



It is our pleasure to invite you to the public talk:

Revival of Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Secularism versus Sharia



On Thursday, March 5, 2020, at 5 pm
at New Europe College (Plantelor 21)

given by

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The Russian conquest of Azerbaijan in the nineteenth century, and the formation of a local secular educated elite under imperial patronage, paved the way for the formation of a new secular nation. Thus, the fall of the Tsarist regime was followed by a brief two-year period of independence of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic. Although the First Republic was swallowed by the Soviet Union, nation-building in the Soviet Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan actually made the restoration of independent statehood after the collapse of the Communist regime a viable possibility, and on 18 October 1991 the Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence.

A strong revival of Islam followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Due to the lack of internal sources of knowledge, which had been wiped out during the Soviet rule, foreign actors played a powerful role in the process of revival. Thus, three major groups of practicing Muslims now dominate Islamic life in Azerbaijan. These are Twelver Shi'is who maintain strong spiritual ties with Iran, and to some extent with Iraq, via the powerful network of grand ayatollahs residing there, different Sunni groups connected to organisations and institutions in Turkey, and Salafis connected to various Arab Gulf States.

Azerbaijani government maintains its grip on power by providing security and stability. Yet this has primarily been achieved by the iron fist by squeezing out space for independent political and economic activity and by the multiple crackdowns on secular democratic opposition, independent media and civil society. Authoritarianism has been consolidated by expanding the unchecked powers of the executive office and establishing its full control over all spheres of public life. The system of checks and balances was left without actual powers. Moreover, the flow of big oil money provided the government with means to satisfy the basic needs of the people, reduce the poverty and carry out modernization and renovation of infrastructure.

However, the unexpected economic downturn since the late 2014, due to falling oil prices, corruption and mismanagement exposed the deep economic and political vulnerabilities of the existing system. So, in this situation the government has been challenged by rising political Islam. Diminishing space for the activities of civil society, independent media and secular opposition boosted opportunities especially for Shi'a Muslim groups to replace weakened democratic forces as the strongest voice of dissent. Yet, secular nature of Azerbaijani society still remains relatively strong.



Altay Goyushov is currently a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. He was Professor of Turkic and Islamic History at Baku State University, Azerbaijan. He received his PhD in the History of Political Islam from the same university in 1993. Currently, his research interests are focused mainly on the issues related to political Islam, Islamic education and the secularisation of Azerbaijan during the last two centuries. He has held fellowships and visiting professorships in Italy, France and the United States, including the

Bourse "Directeurs d'Études Associés" at the FMSH in Paris, a Fulbright Scholarship at Georgetown University, and appointments at Sapienza-Università di Roma, UCLA and the Institut Français d'Études Anatoliennes.

His most recent publication is *"Halted Democracy: Government Hijacking of the New Opposition in Azerbaijan"* (co-author Ilkin Husyenli) in *"Politik und Gesellschaft im Kaukasus"* (ed. **Leïße**, Olaf) published by Springer VS.