

The Enigmatic Connection Between Education and Civic Apathy in Azerbaijan

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In oil-rich Azerbaijan, contrary to many other countries, education does not seem to influence social capital, *ceteris paribus*. Here, citizens with higher levels of education are not more likely than their less educated peers to trust others or engage in community activities such as volunteering or donating to a charity. The dramatic decline in educational quality over the past two decades has contributed a great deal to civic apathy in Azerbaijan. The public education system in Azerbaijan falls short of imbuing young people with civic virtues and transforming them into “good” citizens. Education thus deserves considerable attention (and funds). Delaying reform in this policy area endangers the future of Azerbaijan as a secular nation with a capable workforce and healthy economy.

Education-Social Capital Link

Social capital, [defined](#) by Robert Putnam as “norms and networks of civic engagement” based on social trust, is key to economic development and effective governance. Educational attainment is believed to be the strongest [predictor](#) of levels of social capital and civic participation. Education can foster social capital accumulation. Schools and colleges are the [key sites](#) where social capital is produced and developed, and where young people learn social skills and cooperation through interaction with teachers, school administration, and peers. Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment are generally more likely to join various networks and invest in social skills and resources.

Existing [research](#) on the South Caucasus points to low levels of what researchers have called bridging (generalized) social capital, but good levels of bonding (in-group, family,

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and personal networks) social capital. However, these accounts have two weaknesses. First, bonding capital may be a (by)product of much deeper cultural orientations (such as patriarchal values regulating family relationships or local codes of morality) resistant to change. The prevalence of personal connections may indicate a social trap that Banfield (1958) linked to so-called “[amoral familism](#).” In a society of amoral “familists” that he found in post-war southern Italy, people were mutually distrustful and suspicious, reluctant to build stable social organizations beyond family, had short time horizons, and capitalized on material interests of nuclear family rather than communal life. In many ways, contemporary Azerbaijani society fits this description of “amoral familism.” Second, these studies neglect the role of education in social capital formation.

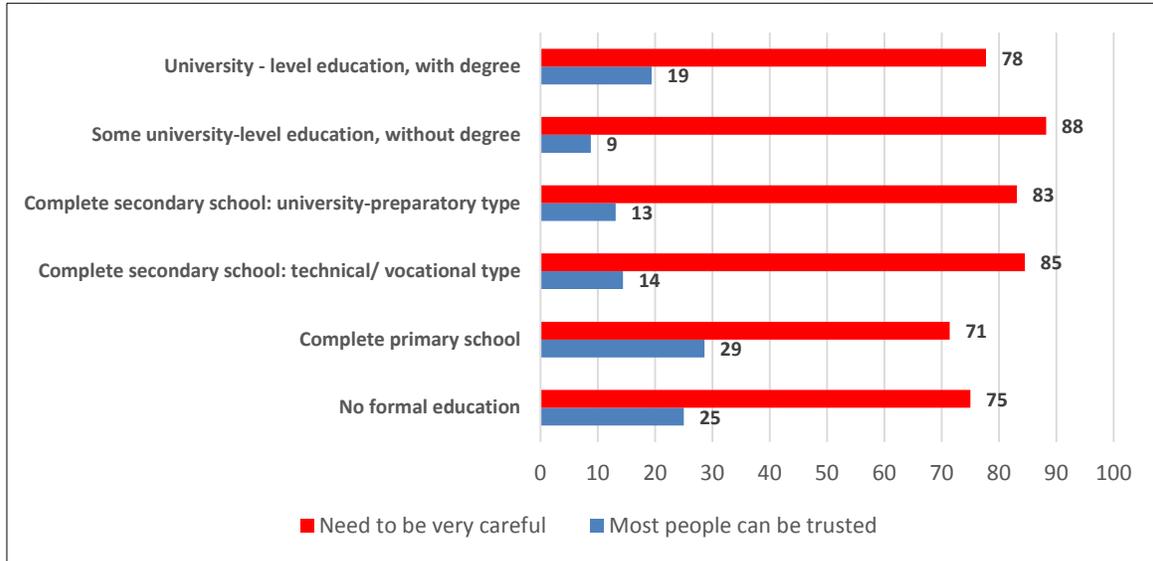
It should be mentioned that norms of reciprocity are certainly not absent in Azerbaijan. There are close-knit networks of relatives and friends that bind individuals together emphasizing narrowly defined “familistic” and nepotistic values and norms. Family bonds trump civic virtues in Azerbaijan. Experiences acquired during early childhood socialization in family, local neighborhoods (*məhəllə*), and schools reveal the importance of personal connections. Cultivating personal ties, therefore, gets a higher priority than investing in social resources, communal networks, or *quality* education. After all, it is through personal connections (*tanışlıqla*) rather than meritocratic selection that people secure jobs.

Survey Evidence

Survey evidence points to extremely low levels of interpersonal trust in Azerbaijan. According to a [World Values Survey](#) (WVS, 2011), 82 percent of those interviewed (N=1,002) express “distrust” and 15 percent express “trust.” Notably, the low levels of trust are stable over time. In 1997, the corresponding figures were equally unimpressive: 75 percent distrusting and 19 percent trusting (WVS 1997). However, education has little effect on social trust in Azerbaijan. When the sample is divided by educational level, respondents with higher educational levels are not more likely to be trusting as theory would predict. Levels of trust were not different between those who completed university with a degree, those who finished secondary school (11 years of schooling), and those who graduated from primary school (4 years of formal education): 78 percent distrust (19 percent trust), 83 percent distrust (13 percent trust) and 71 percent distrust (29 percent trust), respectively (see **Figure 1**).

For comparison, in Estonia, social trust is correlated with educational attainment: 51 percent of respondents with university-level education are trustful (46 percent distrustful), while 76 percent of those with primary school education are distrusting and only 22 percent trusting.

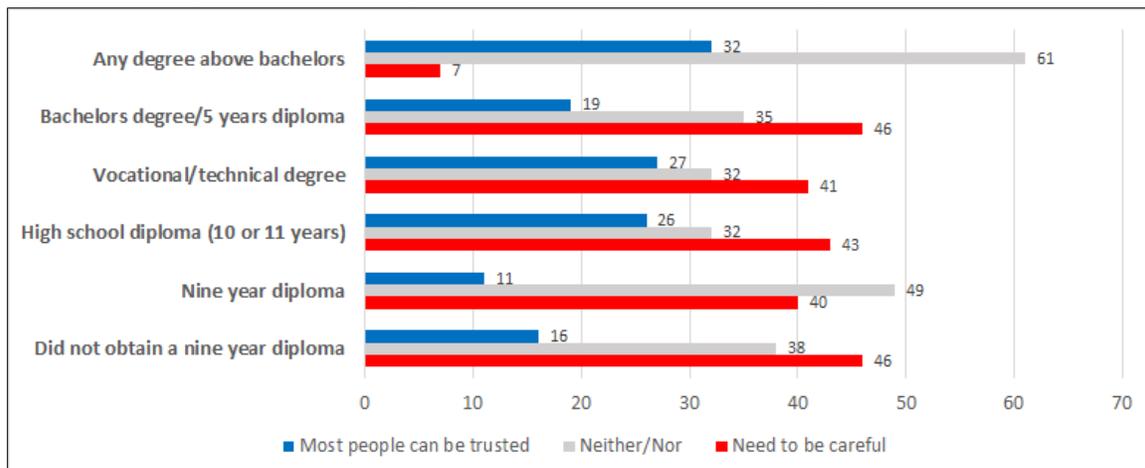
Figure 1. Interpersonal Trust by Educational Level in Azerbaijan, 2011



Source: World Values Survey, Wave 6, 2011

These findings are replicated in another survey. According to a CRRC 2012 [survey](#), 43 percent of respondents reported distrust (against 23 percent trusting) and 34 percent preferred a middle (neutral) position. Similar to the WVS survey results, education has [no impact](#) on levels of interpersonal trust in Azerbaijan (see **Figure 2**). Respondents with nine years of schooling (at 40 percent) were as distrusting (at 46 percent) as university graduates and those who did not complete secondary school. The only difference is the higher number of trusting people (at 32 percent) and only 7 percent of distrusters are found among those with graduate-level training, which is possibly driven by the small number of respondents with such qualifications in the sample.

Figure 2. Interpersonal Trust by Educational Level in Azerbaijan, 2012



Source: CRRC, [Social Capital, Media and Gender Survey](#) in Azerbaijan, 2012

In Azerbaijan, very few people are engaged in formal organizations as evidenced by extremely low rates of associational membership in trade unions, political parties, and voluntary groups (see **Table 1**). The 2012 CRRC [survey](#) reveals the paramount place and role of family in Azerbaijani social life. Political scientist Turkhan Sadigov [argues](#) that in Azerbaijani society “local connections, local politics, personalized informal allegiance have a greater appeal for an individual in comparison to nationwide formal politics and nationwide associations.” College education has a negligible influence on organizational membership, which is hard to gauge from survey evidence given a low fraction of those who reported being a member.

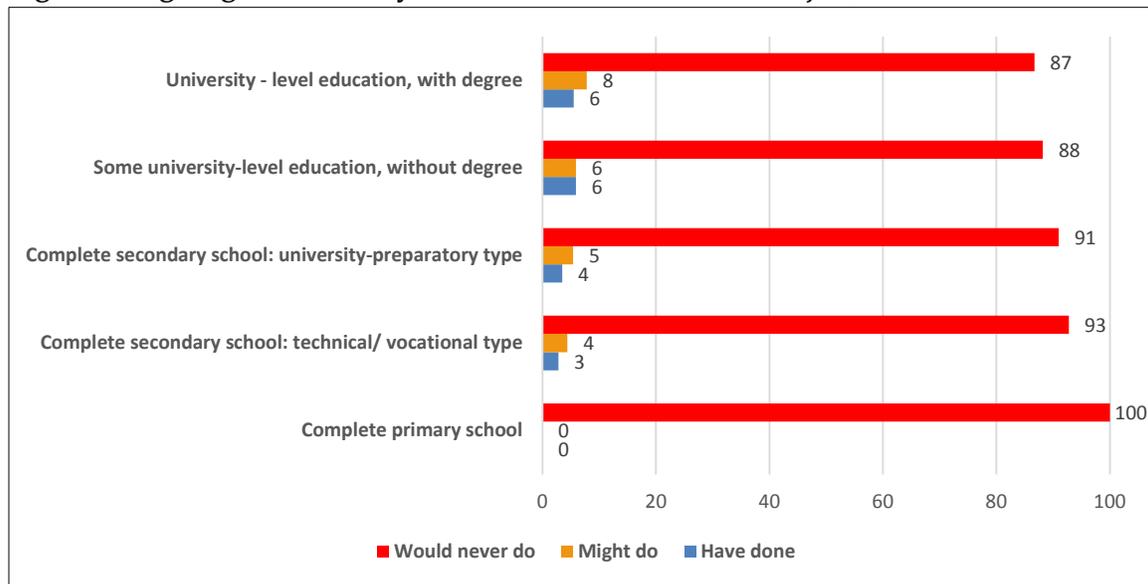
Table 1. Membership in Formal Organizations in Azerbaijan, 2011 (%)

	Political party	Labor union	Humanitarian or charitable org	Artistic or educational org	Sport or recreational org
Not a member	90	95	98	98	98
Inactive member	7	4	1	1	2
Active member	3	1	1	1	0.3

Source: World Values Survey Wave 6, 2011

When it comes to something as innocent as parent school participation, although more educated respondents were more likely to engage in organizational issues, they were not more likely than others to engage in existing initiatives organized by other parents, and in fact fewer of them took part in any event or being a stable member (CRRC, 2012). More than 90 percent said they would not ever sign a petition, and there is not much of a difference between those with university degree and those who graduated from secondary school among respondents (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Signing a Petition by Educational Level in Azerbaijan, 2011



Source: World Values Survey Wave 6, 2011

The Missing Link: Quality of Education

Why does education have no impact on social capital in Azerbaijan? After gaining independence, Azerbaijan has not been able to redefine the role of education in public life. Hundreds of public libraries were shut down and replaced by restaurants, shops, and boutiques. Citizens stopped reading books, and books and education have been commodified. This has been accompanied by a massive fall in the quality of public schools as Soviet-era curriculum became outdated and did not match the demands of a new market economy. While Soviet education had a clear purpose of ideological indoctrination and molding young people into community-spirited “young pioneers,” the new educational system has not been able to redefine itself and has been grappling with something of an identity crisis.

Adjusting the old school model to new realities produced a hybrid model of dubious quality. Teachers often lack modern skills and the pedagogical methods needed to teach the kind of skills that are necessary for the 21st century labor market. On the other side, prevalence of personal connections in getting jobs drags the demand for good quality education down, leading to “Diploma Disease” whereby students are motivated to acquire a formal diploma rather than knowledge, competence, and analytical skills.

During the peak of its oil glory days, the government somehow downplayed education among policy priorities despite the often-celebratory rhetoric of transforming oil revenues into human capital. Between 2011 and 2016, which coincides roughly with the oil boom, the government’s education expenditure was in the range of AZN 1.4 (\$1.8

billion)-AZN 1.7 billion (\$ 1 billion) (converted using the exchange rate of that time) (see **Table 2**). This is a small fraction given that the annual revenue of state budget for the same period was in the range of AZN 16-18 billion.

Table 2. Azerbaijan: Budget Expenditures on Education, Health, and Social Assistance, 2011-2016 (in million AZN)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 (proj.)
Education	1,399	1,575	1,530	1,653	1,711	1,713
Healthcare	563.2	662.7	669.3	725.6	777.7	744.9
Social protection and social security	1,611	1,781	1,813	2,072	2,040	1,896

Source: [Azerbaijan Ministry of Finance](#) (Draft Budget Presentations, various years)

Note: AZN/USD exchange rates for the years 2012-2014 was at the rate of 1AZN=1.27USD, for 2015 1AZN=0.95USD, and for 2016 1AZN=0.6USD.

Notably, the national budget’s educational expenditure is not tied to any reform program, and more than 90 percent of the educational funds are used to cover teacher salaries and operational expenditures. Azerbaijan’s educational expenditure as a percentage of GDP fell from 4.2 percent in the late 1990s to around 2.5 percent in 2011-2014. For comparison, in Finland, which has one of the best schooling systems in the world, education comprises 7.2 percent of the country’s GDP, and in Estonia, 4.7 percent.

Azerbaijan ranked 74th out of 75 countries on the 2009 PISA international education assessment survey (standard quality of education index). It has the [second lowest](#) (after Uzbekistan) university enrollment rate at 25 percent in Europe and Central Asia for which the regional average is 62 percent. According to an [EBRD survey](#), “only around 10 percent of women and 15 percent of men have a tertiary [university] level education in Azerbaijan.” In Azerbaijan, only 23 percent of children receive [preschool](#) education, which is the second lowest (after Tajikistan) in the region. Its vocation training has been decimated and remains dysfunctional.

Other problems, perhaps not uncommon in other post-Soviet states, include the pervasiveness of bribe payments for grades (at public universities), prevalence of supplementary [private tutoring](#) affecting both access to and quality of public schools,

outdated teaching methods, the quality of teachers (many still trained in Soviet-style teacher training institutes that transmit Soviet pedagogical practices), low teacher salaries, lack of school autonomy, and widespread academic plagiarism.

A skills gap is another serious problem: Education does not meet the practical needs of a large percentage of firms. Young workers [lack](#) job-related skills including English language, leadership, problem solving, teamwork, and creative thinking. These are exactly the kind of social skills that are key to the accumulation of social capital and are supposed to be acquired in school/college. More than 60 percent of the graduates [surveyed](#) reported that their education did not adequately prepare them for the domestic job market.

Limited Education Reform

Education reform supported by the World Bank was initiated in 1999, and was implemented in two stages: 2003-2007 and 2008-2014. Funds [allocated](#) were \$5 million for the first stage and \$25 million for the second stage. This is miniscule relative to Azerbaijan's total state oil revenue from the recent oil boom (\$125 billion). In fact, the total amount of educational reform-related expenditure equals \$30 million (apart from annual budget allocation that does not cover reform as such), representing a meager 0.024 percent of the oil revenue surplus.

Moreover, the reforms focused on a small number of technical issues such as curriculum development, IT upgrades, and school infrastructure with priority on primary and secondary school level education. A new curriculum was approved in 2006 and implemented in 2008. However, teachers still have had trouble adjusting to the new curriculum and instruction methods. The government also invested in school infrastructure: 3,000 new schools were [constructed](#) or refurbished, and a new flagship university, ADA University, was established.

An independent [evaluation](#) conducted in 2005 covering only the first phase of reforms noted that the quality of education, especially in rural areas, remained low. While the new national curriculum is largely completed, the lack of funding slowed implementation. The curriculum of teacher training has been revised, but teachers lack incentives to participate in trainings.

Social Risks and Policy Implications

The type of education young Azerbaijanis receive at public schools and universities is still largely Soviet-style in structure and pedagogy. School curricula include civics classes, but nobody takes them seriously. Critical thinking is still alien and teachers

encourage students to memorize course material uncritically. Extra-curricular activities are largely absent. Poor education quality seems to affect the quality of citizenship with limited cross-sectional horizontal networking (bridging) between individuals and groups.

The decline of secular education has raised a generation of poorly educated youth whose entrance to the labor market coincides with difficult economic times. The public sector is shrinking, there are fewer funds for construction and services, and there will be fewer jobs for young people in the formal jobs sectors. Poor job prospects will cause frustration among youth who might turn to alternative moral(izing) narratives, notably Islamist, that abound in the marketplace of anti-liberal, xenophobic, and conspirological ideas.

Azerbaijan and relevant educational policy partners should move beyond the universal literacy measures of educational performance that can be misleading and obscure the worrisome quality of education issues. Beyond the oft-repeated advice to increase teacher salaries, it is important to not only increase educational spending, but more crucially, to improve monitoring and impact evaluation of such expenditures.

Soviet-style rote memorization and sage-on-the-stage pedagogy are the biggest obstacles, as are [corruption](#) in public education and recourse to the informal practice of [tapsh](#) (the use of personal connections to obtain favors such as passing an exam or getting better grades). Educational reform should be grounded in a [capability](#)-enhancing approach and democratic pedagogical methods. According to economics and philosophy Professor Amartya [Sen](#), “Capability reflects a person’s freedom to choose between different ways of living.” Freedom is key: “the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead.” This implies a fundamental change in the philosophy of instruction, shifting to a new system centered on the development of analytical and critical thinking skills, civic skills, an open classroom climate, the content of education, extracurricular activities, and active engagement in student organizations. Tackling corruption in education is hard but essential in reducing the power of vested interests (stakeholders with high stakes in the status quo) whose very power to influence reform depends on their capacity to extract side payments or distortions in allocated funds.