forms of cooperation with the nontraditional Islamic groups that are gradually fitting into Azeri reality. Despite certain unpleasant incidents, they continued functioning in full accordance with the law on freedom of conscience. The country's religious balance will probably go on changing; the process might even become arduous if the official clergy fails to organize religious education in full conformity with the national cultural-historical traditions and society's objective requirements.

Opposition to Religiously Motivated Extremism

The state and society negatively respond to many of the nontraditional trends because some of the groups are radically minded. Religious radicalism is heated, among other things, by inadequate religious education, social and economic hardships, the armed conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Middle East and Afghanistan, the Western life-style imposed on the Azeri society, and individual cases of religious intolerance. The mosques work hard to prevent radicalization of religion and uproot the first shoots of radical ideas. The radically minded Muslims, however, do not frequent mosques: they are convinced that akhunds lack faith or are even apostates. These people prefer to congregate in private homes. This explains why on many occasions followers of the nontraditional trends come face to face with law-enforcement officers who know little or nothing about religious subtleties and are occasionally unduly cruel.

At the same time, in 2007, it became obvious that religious radicalism exceeds the limits of banal everyday intolerance to develop into extremism and terrorist activities. Here is an example. Late in October, Lieutenant of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan K. Asadov left his unit deployed in the Hanlar District armed with four sub-machine guns, one machine gun, 20 hand grenades, and a great number of cartridges. According to official sources, he had come into collision with a group of radical Wahhabis. As soon as the news about the potential threat of terrorist acts became public knowledge, the American and British embassies suspended their work and some of the foreign oil companies closed their offices.

¹² [<http://www.rg.ru/2007/12/15/extremizm-spisok-dok.html>].

The National Security officers acted promptly and professionally: on 27 October, several of the suspected terrorists were arrested in a private house in Mashtaga (outside Baku). One of them tried to resist arrest and was killed. The search revealed part of the stolen ammunition; the rest was found later during operational and investigative measures in the Ismaili District.

On 30 October, the band attacked a LUKoil fill-up station; one of the assistants was gravely wounded. On 9 November, K. Asadov and another member of the band were disarmed by officers of the National Security Ministry.¹³

On 2-3 November, the Ministry detained members of another armed band in Sumgayit suspected of ties with international terrorist organizations; it was headed by an Arab called Abu Jafar.¹⁴

On 14 December, the press service of the National Security Ministry announced that it had prevented an attempted coup and liquidated a criminal organization called the Northern Army of Imam Mehdi. Its members, headed by S. Dadashbeyli, were detained in January on the suspicion of cooperation with the Iranian special services and selling classified materials to the Iranian side.¹⁵

The statement accompanied by a documentary that showed the criminals who admitted their guilt caused a veritable storm among the Iranian officials. On 18 December, Iranian Ambassador was invited to the Foreign Ministry to achieve an agreement that the Iranian side would be supplied with relevant information.¹⁶

The above means that in 2007 the level of extremist activity of radical religious groups reached a height unprecedented in the country's history. Today, the state limits its opposition to religiously motivated extremism to an effort to cut short the illegal activities of radical groups and stop the flow of religious literature of a destructive or extremist nature into the country. This will hardly help: access to the Web is widening, which is rendering such measures ineffective. Indeed, there is any number of radical Internet sites in Azeri, Turkish, and Russian.

This makes an efficient system of religious education indispensable: it alone can restore the lost moral landmarks in all spheres of social life. To achieve this, the legal foundation of cooperation between state and religious organizations should be improved; religious educational organizations should receive financial and economic support to improve their efficiency. At the same time, the traditional religious centers should more actively cooperate with nonofficial religious leaders; so far they stay away from the academic community and creative intelligentsia, the very people whose contribution to religious education might prove invaluable.

Religion and Society: On the Road toward Mutual Understanding and Agreement

In 2007, the public did not change its attitude toward religion to any noticeable extent. People remained very interested in the traditional religions present in the republic: they have obviously reassessed religion's historical role and its post-communist status. The level of religious awareness has been gradually rising under the combined impact of the spiritual and moral values of Islam and national cultural traditions.

¹³ [http://www.mns.gov.az/news/10.11.2007.21.16_ru.html].

¹⁴ [http://www.mns.gov.az/news/06.11.2007.21.18_ru.html].

¹⁵ [http://www.mns.gov.az/news/14.12.2007.17.38_az.html].

¹⁶ [<http://www.day.az/news/society/101918.html>].

According to a sociological poll of June 2007, only 5 percent of young people think of themselves as agnostics; 64 percent of the polled believe in God, but do not perform religious rites; 11 percent perform religious rites from time to time; 13 percent perform religious rites regularly; and 42 percent favored either complete or partial (in the sphere of family law) introduction of the Shari'a into the country's legal system.¹⁷

In 2007, the number of Azeri pilgrims to Mecca (about 6,000) was higher than before even though the cost of hajj increased.¹⁸

As an increasingly greater number of people join religious groups of all kinds, their rights as believers overlap the rights of other citizens to create previously unknown forms of social relations and to call for readjustments in civil legislation.

In the latter half of 2007, society actively discussed whether Muslim women could wear hijabs in state organizations and educational establishments. Human rights activists regularly informed society of cases when students in hijabs were not allowed to attend lectures at higher educational institutions, but the resultant disagreements were invariably resolved in favor of the faithful.

On 25 September, press secretary of the Ministry of Education B. Huseyn-zade said in his interview to Radio Liberty: "There are no legal bans on the hijab in Azerbaijan. Muslim women can wear them in public places; the Ministry of Education does not ban the hijab from educational establishments."¹⁹

Some Azeri politicians, however, believed that hijabs should be banned from state institutions as contradicting the secular nature of the Azerbaijan Republic. Chairperson of the Permanent Human Rights Commission of the Milli Mejlis R. Aslanova said that the instances where students in hijabs were not allowed to attend lectures could not be interpreted as violations of human rights.²⁰

The parliament shifted the hijab issue to the legal sphere at its winter session. Some of the deputies, including speaker O. Asadov, disagreed with the ban on the hijab in schools and higher educational establishments, however the ban remained in the draft Law on Education passed in first reading. The problem has not been settled yet, which gave the heads of several public associations a chance to ask the Milli Mejlis to remove the ban from the draft law.²¹

The developments of 2007 confirmed that nontraditional religious trends figured prominently in the religious revival, although their membership grew at a much slower pace than before. At the same time, the attitude of Azeri citizens to religion can be viewed in the light of their realization of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. Freedom of conscience is closely connected with the degree to which all other civil, political, and economic freedoms are ensured. This explains the religious tolerance that Azeri society, which craves for democratic changes, demonstrates toward religious communities. Religious tolerance in Azerbaijan is also a product of the country's historical and cultural traditions formed during the many centuries of coexistence among different confessions in the country's territory.

Nearly all the social groups negatively respond to the attempts of those who abuse religion in their political interests. Few people agree with the attempts to move religion outside the limits of personal religious experience. This explains why in the last two decades the nontraditional groups, backed by big money and political support from certain states, gathered a mere handful of followers.

¹⁷ The poll was conducted by the method of random sampling among young people (18 to 30 years) by the ADAM sociological service under the FAR Center project with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy of the United States. The total number of respondents was 1,000 (see: *Ekho*, 4 August, 2007).

¹⁸ See: *Zerkalo*, 22 November, 2007.

¹⁹ *Ekho*, 27 September, 2007.

²⁰ [<http://news.trend.az/index.shtml?show=news&newsid=1101867&lang=AZ>].

²¹ See: *Zerkalo*, 29 December, 2007.

Conclusion

In 2007, the religious situation in Azerbaijan underwent little change; the believers and their associations enjoyed practically unlimited freedom ensured by the law on freedom of conscience; the state structures kept control over those radical structures that were involved in illegal activities and acted on the basis of religious-political ideologies. Having demonstrated that it was resolved to fight all manifestations of religious intolerance and religiously-motivated extremism, the state encouraged a general atmosphere of religious tolerance.

The nontraditional religions with no hierarchies displayed a lot of activity, acting through their ramified networks of horizontal ties. Very much as before, followers of the traditional religions tried to compensate for their passivity (particularly in the sphere of religious education) with warnings against what they saw as excessive popularity of the nontraditional religions, which, they argued, threatened the country's national interests and the nation's ethnic and cultural specifics.

Those problems in the religious sphere that became aggravated in 2007 could not be settled in haste: any solution calls for a coordinated mechanism for carrying out the state's religious policy and ensuring wider and deeper cooperation between the administrative structures and religious communities. The Muslim clergy should be reformed; the country needs a multi-level system of religious enlightenment and education, as well as a better mechanism for curbing illegal religious activities.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Introduction

In 2007, Azerbaijan's foreign policy maintained a steady course aimed at meeting the country's main priorities, the most important of which were improving relations with Armenia, implementing regional energy, transport and communication line projects, and integrating into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

A special accent was placed on strengthening the state's international position, which was

objectively promoted by the domestic and foreign political situation that had developed by 2007. The stronger domestic processes enhanced by the discernible economic growth and stabilization of political power in Azerbaijan were accompanied in the foreign policy sphere by more acute competitive trends in interrelations among the main Eurasian power centers, which, along with everything else, led to an increase in the republic's geopolit-