

## Arrival at the Caspian Coast: Migration, Informality and Urban Transformation in Sumqayit, Azerbaijan

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The city of Sumqayit in Azerbaijan was famous in the USSR for its chemical plants, which supplied the whole country with plastics, detergents, and fertilizers. While production increased in the post-WWII period, young people from remote Caucasian villages were attracted as workers to the industrial settlement on the shore of the Caspian Sea and worked together with specialists from all over the USSR. Migration did not stop when the USSR collapsed. To the contrary, mobility increased as Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia and IDPs from Karabakh fled to Sumqayit, which grew to become the second-largest city of Azerbaijan. Although a generation has passed since the ceasefire, IDPs still are separately administered. In the last 20 years, more and more internal migrants have chosen the Greater Baku Region as their destination, mostly finding jobs in the informal labor market. In the post-independence transformative period, informal housing has offered migrants a place to stay in the city. Sumqayit can be regarded as an arrival city, an established urban platform for migrants who prefer internal over transnational migration.

**Keywords:** internal migration, mobility, urban transformation, informality, informal labor market, housing, refugees, Azerbaijan

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## Introduction

“The arrival city is a machine that transforms humans. It is also, if allowed to flourish, the instrument that will create a permanently sustainable world,” postulates Doug Saunders in his much-respected book on migration *Arrival City*.<sup>1</sup> He recognizes arrival cities as “transitional spaces” in which the dynamics of migration take place.<sup>2</sup> His colorful metaphor shows the possibilities and difficulties in the massive migration occurring at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The strength of Saunderson’s conception is that it focuses on places where migration occurs, making the process of migration tangible. Such a perspective helps to provide a deeper understanding of the interaction between a migrant’s agency and the urban structures in which he or she operates.

The World Migration Report 2020 estimates that there are 272 million international migrants.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, the UNDP calculated a much larger global population of 740 million internal migrants,<sup>4</sup> who have had a tremendous impact on regional development and economic dynamics. As a social phenomenon, mobility influences more and more lives. Despite a plethora of global migration studies, the field lacks regional empirical studies that collect qualitative data ‘on the ground,’ to further the development of theoretical knowledge and specialist programs to support migrants.

This article uses an example from the Caucasus to contribute to the ethnographic body of literature on migration. Migration in the region did not begin with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rather in the 1970s, from the heavily populated Soviet south to higher wages in the labor scarce central and eastern parts of the country.<sup>5</sup>

I aim to show shifts in migration to the Azerbaijan city of Sumqayıt over its short 80-year history. How did the structures that migrants encountered in Sumqayıt vary under different political regimes? How did their agency shift over time? My investigation is based on participant observation and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with officials and internal migrants and IDPs (internally displaced persons) conducted over two months of anthropological fieldwork in Sumqayıt in 2015 as well as critical analysis of local (post-) Soviet literature and comparison to other cases.

While Saunders provided examples from Istanbul and Teheran,<sup>6</sup> I intend to enrich the discourse on migration and urban transformation by focusing on the Greater

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Saunders, *Arrival City. How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World* (London: Windmill Books, 2011), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2020* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas M. Bohn, “Bevölkerung und Sozialstruktur,” in *Handbuch der Geschichte Russlands*, vol. 5, second half binding, edited by Stefan Plaggenborg (Stuttgart: Hierseemann, 2003), 628.

<sup>6</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*.

Baku Region. The Azerbaijani capital, Baku, has been analyzed by many scholars including Grant,<sup>7</sup> Roth,<sup>8</sup> and Valiyev.<sup>9</sup> However, studies in social sciences about the rest of Azerbaijan remain an exception. Few anthropologists have conducted research in rural Azerbaijan, with the notable exceptions of Yalçın-Heckmann<sup>10</sup> and Pflüger-Schindlbeck.<sup>11</sup> These studies show how social structure is intertwined with rural migrants' agency concerning economic strategies, risk management, and vulnerability. Yalçın-Heckmann's<sup>12</sup> significant contribution on informal trade networks and migration to Russia highlights relationships and new dependencies between land-owning non-movers and transnational migrants trading agricultural products in Russian metropolises.

In particular, the urban space outside of Baku remains in the dark. After independence, scientific interest concentrated on the capital. In contrast to Baku, which is in urban discourses associated with positive values such as cosmopolitanism<sup>13</sup> or non-western modernism,<sup>14</sup> Sumqayıt is still depicted as a demure and dirty worker's city a generation after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. But the city and its inhabitants have strikingly changed following independence.

Since the 1980s, migration studies has developed as a field in anthropology, concurrent with the disappearance of studies on the classical site of fieldwork, 'the village.' In the aftermath of the writing culture debate,<sup>15</sup> calls grew louder for a different

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Grant, "Cosmopolitan Baku," *Ethnos* 75, no. 2 (2010): 123-147; Bruce Grant, "The Edifice Complex: Architecture and the Political Life of Surplus in the New Baku," *Public Culture* 26, no. 3 (2014): 501-528.

<sup>8</sup> Sascha Roth, "Ideologies and Informality in Urban Infrastructure. The Case of Housing in Soviet and Post-Soviet Baku," In *Post-Socialist Urban Infrastructures*, edited by Tauri Tuvikene, Wladimir Sgibnev, Carola S. Neugebauer (London: Routledge, 2019), 54-71.

<sup>9</sup> Anar Valiyev, "Baku," *Cities*, vol. 31 (2013): 625-640; Anar Valiyev, "The Post-Communist Growth Machine: The Case of Baku, Azerbaijan," *Cities*, vol. 41, supplement 1 (2014): s45-s53; Anar Valiyev and Lucy Wallwork, "Post-Soviet Urban Renewal and its Discontents: gentrification by demolition in Baku," *Urban Geography* 40, no. 10 (2019): 1506-1526.

<sup>10</sup> Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, *The Political Economy of an Azeri wedding*, Working Paper 28 (Halle/Saale: Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung, 2001); Lale Yalçın Heckmann, *The Return of Private Property. Rural Life after Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Azerbaijan* (Berlin: LIT, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ingrid Pflüger-Schindlbeck, *Verwandschaft, Religion und Geschlecht in Aserbaidschan* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, "Informal Economy writ Large and Small: From Azerbaijani Herb Traders to Moscow Shop Owners," in *The Informal Post-socialist Economy: Embedded Practices and Livelihoods*, ed. Jeremy Morris and Abel Polese (London: Routledge, 2014), 165-186.

<sup>13</sup> Grant, "Cosmopolitan Baku," 123-147.

<sup>14</sup> Anar Valiyev, "Urban Development Baku: From Soviet Past To Modern Future," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 87 (2016): 5-7.

<sup>15</sup> The writing culture debate was a scientific discourse in cultural anthropology over the objectivity and legitimization of representing 'the other.' See James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

approach to space, like the multi-sited ethnography.<sup>16</sup> Initially, remittances and the social organization of migration were of central concern. In the 1990s, studies on migration diversified as scholars began to pay attention to fields like transnationalism, inclusion, racism, and citizenship.<sup>17</sup> While these aspects bear significance in international migration, my study of urban transformation and internal migration highlights aspects of gender and the convergence of labor, educational, and forced migration. However, a complete separation seems impossible, because a move from hinterland Azerbaijan to Sumqayıt includes the active decision not to move abroad. Another point concerning citizenship touches non-registered migrants who are deprived of communal services.

“Key traditional analytical categories include institutions, class (or stratification), integration, anomie, solidarity, power, social order, and social conflict. More recent categories include gender, ethnicity, identity, agency, networks, social exclusion/inclusion, and social capital,” Stephen Castles remarked.<sup>18</sup> My article not only takes up these points but, in addition, analyses the historic background of shifting migration to Sumqayıt. On this basis, it can promote an understanding of the specific migration situation called for by Castles.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of studies in the Caucasus, it seems especially worthwhile to fill the void between surveys on Baku, Tbilisi or Yerevan and the countryside. As crossroads between their region and the capital cities, these urban spaces possess their own features and logic. Çağlar and Glick Schiller<sup>20</sup> point out the role of cities as “useful entry points” to study migration, noting that “each city’s institutional structure shapes variations within its different local territorial districts and economic sectors.” The upheavals of the transition period spread out these variations spatially while chronologically condensing them.

An ethnography on Sumqayıt provides more than a ‘post-socialist urban study.’ In recent years the concept of the post-socialist city has come into question. Gentile proposes to drop post-socialist and regional attributes in order to focus on globally comparable social phenomena like gentrification.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117.

<sup>17</sup> Caroline B. Brettell, “Migration: Anthropological Perspectives,” In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 15, ed. James D. Wright (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 422-426.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Castles, “Twenty-First-Century Migration as a Challenge to Sociology,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, no. 3 (2007): 354.

<sup>19</sup> Castles, “Twenty-First-Century Migration as a Challenge to Sociology,” 367.

<sup>20</sup> Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller, *Migrants and City-Making. Dispossession, Displacement and Urban Regeneration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Gentile, “Three Metals and the ‘Post Socialist City’: Reclaiming the Peripheries of Urban Knowledge,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 6 (2018): 1146.

...interpreting urban development in Poland or Azerbaijan—or for that matter anywhere else in the world—requires looking beyond economic transition, marketization, or neo-liberalization, which at best offer only partial explanations that need to be complemented with input from other vantage points.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, my article focuses on migration, informality, and urban transformation as comparable categories. Conceptualizations like informality studied in particular aspects of cities and societies rather than in general territorial units, challenges existing urban theories emanating from the global North.<sup>23</sup> This holds particular potential for “untheorized” cities like Sumqayıt or Gentile’s example Öskemen in Eastern Kazakhstan. They are not merely cities that economically lag behind their respective capitals and global cities.<sup>24</sup> The interplay of their urban actors’ agency with structural elements deserves careful study and can advance urban studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Migration, Development and the ‘City of Youth’**

Sumqayıt,<sup>25</sup> Sumgait, City of Gardens, Komsomolsk-on-Caspian, and City of Youth (*gənclər şəhəri*), are only some of the names connected to the city. While ‘City of Youth’ sounds like a slogan from a bygone period, it entails more than the Soviet youth cult. To this day, Sumqayıt attracts young people from all over Azerbaijan who seek their fortunes in the Greater Baku Region. For many of them, Sumqayıt is not the destination, but a way station. Some stay for only a short while, others stay for years. The flow of people impacts the city and opens up new ways to approach Sumqayıt, in contrast to the image of Sumqayıt as a worker’s city during the Soviet period.

It’s impossible to gain an understanding of Sumqayıt without considering Baku, the capital and oil metropolis on the Caspian Sea. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baku was transformed from a stop along the Silk Road into the center of the global oil industry with the invention of modern methods of oil extraction and refining. The city attracted entrepreneurs from the Russian Empire and beyond, including Europeans such as the Nobel brothers. As in European industrialization, workers moved to the city from the nearby countryside. Early on, the Soviets increased Azerbaijan’s oil extraction

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<sup>22</sup> Gentile, “Three Metals and the ‘Post Socialist City,’” 1148.

<sup>23</sup> Sonia Hirt, Slavomíra Ferenčuhová and Tauri Tuvikene, “Conceptual forum: the ‘post-socialist’ city.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4-5 (2016): 511-2.

<sup>24</sup> Gentile, “Three Metals and the ‘Post Socialist City,’” 1142.

<sup>25</sup> For the article I decided to use the current official name Sumqayıt which I will write in English as ‘Sumqayıt’ according to the most commonly used form in Azerbaijanian English publications.

Figure 1. Map of Sumqayıt



to supply the whole country, before production shifted to the more easily accessible oil fields of Western Siberia. Compared to other republics of the USSR, Azerbaijan was the last to record industrial growth, from 1950-1978.<sup>26</sup> A modest economic growth rate was compounded by high population growth due to high fertility and an influx of ethnic Azeris from Armenia even before the hot phase of the Karabakh conflict (1988-1994).<sup>27</sup> Azerbaijan's national income per capita in 1990 was only 62% of the average Soviet level, below even Georgia (76%) and Armenia (83%).<sup>28</sup> During the Soviet period approximately 36% of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic's (AzSSR's) population was considered poor, above the Soviet average.<sup>29</sup>

The countryside was the locus of poverty in Azerbaijan. While AzSSR agriculture supplied the USSR's economy with cotton and fruits, the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture fell from 47% in 1950 to only 27% in 1987.<sup>30</sup> By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, collective and state farms failed to solve the structural problems of

<sup>26</sup> Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 179.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandre Bennigsen, *Azərbayajdžhan* (Washington: Wilson Center, 1979), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Gertrude E. Schroeder, "Transcaucasia since Stalin. The Economic Dimension," In *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and the Social Change. Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 465.

<sup>29</sup> Nazim Habibov and Linda Fan, "Social Protection and Poverty in Azerbaijan, a Low-income Country in Transition: Implications of a Household Survey," *International Social Security Review* 60, no. 4 (2007): 48.

<sup>30</sup> Schroeder, "Transcaucasia since Stalin," 467.

Soviet agriculture and failed to supply the country with sufficient grain, milk, or meat, or enough jobs for rural youth. A coupon system for milk and butter introduced at the beginning of the 1980s led to 250,000 unemployed by the end of the decade.<sup>31</sup>

Escaping poverty is a prime motive for migration (e.g., Massey et al.,<sup>32</sup> Cohen and Sirkeci),<sup>33</sup> and the Azerbaijan case illustrates that such mobility was not limited to capitalist states. While the region recorded a net outflow of migrants from the Brezhnev period until 2007, high fertility expanded the population. While the rural regions lost population during the entire Soviet period, the cities of the AzSSR gained migrants in the 1980s,<sup>34</sup> a sign of the USSR's economic difficulties. One possibility for the rural poor was to emigrate to the European parts of the USSR.

Azerbaijani migration to other Soviet republics began with oil workers and students. Thousands of talented young Azerbaijanis received scholarships for universities in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities of the USSR.<sup>35</sup> After graduation, they filled nationwide vacancies in the Soviet planned economy. Demobilization after serving in the Red Army also played a significant role in migration. In the late 1980s during Gorbachev's economic reforms, Azeri entrepreneurs targeted the larger metropolises like Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev.<sup>36</sup>

While Lezgins and Jewish Tats from northern Azerbaijan, in addition to Talysh and Azeri from the south, mainly concentrated on selling fruit and vegetables, Azeri and Muslim Tats from the Absheron peninsula tended to specialize in the flower trade.<sup>37</sup> The economy's strong regulation and the deficit of consumer goods during the late Soviet period opened the door to informal trade activities. The numbers of Azeri migrants to Russia rose significantly in the 1990s. Yunusov counted from 1.5 to 2 million Azeri migrants at any one point during the decade, depending on work opportunities and complications like the Second Chechen War or the 1998 Russian financial crisis.<sup>38</sup> Recent estimates count 600,000-1,000,000 Azeri living legally and illegally in Russia.<sup>39</sup>

Rural Azeris also moved to the new industrial centers of the AzSSR like Sumqayit

<sup>31</sup> E.R. Ismailov, *Ocherki po istorii Azerbaidzhan* (Moscow: Flinta, 2010), 380.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas S. Massey et al, *Worlds in Motion. Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey H. Cohen and Ibrahim Sirkeci, *Cultures of Migration. The Global Nature of Contemporary Mobility* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> "Population," The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, accessed July 23, 2017, <http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demoqraphy/?lang=en>.

<sup>35</sup> Mekhman Gakhraman ogy Abdullayev et al. (eds.), *Istoriya Azerbaidzhan. S drevneishikh vremen do peryekh desyattletii XXI veka. Uchebnik dlya vuzov* (Baku: Bakı Universiteti, 2016), 378.

<sup>36</sup> Arif Yunusov, *Migration Processes in Azerbaijan* (Baku: Adiloglu, 2009), 87; 89-90.

<sup>37</sup> Arif Yunusov, "Migration in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Russian Politics and Law* 41, no. 3 (2003): 71.

<sup>38</sup> Yunusov, "Migration in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," 74.

<sup>39</sup> Adeline Braux, "Azerbaijani Migrants in Russia," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 57 (2013): 5.



or Mingachevir (Mingəçevir) to satisfy a nearly unquenchable demand for labor. While the republic's capital required a resident permit (*propiska*), migrants were openly welcomed in the new industrial centers. "Migration in the Soviet era, especially prior to the 1970s, was largely a by-product of crash industrialization and was determined by economic planning objectives rather than voluntary labor market flows," emphasize Becker, Mendelsohn, and Benderskaya.<sup>40</sup> Sumqayıt was an example of this policy. Moscow planned for its population to form an industrial cadre that would produce to meet national demand. The city's impact on local migration processes was not of central concern.

After independence, Baku flourished as petroleum manufacturing was modernized and contracts with transnational oil companies were signed, fueling an increase in trade and a construction boom. Azeris looking for employment found plenty of jobs in the capital, where they earned twice or three times more than in the countryside. A move to the Greater Baku Region offered an alternative to labor migration as *gastarbeiter* in Russia. As my fieldwork shows, the region could also function as a point of retreat for migrants expelled from their original destinations. This could occur because of individual guilt, as in the case of a young man evicted from Moscow for a visa violation, now working as a waiter in one of Baku's shopping malls, or as a reaction to crisis, as with a middle-aged businessman considering relocating his business from the Crimea to Azerbaijan due to conflict and embargo.

## Planning a Soviet City

Immediately following the CPSu's 16<sup>th</sup> party congress (26 June - 13 July 1930) enactment of a massive industrial investment plan, the Leningrad planning bureau Giprogor, which also developed plans for the republic capitals of Minsk and Yerevan, presented its ideas on how to develop the Baku region.

After considering several alternatives, it was determined to establish a larger industrial settlement, beginning with a combined heat and power station<sup>41</sup> in the north-western part of the Absheron peninsula. The location provided a flat topographical relief, access to freshwater via the Shollar Water Pipeline supplying Baku as well as access to seawater for production,<sup>42</sup> and a link to the Rostov-Baku railroad.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Charles M. Becker, S. Joshua Mendelsohn, Kseniya A. Benderskaya, *Russian urbanization in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras* (London: International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 2012), 33.

<sup>41</sup> Kyamal Guseinaga oğly Mamedbekov, *Sumqayıt. Arkhitekturo-Planirovochnoe Razvitiye* (Baku: Elm, 1988), 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Z.A. Dulayeva, *Sumqayıt – Industrial'nyi Gigant Azerbaidzhanı* (Baku: Isdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk Azerbaidzhanskoy SSR, 1962), 39-40.

<sup>43</sup> G. Yu. Akhundov, *Sumqayıt* (Baku: Azerbaizhanskoe isdatel'stvo, 1966), 8.



On November 22, 1949, when Sumqayıt gained city status, its population consisted of 17,200 inhabitants, mainly migrants.<sup>44</sup> Only a minority were recruited from the smaller fishermen and farmer villages of the Absheron Peninsula. The majority were workers of mixed ethnic origin from the Caucasus mountains or even construction worker brigades from Barnaul in Western Siberia or Krasnovodsk (today Turkmenbashi [Türkmenbaşy]) in Turkmenistan),<sup>45</sup> which underlined construction sites' state-level importance. According to Dulayeva, new agricultural technologies and the transition to collective farming enabled the transfer of surplus labor force to Azerbaijan's new industrial centers.<sup>46</sup> Photographs from the Sumqayıt Museum of History show the first worker's wooden barracks, which were upgraded to brick houses in the late Stalin period, and thus named 'Stalinki.' The authorities aimed to offer housing for 90,000 workers, covering an area of 1,700 to 1,800 hectares in a large half-moon along the northern coast. A buffer zone was created between the living quarters and the factories, to isolate dangerous sites, particularly the synthetic rubber plant, which was constructed two kilometers away from the living quarters.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, development focused on the industrial complexes, with the prevailing belief that oil should be processed into other products for the sake of the whole Soviet economy. Cultural centers, clubs, and libraries were constructed around the factories and the living quarters to educate workers.<sup>48</sup> As Kotkin puts it, "the socialist city... was not simply a place where an urban population was located, but a device for including a new set of attitudes as well as new kinds of behavior in its urbanized inhabitants – in a word, an instrument for creating socialist people."<sup>49</sup>

The construction of the first chemical plant began in 1943 and in 1945 a synthetic rubber plant for testing new technologies and production methods followed.<sup>50</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s industrial potential expanded with the construction of a tube-rolling state in 1953 an aluminum factory in 1955,<sup>51</sup> and superphosphate factory in 1958.<sup>52</sup> Factory schools (*shkoly fabrichno-zavodskogo obucheniya*) were introduced in 1944 to locally train workers for the plants, concentrating on practical production skills. The schools developed further into vocational schools, each connected to a large industrial plant; the first training construction workers. Local Azeris in particular benefited, accounting for

<sup>44</sup> Gusani Sadykhov and Ramazan Mamedov, *Armyane v Sumqayıte. Kniga pervaya. Kratkij Istoriko-Sociologicheskij Oчерk (1938 – 1994 gg.)* (Baku: Shur, 1994), 61.

<sup>45</sup> Dulayeva, *Sumqayıt*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumqayıt*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Dulayeva, *Sumqayıt*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 34.

<sup>50</sup> Həmid Aliyev, *Sumqayıt şəhərinin tarixi* (Baku: Elm və Təhsil, 2011), 114-5.

<sup>51</sup> Dulayeva, *Sumqayıt*, 17; 30.

<sup>52</sup> Aliyev, *Sumqayıt şəhərinin Tarixi*, 120.

2,295 of the first 3,000 pupils.<sup>53</sup>

Under Soviet Ministry of Chemistry orders, Sumqayıt received engineers and chemists from universities throughout the country and craftsmen and technicians from special colleges in Voronezh, Yaroslavl, and Yerevan, resulting in an ethnically mixed population comprised 40.6% of Azeris, 35.5% of Russians, 13.0% of Armenians and 10.9% other Soviet nationalities.<sup>54</sup> Living space for inhabitants remained scarce despite housing receiving 23.5% of all investment under Krushchev from 1956-1960.<sup>55</sup> In the 1970s, 30% of urban households still lived in dormitories. Morton described at the time that “because of the zero vacancy rate and with millions waiting to receive their own apartments, most newlyweds are compelled to live with their parents for many years before getting a place of their own.”<sup>56</sup>

Migrants entered Sumqayıt informally and through the state-directed economy. Young Azeris from the hinterland gained easy access to the industrial plants as unskilled workers. Not needing to show qualifications, they could gain access to a worker’s dormitory by registering for work. Newcomers could also stay at the home of a relative or resident from their home village. Working at a plant and living in a dormitory enabled one to obtain a *propiska* (residence permit) needed to register for a flat. How quickly a home could be attained depended on factors like workplace and family status, number of children, and merits in the Soviet system. Informality played a role in early migration to Sumqayıt and sources told me that it was common to ask relatives or workers from the same village or region for a place to stay while looking for a job.

Migrants also relocated to Sumqayıt through the state-directed economy. Young specialists were sent to the city in order to bring knowledge of implementing and developing complex chemical production. In the Soviet system graduating students were required to comply with a directive that determined their workplace, and only after two years, when their diploma was validated, could they search for their own workplace or housing. A city council official during the Soviet period noted the city’s main advantage: young specialists were tempted by a flat, which was difficult to obtain everywhere in the Soviet Union.

Non-Azeris could feel comfortable due to the use of the Russian language for all public purposes. In contrast to Baku or Ganja (Gəncə), Sumqayıt had no Azeri speaking counter milieu for the pre-Soviet period in distinct architectural or cultural units.

Already in the 1950s, it became clear that the planning of compact quarters was

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<sup>53</sup> Dulayeva, *Sumqayıt*, 50-2.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Stefan Plaggenborg, “Lebensverhältnisse und Alltagsprobleme,” in *Handbuch der Geschichte Russlands* 5, second half binding, ed. Stefan Plaggenborg (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2003), 806.

<sup>56</sup> Henry W. Morton, *Recent Reforms in the Soviet Housing Construction Process* (Washington: Kennan Institute, 1979), 2.

insufficient to house the rising number of workers. In 1954 the AzGosProekt planning bureau in Baku began with the concept of micro district (*microrayon*) with a space of 19-31.1 ha, designed as a single complex including a service sector with shops, service facilities, kindergartens, and schools to meet the daily needs of their inhabitants.<sup>57</sup> The idea of the ‘superblock’ originated in the 1930s, “a grouping of four-to-six-story blocks of flats arranged around a quadrangle.”<sup>58</sup> Sumqayit’s first micro-district was planned on an area of 23.5 ha and was expected to offer accommodation for 7,300 people. The main building architecture consisted of groupings of five-story houses with three to four sections (stairways), containing three flats on each floor, with nine square meters per capita,<sup>59</sup> less than in Western countries but significantly higher than the Soviet standard, which, by 1950, at four square meters, was the lowest in Soviet history.<sup>60</sup>

Sumqayit exceeded twice the planned population of 85,000 in the 1960s, extending in a 12-kilometer-long and 2-kilometer-wide strip from the village of Jorat (Corat) and the Nasosny settlement (Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağıyev).<sup>61</sup> AzGosProekt responded with a new general plan in 1964, adopted by AzSSR’s government in 1967. The ecological buffer zones were developed with buildings, however, and included temporary settlements for construction workers ‘Stroitel,’ and ‘KemStroi’ (chemical construction), which contained construction companies for industrial development along with residential buildings and dormitories, producing environmentally harmful exhaust.<sup>62</sup>

Sumqayit’s development was inseparable from industrial growth. The urban ethnography of Abbasov and Selimzade illustrates this:<sup>63</sup>

Sumgait was a worker’s city and all its life is determined by industrial enterprises. The rapid pace of development of the Sumgait industry caused a significant increase in the city’s population.

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<sup>57</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumgait*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Antony R. French, *Plans, Pragmatism and People. The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today’s Cities* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>59</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumgait*, 88-90.

<sup>60</sup> Stefan Plaggenborg, “Lebensverhältnisse und Alltagsprobleme,” 805.

<sup>61</sup> The settlement was named after the patron of the Shollar Aqueduct, but most locals still use the Soviet name Nasosny. This literally means ‘pump station.’ In this sense the legacy of Soviet technocratic realism remains. Similarly, many bus stops still retain the old names of Soviet institutions which have ceased to exist.

<sup>62</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumgait*, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Arif Akim oğly Abbasov and Aidyn Gumbat oğly Selimzade, *Gorod bratstva. Etnograficheskie Osobennosti Stanovleniya Sumgaita i Formirovaniya ego Naseleniya* (Baku: Azerbaidzhanskoe Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1987), 11.

The population grew from 60,000 in 1960, 100,000 in 1965, to 135,000 in 1970.<sup>64</sup> An IDP from the Qubadly (Qubadli) region reported that migration from Qubadly to Sumqayıt increased because of the invitations of local politicians like Kamran Huseynov, Sumqayıt's first party secretary (1953 to 1958)<sup>65</sup> who recruiting Qubadly's farmers. An influx of rural Azeris, attracted by a well-organized industrial workplace and single-family flats with running water and electricity, fueled the city's population growth until the mid-1970s. Later during the USSR's stagnation, natural increase caused Sumqayıt's growth. Migration decreased but never stopped.

Soviet macroeconomic problems were echoed in Sumqayıt. Well-structured extension of a larger micro-district could have improved traffic and the construction economy, but supplies and services were reduced to save costs in the 1964-1967 general plan.

Elimination of separate commercial and restaurant buildings reduced the size of the service sector, which was crammed into the first floor of residential buildings, space ill-suited for commerce, and no area was provided for seasonal street markets.<sup>66</sup> Most shops were centrally located along main streets (Lenina, Druzhby, Nizmi, Samada Vurguna, and Narimanova),<sup>67</sup> leaving undersupplied 70% to 80% of the population living in the micro-districts of eastern Sumqayıt and placing additional pressure on public transport.<sup>68</sup>

Deputy Mayor Akif Kerimov, a Moscow-trained engineer working in the administration since the 1980s explained that expansion in the only open direction, the southeast, placed each new neighborhood farther from the industrial plants in western Sumqayıt. Inadequate train and bus services impeded transportation from Sumqayıt to the worker hometowns in the Caucasus Mountain hinterlands, the source of the city's agricultural produce.

The young growing population put pressure on public services. While each neighborhood had its own educational infrastructure, few children attended school in their own micro-district. With a city population of 235,300 in 1984, 57,000 students had to be sent to other quarters for school.<sup>69</sup> Two of three younger children had no place in crèches or kindergartens and schools provided classes in two or three shifts to meet demand.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sadykhov and Mamedov, *Armyane v Sumgaite*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Alyev, *Sumqayıt şəhərinin tarixi*, 143.

<sup>66</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumgait*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, 94.

<sup>68</sup> Akif Kerimov, *Materialy k ochyotu. Byuro na Plenumu Sumgait'skogo Kompartii Azerbaidzhanana o Rabote po Rukovodstvu Perestroiki* (Sumgait, 1988), 19.

<sup>69</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumgait*, 103, 106.

<sup>70</sup> Kerimov, *Materialy k ochyotu*, 4.

Photo 1. 17<sup>th</sup> Microdistrict built in the 1980s



Sumqayıt currently has five times its originally designed population of 90,000 and the delayed expansion of infrastructure and apartments led to critical articles in the local newspaper, the *Sumqayıt's communist* in the late Gorbachev period.

The city's most serious problem was only publicly aired in the final days of the Soviet Union. The petrochemical industry tainted the air, contaminated the soil, and poisoned the sea giving rise to abnormally high disease rates.<sup>71</sup> Officials kept this dangerous secret, and Sumqayıt's children's cemetery was only revealed following the Soviet collapse. Hundreds of graves bear witness to elevated rates of child mortality, stillbirth, and genetic defects caused by heavy metal poisoning and air pollution. Official statistics were never published.<sup>72</sup>

Kerimov and the City museum director explained to me that the initial drafts of the settlement plan included a protective buffer zone and roads designed to function as the city's lungs by quickly dispersing exhaust. Little by little the buffer zones shrank and industry became more concentrated. Gases safe in isolation could combine to produce a poisonous mixture.

The street market sale of produce from the private plots of Azeri farmers helped insulate Sumqayıt against Soviet supply shortages in the late 1980s. The state cut social programs and redirected its focus to the economy. Despite macroeconomic difficulties, Sumqayıt's population grew from 211,400 in 1980 to 260,700 by 1990.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumqayıt*, 45.

<sup>72</sup> Arif Islamzade, "Sumqayıt. Soviet's Pride, Azerbaijan's Hell," *Azerbaijan International*, Autumn 1994: 26-7.

<sup>73</sup> Sadykhov and Mamedov, *Armyane v Sumqayıt*, 24.

A newly independent Azerbaijan inherited the Soviet industrial complexes. Most could not survive the market economy and closed down, releasing workers. Their last production was used to supply the escalating 1993/4 Nagorno-Karabakh War.

## War, Refugees, and the City

The distant Nagorno-Karabakh War heavily affected Sumqayıt. On the night of February 28-29, 1988, anger and rage over events in Nagorno-Karabakh exploded into the Sumqayıt pogrom. The previous day protesters in Karabakh demanding integration with Armenia murdered two Azeri.<sup>74</sup> A mob of Azeri workers from the dormitories and Azeris who had fled from Karabakh gathered at Sumqayıt's outer micro districts and moved towards the center, searching Armenians, raiding their homes,<sup>75</sup> and in a single night killing between 26 and 29 and injured several hundred Armenians. Only a Red Army-imposed curfew put an end to the violence.<sup>76</sup>

Speculation about the origins of the night's deadly violence includes conspiracy theories about secret KGB operations and conscious provocation by Armenian nationalists,<sup>77</sup> yet no independent historical research has addressed the pogrom. The Sumqayıt pogrom marked the beginning of a new period for the city. Most of the 14,000 Armenians that left were replaced by internally displaced people (IDP)s from Karabakh.<sup>78</sup>

Elderly Azeris in Sumqayıt told me that Armenian emigration left a big gap, in the neighborhood yards of the inner city as well as in the work brigades that had commonly been ethnically mixed. Sumqayıt's officials were caught by surprise and failed to appreciate the importance of Armenians in the Soviet workplace and the effect of events in Karabakh. Even social scientists, such as urban ethnographers Abbasov and Selimzade, saw technocratic unification weakening national identity in Sumqayıt's urban society.<sup>79</sup>

Urban living conditions in relation to rural areas are less likely to preserve the national peculiarity, not only in productive, but also in the non-productive

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 32-33.

<sup>75</sup> De Waal, *Black Garden*, 35.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Aslan Ismaylov, *Sumqayıt / Beginning of the Collapse of the USSR* (Baku: Çəşioğlu, 2011); Ibrahim Mammadov, *The Secrets of the Soviet Empire. The Sumqayıt Provocation Against Azerbaijan. "The Grigoryan Case"* (Baku: Tahsil, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> De Waal, *Black Garden*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> Abbasov and Selimzade, *Gorod Bratstva*, 91.

spheres of life, where the ethnic specialty is usually held most staunchly. Urban conditions are also changing the spiritual culture and traditional relationships between family members, younger and weaker generations, customs, and rituals. The internationalization of the spiritual sphere in Sumgait strengthens the socio-cultural integration of all nationalities. National cultures are becoming more similar in terms of the degree of cultural community. This, in turn, creates new opportunities for closer cultural contacts.

For Abbasov and Selimzade structure influences the urbanites, an approach that the structure-agency-theorists (e.g. Giddens)<sup>80</sup> rendered obsolete. Abbasov<sup>81</sup> and Abbasov and Selimzade<sup>82</sup> demonstrate a lack of cultural sensibility and adopt a systematic approach to formally describe the working class and the industrial city. They sought to show how “specific characteristics of the formation of Azerbaijan’s working-class detachment in Azerbaijan’s new cities,” would overcome cultural peculiarities to develop a common Soviet people.<sup>83</sup> Notions of modernity and Marxist ideology concealed Russian supremacy. Distinctive religious beliefs and practices were defamed as “leftover from the past” to be overcome by scientific Marxist education. Abbasov and Selimzade lost sight of clandestine anti-system forces like religious revivalism and rising nationalism that were hidden beneath Sumqayıt’s socialist veneer and focused instead on system affirming actors, excluding the individual sphere.

Sumqayıt became an important destination for refugees. The number of Azeri refugees and IDPs rose rapidly from 4,000 in January 1988 to 190,000 by the beginning of 1989<sup>84</sup> to 220,000 by the start of the hot phase of the conflict in 1992. Included were refugees from Armenia, and IDPs from Karabakh (formerly 25% Azeri), and the mainly Azeri-populated but Armenia-occupied Lachin Corridor where the Qubadly region is located. By December 1993, 778,500 Azeris were registered as IDPs and refugees<sup>85</sup> rising to 838,000 or 11% of Azerbaijan’s population by the end of fighting in January 1998. 18,276 refugees and 46,842 IDPs officially registered in Sumqayıt,<sup>86</sup> posing a gigantic challenge to the city, which had a population of 273,000 in 1992.

Eldar and Qasim, two men in their sixties, illustrate the challenges faced by IDPs arriving in Sumqayıt in the early 1990s. In 1993 Eldar was driven out of his village in

<sup>80</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society, Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

<sup>81</sup> Arif Akim oğly Abbasov, *Sovremenniy byt i kul'tura Gornopromyshlennykh Rabochikh Azerbaidzhan* (Baku: Elm, 1979); Arif Akim oğly Abbasov, *Obraz Zhizni v Novykh Gorodakh Azerbaidzhan* (Baku: Elm, 1987).

<sup>82</sup> Abbasov and Selimzade, *Gorod Bratsva*.

<sup>83</sup> Abbasov, *Obraz Zhizni v Novykh Gorodakh Azerbaidzhan*.

<sup>84</sup> Yunusov, *Migration Processes in Azerbaijan*, 20-1.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, 22-3.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*, 25.



the Qubadly region where he worked as a teacher. Sumqayit was a logical destination because Eldar had lived there for a decade in the 1970s, initially arriving to work in a factory and returning in 1973 after completing military service in Murmansk. Eldar subsequently studied at the local sports institute and after graduation took a school teaching position in the Qubadly region. Eldar taught sports classes at the village school, married, and established a home, breeding chickens and sheep. He returned to Qubadly for his family, but all this was lost when his family was forced to flee the war to Sumqayit.

Qasim lost contact with his family after Armenian forces occupied the Qubadly region. He served as a policeman but joined a partisan group to defend his homeland in the war. In 1993 Qasim came to Sumqayit, and after a month sheltering at a distant relative's flat, moved into a refugees' hostel. He then rediscovered his lost family members in Sumqayit at a former middle school that had been transformed into a refugees' hostel. They found a place to live together, renting as subtenants of an elderly Russian lady. Qasim returned to fight with a partisan unit until 1996.

Eldar and his family were quartered in a kindergarten, so crowded that Eldar lived with eight others in a three-meter square room, with one person sleeping on top of the table while another slept underneath. The refugees included numerous children. While it first seemed like a bad dream, as more and more IDPs from Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor arrived, he began to realize the impossibility of his plan to return home after a month or two.

Kerimov describes the disorder created from the arrival in Sumqayit of 31,000 refugees in one week at the peak of the crisis in 1993 in need of immediate food, shelter, water, and electricity. Compounding matters, the IDPs arrived after the decommissioning of the industrial factories, at the height of economic collapse, when even basic foodstuffs were in short supply.

Nevertheless, as Kerimov explains, since conditions in Sumqayit were better than in many parts of the country, the city faced a 'second wave' of refugees and IDPs from parts of Azerbaijan lacking electricity, water, and gas. These 'second wave' migrants, who also targeted Mingachevir, Ganja, and Baku, posed an additional challenge to the authorities.

This pattern corresponds with Cohen and Sirkeci's analysis of migrant rationality:<sup>87</sup>

...the outcomes of moving regardless of the conclusions, are executed strategically and in a rational fashion. In other words, when a migrant leaves his or her home, he or she does so with a plan and a goal in mind. Even the moves of refugees who flee cultural, economic, religious, and social problems

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<sup>87</sup> Cohen and Sirkeci, *Cultures of Migration*, 13.

and persecution in their home communities and nations are typically making a calculated decision about their futures.

After fleeing isolation and deprivation in rural shelters along the new Nagorno-Karabakh border many IDPs and refugees determined that their future would be brighter in Sumqayıt.

Thus, the true number of fugitives in Sumqayıt must certainly have exceeded the official figure of 67,000. Kerimov estimates 90,000, in contrast to a pre-conflict population of about 330,000, accounting for nearly one-quarter of the city's current inhabitants. Many in the 'second wave' frequently visited their initial registration site to collect social support funds but then returned to Sumqayıt to live and work.

The refugees and IDPs that arrived in the early 1990s could not replace the departing (mostly non-Azeri) specialists and workers. Unlike the former Soviet-era Qubadly labor migrants, the displaced had to flee. The balance of migration between Azeri workers and Soviet specialists tipped into a massive influx of rural Azeris population changed social life on the streets, as Russian no longer dominated public space. As in Russia and other CIS-states criminal elements filled the void created by the collapse of the Soviet social order.

During my fieldwork I noticed that a fair number of residents who had lived in Sumqayıt from the Soviet period associated negative developments with the arrival of refugees, confusing a symptom of crisis with its cause.

Sadykhov and Mamedov report that in 1994, 18,330 of the 200,000 Azeri refugees from Armenia had settled in Sumqayıt,<sup>88</sup> and of the 62,838 IDPs in Sumqayıt the largest group (27,339) originated from the Qubadly region.<sup>89</sup>

In fact, Qubadly's government administration was relocated to Sumqayıt, providing public services and schools in exile. Public servant's jobs were protected and their salaries paid from the state budget. IDPs from Qubadly thus formed a kind of city inside a city, despite living in kindergartens, schools, and culture clubs scattered throughout Sumqayıt, a short term fix taken at the height of the Karabakh War, but hardly a long-time solution.

Every refugee and IDP was entitled to receive 20 USD per month in so-called 'bread money,' and additional benefits including free electricity, water, gas, school materials, and special scholarships for higher education.<sup>90</sup> The 1999 Law on IDP Status provided tax relief and free medical treatment to IDP pensioners, children, disabled,

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<sup>88</sup> Sadykhov and Mamedov, *Armyane v Sumqayıt*, 31.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Azerbaijan: IDP Living Conditions Improve, but Peace Deal Remains Elusive A Profile of the Internal Displacement Situation* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2007), 61.

low-income earners, and surviving dependents.<sup>91</sup> Altogether, spending on IDPs and refugees amounted to 3% of the state budget by 2011, the highest rate in the world.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the money is insufficient and until the 2010s, IDPs lived in refugee dormitories. Even the upper floors of Sumqayıt's main train station were inhabited by IDPs at the time of my fieldwork in 2015.

The distinctive administrative structure would enable immediate return from exile once Qubadly was free. While the displaced felt secure and taken care of, the system also underscored IDP separation, making them feel that they did not belong in Sumqayıt. The Qubadly administration treats IDPs as 'victims' dependent on state support and shelter. Only the more successful IDPs who start businesses and acquire homes or commercial or industrial property encounter Sumqayıt's administration. Bureaucratic barriers thus divide Sumqayıt inhabitants, including IDP children born and raised on the Caspian coast.

These support structures continue three decades after the Karabakh War. Construction of a new 4 hectare housing complex in 2018 with kindergarten and school for over 1,000 IDPs and refugee families further isolated them from the rest of the city.<sup>93</sup> In Georgia as well, the concentration of IDPs from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in "Collective Centers" did not work well. "...often they are located separately from the main residential areas of the cities, thus creating a suitable environment for physical isolation of IDPs with their further alienation and spatial segregation from the mainstream societies."<sup>94</sup> Socially and psychologically IDPs in Azerbaijan similarly suffered, despite receiving greater financial benefits derived from state oil revenue. Salukvadze et al. (2014) reason that the concentration and separation of IDPs "significantly hinders possibilities of their integration in mainstream urban societies and processes."<sup>95</sup>

The 2020 Karabakh war brought a new dynamic to the situation. According to the agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia moderated by Russia, the Lachin Corridor

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<sup>91</sup> Yulia Gureyeva-Aliyeva and Tabib Huseynov, "Can you be an IDP for Twenty Years?" *A Comparative Field Study on the Protection Needs and Attitudes Towards Displacement Among IDPs and Host Communities in Azerbaijan* (London: Brookings Institution-London School of Economics, 2011), 23.

<sup>92</sup> Internal Crisis Group, *Tackling Azerbaijan's IDP Burden. Policy Briefing* (Baku: International Crisis Group, 2012), 6.

<sup>93</sup> "Ilham Aliyev attended opening of residential building complex for refugee and IDP families in Sumqayıt," Official web-site of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, accessed March 29, 2020. <https://en.president.az/articles/31373>

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Salukvadze, David Sichinava and David Gogishvili, "Socio-economic and Spatial Factors of Alienation and Segregation of Internally Displaced Persons in the Cities of Georgia," In *Spatial Inequality and Cohesion*, ed. Tadeusz Marszał and Iwona Pielesiak (Warsaw: Palac Kultury i Nauki, 2014), 46.

<sup>95</sup> Salukvadze et al., "Socio-economic and Spatial Factors of Alienation and Segregation of Internally Displaced Persons in the Cities of Georgia," 47.

will be monitored by Russian peacekeepers for at least five years.<sup>96</sup> At the end of 2020 it is still unclear when the evacuated Qubately civil administration will be able to reassert control over the region from the Russian military and how many IDPs will be able to return. Considering the level of economic development in the Greater Baku region, a large scale return is hardly imaginable without massive investment.

For Qasim, who worked as an editor for the Qubadly administration official newspaper, Sumqayıt is familiar, but not his homeland, which he considers to be Qubadly where his ancestors are buried. Eldar taught in an IDP school and financed by IDP donations, published a book of poetry about Qubadly. The separate administrative structure provided both with jobs, but it should be reevaluated 25 years after the cease-fire. IDPs living in IDP housing complexes working in IDP jobs form an isolated island inside Azerbaijan society.

### **Formal and Informal Housing**

The breakdown of the Soviet system immediately transformed the lives of Sumqayıt's inhabitants. Closure of the large industrial complexes turned Sumqayıt into a worker's city without workers. The struggle to meet daily needs, though, left no time to worry about an identity crisis. Many non-Azeris reacted by emigrating to Russia or other CIS-republics.

Developing housing represents a challenge for the municipality. Industry and transportation infrastructure take up 78 of the city's 104 square km area, leaving only 26 square kilometers for housing and commerce, which encourages hybrid use of shut down industrial areas. The new market economy stimulated demand for commerce, which was legally restricted to Kolkhoz market, resulting in severe transportation problems.<sup>97</sup>

The crisis affected public housing as well. After the large Soviet construction companies were disbanded in the early 1990s, Kerimov reports that the authorities negotiated with a large French firm to develop multi-story buildings in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> micro-districts but disagreed on costs. This failure resulted in the growth of informal housing.

Later on, as in Baku, Turkish construction companies developed multi-story buildings in 2003 and were followed by Azerbaijanian companies, which built houses south of Sumqayıt near the highway to Baku. Housing co-operatives were granted favorable land access to construct taller buildings, but their popularity declined following

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<sup>96</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/64384>, from November 10, 2020, accessed December 12, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Mamedbekov, *Sumqayıt*, 72-3.

cases of financial mismanagement and botched construction in Baku. Recently arriving rural migrants find most new apartments in the Greater Baku region unaffordable.

As social problems mounted construction of single-family houses became more popular. Beginning with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the local *Kommunist Sumgaita* newspaper complained about long, unmet housing claims and the use of dormitories as permanent abodes. Inhabitants reacted, taking personal initiative, and seizing land, which the authorities tolerated. Viktor Krivopuskov described the situation in 1988:<sup>98</sup>

Almost no attention was paid to the construction of housing and the creation of an appropriate social sphere. Tens of thousands of citizens lived in basements, in self-constructed and unsuitable huts in the so-called “Nakhalstroy” district. The Azerbaijanis of Sumgait were mainly from rural areas, they were the least educated and skilled workers, among them was a large turnover of staff, a high level of unemployment, delinquency, drunkenness, drug addiction...

This negative image can also be viewed as the hybrid use of space. By allowing a certain degree of informality in the 1980s the municipality enabled migrants to combat the housing crisis on their own. Gorbachev’s housing market reforms provided state loans for private house construction, planting the “first seedlings of suburbanization” in the Soviet space.<sup>99</sup> Zhimbiyev’s Ulan-Ude example and my own research demonstrate that private housing spread outside Soviet metropolises, even though Sumqayit lacked the open land or leased land available in Ulan-Ude.<sup>100</sup>

In contrast to Krivopuskov, Kerimov claims that the municipality cared deeply about the housing situation but lacked sufficient resources. He indicates that 19,500 families had already registered in 1985 with the authorities, seeking to improve their housing situation. As mentioned previously, the city confronted a severe shortage of kindergartens and schools.

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<sup>98</sup> Viktor Krivopuskov, *Myatezhnyi Karabakh. Iz dnevnika ofitsera SSSR* (Moscow: Golos-Press, 2007), 384.

<sup>99</sup> Becker, Mendelsohn and Benderskaya, *Russian Urbanization in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras*, 51.

<sup>100</sup> Balzhan Zhimbiyev, *History of the Urbanisation of a Siberian City. Ulan-Ude* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2000), 101.

Figure 2. Informal Housing Hybridization of the Industrial Zone



Informal private construction began in the 1980s. House construction relied on family or personal networks for labor since the private hire of workers was prohibited. The absence of open markets meant that materials had to be acquired through personal networks, or reused from existing structures. The resulting highly heterogeneous buildings, *nakhalstroj*, were concentrated in the dacha area inside the buffer zone. Only after independence could inhabitants equip their homes with running water, electricity, and gas.

Dacha collectives were only erected in the late Soviet period, designed to serve as vacation buildings and gardens rather than as permanent homes. Migrants purchasing dachas or building houses in the former buffer zone are often unaware of its hazards. Even huts inside the former factory areas were built from partial structures, like the walls of industrial plants.

Negligent factory closure left behind a deadly heritage of toxic waste. Soviet-era industries annually released between 70,000 and 120,000 tons of poisonous substances into the air and water causing cancer rates 22-51% higher in Sumqayıt than in other parts of Azerbaijan.<sup>101</sup> In the 2000s the German firm GIZ<sup>102</sup> supported administration

<sup>101</sup> "A Toxic Beach in Azerbaijan Gets Cleaned Up, Solar Baths Become Safer," Pure Earth/ Blacksmith Institute, accessed June 13, 2017, <http://www.pureearth.org/blog/a-toxic-beach-in-azerbaijan-gets-cleaned-up-solar-baths-become-safer/>

<sup>102</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (German Corporation for International Cooperation) is a state founded development agency.



efforts to clean up the most dangerous sites.

Pollution especially impacts migrants unfamiliar with the city's industrial past. A local GIZ worker related the story of a Western Azerbaijan couple who sold their rural estate and came looking for work in Sumqayıt, where they built a house directly near a sewer. The family's small daughter soon fell ill, forcing the mother to leave her job to take care of the chronically ill child. The family invested everything in the house and can't afford to move. In another case in which a house was built directly beneath a power supply line the municipality evacuated the inhabitants and dismantled the building.

In such cases, the administration is urged to offer social housing which limits the number of evictions it orders. Kerimov points out that unlike the *gecekondu* (squatter settlement) in Turkey a massive systematic seizure of land never happened on the territory of Sumqayıt. He remarked that such processes occurred in Baku in the early 2000s. A conflict arose between the municipality and the squatters but was solved by the intervention of Ilham Aliyev. "In 2011, the President of Azerbaijan called for solutions to the issue of informal housing through transparent mechanisms of formalization. However, the situation has not changed since that period of time."<sup>103</sup> At the practical level, legalization proves to be unexpectedly difficult.

Illegal housing in Azerbaijan is in some ways comparable to the *gecekondu*s in Turkey. According to Demirtaş-Milz, *gecekondu* in Anatolia functioned as a vehicle of urban growth in the post-WWII period (2013: 693):<sup>104</sup> "In Turkey, between 1960 and 1980, governments approached *gecekondu* settlements as inexpensive alternatives to the provision of social housing for low-income groups, thereby removing a heavy burden from the state's shoulders." Squatting occurred in Azerbaijan in the 1990s not as a conscious policy but as a reaction to socio-political instability and war. Since the early 1980s Demirtaş-Milz observes in Turkey an internal pressure "...to remove the obstacles of the full transition to a market-driven economy under the guidance of the IMF and the World Bank"<sup>105</sup> and attempts to formalize the settlements with regulations and title deeds,<sup>106</sup> but

t[This] formalization, however, did not lead to the social and physical integration of these settlements as regular settlements within the rest of the city, as expected. Instead, during this transitional period, with clientelistic relations increasing in power, strong local agents (early-comer/established

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<sup>103</sup> Anar Valiyev, "The Post-Communist Growth Machine," s50.

<sup>104</sup> Neslihan Demirtaş-Milz, "The Regime of Informality in Neoliberal Times in Turkey: The case of the Kadifekale Urban Transformation Project," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 37 (2013): 693.

<sup>105</sup> Demirtaş-Milz, "The Regime of Informality in Neoliberal Times in Turkey," 695.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, 696.



immigrants who had more than one house, informal real estate agents, emerging land speculators, and the mafia) gained greater opportunities to realize their entrepreneurial interests...<sup>107</sup>

Sumqayıt's dacha zones, too, never systematically legalized or transformed into a formal residential zone. Only partial title deeds were provided, and due to economic breakdown and war, owner relationships are not always clear. The dacha zone remained a hybrid or 'gray space,' which according to Yiftachel is "...neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of today's urban regions."<sup>108</sup> Within Sumqayıt's buffer zone the city's upper class constructed villa-like estates in central areas, while refugees and dispossessed migrants built huts out of parts of abandoned factories. Barring thorough legalization, the better off may use their connections to secure land rights while others are evicted.

Illegal houses were individually constructed. Interviewees who lived in Sumqayıt during the Soviet period all report that the principle in the 1990s was: anyone with money can build. Houses were erected all along the city border and filled the formerly open space between Sumqayıt and two nearby settlements. From 1999 to 2014 the populations of these two settlements, Jorat and Nasosny, rose from 8,339 to 13,065, and from 18,060 to 21,801 respectively.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, the city has tightened house construction regulations and now requires that building plans be presented to receive building permits.

Architecture in the center of Jorat appears largely heterogeneous, with Soviet buildings standing directly next to newly erected houses built after the demolition of the existing stock. The small plots only allow for a very small garden, if any at all. Houses are usually one or two stories on property enclosed by a wall next to the road. Larger villa-like buildings were erected between Jorat and the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> micro-district in the 2010s. I encountered a 65 year-old pensioner on a walk in Jorat who had lived his entire life there. He told me that a one-hectare plot in Jorat costs 20,000 USD. He built a house for 40,000 USD there in the 2000s which is now more expensive. He complained about a recent rise in the price of building materials.

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Oren Yiftachel, "Theoretical Notes on 'gray cities': The coming of Urban Apartheid," *Planning Theory* 8, no. 1 (2009): 89.

<sup>109</sup> Sumqayıt Şəhər Statistika İdarəsi, *Sumqayıt şəhərinin Statistika Göstəriciləri 2005*. Sumqayıt: Sumqayıt Şəhər Statistika İdarəsi, 2005; Sumqayıt Şəhər Statistika İdarəsi, *Sumqayıt şəhərinin Statistika Göstəriciləri 2014*. Sumqayıt: Sumqayıt Şəhər Statistika İdarəsi, 2014.

Photo 2. Taxi in Jorat – A Taxi Navigates along the Narrow Streets of Jorat



Jorat's image has completely changed. During the Soviet era, Jorat provided a sharp contrast with Sumqayıt, due not only to an architecture of white, tall new buildings surrounded by flowers, in the city, and shaded, twisted alleys with hidden buildings in the village, but also to its inhabitants. While Russian was spoken in the streets of Sumqayıt, Jorat's residents, without exception, spoke Azerbaijani. Jorat's inhabitants behaved contrary to the Soviet slogans of 'higher, faster, farther' and 'peoples' friendship.' An interviewee who spent her childhood in Sumqayıt in the 1980s recalled a neighbor boy who was randomly beaten for walking past Jorat, which was considered a backwater inhabited by barbarians and criminals.

After independence, Jorat became a more desirable residence due to available land and its older village houses which offered an alternative to the micro-district. One of Jorat's new residents, the young father Ramil, fled with his family to Sumqayıt in 1999 from Armenia. he initially lived in an apartment in the micro-district where he married his wife from Fuzuli (Karabakh) and had two sons. He decided to buy a house with a garden in Jorat. Ramil works as an engineer in a chemical plant and stressing the importance of education, sent his sons to school in Sumqayıt, where they also attended private nursery schools.

Jorat's Soviet nickname, the "City of Gardens" now only applies to the city center and communal gardens are rarely found within residential blocks. In the micro-districts on the outskirts of the city, one encounters unmarked parking spaces, and retail and service buildings, along with open spaces that offer creative possibilities in these

neighborhoods. Urban and rural overlap in these hybrid spaces. I witnessed a shepherd herding 30 sheep along Cherkassy Street near the 12<sup>th</sup> micro-district, and three cows grazing in a free field in front of the 35<sup>th</sup> school in the 18<sup>th</sup> micro-district, sites that do not conform to the stereotypical industrial city.

The prices of flats in Sumqayit vary according to location and condition, with the cheapest flats found in micro-districts on the southeastern outskirts of the city. According to a local real estate agent, the price for a single room apartment in 2015 ranged from 36,000 USD in the 5<sup>th</sup> micro-district to 48,000 USD in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter. 2 room-flats costs between 48,000 USD in the 8<sup>th</sup> micro-district and 67,000 USD in the 12<sup>th</sup> micro-district, 3 room flats between 64,000 and 100,000 USD (both 6<sup>th</sup> micro-district), and 4 room flats between 78,000 USD in the 6<sup>th</sup> micro-district and 110,000 USD in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> micro-district. Expensive neighborhoods included the 30<sup>th</sup> quarter and the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> micro-districts.

A local real estate agent reported that housing prices had doubled in ten years with development continuing. Sumqayitians who had privatized apartments in the city center benefited most of all. Privatization began first in 1988 with state officials. Kerimov mentions cases in which struggling families earned money by selling apartments in the city center and moving to the outskirts. While he interprets this as an adjustment to the capitalist order, it could also be considered displacement.

Movement in Sumqayit's housing market is directly linked to migration. Departing non-Azerbaijani specialists made available high-quality apartments just as IDPs arrived demanding affordable housing. A 60-year-old interviewee, who worked in a government ministry after independence, stated that he had exchanged his small apartment in Baku for a spacious apartment in Sumqayit better suiting his family. The few well-trained arrivals to Sumqayit from Baku, however, cannot compare to the tremendous influx of low skilled refugees and IDPs.

## **Formal and Informal Labor Market**

The construction business heated up and real estate prices sharply rose with Azerbaijan's economic growth in the 2000s, first affecting Sumqayit and then all of Asheron. Sumqayit became a bedroom suburb of Baku, causing kilometer long traffic jams on the highway to the capital. Accessible building land became scarce in Absheron with satellite photos showing the entire region covered in buildings outside of oil wells, salt lakes and national parks.

Construction of paved roads, canals, electricity, water and gas could not keep up with the fast rate of development. In the Saray settlement south of Sumqayit multi-story buildings now replace primitive houses in the city center.

Table 1: Demographic Development on the Absheron peninsula

	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019
Baku	1,533.2	1,794.9	1,788.9	2,048.8	2,277.5
Sumqayit	205.7	254.4	283.2	309.4	343.1
Absheron district <sup>110</sup>	53.1	70.4	81.8	189.8	212.6

Population in thousands

Source: Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi. Azərbaycanın demoqrafik göstəriciləri 2014: 63 and 73; Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi. Azərbaycanın demoqrafik göstəriciləri 2019: 62

The statistics show that the Absheron region in the 2000s developed faster than Sumqayit, keeping in mind that IDPs and temporary working migrants are excluded from the figures. The Absheron region offers an opportunity to settle in villages near the metropole in the Greater Baku region. In this sense, Sumqayit is competing with Baku and its surrounding villages. Sumqayit's advantage lies in a stable infrastructure (still struggling to catch up with growth).

Nevertheless, interviewees complain about the quantity and quality of education. Three decades after Kerimov's survey the city still fails to provide sufficient preschool education. While wealthier households can opt for private kindergartens, working migrants often face the decision of caring for their children full time in the city or leaving them in village kindergartens in the hinterland. The informal economy could manage child care, but this requires a level of trust and affiliation to migration networks or personal recommendations. However, all of my interviewees trusted formal private childcare institutions if they were unable to access municipal childcare.

Sumqayit schools are criticized for poor quality. While acknowledging that municipal and IDP schools function at a basic level, highly educated household heads complained that the schools lagged behind those in the capital. A 30 year-old civil servant whose wife works in a bank told me that they are considering a move to Baku for their children. Striking differences are evident in higher education. The Sumqayit university and vocational schools lack a wide range of subjects. Vocational schools are now independent of industrial plants and do not provide standardized diplomas.

While urban interviewees criticized vocational schools, migrants viewed them as an opportunity. For rural Azerbaijan youth, the challenges of gathering information, paying expensive tuition, and finding housing make it difficult to attend educational

<sup>110</sup> The Absheron district covers the west of the Absheron peninsular between Sumqayit and Baku.

institutions in the capital. Studying in Sumqayıt offers the advantages of a diploma which is more valuable than one in the countryside (where corruption is a problem) and the use of study time to search for a future job.

During my fieldwork, I became acquainted with Shafura, a 21-year-old woman from Shaki (Şəki). After finishing school in the ancient town, she found that the only job-training opportunities offered in Shaki were for “typical female jobs” – as she said – like elementary or nursery school teacher, which she found unattractive. She instead decided to register at the state technical vocational school in Sumqayıt where she studied ‘Customs and IT’ for two years as the only female student. After graduation, she applied for a job in Shaki’s customs department but was rejected and relegated to the main customs office in Baku for further training. Challenging financial conditions led Shafura to choose work over further education. Her father separated from his wife and two daughters and did not offer financial support. Shafura tried to persuade her mother to move with her to the Greater Baku Region where salaries were higher and eventually moved the family to Sumqayıt where Shafura found a job as a saleswoman in a fashion boutique and her sister worked a cashier in a supermarket. Concerned about her health the two young women asked their mother to stop working. The sister’s pooled income was sufficient to rent a two-room flat in the 17<sup>th</sup> micro-district together with a Shaki school friend. Although she earns a relatively good salary of 200 Manat (appr. 210 USD in 2015) plus bonuses up to 380 Manat (appr. 400 USD in 2015), she still dreams of a job in customs that would allow her to apply theoretical knowledge. That she also can’t find a job in IT despite her degree, reveals deficits in the program. Nevertheless, Shafura is optimistic about her future.

Shafura’s case shows that she made her migration decision “in reference to the strength and weaknesses of the mover, but also in reference to the strength and weaknesses of her and his household.”<sup>111</sup> As a member of a small, three-person household Shafura could not leave her mother and younger sister behind. Not only could Shafura find a job with sufficient salary and potential for professional work, but her younger sister also found work in a supermarket with an acceptable salary even without work experience, and her mother could work as a cook if necessary, not likely in Shaki’s limited restaurant sector. From this perspective, her household’s move to Sumqayıt can be interpreted as risk avoidance.<sup>112</sup>

Also notable is that Shafura’s household is exclusively female. Migrant women reported to me that even if they find a job, it is much harder to be professionally accepted at a workplace in rural Azerbaijan.

The informal labor market in the Greater Baku Region holds enormous potential. The informal labor market rose immediately following the Soviet collapse in a large

<sup>111</sup> Cohen and Sirkeci, *Cultures of Migration*, 20.

<sup>112</sup> Oded Stark, *The Migration of Labor* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 17.

scale deindustrialization process typical across the newly independent states.<sup>113</sup> The scale of the informal economy in Azerbaijan is difficult to measure but estimates place it between 31% to 60% of GDP.<sup>114</sup> Two empirical examples in my fieldwork demonstrate the difficulty in measuring the informal economy.

In the southeastern outskirts of the city along Mahammad Asadov Street, building material supply stores border the 18<sup>th</sup> micro-district in an area that is easy to reach via the main road from the city center and is close to the beginning of the country road leading to Baku via Saray. Many customers from the Absheron region use the marketplace for their construction sites in Saray and in neighboring villages.

Mostly middle-aged men gather in front of the shops to offer their services as day laborers on construction sites. Although the government now discourages informal employment in the construction business, especially at private construction sites, day laborers are common. Their salary varies according to their knowledge and equipment. If needed, workers also complete garden or storage work.

The day laborers divide themselves into migrants and locals. Migrant workers easily find accommodation as subtenants in the cheaper residential areas of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> micro-districts. The street labor market is easily accessible to migrants and those who seasonally migrate, usually during the construction season from spring to fall.

As is typical with internal migration, the number of seasonal construction workers cannot easily be determined.<sup>115</sup> Arkadii, a Ukrainian pensioner who still ekes out a living as a day laborer, told me that locals like him gather with migrants at the street market and that employers are not concerned about a worker's origin, in contrast to local businesses, which might ask for residency registration.

Street labor markets are common in the region and are known in Tashkent and the Uzbek regions as “*markdor bazaar*.” 60% of the day laborers in Tashkent case are migrants.<sup>116</sup>

The migrants and skilled logistical and construction workers in the Sumqayit street labor market differ from the markets in Baku in the 1990s notoriously known as “slave markets” (*qul basari*), where refugees and IDPs were forced to offer any kind of service. Yunusov describes four male and one female street market in Baku.<sup>117</sup> Only a male street market exists in Sumqayit. In 2015 the demand for female domestic aids and nannies was

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<sup>113</sup> Yang-Ro Yoon, Barry Reilly, Gorana Krstic and Sabine Bernabe, *A Study of Informal Labor Market Activity in the CIS-7*, Paper, prepared for the Lucerne Conference of the CIS-7 Initiative (January 2003), iii.

<sup>114</sup> Farid Guliyev, “The Informal Economy in Azerbaijan,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 75 (2015): 7.

<sup>115</sup> Russell King and Ronald Skeldon, “Mind the Gap! Integrating Approaches to Internal and International Migration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1620.

<sup>116</sup> Evgeniy Abdullaev (ed.), *Labour Migration in Uzbekistan. Social, Legal and Gender Aspects* (Tashkent: UNPD, 2008), 99.

<sup>117</sup> Yunusov, *Migration Processes in Azerbaijan*, 71.

satisfied through informal networks and individual advertisements on online platforms.

The examples show that Sumqayıt offers an alternative to migration abroad. Cohen and Sirkeci remind us that migrants consider several categories of insecurities in addition to economic motivations.<sup>118</sup> Taking political, religious, or environmental insecurities into account, Sumqayıt may seem more attractive than emigration to Russia where Azeris face religious and ethnic discrimination. Seasonal labor migrants take much less effort to come to the Greater Baku Region. With nearly one-third of Azerbaijan's population in Greater Baku, almost every rural household holds ties to the capital.

### **From a Working-Class City to a Creative-Class City**

While industry remains of high strategic importance for the local Sumqayıt economy, it no longer plays as major a role in the labor market. Only 13,940 worked in manufacturing in 2013, with 12,321 employed in commerce and repair services,<sup>119</sup> which fails to include a large number of informal traders, street vendors, and non-registered entrepreneurs. These statistics indicate a shift to the service sector. Taking into account the 329,300 official inhabitants, 60,000 IDPs, and many other non-registered migrants it becomes clear that the city itself forms a marketplace.

Commerce was on the rise in the 2010s. Sumqayıt's central marketplace had been reconstructed and clothing, household goods, and electronics shops, and large supermarkets attracted customers along the central streets.

But Sumqayıt's service and leisure facilities only served to complement those of the capital. The city offered no bookstore except a tiny antiquarian store and most of my younger interviewees complained that they had to go to Baku on the weekends for entertainment, such as the cinema or dancing. My interviewees' most popular recreational activity was walking at the seaside park and eating out with friends.

Baku exerts a significant impact on Sumqayıt's labor market. While Kerimov estimated that 27,000 Sumqayıtians commute daily to the capital, the director of the local job center placed the figure at between 40,000 and 50,000. The decision to commute is based on higher salaries and low transportation costs. During my fieldwork buses continuously shuttled between the cities. Revitalization of the local train link was planned to lessen permanent traffic jams. Students without access to a dormitory in Baku or with relatives in Sumqayıt comprised the largest group of commuters. One type of migrant appears to hold the key to the city's transformation: migrants returning home to Sumqayıt. If they were born in Sumqayıt or spent much time here, these

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<sup>118</sup> Cohen and Sirkeci, *Cultures of Migration*, 2-3.

<sup>119</sup> Sumqayıt Şəhər Statistika İdarəsi, *Sumqayıt şəhərinin Statistik Göstəriciləri 2014*, 56.



returning migrants appear to be nearly invisible. Nevertheless, they actively decided to return to Sumqayıt after living abroad. I met young migrants who returned after working or studying abroad.

Overseas education opens opportunities for well-paid jobs in Baku and entrepreneurial enterprises in Sumqayıt as is evident in the example of the 26 year-old Sarhan who returned after completing his Master's studies in England.

Upon return, he found work in the administration of an international organization in Sumqayıt, and decided to also open a café based on a coffee shop he'd experienced in Sheffield. Sarhan set up the London Café, a cozy coffee shop located directly in the city center. The London quickly became popular among Sumqayıt youth, especially among young women unable to enter the male designated *çayhana* Azeri teahouses. While one café has little measurable impact on the local economy, it creates a base for other cosmopolitan-oriented young people who would otherwise have to travel to Baku for such an experience. Initiatives like this should be recognized because they help the city emancipate itself from the image of a worker and refugee city and attract new business activities outside industry.

Sarhan's example shows youthful spirit. Entrepreneurs like him, who engage in transnational migration and return with ideas can provide an impetus for economic and cultural development. This approach is taken by migrants who focus their attention beyond Baku's labor market. Rapid settlement on the Absheron peninsula allows for renegotiation of centers, and new opportunities for Sumqayıt. Supporting Sumqayıt as a creative center presents a challenge to the central state, whose focus is directed towards modernizing the capital and Azerbaijan's regional agricultural development.

Another young entrepreneur is Azad, in his mid-twenties from central Azerbaijan. After graduating from Sumqayıt's university to become a teacher he did not pursue a career at school but took over and developed a learning center in Sumqayıt offering computer, language, and soft skill classes. The learning center boomed in 2015, as students sought to increase cultural capital to find a well-paid job in Baku or even abroad. To informally supplement his salary from the new firm Azad writes business cases and advertisements for local companies.

Start-ups in the Greater Baku Region are looking for creative consultants, offering the possibility of high-paying jobs in the informal economy, demonstrating that the informal economy is transforming, rather than disappearing from Azerbaijan's modernizing economy.

The younger generation especially was actively looking for possibilities. Azad saw Sumqayıt's development potential:

That is to say, I had a chance to study, the year I entered, that is, to study in Baku, that is, I could go and study, but I think Sumqayıt is a better place, a

more convenient place for a young person who wants to develop and prove himself. From the point of view that it is not a very developed city, that is, and not a mixed city like Baku, that is, you can define yourself, what you want and where you should focus.

Azad's narrative reveals the spirit of a young creative mind finding an open space in Sumqayıt while Baku seems to channel migrants into a few places like the Heydar Aliyev Center, the gentrified central districts, and the decaying, overcrowded Soviet blocks in the outer districts. Sumqayıt instead offers a place to find a new home at a reasonable rent, at least until the 2010s construction. Entrepreneurs could try out business ideas without massive investments and much local competition. The mixture of open space, economic boom, and accessible education paved the way for a vivid urban transformation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One aspect of the free space Sumqayıt offers to migrants is related to safety from political pressure. As the capital and gateway to the world, Baku is more closely connected to, and affected, by, the international market. Sassen views the Baku metropole this way as the Caucasian global city, command point, key location, and production site.<sup>120</sup> The autocratic state reacted to economic pressure without negotiating with the local population, infringed on space by demolishing the central Sovetsky district in Baku in the 2010s, which disrupted the neighborhood's structure (*mahalla*), displacing 10,000 households without fair compensation and pushing the former inhabitants to newly built blocks at the edge of the city.<sup>121</sup>

Politicians exert less pressure on landholders in Sumqayıt. As Kerimov described officials handle the housing issue with care. Although most houses are illegally or semi-legally erected (for use as a dacha but not for permanent living) the municipality restricts home demolition to cases that immediately jeopardize life. Settlers still face danger, though, because illegal neighborhoods have no formal political representation. While President Aliyev appoints the Mayors of Baku and Sumqayıt and the heads of the executive in the Azerbaijanian political system, registered citizens elect the municipalities (*bələdiyyə*), which assist the executive.<sup>122</sup> Migrants thus lack this opportunity for democratic participation.

But there is another side of the coin. Islamic extremists have also made use of Sumqayıt's open space. Arab countries had already gained influence by Azerbaijan independence, for instance in the case of the Saudi charity organization Nijat which financed the construction of apartments in Sumqayıt for IDPs from the Karabakh War in 1993.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Saskia Sassen, "Place and Production in the Global Economy," In *The City Reader*, ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (London: Routledge, 1996), 302.

<sup>121</sup> Valiyev and Wallwork, "Post-Soviet urban renewal and its discontents," 1510.

<sup>122</sup> Valiyev, "The post-Communist growth machine," S46.

<sup>123</sup> Kamal Gasimov, "Examining Salafism in Azerbaijan. Transnational connections and local context," in

Tightened state control following extremist Salafist group recruitment for *jihad* in Baku's Abu Bakr Mosque, sent extremist groups looking for a new recruiting ground.<sup>124</sup> The new Salafist movements gained power in Sumqayit, which already functioned as a safe base for Dagestan extremists, and Sumqayitians were found among ISIS members.<sup>125</sup>

Those in Baku may possess a negative image of Sumqayit as a dirty industrial city, an extremist hideout, and a place to rehabilitate former prisoners (3,095 of which from 1981 to 1991 were given low ranking jobs in Sumqayit's industry during Soviet times). But from the Sumqayitian perspective the city provides a democratic space of expression for disadvantaged groups like impoverished internal migrants, religious believers fleeing suppression, and former prisoners. The city forms a stage with fewer state actor-predefined *representations of space* or limits on the *spatial practice* of the inhabitants.<sup>126</sup> In this sense, Sumqayit proves to be a city of a new and heterogeneous Azerbaijan.

### A Post-Socialist City and/or Arrival City?

Sumqayit is a young city, planned and built according to the principles of socialist urban development, but could we call it "post-socialist," considering its dynamic growth and social, cultural and economic impact on a globally connected Azerbaijan during the first 30 years of independence? Does such a category reasonably fit the Sumqayitian case? "Aside from becoming a weaker spatial container, post-socialism has also ceased to be a temporal container or recognizable condition..." Chelcea and Druță argue.<sup>127</sup> In observing Sumqayit's dramatic contemporary history, instead of categorizing containers, more attention should be paid to the agency of migrants, non-movers, and urban authorities. As Ferenčuhová encapsulates, the scientific debate has been advanced through "...contributions carefully considered various meanings of post-socialism in order to understand the specificity of the post-socialist urban experience."<sup>128</sup> This approach is more reasonable than generalizing about the post-socialist city according to a political or geographic category. My study contrasts with the image of a passive entity

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*Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ansgar Jödicke (London: Routledge, 2017): 109. Russell King and Ronald Skeldon, "'Mind the gap!' Integrating Approaches to Internal and International Migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1620.

<sup>124</sup> Julie Wilhelmsen, "Islamism in Azerbaijan: How Potent?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 8 (2009): 735.

<sup>125</sup> David Lonardo, "The Islamic State and the connections to historical networks of Jihadism in Azerbaijan," *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 3 (2016): 243-245, 247.

<sup>126</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 33.

<sup>127</sup> Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druță, "Zombie socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 4-5 (2016): 524.

<sup>128</sup> Slavomíra Ferenčuhová, "Explicit Definitions and Implicit Assumptions about Post-Socialist Cities in Academic Writings," *Geography Compass* 10, no.12 (2016): 516.

under pressure from global capitalism and contributes to the investigation of ‘social agents’ interpreting and creating on-going change.<sup>129</sup>

My ethnography also advances Ferenčuhová’s critique that “more history in the research on today’s post-socialist cities, including examining the history of the concepts we are using” should be taken into account. In the Cold War period, the idea of the socialist city was used to “designate the ‘other’ to the Western or capitalist city.”<sup>130</sup> Planned by the leading offices of city development Sumqayıt was designed as a paragon of the socialist city, and – taking Moscow’s perspective – offered proof that a socialist city could be established outside of the Russian communist heartland.

But we must take a critical view that includes migrants’ local agency. The Soviet authorities understandably tolerated informal housing (*nakbalstroj*) and the upgrading of dachas, holding on to the ideology of a superior socialist economy at a time when insufficient resources impeded the construction of formal housing needed by migrant workers in Sumqayıt’s industrial complexes.

Returning to Saunders, Sumqayıt could be considered as an arrival city. While on the one hand, Sumqayıt shines as an example of a Soviet planned city outside Russia with its structured center and industrial heritage, on the other the city serves as a transitory place for newcomers. The city has the potential to offer a new start for refugees and IDPs, as well as migrants from Azerbaijan’s hinterland. Manageable costs and migration risks characterize the “*entry mechanism*” for migrants.

It not only takes people in, by providing cheap housing and assistance finding entry-level jobs (through the networks), but it also makes possible the next wave of arrivals in a process known as a chain of migration: the arrival city sends cash and provides basic lines of credit to the village, it arranges jobs and marriages...<sup>131</sup>

From this perspective, migration processes continue back to the early days of Sumqayıt, even within the socialist economic model. Post-socialist Sumqayıt developed the fundamentally different function of an “*urban establishment platform*.”<sup>132</sup> Following independence, Sumqayıt offered manifold possibilities to build a house and establish a small business, while the Baku market overheated after the oil-driven economic boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Kerimov relates, in the 2010s well-planned, vigorous state campaigns were mounted against informal employment, including within

<sup>129</sup> Ferenčuhová, “Explicit Definitions and Implicit Assumptions about Post-Socialist Cities in Academic Writings,” 520.

<sup>130</sup> Hirt, Ferenčuhová and Tuvikene, “Conceptual forum: the ‘post-socialist’ city,” 502.

<sup>131</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 20.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

construction. There is a thin line between combating economic crime and abuse which threatens the social and economic development provided through informal structures.

## Conclusion

My research shows how ongoing migration left a footprint on the city. From the initial construction workers that established the city to the labor migrants of today, migration to Sumqayıt has never stopped. The USSR integrated Azerbaijan into a larger Soviet migration system which intensified in the 1980s and continued after independence into the 1990s. Founded as a socialist city, Sumqayıt was intended to both develop a strong chemical and metallurgical industry and blossom as a worker's city with educational and cultural institutions. Migrants were regarded as a cadre or as refugees, as a mass, floating into the city.

Such a perspective cannot obscure the view of migrants as individual actors, however. My anthropological fieldwork reveals the individual agendas, motivations, hopes, fears, and interactions of migrants with urban dwellers, which must be taken into consideration to understand Sumqayıt today. Refugees and IDPs continue to shape Sumqayıt's urban landscape even though government authorities separately administer to them, a generation after the Karabakh conflict.

With independence, Sumqayıt adopted a different development path. Rather than construct more common mass housing the former buffer zone and industrial estates were hybridized and transformed into residential areas offering a place to stay albeit with hazards like pollution and legal uncertainty. Constant population growth put pressure on the city to provide living conditions for urbanites and newcomers while revitalizing its industrial and architectural heritage.

Migrant agency in relation to the city structure shifted over time. During the Soviet period, formal institutions provided work, housing, and security, but limited access to the city. After independence, the city offered more possibilities. For migrants with high or medium salaries, Sumqayıt's micro-district provided accessible housing. Migrants from poorer regions of the country used alternative means to access the city, constructing informal housing on the city's border or in abandoned industrial sites and finding informal work. Migration to Sumqayıt offered fewer risks than to Baku while facilitating participation in the Greater Baku regional economy.

Laborers and returning migrants form a city by bringing in new impulses for development. My study shows that the considerations and choices of workers regarding a place for life and work closely connect Sumqayıt to the Greater Baku Region. Until now Sumqayıt has only been understood as part of a regional system in reference to the capital and the surrounding Absheron district. Economic possibilities in the formal

and informal labor market offer a serious alternative to transnational migration. As an arrival city, Sumqayit provides an urban establishment platform for migrants like Shafura to make a living or for IDPs like Eldar to find a second home.

\*all the names of migrants have been changed.

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