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An analysis of the costs and benefits of increasing Baku's public transportation tariffs

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Abstract

According to a resolution of the Tariff Council of Azerbaijan, starting from August 2018, prices of passenger transportation services were increased by 50% across the board. The increase in prices covers both bus and metro transportation. Note that the share of bus and metro transportation of all transportation services in 2017 was equal to 96.3%, as reported in official figures. Thus, the increase in the tariff of passenger transportation services covers more than 96% of the sector.

Although the Tariff Council has tried to justify its resolution with several arguments, continuing public discussions show that the resolution has caused serious dissatisfaction in society.

Considering the importance of the topic, this paper discusses the resolution on increasing prices of passenger transportation services in Azerbaijan, analyzing its costs and benefits in the context of the current domestic situation.

How did the prices of public transportation change in Azerbaijan?

In addition to the mounting pressures of unemployment, rising interest rates, and high inflation, this August the Azerbaijani people have been faced with a new problem threatening social stability – the increase in prices of passenger transportation services. According to the Resolution of the Tariff Council of Azerbaijan Republic approved on July 30, 2018, the prices of countrywide passenger transportation services were increased¹.

The last time metro prices were increased was in 2011, while bus fares within city limits and those within Baku region were increased in 2007. Fares for travelling between cities were changed in 2013².

It would be wrong to say that the recent resolution was unexpected. In 2011, the last time metro prices were increased, agency officials proclaimed that the increase was not enough. In the following years, news about subsequent increase in prices of passenger transportation services was discussed publicly several times, particularly after bus fares were raised in 2013. In 2016, local media cited government sources reporting there would be a 50% price increase in passenger transportation services (**Note: The present increase has also been 50%**)³. Speculation surrounding this 2016 rumor only increased the next year, in 2017, with the passage of the resolution to increase car fuel prices. Following the reignition of public fears of price hikes on public transportation, in October 2017, the Baku Transport Agency, a state-controlled agency for public buses, attempted to quell such fears by stating that they did not apply to the Tariff Council for an increase in prices⁴. In April 2018, the Tariff Council also informed the local media that, additionally, “Baku Metro” CJSC had never applied for a price change⁵.

So, an interesting question arising here is that of why prices were not changed in 2015-2017, when economic conditions changed sharply, but were increased instead in 2018. We will try to answer this question broadly in the next parts of this article. First, let’s see how prices were changed in each category of passenger transportation services in Azerbaijan, according to the resolution of Tariff Council. [See: Table 1]

¹ Azərbaycan Respublikası Tarif (qiymət) Şurası, 30.07.2018, “Tarif (qiymət) Şurasının 2018-ci ilin 30 iyul tarixində keçirilən iclasında ictimai nəqliyyatda sərnişindəşımaya xidmətləri üzrə yeni tariflər təsdiq edilib”, 30.07.2018

<http://tariff.gov.az/?/az/news/view/170/>

² “Ümumi istifadədə olan avtomobil nəqliyyatı ilə (taksi istisna olmaqla) ölkədaxili sərnişindəşımaya xidmətlərinin tariflərinin tənzimlənməsi barədə”, 26.04.2013

<http://tariff.gov.az/?/az/resolution/view/102/>

³ Anaxəbər.az, “Avtobus və metroda gediş haqqı 50 faiz bahalaşır - təfəsilat”, 27.11.2016

<http://anaxeber.az/alt-manset/26587-avtobus-ve-metroda-gedish-haqqi-50-faiz-bahalashir-tefsilat.html>

⁴ Bakı Nəqliyyat Agentliyi, “Sərnişin avtobuslarında gediş haqqı qiymətləri artırılmayacaq”, 26.10.2017

<http://bna.az/az/news/378>

⁵ Qaynar.info, Yeni metro qatarları alınır: gediş haqları artırılacaq? (AÇIQLAMA), 04.04.2018

<http://qaynarinfo.az/az/yeni-metro-qatarlari-alinir-gedis-haqlari-artirilacaq-aiqlama/>

Table 1: Changes in tariffs of passenger transportation services

Type of Transportation	Previous Tariff	New Tariff	Change, %
<i>Metro</i>	0.20	0.30	50%
<i>Bus (within city limits)</i>	0.20	0.30	50%
<i>Bus (between cities), per km</i>	0.16	0.24	50%

Source: Tariff Council of Azerbaijan Republic, 2018

As seen from the table above, tariffs of passenger transportation services have increased by 50% in each category.

The institution justifies the price changes with several arguments including: increases in passenger transportation-related costs, renovation of its bus fleet, increase in prices of import-dependent technical equipment, increase in service quality, application of the non-cash system, and a reduction of the share of the state budget going to metro transportation⁶. However, were the changes of prices in passenger transportation really necessary? To answer this question, we need to examine current conditions.

Current economic condition of the public transportation sector

The public transportation sector in Azerbaijan is made up of both state-owned and private entities. “Baku Metro” CJSC is a natural monopolist in metro passenger transportation. In bus transportation, the state-owned “Baku Bus” LLC and other private companies operate together. Currently, both of the state-owned institutions in this field (“Baku Metro” CJSC and “Baku Bus” LCC) operate with a loss (<http://metro.gov.az/az/about/metropolitan/fin>, <https://www.bakubus.az/files/BakuBus%20IFRS%202016.pdf>).

Despite the implementation of several state programs, it has been impossible to establish a public transportation system in the country which meets modern standards. Tariffs for public transportation are regulated by the government through its Tariff Council⁷. Passenger transportation activity is one of the activities requiring a special allowance (license).⁸ In order to regulate state policy and charge one institution with the regulation of the passenger transportation field, the Baku Transport Agency was established in 2015 under the Cabinet of Ministers⁹.

⁶ Azərbaycan Respublikası Tarif (qiymət) Şurası, 30.07.2018, “Tarif (qiymət) Şurasının 2018-ci ilin 30 iyul tarixində keçirilən iclasında ictimai nəqliyyatda sərnişindəşımaya xidmətləri üzrə yeni tariflər təsdiq edilib”, 30.07.2018

<http://tariff.gov.az/?/az/news/view/170/>

⁷ “Qiymətləri (tarifləri) dövlət tərəfindən tənzimlənən malların (işlərin, xidmətlərin) Siyahısının təsdiq edilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Nazirlər Kabinetinin Qərarı”, 28.09.2005

<http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/11342>

⁸ “Lisenzialar və icazələr haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu”, 15.03.2016

<http://e-qanun.az/framework/32626>

⁹ “Bakı şəhərində nəqliyyat sahəsində islahatların keçirilməsinə dair əlavə tədbirlər haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Fərmanı”, 21.12.2015

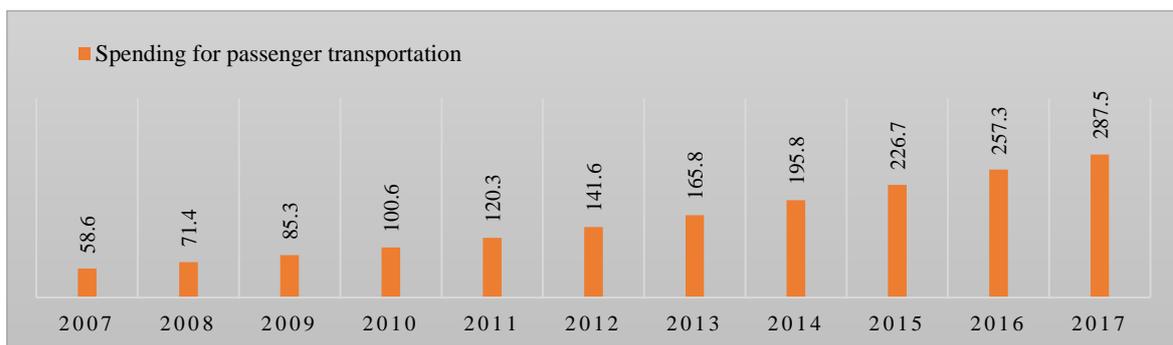
<https://president.az/articles/17196>

Recently, the demand for transportation services has increased due to several reasons such as population growth rate, urbanization, development of tourism sector, increase in car fuel prices, and greater occurrence of traffic jams in Baku. The total number of passenger's transported by public transportation services in 2017 was 1 billion and 973.4 million people (*this number was equal to 1 billion and 148 million in 2007*). 84.7%, or 1 billion and 672.2 million, of them traveled by bus while 11.6%, or 228.8 million people, traveled by metro. In general, 96.3% of passenger transportation within the country was conducted by bus and metro¹⁰.

Revenue generated from bus transportation in 2017 was 487.7 million AZN while from metro transportation it was equal to 44.3 million AZN. Total revenue generated was 532 million AZN for that year¹¹. Note that since the last price changes in city bus fares in 2007, revenue generated from bus transportation has increased 4 times. (*note: due to the weak structure of official statistics and accountability, determining the true dynamics of revenues generated from bus transportation within city limits and Baku region [sectors in which the price has not changed since 2007] was impossible*). After the price changes in 2011, revenues generated from passenger transportation by metro have increased by 54%. The reasons of the increase in revenues in both bus and metro transportation was the increase of transparency in the sector in comparison to the previous years, the increase in fare of passenger transportation between cities, and the expansion of passenger turnover.

Statistical analysis shows that the costs of passenger transportation have increased greatly over the last 10 years; however, no changes were observed in tariffs during these years. Factors that caused the increase in costs of transportation include the increase in prices of electricity and car fuels, renovation of transportation fleets, rise of fiscal spending caused by the expansion of the legal operation sphere, and the increase of salaries in the sector. Because of these factors, spending for bus passenger transportation was 287.5 million AZN in 2017, which is 228.9 million AZN, or about 5 times, higher than that of 2007. The following diagram shows clearly how spending in this field has changed in the last 10 years [*see: Diagram 1*].

Diagram: Spending for passenger transportation by bus, million AZN



Source: State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan Republic, 2018

¹⁰ Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi, “Azərbaycan rəqəmlərdə”, baxış tarixi: 01.08.2018, səh: 97

https://www.stat.gov.az/menu/6/statistical_yearbooks/source/azfigures-az_2018.zip

¹¹ Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi, “Nəqliyyat sektorunda sərnişin daşınmasından əldə olunan gəlir, min manat”, baxış tarixi: 01.08.2018

<https://www.azstat.org/MESearch/details>

It is interesting that despite the changes in conditions noted above, the cost of transportation per person by bus has not changed in 5 years (0.14 manat/km)¹². However, according to official numbers, the total profit of the sector has also increased in the past period, by approximately 44% in 2017. The increase in profits despite increases in spending (rising costs) and stagnant tariffs raises questions about and evokes doubts in the quality of statistical data provided by the agencies.

Similar dynamics are also visible in passenger transportation by metro. Spending on passenger transportation by metro has increased by approximately 2.6 times during 2007-2017, a total equal to 105 million AZN¹³. Although the main reason for the increase in spending is the renovation of infrastructure and metro fleet, an increase in salaries, the implementation of the electric payment system of the metro, and sharp increases in natural gas purchase costs were also observed. For instance, in 2017, “Baku Metro” LLC’s purchase of oil products and the costs of purchasing gas and electricity were more than 12 million AZN, which was 42% higher than in 2013¹⁴ (*note: As the financial data of the institution before 2013 was not available, 2013 was used as a base year*).

Non-transparency of the sector and the weak quality of officially-provided statistics makes it difficult to compare the revenue and losses of the sector. For that reason, this paper examines the current situation considering the changes in spending of the sector.

It is worth noting that, especially in the last 3 years, a new economic situation has crystalized in Azerbaijan. Because of the decrease in oil prices during 2015-2017, the national currency (Azerbaijani manat) lost more than 54% of its value and the prices of fuel and electricity increased by 63.6%¹⁵ and 34%, respectively. Furthermore, the consumption price index of the country was 4% in 2015, 12.4% in 2016, and 12.9% in 2017. However, independent experts think that the inflation rate is higher than official indicators. Under these conditions, new challenges have emerged for economic entities operating in public transportation, along with those operating in other sectors. The overall contraction in profitability of the sector leads to the declining quality of public transportation, depreciation of the transportation fleet, and diminishing competition because of cessation of activities by many entities. In particular, the sharp devaluation of the local currency has substantially increased the cost of repair and maintenance of the transportation sector, which is dependent on imports in terms of technical equipment. With a view to all the aforementioned factors, there is a need to take certain actions in the field of public transportation; optimization of tariffs for passenger transportation services can be included in this list.

However, as the Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD), we believe that the Tariff Council should not have raised the prices 50% so suddenly. Firstly, such a sharp

¹² Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi, “Nəqliyyat sektorunda 1 sərnişinin orta daşınma məsafəsi, km”, baxış tarixi: 01.08.2018

<https://www.azstat.org/MESearch/details>

¹³ Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi, “Nəqliyyat sektorunda sərnişin daşınmasına çəkilən xərclər, min manat”, baxış tarixi: 01.08.2018

<https://www.azstat.org/MESearch/details;jsessionid=2F0283F70F613B5884601FEF93D6CAEF>

¹⁴ “Bakı Metropoliteni” Qsc, “Bakı Metropoliteni” QSC-nin Maliyyə Vəziyyəti Haqqında Hesabatı 31 Dekabr 2017-Ci İl Tarixinə Olan Vəziyyət”, 28.06.2018

¹⁵ Azərbaycan Respublikasının Tarif (Qiymət) Şurası, Qərar №14, 02.12.2013

<http://tariff.gov.az/?/az/resolution/view/104/>

¹⁶ “Azərbaycan Respublikasının Tarif (qiymət) Şurası qərar №8”, 14.07.2017

<http://tariff.gov.az/?/az/resolution/view/174/>

upsurge will undermine the social security of low income families, who are usually the consumers of public transportation. According to the initial calculations, the population of the country will have to spend 260 million AZN more a year for public transportation¹⁷, which is a serious figure. Secondly, the non-application of differential price mechanisms targeting various social groups in the country will further deepen the social impact of price hikes. Thirdly, the absence of conditions creating a direct correlation between the effect of price increases and the quality of service. This fact sheds doubt on the probability of creating a better-quality transportation service environment. Fourthly, existing mechanisms for the calculation of real costs of public transportation are not effective. This, on the other hand, can lead to an improper pricing policy. Thus, the level of transparency in the activities of state-owned companies operating in the field of passenger transportation in particular, is not satisfactory. For example, the accountability of “Baku Metro” CJSC, one of the 20 large state-owned enterprises of the country, is poorly organized and does not even meet the standards defined by the state, saying nothing of international standards. Despite having an annual turnover of around 100 million AZN, the external auditor involved in the assessment of its financial activities is a natural person. At the same time, this organization’s annual financial statements are not informative [see: <http://metro.gov.az/az/about/metropoliten/fin>]. This weakens the quality of financial monitoring over its activities.

Troubles with accountability are also visible in “BakuBus” LLC. For example, according to the reports of the Chamber of Accounts, 99.4% of the shortcomings revealed during the inspection of “BakuBus” LLC are related to its accounting¹⁸. Despite the passing of 7 months, the company has not yet publicized its financial reports for 2017¹⁹.

Failure to complete the transition to cashless payments in all passenger transportation is considered to be one of the key factors contributing to the existence of hidden turnover. Despite taking certain steps for making public transportation payments cashless in Baku since 2011, the realization of the process has not been possible. Although the Baku Transport Agency announced that it would achieve full implementation of the cashless payment system in the first half of 2018, it was not achieved and most buses still accept cash payments²⁰. Let us note that, at present, there are 2021 busses serving 150 lines in Baku, of which only 500 buses in 25 lines have completed the transition to the cashless payment system²¹.

We believe that the competitive environment of the passenger transportation sector is not satisfactory. That is, factors such as the subsidization of state-owned enterprises, lack of correlation between service quality and fees charged, existence of subjective approaches in the tenders for the sale of transportation lines, and lack of transparency, as well as the widespread monopoly in the sector, are considered important problems for the formation of a healthy, competitive environment in the sector.

¹⁷ Note: calculations based on passenger transportation indicators provided by the State Statistical Committee

¹⁸ “Azərbaycan Respublikası Hesablama Palatasının 2017-Ci İldə Fəaliyyəti Haqqında HESABAT”, baxış tarixi: 03.08.2018, səh: 40

http://sai.gov.az/upload/files/Hesablama%20palatas%C4%B1%20HESABAT_2017.pdf

¹⁹ “Baku Bus” MMC, Bölüm: Maliyyə Hesabatları

<https://www.bakubus.az/>

²⁰ Poliçon.az, “Azərbaycanda ictimai nəqliyyatdakı əsas problemlər açıqlandı”, 12.01.2018

http://www.pia.az/Azərbaycanda_ictimai_nəqliyyatdakı_əsas_-231424-xeber.html

²¹ Bakı Nəqliyyat Agentliyi, baxış tarixi: 05.08.2018

<http://bna.az/az/ictimai-neqliyyat>

Currently, there are no mechanisms for applying differential prices in public transportation. Tariffs for passenger transportation are applied without considering the well-being of different social groups of the population and of service quality. This is one of the weaker points of social policy and hampers the formation of a suitable environment for more effective financing.

One of the most important problems in public transportation is the depreciation of the transport fleet. The devaluation of the national currency, increases in the prices of fuel, and other expenditures have decreased the investments in fixed capital by entities operating in the sector. Despite 1038 vehicles being brought to the country for passenger transportation in 2012²², the corresponding figure in 2017 was 6 times less, with only 187²³. As a result, the transportation fleet has become significantly worn out.

In general, because of factors such as the non-implementation of an optimal tariff policy, the lack of a competitive environment, the existence of subjective approaches, and the non-fulfillment of the responsibilities of relevant supervisory bodies, it has not been possible to establish a modern and high-quality public transportation. We believe that there is a need for a comprehensive action plan taking international experience into account in this direction.

²² Dövlət Gömrük Komitəsi, Xarici ticarətin gömrük statistikas, hesabat dövrü: 01.01.2012-31.12.2012, baxış tarixi: 05.08.2018, səh: 7

http://customs.gov.az/modules/pdf/pdffolder/25/FILE_CF8DE5-10B5EA-3EBB1E-A0F13F-CB481C-EC1C01.pdf

²³ Dövlət Gömrük Komitəsi, Xarici ticarətin gömrük statistikas, hesabat dövrü: 01.01.2017-31.12.2017, baxış tarixi: 05.08.2018, səh: 7

http://customs.gov.az/modules/pdf/pdffolder/56/FILE_AA28EF-712081-B355C1-37724A-E40246-2FAAF8.pdf

Conclusion

Over the past years, economic circumstances in Azerbaijan have changed dramatically, which has created new challenges for the public transportation sector. That is, the increases in the price of automobile fuel, electricity, labor costs and the two-fold rise in the costs of imports of vehicles and their parts (as a result of the manat's devaluations) have made it necessary to optimize tariffs for passenger transportation services. Also, subsidies to state-owned public transportation entities ("Baku Metro" CJSC and "BakuBus" LLC) have created an unequal competitive environment in the sector. It has become impossible for private owners to put modern transportation vehicles into operations, which has created an unfair environment, particularly in Baku. Nevertheless, the decision to increase the tariffs by 50% is likely to form a substantial burden on family budgets, particularly of those belonging to vulnerable groups of society, and negatively impact social well-being. There has been no differentiation of tariffs for various social groups with the new prices (for example: students, pensioners etc.). This gives enough ground to say that the government's social policy is not based on the principles of sustainability and income redistribution. According to initial calculations, as a result of the increase in transportation costs, the population will face an additional expense of 260 million AZN annually.

Another important point is that the decision to increase the tariffs did not emerge with a commitment to improve the quality of services and the renewal of the transportation fleet. We believe that the lack of correlation between the quality of transportation and the price will have an undesirable impact on the quality of this sector in the future. No steps have been taken to create a suitable infrastructure before the tariff increases. In particular, the accountability of state-owned companies operating in this field was not increased, public control over financial flows were not provided, and the transition to cashless payment system was not completed.

In general, public transportation in Azerbaijan has not been organized in line with modern requirements, there are serious shortcomings in the quality of service, and the existing tariff policy creates certain obstacles for the further development of the sector.

Recommendations

Given that the interests of social groups should be protected to maximum extent possible, the Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD) considers it appropriate to take the following steps to implement an effective state policy for sustainable development in public transportation, quality change, increasing competitiveness and investment flows:

1. ***Implementation of a special program for the full transition towards a cashless payment system in public transportation over the next 6 months*** – a specific commitment may be imposed on natural persons and legal entities carrying out passenger transportation services. The Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies and Baku Transport Agency can organize the creation of an appropriate infrastructure.
2. ***Establishing appropriate software for cashless payment system in public transportation that can be used with all kinds of plastic cards*** – thus the need for additional payment terminals and cards can be eliminated and the cost of setting up the required infrastructure for cashless payment system may be reduced significantly.
3. ***Application of differential tariffs in public transportation*** – different tariffs can be defined according to social groups and distance. Also, sale of daily, weekly, monthly and yearly passes for public transportation can be offered at a discounted price. This can create an opportunity for citizens to plan their medium and long-term expenditures, as well as to benefit from certain discounts. On the other hand, it can increase the liquidity of economic entities operating in the sector, expand access to affordable financing, and foster the investments in fixed capital.
4. ***Ensuring correlation between service quality and price*** – if passenger transport tariffs are determined by the quality of service and, in particular, with the condition of the transport fleet, it is possible to achieve a more effective mechanism for the sustainable development of the public transportation and the promotion of investment.
5. ***Increasing the transparency and accountability of financial activities of the state-owned companies operating in the sector*** – The effective spending of funds can lead to a reduction in passengers' transportation costs and subsidies dedicated for state-owned companies in this sector.
6. ***Liberalization of the business environment in the public transportation sector*** – The environment can be made more competitive through transparent processes in areas such as obtaining appropriate permits, commissioning new routes, and organizing overseeing mechanisms, which can create adequate conditions for better quality services.
7. ***Promoting price difference for passenger transportation services*** – although the Tariff Council determines the higher boundary of the price of public transportation, in practice, there is no supplier offering a lower price. Application of effective policies such as tax breaks and the deepening of competition can lead to entities operating in this sector to offer different prices.

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