

## **Azeris and Armenians Best of Friends in Moscow**

National conflict is forgotten in a city where both Armenians and Azerbaijanis feel like strangers.

“Your nationality doesn’t matter in Moscow,” said Agif Abdullaev, a 33-year-old Azerbaijani. “What matters is whether you are a local or a visitor. Migrants here share one overriding concern: how to survive in this giant city.”

Agif, an economics graduate, spent three years looking in vain for a job at home, so he decided to move to Moscow and join the army of market traders from the Caucasus. In 1998, he met and went into business with Levon Arayan, an Armenian, at the Kuzminki market.

Although the two nations have been in conflict with one another over the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh since 1988, Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Moscow say they get along well with one another – and often find they have much in common as Caucasians in the Russian capital.

“I offered him my goods, and we did a deal and started doing business together,” recalled Levon. “National hatred between our people is no obstacle to business. We hardly ever talk about politics or Karabakh. The whole thing was orchestrated by those in power. Regular people like us have always been good neighbours.”

Levon joked, “What’s the use of that land [Karabakh] to Armenia anyway? I think we should donate it to Azerbaijan in exchange for an oilfield.”

“Levon is the only person I know who will always help me out in emergency,” said Agif. “Once I had to scrape together 4,000 dollars. He gave me the money, no questions asked. We really trust each other. It’s hard to find someone you can trust in this day and age.”

His business partner chimed in, “I’ve borrowed large sums from Agif, too. Our joint business has been very successful. We have recently started a new project at the Tekstilshchiki market.”

The two men visit each other’s homes frequently - but only in Moscow. Because of the unresolved Karabakh conflict, Agif cannot invite Levon to Baku, while Levon thinks it would be too dangerous for Agif to show up in his native Gyumri in Armenia. “I rarely go back there myself,” said Levon. “It’s not fit for living in. I only go to see my family there once a year, for three or four days.” Agif said he travels to Baku quite often, but never tells his Azerbaijani family about doing business with an Armenian.

If the 2002 census results are to be believed, there are 96,000 Azerbaijanis and 124,000 Armenians in Moscow, each group accounting for about one per cent of the city’s population. However, most observers think this is a gross underestimate.

Muscovites were never especially friendly to visitors from the Caucasus, even in Soviet times. Now they are lumped together under the pejorative tag of “persons of Caucasian nationality”. The conflict in Chechnya has worsened Russians’ attitude towards people from the region, and harassment and race attacks on southerners have become commonplace.

This shared experience of xenophobia has brought Armenians and Azerbaijanis closer together. But in

many cases the partnership is of longer standing, stemming from a shared background in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, which once had a large Armenian population of 200,000. All but a handful of them left Baku between 1988 and 1990.

Edik Mirzoyan and Yashar Huseinov, an Armenian and Azerbaijani respectively, run a flower stall at the entrance to the University metro station. The two are childhood friends from Baku and have been in business together for six years. Yashar trusts his partner more than anyone else in the world. "Our business is quite recent, but Edik and I go way back," he said. "We're childhood friends. That kind of bond is stronger than money. We don't care what goes on in and around Karabakh."

"All my family are in Armenia, except my wife," said Edik. "When she gave birth, only Yashar's wife Nargiz was here to help her. I will never forget that." The Armenian added, "It's a pity that for religious reasons I cannot ask Yashar to be my son's godfather, even though he is the closest friend I have in Moscow."

Artur Shakhramanian and Zemfira Salimova are husband and wife as well as business partners. They got married in Baku 20 years ago, but three years later, when their daughter had just turned one, hostilities broke out between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Baku.

"My husband is a native of Baku. I come from Ganje," recalled Zemfira, who is Azerbaijani. "We both went to the Pedagogical Institute in Baku. We married during our graduation year. Then all hell broke loose. My husband's family fled to Armenia and wanted Artur to come along. My family insisted I get a divorce. We defied them all and moved to Moscow."

Artur, Zemfira and their daughter - now 18 - all work at an upmarket restaurant owned by an Azerbaijani. Zemfira tends the bar, Artur is the gardener and their daughter manages the office.

"It was tough until the mid-Nineties, but since then we've been back in touch with our families," said Artur. "We call, and they visit us from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. I've been working here for about six years, and I've never had any problem because of my ethnic background. I am a good gardener, and that's all that my boss cares about."

Caucasians have traditionally specialised in certain trades in Moscow - commonly working as market traders and ticket inspectors.

Vardan and Melikabbas, an Armenian and Azerbaijani, used to work in a market but now have jobs as inspectors on tram route 28.

"Being a ticket inspector is a good job for people like us from the Caucasus," admitted Vardan. "Many of the people we catch without a ticket are our fellow countrymen. For a small fee, we let them go. For them it's better than paying a fine, and it's good for us too. That way we supplement our meagre salaries."

And - as if to confirm the prejudices of some Muscovites - the two nationalities team up in the criminal world as well.

In June, the police arrested an Armenian and an Azerbaijani for armed robbery in Moscow's Shchukinsky district. According to police reports, Alexei Aserian and Hasan Aliev spotted a man in a gambling hall who had a huge wad of cash in his wallet. The temptation was too strong to resist - when he left, they followed him and mugged him in a dark street.

A week later, they were detained at the same gaming venue. Investigators say this was not the first robbery they had committed, and are holding them in custody pending trial.

Samira Ahmedbeily is a journalist with Azerros newspaper in Moscow. Elina Arzumanian is a reporter for Mir TV and radio company

**Location:** Caucasus  
Stavropol  
South Ossetia  
North Ossetia

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