

# Monday, October 13, 2008

## [Policy Think Tanks | A Skeptical Assessment](#)

Here is an assessment of policy research in Azerbaijan that we stumbled upon, in a yet-unpublished piece. It paints a stark picture, but we thought it provides food for discussion.

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"Existing policy institutions are mostly shadow organization of one individual, where staff is added on an as needed basis (for example one key organization does not even mention staff members on its websites). Ultimately these individualistic organizations demonstrate well the old guard categorization - one of three less-than-flattering categories -- 1) the fleers 2) the old guard and 3) the GONGOers - that Azerbaijan policy analysts fall into.

The *fleers*, often of the younger generation, fearing the future direction of Azerbaijan, have sought to ensure the possibility of legally remaining outside of their country of birth. This group has either

- left Azerbaijan to pursue further education and career opportunities in European or North American destination, while staying in the research field; or
- migrated to the private sector to large multinational companies in Azerbaijan, with the goal of attaining geographic mobility and potentially expatriate status in the mid-term.

The *old guard* are generally those who received training during the Soviet era. This group can maintain some distance from the government; however, the risk being self-absorbed and may well be spoiled by an overabundance of funding that often has accepted shallow and low-quality outputs. Generally, therefore, the *old guard* see very limited use in updating their skill sets, since they remain comfortable doing what they have always done.

The GONGOers (Government Organized NGOs) are a combination of younger and older Azerbaijanis, who work for NGOs or research organizations that are either directly or indirectly funded by the Azerbaijani government. They have at best a limited capability of pursuing independent policy research.

As a result, there are almost no human resources to do policy research and many efforts to improve the situation have failed, a situation further exacerbated by three intersecting problems create a negative perception of policy research in Azerbaijan.

1. Azerbaijani universities (maybe with the exception of Khazar) are not incubating the skills necessary for the younger generation to carry out policy analysis. There are competent lecturers, but they are exception. Curricula remain outdated; while many students want to learn, they have little formal opportunity to do so. There are many brilliant young people (as seen in the lively discussions on the Azerbaijani Studies Group), but they are largely self-taught.
2. The private sector in Azerbaijan, dominated by an inner circle close to key families, does not demand high quality research. Business grows through oligarchic capture, not by a detailed orientation toward customers. Thus, there exists little independent market research (though

there are some organizations with potential for reform such as SIAR and ERA) that could form the nucleus for quantitative, evidence-based approaches to policy research.

3. The Azerbaijani government does not encourage independent analysis. It does not release important data publicly and at times actively discourages independent analysis.

A policy vacuum is therefore expanding in the country, which has no capacity to reflect systematically on its own challenges, and therefore no ability to articulate constructive solutions. The vacuum is well illustrated by hard numbers: last year one international organization offering stipends received 25 highly competitive applications to a scholarship program in Armenia, 14 in Georgia (where a lot of the potential talent is busy in government), but merely four competitive applications in Azerbaijan. On a more substantial level, Azerbaijan's bad public policy is visible everywhere and the country can no longer ignore its fundamental problems by palliative spending.

While the picture painted is a stark one, there is an opportunity to develop a new cohort of policy analysts, rather than trying to work with current researchers. This should significantly improve the mid- to long-term outlook of Azerbaijani policy research with the hope that a more open society will slowly emerge, which is more attractive to the younger generation. Such a move should plant the seeds of a virtuous cycle of better policy analysis in a younger generation by..."