

Social Crisis in Azerbaijan

Author: IWPR

At least 90 per cent of Azerbaijan's population now live below the poverty line and there is precious little evidence of the government acting to improve the situation.

On Novruz Bairam, a holiday celebrating the arrival of spring, passers-by on Baku's central thoroughfare barely spared a glance for the 90-year-old woman camped out on the pavement. Some even trampled carelessly over her tatty display of greetings cards and photos, presented to Lyudmila Belyukova by her grateful pupils in recognition of 50 years' service to a local school.

The authorities, however, were less appreciative of her lifetime's work. In a cruel twist of irony, the old woman was recently evicted from her comfortable city apartment, after a minister in the Social Security Department bought up 17 apartments in her building. Now she is forced to beg for sympathy on the city streets.

Lyudmila's fate is typical of the government's attitude to the socially disadvantaged. And in today's Azerbaijan, that includes most of the population: 90 per cent of Azerbaijanis live below the poverty line, even though Azerbaijan appears from the outside to be the most prosperous country of the South Caucasus. The authorities constantly publish glossy brochures on the attractions of investing here.

The hardest-hit sectors of the population are obviously the most vulnerable - families with many children, single mothers, pensioners and invalids. But state sector professionals - where monthly wages are 66,600-83,600 manats (\$15-19), compared to 220,000 manats (\$50) in the commercial sector - are equally hard-hit, and they have resorted in alarming numbers to taking bribes to survive. How else can we explain the discrepancy between an average teacher's wage (10,000 manats or \$25 a month), and Baku's appearance on the Economist Intelligence Unit's recent list of the most expensive cities in the world?

Apart from Moscow, Baku was the only former Soviet capital to make the list. But though Moscow comes in at number 38, (Baku is number 93), many everyday necessities are in reality much more expensive in Azerbaijan than in Russia. A litre of petrol, for example, costs 8 roubles in Moscow (\$0.28), and 1,800 manats (\$0.41) here. A kilo of bananas is twice the Moscow price. And an average chicken - only 37 roubles (\$0.29) in Moscow - costs up to 10,800 manats (\$2.45) here.

No wonder most Azerbaijanis struggle to live from one payday to the next, and have to rely increasingly on getting food "on the slate" from private shops. According to the Confederation of Azerbaijani Trade Unions (CATU), the price of an average shopping basket was \$50.19 at the beginning of the year. Three months on, the cost has soared to 331,310-400,890 manats (\$75.29-\$91.11), and is certain to rise still further.

Yet the authorities are taking very few steps to help, despite regular protests from the press and the opposition. Their policy, it seems, is to rely on the patience and survival instincts of the population, and do nothing.

The Ministry of Employment and Social Security, for example, recently cut child support from \$2 a month to \$1.13, despite increasing the level of taxes (from 8-14% to 35%) that corporations must contribute to the Social Fund. Where proceeds from these taxes are going is as yet a mystery.

They're certainly not being used to care for the 600 Azerbaijani children born every year with thalassaemia, for example. Thalassaemia - a form of anemia - is treatable with monthly blood transfusions. But, of the 2,800 Azerbaijanis with the condition, only 100 receive any form of treatment. Azerbaijani children with thalassaemia rarely live beyond the age of five, though they would almost certainly survive in the West. For

the last few years, it's estimated that the government's lack of support has resulted in the death of one child a month.

The elderly and the unemployed are no better off: The government promised to increase the average pension to 50,000 manats (\$11.36) from the beginning of this year, and allocated 50 billion manats (\$11.36 million) in the budget to pay for the increase. The raise, they said, would affect every third pensioner.

Official statistics say 45,000 Azerbaijanis - out of a labour force of two million - are unemployed, though this takes no account of people who are almost undoubtedly struggling to get by without government assistance.

Indeed, social researchers have discovered that many people in the regions of the republic aren't even aware that there are government bodies supposed to be supporting them. And even if they were, the chances that they could live on the financial support provided (17-30,000 manats or \$3.80-4.80) are slim.

The Ministry for Employment and Social Services managed to run up 15 billion manats (\$3,409 million) of debt last year, despite receiving two per cent of the profits from every business in the country.

Wounded veterans of the 1991-1994 war in Nagorny Karabakh are also in dire straits. "We call ourselves living victims," says Firudin Mamedov, chairman of the Society of Invalids. Though better provided for than most - the state pays invalided veterans 80,000 manats (\$18) a month - the pressures from bureaucratic corruption make it hard for veterans to set up small businesses or trade. In recent years, 26 veterans have committed suicide, in the face of public indifference to their plight.

Foreign investment is the answer, according to Deputy Economics Minister Oktai Akhverdiev. But foreign investors are wary, having already had their fingers burned by the raging fire of bureaucratic corruption here.

Akhverdiev is fond of the old proverb "he who doesn't work doesn't eat." But in today's economic climate, if the government's treatment of Lyudmila Belyukova is typical of their approach in changing things for the better, it seems that few of us will be working much - or eating much - for the foreseeable future.

Alena Myasnikova is a journalist on the Baku weekly newspaper Bakinsky Boulevard

Location: Caucasus
Stavropol
South Ossetia
Russia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/social-crisis-azerbaijan>