

Udis as a tool of Azerbaijani expansionism

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At the end of November 2024, it became known that Azerbaijan has transferred the Armenian monastery complex of Dadivank in Artsakh to the administration of the Udi community of Azerbaijan. Earlier, it was reported that the ancient monastery of Tsitsernavank in the Lachin region (Armenian Berdzor), which is called *Aghoghlan* in Azerbaijani, was also “returned” to the Udis of Azerbaijan. Baku's intentions to “*Albanese*” these spiritual and historical heritage sites of Artsakh Armenians became known immediately after the 44-Day War, when Baku began organizing pilgrimages of the leaders of Azerbaijan's Udi community to Dadivank and Tsitsernavank churches, allowing them to conduct services there. At the same time, the Azerbaijani propaganda has noticeably intensified the generation of a pseudo-scientific thesis in the media space that all ancient Christian monuments in Artsakh-Karabakh belong to Albanian heritage and therefore should be returned to the Udis – a small ethnic group that has retained ethno-linguistic and cultural-historical identity with Caucasian Albania.

The origins of this falsification date back to the 1960s, when the so-called “Azerbaijani scholar” Ziya Buniatov, contrary to the facts and using falsification methods, initiated the discourse on “*Armenianized Albanians*” in Nagorno-Karabakh and the expropriation by Armenians of the entire Albanian cultural-civilizational heritage in the historical territories between the Kura and Araks rivers. Subsequently, the development of falsification under state patronage was continued by Azerbaijani pseudo-scholars Davud Akhundov, Farida Mamedova, and others, who aimed to establish it as “*scientific truth*”, which, however, is not taken seriously outside of Azerbaijan and its academic environment.

Numerous fundamental studies in the Armenian and international scientific community not only refute Buniatov's concept and its “*scientific validity*” but also question the level of professionalism and professional ethics of the “*Azerbaijani scientific community*”. However, these issues should be left out the scope of this publication, noting that the falsifications and unscrupulous researches of the “Azerbaijani scholars” have been established by the authorities of Azerbaijan as the basis of the anti-Armenian policy and the “ideological foundation” for the eradication of the Armenian factor not only in Azerbaijan itself but in the region as a whole. The concept of the alleged “*non-indigeneity of Armenians*”, their assimilation, and the expropriation of the ethno-civilizational heritage of the indigenous peoples of the South Caucasus, fabricated in the USSR, was turned into a political program for the future.

It is known that, along with the preparations for the “*Karabakh revenge*”, the Aliyev regime has been working for 30 years to discredit Armenia's image on international platforms as a country that allegedly not only “*occupied the territory of a neighboring state*” but also carried out “*cultural genocide*” on its lands. Baku launched an extensive campaign to draw the attention of UNESCO and various international human rights organizations to the “*problem of the destruction of Islamic cultural heritage sites in Karabakh and the*

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expropriation of the originally Albanian Christian heritage". Baku attached no less importance to these steps than to the political and legal components of the Karabakh case, since, from its point of view, they contributed to the legitimization of its claims to Nagorno-Karabakh in the historical-civilizational context.

However, this course led to the fact that after the forcible capture of the territory of Artsakh, Baku was faced with the problem of the further fate of these "*monuments of Albanian heritage*". Naturally, the most "experienced" solution for Baku would be their destruction following the example of Nakhijevan, where practically none of the several thousand Armenian monuments, that Baku once "*included*" in the "*Albanian historical heritage*", remained.

Yet, in the case of Artsakh, it would be more difficult for Azerbaijan to resort to such measures, since Baku itself had worked thoroughly on popularizing the Armenian Christian heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh, trying to present it to the international community as "Albanian religious artifacts". Azerbaijan, positioning itself as a civilized country and the successor of various historical-civilizational layers and ethno-cultural traditions, cannot afford the physical destruction of the Armenian churches of Artsakh, as the Taliban movement did with the Buddha statues in Afghanistan in 2001. Nevertheless, this does not absolve Baku from the task of destroying the "historical passport" of these cathedrals and the entire millennial cultural and historical heritage of the Armenians of Artsakh. This also does not mean that the Armenian historical-architectural and religious monuments of Artsakh–Nagorno-Karabakh have gained safety from physical destruction, even under the "*personal guarantees*" of the head of Russia. On the contrary, satellite imagery monitoring, conducted by several Armenian and international organizations specializing in the protection of historical monuments, indicates that Azerbaijan is massively destroying small historical-architectural monuments and shrines in Artsakh, the destruction of which, in their opinion, may go unnoticed by the international community or may not cause significant negative resonance. But in the case of well-known and large-scale monuments, especially those included in UNESCO's list of World Civilizational Heritage sites, Baku is still taking a wait-and-see approach or has already made a final decision on their preservation. It should be especially noted that in this case, the word "*preservation*" is conditional, as it does not protect them from modification or arbitrary reconstruction of their original appearance. A vivid example of this is the Shushi Cathedral of Ghazanchetsots, whose "*restoration*" by "*Azerbaijani specialists*" distorted the authentic appearance of the temple.

Thus, for Baku, the preservation of the most significant historical and cultural monuments of Artsakh is, on the one hand, a forced measure, and on the other, a way to legitimize its historical claims to Artsakh-Karabakh. However, for the full implementation of the "*Albanian Concept*", Baku needed practical steps to prove that the supposed true owners of Karabakh's Christian heritage are not the Armenians, but the small ethnic group of Udis living in Azerbaijan, who, allegedly, can delegate the right to this republic the right to consider themselves the legitimate heirs of Caucasian Albania and the entire Karabakh. For this, the Udi community of the Gabala region, on whose territory the capital of the state of Caucasian Albania was located until the 7th–8th centuries, was included in the program of historical-cultural de-Armenization of Artsakh.

Baku's goal is to legitimize the expropriation of Artsakh's cultural-historical heritage by the Udis and to complete the process of “*Azerbaijanization*” of the region by eliminating the right of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin to the Artsakh Diocese. For Azerbaijan, the religious dimension of the Karabakh issue is now extremely important, because despite the occupation of the region and the ethnic cleansing of Armenians, the Artsakh Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church continues to exist in its status. Thus, it contributes to keeping the issue of the historical right of the people of Artsakh to their heritage, the return of Armenian refugees, and the political registration of their right to live in their historical homeland on the international agenda. In Azerbaijan, they see an opportunity to finally nullify such prospects by re-establishing the Albanian Patriarchate, which was abolished in 1836 by a decree of Russian Emperor Nicholas I.

The history of the establishment of the Albanian Church, its patronage and direct management by the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC), as well as the reasons that led the Etchmiadzin Throne to transfer the center of Albanian spiritual life directly to Armenian lands, are detailed in the scientific literature. Here, it is necessary to directly address the essence of events. Baku deemed it possible to take advantage of the situation and try to implement the project of “*revival of the Albanian Church*”, moreover, with the status of autocephaly, which it never had. Perhaps this attempt would not have provoked the indignation of the Holy Etchmiadzin and the Christian Churches in solidarity with it if the basis of this program did not include Baku's intentions to incite the hatred of the Udis against the Armenians, who once saved them from total Islamization, and to contribute to the appropriation by the new “*religious structure*” of the inherently Armenian spiritual heritage of historical Eastern Armenia. It is precisely the hostility and Armenophobia that Azerbaijan generates among the few Udis who survived the Turkic assimilation, forcing them to take a path that contradicts Christian values.

It is obvious that the small Udi community of the village of Nidzh has become a hostage to Baku's policies and is unable to resist its project. It is known that Baku pursues an uncompromising policy towards national minorities, making it impossible for the leaders of the Udis from the districts of Gabala and Oghuz (formerly – Kutkashen and Vardashen districts of Azerbaijan) to refuse the anti-Armenian venture imposed on them. However, the leaders of the communities have probably long since accepted the lack of alternatives, especially given the individual work of the Azerbaijani authorities with each of them. There is evidence that the leaders of the Udi community cooperate closely with Azerbaijan's special services and receive funds from Baku both for themselves and for the needs of the community. It is no coincidence that the Udi village of Nidzh is considered one of the best-maintained in Azerbaijan, and it is popularly referred to as the “*showcase of Azerbaijani prosperity*”.

Although Baku started utilization of the “*Udi factor*” in the mid-2000s, when the republic began to recover from the consequences of the “*Karabakh defeat*”, the active phase of the Udi “*historical claims*” began in the early 2010s, when community leaders started making increasingly insulting statements against Armenians and directly accusing them of historical fraud. Robert Mobili was placed at the forefront of the anti-Armenian movement: a geologist by education, a “*linguist and cultural scholar*” by occupation, and a “*politician and*

leader of the Azerbaijani Udis community”. Over the past years, R. Mobili has published hundreds of pseudo-scientific articles about the “*fraud*” of Armenian historiography committed “*with the aim of appropriating the cultural and historical heritage of the Albanians*”, about the “*conspiracy*” of the AAC with the Russian Emperor regarding the abolition of the Albanian Church, and on the assimilation of the Caucasian Albanians by the Armenians, supposedly proven by the anthropological characteristics of the people of Artsakh, which are not typical of their compatriots from the Ararat Valley.

There is information that in order to preach these theses to the people of Karabakh, R. Mobili and the Azerbaijani special services overseeing him even sent emissaries to Russia, where they were instructed to establish connections with the largest communities of Artsakh Armenians and try to spread ideas among them about the “*Albanian genetic code of the people of Karabakh*”. At the same time, Mobili actively developed Buniatov's “theory” about the Albanian roots of Armenian temples, moving the historical boundary of Caucasian Albania far beyond the Kura Valley. In addition to the cathedrals of Syunik and Etchmiadzin, R. Mobili's list also included Armenian churches in Western Armenia (the territory of modern Turkey). For instance, in August 2019, a delegation sent by Mobili to Turkey, headed by the “*spiritual leader*” of the “Albanian-Udi Church” Sevan Magari and a representative of the Udi community of Azerbaijan Rafik Danagari, broke into the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on the Akhtamar Island and conducted “*services*” there. The “pilgrims” also recorded a video on the island calling on the Turkish authorities to “*return the church to its true owners – the Albanian-Udis, Kipchaks, and Christian Turks*”.

It should also be emphasized that the Udis of Azerbaijan have been tasked with provocations regarding not only Armenian but also Georgian historical and cultural heritage. Since the emergence of tensions in Georgian-Azerbaijani relations over the ownership of the Christian temple complex of David Gareji, “spiritual delegations” of Azerbaijani Udis have repeatedly visited the churches occupied by Azerbaijani border guards and conducted “religious rituals” there.

There are grounds to assert that Baku has now launched active efforts to create the “*Albanian Catholicosate of Azerbaijan*” based on the temples and religious centers of the Artsakh Diocese of the AAC. By tracking the routes of the Udi “*clergy*” pilgrimages in historical Artsakh and considering Baku's decision to transfer the main temple complexes of Artsakh under its control, it can be concluded that the Azerbaijani authorities are preparing to institutionalize the “*new church*” and form its property fund. This includes Dadivank, Tsitsernavank, Amaras, Ghazanchetsots, Oreghavank, Gtchavank, and possibly some other significant Armenian spiritual centers of Artsakh. Apparently, to present this venture as the “*restoration of historical justice*”, the center of the pseudo-Catholicosate should become the Gandzasar Monastery complex.

Despite the serious intentions, Baku, however, will face obvious difficulties on the path of its venture.

First, the scale of the intended project is too large to be implemented and sustained with the resources of the Azerbaijani Udi community, numbering no more than 4 thousand people. The overwhelming majority of them are peasants from Nidzh, who lack the motivation and capacity to engage in a large-scale political-religious scheme. In turn, the Udi

“clergy” do not have the appropriate education and canonical knowledge, and the remaining fragments of church traditions are rooted in the history of the AAC, against which the Azerbaijani authorities' program is directed.

Second, the Udis and the Azerbaijani authorities cannot determine from which spiritual throne they intend to “receive” autocephaly and to which Christian tradition they want to adhere. The problem of achieving autocephaly is the biggest obstacle to the intended project since, in essence, none of the thrones has the right to grant the status of the “Albanian-Udis Church” without the consent of the AAC, since this will be considered an adventure and will create another schism in the Christian world. However, Baku obviously does not want to reconcile with such a state of affairs, and, without delving into the subtleties of the canonical traditions of the Christian world, is ready, if not to obtain a autocephaly for the Udis, then at least to secure the support of the world centers in the self-proclamation of a new church entity.

It is probably for this reason that Baku maintains an active dialogue with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, as well as deepens its interaction with the Vatican, accompanied by generous funding of the Holy See's restoration projects. Supporting Baku's intentions to integrate its project into the interests of the Roman Catholic Church is also evidenced by the fact that an increasing number of young Udis from Azerbaijan are being sent to study in Catholic seminaries in Europe, particularly in Poland.

Summarizing the above, it should be noted that the actions of the Azerbaijani authorities have nothing to do with the genuine interests of the Udi ethno-confessional group, which has become a hostage to Baku's policy aimed at destroying the Christian identity of the region and appropriating, along with the land, the civilizational heritage of the indigenous peoples. The small Udi community, cut off by Baku from its true cultural and spiritual roots, which were once deeply intertwined with Armenian civilizational identity, has now turned into a tool for the final eradication of the Armenian factor in Azerbaijan. An overview of the Azerbaijani leadership's actions suggests that its efforts are aimed not only at expropriating the Armenian heritage of Artsakh but also at preparing the ground for further enlargement and legitimization of Azerbaijani expansionism throughout the region.