



Formative and educational aspect of Azerbaijan. The pedagogical message of the poet Mirza Shafi Vaseh (1794-1852)

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Abstract

The economy of Azerbaijan has been moving forward towards “diversification” for many years and has not been focusing on the petrol sector anymore, but on a variety of fields, education above the others. Azeri education is deeply rooted in sport and health policies, and it finds expression in various sports events promoted by the Government. The history of juvenile politics dates back to 1994, thanks to the authoritative promotional effort of the national leader Gaydar Aliyev. Azeri young people between 14 and 29 are regularly involved in all these events, actively participating in conferences and international scientific research projects. Azerbaijan aims above all at improving the knowledge of the English language among pupils, university students, and leading scientists. Azeri school is a formative and educational laboratory where events promoted by the Ministry of Education are often experimented.

Since 2016 Azerbaijan has been focusing on making the Azeri society online-oriented, focusing on immediacy and material, effort, and time-saving. Education is firmly based on the lifelong learning approach, that is fundamental for today's personal and professional fulfilment. Human beings create their deep inner reality by educating themselves and the others and, in order to feed their souls, they often resort to the literary world, which is full of formative and educational elements. This is the reason to start a detailed reflection on the work of a famous Azeri poet: Mirza Shafi Vaseh (1794-1852). His poems deal with the human being's search for love, reflection, wisdom and 'formative' beauty.

Keywords: *Azeri formation and education, youth policy, sport, lifelong learning*

1. Introduction

The Republic of Azerbaijan, a country in Transcaucasian Asia whose economy has been growing steadily since the Nineties, also set for 2018 a plurality of objectives aiming at a continuous multifaceted development. The economy of this country has been moving forward towards 'diversification' for many years and has not been focusing on petrol sector anymore but on a variety of fields, such as manufacturing, agriculture, tourism, education, science, culture, sport and others. This 'philosophy of life' is leading Azerbaijan to a noteworthy acknowledgement by many European countries (Italy in the first place), which have the intention to build excellent trust and cooperation relations with this strategic partner in the South Caucasus. For this reason, it is interesting to analyse a *non-oil* sector of Azeri economy, the *education* sector, analysing it in details also with the help of national and international scientific cooperation.

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2. Azeri education and youth policies

Azeri education that is deeply rooted in *sport* and *health policies* finds expression in various sports events promoted by the Government, such as:

- a) June 2015 – Baku European Games;
- b) 2016 – Pre-Olympic International Boxe Tournament and Target Shooting World Cup (Figure 1);
- c) 19 June 2016 – the capital city, Baku, for the first time in its history, hosted the Formula One Grand Prix, called 'European GP'. In 2017 the Azeri capital city hosted the IV Islamic Solidarity Games and the Women's European Volleyball Championship (Baku and Gəncə) (Figure 2);
- d) 20-27 September 2018 – World Judo Championships (Baku).



Figure 1: Domenico Valentino versus Miklós Varga (Source: <https://www.oasport.it/2016/06/boxe-preolimpico-mondiale-baku-2016-domenico-valentino-passa-per-split-decision/rio-2016/>)



Figure 2: Gyulguseyn Abdullayev, the first place of Baku City F1 Circuit for Azerbaijan GP. (Source: <https://www.thisisf1.com/gyulguseyn-abdullayev-takes-first-laps-of-baku-city-f1-circuit-for-azerbaijan-gp-2/>)

Already in 2003 the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev (Figure 3), addressed young people through a quality targeted policy with a clear educational message and particular attention to *healthy lifestyle* and *personal and professional fulfilment*, key elements for an authentic Azeri citizen. The history of juvenile politics in Azerbaijan dates back to 1994, thanks to the authoritative promotional effort of the then national leader Gaydar Aliyev, who promoted the birth on the national territory of many youth sports organisations, which on a daily basis design and implement the good policies of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.



Figure 3: Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan.
(Source: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/141601.html>)

Azeri young people between 14 and 29 (28% of the total population of more than 9,600,000 inhabitants) are constantly involved into all these events, *actively participating* in international scientific research projects and conferences, through students exchange programs with many other countries. The 'Government Program for Azeri Youth Education Abroad', promoted by the Ministry of Education between 2007 and 2015, gave more than 3,500¹ young people the opportunity to study abroad. Usually, the cultural exchange happens with: Italy, Russia, China, Iran, USA, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Turkey, Netherlands, France, Indonesia, Algeria, Vietnam and Kuwait. Facing the new formative and educational challenges, the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan launched the Governmental program 'Azeri youth in 2016-2020', in order to support the students who will contribute with technical and scientific innovation, to the development of their country.

During the fifth Republican Contest 'Scientists of the Future' in February 2016, Akif Alizadeh, scholar and scientist, President of Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, claimed, "Is nowadays very important for Azerbaijan to educate young people to be highly and intellectually qualified and to aim at success"². Azeri scientific success is linked, above all, to an essential linguistic competence for every young scientist. The quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of Azeri science have to be found in the mastery of the *English language*. During a press conference held in November 2015 for the 70th Anniversary of Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, President Akif Alizadeh (Figure 4) underlined that "If a young and talented man wants to be part of the scientific world, he must speak at least English. Maybe we are asking too much, but there will not be a way back"³. In order to take part in

¹Source: <https://novosti.az/education/42464.html>

² Source: <http://interfax.az/print/664948/ru>

³ Source: <http://interfax.az/view/655704>

international research projects, Azeri scientists should be at least *Toefl* level. The Government of Azerbaijan contributes to an in-depth learning of the English language by introducing English courses in the Azeri schools, giving the opportunity to young people to graduate in English and to go on with their studies in England or other foreign countries. English is one of the mandatory subjects in the annual national contest of the School Olympics. In 2016 about 27,500⁴ pupils took part in these Olympics promoted by the Ministry of Education. In 2019 a competition named 'Best Computer Scientist of 2019' will be held in Baku and young people from more than 90 countries⁵ will take part in it.



Figure 4: Akif Alizadeh, President of Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences
Source: <https://report.az/en/education-and-science/akif-alizadeh-proposals-for-introduction-of-nanotechnology/>



Figure 5: Mikayil Jabbarov, Minister of Education. Source:
<https://www.azernews.az/nation/123480.html>

Azeri school is a formative and educational laboratory where various initiatives promoted by the Minister of Education Mikayil Jabbarov (Figure 5), are often experimented. In 2015 he promoted the project 'A Healthy Education Means a Healthy Nation'. School number 47 in Baku put the project into effect using innovative elements, creating a 'healthy class'⁶ where half of the pupils stood up during the lesson while the other half remained seated at their desks, and every fifteen minutes they swapped places so that this freedom of movement nurtured concentration and, consequently, better results. Moreover, in order to avoid a premature decrease in vision, an eye training device was installed on the ceiling of the classroom. In 2015-2016 this 'healthy class' model was adopted at the beginning in 52 classes, later in 67 classes, 33 of which in Baku.

In general, the Ministry of Education gives great attention to the demographic increase in the school population, which by 2020 will allegedly increase by 30%. At

⁴ Source: <http://interfax.az/view/662766>

⁵ Source: https://m.az.sputniknews.ru/science/20181023/417550624/mezhdunarodnaja-olimpiada-informatika-projdet-v-baku.html?mobile_return=no

⁶ Source: <http://interfax.az/view/651882>

the moment Azerbaijan is setting goals related to building new public schools to deal with this forecast in the best way.

3. Online society

Azeri school scientific and working community has been carrying out a *full reality digitalisation*, characterised by immediate virtual communication on all fronts. First of all, Azerbaijan since 2016 has been focusing on **making the Azeri society online-oriented**, focusing on material, effort, and time-saving, immediacy, increase in the efficiency and efficacy in many fields of everyday life, above all in the educational, economic, political, social, and cultural ones. In high schools and universities, *EDUMAN*⁷ online platform for the automation of the learning process is not news anymore. Moreover, about forty Azeri universities have already subscribed to the online platform *Web of Science* which gives access to an international scientific database. The online modality is the first choice also for individual students to manage their studies autonomously. School Olympics give rise to a new category of *e-Olympics*, and the Ministry of Education created an internet portal for *online communication* with citizens. The Government also issued *e-entry visas* for Azerbaijan, a country where *e-information* is the foundation of effective communication.

Thanks to online communication and high-level meetings between Government delegates and experts in various fields, Azerbaijan keeps an excellent relationship with Italy. This relationship was strengthened in 2014 through the '*Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership*', and it is characterised by fruitful cooperation between the two countries in the political, economic and commercial, scientific, educational and cultural sectors. The beginning of the partnership between Italy and Azerbaijan dates back to 20th March 2013, when the private and non-party association 'Italy-Azerbaijan Association' was born in Rome with the aim of promoting bilateral relations in the political, economic, educational, cultural and touristic sectors. Italian-Azeri relationships also strengthened thanks to the *Italian-Azeri Chamber of Commerce* (ITAZERCOM) that was born in Rome in 2012 and is now considered the most important and most active association in the cooperation between the two nations. As we know, Azerbaijan is moving towards the future full to the brim with international projects, agreements with European countries and key objectives related to the development of the country and the well-being of the Azeri population. In 2012 the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev signed the decree 'Development Concept. Azerbaijan – 2020: Outlook for the future'. Thanks to it, in 2020 Azerbaijan will become a 'fully competitive and developed country' with high social welfare and high indicators in the education sector.

⁷ Source: <http://interfax.az/view/662308>

4. To be educated to think and to know

Education is strictly related to upbringing. Reflecting on the concept of *lifelong learning* is therefore essential, because of its great significance in the third millennium and the ongoing personal and professional transformation of the human being.

Human beings create their deep inner reality by educating themselves and the others and, in order to feed their souls, they often resort to the literary world, which is full of formative and educational elements to be interpreted. Kamal Abdulla, born in 1950, Azeri scientist, writer and theatre playwright, State counsellor on multiculturalism and religion issues, member of the National Academy of Science since 2007, invites the Azeri people to “learn to love literature as they do in Italy, in Russia and the Baltic States”⁸.

Concerning his opinion, it is now important to reflect upon the educational code that can be found in the works of a renowned Azeri poet, Mirza Shafi Vaseh (1794-1852). He lived in Gəncə (the second city in Azerbaijan after the capital city Baku) between 1796 and 1852 (some sources suggest 1794-1851).

His life seemed to be completely dedicated to religion, but after his father's death, little Mirza's custody was given to the merchant Hadzhi Abdulla, who housed him warmly and taught him Arabic and Persian literature. In the 30s of the 1800s Mirza Shafi taught in Gəncə and in 1840 he moved to Tiflis (today's Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia), where he started to teach calligraphy. That was when he met the German poet Friedrich Martin von Bodenstedt who would then publish with his name the Azeri poet's work in Germany. The plagiarism was later discovered by the Azeri scholar A.A.Seidzade, thanks to whom the famous Azeri poet achieved celebrity and became well-known to an international audience thanks to the translation of his work in many European languages (English, French, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, Danish, Polish and even Hebrew). Only some manuscripts have survived until today in Azerbaijan; two of them were found in 1964.

⁸ Source: <http://interfax.az/view/649998>



Figure 6. Mirza Shafi Vaseh. (Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirza_Shafi_Vazeh)

Through Mirza Shafi's poems, Azerbaijan is today culturally, philosophically and pedagogically tied to Italy and the whole of Europe. The Azeri poet's philosophy of life shines through his work. It is characterised by essential joys, wisdom, and the kindness of the human being. By rejecting religious fanaticism, old customs and prejudice, Mirza Shafi decided to give his free thoughts a poetic expression. A human being, 'grain of eternity in an everlasting life' (Shafi, 1986: 94), 'flower' in the 'field of life' (*ibid.*), builds and educates himself through and to the beauty and harmony of nature, becoming beautiful and harmonious in his deep inner self. All the power of human inner beauty is expressed, according to the Azeri poet, in a love that is able to enlighten the human being, making him realise that he owns unique poetic skills. The poem '*Idēm k odonoj my zeli - ja i ty*' ("You and I are going towards the same objective") claims the existence of a perfect cohesion that can join two people who deeply love each other. This cohesion of 'you and I' is solid, defined, unique and happy. It is common in different experiences around the world, and it never separates the 'I' from the 'you'. In the poem '*Znanie i mudrost*' ('Knowledge and Wisdom') Mirza Shafi is sure that "everybody has the ability to solder the cohesion between wisdom and knowledge" (Shafi, 1986: 65). Wisdom that consists of

'thought' knowledge has to be cultivated and increased throughout one's life: this is the basis of a human being who can build and educate himself and the others in and to the freedom of thought. Mirza Shafi is still today a poet to interpret because his poems emanate a light that is not part of the seven colours of the rainbow.

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