

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Do citizens of the former Soviet Union trust state institutions and why: The case of Azerbaijan



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

Trust
Determinants of trust
Azerbaijan
Macro-and micro cultural theories

ABSTRACT

This study examines the trust in political institutions in Azerbaijan using the data from the survey Caucasus Barometer (CB) conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRCC) in 2012–2013. Two hypotheses – cultural and institutional – were tested. The study partially confirms the previous findings that national culture, as well as individual socialization (macro and micro-cultural theories) are the main determinants of trust in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, government performance and individual evaluation (macro-and micro institutional theories) did not affect much on the trust level in the country.

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1. Introduction

There is a general understanding that trust in a political system is an important element for democratic reforms and economic development (Howard, 2003; Fukuyama, 1995); social order (Durkheim, 1984), and institutional performance (McKee et al., 2013; Bjørnskov, 2010; Putnam et al., 1993). Trust in state institutions is the key factor underpinning political stability in the country. Trust contributes to economic development and market economy, social integration, political reforms, and democratic stability and even to good health and longevity (Newton, 2001). Increases in trust levels also leads to increases in levels of democratic action (Lukatela, 2007), while declining trust undermines liberal domestic policy ambitions (Chanley et al., 2000; Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington and Globetti, 2002; Rudolph and Evans, 2005). In general, trust is a necessary element for a society to prosper (Misztal, 1996).

Political and social scientists usually distinguish two types of trust – political and social. While social trust covers the attitudes of people towards each other as well as participation in civil and voluntary organizations, political trust measures the attitudes of the public towards political institutions (Zmerli and Newton, 2008). Meanwhile, it is widely accepted that political trust is a very important foundation for good governance. Political trust is defined as the ratio of the people's evaluation of government performance relative to their normative expectations of how government ought to perform (Coleman, 1990; Hetherington, 2005; Miller, 1974; Stokes, 1962). There are two (most widely researched) theories of political trust. The first, politics-centered theory, concentrates on the performance of governments. It is self-evident and plausible that political and economic performance has direct effects on political trust, and good performance can guarantee support by citizens (Newton 2001). The second, society-centered theory focuses on social capital. Social capital theory argues that (generalized) social trust plays a great role in maintaining good (stable and effective) governance. Therefore, socially trusting

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citizens tend to be politically trusting as well. Especially, in cases of consolidated democracies, research has produced robust and statistically significant correlations between (generalized) social trust, on the one hand, and confidence in and satisfaction with (political) governance on the other (Zmerli and Newton, 2008). Good governance, in turn, may then enhance the conditions in which both social and political trust flourish, enabling citizens to cooperate effectively in both private and public affairs (Zmerli and Newton, 2008, p. 707). In this way, a virtuous triangle of a) social trust, b) political performance and c) political trust/support may emerge and reinforce each other over time. To summarize the theoretical trust literature, social and political trust dimensions are closely associated and mutually supportive (Sztompka, 2000; Dekker and Uslaner 2001; O'Neill, 2002; Uslaner, 2002; Rothstein and Stolle, 2003; Newton, 2007; Delhey and Newton, 2002; Delhey and Newton, 2005). To sum the argument on its head, it means that social mistrust may dampen political trust in and support of governmental actors and institutions; vice versa poor performance of government can not only lead to a decline in political trust and support, but also have detrimental effects on social trust and cooperative behavior in society.

Since the collapse of communism, low and declining levels of trust, and high and increasing levels of corruption have characterized many countries in the transition region. These negative trends have impeded many countries' transition to well-functioning markets, undermined people's life satisfaction and challenged their views of the positive benefits of the transition to market economies and democracy. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and emergence of new transitional states gave birth to and popularized theories of trust (EBRD, 2011). Political scientists began to see the absence of trust as the main element of weakness in the political system (McKee et al., 2013; Letki, 2004; Howard, 2003). As a result of studies on the former communist states, researchers came up with several explanations on the reasons of high or low trust in government. Mishler and Rose (2001) in their study of East European countries proposed four testable hypotheses, each related to different theories. National culture, individual socialization, government performance and individual evaluations were the main factors determining trust in the government. In their attempt to explain trust in post-communist countries, Mishler and Rose (2001) differentiated cultural and institutional theories of trust. Institutional theories of trust see it as being driven by the characteristics of those institutions as viewed by individuals; cultural theories see trust in institutions as an extension of an individual's trust in general, learned early in life and projected onto institutions. Consistent with previous research, these were divided into macro and micro level theories. Macro-cultural theories emphasize the homogenizing role of national culture in shaping trust while micro-cultural theories consider how each individual's trust has been shaped by his/hers past experiences. Macro-institutional theories base trust on the aggregate ability of institutions to perform, for example by promoting economic growth, whereas micro institutional theories are based on the sum of individual's personal experiences with them.

The present article tries to find the determinants of trust in the political institutions in Azerbaijan – a Muslim country in the South Caucasus that became independent only two decades ago. In Azerbaijan, trust in governmental institutions varies significantly from institution to institution. Trust in the president has always been high in Azerbaijan since the population tends to associate all positive changes or developments in the country with the leader. However, the public associates most negative phenomena, such as injustices and unresolved problems, with other governmental agencies. For example, in 2013 the least trusted political institution was political parties with overall 15 percent of trusting and 39 percent distrusting population. The rest 31 percent is neutral and 15 percent refused to answer. Among the public institutions local governments and court system had the lowest trust level, by having 41 and 39 percent trust accordingly. Interestingly enough, although the executive government does not have high levels of trust (only 56 percent trusting and 22 percent distrusting, 19 percent neutral, while the rest 3 percent refused to answer), the president, as a head of executive branch, has always enjoyed the high levels of trust in the country. According to the survey, 85 percent of the respondents reported that they trust in the President of the Azerbaijan Republic. On the one hand, people highly trust in the president, on the other hand, other branches of the government are distrusted. Among the low trusted institution, we can also find police (48%) and parliament (52%) institutions.

Such an environment creates political apathy and leads to low membership in political parties, associations and other civil society organizations. The absence of trust hinders the consolidation of liberal democracy in the country and the evolution of a truly civil society (Chanley et al., 2000; Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington and Globetti, 2002; Rudolph and Evans, 2005). At the same time, low trust in other institutions increases the cost of transactions in society and leads to corruption (Hakhverdyan and Mayne, 2012). For example, in Azerbaijan, distrust in public education on the level of secondary schools led to the creation of the private tutoring system, which puts an additional burden on parents. It is surprising to see and difficult to explain that despite the fact that majority of parents send their kids to the private tutors, around 67% still trust the education system. While mistrust in the health care system (50 percent trust and 35 percent distrust) forces people to turn to the private sector or pay additional fees to obtain better treatment. At the same time we see that in Azerbaijan support for democracy and a market economy is high, with the middle-aged being the most supportive. However, alienation from the political and economic system is also evident, with four out of ten believing that the type of political/economic system does not matter (EBRD, 2007).

Certain paradoxes seen in Azerbaijan encouraged us to ask the main question of whether trust in public institutions in Azerbaijan is institutionally created or a cultural phenomenon. For the purposes of our study we will come forward with two hypotheses that were previously used in the studies of Mishler and Rose (2001), and McKee et al. (2013) and nominally were divided into institutional and cultural.

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