

The right to live in the city

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Abstract

Purpose – Moral values and behavioural codes that governed the urban life and the appropriation of urban spaces changed significantly in Baku over the last two decades leading to conflicts over the right behaviour in the city and about the question who has the right to set the rules in public spaces. The purpose of this paper is to explore the current political as well as social rules that govern the public spaces in Baku and how they are discussed in order that the city should appear “European” in contrast to “oriental”.

Design/methodology/approach – The author focuses on everyday practices of people acting in the public sphere, how they use the space and which discussions emerge around different behaviour in public places. The paper is based on observations and interviews the author made between August 2010 and May 2012.

Findings – The paper shows new ways of appropriation of public space and dealing with social as well as official control.

Originality/value – The paper presents new research on a quickly changing post-Soviet city.

Keywords Azerbaijan, Social change, Baku, Post-socialist capitals, Urban studies

Paper type Research paper

The material (re-)construction taking place in post-Soviet cities, and especially in the capitals of newly independent states, is breath taking. Soviet buildings – sometimes whole quarters – are being erased and new post-modern buildings are being built. The marketplaces that emerged during the transformation period are being replaced by glittering malls. In the shadow of these material transformations, immense social changes have also taken place following the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The moral values and behavioural codes that governed urban life and the appropriation of urban spaces have changed significantly, leading to conflicts over correct behaviour in the city and about who has the right to write the rules for public spaces.

In the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku, just as in other capitals in the Caucasus and Central Asia, frequent conflicts occur between established city dwellers, who describe themselves as Bakintsy, and newcomers over the correct rules of behaviour in the city. In many conversations with Bakintsy it seems as if they find it more disturbing that their neighbours from the countryside do not use rubbish bins than the fact that their house might be demolished in the coming year in order to make way for a post-modern skyscraper.

Conflicts between longstanding city dwellers and newcomers and the feeling of the former that they have lost their city have been widely described in anthropological research, not only for Baku (Darieva, 2011; Grant, 2010; Sayfutdinova, 2009), but also for other cities (Fehlings, 2014 and in this volume for Yerevan; Kosmarski, 2011 for Tashkent; Flynn and Kosmarskaya, 2012 for Bishkek). All these researchers tend to adopt the perspective of the established city dwellers in describing the newcomers as social and cultural others and their appearance as the beginning of a new (usually worse and uncultured) time for the longstanding city dwellers, who feel defenceless and can only react by avoiding places where they no longer feel at home. In contrast to this perception, I argue that the Bakintsy were actually quite successful at defending their urban habitus as representing the standard for correct behaviour in public spaces. I analyse why it is so important for them to maintain control over what they consider correct urban behaviour and how they try to “get their city back” by enforcing their own rules.



This appears to be an appropriate case for which to use Lefebvre's idea of the "right to the city" to analyse the conflicts (Lefebvre, 1996). But Lefebvre, as well as those academics who discussed the "right to the city" and the use of this phrase in academia and beyond (Harvey, 2008; Souza, 2010), used as examples more or less democratic societies where various actors could at least speak out for their "right to the city". But the conflicts between old and new city dwellers in public space in Baku are situated on a level below the discourses usually described and analysed under the umbrella of the "right to the city". In Baku there is no open discourse about the destruction and reconstruction of the city centre, no various actors from the government and economic and civil society are trying to shape public spaces. Rather, there is one single stakeholder, the national government (Valieyev, 2013). When inhabitants of Baku try to defend their city and (re-)gain what they consider a humane environment, they concentrate on the micro level of behaviour among neighbours, defending a certain urban habitus that has roots in a shared Soviet urban culture. I use the habitus concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1987) and Norbert Elias. I also refer to Elias's work "The Established and Outsiders" (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1990) which analyses the relationship between old and new dwellers in Winston Parva, a British industrial town. The situation Elias and Scotson found in Winston Parva, where internal migration led to social problems, is in many ways comparable to the situation in Baku.

It might appear as if Baku lacks the urban qualities which allow for a wide range of diverse life styles and behaviours (Park and Burgess, 1925/1984; Wirth, 1938; Häußermann, 1995), but I argue that in comparison to the rest of the country, Baku indeed allows the possibility of some diversity.

Research on Baku often focuses on the cosmopolitan city as it is remembered from the 1960s and 1970s, and how this remembered Baku changed after independence and the second oil boom (Grant, 2010; Darieva, 2011; Krebs, 2011, 2013; Rumyansev and Huseynova, 2011). This paper also starts with the idea of the "lost (Soviet) city" but goes beyond this by exploring ways of regaining the city through control and a feeling of moral superiority, and asks how young people with no memory of the Soviet city perceive and appropriate urban spaces. Considering the situation in Azerbaijan, it is also a study of people trying to exercise their "right to the city" under an authoritarian regime that does not allow any debate about urban planning issues in any form, by defending a symbolic city.

Method

To analyse the conflicts between old and new city dwellers, I focus on everyday practices of people acting in the public sphere, how they use the space and what discussions arise around different kinds of behaviour in public places. The observations, informal conversations and interviews quoted in this paper took place between August 2010 and May 2012. The interviews focused on how people perceived urban changes in Baku and how they feel in public spaces today. Most interviews took place in public spaces, in parks or cafes on the Bulvar or in the Torgovaya area – the places which play an important role in the everyday life as well as in the memory of many Bakuivians. I let my interviewees decide where the interview about their relationship with their city took place, and with a few exceptions (mostly people who had an office where they could meet me) people suggested a meeting point in this area. For young people it was a place where they would hang out anyway, while elderly Bakinty often used the opportunity to show me their city and recount their memories of special places when we passed them. Sometimes this led to a longer "go-along", as described by Kusenbach (2003), but usually

it was focused on three or four places very close to each other. Those of my informants who described themselves as Bakinty were between 35 and 75 years old and came from Azerbaijani, Russian and Armenian backgrounds, while those who did not describe themselves thus were aged between 18 and 45 and defined themselves as “Azerbaijanis”. Interviews with Bakinty were always conducted in Russian, because that is the language my informants preferred (often it was the only language they felt confident in), interviews with “Azerbaijanis” were mostly conducted in English, but often also with significant parts in Azeri or Russian.

Despite the political situation in Azerbaijan, all topics for this paper could be openly discussed in the public sphere – another hint that the debates I am focusing on are situated below political interests in Azerbaijan.

“This is not my city anymore”

When I came to Baku in 2010 and started to research how urban changes were perceived by the citizens of Baku, I was usually told how wonderful the city had been in the 1970s and 1980s and how everything had started to deteriorate after independence. “It’s not my city anymore” was a frequent statement. The interviewees who complained most about the deterioration of the city were elderly people from various ethnic backgrounds (Azerbaijani, Russian, Armenian) who described themselves as “Bakinty”[1], as born and raised in Baku. But this was only part of their identity, it was equally important that they used to be part of a mainly academic, Russian-speaking, Soviet middle class with its own behavioural codes and moral standards. Newcomers – wherever they came from – who could adopt this Russified urban habitus were welcomed. Bakinty now expressed a feeling of being culturally and economically marginalised following the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Commodities and spare-time activities they had considered a matter of course had become difficult and expensive. Such activities included going to concerts and the theatre, having a drink in a coffee shop in the city centre or on the seafront or traveling to other parts of the Soviet Union. Today they face many of the typical problems of the transformation period following the fall of the Soviet Union: their salary or pension is not enough to make ends meet, the Soviet apartment blocks they live in are in poor condition (and nobody takes responsible for this) and public transport is still a nightmare. All these were things they told me when explaining why they feel marginalised and no longer equal citizens. For my interviewees, the decline of their city and the fact that their lives had become more difficult than they ever expected are inseparably interlinked. Most of the Bakinty I talked to were people who actually remember Soviet times, but this does not mean that it is only they who refer to the 1970s and 1980s as Baku’s Golden Times – there are many people who are actually too young to remember these times but who are still certain that everything was better back then.

One of the main reasons my interviewees gave for the decline of their city was that it had lost its “cosmopolitan”[2] flair, which its population hailing from all over the former Soviet Union had given it. In fact, the population pattern of Baku changed significantly after independence, from a city with a mixed multi-ethnic as well as multi-religious population to a mainly Azerbaijani city[3]. But for Bakinty, the change in population meant much more than that their former Russian or Armenian neighbours left and Azerbaijanis from the countryside moved into the city. They described it as a step backwards into times they considered behind them: times when Baku was a dirty “oriental” town instead of a European city and when nationality was more important than the solidarity between the various nations of the Soviet Union. “Back than we had

kosmopolitizm, we had *internatsionalizm*[4]. It was a good time, a cultivated time. Not like today” (Azerbaijani woman, 70). For my interviewees it was a fact that Baku in the 1960s and 1970s was a cosmopolitan city where people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds lived together peacefully and enjoyed the special flair of the city on the sea that Baku became once the oil industry lost its importance at the end of the 1960s. Even if there are many hints that this ideal was mostly a dream – from the very low number of interethnic marriages (Grant, 2010, p. 127) to the hostility and pogroms of the late 1980s and early 1990s when nationality became hugely important again – for Bakinty of all ethnic backgrounds (even Armenians who had to flee in the early 1990s) there is no question that it was the city’s golden era. To question these memories means to question the memories not only of an individual but of a whole social group.

Critical questions are often answered in irritable terms: “Everybody knows that it was like that!” “Everybody” means “everybody who keeps the memory of the ‘right’ Baku” and can include younger people who have no memory of these times themselves, and even newcomers who accept the cultural superiority of old Baku over the rest of Azerbaijan and modern times.

Jazz became a cypher for the Soviet life in Baku, where modern western and traditional Azerbaijani musical elements were mixed and where young men and women enjoyed much more freedom than in other parts of the South Caucasus (Sayfutdinova, 2009, p. 37). In contrast to these “Golden Times” of cultural life in Baku, with its Russified Soviet culture, after independence Baku was often described by Bakinty as a city that felt as if it were back in another, less cultivated era. The most visible aspect of this new era was the behaviour of the newcomers from the Azerbaijani countryside who lack the urban habitus Bakinty claim for themselves and are therefore widely considered as “uncultivated” and “unable to live in a city”, as many of my interviewees stated. They were accused of behaving “like Baku was just a big kolkhoz” (Russian man, 68). In everyday life the newcomers’ “inability to live in a city” is mostly connected with the accusation of being untidy and reckless – spitting in public, throwing garbage into the yard or at the entrance of the house instead of using rubbish bins, talking too loudly or listening to music in the streets. In a broader sense, for the Bakinty, the newcomers’ lack of culture is demonstrated by their rural habitus, which includes speaking Azerbaijani better than Russian (or at least preferring Azerbaijani to Russian), listening to “bad” (e.g. Turkish pop) or “old-fashioned” (Azerbaijani Mugham) music instead of western classical music or jazz, dressing badly or showing their Islamic faith through, for example, wearing headscarves or beards. Romyansev and Huseynova’s paper on memories of the jazz era and the beginnings of a new Muslim consciousness after 2000 demonstrates how, for many Bakinty, the “modernity” and “openness to the world” of Soviet times are contrasted with the perceived “backwardness” and “separation from the world” of contemporary Baku (Romyansev and Huseynova, 2011).

The concepts of “modernity” and “backwardness”, of “cosmopolitanism” and national seclusion have their roots in typical Soviet concepts of modernity and urbanity. In general, Soviet cities were meant to serve as centres of modernisation, secularisation and industrialisation with an architecture and infrastructure that would help build the bright socialist future. A typical example of the intertwining of the material environment with political influence are the yards between Soviet apartment blocks, with their trees, benches and playgrounds, which were part of the recreation programme for workers as well as being places of social (and political!) control among neighbours (Humphrey, 2005, pp. 52-54). Growing up and living in the same yard could create lifelong connections of

trust and cooperation, creating networks which operated between the private and public spheres (Fehlings, this volume). For Bakintsy, the phrase “we used to live in the same yard” is often used to describe the everyday kosmopolitizm of Baku, where neighbours got together at family and religious holidays and shared food and music from the various ethnic groups peacefully.

In particular, the planning and construction of the capitals of the Soviet republics in the South Caucasus and Central Asia between the 1920s and 1960s was part of a Soviet cultural policy to turn the “oriental” and “traditional” cities into “modern” and “cultivated” cities which would house and forge the new Soviet working class. Stronski uses the Uzbek capital Tashkent as an example of the construction of a “cultivated” city out of an “oriental” town, with its green parks and straight alleys, modern housing and industrial facilities demonstrating modernity and industrialisation (Stronski, 2010), while Ter Minassian describes the same for the construction of Yerevan (Ter Minassian, 2008).

But even if the idea was to create an urban working class, the inhabitants of these ideal republican capitals were largely not proletarian in the Marxist sense, but were academics and technical experts. Over the years, an urban, well-educated and Russian-speaking middle class developed, who often defined themselves more by their common urban background than by the nationality indicated in their Soviet passport. This process was aided by restrictions placed on internal migration within the Soviet Union, which made it difficult for people from rural areas to move to the urban centres in their republic, while highly educated specialists from other parts of the Soviet Union had no problems obtaining permission to settle there (Sayfutdinova, 2009).

After independence, not only the influx of rural population but also the sudden breakdown of the economy and exploding increases in the cost of basic food led to the increasing ruralisation of cities. Urban dwellers started to grow vegetables or keep hens or even sheep in their yards and on their balconies. For many this felt like a step back to pre-modern times, when a subsistence economy was the normal way of life and there were no big differences between villages and the city (Alexander and Buchli, 2007, p. 30). These conditions – even if they have been a thing of the past in Baku since the late 1990s – are still visible in some yards, where benches were destroyed and used as borders between private gardens.

When Bakintsy talked about losing their city, this was not just meant symbolically. They felt physically expelled from places like the seafront Bulvar and the Art Nouveau streets in the city centre, which played an important part in their memories of the good old days. These streets were now used mainly by people they felt were strangers, people who behaved in unfamiliar ways, sometimes not even speaking the same language as them. This alienation from one’s native city is the subject of *The Red Limousine*, a short story by Bakuvian novelist Anar. The main character, an editor at one of Baku’s newspapers, walks through his native city, feeling as if he is in a foreign town:

He did not see any familiar faces. It was [as] if he were in a completely strange town. This of course was not a feeling peculiar to today only. He had had this feeling for the past two or three years. He and many other people of this town could no longer recognize the place. It was if as (sic) they were strangers, as if the town was filled with a completely new set of inhabitants. Not the look or the kind of people but the way the people behaved, the way they carried themselves, had changed. It looked as if the buildings, alleys and squares had altered, had become strange. Before, on the way to his home or to his office, he would at least see some familiar faces. Now, even if he walked the streets for hours, he would not see a single familiar face, not one friend (Anar, 1996).

The only familiar face he meets during the novel is that of his Jewish ex-girlfriend who is about to move away from Baku, leaving her father's library behind to be scattered across the city – a powerful image of alienation, loss and deculturalisation.

The words of a 70-year-old Azerbaijani woman describe the same situation: "In the old days you could go anywhere and have a nice drink and you would meet someone you knew and perhaps have an interesting, cultivated chat. Now there are strangers everywhere, many new buildings, no one to talk to and no place to have a coffee". All the changes the Bakinty have had to accept since independence are contained in this statement: the emigration of their non-Azerbaijani neighbours and the increase in internal migration; the loss of the lifestyle they had had before and the rapid changes in the built environment of Baku. With the beginning of the so-called "second oil boom" in the mid-1990s, the Azerbaijani government set out to showcase its new wealth through the state capital, leading to a monumental reconstruction of the city, both socially and architecturally. The big changes post-Soviet cities have experienced in the last 20 years have often been described, but the changes in Baku are remarkable. In less than 20 years it has grown from a Soviet city at the periphery of the empire to a very rich, modern city which is trying to erase almost every trace of the Soviet era from the city centre. Skyscrapers serving as office buildings, hotels or apartment blocks have been built all over the city, popular public places like the seafront Bulvar and the Torgovaya and Fountain Square were given a completely new look between 2008 and 2012, while many other parks, both new and old, are still under construction. The new buildings are irrelevant to the everyday life of most Baku citizens – at least as long as they are not among the unlucky people whose homes in the city centre are demolished to make space for these big building projects, meaning they have to settle far away on the outskirts of the city. The appearance of these constructions mostly evoked the same feelings as the appearance of the newcomers: something is destroying the old Baku and is completely out of their control.

Defending "Baku how it was and how it should be"

The Bakinty in my interviews tended to present themselves as victims of an urban change they could not control, helpless in the face of the growing dominance of the newcomers. They kept hold of the idea of "how Baku was and how it should be", as one of my interviewees, a woman in her late 30s, put it. This informant drew more on collective memory and oral history than on her own experiences when evoking the spirit of old Baku, but at the same time she emphasised that there is no way to play an active part in the changes the city is experiencing. Their mourning of old Baku is primarily nostalgic, a nostalgia that is mainly "restorative" in shape, as Svetlana Boym describes, even if nobody believes that is possible to restore the city they now idealise. But it is still far from being a "reflective" nostalgia that allows one to play with nostalgic attitudes, and it is very averse to irony (Boym, 2001, pp. 41, 49-55). Of course, my informants saw themselves not as nostalgic but as the keepers of the "right Baku". "Old Baku" is a symbol of a time gone by, a golden age that, if it cannot be restored, is at least worthy of being mourned for forever. While most of this nostalgia is expressed in private conversation, in the kitchens and yards of Soviet apartment blocks there are also certain – mostly temporary – places where people gather and celebrate their memories of the Soviet, Russian-speaking Baku. One example of such a temporary space is the "Russian Songwriter Festival" held every summer (at least until 2010) in the Rashid Behbudov Theatre. There are also some jazz clubs and events which, although they are no longer considered "completely right", are near enough to be recommended if one wants to experience Baku "as it was and how it should be". I never heard a newcomer talking about going to any of these places or events,

while most Bakintsy were completely stunned when I talked about going to a Mugham concert. “That is so old-fashioned!” was a typical reaction, completely ignoring the fact that the average age at a jazz concert today is much higher than that at a Mugham concert.

But while the inhabitants of Baku – whether Bakintsy or newcomers – are in fact helpless in the face of the changes to the urban construction around them (Valiyev, 2013), this does not mean that Bakintsy accept the “uncultivated” behaviour of the newcomers without comment. In the streets of Baku, elderly women are especially likely to loudly express their moral superiority to the *kolkhozniki* from the countryside whenever they witness what they consider to be an assault on correct behaviour in the city. My field diary describes a typical situation:

Yesterday I took a picture of one of the simple white metal boxes where newspapers, cigarettes and sweets are sold, talking to the vendor who had just told me about his fear of being replaced by one of the larger new kiosks with their slightly 19th-century look, when a woman started to yell at us, claiming that we had just broken a law by taking pictures in this part of the city (not that she was in the picture!) and if we didn’t stop immediately she would call the police. When asked why it was forbidden to do this she just answered “You are not from a city. Every urban person knows this.” For the vendor the point was clear: we had made a mistake because neither he nor I were “real Bakintsy”, because he had moved to the city only ten years ago and I was a foreigner who couldn’t know the cultural codes anyway (Field diary, October 2011).

In this situation the woman did much more than just comment on behaviour she considered inappropriate: she made clear to me and the vendor, as well as to other passers-by, that with her urban background she was in charge of setting and enforcing the rules other people must follow in a mutually inhabited public space. It was she who knew the cultural codes of the city and – unlike us – had the right to live there through birth and upbringing. In every similar situation, I observed that those who claimed to know the rules of the city and referred publicly to their urban background were successful in stopping any behaviour they did not approve of. For the accused, it was always clear that it was they who failed to know the unwritten cultural codes governing public urban space. It is not important whether the behaviour in question was offensive or dangerous, and at least for a foreigner there was no logical explanation why this behaviour should be forbidden. Behaviour I witnessed or heard about which led to aggressive accusations included sitting on the grass (even in small unrenovated overgrown parks full of stones and with dilapidated benches), eating and drinking outside restaurants and cafes, taking photographs, playing music, riding a bicycle, gathering in larger groups or holding hands with someone of the opposite sex.

Bakintsy, in defending their own Baku and their special right to define what is meant by “real urban behaviour”, draw on the fact that there are hardly any written rules or prohibition signs in these parts of the city. This leads to a lot of uncertainty over what is forbidden and where, leaving room for people to set their own rules and enforce them often quite aggressively. When nobody knows which rule is indeed a real law, everybody can declare his or her own rules, which everybody else has to respect.

Clashes like that described in my field diary occur especially often in the as yet unrenovated parts of the city centre which can be considered an intermediate public space. The social control of the old Soviet yards and *mikrorayons* does not operate in this area because there are too many “strangers” (i.e. people who cannot be addressed by name and cannot be influenced by threats to talk to their parents), but unlike in neighbouring parts of the city centre there is no official control. The Torgovaya area and the Bulvar along the seafront in particular have become more and more gentrified since

2010 and are increasingly subject to a different, more official authority: police officers and security guards are everywhere and both official and private cameras can be found on nearly every corner. Control over correct behaviour in the city has therefore been taken away from Bakinty by more or less official authorities who are used to acting more or less the same as Bakinty: claiming to defend rules that are often written nowhere and using their authority – in this case based not on their urban background but on their uniform – to make clear who has the right to be in this public space and what constitutes correct behaviour. Thus, in autumn 2014 I had more or less the same experience with a security guard in a newly built mall as I had had with the elderly Bakinty three years before. He accused me of breaking a law by taking pictures, and when I told him that according to the signs at the entrance only riding a bicycle and taking dogs to the mall were forbidden he answered “Yes, because it is not necessary. Everybody knows it”.

The conflict between Bakinty and the newcomers is comparable the situation depicted in *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias and Scotson’s (1965/1990) study of an industrial town in Britain where a new quarter with new inhabitants developed after the Second World War. The established inhabitants of the town had developed their own moral values and norms over the years, and according to these rules community life was considered very important. The newcomers were excluded from community activities and public and semi-public places like pubs and clubs were not shared but were divided between those belonging to one group or the other. For Baku in 2010 the picture was quite similar: Bakinty avoided places where newcomers went and newcomers felt unwelcome in places and at events frequented by Bakinty.

There are no statistics that can quantify the social, economic or educational differences between Bakinty and newcomers, but it is likely that they may not be as large as Bakinty tend to claim. The social and economic situation of Bakinty is not better, but sometimes is in fact worse than that of the newcomers. The fact that they are increasingly marginalised compared to newcomers, who due to their economic strength have more, makes it even more necessary for them to claim a moral superiority for which culture and correct behaviour are of greater importance than money. Even if Bakinty in general might be better educated than newcomers, this cultural advantage is also not unchallenged and is fading. Elderly IDPs from Karabakh – especially from Shusha – are also proud of their urban cultivated background, while younger newcomers go to university and make careers in spheres Bakinty had thought of as their own. These outsiders are seen as exceptions at best, but their background prohibits them from attaining the status of established citizens.

While Elias and Scotson found no real difference in the social, educational or economic backgrounds of the two groups, there was a strict separation on a moral basis. They also found that outsiders were willing to attain the moral standards of the established and wished to be accepted by them, even if it seems rather unlikely that full acceptance could ever be achieved. I could observe the same structure in Baku: one of my informants, a young doctor who had moved to Baku from northern Azerbaijan to attend university and had just finished her degree, saw herself in the role of an outsider who was eager to learn the behavioural codes of the city and got angry whenever she witnessed “bad behaviour” by other newcomers. When I asked her what she thought about the control exerted by her neighbours in her neighbourhood and in public places in the city centre by police officers and security guards she defended it, saying: “We are not in Europe, you know. Our people are not that cultivated. We need that control otherwise people would start to do forbidden things”. As a newcomer

and outsider she accepts the moral superiority of the established citizens and does her best to be accepted by them.

An interesting phrase which came up in this informant's interview, one which I heard quite often from younger people, was "our people are (not) like that". This was quite common when speakers were attempting to explain the reactions of others with whom they did not agree. While the phrase creates a distance between the speaker and others, it also marks an inclusion: I might disagree with them, I might even fight with them or be ashamed of them, but they are still "my people". The phrase includes people from all over Azerbaijan, regardless of their background, urban or rural, an idea that is especially unfamiliar to elderly Bakinty, who still think more in the category of a mutual urban background rather than in national terms. For many of them, "our people" are still their former Armenian and Russian neighbours rather than their fellow Azerbaijanis. I never heard this phrase used by Bakinty when speaking about newcomers from the countryside: here a strict distinction is made between "us" and "them", between people who know how to behave in the city and people who do not. It might be a sign of the vanishing distinction between Baku and Azerbaijan that young people use the phrase "our people" more and more frequently, even if they might still be proud of their urban background. Another example is provided by members of the current elite who were born and raised in Baku. The very few I had the opportunity to speak to made clear that they would not call themselves Bakinty, at least in public interviews, because they "care about the country as a whole, not just the city" as one emphasised in my interview with him.

"We finally have our city back"

In my fieldwork during 2010 and 2011, the divide between the Bakinty and the newcomers from the countryside seemed insurmountable. But as more and more public places were renovated, reappearing in a globalised post-modern style which left no traces of their Soviet past, and with only slight hints of the country in which they are located, and as official control expanded in these renovated places, Bakinty seemed more and more reconciled to their lost city. "We finally have our Baku back", a retired piano teacher told me while watching TV coverage of the opening ceremony of the new section of the seafront Bulvar in May 2012. This new section was built to connect the old part of the Bulvar with the Crystal Hall, where the Eurovision Song Contest was held. It did not matter for elderly Bakinty that this part of the Bulvar was not even open to the public before the end of the Eurovision Song Contest or that hardly any of them could afford a ticket to one of the cultural events planned to take place in the Crystal Hall, or even that nothing in their everyday life had changed. Many things they had complained about before when explaining why they felt marginalised and as if they were inferior citizens remained the same. Their salary or pension was still too small to afford a drink in the new cafés, while housing conditions and public transport had not improved. But for these few weeks at least, when Baku was full of tourists and foreign journalists, it seemed to be enough that people from all over the world were coming to Baku and finding a city that was in no way "Asian", but was full of buildings and recreation facilities like those found anywhere in the world, with people who behaved like real urban inhabitants – that is, at least, under strict control, and without any efforts from the Bakinty themselves. They felt the rules they had defended for the previous decade were finally being appreciated by official policy. It made no difference for them whether this control was exercised by police officers or security guards, who are not only in charge of semi-public places such as malls, but also of parts of the Bulvar and the city centre.

To have defended their city against bad behaviour and re-established their urban habitus as the “right” one for everybody seems to have reconciled the Bakintsy with many hardships. Although they never had a good word to say about the current regime, and while they had been telling me for years how Baku had been ruined after independence, they suddenly announced how beautiful Baku had become, how proud they were again to be living there and what a great job the government had done in renewing the city. Their feeling of “having the city back” goes beyond symbolic regaining. The new buildings, the underground pathways which seemed to have replaced the metro stations as “palaces of the people”, the renovated parks (even if they contain more polished stone than greenery) became a matter of pride for Bakintsy. They were sure that there was no danger that their city would appear rural or “oriental” in the foreign media. In contrast to the people of Astana, who look at the new buildings on the Kazakh steppe and ask whether they look “right” (i.e. European) or not, as described by Buchli (2007, p. 40), most Bakuvians of all ages and social backgrounds are sure that their newly built environment makes their city “western” – or at least in the eyes of some officials and young people – even more modern, and therefore better than Europe or the USA. For them, Baku’s future is as the “Dubai of the Caspian” – interestingly they never connect “Dubai” with anything “oriental” or even “Islamic” but with a kind of hypermodernity and cleanliness.

But there was still a fear that this “western” appearance would not last. When I asked my informants what they thought about the widespread use of surveillance in the most popular public places, both Bakintsy and newcomers, young and old, again argued for the importance of creating and defending Baku as a “European” or “western” city. Surveillance and its results were evaluated to the extent that it made the city more “European” or “western”. I discerned a difference in this evaluation not only between Bakintsy and newcomers, but also between generations. Most Bakintsy over fifty did not hesitate to tell me that surveillance was necessary in order to make Baku clean and safe, or “European”. They see official surveillance as a way to help to regain their western city. With this control over the uncultivated behaviour of outsiders they felt that they could use their old places again without having to fight for their clean and cultivated city by themselves. On the other hand, most of my younger interviewees – whether or not they called themselves Bakintsy – seemed to be uncomfortable with the question. This was not because they are actually bothered by surveillance – for them it was still better than the social control in the neighbourhoods where they live – but mainly because they assumed that I would not like it. Cameras and policemen were considered “non-European” and “Eastern” – an impression most of them want to avoid giving under any circumstances.

Another argument provided especially by younger people is that they feel free in the city centre. Official control is considered less disturbing than the social control they experience in their own neighbourhoods. A young man complained about being approached by a security guard for kissing his girlfriend in public, but a minute later he emphasised how free he and his girlfriend feel in the city centre – an anonymous security guard will just try to get a bribe, while a neighbour would immediately tell their parents what he had seen.

“Western” behaviour challenged – flashmobbers in Baku

There are few people who dare to challenge the system of unwritten rules in public. In the debate over “forbidden things” and “uncultivated behaviour” that supposedly make Baku appear “backward” and “uncultivated” in contrast to “western”, what is widely ignored is that such behaviour might well be considered normal in European or

Northern American cities. At issue are actions like drinking and eating in public, hugging one other or performing street music. One group of young people in Baku addresses this paradox of wanting to appear “western” by forbidding “typical western” behaviour by organising flashmobs. In a situation where correct behaviour plays such a crucial role in the question of belonging and the right to live in the city, consciously crossing the line between the allowed and the forbidden can be seen as an act of resistance. The idea of making themselves visible, of doing something which makes people observe (and therefore judge) them, scares many people. The group is fairly heterogeneous: the organisers of flashmobs and those who participate in them have various political and religious backgrounds – some are members of the government’s youth organisation, some define themselves as oppositional. The age range is also quite wide (at least by Azerbaijani standards), ranging from high school students to young professionals in their mid-30s. When I first had contact with the Baku flashmobbers in February 2011, at least 75 per cent of them were male, but in the last few years the number of women has rapidly increased, and by 2012 at least half of the participants were already female, while there were also more women in the planning group. The social background of the organisers, however, is quite homogeneous: they come from the well-off, urban middle class, those who have often (if not always) had the opportunity to travel or study abroad. They communicate with each other in Azeri, but speak English very well (and generally better than Russian), and use all kinds of modern media and communication systems to communicate with people all over the world. Interestingly, even though most (but not all) of them come from families who would call themselves Bakinty, the distinction between “real urban people” and “people from the countryside” is not relevant for them. They see themselves as a new kind of “outsider”, provoking what they also call “our people”, whether or not they are Bakinty, in a playful way.

The group mobilises participants for flashmobs via electronic social networks (especially Facebook) and spreads news of successful events by uploading highly professional videos of their actions to YouTube shortly after the event[5]. The internet is also used to plan flashmobs, to communicate meeting points to participants, and recently increasingly as space for discussions about new themes for flashmobs.

For the organisers of these flashmobs it is important to state that they are not political action but entertainment. As an organiser explained: “It’s extraordinary entertainment. It’s absurdity in public places”. This absurdity includes dancing to music by western stars, but also singing and dancing to works written by famous Azerbaijani composers, making soap bubbles or playing with balloons. Most interesting from my perspective are those flashmobs which aim to do something which, while unusual (or even forbidden) in public spaces in Baku, would be considered normal in western countries. People might stand in the street reading books or sit down (not only on benches!) and have a coffee in the street. Other examples are the Free Hugs flashmob in February 2011 (with a follow up one year later) and the No Pants flashmob (2012). Especially in a society where most people think – or at least claim – that it is against the law to hold hands in public with someone of the opposite sex, hugging in the streets or walking only in (quite long) underpants is provocative. In 2011 the participants themselves did not feel comfortable with the idea of the Free Hugs flashmob, as became clear during the preparation meeting when the idea was explained and a PowerPoint presentation showed different kinds of hugging. This caused a lot of giggling and also some unease, and only the bravest actually dared to take part afterwards. Not surprisingly, they ended up hugging each other, which caused plenty

of attention in Baku's main street. Most reactions were astonished and aggressive but the fact that participants were wearing "free hugs" signs in English helped a lot in calming people down. This made the whole event less Azerbaijani, and many people said things like "well, this is foreign advertisement", which made the event European and therefore at least tolerable, if not understandable.

Again, the "European argument" is striking. Sometimes it even seems as if "making the city European" is the main aim of most flashmob organisers. One wrote in an internet comment about the Michael Jackson tribute flashmob in August 2010:

This is the biggest dance flashmob in the history of Azerbaijani youth activists. Flashmob is [an] extraordinary and unusual thing for Azerbaijan and especially Islamic countries. But this proves how modernistic and active are our youth[6].

This quotation could have come from an official Azerbaijani web site demonstrating Azerbaijan's "Westernness" and "active youth" to the world. The only difference between this statement and official ones is that officials hardly ever use the word "Islamic". Azerbaijan is described as multi-religious, multi-ethnic, sometimes as globalised, but never as Islamic, while the flashmobbers use the term "Islamic" quite often to describe what they mean by a closed society that has to be "opened up". Also interesting in this quotation is the description of the young flashmobbers as "our youth", as if the writer (actually one of the main flashmob organisers) was speaking for a larger audience that sees the flashmobbers as "ours". That this is not the case became obvious at the soap bubbles flashmob, held in mid-May 2012 on the Baku waterfront near the Maiden Tower, a place so crowded on a sunny Sunday afternoon that it was easy for more than 100 young people to gather without being immediately surrounded by suspicious security guards, whilst also receiving a lot of attention from other passers-by. Even if the police and security unsurprisingly demanded explanations as soon as the event started, they were quite quickly satisfied with the explanation that it was not a political action, but was a kind of art festival as happens in European cities. The reactions of other people walking along the Bulvar were much more aggressive: elderly people especially made hateful comments about young people who do not have to work and think they can behave however they want.

Again, positions were taken around correct behaviour in the city and the question of whether making soap bubbles in public can be considered "European" or "western". However, the actors in the discourse had changed: now young people were bringing new aspects of "being Western and modern" to public spaces, completely new approaches: ideas and actions that challenge both the "Bakinty's idea of "being Western and modern" and the traditional Azerbaijani norms which newcomers are considered to adhere to."

It seems that the idea of flashmobs as absurd actions which cross the line between appropriate behaviour and "forbidden things" in public spaces, which raise awareness that public space can be more than a closely surveilled place, at least hits home, provoking discourses that are not possible in the everyday conflicts over correct urban behaviour.

Conclusion

Baku today does not exhibit a high diversity of urban life styles, and public places in particular are highly regulated in order to enforce normed behaviour – behaviour that is shaped by the idea of Soviet urban culture and an imagined "western" city. But what seems highly restrictive, and even contrary to notions of urbanity for the western researcher is not perceived as a problem by a large part of the urban

population. For the older generation in particular, but also for many young people, this control evokes a feeling of stability, a sense that Baku is still (or again) a safe and beautiful city. It also provides places like the Bulvar and the Torgovaya area where – despite official control – there is at least the freedom of anonymity. In these areas one can risk much more non-conformist behaviour than could be attempted in the Azerbaijani countryside or even in the *microrayons* surrounding the city centre. In a political environment where claiming the “right to the city” as discussed by Lefebvre and others (Harvey, 2008; Souza, 2010) can lead to serious problems with the authorities, Bakintsy try to make up for their limited “rights to the city” at least by defending their urban habitus as the only one acceptable in “their” city. Increasing control by police and security guards gives them the feeling that their needs and lifestyle are respected by a government which they usually feel neglects them.

As official and social control do not allow non-conformist behaviour, a fact which is widely accepted by the population, the use of public spaces as areas where conflicts and debates can take place is highly limited. Still, far from bringing serious conflicts over the “right to the city” to public spaces, the fact that a group of young people has begun to challenge the rules at least temporarily and in a playful way is remarkable. While the conflicts between established city dwellers and newcomers which have been described for post-Soviet cities over the past decade seem to be settling down in Baku at least, the generational conflict over cultivated behaviour in public space and the right way to represent Baku as a modern city will become more important.

Notes

1. I use the emic term “Bakintsy” to distinguish this group that has always been only a part of the population of Baku as a whole (Huseynova, 2013, p. 253). I use the term “Bakuvians” to denote the whole population.
2. I thus use the Russian term *kosmopolitizm*, used by my informants to describe their lifestyle and everyday experience in the 1960s and 1970s, to emphasise that it is not used here in the way that “cosmopolitanism” is defined by western scholars (Hannerz, 1990; Robbins, 1998).
3. According to the 1959 census, the total population of Baku was 897,000, with 38 per cent Azeris, 34 per cent Russians and 17 per cent Armenians. By 1979, the population had grown to 1.5 million, with 56 per cent Azeris, 22 per cent Russians and 14 per cent Armenians (Yunusov, 2000, p. 65). In 2009, more than 91 per cent of the 2.1 million inhabitants of Baku were Azerbaijanis, 5 per cent were Russians and 4 per cent others (UN-Habitat, 2013, p. 208)
4. Elderly people in particular tend to use the Soviet term *internatsionalizm* synonymously with *kosmopolitizm*. For the use of *kosmopolitizm* and *internatsionalizm* in the Soviet Union see Humphrey (2004) and specifically for Baku see Krebs (2013).
5. For a collection of various flashmobs (and professional media coverage of them) since 2009 in Baku see www.youtube.com/watch?v=pap4V5M4EZg&list=PL215FF2A3C3E3BB65&index=14 (accessed 8 September 2014).
6. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptGEcgmT5po (accessed 12 July 2012).

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