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Sociology of Russophilia in Azerbaijan: A Classification for Russophile Social Groups

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ABSTRACT

Azerbaijan, which has long historical, cultural, and political and economic relations with Russia, has various Russophile social groups formed during the period of independence. This study aims to classify the Russophile social groups in Azerbaijan and generalize their characteristics, naming each social group according to its motivation. In this regard, according to the results of the research conducted among Azerbaijanis over the age of 18 in 2022–2023, there are six Russophile social groups in Azerbaijan, which can be called Ethnic Russians, Russian-educated, Communists, Nostalgics, Dependents, and Iranophiles. Each of these social groups has different motivations and different characteristics in relation to Russia and Russian culture. This gives a reason to suggest that there is a mosaic view in relation to Russia and Russian culture in Azerbaijan. According to results of the research, social groups in Azerbaijan exhibit a shared desire for improved relations with Russia and a common interest in promoting the Russian language. Anti-American sentiments pervade some groups, signaling a geopolitical alignment away from the West. Notable differences include Iranophiles' religious ties to Iran, Dependents' economic focus on Russia, and varied emphases among Nostalgists, Communists, Russian-educated, and Ethnic Russians, reflecting nuanced geopolitical perspectives within the overarching Russophile sentiment.

KEYWORDS

pro-Russian sentiment, Azerbaijan, social identity theory, group motivation, post-Soviet studies, political sociology, cultural nostalgia

Introduction

Ethnophilia and ethnophobia are concepts widely utilized in ethnic studies to describe positive or negative sentiments toward particular ethnicities or nations. Ethnophilia denotes a deep admiration or affection for a specific culture, often linked to historical, linguistic, or ideological affinities (Thompson, 1987). Similarly, sinophilia and sinophobia—concepts related to China—have been extensively explored in previous studies, highlighting how these sentiments shape societal and political attitudes (Peyrouse, 2016). Similarly, in modern politics, Russophilia and Russophobia represent two opposing trends that shape international relations. Russophilia is driven by admiration for Russia’s cultural heritage, political traditions, and geopolitical influence. It is often seen in nations with historical ties to Russia or in groups that support multipolarity in global politics. Countries like Serbia as well as certain political movements in Europe and the Middle East express Russophilic sentiments, advocating for stronger partnerships with Russia (Jahangirli & Jabarov, 2023). In contrast, Russophobia reflects wariness or skepticism toward Russia’s role in global affairs, influenced by historical tensions and geopolitical rivalries. This sentiment tends to dominate in regions such as Western Europe (Gutorov et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the sociological significance of language in shaping post-colonial relationships is profound, especially in Francophone countries. The French language, as a colonial legacy, continues to serve as a bridge between France and its former colonies, facilitating cultural, educational, and economic ties. Studies show that Francophonic sentiment remains largely positive due to the pervasive influence of the French language, which still holds prestige in many African nations as a symbol of education and global connection (Abu-Haidar, 2000; Laroussi, 2003). This linguistic attachment often results in a favorable view of France, as the language acts as a tool for upward mobility and international engagement (Siradağ, 2014; Uchehera, 2014). However, this sentiment is not without its complexities; while French continues to wield soft power, there are growing critiques of its neo-colonial influence (Chafer & Majumdar, 2023). Thus, language plays a dual role, that is preserving cultural ties while also serving as a reminder of colonial dominance.

Such concepts are crucial for understanding how nations and ethnic groups engage with each other at both cultural and ideological levels. In the context of Russophilia, authors like Petsinis (2016), Jahangirli and Jabarov (2023) have employed this concept to describe the cultural and ideological bonds that specific social groups in various countries maintain with Russia. Their studies emphasize that Russophilia represents more than just political alignment; it encompasses a complex, historically rooted attachment to Russian culture, language, and geopolitical influence, making it a distinct area of study in sociology.

The concept “Russophilia” was chosen for this study because it conveys stronger and deeper connections than the more general concept “pro-Russian sentiments.” Russophilia reflects not just positive sentiments towards Russia but also enduring cultural, linguistic, and ideological attachments that influence social behavior

and attitudes at a more profound level, which makes it a more suitable concept for examining the targeted social groups in this research.

Russophilia refers to a conceptual framework utilized to denote a sentiment of reverence and affection towards Russia, encompassing an appreciation for its historical legacy, cultural heritage, and societal traditions (Ivanov et al., 2015, p. 148). The emergence of Russophilia dates back to the 19th century (Ripetsky & Sereda, 1993). Subsequent to that period, numerous transformations have occurred pertaining to the conceptualization and historical trajectory of Russophilia. In contemporary times, Russophilia has evolved into a notion closely tied to the interests of the Russian state, elevating it to a matter of national concern. The utilization of Russophilia as an instrument of public diplomacy by Russia in various nations has become an integral component of its strategic endeavors (Putin: *Russkii iazyk*, 2021). Russophiles constitute the primary social foundation for such endeavors in the realm of public diplomacy. Undoubtedly, within this framework, one of the central objectives pursued by the Russian state is to augment the ranks of Russophiles, initially focusing on countries within its sphere of influence, and subsequently extending its reach to a broader geographical scope (Chvarkov: *Kul'turnaia ekspansiia*, 2016). In this regard, the study aims to explore the main sociological characteristics and features of Russophiles in Azerbaijan. Qualitative methods, particularly unstructured interviews, were chosen as the primary means of collecting in-depth, nuanced data to address the research objectives.

Thus, the main purpose of the study is to provide a classification of pro-Russian social groups in Azerbaijan based on the analysis of the qualitative research conducted.

The differentiation of pro-Russian groups is important for several reasons. Firstly, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the various motivations and characteristics that drive these groups, which are often diverse in nature. By differentiating the various forms of pro-Russian sentiment, such as those rooted in cultural nostalgia, economic connections, or ideological perspectives, researchers can gain a clearer understanding of the impact and significance of these groups within society. Moreover, this allows policymakers to more effectively evaluate their influence in both national and broader contexts. Additionally, such classification helps in identifying the distinct factors that contribute to the formation of these groups, providing a clearer picture of their social dynamics and internal structures.

Historical Dynamics of the Formation of Rusophile Social Groups in Azerbaijan During the Independence Period

The third president of Azerbaijan (from October 1993 to October 2003) Heydar Aliyev, upon assuming leadership, initiated a gradual departure from the policies implemented by the previous nationalist government and adopted a new approach. He actively endeavored to improve the negative sentiment towards Russia and the Russian language that had been cultivated within Azerbaijan. During the nationalist government's tenure, there were discussions regarding the potential removal of Russian-language instruction from Azerbaijani schools, causing apprehension

among the Russian government. It is important to note that Azerbaijan has maintained a bilingual education system since 1991, where both Azerbaijani and Russian languages are used as media of instruction across all educational levels. Students have the freedom to choose their language of study. In his interactions with Russian government officials, Heydar Aliyev reassured them of his commitment to uphold and preserve this educational framework (Əliyev, 2011, p. 365). The decision to maintain the utilization of Russian as a medium of instruction in the Azerbaijani education system was met with great satisfaction by the Russian government officials. This practice not only served as a means to preserve Russian culture within Azerbaijan but also prevented a potential exodus of a larger segment of the ethnic Russian population from the country. By ensuring the continuation of Russian language instruction, Azerbaijan was able to retain at least a portion of its Russian community, thereby facilitating the preservation of Russian cultural influence. Furthermore, this factor played a significant role in laying the groundwork for a renewed sense of affinity towards Russia, known as Russophilia, among the Azerbaijani population in the subsequent years.

Another important process should be noted here. In the 1990s, a large number of people from most of the post-Soviet countries, as well as from Azerbaijan, went to work in Russia (Hosner et al., 2018, p. 11). The majority of these migrant workers, predominantly male, faced limitations in accessing white-collar employment due to their lack of qualifications. As time passed, the influx of migrant workers into Russia grew significantly, resulting in a division by nationality, with each group “specializing” in particular sectors. For instance, Azerbaijanis predominantly engaged in the sale of fruits and vegetables within the market sector. This arrangement had significant benefits, including reducing the unemployment rate in smaller countries that were still in the process of developing their economies and generating foreign currency inflows. Importantly, both Russia and the migrant workers derived advantages from this migration. Russia benefited from a readily available and inexpensive labor force, while the migrant workers’ families had a direct stake in Russia’s economic development and security, as it directly impacted their well-being. As a result, an increasing number of individuals in Azerbaijan developed sympathies toward Russia over time.

Concurrently, Azerbaijan, akin to other nations in the South Caucasus and Central Asian region, faced arduous economic conditions. With the collapse of the economic system of the USSR, a deep production and export problem arose in these countries. The manufacturing industry of the USSR was scattered in all countries and was interconnected (Zapol’skis, 2017). If a car was manufactured in Baku during that period, it relied on a complex network of interdependent economic relationships within the USSR. Not all the components necessary for production were sourced locally; instead, various parts were obtained from different cities across the Soviet Union. For instance, tires were acquired from Tbilisi, glass from Yerevan, engines from Moscow, and brake systems from Ashgabat. These components, in turn, comprised raw materials originating from yet other cities within the USSR. For instance, the rubber used in tires produced in Tbilisi might have been sourced from Kiev, while metal parts could have come from Minsk. The production process of such a product thus hinged upon the economic interdependencies among different cities. Consequently, following the dissolution of the USSR, the disruption of

these economic ties constituted a significant factor contributing to a profound economic crisis in the affected countries (Zapol'skis, 2017).

Over time, individuals naturally drew comparisons between the advancements in their daily lives and the period of the USSR. Subsequently, some individuals who observed a higher standard of living and greater well-being during the Soviet era began to experience a sense of nostalgia for that period. A significant portion of the general populace attributed their difficulties and economic hardships to the collapse of the USSR, leading to a deep resentment towards Mikhail Gorbachev, the final General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR. This sentiment was further fueled by the events of January 1990. During this period, the notion that "Gorbachev single-handedly dismantled the USSR" gained popularity among the people (Mamedov, 2019, p. 2).

The economic difficulties in the 1990s made people nostalgic for the USSR as well as communism. Many social policy measures implemented in the USSR, such as free education, free health care, official induction and employment by state institutions (Cəfərli, 2021), were things that were not easily accessible to Azerbaijanis in the first years of independence. Upon learning that in the USSR university graduates were directly assigned employment, an unemployed person who had recently completed their studies could not help but yearn for a return to the USSR and, consequently, to communism. Similarly, an unskilled unemployed youth, upon hearing from their parents about the guaranteed employment provided by state institutions in the USSR, naturally developed a fondness for the era of the USSR and its communist policies. It is important to note that not all individuals held this perspective during that period. Supporters of nationalism, Pan-Turkism, and the pursuit of freedom believed that attaining independence outweighed the allure of material prosperity (Musavi, 2018). At this time, the nation was divided into those who wished for the USSR and supporters of independence. But still, in a country that faced 50% unemployment in 1993 and 1763.5% inflation in 1994, as well as lost two-thirds of its industry (Prezident Kitabxanası, 2016), it is understandable that people miss the stable economy of the USSR.

It is undeniable that the expression of nostalgia for the USSR and communism carries an implicit longing for the Russians and the Russian government. This observation suggests that the difficult economic circumstances of the 1990s not only did not diminish the affinity towards Russia, but rather intensified it within Azerbaijan. Concurrently, it further reinforced the existing profound support for communism in the country, thus significantly contributing to the perpetuation of communist ideals among future generations in Azerbaijan.

Another essential aspect deserving attention is the relaxation of border controls and the consequent influx of individuals pursuing education abroad, including religious education, following Azerbaijan's attainment of independence. It is noteworthy that during the 1990s, Iran's interest in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, where a significant population of ethnic Persians, particularly the Talish people, reside, experienced a noticeable upsurge. The influence of religious interests on Azerbaijani society is a broad and multifaceted subject that merits dedicated analysis in

a separate article. A significant number of young Azerbaijanis from these regions opted to seek religious instruction in Iran, which entails a duration exceeding that of secular education. The duration of religious education typically spans from seven to 12 years, depending on the individual's aspirations and objectives (Oqtayqızı, 2021). As a result, a remarkable phenomenon emerges whereby a young individual who embarks on a journey to Iran at the age of 18 becomes deeply entrenched in the sphere of Shia culture until reaching the age of 25–30. Empirical data demonstrates that clergy members who have received religious education in Iran and subsequently return to Azerbaijan demonstrate a clear inclination towards the Iranian state and its religious authorities. Essentially, a significant proportion of individuals who have undergone religious instruction in Iran reintegrate into their homeland as advocates of Iranophilia.

Initially, the connection between Iranophilia and Russophilia may not be readily apparent on the surface. However, upon closer examination, a correlation becomes evident within the context of Azerbaijan. Since the 1990s, Azerbaijani society has been marked by a division between two distinct political orientations: a Western orientation encompassing the United States, Europe, and Turkey, and an Eastern orientation encompassing Russia. In this framework, individuals with a preference for Iranophilia tend to adopt a strongly adversarial position against the Western orientation. It is worth noting that a significant number of Azerbaijani Iranophiles harbor sentiments of anti-Americanism, Europhobia, and Turkophobia. Consequently, they align themselves with the Eastern orientation, where Russia holds a prominent position. In some cases, driven by the adage "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," certain Iranophiles eventually transition into the realm of Russophilia. As a result, Azerbaijanis who have received religious education in Iran have played a distinct role in the propagation of Russophilia within the country.

Ilham Aliyev, who came to power after Heydar Aliyev in 2003, continued father's policy in relations with Russia, as well as in the protection of the Russian language in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, the Russian-language education system was kept as it was. However, gradually, especially in recent years, some post-Soviet countries began to gradually reduce and eliminate Russian-language education (Sarıyeva, 2022). These applications increased the pressure on Russian-language education, which is already a matter of dispute every year in Azerbaijan. However, Aliyev's government did not make any changes in this field. At the same time, President Ilham Aliyev promised that the Russian language will be preserved in Azerbaijan during his meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow in February 2022:

Regarding schools, I would like to clarify a bit. There are about 340 schools in Azerbaijan where education is in the Russian language, and more than 140,000 children study in these schools. More than 15,000 citizens of Azerbaijan are studying in the Russian language sections of higher educational institutions. In my opinion, this is a very important basis of our relations and our future relations, because the Russian language has always united the countries of the former Soviet Union, and of course, without knowledge of the Russian language, it will be very difficult to arrange the relations of future generations. Therefore, as I said,

it is a very important factor in our life. (Prezident İlham Əliyev, 2022; Trans. by Jahandar Jabarov)

As can be seen from İlham Aliyev's words, he views the Russian language as a unifying force and considers it important to regulate relations between the future generations of Azerbaijan and Russia. Acknowledging the annual disputes surrounding Russian-language education in Azerbaijan, President Aliyev committed to maintaining the status quo and highlighted the historical significance of the Russian language as a unifying factor among former Soviet Union countries. In quantifying the impact, Aliyev provided specific details, noting that approximately 340 schools in Azerbaijan offer education in Russian, with over 140,000 children studying in these schools and more than 15,000 citizens enrolled in Russian-language sections of higher educational institutions. The President framed the preservation of the Russian language as a crucial basis for relations, stressing its historical importance and its role in facilitating connections among the nations of the former Soviet Union. Delivered in a diplomatic tone, Aliyev's statements also reflect the geopolitical context, notably in the context of Azerbaijan's relations with Russia, underscoring the importance of linguistic continuity for future generations and bilateral ties.

The intricate web of cultural, historical, and political and economic interactions, coupled with the discernible stance of the Aliyev government towards Russia and the Russian language, necessitates a pressing inquiry into the presence of Russophile social groups in Azerbaijan, the distinctive characteristics of these social groups and discern the impact of government policies on shaping their attitudes.

Methodology

The research transpired progressively between the years 2022 and 2023, extending over a duration of two years. In pursuit of this objective, iterative field research endeavors were undertaken on multiple occasions within the geographical confines of Azerbaijan. The methodology of the research is given in the Table 1. In this context, methodology aspects such as participant selection, criteria for diversity, challenges in recruitment, sample size rationale, interview duration and structure, ethical considerations and triangulation are given and their explanations are shown.

Table 1
The Methodology of the Research

Aspect of the Methodology	Explanation
Participant Selection	A total of 300 potential participants were initially approached face-to-face, where the concept of Russophilia was explained. Out of this pool, 75 individuals self-identified as Russophiles and became the focus of detailed interviews
Criteria for Diversity	To ensure diversity and representation, participants were selected from various demographics, including university students, housewives, and individuals from different urban and rural settings, resulting in a broad representation of the Russophile population in Azerbaijan

Table 1 Continued

Aspect of the Methodology	Explanation
Challenges in Recruitment	One primary challenge in participant recruitment was participant hesitation due to concerns about potential political scrutiny. Participants were reassured that their political views were not the focus, and measures were taken to address fears of public censure
Sample Size Rationale	The sample size was determined based on the diversity of backgrounds, ensuring representation across different sections of the population. The inclusion criterion was being over 18 years old, with no additional restrictions
Interview Duration and Structure	During the interviews, participants were asked five main questions common to all, followed by additional definitive questions based on their responses. Each interview comprised approximately 12–14 questions in total
Ethical Considerations	Two main ethical considerations were addressed. Firstly, participants were not compelled to answer questions they were uncomfortable with. Secondly, written and signed consent was obtained, ensuring the voluntary participation of individuals in the research
Triangulation	To enhance the validity of findings, triangulation methods were employed. Observational data were gathered to compare insights obtained through interviews with participants' actual behaviors and practices, providing a more comprehensive understanding of Russophilia in Azerbaijan

Beyond employing the triangulation method detailed in Table 1, the validity and reliability of participant-provided data are further substantiated through extensive longitudinal observations conducted in authentic settings. Moreover, in recent years, supplementary observations within the realm of social networks have been undertaken to enhance the robustness of the data.

Current Classification of Russophile Social Groups in Azerbaijan

In Table 2, Russophiles in modern Azerbaijan are classified into six groups: Ethnic Russians, Russian-educated, Communists, Nostalgics, Dependents, and Iranophiles, based on their motives and sources. Certainly, it should be noted that within these groups, there are further subdivisions and numerous smaller groups that coexist alongside the six major groups mentioned. However, due to the abundance of subcategories, encompassing all of them within a single research is impractical. Hence, our focus in this article revolves around the examination of the most prominent Russophile groups. This classification is rooted in a comprehensive analysis of the motives and sources elucidated by respondents during in-depth interviews. The purpose behind this categorization is to effectively generalize and classify the diverse array of motives and sources expressed by individuals identifying as Russophiles. By delineating these social groups, it is aimed to provide a structured framework that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of Russophilia in Azerbaijan, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the varied motives and sources and sociocultural

dynamics inherent within each social group. This methodological approach facilitates a systematic examination of the sociological characteristics, perspectives, and affiliations that collectively contribute to the overarching classification of Russophiles in the contemporary Azerbaijani context.

Table 2

Classification of Russophiles in Contemporary Azerbaijan According to Their Motives and Sources

Russophiles	Motives and Sources
Ethnic Russians	Belonging to the Russian nation
Russian-educated	Proximity to Russian culture
Communists	Communism past
Nostalgists	Missing the USSR
Dependents	Economic dependence on Russia
Iranophiles	Hatred of the Western world

As depicted in Table 2, each of the six groups possesses distinct motivations for embracing Russophilia. Ethnic Russians espouse Russophilia due to their innate sense of affinity and belonging to the Russian nation. Azerbaijani individuals educated in Russian institutions develop a cultural bond with Russia through language acquisition, exposure to Russian national and cultural values, as well as consumption of Russian media and engagement with Russian social networks. This cultural kinship serves as their primary impetus for embracing Russophilia. The group of Communists holds admiration for Russia's communist history and aspires for the establishment of communism within modern Azerbaijan. Their Russophilia primarily stems from the Soviet Union's status as the largest communist state in the world, and the Soviets being the most extensive communist society globally. Nostalgists, despite the passage of three decades since the collapse of the USSR, continue to yearn for its existence. Their longing arises from the enduring influence of memories from their youth, the comparatively weaker state of Azerbaijan's industrial sector in comparison to that of the Azerbaijan SSR, and perceived inadequacies in Azerbaijan's social policies. Dependents, as implied by their name, rely on the Russian economy for their sustenance. Their Russophilia is driven by the desire for Russia to maintain strength and stability, free from any sanctions or embargoes, as their livelihood heavily depends on currency flows from Russia. Lastly, Iranist-religious individuals have been inspired by the close ties between Russia and Iran since the 1990s. Shared antipathy towards the Western world in both countries has fostered closer relations between their leadership and societies, exemplified by the adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." This, like the Iranians (Farmanesh, 2018, p. 11), prompted the Azerbaijanis, who were influenced by the Persian culture, to sympathize with Russia. Most likely, if this group had lived in the years of World War II, it would not have had such a positive attitude towards Russia. At the same time, this segment, which condemns the Azerbaijan government's establishment of warm relations with Israel, is against Aliyev's government.

Ethnic Russians

The analysis of the interviews reveals distinctive sociological characteristics within the group identified as Ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan. This ethno-cultural cohort exhibits multifaceted attributes that shape their identity, attitudes, and affiliations. The following sociological dimensions encapsulate the essence of Ethnic Russian social group in the Azerbaijani context (Table 3).

Table 3

Sociological Dimensions Within the Ethnic Russian Social Group in Azerbaijan

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Ethnic Russians
Heritage and Linguistic Identity	Individuals with a familial background that includes either both parents or at least one parent of Russian origin, where the primary language is Russian, reflecting a linguistic identity intricately connected with Russian religious and cultural values
Transnational Family Ties	Maintaining familial connections with Russia or other post-Soviet countries through relatives residing there
Attitudes towards Russian-Azerbaijani Relations	Expressing a vested interest in fostering warmer relations between Russia and Azerbaijan
Cultural Integration and Language Proficiency	The inclination to foster Russian culture and establish Russian-speaking environments in Azerbaijan is accompanied by the challenge of effective communication in the Azerbaijani language
Acceptance of Russian Perspectives	Alignment with Russia’s historical, political, and ideological perspectives
Sentiments towards the USSR	Expressing admiration for the Soviet Union, reflecting nostalgia for a bygone era
Geopolitical Orientations	Some individuals exhibit anti-American sentiments, while others hold Europhobic views

Table 3 succinctly organizes the key sociological dimensions and their corresponding characteristics within Ethnic Russian group in Azerbaijan. The delineated attributes of the ethnic Russian social cohort in Azerbaijan resonate with the tenets of cultural and identity theories in sociology. Specifically, the Cultural Identity Theory, positing that individuals derive their sense of self and affiliation from communal cultural facets, substantiates the circumstance of this social grouping (Lecours, 2000). The identified characteristics, such as linguistic identity, familial bonds, and alignment with Russian religious and cultural values, signify a robust cultural identity prevalent among ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the manifestation of nostalgia for the Soviet Union and admiration for Russia’s historical, political, and ideological tenets underscores a collective cultural identity molded by historical experiences.

Additionally, the application of the Social Identity Theory contributes to comprehending the dynamics within the ethnic Russian social assemblage. This theory asserts that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups

based on shared traits, fostering a collective sense of belonging and identity (Collier, 1988). In the context of ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan, the shared linguistic heritage, familial associations, and cultural values collectively contribute to the establishment of a distinctive social identity within the broader Azerbaijani societal framework.

Hence, the amalgamation of Cultural Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory furnishes a comprehensive framework to substantiate the circumstances surrounding the ethnic Russian social group in Azerbaijan, elucidating the manner in which shared cultural and identity components configure their attitudes, predilections, and interactions within the sociopolitical milieu of the nation.

Russian-Educated

The examination of interviews reveals distinctive sociological attributes within the group identified as Russian-educated individuals in Azerbaijan. This cohort, consisting of Azerbaijanis with educational backgrounds spanning from elementary school to higher education, exhibits a spectrum of characteristics that delineate their identity, cultural affiliations, and geopolitical perspectives. The following sociological dimensions encapsulate the essence of Russian-educated social group in the Azerbaijani context (Table 4).

Table 4
Sociological Dimensions Within the Russian-Educated Social Group in Azerbaijan

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Russian-Educated Group
Linguistic Proficiency and Language Challenges	Russian-educated individuals exhibit a high proficiency in the Russian language, akin to their mother tongue. However, some encounter challenges in speaking the Azerbaijani language
Cultural Engagement	Acquaintance with Russian literature, music, and art underscores their cultural familiarity with Russia. Additionally, some individuals actively share and engage with elements of Russian culture
Advocacy for Russian-Speaking Environment	A notable segment expresses interest in fostering a Russian-speaking environment within Azerbaijan
Partial Acceptance of Russian Perspectives	Russian-educated individuals exhibit a nuanced stance, partially accepting Russia's approach in history, politics, and other domains
Social Networks	Establishing diverse social networks, some individuals maintain many friendships with ethnic Russians
Sentiments towards the USSR	A subset of this social group expresses admiration for the Soviet Union, reflecting nostalgic sentiments
Geopolitical Orientations and Europhobia	The Russian-educated cohort encompasses individuals with varying geopolitical orientations, including both anti-American sentiments and Europhobic views, indicating complex geopolitical attitudes

This sociological analysis illuminates the multifaceted nature of Russian-educated group in Azerbaijan, shedding light on their linguistic proficiency, cultural engagement, and nuanced geopolitical perspectives that collectively contribute to their sociocultural identity. The characteristics exhibited by Russian-educated

group in Azerbaijan align with aspects of Cultural Capital Theory and Social Identity Theory in sociology, providing a nuanced understanding of their situation. Cultural Capital Theory, proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, can be applied to justify the situation of the Russian-educated social group. According to this theory, individuals accrue cultural knowledge, skills, and behaviors that confer social advantages (Öztürk, 2020). In the context of Russian-educated group, their high proficiency in the Russian language, cultural familiarity with Russian literature, music, and art, and active engagement with Russian culture reflect a form of cultural capital. This cultural capital not only shapes their identity but also positions them within a distinct social group with shared cultural attributes.

Additionally, Social Identity Theory is relevant in understanding the dynamics of Russian-educated group. This theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, fostering a sense of belonging (Hogg & Williams, 2000). In the case of the Russian-educated individuals in Azerbaijan, their linguistic proficiency, cultural familiarity, and nuanced geopolitical orientations contribute to the formation of a distinct social identity within the broader Azerbaijani context. Therefore, Cultural Capital Theory and Social Identity Theory together provide a comprehensive theoretical framework to justify the situation of the Russian-educated social group in Azerbaijan, elucidating how their cultural capital and shared identity elements influence their perspectives and interactions within the sociocultural landscape.

Communists

The sociological analysis of the Communists segment in Azerbaijan reveals a distinctive set of ideological, geopolitical, and cultural characteristics. This cohort, defined by its adherence to the ideology of Marxism–Leninism, exhibits a complex combination of beliefs and affiliations that shape their sociocultural identity. The following sociological dimensions encapsulate the essence of Communists social group in the Azerbaijani context (Table 5).

Table 5
Sociological Dimensions Within the Communists in Azerbaijan

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Communists
Marxist–Leninist Ideology and Perception of Nationalists	Communists in Azerbaijan adhere to the ideology of Marxism–Leninism, indicating a commitment to the principles and tenets of communism, while perceiving nationalists in the image of fascists, suggesting a negative association with nationalist ideologies
Anti-American Stance	This social group adopts an anti-American stance, reflecting a geopolitical orientation that opposes American influence
Desire for USSR Reconstruction and Admiration for Former USSR Leaders	Communists express a desire for the reconstruction of USSR communism, highlighting a nostalgic aspiration for the historical political structure, and there is admiration within the group for former USSR leaders, suggesting a reverence for historical figures associated with the Soviet era

Table 5 Continued

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Communists
Turkophobia, Europhobia, and Cultural Affiliation	Communists exhibit Turkophobic and Europhobic views, indicating negative sentiments towards Turkish cultural and geopolitical influences as well as aversion to European cultural and political elements; however, while not fully aligned, they partly share Russian culture, indicating a cultural connection influenced by their ideological stance
Cosmopolitan Orientation	The majority of Communists in Azerbaijan demonstrate a cosmopolitan orientation, reflecting a global and inclusive perspective

This sociological analysis offers insights into the intricate combination of ideological, geopolitical, and cultural factors that define Communists group in Azerbaijan. Their distinctive beliefs and affiliations contribute to a unique sociocultural identity within the broader context of Azerbaijani society. The characteristics exhibited by the Communists in Azerbaijan align with aspects of Ideological Theory in sociology, offering insights into the justification for the situation of this social group. Ideological Theory, broadly encompassing political and cultural ideologies, can be applied to understand the situation of the Communist social group (Freeden, 1998). The adherence to Marxism–Leninism, the desire for the reconstruction of USSR communism, and the negative association with nationalist ideologies signify a shared political and cultural ideology within this group. Ideological Theory posits that individuals with common ideological perspectives form cohesive social groups (Freeden, 2006), and in the case of Azerbaijani Communists, their ideological alignment creates a distinct social identity within the broader sociopolitical context.

To sum up, Ideological Theory provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to justify the situation of the Communist social group in Azerbaijan, elucidating how shared ideological perspectives and cultural elements shape their attitudes, preferences, and interactions within the sociopolitical landscape.

Nostalgists

The sociological analysis of the Nostalgists group in Azerbaijan reveals a distinctive set of characteristics rooted in experiences and sentiments tied to the Soviet era. This cohort, primarily comprised of individuals who studied and spent their youth in the USSR, exhibits a unique sociocultural identity shaped by historical affiliations. The following sociological dimensions encapsulate the essence of Nostalgists social group in the Azerbaijani context (Table 6).

Table 6
Sociological Dimensions Within the Nostalgists in Azerbaijan

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Nostalgists
Soviet Educational Background and Aging Demographic	Nostalgists, individuals who received their education in the USSR, reflect a formative period shaped by Soviet educational institutions and represent a relatively older segment of society, having spent their youth in the USSR, thus influencing their perspectives

Table 6 Continued

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Nostalgists
Linguistic Identity	Nostalgists can speak Russian as their mother tongue, emphasizing a linguistic identity deeply rooted in Soviet-era cultural and educational practices
Admiration for Former USSR Leaders and Disdain for Mikhail Gorbachev	Nostalgists express admiration for former USSR leaders, reflecting a sense of reverence for historical figures associated with the Soviet regime, while simultaneously harboring negative sentiments towards Mikhail Gorbachev, suggesting a distinct disapproval of his role in the later years of the USSR
Desire for USSR Social Policy Model	This segment of Russophiles desires the social policy model of the USSR, indicating a nostalgic yearning for the societal structures and policies prevalent during the Soviet era
Admiration for the Russian State	Alongside their affinity for the USSR, Nostalgists express admiration for the contemporary Russian state, reflecting a continuity of positive sentiments towards Russian governance

This sociological analysis provides insights into the unique characteristics and perspectives of Nostalgists group in Azerbaijan. Shaped by their experiences in the Soviet era, these individuals exhibit a sociocultural identity marked by linguistic ties, nostalgic sentiments, and a nuanced stance on both historical and contemporary political landscapes. The situation of Nostalgists in Azerbaijan is intricately connected with Collective Memory Theory (Licata & Mercy, 2015), as their characteristics and perspectives reflect a collective construction of memories rooted in their formative period within the USSR. The linguistic identity deeply embedded in Soviet-era cultural and educational practices forms a central aspect of the collective memory, as the shared experience of speaking Russian as their mother tongue serves as a key marker of their historical and cultural background.

The admiration for former USSR leaders and the expression of negative sentiments towards Mikhail Gorbachev underscore the selective nature of their collective memory (Hirst & Coman, 2018), emphasizing positive associations with historical figures aligned with the Soviet regime while harboring disapproval for events perceived as detrimental to that era. This selective memory contributes to the formation of a distinct collective identity within the Nostalgist social group.

The nostalgic yearning for the social policy model of the USSR further reinforces the collective memory, as Nostalgists hold onto perceptions of societal structures and policies prevalent during the Soviet era. This yearning signifies a shared memory of a specific socioeconomic model that has left a lasting imprint on their perspectives. Moreover, the positive sentiments expressed towards the contemporary Russian state highlight a continuity of favorable perceptions, connecting their present attitudes to the historical memory of the Soviet regime. This linkage suggests that the collective memory of the USSR extends beyond the temporal boundaries of that era and influences their contemporary views.

In essence, the characteristics of Nostalgists in Azerbaijan, when viewed through the lens of Collective Memory Theory, reveal a dynamic interplay between shared memories, linguistic identities, and cultural practices. The theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how historical recollections shape

the unique situation of the Nostalgist social group, illuminating the ways in which collective memories influence their attitudes, preferences, and interactions within the sociocultural landscape of Azerbaijan.

Dependents

The sociological analysis of the Dependents group in Azerbaijan reveals a distinct set of characteristics shaped by economic dependencies and familial ties to Russia. This cohort, primarily defined by their reliance on financial support and economic connections with Russia, demonstrates a unique sociocultural identity influenced by transnational economic dynamics. The following sociological dimensions encapsulate the essence of segment of the Dependents in the Azerbaijani context (Table 7).

Table 7

Sociological Dimensions Within the Dependents in Azerbaijan

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Dependents
Economic Dependency on Russia	Dependents have at least one family member or close relative working in Russia, establishing a vital economic link between their households and the Russian labor market
Financial Needs and Interest in Ruble Appreciation	Members of this group, reliant on capital from Russia, indicate a financial dependence on external sources and express a keen interest in the appreciation of the Russian ruble, as it directly impacts their financial stability
Impact of Sanctions	Sanctions imposed on Russia have a significant and direct/indirect effect on Dependents, underscoring the vulnerability of their economic situation to geopolitical events
Interest in Bilateral Relations and Economic Developments	Dependents exhibit a notable interest in the warming of Russian-Azerbaijani relations, reflecting a desire for enhanced diplomatic ties that could potentially benefit their economic circumstances, while concurrently closely following economic and political developments in Russia, demonstrating an awareness of the factors that impact their economic well-being

This sociological analysis sheds light on the unique characteristics of Dependents social group in Azerbaijan, emphasizing their economic interdependence with Russia and the consequential impact on their sociocultural identity. The dimensions explored underscore the intricate relationship between economic dependencies and sociopolitical interests within this group. The situation of Dependents in Azerbaijan can be aptly understood through the lens of Dependency Theory. Dependency Theory is a sociological perspective that explores the asymmetrical relationships between developed and developing countries, emphasizing economic dependence as a central feature (Hills, 1994). In the context of Dependents in Azerbaijan, this theory provides insights into the dynamics of their sociopolitical and economic circumstances shaped by their reliance on another country, particularly Russia.

Dependency Theory posits that less developed nations can become economically dependent on more developed nations, leading to imbalances in power, influence, and economic stability (Angotti, 1981). In the case of Azerbaijani Dependents, their economic link to Russia, manifested through family members working in the Russian

labor market, establishes a tangible form of dependency. This economic reliance on Russia shapes their perspectives, interests, and affiliations.

The keen interest expressed by Dependents in the appreciation of the Russian ruble and their vulnerability to sanctions imposed on Russia further underscores the economic interdependence highlighted by Dependency Theory. Their economic well-being is intricately tied to the economic conditions in Russia, emphasizing the asymmetrical nature of the relationship between the two countries. Moreover, the Dependents' expressed interest in the warming of Russian–Azerbaijani relations aligns with Dependency Theory's emphasis on the diplomatic and political dimensions of dependency. The desire for enhanced diplomatic ties reflects an awareness among Dependents that improved relations could potentially benefit their economic circumstances.

Iranophiles

The sociological analysis of the Iranophiles group in Azerbaijan reveals a distinctive set of characteristics deeply rooted in religious, cultural, and geopolitical affiliations with Iran. This cohort, predominantly composed of Shiite individuals with connections to Iranian education and culture, exhibits a unique sociocultural identity shaped by religious beliefs and anti-Western sentiments. The following sociological dimensions encapsulate the essence of Iranophiles social group in the Azerbaijani context (Table 8).

Table 8

Sociological Dimensions Within the Iranophiles in Azerbaijan

Sociological Dimensions	Characteristics Within Iranophiles
Shiite Identity and Religious Education	Iranophiles are predominantly Shiites, emphasizing a shared religious identity that extends to their acceptance of religious education, often acquired in Iran
Religious Leadership and Cultural Affiliation	They accept the religious leader of Iran as their own, underlining a religious connection that goes beyond national borders, and living with Persian culture, Iranophiles manifest a cultural affiliation with Iran that transcends mere religious ties
Acceptance of Iran's Approach and Geopolitical Orientations	Members of this group embrace Iran's approach in history, politics, and various fields, signifying a broader ideological alignment with Iranian perspectives, and expressing anti-American sentiments, along with Turkophobic and Europhobic views, Iranophiles demonstrate a distinct aversion to Western and certain regional influences
Sympathy for Russia and Non-Sharing of Russian Culture	The primary reason for their sympathy for Russia lies in politics and rivalry with the West, showcasing a geopolitical alignment driven by anti-Western sentiments, while in contrast to other Russophile social groups, Iranophiles do not share Russian culture, emphasizing a selective appreciation for geopolitical reasons rather than cultural affinity
Opposition to Aliyev's Government	Iranophiles oppose the government of Aliyev, primarily due to its close relations with Israel, indicating a divergence in geopolitical alliances

This sociological analysis unveils the intricate interplay of religious, cultural, and geopolitical factors that shape the identity of Iranophiles group in Azerbaijan. Their distinctive affiliations and geopolitical orientations contribute to a unique sociocultural identity within the broader context of Azerbaijani society. The situation of Iranophiles in Azerbaijan can be effectively understood through the lens of world-system theory, particularly its emphasis on geopolitical and cultural alignments within the global system. World-system theory, developed by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, examines the hierarchical relationships between core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral nations within the global economic and political structure (Chirot & Hall, 1982). In the context of Iranophiles, their religious commitment and cultural affiliation with Iran, despite residing in Azerbaijan, align with the concept of semi-peripheral nations within the world-system framework. Iran, as a regional power with a significant influence in the Middle East, occupies a semi-peripheral position in the global hierarchy. Iranophiles' religious and cultural connections to Iran contribute to their semi-peripheral identity, transcending national borders and reflecting a nuanced geopolitical alignment.

The sympathy expressed by Iranophiles towards Russia, driven by politics and rivalry with the West, resonates with world-system theory's insights into geopolitical dynamics. In the global system, alliances and oppositions are often shaped by geopolitical considerations, and Iranophiles' alignment with Russia can be seen as a strategic response to their anti-Western sentiments. Furthermore, the divergence in geopolitical alliances, as evidenced by Iranophiles' opposition to the government of Aliyev due to its close relations with Israel, aligns with world-system theory's examination of how geopolitical factors influence political stances within a global context.

In addition, the concept of Transnationalism, particularly in the context of religious identity and commitment, can offer valuable insights into the situation of Iranophiles in Azerbaijan. Transnationalism refers to the ways in which individuals and communities maintain connections, relationships, and affiliations that transcend national borders (Clavin, 2005). In the case of Iranophiles, the strong religious commitment to Shiism and the acceptance of religious education, often acquired in Iran, reflect a form of transnational religious identity. Transnational religious communities often maintain ties with religious institutions, leaders, and practices beyond the borders of their residing country (Tedeschi et al., 2022). Iranophiles, through their acceptance of the religious leader of Iran and their religious education acquired in Iran, exemplify a transnational religious orientation. This implies that their religious commitment extends beyond the national context of Azerbaijan and is influenced by religious practices and teachings originating in Iran. This perspective allows for an understanding of how religious commitments, in this case, Shiite Islam, can shape the identities and affiliations of individuals in ways that go beyond the confines of national borders.

Therefore, while world-system theory provides insights into the geopolitical aspects of Iranophiles' situation, the concept of Transnationalism offers a complementary perspective, focusing specifically on the transnational dimensions of their religious commitment and identity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings can be discussed by being integrated with theoretical approaches. In this regard, Rogers Brubaker's theory of ethnicity, particularly outlined in his work *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2006), challenges the notion that ethnic groups are solid, stable entities. Instead, Brubaker suggests that ethnicity, much like race and nationhood, should be viewed as a fluid, dynamic process that arises through social and political contexts. He introduces the concept of "groupness," which refers to the contingent, context-dependent nature of group identity. According to Brubaker, ethnic identities and groups are often the product of political mobilization, and their formation is influenced by external events and circumstances, rather than being fixed and inherent. His theory emphasizes that ethnic groups are not pre-existing social entities but are constructed and reconstructed through ongoing processes of social interaction and political action.

Applying Brubaker's framework to the study of Russophile social groups in Azerbaijan, one could argue that these groups may not constitute a fixed, homogenous entity but rather reflect dynamic and context-dependent identities. The degree of Russophilia within these groups could fluctuate based on political, economic, and social circumstances. For instance, individuals or sub-groups within the broader Russophile community in Azerbaijan might express varying degrees of attachment to Russian culture, language, or political ideologies, depending on factors such as historical ties, geopolitical developments, or economic incentives. This theory allows for the possibility that Russophilia in Azerbaijan is not a static identity but could be activated or de-emphasized in response to external events. Thus, while Brubaker's theory does not directly explain Russophile groups, it offers a useful lens through which the fluid and constructed nature of these groups might be understood.

In Azerbaijan, various social groups exhibit Russophile tendencies, reflecting complex intersections of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. While these groups share certain commonalities, they also demonstrate distinct characteristics that shape their unique perspectives. A notable convergence among these social groups is the desire for warmer relations between Azerbaijan and Russia. Additionally, the interest in fostering Russian-speaking environments within Azerbaijan is a shared theme, reflecting a common appreciation for the Russian language and culture. Anti-American sentiments are evident in some groups, indicating a shared geopolitical orientation that leans away from Western influences.

However, within this overarching Russophile sentiment, significant differences emerge. Iranophiles, for instance, highlight a religious and cultural connection with Iran that transcends national borders. Their affinity for Iran's historical, political, and ideological perspectives sets them apart. In contrast, Dependents emphasize economic ties with Russia, underlining their financial dependence on external sources. Their primary concern lies in the appreciation of the Russian ruble and the impact of geopolitical events on their economic stability.

Nostalgists and Communists share a desire for the reconstruction of USSR communism, but their focus differs. Nostalgists center their Russophile sentiments on historical ties with the USSR, emphasizing linguistic identity rooted in Soviet-

era cultural practices. Communists, on the other hand, align with Marxist–Leninist ideology and share some cultural connection with Russia. Russian-educated social group exhibits a nuanced stance, partially accepting Russia’s approach, and maintains diverse geopolitical orientations. Ethnic Russians, with linguistic ties to Russian religious and cultural values, express an interest in fostering warmer relations.

The multifaceted nature of Russophile sentiments is evident in the diverse geopolitical alignments and perspectives within these groups. Iranophiles’ alignment with Iran is intertwined with anti-Israel sentiments, highlighting a unique geopolitical stance. Communists demonstrate a cosmopolitan orientation, embracing a global and inclusive perspective. Meanwhile, Russian-educated group encompasses individuals with varying geopolitical orientations, including both anti-American sentiments and Europhobic views.

The purpose of this study was to classify Russophile social groups based on the results of the interviews conducted. Prior to the research, there was no clear understanding of whether these social groups were homogenous or heterogeneous. The classification emerged as a direct outcome of the data analysis, and it was only through this process that the varying characteristics and motivations within these groups became evident. Thus, the differentiation of these groups was not a pre-existing hypothesis but rather a conclusion drawn from the qualitative insights gathered during the research. This approach highlights the exploratory nature of the study, as it sought to reveal the internal diversity or uniformity of pro-Russian sentiment in Azerbaijan through empirical findings.

In conclusion, while a shared Russophile sentiment prevails across these social groups in Azerbaijan, each group’s distinct characteristics, motivations, and geopolitical alignments contribute to a nuanced landscape. The interplay of historical legacies, cultural affinities, and economic dependencies shapes the complex tapestry of Russophile sentiments within Azerbaijani society. Understanding these nuances is essential for grasping the diverse perspectives that contribute to the overall geopolitical landscape of the region.

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