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Informal Institutions in Azerbaijan:

Exploring the Intricacies of *Tapsh*

Abstract

The past twenty years have seen increasingly rapid development in research on informal post-communist economy and informal political institutions. While there is no lack in research on informal practices in Russia and other Eastern European countries, comprehensive empirical investigations of informality in peripheral regions of the former Soviet Union—such as the Caucasus and Central Asia—are still rare. This article fills this gap by providing an evidence-based empirical account on informal practices of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Drawing its empirical data from a two-decade-long ethnographic participant observation carried out in various locales of Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, this study is the first to offer nuanced insights into the hitherto unexplored in the literature informal practice of *tapsh*.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASED interest in the topic of informal practices and institutions of post-communist countries. A large and growing body of literature examines the use of informal practices in Russia (Ledeneva 1998; 2006; 2013; Lonkila 2010; Michailova & Worm 2003; Rose 2000), Ukraine (Onoshchenko & Williams 2013; Polese 2008; Round et al. 2008), Central Asia (Radnitz et al. 2009; Rasanayagam 2011; Oka 2013) and non-Soviet former Socialist countries (Kim 2005; Miller et al. 1997; Rose et al. 1997; Sneath 2006; Sik 1994). While extensive research has been carried out on such well-known informal practices such as Chinese *guanxi*, Arab *wasta* or Russian *blat*, there is a general lack of studies on specific informal practices of the South Caucasus's societies. More general

studies on informal relations of the South Caucasus's societies have been published by Di Puppo (2010), Timm (2012), Stefes (2008) and Babajanian (2008). Previous studies on informality in Azerbaijan have focused on informal political institutions (Safiyev 2013), social capital (Hasanov 2009), kinship networks (Aliyev 2014a), informal market relations (Yalçın-Heckmann 2014), and the use of informal channels in welfare provision (Sayfutdinova 2015).

Nevertheless, the academic understanding of specific informal behaviours, such as the widespread informal practice known under the term '*tapsh*', which has been thriving in Azerbaijan's capital Baku since the early Soviet period, remains limited. Widespread and often indispensable for the population of Azerbaijan for generations, the practice of *tapsh* remained virtually unknown to outsiders for decades. A simple search in 'Google Scholar' for the term '*tapsh*' would suffice to reveal that not a single study has thus far focused on the phenomenon of Azerbaijan's *tapsh*. With the empirical focus on the use of *tapsh* in the education sector and at the job market, the findings of this study demonstrate that—sustained and reinforced by problems of post-communism—*tapsh* is thriving in both public and private spheres of Azerbaijan.

This article seeks to shed some light on what Azerbaijan's informal practice of *tapsh* is and how it manifests itself in highly informalised education and employment sectors. Along with the primary empirical focus on the use of *tapsh* in higher education and in search for jobs, this study also aims to answer a number of broader questions crucial for the understanding of the role of *tapsh* in the contemporary Azerbaijan, as well as its emergence and functioning. What is the socio-political and socio-economic significance of *tapsh*? How does *tapsh* compare to other informal practices in the post-Soviet region? What has changed since the end of the Soviet rule as far as the extent and practice of *tapsh* concerned?

To address these questions, this study pursues both theoretical and empirical objectives. Theoretically, this article presents *tapsh* as functionally and structurally similar to other informal practices flourishing in different parts of the world. It is argued in this study that, despite the cultural embedding of *tapsh*, which makes it intrinsic to Azerbaijan and distinguishes it from informal behaviours in other countries, *tapsh* is not unique. Its triadic, reciprocal and ambivalent nature enables classifying *tapsh* as part of the 'larger family' of informal practices. The key theoretical argument of this study is that Azerbaijan's *tapsh* is functionally and operationally synonymous with informal practices of other post-communist

societies, which enables this empirical investigation of *tapsh* to contribute towards broader research on post-communist informal institutions. Empirically based on extensive multi-stage ethnographic fieldwork, this article offers an exclusive insight into the shadowy and little known outside of Azerbaijan practice of *tapsh*, which, as revealed by this study, functions as a complex and, at times, indispensable social mechanism omnipresent in urban settings of Baku and other major Azerbaijani cities.

This article incorporates empirical data from long-standing ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the author in Azerbaijan's capital Baku during the late 1990s (1998−1999), mid 2000s (2005−2007), and more recently between 2013 and 2014. The main method employed to collect qualitative ethnographic data is participant and field observation. The method was centred both on first-hand witness experience of informal practices in action and on hundreds of mostly unrecorded informal unstructured interviews. Many of these interviews, which were carried out with a wide range of informants, representing different age groups, gender, occupations, social class and originating from both urban and rural settlements of various regions of Azerbaijan.[1], occurred as casual conversations. This ethnographic observation covers representatives of several ethnic groups, including the Azeri majority and ethnic Russian minority, as well as Lezgins and Baku's Jews originating from different parts of Azerbaijan. However, over 90% of informants were permanent residents of Baku, and were either born in the capital or moved to Baku from other parts of the country. The bulk of field observation research was carried out either in Baku's downtown district or in the vast south-western district of Khatai. While interviews covered a wide range of topics about the use of *tapsh*, the key observation points were the use of *tapsh* in education and at the job market. Main observation places were state and private universities.

Given that most Azerbaijanis are initially reluctant to talk about *tapsh* and, even more so, to admit using it, the data collection process required building trust-based relationships between the researcher and informants. Due to the random and unstructured character of interviews, this study does not pursue presenting a statistically representative sample. Rather, the main goal of this research is to provide systematic qualitative evidence collected from participant observation of 'common people', representing various segments of population. Regardless of the lack of statistical representativeness of this sample, yet

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[1] Most interviews carried out during the third stage of fieldwork (2013−2014) were digitally recorded.

owing to its focus on a variety of informants of different age, gender and occupational strata, it represents the views and opinions commonly held by the plurality of Baku's population. The use of qualitative ethnographic observation is not uncommon in research on post-communist informal practices (Ledeneva 1998; Polese 2008), as it allows the researchers to uncover social behaviour that is not easily notable by an outsider and cannot be accurately encoded by representative surveys.

Theoretical Framework: Extended 'family' of informal practices

This study of Azerbaijani *tapsh*—through its context-based analysis of Azeri informal practices' characteristics—seeks to demonstrate functional and structural convergences of post-communist informal practices. With regard to its theoretical foundation, this study follows those scholars of informality who have proposed that informal practices of different societies, notwithstanding their differences, share common characteristics, such as their functions of private safety nets and their general use of circumventing formal bureaucracy (Rose et al. 1997; Ledeneva 1998; Misztal 2000; Smith et al. 2012).

Although the practice of using informal networks and connections to receive preferential access to public goods and services dates back to the early periods of modernisation and industrialisation (Castells 2011; Misztal 2000), human societies relied on informal practices since the dawn of mankind (Mauss 1967). In different societies and countries, informal practices are known under various names. A considerable amount of literature has been published on Chinese informal practice of *guanxi* ('connections') (Gold et al. 2002; Yang 1994), which, as argued by Gold et al. (2004, p. 1) 'is absolutely essential to successfully complete any task in virtually all spheres of social life', not only in mainland China but also in Taiwan and amongst Chinese immigrant communities in different parts of the world (Hutchings & Murray 2002). Much less known in academic studies is the Korean equivalent of *guanxi*— *gwangye* ('connections' or 'contacts'), which, similarly to *guanxi,* manifests itself in nearly all areas of public and private life on both parts of the Korean peninsula. While the research on *guanxi* has occupied the central part in studies of informal practices for decades, an increasing amount of literature has appeared in recent years on the informal practice of *wasta* ('going in between'), endemic to the Arab world (Al-Ramahi 2008; Barnett et al. 2013; Hutchings & Weir 2006). *Wasta*, defined as a 'personal exchange system between members of society' (Al-Ramahi, 2008, p. 36), in Hutchings and Weir's (2006, p. 278)

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explanation, 'pervades the culture of all Arab countries and is a force in all significant decision making'. In Brazil, informal practices, functioning as social safety nets and problem-solving mechanisms and granting access to public goods, are known under the term *jeitinho* ('little way') and are 'widely recognized and practiced through Brazilian contemporary society' (Ferreira et al. 2012, p. 332). Similarly well-known are the Mexican *palanca* (Daymon & Hodges 2009), and numerous other informal practices of different Latin American countries (Lomnitz 1971; Portes 2003).

Former socialist societies, which remained hidden from the eyes of researchers until the fall of state communism in the late 1980s, have also developed complex and deeply-rooted in social culture traditions of informality. Recent research on informal practices in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe revealed that such practices as Polish *zalatwić sprawy* (Butler 1995), Bulgarian *blizki* ('relations') and *vruzki* ('connections') (Begg & Pickles 1998; Chavdarova 2013), as well as various informal practices of other former socialist European societies (Grødeland 2007), have successfully survived the collapse of state communism, and even continued to prosper after the accession of these countries to the European Union (Grødeland & Aasland 2011).

Although not much is known about specific informal practices of post-Soviet societies in peripheral regions of the former Soviet Union, such as the Caucasus and Central Asia, there is a large volume of published studies describing the Russian-Soviet practice of *blat*. The leading expert on *blat*, Alena Ledeneva (2013, p. 7) defines *blat* as 'the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures'. Pioneered by Ledeneva (1998), the research on *blat* now consists of numerous studies (Michailova & Worm 2003; Lonkila 2010), which present *blat* as a complex and highly adaptive informal practice flourishing not only across the vast expanse of Russian Federation, but also in Ukraine (Onoshechneko & Williams 2013), Kazakhstan (Oka 2013), Uzbekistan (Rasanayagam 2011) and the South Caucasus (Aliyev 2013).

Rather than being confined to the developing world, informal practices—though on a much smaller scale—also exist in developed capitalist societies. For instance, the British practice of 'pulling strings' and the 'old boys' networks in Canada, United States, Australia and New Zealand are typical examples of informal practices used in developed countries. The French term *piston* and the Israeli *protetzia*, are used to describe clientelist informal practices employed to circumvent formal institutions and procedures.

Notwithstanding this diversity of informal practices, all of the above informal behaviours perform similar functions. According to Smith et al. (2012, p. 345), who compared *guanxi*, *wasta*, *jeitinho*, *blat* and 'pulling strings', the 'informal influence varies between nations more in amount than in its specific qualities'. Regardless of differences in the scope of their spread and their importance within the society, the main purpose of each of these practices is to circumvent formal rules and provide their beneficiaries with selectively redistributed favours and services. Most of these informal practices are structurally organised into informal networks (Lomnitz 1988). Nearly all informal behaviours are functionally ambivalent and tend to occupy a 'grey' zone between informality and illegality. Each of these informal behaviours not only employs morally appropriate functions of private safety nets, but also actively engages in corrupt, nepotistic and even criminal practices. This has led many scholars of informal practices to suggest that informal structures are neither positive nor negative (Ledeneva 1998; Polese 2008; Grødeland & Aasland 2011; Yang 1994). Bearing in mind these inherent similarities of informal practices, this study presents Azerbaijani *tapsh* not as a unique informal practice, but as a part of a 'larger family' of informal behaviours currently existing in different parts of the world.

What is tapsh?

Tapsh is an informal practice—intrinsic to the post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan—based on the provision of informally and selectively redistributed services, favours and other forms of informal assistance, offered via clientelistic channels to family, friendship, professional connections and contacts. Most informants equivocally described *tapsh* as a service granting preferential access to resources, which otherwise remain unavailable due to bureaucratic challenges, corruption, or nepotism. In some cases, *tapsh* enables access to services, such as assistance in obtaining construction permits or land-ownership deals, irrespectively of whether individuals seeking access to such resources are formally or legally entitled to receive them. *Tapsh* is widely employed to obtain preferential treatment in different types of formal institutions and it is particularly omnipresent across the education sector and the job market.

The term '*tapsh*' originates from Azerbaijani verb '*tapşırmaq*' (or noun *tapşırıq* 'assignment'), which translates into English as 'to assign' or 'to authorise.' The use of the term *tapsh*, as well as the complete understanding of its functions, is geographically limited to the capital Baku and neighbouring

Sumgayit city, the third largest city of Azerbaijan. Although informants from Ganja, the second largest city of the country, were familiar with the term *tapsh*, they nonetheless preferred using synonymous terms of '*hormet*' ('favour') or '*adamimiz*' ('people of the circle'). The majority of informants from rural settlements, particularly the areas located outside of the region of Absheron (a region which includes Baku), were either unfamiliar with the term *tapsh* or were more inclined on using the term '*hormet*' instead. Nevertheless, all permanent and long-term residents of Baku are well acquainted with the term *tapsh*. During the Soviet period, *tapsh* was linguistically Russified. In the Russian language, the use of *tapsh*-favours is referred to as *tapshanut`sya* (or 'to make use' of *tapsh*), or *tapshevat`* ('to provide' *tapsh* for someone). Despite being extensively used by both Russian-speaking Azeri and ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan, the term *tapsh* is a typical Azeri phenomenon, unknown and unheard of in Russia or other former Soviet republics. The mystery that surrounds the phenomenon of *tapsh*, as well as the complete lack of research on *tapsh*, persists largely because Azerbaijanis, similarly to beneficiaries of informal practices in other countries, rarely talk about *tapsh*, not only to outsiders but also among themselves. The unwritten rules of *tapsh*, similarly to those of other informal practices, are both informally codified and self-interpreted. The mystery that surrounds the phenomenon of *tapsh*, as well as the complete absence of research on *tapsh*, is largely because Azerbaijanis rarely talk about *tapsh* not only to outsiders but also amongst themselves.

Tapsh is primarily a triadic relationship involving a *favour-seeker*, *favour-provider* and a *guarantor*. Guarantor serves as an intermediary who employs his or her personal influence, status or position within the society in order to persuade favour-provider to offer *tapsh*-favours to the guarantor's family members or friends. Hence, *tapsh* transactions and, particularly, the intermediary who makes them possible, are used as a bridge, or a weak tie, connecting two strong tie networks and allowing them to re-distribute services and public goods available within one network yet inaccessible for members of other networks (Granovetter 1973). It is not uncommon for *tapsh* to involve a number of individuals, creating a 'chain' relationship where Person A employs his or her connections requesting them in turn to use their networks in order to secure a favour for Person B, who might be a friend or a distant relative of A. As explained by a graduate student at a Baku university: 'I had to get some important papers signed by the rector, and my dad had a friend who knew someone related [by blood] to the rector. So, my dad, asked his friend to do a favour

for him persuading the rector's relative into asking rector to sign this document for me'[2]. Although many of *tapsh* 'transactions' involve more than two participants, cases of preferential treatment provided to one family member by another are not unique. One typical example of dyadic *tapsh* is when an individual is being employed by his or her family member regardless of the existence of more qualified but unrelated to the employer candidates.

Often *tapsh* is provided in return for a favour or as a sign of gratitude. Then it acquires a reciprocal character. While reciprocity is not a necessary component of *tapsh* practices, 'doing good' by offering preferential treatment to 'pay back' for one's help is widely practiced. A number of informants confirmed that they did 'favours' to the individuals who previously provided them with *tapsh*-favours. In the words of a doctor: 'a friend of mine helped my son to get a good job, so whenever she needs medical services, I make sure that she receives all the necessary [medical] treatment in our hospital for free'[3]. Although the element of reciprocity in *tapsh*-relations often becomes overshadowed by other variables, such as hierarchy, even the most hierarchical and clientelistic of *tapsh*-transactions still retain some sort of reciprocity. A junior lecturer at a Baku university said the following: 'I am often being asked by [my] superiors to give certain students, who have *tapsh*, good grades. When I once approached one of my superiors to *tapsh* my nephew in getting admitted to the university, he helped me eagerly'[4]. As seen from this example, even in top-down hierarchical type of relations, reciprocity is still present: if the lecturer's supervisor refused to help her—regardless of the existing hierarchy—she would be unwilling to do favours for him.

The effectiveness and pervasiveness of *tapsh* depend on the strength and importance of one's connections, contacts, acquaintances and family links. As engrained in the Russian proverb '*ne imei sta rublei a imei sto druzei*'—literally translated as 'having hundred friends is more important than having hundred roubles'—the role of connections is fundamental in one's reliance on *tapsh*. Since *tapsh*-favours are often, although not always, distributed as a sign of respect, as an acknowledgement of a relationship—such as based on family, kinship or friendship links, or on professional hierarchy and superiority—desire to

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[2] Conversation with a graduate student, Baku, November 1999.

[3] Conversation with a doctor, Baku, August 2006.

[4] Conversation with a university lecturer, Baku, 1999.

please, or a necessity to obey one's orders, the value and importance of such favours, first of all, depend on the nature of personal relationship between *tapsh* providers and their beneficiaries. This means that sometimes *tapsh* is hierarchical. For example, *tapsh* relations are hierarchical when providers of access are obliged to offer a service either following orders of superiors or as a sign of respect to someone more influential and powerful than they are. Some informants, who relied on *tapsh* in order to receive good grades, admitted that lecturers had given them top grades because they were told to do so by their superiors.[5] Although the element of hierarchy is present in many *tapsh* relations, hierarchy is not always and necessarily present. Numerous informants agreed that they provide *tapsh*-favours not because they have to, but because they feel moral obligation to do so, or they are driven by a sense of gratitude or appreciation. For instance, a university lecturer in Baku explained that she often gives good grades to students whose parents, or other family members, are employed at the same university, even if she is not asked to do so by either students or their parents. In words of that informant, 'I just feel professional obligation to "help" these kids. I know that their parents would do the same for my children'[6]. In this case, the informant offers preferential treatment to some of her students not following requests from her superiors or colleagues, but because she thinks it is a good manner. This also shows that, similar to other post-communist informal practices (Smith & Stenning 2006; Rasanayagam 2011), *tapsh* is deeply embedded in social culture. Due to this power of non-codified constraints, *tapsh* bears some similarity to *guanxi* code that is more formal and ceremonial than informal practices like *blat* would imply (Ledeneva 2008). The code of honour and the loss of face, incorporated into *tapsh* also make it similar to *wasta* (Al-Ramahi 2008).

For Azerbaijanis, *tapsh* is neither positive nor negative. The perception of *tapsh*, as well as the perception of corruption, in Azerbaijan and in many parts of the former Soviet Union (Morris & Polese 2014; Polese 2014; Wanner 2005), depends on the context in which such practices are employed. A Baku resident stated: 'of course, when I have [good] *tapsh*, I do not complain. I will use it [*tapsh*] eagerly. Yet,

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[5] Nevertheless, hierarchy in *tapsh* relations does not exclude reciprocity and superiors also have to provide *tapsh*-favours to their subordinates.

[6] Conversation with a university lecturer, Baku, 1998.

when someone else has 'stronger' *tapsh*, I think that it is normal. There is nothing unfair about that'[7]. On more than one occasion, different informants admitted that if not for *tapsh* they would have had difficulties receiving their degrees, finding jobs or obtaining formal papers. A recent university graduate in Baku noted: 'if I did not rely on *tapsh*, I would have to spend a lot of time studying subjects which were largely irrelevant to my career'[8]. While there was a general sense of agreement among informants that life without *tapsh* could be easier, many have thought that if they could no longer employ their connections, they would either have to pay bribes or formal fees. Both the former and the latter would incur considerably higher financial costs than using *tapsh*. This leads us towards the ambiguous relationship between *tapsh* and corruption.

Tapsh and Corruption

A thin red line between *tapsh* practices and corruption lies in the intrinsic characteristic of *tapsh* as an access-granting service. As observed by a Baku resident: '*tapsh* is a non-monetary corruption'. However, *tapsh* is neither a substitute nor an equivalent for corruption. Given that building and maintaining inter-personal networks are more time-consuming and difficult than paying bribes, *tapsh* is commonly understood as superior to corruption. Unlike corruption, which remains omnipresent among both street-level bureaucrats (Morris & Polese 2014) and high ranking government officials, *tapsh* grants access to public goods and services which cannot always be bought for bribes (Rivkin-Fish 2005). A Baku resident, who was employed in wholesale trade, explained:

> If you want to get a favour from a high ranking official in a ministry, you cannot simply walk
> into that person's office and put envelop [with money] on his desk. [in that case] … you will
> be immediately escorted by security guards …. What you need to do is to find someone who
> can "recommend" [*tapsh*] you to that official … it is only then that you can ask [official] for a
> favour and reciprocate with a valuable gift. So, that no money changes hands.[9]

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[7] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, February 2007.

[8] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, September 2006.

[9] Conversation with an entrepreneur, Baku, June 2006.

In other cases, *tapsh* is needed in order to gain trust of an official or a business partner. Based on that trust-bound relationship, favour-seeker may offer bribes or material gifts to favour-provider, in case if there are no other means of reciprocating for services. *Tapsh* is generally preferred over bribery due to its 'safe' and relatively 'clean' nature. Unlike bribery, *tapsh* is not illegal. A public servant who worked at a health clinic in Baku emphasised: 'I never took bribes… neither during Soviet period, nor afterwards. However, I do not object *tapsh*, because it is different. There is nothing wrong about having connections with good people and using these connections when there is no other way [of getting things done].'[10]

If to a Western eye, informality in post-Soviet spaces is corrupt and nepotistic (Giordano & Hayoz 2013), post-Soviet citizens perceive informal practices as coping mechanisms and private safety nets, employed in daily life, fostered and valued. As findings of this research reveal, multiple officials and businessmen in Baku favour *tapsh* over bribery, not only because the former is 'safer' and more morally appropriate, but also because it enables them expanding their personal networks and acquiring new contacts. An office manager of a small local company stated that he is '… not afraid to use connections and *tapsh*, because these are not bribes and nobody can say that I am doing anything wrong, because everyone does that!'[11] Another informant, who worked at a state hospital in Baku, pointed out that a person who refuses to engage in exchange of *tapsh*-favours may appear abnormal to others and if people realise that *tapsh* does not work with that person, they may start offering bribes.

Tapsh is widely employed as a means of brokerage for corruption, but *tapsh* relations are not purely monetary transactions; they are services of access. Following the unwritten rules, individuals receiving *tapsh*-favours will chose to reciprocate either (and preferably) with a similar favour or—in case if the exchange of favours is not possible—with a material gift. This means that money may be substituted with a favour of similar importance or a material non-monetary gift. Similarly to other informal practices, *tapsh* bears many characteristics of corruption and bribery (Parry & Bloch 1989; Polese 2014). Nevertheless, as *tapsh* transactions do not involve money changing hands, it would be erroneous to classify *tapsh* as a form of corruption. In contrast to individuals engaged in systematic corruption, people relying on *tapsh* are not

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[10] Conversation with a retired public servant, Baku, December 2006.

[11] Conversation with a private sector employee, Baku, March 2007.

necessarily seen as 'corrupt.' Because *tapsh*-favours occur not only between the population and public officials, but also among people from all walks of life, *tapsh* differs from nepotism and favouritism. Unlike nepotism, *tapsh*-practices function as reciprocal exchanges between equals, similar to mutually beneficial exchanges in *blat* (Ledeneva 1998) and *guanxi* (Yang 1994). The reciprocal characteristics of *tapsh* also distinguish it from clientelism and patronage. While in some cases *tapsh* transactions may involve elements of clientelism—for instance patron-client hierarchy—in other cases favours may be distributed without the 'pressure from above'.

Tapsh and Politics

Tapsh is primarily a socioeconomic phenomenon that manifests itself in many aspects of daily life and functions as an important private safety net in such areas as assistance at the job market, knowledge and expertise sharing, as well as the distribution of various services of access. Hence, *tapsh* performs numerous socio-economic functions and therefore can be characterised—similarly to most other post-communist informal practices—as an essentially socio-economic informal institution. Notwithstanding *tapsh*'s strong socio-economic character, *tapsh*-favours also trickle down into the socio-political sphere. With regard to *tapsh*'s function of offering individuals' preferential treatment in state institutions, *tapsh* serves as a bridge between elected or appointed public officials and the population. Bearing in mind that access to some public services, such as register offices, customs services and the Prosecutor General's office, requires more than basic friendship connections, which otherwise would be sufficient to obtain a simple service of access in public institutions, reaching out to higher echelons of political establishment secures higher quality *tapsh*. Access to high ranking officials is of particular importance for businessmen and entrepreneurs who have to deal with state officials on a frequent basis. Obtaining land registers, tax clearances, all sorts of permits and other official documents in Azerbaijan requires not only paying bribes, but also establishing informal 'work relationship' with the people in power.

This favour-based relationship between private entrepreneurs and public officials requires market actors to engage in network building with ruling elites. As explained by an owner of a medium-sized business in Baku, having connections with political elites is 'always good for business' because high level *tapsh* 'makes all official processes fast and easy.' As the value of *tapsh* increases, so does the challenge of

securing access to elite *tapsh*-providers. Another businessman detailed that 'getting close to high-ranking officials involves treating them banquets [*qonaqliq*] and making expensive gifts'[12], but it is a 'worth investment' into one's business. One's ability to receive *tapsh* from top-ranking state officials is a high privilege that would ensure rapid access to various administrative services, which otherwise require longer waiting time or higher informal payments.

Unlike *tapsh*-transactions between businessmen and public officials, where the former are commonly able to repay for the latter's services with material gifts, *tapsh*-relationships in politics easily acquire top-down patronal characteristics. As informal favours become distributed among politicians, they are neither described by the term *tapsh* nor retain typical features of *tapsh*, such as functions of safety nets and the right of access (Tokluoglu 2012). The highly hierarchical nature of Azerbaijan's politics determines that the distribution of reciprocal favours is of little value in an environment dominated by vertical patronage relationships (Safiyev 2013). Unlike business-state relations, where hierarchy is combined with some sort of reciprocity, relationships within the ruling elite are based on strict subordination to the centre, which in its turn distributes resources and orders to lower tiers of hierarchy. This rigidly hierarchical structure leaves little room for any other informal institutions except patron-client relations. In contrast to patronage institutions, *tapsh* is ambivalent in its functions: sometimes it assumes elements of patronage, other times it exists as reciprocal relations or functions as brokerage. This lack of clearly designated functionality is another characteristic of *tapsh* that firmly places it into a broader category of post-communist informal practices. Yet how different is *tapsh* from other post-communist informal practices?

Tapsh and Other Post-Soviet Informal Institutions

The key characteristics of Soviet-era and the early post-communist *blat* was its emphasis on reciprocity of favours—dubbed by Ledeneva (1998) as an 'economy of favours'—its non-hierarchical nature and main function of procuring material goods in short supply and preferential treatment in formal institutions. In later periods, owing to improvements in economic well-being of the population and belated transition to market economy, *blat* has lost its function of procuring commodities (Ledeneva 2009, p. 206-210). The

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[12] Conversation with a business-owner, Baku, August 2005.

reciprocity of favours was also no longer a must, and hierarchical relations began occupying a central part in *blat*-based transactions.

In contrast to *blat*, *tapsh* was rarely used to obtain commodities. Even during the Soviet period, *tapsh* was primarily employed to access formal institutions and circumvent bureaucracy, rather than to purchase deficit goods. *Tapsh*, similar to *blat*, also retains some elements of reciprocity, which, unlike reciprocal exchanges of favours in *blat* practices, was never central to the functioning of *tapsh*. In contrast to the communist-era *blat*, *tapsh* was always hierarchical and clientelistic, and reciprocity, though present, was of secondary importance. However, two and a half decades of post-communist socio-political and socio-economic transformation eradicated most fundamental differences between the two practices and the functions of present-day Russian *blat* are hardly distinguishable from those of Azerbaijani *tapsh*.

The main difference remains in perception. In contrast to Georgia, where the term *blat* remains largely unknown (Aliyev 2014b, p. 25; Altman 1983, p. 6-1), *blat* is well-known in the urban milieu of Azerbaijan and the majority of informants appeared familiar with the term. Whereas the younger post-communist generation of Azerbaijanis—with the exception of Russian-speaking natives of Baku—either never heard of *blat*, or found it difficult to explain its meaning, the predominant majority of respondents with at least a decade of life-experience under communism were intimately familiar with the term *blat*. Noteworthy is that informants familiar with the meaning of *blat* insisted on differentiating it from *tapsh*, because the term *blat* in Azerbaijan, as stated by an informant 'is, first of all, a part of street slang or a criminal jargon used to refer to one's social standing or status within a group of friends or *mahalla* [urban community]'[13]. In contrast, the term *tapsh* refers to specific informal practices seen by the population as normal and even trivial. This shows that although the concept of *blat* survives in post-Soviet Azerbaijan—mainly as a Soviet legacy—it is understood differently from *blat* in Russia or Ukraine. A number of informants, who previously lived and worked in different parts of Russia, claimed that Russian *blat*, or its Azeri equivalent, and *tapsh* are not the same thing. In the words of an informant, who due to business interests spends considerable time in Russia:

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[13] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, October 2006.

If I am asked by my [Russian] friends to do someone favour *po znakomstvu* [using connections] …

This is what you would call *blat* … I may or may not do it. It depends on circumstances. And, if I

do not do it; it is OK. I can do it next time. In Azerbaijan, if I am asked to *tapsh* someone,

particularly if the request comes from a relative, I must do it. It is a matter of honour, of prestige.

There is no way of refusing. That person will never talk to me again [in case of refusal].[14]

This example demonstrates that in contrast to *blat*, which 'is normally a relation of equal parties' (Ledeneva 1998, p. 53), *tapsh* is deeply embedded in individual and family honour. Hence, unlike *blat*, engaging in *tapsh*-based relations is often an obligation that has to be fulfilled regardless of individuals' choice. This makes *tapsh* somewhat more pervasive and effective than *blat*.

Much less pronounced are the distinctions between Azerbaijan's *tapsh* and informal practices of other ethnic groups in the Caucasus and Central Asia. For example, Georgian informal practice *krtami* (Aliyev 2014b), similarly to *tapsh* is highly ambivalent and employed as both a private safety net and a mechanism of circumventing formal bureaucracy. *Krtami*—often translated as 'bribe'—combines the use of informal connections and networks with distribution of material gifts and the provision of access services. One major similarity between *tapsh* and *krtami* is that both informal practices are deeply embedded into socio-cultural traditions of the South Caucasus's ethnic groups. This means that hierarchical kinship and extended family relations are as crucial for Georgians as they are for Azeris. While *krtami* is an example of synonymous with *tapsh* informal practices in the South Caucasus region, Kazakhstan's *para*-exchanges, witnessed by Werner (2002), present a symbiosis of informal networking and exchanges of informal payments and gifts for access to state institutions. Given that just like *tapsh*, *para* and *krtami* expanded and proliferated during the communist period, a clue towards understanding differences and similarities between *tapsh* and other post-Soviet informal practices, such as *blat*, may lie in unravelling the historical origins of *tapsh*.

Tapsh: A Soviet Phenomenon?

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[14] Informal conversation with a businessman, Baku, March, 2007.

The origins of *tapsh* are shrouded in mystery. With no research carried out so far, it seems impossible to trace back the roots of the phenomenon. The findings of this study illustrate that *tapsh* was thriving throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. A retired healthcare sector employee in her early 70s reminisced that *tapsh* existed as long as she can remember herself. As her parents—who were of pre-Bolshevik generation and were not using the term instead describing such relations as *tanışlıq* ('connections')—she was certain that *tapsh*-practices reached their prime during the 1940s. In the words of a pensioner, who had a career in communist administration of Soviet Azerbaijan, '[e]verything was difficult in post-war [World War II] years, and we only survived because we had families and friends to rely on. Connections and networks meant everything'[15]. Although he stated that the term *tapsh* became firmly fixed in Baku's urban slang only during the 1960s, the informant was confident that practices described under the term *tapsh* flourished since the post-WWII period.

A more nuanced analysis of Azerbaijan's social milieu under Soviet rule reveals that owing to chronic shortages of consumer goods and food items, the reliance on 'connections' (*tanışlıq*) was more essential than circumvention of formal bureaucracy. The communist elites of Azerbaijan, as well as of other indigenous republics, were frequently purged during Stalin's and Khrushchev's periods and, despite the growing importance of local elite-networks, were still firmly under the iron fist of Kremlin (Beissinger 2002). It is during the period of Brezhnev's stasis (*zastoi*) that Soviet administrations of Azerbaijan became mired in chronic corruption and clientelism which pervaded all areas of public administration (Aliyev 2015, p. 63-65). Doing things through *tapsh* became norm-of-the-day in Soviet Azerbaijan not only for communist elites, but also for common citizens who struggled to circumvent formal bureaucracy and corruption, and, therefore, employed *tapsh* extensively in their daily lives.

Sometimes *tapsh* was used to expedite formal procedures. In the words of a witness: 'it could take forever to get anything done if you had to deal with [Soviet] authorities in Baku. Even to call a plumber, you had to wait for weeks, unless you have connections and you know "necessary people"'[16]. More often *tapsh* was used to receive access to public goods and services. Though all Soviet citizens were entitled to free education and healthcare, the access to, and, particularly, the quality of services heavily depended on

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[15] Conversation with a retired Baku resident, Baku, 1998.

[16] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, 2000.

the leverage of individuals' *tapsh*. An elderly informant, who spend most of her life under the Soviet rule, lamented that in Soviet times 'it was nearly impossible to get admission to a good doctor unless you had *tapsh*. Even if you try to approach that person [with a bribe], they could refuse it, they did not even take gifts [of access] without *tapsh*'[17]. A similar situation was described by a former public servant: 'all people in our administration were *tapshevannyie* [appointed through *tapsh*], it was literally impossible to get a job in a government or [communist] party administration without *tapsh*'. Another informant of similar age and social background added that 'party membership and Marxist-Leninist ideology were totally irrelevant for your access to good [party] jobs. All that mattered is your family connections'[18].

Tapsh was not only an inseparable—although well-disguised—element of Azerbaijani communism, but it also helped to undermine the communist party's credibility and legitimacy. In statement of an informant who studied in a Baku university during the 1960s: '[w]e almost always used *tapsh* to pass classes on Marxism-Leninism. We all knew that these classes were nonsense and we did not want to waste our time on studying it'[19]. A former academic explained that:

[in Soviet times] … *tapsh* in higher education, due to the absence of specialists, led to the "extinction" of certain academic disciplines … there was no one to teach some subjects [such as history of communist party or the principles of Leninism] because nobody studied them … everyone passed their exams with *tapsh* … so they [communist authorities] had to bring in lecturers from Russia.[20]

Apart from *tapsh*'s pernicious effects on communist ideological education, because of the use of *tapsh* in higher education, many of Azerbaijan's technical industries desperately lacked experts and educated professionals. As mentioned by a former factory administrator from Baku: '[w]e never had enough knowledgeable professionals, because university graduates were usually lacking proper education

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[17] Conversation with an elderly Baku resident, Baku, 1999.

[18] Conversation with an elderly Baku resident, Baku, September 2004.

[19] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, August 2007.

[20] Informal interview with a university lecturer, Baku, September 2013.

and we had to spend years training them [before they could be of benefit for the factory].'[21] He added that 'due to high levels of corruption [in universities], many of them [graduates] … either had to pay bribes or to use *tapsh* [to pass subjects] … so in the end they learned nothing'. Nevertheless, many of those informants who spend significant parts of their lives living in the USSR agreed that Soviet-era *tapsh* was far more 'benign' and 'amicable' than present-day informal practices. Many have also believed that economic hardships and deterioration of social security—that people were used to and even took for granted under communism—during the immediate post-communist period have led to the growing demand for *tapsh*-centred practices.

The end of the Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, among other things, has left a serious imprint on both the role of *tapsh* in Azerbaijani society and on the informal practice's operational specifics. The most obvious change occurred in the perception of *tapsh*. If previously seen as a shameful or disgraceful practice that contradicted socialist values, with the collapse of the USSR, *tapsh* became to be viewed by the population as a coping mechanism and a means of overcoming economic challenges of post-communism. A Baku resident stated that 'in communist times, using *tapsh* was risky, in post-communist period not using *tapsh* became risky [due to the peril of missing opportunities]'[22]. As well-paid jobs were scarce, the value of connections increased and the reliance on *tapsh* became to be seen as normal and even necessary. The socio-economic transformation during the immediate post-communist period also affected operational characteristics of *tapsh*. Instead of preying upon communist command economy, informal practices had to adapt to 'new rules' of the game dictated by the transition to market economy. This has resulted in steady monetisation of *tapsh*-services.

The process of commodification of *tapsh* has been in development over the past twenty five years and is still on-going. While the plurality of informants described offering gifts as signs of gratitude for *tapsh*-favours in the 1990s and early 2000s, during more recent periods (from the mid-2000s) the informants' preference shifted towards repaying *tapsh*-services with cash. The growth of Azerbaijan's economy over the past decade, accompanied by the improvement of living standards, has seemingly weakened the custom of gift-giving. One informant explained: 'I would still give gifts if I deal with older

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[21] Conversation with a factory administrator, Baku, June 2006.

[22] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, September 2005.

individuals, but I'd rather give cash to a younger person, because traditions are changing'[23]. This transformation can partly be explained by the generational change and the steady disappearance of the Soviet-period tradition of making material gifts in return for informal favours (Patico 2002). Over the past two and a half decades, *tapsh* has also been slowly withdrawing from some sectors of the public sphere which it dominated under the Soviet rule and during the 1990s. For instance, *tapsh* services in healthcare have been almost entirely replaced by informal (or formal) payments. The use of *tapsh* in community assistance and in procurement of commodities also becomes more limited than before. Nonetheless, *tapsh* remains omnipresent in its 'traditional' areas of control: job market, education, access to public services, and circumvention of state bureaucracy.

This article limits the scope of its empirical investigation of post-communist *tapsh* to two public sector areas particularly affected by *tapsh*: higher education and the job market. The research on the use of informal practices in post-Soviet education and the labour sector affirms that these two sectors have been among the most affected by informal relations areas of the post-Soviet public sphere (Orkodashvili 2010; Rodgers & Williams 2009; Rumyantseva 2005). Empirical findings of this study confirm that *tapsh* practices are thriving in the education sector and at the labour market, performing functions similar to *blat* in Russia and Ukraine (Onoshchenko & Williams 2013; Rodgers & Williams 2009), and to *krtami* in Georgia (Aliyev 2014b) or *para* in Kazakhstan (Werner 2002).

Tapsh in Higher Education

This section is based on fieldwork observation carried out during the late 1990s and early 2000s among graduate students of several major state and private universities in Baku. Some 25─30% of graduate students interviewed by the author was from outside of the capital city and came to Baku only for the purpose of education. Over 70% of informants were permanent residents of Baku. Most of the data presented in this section is derived from unrecorded discussions and participant observation.

The issue of corruption in Azerbaijan's system of education has only recently begun emerging in academic debates (Lepisto & Kazimzade 2008; Drummond & Gabrscek 2012; Johnson 2004; Sadigov

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[23] Conversation with a Baku resident, Baku, November 2013.

2014). The role of *tapsh* in higher education has never been previously discussed in academia. Throughout the 1990s, *tapsh* practices were rampant at all levels of higher education in Azerbaijan. In the words of a student from a humanities department, 'you won't find anyone who studied at a university … and have not heard of or used *tapsh*'[24]. Given that in post-communist Azerbaijan, similarly to most other post-Soviet countries (Onoshchenko & Williams 2013; Morris & Polese 2014), it was nearly impossible to receive a university degree without having to pay a bribe at least once, the reliance on *tapsh* was instrumental in circumventing corruption. Although, as observed from this fieldwork, not all university lecturers accepted bribes, the majority of instructors working in higher education eagerly engaged in bribe-taking.[25]

The mechanism of corruption in institutions of higher education in Azerbaijan does not significantly differ from bribery in education sectors of other post-Soviet countries (Morris & Polese 2014). During the observed period, bribes were distributed through student mediators who negotiated with lecturers the amount that each individual student had to pay. The 'cost' of passing exams and tests depended on the grade that a student wished to receive and on student's individual qualities, such as whether the student was diligent and attended most of lectures and seminars. Those students who chose to pass exams 'on their own'—without bribes or *tapsh*—were usually allowed to do so. However, a couple of informants had spoken about one or two lecturers in their universities who—regardless of the students' knowledge of subjects—never let their students pass exams without bribes or *tapsh*. Such cases, however, were seen as exceptional.

The need to pay bribes at the end of each academic semester significantly raised the costs of university education and increased the value of *tapsh*. Therefore, all possible family and friendship connections were actively employed by students and their parents in order to obtain good grades without having to pay bribes. While the most 'well-connected' students relied on 'protection' from high-raking government officials, the plurality of those who managed to secure *tapsh*-services at universities gained access to lecturers or their superiors through kinship or friendship networks. Once established, such

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[24] Conversation with a graduate student, Baku, 1999.

[25] With an average monthly salary under US$100 throughout the 1990s and most part of the second post-communist decade, the majority of university lecturers, as well as teachers in schools and technical institutes, were forced to rely on bribery as their main source of income.

relationships were carefully maintained through regular gift-giving. The tradition of distributing material rewards as a gratitude for *tapsh*-favours is well-represented in Azerbaijani society. It is also very similar to the Russian culture of gift-giving in return for *blat*-services (Ledeneva 1998; Patico 2002). Due to their reliance on *tapsh*, students avoided paying bribes, but they still were socially sanctioned to reward their lecturers with a gift, sometimes a fairly symbolic one, such as a box of chocolate. Notwithstanding the costs of such relationships, the use of *tapsh* markedly alleviated meagre economic conditions of Baku's graduate students.[26] Even for students from richer backgrounds, spending money on bribing lecturers was perceived as wasteful and irrational. As mentioned by a graduate student from a well-off family, he would rather use *tapsh*—which was not difficult to obtain through his family's extensive connections—than pay bribes, because 'you can always spend money on something better'.

Another source of acquiring *tapsh* by university students was through their private tutors. Since most university lecturers were eager to supplement their low state-paid salaries by 'working on the side' and doing informal and untaxed tutoring for money, those students who happened to take classes taught by their private tutors were normally exempted from bribes. This form of *tapsh* was always reciprocated by generous gifts to lecturers. Given that the permanent flow of income through tutoring fees was greater than bribes received at the end of each semester (twice per year), most lecturers have valued relations with their students and always graded them positively. This formula worked for major subjects, such as the English language, mathematics, chemistry and physics. Less 'lucky' lecturers of minor subjects—biology, literature, physical education and so on—survived almost entirely on bribes and *tapsh*-related gifts.

At universities, *tapsh* was used not only to receive good grades but also, although much less commonly, to receive degrees. The practice of employing *tapsh*-connections to obtain a graduate certificate, without attending lectures and passing exams, was particularly widespread among working students enrolled in Master (*Magistr*) or doctoral degrees. While most of those informants who encountered these practices admitted that paying a bribe was always an option, it was much easier and financially preferable to rely on *tapsh*. In fact, a number of informants confessed that if they had 'proper' *tapsh,* they would prefer working full-time and using *tapsh* to receive a degree rather than spending their time at a

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[26] A significant percentage of students were paying tuition fees. Government-provided student scholarships amounted to only about US$15 per month, which was insufficient to even cover the cost of public transportation.

university without 'learning much' and instead 'wasting' their money on bribes. A former university graduate, interviewed at a later period, said: '[e]ssentially it does not matter whether you received your degree by actually attending lectures or you bought it … or got it through *tapsh* … nobody values these [university degrees] anyway … all you need to get a decent job is *tapsh*'[27]. He added that even graduates from prestigious foreign universities are still jobless unless they have *tapsh*. In point of fact, having a university certificate is seen as a formality, commonly ignored by most employers in Azerbaijan. This takes us to the next empirical case: the use of *tapsh* in search for jobs.

Tapsh at the Job Market

The role of connections at Azerbaijan's employment market, though neglected in academic studies, is observable from representative surveys recently conducted in the country. For example, according to the Caucasus Barometer surveys, conducted in Azerbaijan by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC), over 30% of survey respondents indicated that connections and 'doing favours to the "right" people' are essential in looking for jobs. Azerbaijanis are well aware about the importance of *tapsh* in search for good jobs. The most common expectation among Azerbaijan's youth is that their parents will take care of finding a decent job for them through their informal networks.[28] A similar observation has been made by Rogozin (2008, p. 84) in his research on young people in the North Caucasus. A number of graduate students claimed that they do not worry about their future employment because their parents have all the 'necessary' contacts. It has emerged from this fieldwork that only two types of jobs are readily available without *tapsh*. First type is a low paid dead-end jobs, usually given to recent high school and university graduates. Long working hours, often without weekend breaks, low salary and little or no opportunities for career growth are typical features of jobs—commonly offered by medium-sized local companies and firms—that await young people without *tapsh*-connections. The second type is jobs at international companies. However, international employers are looking for experienced and well-trained

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[27] Conversation with a university graduate, Baku, 2000.

professionals and therefore are usually unwilling to employ younger applicants with no work experience. As explained by a recent graduate of the prestigious Oil Academy:

> I went for interview to BP [British Petroleum] … but since I had no work experience, they did not accept me. So, I had to ask my uncle [who owns a small logistics firm] to give me a job. Of course, several years later … once I have gained some work experience, I will again try to make my way into the oil industry.[29]

The reliance on *tapsh* in searching for jobs appears to do more than assisting youth in finding decedent employment opportunities; it is also used by employers as a form of pre-modern reference. An owner of a small business in Baku's suburb confessed that he prefers hiring either his relatives and relatives of his friends or people recommended to him by his family members, because 'it is hard to trust strangers'. Unlike Western societies where letters of reference and applicant's educational credentials serve as a guarantee of employee's professional qualities, in Azerbaijan the most reliable source of reference is individual's family and friends. A native of Azerbaijan's northern region who came to Baku to start his own business explained that once he succeeded in opening his retail company—to a certain degree owing to the support he received from his family and other natives of his hometown—he invited his relatives and friends to work for him. In his words: 'I never had to look for employees … I have plenty of relatives and friends who make the best employees and whom I can always trust'[30].

This shows that *tapsh* at the employment market is valued and sought after by both job seekers and employers. The unwritten rules of *tapsh* at the job market prescribe that loyalty, determined through the strength of *tapsh* references, is more important than professionalism. As some informants confessed, applicants with 'strong *tapsh*' are generally expected to have higher chances of passing job interviews than better educated or more professional individuals. While many Azerbaijanis, similar to beneficiaries of informal practices in other parts of the world (Ledeneva 1998; Al-Ramahi 2008; Yang 1994), are rather uncomfortable to discuss their own experiences of using *tapsh* in searching for jobs, they, nevertheless, are

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[29] Conversation with a university graduate, Baku, April 2007.

[30] Conversation with an entrepreneur, Baku, 1998.

eager to admit that *tapsh*-connections are almost always crucial in finding good employment or receiving promotion. Although many informants mentioned that they do not want to use *tapsh*, they also understood that given the current reality at the job market, employing *tapsh*-networks is not a matter of choice but a necessity.

If the practice of using *tapsh* in searching for jobs in the private sector—due to the absence of formal private sector employment under the Soviet rule—is a post-communist phenomenon, the reliance on *tapsh* in finding a job in the public sector is a practice widely employed since the Soviet period. A number of informants, observed by this research project, were certain that to get a decently paid government job or a civil servant job that promises a constant flow of bribes, one either has to have solid connections or be prepared to pay a hefty bribe. A university lecturer, who only recently completed her degree at the same department where she currently works, acknowledged that she got her job immediately after graduating because her academic supervisor 'helped' her. Another informant who works at a ministry confessed that he was given the job because his parents 'helped' him.

Unlike the use of *tapsh* in higher education—seen by many as corrupt and detrimental—relying on connections and using *tapsh*-favours when searching for jobs was understood as normal and even positive by many informants. In the words of a recent university graduate: 'using *tapsh* to get good grades is wrong, because people can study and earn their grades on their own, yet, to use *tapsh* to find a good job is all right if there is no other way of doing it'[31]. The prevailing public opinion on the 'positive' use of *tapsh* in employment sector is often reasoned by rampant unemployment, low salaries and the overall lack of decent jobs. The dominant among young people opinion can be summoned in the words of a former university student as follows: 'I would not ask my parents to help me find a job, if I could do it myself … but I can't … so I have no choice'[32]. For parents, finding a good job for their children is both a moral duty and a private safety net. Firstly, in tightly-knit patriarchal families of Azerbaijan's society, as well as in other Caucasian and Central Asian societies, the role of parents is not only limited to raising their kids, but also obliges them to take care of their children's future by finding them 'good' spouses and well-paid jobs. For instance, Polese et al. (2014, p. 191) illustrate on the example of Uzbek society that 'parents take care of

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[31] Conversation with a university graduate, Baku, March 2006.

[32] Conversation with a university graduate, Baku, October 2005.

the economic needs of children. After that the young look after the old'. Secondly, in the same way as in Central Asia, where '[i]t is not uncommon where the state is not providing a sufficient pension for the older generations to be supported by their children' (Polese et al. 2014, p. 190), many parents in Azerbaijan perceive their offspring as potential caretakers.

Conclusion

Thriving primarily in the nation's capital Baku, the practice of *tapsh* appears to be deeply engrained in social traditions of contemporary Azerbaijan. On theoretical front, this article posited that *tapsh* belongs to a bigger family of informal practices, which commonly share similar characteristics. Similarly to other informal practices employed by different societies around the world, *tapsh* is widely used to receive preferential treatment at formal institutions. It is employed to circumvent formal bureaucracy and to gain access to public goods and services in short supply. The obligatory and hierarchical nature of *tapsh* relations, as well as their clientelist and nepotistic characteristics, is not unique to *tapsh*, and is also found in other informal practices, such as Arab *wasta*.

The main empirical goal of this study was to illustrate how, why and under which circumstances the informal practice of *tapsh* manifests itself in socio-economic and socio-political spheres of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Due to *tapsh's* embeddedness in local social culture and family traditions, it has succeeded in surviving for generations. While *tapsh* manifests itself in various areas of public and private spheres, the plurality of informants indicated that *tapsh* is particularly prevalent in higher education and in search for jobs. The examples of the use of *tapsh* in these two areas are manifold and most of Baku's residents seem to have relied on or encountered the use of *tapsh* when studying at universities and while searching for jobs. As seen from practical examples of the use of *tapsh* in selected areas of private and public sectors, demonstrated throughout this article, the popular attitude towards *tapsh* is neither negative nor positive. Most Azerbaijanis rely on it in their daily lives and, (though often resentfully) accept its centrality. The widespread reliance on informal practices clearly exacerbates social inequality by limiting access to education and employment, as well as to other areas dominated by *tapsh* practices, in accordance with individuals' ability and means of developing 'useful' private networks. Individuals lacking 'necessary' *tapsh* connections are faced with the need of either engaging in corrupt practices or accepting the

bureaucratic reality. However, the findings of this study reveal that plurality of informants to varying degrees had access to *tapsh* networks developed throughout their lifetime or inherited from their parents. The accessibility of *tapsh*, to a certain degree equalised the majority of population in terms of their ability to obtain public goods and legitimises the reliance on *tapsh*. With the social organisation of Azerbaijan's population heavily based on extended patriarchal family and kinship groups, each member of household retains some sort of access to *tapsh*-services. This makes the custom of *tapsh* legitimate and socially acceptable, thus ensuring its survival and continuity over generations.

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