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Ethnic Minorities in Azerbaijan

An Overview

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Introduction

Peaceful co-existence between ethnic and ethno-religious groups in any diverse society is an essential element of public order, social peace, security and human development. Tolerance and respect for cultural differences is the best antidote to extremism, social tensions, violence and civil war.

Since the beginning of this century, the number of domestic conflicts around the world that have brought ethnic and ethno-religious groups into variance with one other and with their national parliaments has mushroomed. These conflicts have taken their toll of victims in Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, Nigeria, Central African Republic and other countries.

In Europe, there is now a trend and a threat to fragmentation of and secession from sovereign states. Kosovo has gained its independence from Serbia. Catalonia and Scotland will each hold a referendum for independence. In Ukraine, Crimea has held an illegal referendum and has joined the Russian Federation regardless of international law.

States hosting a wide range of peoples, linguistic, religious and ethnic groups can have legitimate concerns about their territorial integrity, especially if neighbouring countries have some geo-political interest in weakening their social cohesion and exacerbating their internal tensions.

This study addresses the issue of the co-existence of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan and the management of diversity by the state. It highlights the specificities of a number of minorities and their historical roots, as well as the concerns of the state, which is still in the process of creating a new identity from the ashes of the former Soviet Union and which, due to recent experience, is also concerned about its territorial integrity.

The challenges were and are still huge: the identification of ethnic minorities in the light of the self-identification of their members, the accommodation of collective rights, social integration while respecting diversity and security.

Ethnic identification and self-identification

In the absence of a clear definition of basic terms such as “national minority” or “ethnic minority,” the number of ethnic and foreign groups that are present in any given country is virtually impossible to define. Concerning Azerbaijan, the figures vary from 60 to 80, depending on the sources and the actors met by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* on the occasion of several trips to Azerbaijan. Official censuses from the early Soviet period until the independence of Azerbaijan provide some useful information, but due to the repressive nature of the Soviet regime, ethnic self-identification cannot be an altogether reliable source of information.

Moreover, censuses are often contested by minorities, regardless of the country context or the political system. Statistics can be challenged by simply multiplying by two or three or more

the alleged number of their people. Such data are usually partisan and not based on scientific research and investigation. In the case of Azerbaijan, we have grounded our conclusions on the results of the last official census (2009), since the methodology has been certified by the Council of Europe Advisory Board on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the following terms:

26. The Advisory Committee is pleased to note that the census of 2009 appears overall to have been prepared and conducted in line with international standards, notably those prepared by the Eurostat office. Enumerators were reportedly trained to inform respondents of the voluntary nature of any questions related to ethnic background as well as of the principle of free self-identification. Minority representatives confirmed during the visit that they had been encouraged during the 2009 census to freely indicate their ethnic background and numerically smaller minorities, such as Quiz, Khanbalik and Budge, indeed registered for the first time as a separate ethnic group.¹

Self-identification does not always make for set and clear-cut data. People can have multiple identities and prioritize them differently with the passing time whatever the reasons. In addition, mixed marriages, a policy encouraged for 70 years by the Soviet regime in order to create a new supra-national identity, have contributed to the fade-out of earlier individual and collective identities.

Minority rights, social integration and security

To be a member of a minority is never easy and to accommodate the claims of minorities is often a difficult exercise for any state.

On the one hand, minorities would like their identity, their culture, their folklore, their language or their religion to be preserved and developed. However, some of these markers risk getting diluted by mixed marriages and school education in the official language. They can disappear from one generation to the next. Members of minorities want to be fully integrated in society, but they do not want to be entirely assimilated.

On the other hand, states often perceive demands for more collective rights, for more autonomy, for constitutional and political changes with suspicion and as a possible threat to their territorial integrity in the future.

Both of these trends are perceptible in Azerbaijan.

¹ Advisory Board on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Third Opinion on Azerbaijan adopted on 10 October 2012. Ref. ACFC/OP/III(2012)005 (3 September 2013)

About this study

This study² comprises brief and succinct reports about some fifteen ethnic minorities and foreign groups³ that are resident in Azerbaijan. In recent years, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has met with community leaders of almost all of them as well as representatives of official institutions. Some groups enjoyed financial state support on particular projects, but most did not and were proud of being self-sufficient.

This study also describes the mechanisms put in place by Azerbaijan since independence to address the complexities of the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity in the country.

It is worth noting that while the North Caucasus has historically been the scene of tensions and conflicts which persist to this day in present-day Russia, the independent and secular republic of Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus has not experienced similar domestic conflicts of a protracted nature. Azerbaijan's experience shows that the co-existence of several ethnic groups in the South Caucasus can be peaceful and that the solution to ethnic conflicts elsewhere is not to create ghetto mono-ethnic states but to encourage multi-ethnic diversity, respect and tolerance, which is in line with the European values.

There may be lessons to learn from Azerbaijan's experience of ethnic and ethno-religious diversity that could be helpful for other states that are dealing with comparable diversity within their borders. This study is presented in this hope.

² This research work is not a human rights report about minorities in Azerbaijan but it aims to help understand the broader context of the issue.

³ The ranking of the groups hereafter corresponds approximately to the decreasing demographic order.

The Lezgis

The Lezgis⁴ are a Caucasian ethnic group living predominantly on both sides of the Samur River in Southern Dagestan (Russia) and in the north-east of Azerbaijan⁵ but also in Baku and in Sumgait. The Lezgis are the descendants of Northeast Caucasian peoples who have inhabited the region of southern Dagestan since at least the Bronze Age.

According to the 1999 census there were 178,000 Lezgis in Azerbaijan, accounting for 2.2 per cent of the population, while about 470,000 live in Russia according to the official census. Lezgis are predominantly Sunni Muslims in Shia majority Azerbaijan.

Their language belongs to the north-east Caucasian group of Lezgetic languages. There were very few written works in Lezgi before the Soviet period. Until 1928, Arabic script was used; from 1928 to 1938 Latin script and then after 1938 Cyrillic script.

Lezgis have largely assimilated into the cultural and political life of Azerbaijan. Even still, some Lezgis, coming especially from outside the country, have tried to build nationalist opposition to Azerbaijani policy toward the Lezgi minority:

Many experts emphasize that Lezgis, the largest ethnic minority in Azerbaijan, face no discrimination at the personal level and the Lezgi nationalist movement has no wide support among the public. Nevertheless, Lezgi nationalists accuse Azerbaijani authorities of discriminatory practices. Despite such allegation no serious violent incident occurred in the Lezgi populated area between the authorities and nationalists since the declaration of Azerbaijan's independence. Lezgis are well represented in the government and media. Education in Lezgi language exists in the country. The lack of public support did not prevent Lezgi nationalists from forming an organized group. (...)

Fortunately, despite outside attempts to instigate Lezgi separatism, peace has prevailed thus far. However, a potential danger still exists due to a number of factors, mainly external interests. (...) Not least, Azerbaijan should continue to pay attention to the social well-being of Lezgi populated area, as Lezgis will always look at their brethren in the north, in Dagestan, to compare the situation there with their own. Lezgi nationalists refer to economic hardship and corruption to justify their respective claims while overlooking the fact that Dagestan is one of the poorest and corrupt regions in Russia. Overall, Lezgis prefer a peaceful existence within Azerbaijan, particularly in view of the many interethnic marriages and their well-integrated status. However if

⁴ They are also called Lezgian, Lezgi, Legi, Lakzi or Kyurin.

⁵ Percentages of Lezgis in the overall population of some regions and cities according to the 2009 census: Gusar region (90,63% - 79 629) – Gabala region (17,11% - 16 020) – Khachmaz (15,50% - 24 688) – Oguz (11,99% - 4831) - Ismayilli (10,18% - 8076) – Kuban (5,87% - 8952) – Shaki (4,19% - 7152) - Baku City (1,22% - 24 868) – Sumgait (1,13% - 24 688).

there were external support, violence might erupt on the part of some nationalist elements.⁶

Identification and Identity

Prior to the Russian Revolution, the Lezgis did not have a common self-designation as an ethnic group. They referred to themselves by village, region, religion, clan or free society. Before the Revolution, the Lezgis were called "Kyurintsy," "Akhtintsy," or "Lezgitsy" by the Russians.

Prior to the Soviet period, the term "Lezgi" was used in different contexts. At times, it referred only to the people known today as Lezgis. At others, it referred variously to all of the peoples of southern Daghestan: the Aghuls of southern Dagestan and somewhat more distantly to the Tsakhurs, Rutuls and Tabasarans (the Lezgis' northern neighbours); all of the peoples of southern Daghestan and northern Azerbaijan (Kryts, Jek, Khinalug, Budukh, Sahdagh); all Nakh-Daghestani peoples; or all of the indigenous Muslim peoples of the Northeast Caucasus (Caucasian Avars, Dargwa, Laks, Chechens and Ingush). In reading pre-Revolutionary works one must be aware of these different possible meanings and scope of the ethnonym "Lezgi".

History

In the 4th century BCE, the numerous tribes speaking Lezgi languages, which is part of the Nakh-Dagestan family of languages, united in a union of 26 tribes. Under the influence of foreign invaders Caucasian Albania was divided into several areas.

Islam appeared in the region in the 8th century, although the Lezgis remained primarily animist until the 15th century, at which time Muslim influence grew with Persian traders coming from the south and the Golden Horde pressing in from the north. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Turks occupied the area, further consolidating the influence of Islam.

At the beginning of the 18th century, an anti-Persian uprising began in eastern Transcaucasia, led by the Lezgis and other peoples. By the first half of the 18th century, Persia was able to restore its authority throughout the Eastern Caucasus.

By 1813 almost all Lezgis were under the rule of the Russian Empire although many of them fought against the Russians right up until 1859, after which their territory known as "Lezgistan" was divided between the tsarist districts of Derbent and Baku, a division that persists up until the present day. In the time of the Soviet Union, the Lezgis were spread over two different Soviet Republics. The Northern Lezgis lived in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Dagestan while the Southern Lezgis lived in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. The Lezgis resisted Russification by refusing to participate in programs to relocate

⁶ Fareed Shafee, "Inspired from Abroad: The External Sources of Separatism in Azerbaijan," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2(4) Autumn 2008

them from the highlands and settle them into lowland towns and collective farms. Thus, the majority of the Lezgis still maintain a traditional lifestyle. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the two areas became part of two separate countries: the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan. This led to campaigns to revise the border within the Lezgi communities on both the Russian and Azerbaijani side.

In July 1990 the Lezgi Democratic Movement -- *Sadval (Unity)* – which was headed by a retired Russian general, Mukhaddin Gahramanov, held its first congress in Dagestan. The purpose was to promote the unification of the Lezgi people and to redraw the Russian–Azerbaijani border to allow for the creation of a single Lezgi state which encompassed areas in Russia and Azerbaijan where Lezgis had been compactly settled.

A rival body to *Sadval* was formed in 1990 and registered in January 1992 as a cultural organization of the Lezgis⁷. It was named *Samur*. It stood against any revision of the northern border of Azerbaijan and was opposed to ethnic separatism.

In December 1991, as the Soviet Union was collapsing and its republics were gaining their independence, various Lezgi groups held an All-National Congress, which adopted a declaration calling for the creation of an independent “Legizstan” for the Lezgis of Dagestan and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan considered *Sadval* a terrorist organization and banned it after allegations that it was involved in a bomb attempt in the Baku underground in March 1994 that killed 14 people. *Sadval*, which was relatively strong and radical in Azerbaijan at the beginning of 1990s, later decreased in importance due to Moscow’s diminished support for the organization.

In 1998 *Sadval* split into “radical” and “moderate” wings. As a result of infighting between the two wings, the movement lost much of the popular support it had once enjoyed. In March 1999 another organization, the *Federal Lezgi National Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA)*, heir of the *Sadval* nationalists, was established as an extraterritorial movement advocating cultural autonomy for Lezgis⁸. By sponsoring a 2012 conference of the FNLCA, Russia obviously

⁷ There were 18 founding members of *Sadval*: most of them were intellectuals involved or interested in history, literature, music, culture and education. The movement later transformed itself into a social and political body concerned with language and cultural rights.

⁸ The Federal Lezgi National-Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA) lobbies governments and organizes hearings, academic conferences and international symposia together with Russian ministries, the Duma and regional authorities. It also supported protests in Moscow and the North Caucasus on behalf of two Lezgi villages, Khrakh-uba and Uryan-Uba, that were formerly part of Dagestan before being incorporated into the territory of Azerbaijan in 1991. In 2010 Russia renounced its rights to the territory, making the villagers, formerly citizens of Russia, foreigners on Azerbaijani soil. In September 2011, Russia and Azerbaijan signed a border agreement, prompting residents of Khrakh-Uba to go back to Russia and those in Uryan-Uba to take Azerbaijani citizenship, some say under pressure from local authorities. Russia has offered no compensation for lost property or help in resettlement.

In 2012, the FLNCA and the Avar National-Cultural Autonomy held a joint conference in Moscow on related issues. Lezgi leader Arif Kerimov became a member of Azerbaijan’s Presidential Council on Ethnic Relations.

endeavours to revive the Lezgi issue in Azerbaijan. The country remains vulnerable to an ethnic conflict should Russia decide to play this card as it did in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014⁹.

Relations with some segments of the Lezgi community grew more complicated along religious lines as Islamic fundamentalism and Salafism enjoyed some popularity among Lezgis. In July 2000 Azerbaijani security forces arrested members of Lezgi and Avar ethnicity belonging a group named the *Warriors of Islam*, which allegedly was planning an insurgency against the Azerbaijani state.

Meeting with the Chair of the Lezgi National Cultural Centre

On 6th March, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* met with Shair Hasanov,¹⁰ the chair of the Lezgi National Cultural Centre or *Samur*.

During its first five years of existence, the Lezgi National Cultural Centre was sponsored by the government. Afterwards, its leadership no longer applied for public funding and has become self-financing.

Hasanov said that most Lezgis speak Russian, Azerbaijani and Lezgi. There is a 30-minute program in Lezgi once a week on the national radio station and there are also Lezgi-language local radio and TV broadcasts in the Khachmaz and Gusar regions. *Samur*, a Lezgi multilingual newspaper founded in 1996, has a circulation of 3000 and is published twice a month in Baku, containing articles in Azerbaijani, Russian and Lezgi.

In more than a hundred schools, there are Lezgi classes in the first four grades. The teachers in Lezgi classes are trained at the Pedagogical University of Baku. They can also go to Dagestan on the other side of the border with Russia to get university training.

Hasanov also claims that there are two ethnic Lezgi Members of Parliament.¹¹

Other influential leaders also continue to press the Lezgis' cause, notably billionaire Sulejman Kerimov, Dagestan representative on the Russian Federation Council. The FLNCA advocates for "Lezgi rights" abroad, including at the European Parliament, although its position does not reflect the general opinion of the Lezgi population in Azerbaijan. Concerning the two villages, Russian Federation consul Evgeny Kozmin told the [Caucasian Knot](#) that "residents of the village of Uryan-Uba accepted Azerbaijani citizenship and continue to live in the village as citizens of Azerbaijan. Residents of the other village, Khrakh-Uba, practically left the village. Each state has its own sovereign rights, including the right to prevent entering its territory by persons, who have violated the terms of the migration regime. The Azerbaijani side has taken such measures with regard to a number of residents of the village of Khrakh-Uba."

⁹ In a 2008 statement on the protection of minorities and citizens abroad, the OSCE High Commissioner pointed out "the presence of one's citizens or 'ethnic kin' abroad must not be used as a justification for undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other States." See OSCE Press-Release, "OSCE High Commissioner Issues Statement On Protection Of Minorities And Citizens Abroad", August 25, 2008. <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/50009>

¹⁰ Shair Hasanov was born in 1936 in the Gusar region, which is heavily populated by Lezgis. He graduated from the Azerbaijan Polytechnic Institute in 1958 and started his career as an engineer. For 23 years, he worked for various ministries of the Soviet Union and in 2001 was appointed the head of the Azerbaijan State Committee of Construction and Architecture.

The Russians

The Russian minority in Azerbaijan numbered 119,300 according to the last census held in 2009. Cossacks and members of persecuted religious minorities were the first Russian settlers in the region.

History

Russian Empire

Russian Cossacks were the first ethnic group from the Russian Empire to settle on Azerbaijani lands after the Russian-Turkish War of 1787-1791.¹² At the conclusion of the Russian-Persian War, the Treaty of Gulistan determined in 1813 that Azerbaijan, Daghestan and the eastern part of Georgia were to be integrated into the Russian Empire. The first Russian settlers came from the Empire's southern provinces and were mainly traders and religious dissidents, such as Molokans, Dukhobors and Old Believers. These settlements consolidated the new border to the south while expanding the reach of the Empire. Relations with the mostly Muslim population were friendly.¹³

Following the Russian-Persian War of 1826-1828, the Treaty of Turkmenchay gave most of present-day Azerbaijan to Russia. Over the course of the 1830s, more immigrants from Tambov, Saratov, Voronezh and other Russian provinces settled in Azerbaijan.

Another wave of Russian migration took place at the end of the 19th century during which a number of young professionals from the Russian Empire came as a result of rapid development in the petroleum industry and the consequent urbanization in Azerbaijan.

Soviet Union

After Azerbaijan became part of the Soviet Union, the republic's Russian population continued to rise steadily. It reached 500,000 by 1939, accounting for more than 16% of the total population. Many Russians arrived in Baku during the Great Patriotic War as well as during the surge of rapid industrial development in the 1950s. They were in a favourable position and occupied key industrial and financial posts in Azerbaijan. The Russian language came to dominate politics and society. For decades a Russophone élite existed in Baku, including famous personalities such as the musician Mstislav Rostropovich, the singer

¹¹ After a shift away from proportional representation in the parliamentary elections of November 2005, the FLNCA complained regularly about the underrepresentation of Lezgis in the Azerbaijani Parliament. At the same time, systems of parliamentary quotas on the basis of ethnicity, religion or gender are an issue for which there is no clear consensus by the international community, including feminist organizations and ethnic or religious communities that are concerned.

¹² Anton Holovaty (1744-1797) is considered one of the founders of the former Black Sea (now Kuban) Cossack Army. He was one of the principal figures in the migration of the Cossack Army to Kuban and its organization in a new territory. In 1795, he created a Cossack outpost near Lenkaran (southern province of Azerbaijan). Two years later he died of a fever and was buried on the island of Sarah.

¹³ Molokans live in some compact settlements, especially in Ivanovka where 3000 of them share in community life.

Muslim Magomaev, Nobel laureate Lev Landau, actor and film director Yuri Guzman and others.

However, by the mid-1970s a trickle of Azerbaijan's Russian population began to leave the country, as was the case in other republics of the Caucasus. By the 1980s, this became a steady and large-scale exodus. In 1970 there were about 510,000 Russians in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, in 1979 about 475,000 and by the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union 392,000.

Independent Azerbaijan

The demise of the Soviet Union was accompanied by a number of regional conflicts and wars for independence. Azerbaijan was no exception. The tragic events of 'Black January' 1990, when the Soviet Army entered Baku and killed hundreds of civilians, aroused anti-Soviet and anti-Russian hostility. Thousands of Russians left Azerbaijan during the first months of 1990 until 1993 because of the lack of political and social stability, limitations on the use of the Russian language, the closure of Russian schools and overall discomfort in the new state.

The Russians who remained in these republics faced difficult choices regarding their future, as some of them were unwilling or unable to leave their countries of residence. Those who remained found themselves in a disadvantageous situation. The Russian language was gradually replaced by Azerbaijani, not only at the state level but also in everyday life. Not knowing the official language of their newly independent countries, the Russians were left out of the social and economic life of society. The early 1990s were a difficult period in the history of Russian-Azerbaijani relations in general and for the Russian minority in Azerbaijan. The number of Russians further dropped sharply due to the domestic politics of the radical National Popular Front, led by Abulfaz Elchibey.

After Heydar Aliyev assumed the presidency in 1993, there were positive changes in policies in respect to the Russian-speaking population of Azerbaijan. Aliyev revived relations with Russia and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States. He restored the 9th of May as WWII Victory Day and Woman's Day on 8th March, two important and emblematic holidays of the late Soviet Union. Despite the dominant role of the Azerbaijani language, Russian was no longer banned from public life. These changes were also due to the expanded activities of a number of local Russian NGOs.

The Russian Orthodox Church occupies a very strong position in Azerbaijan¹⁴. On December 28, 1998, the Baku-Caspian diocese was restored, which became the 128th diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, comprising Orthodox parishes in Azerbaijan, Dagestan and Chechnya. There are eight Orthodox churches in Azerbaijan, five of which are located in Baku. The largest is the Cathedral of the Myrrhbearers, which reopened only at the end of the

¹⁴ For more details about the Russian Orthodox Church in Azerbaijan, see the report of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* "Non-Muslim Religious Minorities in Azerbaijan/ From their Inception through Russian Empire and Soviet Repression to Present-day Secular State of Azerbaijan" published in 2013.

20th century. There are three churches in other cities: Ganja, Sumgait and Khachmaz. During his visit to Azerbaijan, Patriarch Alexy II said that the establishment of the Baku-Caspian diocese was important for Orthodox believers in Azerbaijan and facilitated dialogue between the Muslim and Orthodox communities in the country. The patriarch also praised the friendly relations toward Russians in Azerbaijan, emphasizing that the presence of the Russian community there is “an important factor in cultural interaction.”

Meeting with the Centre of Russian Culture in Azerbaijan

Mikhail Zabelin has been for decades the main figure and driving force of the Russian community in Azerbaijan. Under Soviet rule, he was an assistant to Heydar Aliyev, which later had a role in facilitating the recognition of Russian civil society organisations. Zabelin is presently a Member of Parliament, known as the *Milli Majlis*.

Mikhail Zabelin established the Azerbaijan-Russia Society in 1992, the first of its kind in the country. It is now headed by the well-known Azerbaijani writer and Member of Parliament Maksud Ibrahimbekov¹⁵.

The delegation of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* met Zabelin in the premises of the Centre of Russian Culture in Baku at a busy time when all sorts of classes were taking places: pre-school education, dance, English classes, painting and others. Zabelin gave an overview of the network of state schools where teaching of the Russian language has been established:

- 12 schools in regions with compact settlements of Russian-speaking people (Ivanovka, Lenkaran, Khachmaz...) provide the full curriculum in Russian;
- 450 schools have a Russian section;
- 50 pilot schools teach Russian from the first grade on.

“Up to 25 000 students have obtained their higher education in Russian language,” said Zabelin. “Despite the vicissitudes of Baku Slavic University during the Soviet period, the institution has nonetheless remained in the foreground of the promotion of the Russian language and literature.”

Several magazines and newspapers are now published in Russian. The active promotion of the Russian language and culture enjoys the full support of President Aliyev, the Embassy of Russian Federation and civil organizations. During the interview Zabelin stressed that “many”

¹⁵ Ibrahimbeyov was born in Baku. In 1960, he received a B.A. in Industrial and Civil Construction from Baku Polytechnic Institute. He later worked at the Azerbaijan SSR Ministry of Construction and tried his chances as a reporter representing Azerbaijan at the All-Union Radio and Television. At this stage he began focusing on literary studies and attended courses for advanced screenwriting and directing in Moscow in 1960–1964. Since then he has become known as a Russophone Azerbaijani writer. Some of his plays were later acted out in theatres throughout the USSR. He has also written screenplays for 12 feature-length movies and 11 documentary films. He has been in politics since 1985. He was twice elected to the Parliament of Azerbaijan: in 2000 and in 2004. Even though during the elections he ran as an independent candidate, he has been known for his loyalty to the ruling New Azerbaijan Party.

Russians living in Azerbaijan had participated in the Nagorno-Karabakh War on the side of Baku and that five of them were even granted the status of national heroes.

The Centre of Russian Culture was registered in 1993, the same year that Heydar Aliyev came to power, restoring the rights of the Russian community, safeguarding the Russian department of the Slavic University and reopening Russian schools. The Centre conducts cultural and educational work aimed at promoting the study of Russian history, culture, language, traditions and customs as well as strengthening interethnic relations. It has published a book about the history of the Russian community in Azerbaijan. The organisation is active in Baku as well as in all the major cities in the country: Sumgait, Ganja, Shamakhi, Khachmaz and others.

Many activities are funded by the Council on State Support to NGOs, various Azerbaijani ministries (Culture, Youth and Sports), the Russian embassy and private foundations. In May, the Centre organises an annual festival in Baku, an exceptional event covered by national television where talented people compete in various fields. A jury awards prizes before closing with a gala concert.

Azerbaijan is also home to such organisations as the Association of Teachers at Russian Schools of Azerbaijan, the Slavic Cultural Association, the Association of Russian Youth of Azerbaijan, the International Centre for Russian-speaking Youth and others.

Meeting with the Fraternity of Cossacks in Azerbaijan

The delegation of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* also met Sergey Samuylov, head of the youth department for the Fraternity of Cossacks,¹⁶ and Tamara Ibrahimova.

The Community of Azerbaijani Cossacks was registered by the Ministry of Justice in 1994. It groups together about 1,500 people whose ancestors have Cossack roots and those who accept the charter and tradition of the Cossacks. Today, the fraternity is led by Hetman Viktor Mereshkin, who maintains close ties with the Kuban and Siberian Cossacks as well as the Union of Cossacks of Russia. It is active in Azerbaijan, having its own youth organisation.

Conclusions

Despite the resentments generated by the decimation of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia and the destructive russification of the country during the Stalinist period as well as by the “Black January” events in 1990, there does not appear to be any anti-Russian mood in the country. No grievances on ethnic grounds have been voiced by members of the Russian community in recent years.

¹⁶ More information about this organisation can be found at <http://kazaki.az>

The Talysh

The Talysh minority in Azerbaijan lives along the Iranian border in the districts of Astara, Lenkaran and Lerik. The 2009 census claims 112,000 Talysh citizens living in Azerbaijan.¹⁷ The Talysh are mainly Shia Muslims.

Self-identification

Talysh identity is fairly ill-defined, according to Hema Kotecha, a development researcher and anthropologist, who wrote in 2006 on Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan.¹⁸ Other experts contend that the Talysh minority in Azerbaijan self-identify into two distinct groups:¹⁹ those with radical nationalistic views and those with no interest at all in such matters. Still others, such as Zahir Amanov of the independent newspaper *South News*, note a complete lack of self-identity as being either Talysh or Azerbaijani²⁰ or those who limit their Talysh identity to family or the Talysh-speaking community.²¹

History

Persian Rule

Talysh are believed to be one of the oldest populations of the Caucasus. The region they occupied was ruled by the Persians beginning in 1735, when the Shah signed an agreement that transferred jurisdiction of the Caspian territories from Russia to Persia. The Lenkaran Khanate, was established in the Persian Empire at that time with Lenkaran as its capital (now an Azerbaijani city). However, when the Shah Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar later instructed the various khanates of the South Caucasus to form a pact against the Russian Empire, the Lenkaran Khanate refused. The rebellious khanate was subsequently attacked and overthrown, and direct control of Lenkaran passed to the Persians.

Imperial Russian Rule

The Russians took over the khanate during the first Russo-Persian War. Eventually the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813 forced the Persians to surrender many of the independent khanates, including the Talysh Khanate. The Persians attempted in 1826 to take back the regions they had lost, but the Russian Empire eventually defeated the Persians, leading to the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828. The treaty forced Persia to cede control of several areas in the South Caucasus: the Erivan Khanate, the Nakhchivan Khanate and the remainder of the Lenkaran Khanate. The boundary between Russian and Persia was then set at the Aras River.

¹⁷ The 1926 census registered 77,039 Talysh. In the 1959, 1970 and 1979 censuses, they disappeared from the list of ethnicities to be surveyed. Only in the 1989 census could the Talysh again mention their ethnicity. Around 21,200 dared do it at that time.

¹⁸ <http://www.osce.org/baku/23809>

¹⁹ http://www.talish.org/publ/news_talysh/the_sociolinguistic_situation_of_talyshs_in_azerbaijan/1-1-0-3

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Soviet Rule

Following the demise of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1921), Soviet power was established in present-day Azerbaijan. In accordance with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of “internationalism,” ethnic national identities were ignored or suppressed. The Talysh people were victims of this policy. They became a minority in the newly-created Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, which was then dominated by the Turkic population. All Talysh intellectuals were labelled as “nationalist” and anti-revolutionaries and sent to Siberia. In 1926, the Azerbaijan SSR imposed the Latin script on the Talysh language to separate them from the other Muslims who were using the Arabic alphabet. Although the Russian language was the dominant language in the army, it was only secondary to Azerbaijani and Talysh, due to the distance between Russia and southern Azerbaijan. In 1940, Stalin changed their script to Cyrillic in an effort to further integrate the whole society into the Moscow-centered system of totalitarian control.

Independent Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan declared its independence from the former Soviet Union on 30th August 1991 after some heavy fighting with Soviet troops. Elections were held in September 1991 and again in 1992, but neither of the first Presidents managed to politically unify the new republic.

In June 1993, Ali Akhram Hummatov, a former military commander, taking advantage of the country’s general political unrest and recent disappointments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, declared the formation of the Talysh-Mugansk Republic, composed of seven districts under his direct control. However, the republic lasted only a couple of months.

On 3rd October 1993 the Parliament called Heydar Aliyev, then governor of Nakhichevan, to become the new president of Azerbaijan.

Language

The Talysh language is a north-western Iranian branch of Indo-European languages used in northern Iran and southern Azerbaijan. It is currently written in Azerbaijan with a version of Latin script. Talysh are for the most part bilingual, speaking both Talysh and Azerbaijani. Talysh classes are offered in homogenous Talysh areas for children in grades one to four.²²

In April 2006 a bilingual Azerbaijani–Talysh newspaper, *Shavhisht*, was published in Baku by Farhadin Aboszoda²³. The aim of *Shavhisht* was to disseminate information about the life of the Talysh minority in Azerbaijan.²⁴

Another newspaper, the *Talysh Sado* ("The Voice of Talysh"), was also created the same year and is the only newspaper in Azerbaijan that is solely written in the Talysh language.

²² http://www.talish.org/publ/news_talysh/the_sociolinguistic_situation_of_talyshs_in_azerbaijan/1-1-0-3

²³ <http://www.panorama.am/en/law/2014/03/28/fidh-azerbaijan-torture/>

²⁴ <http://www.minorityrights.org/1927/azerbaijan/talysh.html#sthash.Bz10J8do.dpuf>

International Interference

There have been allegations that Armenia and Iran have tried to galvanize the Talysh minority to seek independence from Azerbaijan or to press for more rights as a way to destabilize the country.

Armenia

In May 2005, an event on Talysh studies was organized in the Armenian town of Tsakhgadzor by the Yerevan State University's Iranian Studies Department and the Centre for Iranian Studies in Yerevan. It was attended by representatives of the Talysh National Movement in Azerbaijan, the Talysh diaspora in Russia and the Talysh minority in Armenia itself.²⁵ The conference resolved to establish an International Talysh Association.

In 2013, a Talysh radio station was launched in the occupied territories of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Iran

Thanks to the closeness of the Talysh and Farsi languages and their common Shia faith, Iran is able to exert some influence on the Talysh issue. Tehran has allowed a Talysh radio station to operate from its territory and the Cultural Centre of the Talysh of Iran to have its seat within its borders.

Meeting with a Talysh Member of the Parliament

Eldar Guliyev, a Talysh, has been a Member of Parliament for 20 years. His mother was Turkish and his father a Talysh from Iran. He said that several Talysh occupy official positions: the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to India, staff in some embassies abroad, the head of the Humanitarian Aid and so on. In Talysh compact settlements, they have mayors and councillors. Talysh are to be found in pro-government and opposition parties. They preserve their culture and their language through music, cultural associations and Talysh-language websites.

²⁵[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=30461&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=176&no_cache=1#.U2j2MFd8KJ8](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=30461&tx_ttnews[backPid]=176&no_cache=1#.U2j2MFd8KJ8)

The Avars

The Avar people live principally in the Caucasian Mountains of northwestern Azerbaijan and Dagestan (Russia). They are Sunni Muslims²⁶ and their activity is principally related to agriculture. According to the last census (2009), they numbered 49 800, one thousand less than in 1999 but much more than all the previous censuses²⁷. The Avars refer to themselves as Maarulal but are also named Avartsy. Various references in the literature have included as many as fifteen distinct ethnic groups within the broad definition of Avar. There are few mixed Avar-Azerbaijani marriages in homogeneous Avar populations. Avars are generally fluent in Azerbaijani. Proficiency in the Russian language is declining.

Language

The Avar language is a member of the Avaro-Andi-Dido language group, which belongs to the northeastern branch of the North Caucasian language family. The Avar dialects are generally divided into northern and southern dialects. Literary Avar is reported to be difficult for Avars in Azerbaijan. Very few Avars, whether they live in towns or in villages, can speak, read or write it.

The Avar language began to take written form in the 17th century. The orthography was originally based on Arabic. It was later changed to a Latin-based and then to a Cyrillic-based script. A further development was the recent reversal of orthography from Cyrillic to Latin in Azerbaijan. In the Soviet period, the Avar language was granted a special status in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Dagestan and this allowed it to be studied in schools, although it was seldom taught in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan.

Most of the children of Avar families attend Azerbaijani schools, their choice being motivated by the location of the school rather than by language. However, there are 11 schools in Balakan attended by 890 students in 2013-2014 and as many schools in Zaqatala with 644 students where the Avar language has been taught from the 1st to the 4th grade since 1989²⁸.

In homogeneous populations of Avar speakers, only Avar is spoken in interactions with other Avar speakers. Azerbaijani is spoken with non-Avar speakers and in more formal settings.

²⁶In neighboring Dagestan Avars are among those groups more influenced by Islamic religious revival and the spread of Wahhabism, an unwelcome movement in the secular republic of Azerbaijan.

²⁷1926 census : 19,104 – 1939 census : 15,740 – 1959 census : 17,254 – 1970 census : 30,735 – 1979 census : 35,991 – 1989 census : 44,072 – 1999 census : 50,871. This steady demographic increase is attributed to a birthrate that is higher than the death rate and the average birthrate in the country. Birthrate is higher due to their religious lifestyle.

²⁸ Statistics provided by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, Department of International Cooperation.

In ethnically mixed communities, Azerbaijani is the primary language used in most circumstances. The use of Avar is limited to the home and on the street. Even still, some Avars are most fluent in either Russian or Azerbaijani. As a result, they tend to use a mixture of Avar and either Azerbaijani or Russian in the home and with other Avar speakers.

In Baku, many Avar individuals are most fluent in either Azerbaijani or Russian, even though Avar was their first language. These individuals speak Azerbaijani and/or Russian at home, and Azerbaijani on the streets of Baku.

Regardless of this linguistic diversity, some external actors have attempted to exploit groups in Azerbaijan for their own political agenda. In June 2008, the website www.rossia3.ru posted an appeal "To all people of good will" signed by eight organizations allegedly representing the Avars, Lezgis, and Tsakhurs in Azerbaijan and pleading for the creation of autonomous regions for the three groups. One of those organizations is the Imam Shamil Avar National Front²⁹ headed by Dagneft President and Russian State Duma Deputy Gadji Makhachev, who many observers believe had close ties and even possibly taking orders from the Kremlin.

Meeting with the Avar National Cultural Centre

This association, whose objective is to promote the Avar cultural heritage, was created by three scientists and registered in 2007. The board now comprises fifteen members. Their singers, musicians and dance groups participate in cross-ethnic events such as the Cultural Night, Solidarity Day on 31st December and Novruz celebrations. They have received twice a grant from the Council on State Support to NGOs.

Human Rights Without Frontiers delegation interviewed Mahama Bazarov, the head of the cultural center. "I am from Zaqatala, a region with a compact Avar settlement, and I have never been perceived differently from the ethnic Azerbaijanis. Avars have equal opportunities. Some of them have become famous as wrestlers and sportsmen. A member of the parliament is Avar. Two of my three brothers fought in the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Our language is taught in the primary state schools in Zaqatala: two hours per week. We do not have newspapers in Avar but there is a 15-minute program every week on radio and television. Unemployment in our regions is however a problem."

²⁹Imam Shamil (26 June 1797 – 4 February 1871) was an Avar political and religious leader of Muslim ethnic groups of the Northern Caucasus. He was a leader of anti-Russian resistance in the Caucasian War.

The Turks

According to the 2009 census, about 38,000 people identified themselves as Turks in Azerbaijan³⁰ but there are some controversies about whether to call them "Ahıska Turks"³¹ or "Meskhetian Turks."³² They live in rural areas, mainly in the Sabirabad, Guba, Gazakh, Beylagan, Khachmaz, Shamkir, Saatly regions. They basically came to Azerbaijan at the end of the 1980s, when they fled from Uzbekistan following the ethnic conflict in Fergana.

History

Turks in Azerbaijan are a Sunni Muslim people who originally inhabited what is today southwestern Georgia. They speak a Turkic language very similar to Turkish. Deported in 1944 from Samtskhe-Javakheti, a region of southwest Georgia, by Stalin, they are scattered in many parts of the former Soviet Union. Estimates of their number range as high as 250,000. Attempts to return to their homeland in Georgia have been mostly unsuccessful.

In the late 1950s Premier Nikita Khrushchev allowed them to leave their camps in Central Asia. Unlike most of the other deported peoples, however, the Turks were not allowed to return to their ancestral homeland. The Georgian SSR was considered a sensitive border region and as such was off limits. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turks have tried to return to their homeland in newly independent Georgia, but they face strong opposition of the authorities.

The Turks are now scattered across the former Soviet Union, with the largest populations in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Russia.

In Azerbaijan, they have managed to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity by living in compact settlements. However, many still intend to return to Georgia.

In 2007, the Georgian parliament finally adopted the law "On Repatriation of Persons forcefully sent into exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century"- one of Georgia's commitments to the Council of Europe - but the law does not specify where the returnees are expected to live and does not provide for financial assistance. The Turks, however, want to go back to their historic lands, not to any region of Georgia. Moreover, local tensions ran high in the early 1990s when Turks identifying themselves as ethnic Georgians returned to the region. This might have a deterrent effect on candidates to repatriation. Finally, Samtskhe-Javakheti, their homeland, is a predominantly ethnic Armenian region that borders Turkey, and some Georgian politicians fear risks of regional separatism.

³⁰ 1926 census : 95 – 1939 census : 600 – 1959 census : 202 – 1970 census : 8491 – 1979 census : 7926 – 1989 census : 17,705 – 1999 census : 43,454

³¹ See <http://www.ahiska.net>

³² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meskhetian_Turks

Meeting with Vatan Society of Ahiska Turks

The *Vatan Society of Ahiska Turks living in Azerbaijan* was registered in 1993 after an easy application process, according to its chairman, Ibrahim Mammadov. In 2011, it was decided to rename it as the *Vatan Society Public Association*.

Concerning the situation of Ahiska Turks in Azerbaijan, Ibrahim Mammadov commented: “From the day of their arrival in Azerbaijan, they were welcomed by the local population. We have the same religion and speak a Turkic language. We send our children to Azerbaijani state schools, and for higher education they can go to universities in Turkey.³³ The Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan often sheds light on our people, their culture and their art, in its publications.”

Commenting on the move of the Turks back to Georgia, he said: “Applications for repatriation were only valid until 2010 and the law contained too many restrictive conditions.” Documents for the repatriation of about 14,000 people from Azerbaijan were prepared but by July 2010, the Georgian government received only 5,841 eligible applications, according to the European Centre for Minority Issues. This amounted to just 9,350 individuals.

Search for work in other countries also contributes to the slow but steady decrease of the outflow of Ahiska Turks.

³³ In 2012, five Turkish universities received 220 young people from Azerbaijan.

The Tatars

The Tatars of Azerbaijan number about 30.000,³⁴ most of them living in the Baku area while others are spread throughout the country.³⁵ They are the descendants of the Penza³⁶ Tatars, who speak the Kazan Tatar language,³⁷ Russian and Azerbaijani.

History

Since the end of the 19th century, Baku has been the epicentre of Tartar migration in Transcaucasia. Tatar migrants from Russia were principally attracted by the availability of jobs in the oil industry as well as the closeness of the Azerbaijani language, a common religion and the overall tolerance of Azerbaijani society. Even before the revolution, there were quite a number of Tatar intellectuals in Baku. Newspapers and books were published in the Tatar language.

During the 1920s, the Tatar population expanded with the arrival of people both fleeing a famine in the Volga region and profiting from the quickly developing oil industry. Oil and petrochemical complexes in Azerbaijan and Tatarstan were closely linked within the Soviet Union. There was close cooperation in the areas of medical, pharmaceutical, food and tobacco industries. The cultural ties were particularly strong and had a long history.

In 1996, Azerbaijan held its first organisational meeting of the Tatar community. Community offices were soon opened in Baku and regions of the republic. The main objectives of the community were defined as the consolidation of the Tatar community living on the territory of Azerbaijan and the strengthening of friendly relations between the Azerbaijani and Tatar peoples.

The Tatar diaspora in Azerbaijan is in contact with the World Congress of Tatars and has participated in various conferences. Although Azerbaijan Tatars constitute a very small percentage of the overall population, some of them have become noteworthy personalities, such as Olympic champion Zemfira Meftahetdinova.

The Tatars Today

Tatars are primarily Hanafite Muslims, who tend to give greater place to reason. Many Tatars also follow some beliefs and practices that have persisted from pre-Islamic times. For instance, some still observe *sabantuy*, an ancient spring festival that coincides with the

³⁴ Their historical cradle is Tatarstan in Russia.

³⁵ The Tatars comprise a group of Turkic people who had substantial colonies in virtually every republic of the former Soviet Union. While the main population is centred around the Volga region, some also live in many of the Central Asian republics.

³⁶ Penza, a Russian city, 625 km south-east of Moscow

³⁷ The official alphabet is Cyrillic with some additional letters although in the past the Latin or Arabic alphabet was also used.

anniversary of the founding of the Russian Tatar Republic on 25th June.³⁸ The celebrations have their origins in shamanism. Many Tartars have also adapted their Islam to embrace the veneration of saints and holy places and traditional beliefs like the “evil eye” that can curse someone at a glance.

Even still, true to the spirit of Hanafi Islam, Tatar practices are more progressive and intellectual than of the more orthodox Muslims of Central Asia or the Caucasus. For instance, prayer times in many mosques have been arranged so as not to conflict with work schedules. Women have also been encouraged to join the men at the mosques, instead of praying at home. Tartars in Azerbaijan are as modern as any other Azerbaijani today.

The Tatar community maintains regular contact with the Russian Republic of Tatarstan in the Volga federal district³⁹ and receives material in their language from Tatarstan through various channels. In May 2012, the President of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, paid an official visit to Azerbaijan, met with President Ilham Aliyev and the Tatar community of the country, including Guljan Myasoutova, the leader of the National Society of Tatar Culture, known as *Tugan Tel*. At the meeting, it was requested to raise the quota of Azerbaijani Tatars in Tatarstan attending higher education institutions. The Russian Republic of Tatarstan also has a permanent representation in Azerbaijan. It organises the annual "Tatar Song" contest in collaboration with *Tugan Tel* and the Centre of Tatar Culture, *im Tukaya*.

Meeting with Tugan Tel

This civil society organisation was founded in 1989 as a cultural centre and registered by the Ministry of Justice in 1990. It has created a musical folk band, which has appeared on several occasions on national television and abroad. It organises Tatar cultural events, such as the annual Day of Tatar Cuisine, and takes part in cultural activities alongside other national minorities, such as the Lezgis, the Avars and the Russians.

Tugan Tel is financially independent and has not claimed state support for its activities. Nor has it requested time on radio or TV. It is also a member of the Forum of National NGOs in Azerbaijan⁴⁰ and participates annually in the festival of national minorities, which brings together more than 250 representatives of various ethnic groups of multi-national and multi-confessional Azerbaijan.⁴¹

³⁸ Sabantuy is the annual festival of all Tatars around the world. In Baku, representatives of the Russian embassy and local Russian civil society organizations are also invited as guest-speakers.

³⁹ With its 3,786,488 inhabitants, Tatarstan is considered the “holy see” of the World Tatar community.

⁴⁰ The National NGO Forum (NNF) of Azerbaijan Republic was founded on June 11, 1999 by 95 NGO-s and officially registered with the Ministry of Justice on 29th July, the same year. Currently it is a public coalition combining 583 non-governmental organizations. NNF has steering committee consisting of 21 members. See <http://www.azerweb.com/en/ngo.php?id=214>

⁴¹ The festival is organized to preserve and to develop the cultural heritage of ethnic groups as well as to strengthen mutual understanding and friendly historical relations between them. Called “The Ethnic Renaissance,” the festival comprises a series of events which highlight the artistic life of the national minorities. Among them were the launch of a website dedicated to Azerbaijan’s ethnic groups; a conference titled “The Cultural Heritage of National Minorities and Modernity;” a photo exhibition and dance performances, etc.

The Tsakhurs

Two-thirds of the Tsakhur people are living in the Caucasian Mountains of north-western Azerbaijan and one third in Dagestan (Russia)⁴². They are Sunni Muslims and traditionally shepherds, living in various degrees of social isolation. According to the last census (2009), they numbered 12,300.⁴³

The Tsakhurs refer to themselves as Liqhy. There are over 30 Tsakhur villages scattered on both sides of the Samur River in Dagestan and in the Azerbaijani districts of Zaqatala and Qax. Significant numbers of Tsakhur are said to live in an additional sixteen ethnically mixed communities, two of them with an Avar majority and the rest with an Azerbaijani majority. There are few mixed Tsakhur-Azerbaijani marriages in more generally homogeneous Tsakhur populations.

History

Known as the builders of mighty fortifications, the Tsakhurs resisted in their mountain strongholds the invasions of the Arabs (8th century), Tamerlane's army (1396), the Shahs of Shirvan (12th – 14th centuries), Transcaucasian rulers (15th – 16th centuries) and Turkish and Persian sultans (17th – 18th centuries). The Tsakhur Khanate (later Elislu Sultanate) was established in 15th century. In 1803 it became a subject of the Russian Empire but with substantial internal autonomy. In 1844, Sultan Daniel-Bek supported the Shamil Revolt. As a result of Russian pacification of the rebellion, the sultanate was dissolved in 1852 and the Tsakhurs found themselves under direct Russian rule. The Soviet regime came to the region early in 1920 and divided the Tsakhurs between Dagestan ASSR and Azerbaijan SSR. Collectivization and anti-Islam propaganda followed. During the Second World War, the Tsakhurs withdrew to the mountains and managed to avoid any engagement, which proved fatal to so many nationalities of the Caucasus.

Language

The Tsakhur language belongs to the Lezgi group of north-eastern Caucasian languages. The common designation of Tsakhur is derived from the name of their villages in Dagestan. The Tsakhur language was put in written form in 1932 (Latin script) but has hardly been used even to the present day.

⁴² Originally, they lived in Dagestan. During the 13th century, some of them moved to the north of present-day Azerbaijan. Throughout the centuries, they fought for independence from the Turks and the Persians. In the early 1800s, they looked to Russia for help and became part of the Russian Empire. In the mid-1800s they were exiled to Azerbaijan.

⁴³ 1926 census : 15,552 – 1959 census : 2,876 – 1970 census : 6,208 – 1979 census : 8,546 – 1989 census : 13,318 – 1999 census : 15,877.

Tsakhur is still the preferred language for most Tsakhurs of Azerbaijan. Most adults have a high level of proficiency in Tsakhur and speak it in their daily lives in homogeneous Tsakhur populations. In some mixed areas, they are opting for Azerbaijani. The rate of bilingualism in Tsakhur and Azerbaijani is high. Other languages popular among Tsakhurs include Russian and Lezgi. In Zaqatala District, five primary schools attended by 411 students in 2013-2014 were providing two hours of Tsakhur language instruction during the first four grades.

Despite these conditions, some external forces have tried to manipulate some groups in Azerbaijan for their own political agenda. In June 2008, the website www.rossia3.ru posted an appeal "To all people of good will" signed by eight organisations allegedly representing the Avars, Lezgis, and Tsakhurs in Azerbaijan and pleading for the creation of autonomous regions for the three groups. One of those organisations is the Imam Shamil Avar National Front,⁴⁴ headed by Dagneft President and Russian State Duma Deputy Gadji Makhachev. Many observers believe that these men have close ties with The Kremlin and on occasion act on its orders.

Modern Intellectual Life

A notable achievement of Tsakhur culture has been the development in Soviet times of a national intelligentsia. Among their scholars are one of the first linguists of Azerbaijan and Daghestan, S. A. Dzhafaror; the language specialist Professor G. Kh. Ibragimov of the Daghestan State Pedagogical Institute; and the physicist and corresponding member of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences Professor A. L. Mukhtarov of Azerbaijan State University. The Tsakhurs are proud of their poets, such as S. Dzhafarov and D. Dabersov, both publishing in Lezgin and of artists such as Ismail Daghstanly and Nazirova Mira Bashir-kizy.

The contemporary culture of the Tsakhurs is evolving, even while retaining many traditional features, under the powerful influence of the Azerbaijani culture and to a lesser extent of Daghestan. The general processes of globalisation and integration have also had their influence on Tsakhur culture.

⁴⁴ Imam Shamil (26 June 1797 – 4 February 1871) was an Avar political and religious leader of Muslim ethnic groups of the Northern Caucasus. He was a leader of anti-Russian resistance in the Caucasian War.

The Albanian Udis

The Udis are one of the Caucasian Albanian ethnic groups. They live in the north of Azerbaijan, mostly in the village of Nij (region of Gabala) and Oguz (former Vartashen) but also in Baku. Their religion is Christianity. In the last census about 3800 people identified themselves as Udis. Their population has been slowly decreasing since the country's independence.⁴⁵ In recent times they have been mostly assimilated with the people of Azerbaijan.

History

The Udis are one of the most ancient native peoples of the Caucasus. They were first mentioned in Herodotus' Histories (5th century BCE). They are considered to be the descendants of the people of Caucasian Albania and one of the ancestors of the Azerbaijani people.

The Udi lands were part of the Albanian Kingdom⁴⁶ which existed in the northern part of present-day Azerbaijan from the 4th century BCE until the Arab Muslim invasion at the beginning of the 8th century.

The Apostle Bartholomew, one of the twelve early followers of Christ, is said to have laid the foundations of Christianity in the Albanian Kingdom in the 1st century. On his way back from India to Caucasian Albania in 71 CE, he carried out missionary activities in the Albanian Kingdom, preached Christianity in Albana (now Baku) and managed to convert the local king and his family.

In 313, King Urnair declared that Christianity would be the religion of the Albanian Kingdom⁴⁷. The Albanian Apostolic Church was at first independent from any other Church and remained autocephalous until 1836. Its clergy was appointed by the Albanian kings. The Bible was translated into their language, which had its own alphabet.

In 705, the Albanian Kingdom collapsed and Arab emirs began to rule the country. Albanians were massively subjected to Islamization. However, the Udi ethnic group managed to preserve its cultural, linguistic and religious identity. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Caucasus was conquered by tsarist Russia. In 1815, the office of the Caucasian Albanian Catholicate was abolished. In 1836, the status of the Armenian Apostolic Church within the Russian Empire was regulated by a decree of Nicholas I and the office of the Caucasian Albanian Metropolitan Bishop was abolished. Its jurisdictions

⁴⁵ 1926 census: 2,445 – 1959 census: 3,202 – 1970 census: 5,492 – 1979 census: 5,841 – 1989 census: 6,125 – 1999 census : 4,152 – 2009 census : 3,800. The main factor behind the decrease in population has been the lack of employment opportunities. Knowledge of Russian has allowed a number of Udis to find jobs with better salaries in Russia. At one time this led to a number of Udis leaving Nic. More recently, however, some of these people have returned to Nij.

⁴⁶ The Albanian Kingdom in the Caucasus is not synonymous with modern Albania in Europe.

⁴⁷ For more details about the history of the Albanian-Udi Christian community in Azerbaijan, see the report of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* "Non-Muslim Religious Minorities in Azerbaijan/ From their Inception through Russian Empire and Soviet Repression to Present-day Secular State of Azerbaijan" published in 2013.

were directly subordinated to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Udi Christians successfully resisted this new attempt of assimilation. Under the Soviet regime, the churches were confiscated by the state and fell into disrepair, and all religious activities were banned.

Language

The Udi language is a northeastern Caucasian language of the Lezgi branch. The two primary dialects are *Nij* and *Vartashen*.

The Udi language was a widespread language in the Caucasian Albania. In the 5th century, the Albanian writing was created and constituted the basis of the Udi people literary language. The alphabet had 52 letters. The language was widely used, as major Bible texts were translated into the Albanian language. Church services were conducted in the Udi language. Due to historical reasons, the Albanian written language was superseded by others imposed by conquerors and gradually disappeared.

The people today also speak Azerbaijani and Russian. The Udi are commonly bilingual, depending on residence and work. Many use Udi only in daily life, but for official purposes, the Udi use the Azerbaijani language. Three primary schools in Gabala provide Udi classes in the first four grades and are attended by 206 pupils. children generally use Udi even at school during breaks and before and after classes.

In conclusion, the Udi language does not seem to be in imminent danger of extinction. As long as the out-migration continues to be reversed, the attitudes of the Udi people towards their language would seem to ensure its survival. At the same time, it is important that efforts to strengthen its position as a literary language to give it higher prestige among its neighbors be actively encouraged and supported.

Contemporary Times

The Albanian Udi church in Nij has become the symbol of historical religious diversity. The village is a prime example of religious tolerance: to date, there are three churches and two mosques in the village, all of them restored by the government. Prof. Robert Mobili is one of the main actors behind the revival of the Udi community and the restoration of the 17th century Jotari church of St. Eliseus, one of the three Albanian Udi churches of Nij. The site has been visited twice by President Ilham Aliyev and by prestigious foreign personalities such as Prince Andrew from the British Royal Family, U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar and French actor Gérard Depardieu.

In early August 2013, an event was held in the northern Gabala Region to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the official adoption of Christianity as the state religion in Caucasian Albania and the 10th anniversary of the revival of the Albanian Udi Church⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Pictures of both churches can be seen at <http://www.udi.az> and <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/87996543>

The Caucasian Albanian Udi Christian Community was registered on 10th April 2003 and recently re-registered under the 2009 Law on Religion. Afterwards, work began on the restoration of a number of churches so that worship could be resumed. The church in Kish (Sheki Region), which is one of the oldest in the Caucasus and is considered to be “the Mother of Albanian churches”, was restored in 2003.

The Jews

The history of the Jews in Azerbaijan dates back to Late Antiquity⁴⁹. Population statistics for Jews in Azerbaijan fluctuate between 8,800 and 30,000⁵⁰; the official 2009 census registered 9,100 Jews. There are three main Jewish communities in Azerbaijan⁵¹: 1) the *Mountain Jews (Caucasus Jews)* mostly reside in Quba (Krasnaya Sloboda/Red settlement)⁵² and in Baku, 2) the *Ashkenazi Jews (European Jews)* live principally in Baku and Sumgait, and 3) the *Georgian Jews* mainly reside in the border regions of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Mountain Jews

The first group to settle in Azerbaijan was Mountain Jews (*Caucasus Jews*). Where they actually came from is a matter of much scholarly speculation. The traditional view argues that the Mountain Jews arrived around 2,500 years ago during the time of their exodus from Israel after Jerusalem's first temple was destroyed in 586 BCE. At this time, the Babylonian king deported the majority of the Jewish population to his northern possessions. Then in 539 BCE this region was conquered by the Persian emperor, who decreed the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, although a sizable community of Jewish settlers remained in Persia. According to another theory, the Mountain Jews are descendants of the Khazars or ethnic Persian Tats who converted to Judaism.

The Mountain Jews are considered to be very conservative. Unlike the Ashkenazi Jews of the former Soviet Union, who largely stopped practicing religion, the Mountain Jews have managed to maintain and even strengthen their cultural and religious traditions. They have borrowed various customs and traditions from their Muslim neighbors over the years but overall have resisted being assimilated.

During Soviet rule, almost all synagogues were closed and the public practice of religions was banned. One of the biggest synagogues was turned into a footwear and hosiery factory.

After independence in 1991, all the synagogues were rebuilt or re-opened and became the property of Jewish people. In Krasnaya Sloboda there are currently 6 synagogues, 2 Jewish schools, 2 yeshivot and Jewish cultural centers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many

⁴⁹ For more details about the history of Jews in Azerbaijan, see the report of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* "Non-Muslim Religious Minorities in Azerbaijan/ From their Inception through Russian Empire and Soviet Repression to Present-day Secular State of Azerbaijan" published in 2013.

⁵⁰ 1926 census: 20,578 – 1939 census: 41,245 – 1959 census: 40,198 – 1970 census: 48,652 – 1979 census: 35,487 – 1989 census : 30,792 – 1999 census : 8,916.

⁵¹ At one point, Azerbaijan was or still is home to smaller Jewish groups: Krymchaks, Kurdish Jews, Bukharian Jews, Gers (converts) and Subbotniks.

⁵² The formal creation of KrasnayaSloboda is traced back to the 18th century when in 1742 the khan of Guba, Feteli Khan, gave the Jews permission to set up a community free of persecution across the river from the city of Guba. Originally referred to as Yevreiskaya Sloboda (Jewish Settlement), the name was changed to KrasnayaSloboda (Red Settlement) under Soviet rule in honor of the Red Army. Its current population is about 3,000 – 4,000.

Mountain Jews left for Israel, the USA, Russia, Germany and other countries, where a number of them became prosperous businessmen, e.g. Telman Ismailov.

Ashkenazi / European Jews

The second largest group is known as Ashkenazi Jews (*European Jews*). They live in the two major cities of the country: Baku and Sumgait.

The first Ashkenazi Jews were Tsarist Cantonese soldiers, who were conscripted into the army at birth. These settled in Baku. During the 1900s oil boom, wealthy German Jews also settled in Baku. The Rothschild family established an oil company called “the Caspian-Black Sea Company,” which later became the leading member of the Baku Oil Council. The number of European Jews consequently increased significantly but later became victims of pogroms, as in Chisinau (1903) and in Kiev (1904).

During World War II, Jews from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus looked for a safe haven in Azerbaijan. This wave of Ashkenazi Jewish migration positively affected the economic and intellectual life of the Azerbaijan SSR. Many of the new migrants were well educated: engineers, scientists, accountants, lawyers and physicians. They were particularly active in Azerbaijani politics. Six of the “26 Baku Commissars” were Ashkenazi Jews. Dr. Yevsey Gindes served as Minister of Health of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–1920). In 1962, famous physicist Lev Landau received the Nobel Prize in physics for his development of a mathematical theory of super-fluidity.

Most Ashkenazi Jews speak Russian as their first language and Azerbaijani as the second language. Currently Ashkenazi Jews consider themselves to be an upper class in comparison with the Mountain Jews.

Georgian Jews

At the turn of the 18th-19th centuries, Jews began to migrate from Georgia to Azerbaijan and settling in central Baku. They engaged in trade and crafts and were partners of large Russian-Caucasian trading houses, stock exchanges, commercial banks and joint stock companies. They did not forget the basic precepts of Judaism and were actively engaged in charity work. For instance, a shelter for the poor was built in Baku by the Jewish philanthropist Elikashvili.

Before the 20th century, Georgian Jews had almost no opportunity for more than a secondary education. Until 1920, in Baku there was a Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among Georgian Jews. After schools began to be established for the Mountain Jews, Georgian Jews set up similar educational structures together with the Ashkenazi. Currently, the synagogue of the European Jews in Baku is shared with the Georgian Jews. There are no more than a few hundred Georgian Jews left in the country.

A synagogue of Georgian Jews was restored in 1997 with the financial aid of the Jewish Joint Committee.

Community and Intellectual Life

In Baku there are two Jewish schools, “Chabad or Avner”⁵³ and “Vaad L’Hatsala” (Jewish department #46 of this state school⁵⁴ is managed by Haradi rabbis). Both of these schools are religious and only Jews can be enrolled but they follow the curriculum of the Ministry of Education. They have an academic program with extra-classes like Hebrew language, the history of Judaism and Jewish tradition. Students learn several languages: Azerbaijani, Russian, Hebrew and English.

In two state universities of Azerbaijan, Hebrew language and history as well as geography and literature of Israel are taught.

A number of Jewish organizations are located in the same building which is called “Jewish Home”: Ulpan-Hebrew language center, Sochnut Jewish Agency, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Chesed-Gershon, the Israel cultural center, the Hillel youth club and the Humanitarian Association of Jewish Women and Hava.

Four monthly Jewish magazines are published in Baku: Nash Izrail (Our Israel, published by the Jewish cultural center of the Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan); Or Shelanu (Our Light, published by the Jewish cultural center of the Joint); The Tower (published by the Hillel youth club); and Chesed-Gershon (published by the welfare center of the same name).

In Baku there are two synagogues: the Ashkenazi synagogue (shared with the Georgian Jews) and the synagogue of Mountain Jews.

Anti-Semitism

Jews have been living in Azerbaijan for more than 2,000 years and for about 1,400 years as a minority group within a Muslim environment. Throughout this period, they have been fully part of society regardless of the regime under which they have lived.

Unlike many other countries in the world, there is no discrimination, social hostility or organized manifestation of anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan. A high level of tolerance in society prevails and Jews obviously benefit from it. They live peacefully among the Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, who comprise 96% of the population.⁵⁵

⁵³ In 2013-2014, there were 140 students.

⁵⁴ In 2013-2014, Hebrew was taught in I-IV grades (18 pupils) and in V-IX grades (40 pupils).

⁵⁵ According to a May-June 2012 survey conducted by the government Center for Strategic Studies, 40.5 percent of respondents viewed Jews positively or with respect; 46.8 percent viewed Jews neutrally; 8.7 percent reported they did not trust Jews; and 4 percent viewed Jews as an enemy.

Some negative views are only to be found in some small extremist Muslim groups because of the situation in Israel but the government has quickly repressed any form of anti-Semitism in the few cases that have occurred.

For the most part, the Jewish community has enjoyed strong relations with the government. Azerbaijan and Israel have had diplomatic relations since 1991, when Azerbaijan emerged from its Soviet past.

Meetings with Jewish Community Leaders and Rabbis

Jewish community leaders and rabbis enjoy talking about their integration into the Azerbaijani society while preserving their identity, their religion and their culture.

Endogamy prevails among the Mountain Jews. Askhenazi Jews are more open to mixed marriages.

A number of old Jews who lived under Soviet rule and whose identity was strongly eroded still choose not to be known as Jews even if they want to be buried in the Jewish section of the cemetery.

The Jewish communities are financially self-sufficient in a wide range of social, humanitarian and educational activities.

While there has been considerable migration to Israel, the USA and Europe since Azerbaijan became independent from the Soviet Union and opened its borders, a movement back to Azerbaijan is now noticeable. This has led to a slow but steady revival of the Jewish communities and investments in many projects.

The Holocaust is remembered publicly and is not denied by the dominant Muslim society. The President and a number of political personalities attend some major Jewish events. Jewish monuments have been erected in Baku and elsewhere. During WW II, some 600,000 Azerbaijanis, including Jews, fought against Hitler's army which was stopped in Stalingrad. A Jewish tank driver, Albert Agarunov, was killed in the Nagorno-Karabakh War. A state school (school #46) where he studied in Baku now bears his name. Four Jews also lost their lives in the war of independence from the Soviet Union.

All these events have contributed to the integration of Jews into the fabric of Azerbaijani Muslim society: Yevda Abramov, a Mountain Jew, is a member of the Azerbaijani parliament and deputy chairman of the Committee on Human Rights; a Jewish woman is now a member of the Supreme Court and two Jews are judges in regional courts; Mirza Khazar is a well-known writer, political analyst, anchorman, radio journalist, publisher and translator of the Bible into the Azerbaijani language; Albert Agarunov, who died in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, was granted the title of National Hero of Azerbaijan.

The Kurds

The Azerbaijani census recorded about 13,100 Kurds in 1999 and only around 6100 in 2009. Unlike most Kurds, those in Azerbaijan are predominantly Shi'a Muslim like most Azerbaijanis.

As they have for a long time shared the same religion and other cultural elements with the Azerbaijanis, they were already largely assimilated by the end of the nineteenth century. The process accelerated under Soviet rule and after independence, when Azerbaijani became the official state language.

History

Kurds settled in what is now Azerbaijan at various times, beginning in the ninth century. By the tenth century, Ganja and its surrounding areas were ruled by a dynasty of Kurdish origin and the most powerful Kurdish clan of the South Caucasus.

Another wave of Kurdish migration to western parts of modern Azerbaijan took place in 1589, when "victorious Ottoman soldiers" remained in lands during the Ottoman-Safavid War. Safavids resettled Shi'a Kurds along the historic borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh and Zangezur regions. In the eighteenth century, many Kurdish tribes formed tribal unions with Azerbaijanis in the Karabakh Lowlands.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Kurds were found in large numbers in Zangezur, Javanshir and Jabrail. In 1886, they constituted 4.68% of the population of the Elisabethpol Governorate. Mass migration of Kurds from Persia and to a lesser degree from the Ottoman Empire into mountainous regions of present-day Azerbaijan continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century until 1920, when Azerbaijan became part of the Soviet Union. During the 1920s, a number of these Kurds relocated to Armenia, settling primarily in Azerbaijani-populated regions of the country. This led the Kurdish population of Azerbaijan to significantly decrease in numbers.

After the establishment of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, the Central Executive Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR created in 1923 an administrative unit known as "Red Kurdistan" in the districts of Lachin, Qubadli and Zangilan with its capital in Lachin. According to the 1926 census, 73% of its population was Kurdish and 26% was Azerbaijani. In 1930, Red Kurdistan was abolished and most remaining Kurds were progressively re-categorized as Azerbaijanis.

The Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the early 1990s spilled across the region into the traditionally Kurdish populated areas in both of these countries. In Armenia, Muslim Kurds were often associated with Azerbaijanis due to cultural and religious similarities. No less than 18,000 Kurds are said to have fled from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and later onto the Russian Caucasus. In 1992–1993, Armenian troops entered Kalbajar, Lachin, Qubadli and Zangilan, forcibly displacing the non-Armenian

civilian population, including as many as 80% of the Kurds. This has further increased their assimilation into Azerbaijan.

Language

The Kurdish language is Indo-European from the same group as Farsi (Indo-Iranian) and not Altaic like Azerbaijani or Turkish. The most widely spoken dialect in Azerbaijan is Kurmanji. A pan-Kurdish alphabet has been developed, based on the Latin script.

Statistical data shows that Kurds of Jabrivil and partly Javanshir spoke Azerbaijani as a first language in 1886. According to the first Soviet census in 1926, only 3,100 people (or 8.3%) of Azerbaijan's Kurdish population (at the time about 37,200 people) spoke Kurdish.

Kurds continued to assimilate into the dominant culture of their Azerbaijani neighbours. Mixed Azerbaijani-Kurdish marriages were commonplace; however, the Kurdish language was rarely passed on to the children of such marriages.

Meeting with the Ronahi Kurdish Cultural Centre

The Ronahi Kurdish Cultural Centre was formed in 1991 with 50 founding members to preserve the identity and the heritage of the Kurdish minority in Azerbaijan. They currently have more than 200 members⁵⁶. It is mostly self-funded, although the centre has received some financial help from the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Culture to publish books for seminars. It has also applied for assistance from the Ministry of Education to help preserve the Kurdish language; however, it has yet to receive a response.

According to Pashayev Fexreddin Muzaffer, the centre's spokesman, the Kurds are an autochthonous population in Nagorno-Karabakh. People spoke Kurdish in eleven villages of the region before the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Kurds now live throughout Azerbaijan, and a preference for the Azerbaijani language is widely reported within Kurdish families. At home, they speak Kurdish and Azerbaijani, but school is taught in Azerbaijani. Although the Kurdish population is now small and widely dispersed, two schools in Samux (near Nagorno-Karabakh) have Kurdish classes in the first four grades that are currently attended by 40 children. The government radio station also broadcasts Kurdish-language programs of 15 minutes twice weekly. It is also worth mentioning two Kurdish newspapers: "Dengeyi Kürd" (editor-in-chief; Seymur Alixanov) and "Diplomat" published in three languages -Azerbaijani, Kurdish and Russian but the latter stopped its activity in 2012.

⁵⁶ On 1st March 2013, the Ronahi Center hosted the Kurdish Congress.

The Armenians

Statistics concerning the Armenians living in Azerbaijan vary according to the sources. The last official census (2009) says about 120,300 ethnic Armenians are living in Azerbaijan, most of them in the break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh, although no census could be conducted there. According to the authorities in Baku, 30,000 Armenians are living in the rest of Azerbaijan⁵⁷.

According to a study of ethnologist Sevil Guseinova published in 1999 by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, “Ethnic identity as a social status and stigma: Armenia in post-Soviet Baku”, “in the 1999 census only 645 people identified themselves as Armenians (36 men and 609 women), living on the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan. More than half live in Baku and the rest in rural areas.

However, this figure is disputed by expert Arif Yunusov⁵⁸ who stated that in 1996 there were 1393 Armenians living in Baku.”

According to Guseinova, the vast majority of citizens in Azerbaijan who identify themselves as ethnic Armenians are women married to Azerbaijanis and ethnic Russians or persons of Armenian-Azerbaijani descent. These mixed marriages in Azerbaijan show that co-existence between individuals of both groups is a historical fact and is still possible. This should be a hope for the future co-existence in the South Caucasus.

History

Baku's Armenian community grew alongside the city's own development through the course of the 19th century. During the Imperial Russian period, the community enjoyed a vibrant literary culture, as seen in the publication of dozens of Armenian-language newspapers, journals, and magazines. The first Armenian periodical to be published in Baku, in 1877, was *Haykakan Ashkharh* (The Armenian World), a literary and pedagogic journal established and edited by Stephannos Stephaney.

The large scale construction and expansion of the city attracted numerous Russian and Armenian architects, many of whom had received their education in Russia or other parts of Europe. Prominent Armenian architects included Hovhannes Katchaznouni, Freidun Aghalyan, Vardan Sarkisov and Gavriil Ter-Mikelov. Among the most well-known buildings are the Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall and the Commercial College of Baku (both designed by Ter-Mikelov).

There were three Armenian churches in Baku, but they were demolished or closed down following the establishment of Soviet power in 1920.

⁵⁷ 1926 census : 282,004 – 1939 census : 388,025 – 1959 census : 442,089 – 1970 census : 483,520 – 1979 census : 475,486 – 1989 census : 390,505 – 1999 census : 120,745 (including Nagorno-Karabakh and some other territories occupied by Armenia).

⁵⁸His mother was Armenian (Arshaluys ArsenovnaBarsegyan).

After WW II, some Armenians living in Azerbaijan were also prominent sportsmen and chess-players, such as Garry Kasparov.

Clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians started under the rule of the Russian Empire and peaked during the short period of independence of Azerbaijan (1918-1920).

The conflict between Yerevan and Baku surfaced again in 1988 following a campaign by Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians for unification with Armenia. As the violence increased, direct rule was imposed by Moscow. Following the declaration of a state of emergency in mid-1991, Soviet troops were deployed in the region.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan found themselves as independent states facing an increasingly intractable conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh declared its secession from Azerbaijan on 2 September 1991. By December 1991, a referendum on independence was unilaterally held and confirmed on 6 January 1992 by the newly elected Nagorno-Karabakh legislature. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict then erupted into a full-scale war. The darkest event in the history of this conflict is the Armenian assault on the town of Khojaly on the night of 25-26 February 1992 and the subsequent massacre of fleeing civilians trying to reach a safe haven: 613 people were killed in and around Khojaly as reported by the official Azerbaijani parliamentary investigation commission.

At the end of the armed conflict, the Armenian forces were occupying– and are still occupying - over 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory, including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions.

A ceasefire negotiated in May 1994 has held till the present, despite sporadic instances of violence and casualties along the line of contact, the unofficial border between Azerbaijan and the occupied territories. The Karabakh Armenians have established self-rule under the name of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, regularly holding presidential and parliamentary elections that are not recognized by the international community at large.

Attempts at mediation were made by a number of parties, including CIS countries, notably Russia and Kazakhstan, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE; later the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE), Turkey and Iran. Since mid-1992 mediation efforts have been undertaken by the OSCE Minsk Group of 11 countries, headed by a tripartite structure of co-chairs from Russia, the United States and France. Still to no avail more than 20 years later.

The Nagorno-Karabakh War led to huge and tragic displacements of populations. Almost all Azerbaijani left Armenia and almost all Armenians left Azerbaijan⁵⁹ while more than 600,000 Azerbaijanis had to leave the occupied territories.

⁵⁹ There are Azerbaijani-Armenian couples with children in Azerbaijan while there are no such mixed couples left in Armenia.

This war fueled reciprocal negative sentiments in both countries that still persist today as it is usual in armed conflicts between states or between ethnic groups.

Four resolutions of the UN Security Council - No. 822, 853, 874, 884 - called on the Armenian side to withdraw their military forces from the occupied territories and restitute them to Azerbaijan.

The ethnic Armenians who have chosen to stay in Azerbaijan keep a low profile and hide their descent to avoid social hostility as the tension is still high between both countries and the issue of the occupied territories has still not been solved. There is no Armenian association of any sort. Armenian churches are not used any more for religious services and there is no request for Armenian Apostolic places of worship, including in Baku.

Meeting with an Ethnic Armenian Woman

Through mixed marriages with Azerbaijani and Russian men, Armenian women have ineluctably been assimilated by the Azerbaijani society. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* met a woman born in Baku whose father was an Armenian Orthodox and her mother an Azerbaijani Muslim. From the age of seven on, she grew up with her brothers and sisters in an orphanage. She got married to a culturally Muslim Azerbaijani and became Muslim. Their children are raised in the Muslim faith. She has never spoken Armenian to them. At the time of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, her brothers and sisters went to Armenia. She lost all contacts with them.

The Poles

According to the 1991 census there were 900 Poles living in Azerbaijan;⁶⁰ however, the number of people with Polish descent in Baku alone has grown to around 2,000. Several thousand people identify themselves as ethnic Poles in Azerbaijan.⁶¹

Long economic, cultural, commercial and political relations between Poland and Azerbaijan have led to positive association between Azerbaijan and Poland. It has also resulted in a warm attitude towards the Polish minority within Azerbaijan itself.⁶²

History

The Poles began to appear in Azerbaijan by the 13th century, mainly as captives by Tatars but also as those who migrated voluntarily. A substantial number of Polish Jesuit missionaries also came to Azerbaijan at the end of the 16th century to evangelize the region.⁶³

Polish citizens also came to Azerbaijan following the First Partition of Poland by the Russian Empire in 1772. Russia forced Polish recruits at that time to go fight in the Caucasus. In 1813, an additional 10,000 Polish prisoners were sent to the Caucasus as a result of Napoleon's campaign in the region. In November 1831, after a failed uprising against the Russian Empire, a new wave of exiled Polish insurgents was sent to Azerbaijan. The main points of entry for the Poles taking up military service were Quba, Qusar, Shamakhi, Ganja, Baku and Zaqatala. Chapels built for these Polish military personnel and their families in Quba and Zaqatala still exist.

In 1912 the first Catholic Church was built in Baku by the Polish community⁶⁴, although it was later destroyed by the Communist regime.⁶⁵ Polish born architect Joseph Goslawski, chief architect of the city of Baku, played a significant role during this period in designing buildings in city centre. Goslawski also assisted local architect Robert Marfeld in designing the largest church in the Caucasus, the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral of Baku. This structure was destroyed by the Soviets in 1936. On 30th August 2006, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev authorised the placing of a plaque in memory of Goslawski at his former residence in Baku.⁶⁶

After World War I many Poles were deported from their homeland to Azerbaijan. However, with the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan, repressions against other nationalities,

⁶⁰ <http://www.polonia-azeri.org/history1.html>

⁶¹ <http://polacy.az/polacy-w-azerbejdzanie/>

⁶² <http://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/2917655.html>

⁶³ <http://polacy.az/polacy-w-azerbejdzanie/>

⁶⁴ For more details about the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan, see the report of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* "Non-Muslim Religious Minorities in Azerbaijan/ From their Inception through Russian Empire and Soviet Repression to Present-day Secular State of Azerbaijan" published in 2013.

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ <http://news.day.az/society/57667.html>

including the Poles, began. Many were forced to leave Azerbaijan. Others changed their nationality so that they could stay.⁶⁷

In December 1991 Poland recognized Azerbaijan as an independent country and by February 1992 diplomatic relations were formalised between the two countries. The Embassy of Poland was established in 2001. Today the embassy actively promotes Polish language classes and organises special events for the Polish community, such as the Day of Polonia and Constitution Day on May 3rd and Christmas Eve celebrations for embassy staff and others.⁶⁸

On the occasion of Pope John Paul II's visit in 2002, President Aliyev donated a plot of land for the construction of a Catholic church in Baku. The new Roman Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was officially opened in March 2008.

In 2006 the Centre for Polish Language and Culture was opened at the Baku Slavic University. Polish language is taught in two faculties of the University. Around 20 students graduate each year from these faculties.⁶⁹

Meeting with the Polish Cultural Centre Polonia-Azerbaijan

Registered in 2003 as a financially independent organisation, the Polish Cultural Centre Polonia-Azerbaijan endeavours to promote Polish culture and language throughout the country.⁷⁰ The centre will soon begin publication of a bilingual Polish-Azerbaijani magazine.

According to the centre's representative, Stanisława Mutallimowa, about a hundred families, mainly middle class, are affiliated to the organisation. Ms Mutallimowa's family situation is exemplary of much of the Polish diaspora and its progressive assimilation into Azerbaijani society. Her ancestors came from Lithuania and Belarus. She is married to an Azerbaijani Muslim. Their child is educated in Islam and has a better knowledge of the Azerbaijani language than Polish.

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ <http://www.polonia-azeri.org/history1.html>

⁶⁹ http://www.baku.msz.gov.pl/en/wspolpraca_obustronna/scientific_cooperation/center_for_polish_language_and_culture/

⁷⁰ <http://www.polacy.az>

The Bulgarians

The precise number of Bulgarians in Azerbaijan is unknown. The “historical” Bulgarians came during the 1932-1933 Holodomor, the famine engineered by Stalin in the Ukraine. A number of Bulgarians left Ukraine, where they were living in three designated districts at that time,⁷¹ and migrated to other parts of the Soviet Union. Moreover, other Bulgarians were deported by Stalin along with Tatars from Crimea to other Soviet republics in 1944.

In June 1992 diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Azerbaijan were established. The Bulgarian embassy in Baku was opened in December 1999.⁷²

The Bulgarian language has been taught at Baku Slavic University since 1996. In 2002 a formal agreement of cooperation was signed between Baku Slavic University and Sofia University St. Kl. Ohridski.

The Bulgarian Language and Culture Centre was opened in 2004 with the assistance of the Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria to Azerbaijan. The opening ceremony was attended by the President of the Republic of Bulgaria Georgi Pirvanov.

The aim of the Bulgarian Language and Culture Centre is to create better relations between Azerbaijan and Bulgaria and to increase interest in the Bulgarian language in Azerbaijan⁷³ by promoting Bulgarian language, culture and history. An interesting development is the creation of a Bulgarian language conversation club where native Bulgarians speak with students. Bulgaria’s ambassador and other Bulgarian diplomats participate in the conversation club.⁷⁴

Meeting with the Bulgarian Union

The Bulgarian Union has enjoyed the support of the Council on State Support for NGOs for various projects: publication of their Magazine “Akord”, organizing a conference in Guba, participating in cultural events in Turkey, etc.

According to Maria Atanassovna Huseinova, the chair of the Bulgarian Union, who graduated from the State University in Kiev, the “historical” Bulgarians worked mainly in the tobacco industry. At the time of the Soviet Union, they were living in some compact settlements such as Ganja, but now they are scattered around the country and are Azerbaijani citizens.

The Bulgarian embassy in Baku is playing a major role in the promotion and preservation of the Bulgarian language and culture.

⁷¹ At the beginning of the 1930s, there were 25 national districts in the administrative-territorial system of Ukraine, including seven German, three Bulgarian, three Greek, three Jewish, one Polish and eight Russian districts.

⁷²<http://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/7869865.html>

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴<http://bsu-edu.org/EXabar.aspx?kkk=147>

The Greeks

The Greek minority currently is concentrated in Baku and numbers around 500 people.⁷⁵ However, there are also Azerbaijanis of Greek descent scattered in other parts of the country (i.e. Sumgait and Nakhichevan) who are the remnants of early immigration waves in the 19th-20th century.

History

The majority of Greeks in Azerbaijan are descendants of the Pontics who migrated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of the country's oil boom.⁷⁶ However there are also some Greeks whose families came from Georgia in the 19th and 20th century⁷⁷ or were Greek refugees from Turkey looking for a safe haven in Azerbaijan after the First World War.⁷⁸

In 1907 a petition was filed to the local authority for a permit to build the Greek Orthodox Church of Baku. The reason for this request was the fact that there was a significant number of Greeks living in Baku at the time and the Russian Orthodox Cathedral only provided religious services in Russian.

After the establishment of the Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, the Greeks were a target of repression like many other groups and many went back to Greece.⁷⁹

Greeks in Mehmana, Nagorno-Karabakh

One reason for which the Greeks were drawn to Mehmana⁸⁰ in the 19th century was the precious metals in the hills around it. Another group of Greeks arrived in the village following the massacres of Armenians and Pontic Greeks in Anatolia in 1915-18.

During the Nagorno-Karabakh war, most of them moved back to Greece.⁸¹ Just a few Greeks of mixed marriages stayed in Mehmana. Their presence is now nearly extinct.

Language

There is no history of Greek being spoken in Azerbaijan until the Greeks migrated there in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the language has been taught at the Baku Slavic University since 1999. The university opened The Centre of Hellenic Studies in 2004 with

⁷⁵ Greek Embassy in Azerbaijan - <http://www.mfa.gr/missionsabroad/en/azerbaijan-en/bilateral-relations/cultural-relations-and-greek-community.html>

⁷⁶ By the 19th century, Azerbaijan was the leading supplier of the world's oil and gas industry. By the beginning of the 20th century, Azerbaijan was producing more than half of the world's supply of oil

⁷⁷ <http://www.azembassy.gr/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Azerbaijan-An-Eternal-Crossroads-of-Civilizations.pdf>

⁷⁸ <http://www.greeks-su.com/ru/press/news/1889.html>

⁷⁹ <http://www.greeks-su.com/ru/press/news/1889.html>

⁸⁰ Mehmana is a small village in the northern part of Nagorno-Karabakh.

⁸¹ <http://iwpr.net/report-news/slow-demise-karabakh-greeks>

funding from the Greek government and the Greek Embassy in Azerbaijan. The Centre teaches Greek culture and history in addition to the Greek language.⁸²⁸³

Meeting Argo

Argo was established in 1994 by five founding members. The organization did not face any issues when they applied for registration. Its goal is to promote the Greek language and culture as well as research about the history of the Greek diaspora in Azerbaijan. About 200 families (grouping together around 500 people) are members of Argo but most of them are assimilated as a result of mixed marriages. Many of them practice both Christianity and Islam and observe celebrations of both religions.

According to Prof. Saida Mehdiyeva, who has been teaching Greek at Baku Slavic University since 2001, 47 Azerbaijanis are currently studying Greek. She has previously been invited to speak on national television about Azerbaijanis of Greek origin.

Argo has had relations with the Greek embassy since its inception. The Greek diplomatic mission in Baku provides the Greek community with Greek newspapers and literature, and offers scholarships for students to go to Greece on vacation or to study there. Funding has also been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece and private foundations. Argo is financially independent from the Azerbaijani state.

⁸² http://www.ekathimerini.com/4Dcgi/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite6_1_25/05/2012_443914

⁸³ <http://bsu-edu.org/EXabar.aspx?kkk=135>

**International Instruments on Minorities and National Legal
Framework**

International Instruments

CoE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1998)

Azerbaijan ratified the Convention on 26th June 2000⁸⁴.

With regard to the incorporation of the standards of the Framework Convention into the domestic legislation, it should be mentioned Azerbaijan joined the CoE Framework Convention “On protection of National Minorities” with some reservations. According to the statement of the Republic of Azerbaijan “ratification and implementation of the CoE Framework Convention on Protection of National Minorities excludes any actions that may prejudice or damage the territorial integrity and sovereignty, internal and external security of Azerbaijan.”

CoE European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992)

Azerbaijan signed the Charter on 21st December 2001 but did not ratify it although it was one of the conditions for its CoE membership.

Several other member States of the Council of Europe have not yet acceded to the Charter. Among them, six States that committed themselves to signing and ratifying the Charter when acceding to the Council of Europe have not yet done so (Albania, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia").

UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (Paris, 20 October 2005)

Azerbaijan acceded to the Convention on 26 November 2009.

National Legal Framework

Constitution

Article 21. Official language

I. The official language of the Republic of Azerbaijan shall be the Azerbaijani language. The Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the development of the Azerbaijani language.

II. The Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the free

⁸⁴ CoE Members which signed but did not ratify the Convention: Belgium (31/07/2001), Greece (22/09/1997), Iceland (01/02/1995), Luxembourg (20/07/1995).

CoE Members which neither signed nor ratified the Convention: Andorra, France/Monaco, Turkey.

Article 25. Right to equality

I. Everyone shall be equal before the law and the courts. II. Men and women shall have equal rights and freedoms. III. The state shall guarantee the equality of rights and freedoms to everyone, irrespective of race, nationality, religion, language, sex, origin, property, occupation, beliefs, or affiliation with political parties, trade unions or other public associations. It shall be prohibited to restrict rights and freedoms of man and citizen on the grounds of race, nationality, religion, language, sex, origin, beliefs, or political or social affiliation. (...)

Article 45. Right to use native language

I. Everyone has the right to use his native language. Everyone has the right to upbringing, education and creative activity in any language of his own choice.
II. No one may be deprived of the right to use his native language.

Criminal Code of Azerbaijan

The Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan provides for criminal liability for the discriminatory offences on the basis of racial and religious indications alongside with other features.

Article 61.1.6 provides that the commission of any offence on grounds of, inter alia, racist, national or religious hatred or fanaticism shall constitute an aggravating circumstance for determining the sentence.

Article 103 punishes genocide.

Article 109 represses acts of persecution against any group or organization on the racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual and other grounds, in other words, the rough deprivation of persons of their fundamental rights for their affiliation to certain group or organization.

Article 111 punishes acts committed with a view to establishing or maintaining the dominance of one racial group and oppressing another racial group (apartheid);

Article 120 § 2.12 (murder with aggravating circumstances) provides for a more severe penalty when murder is committed for reasons of national, racial or religious hostility or hatred.

Article 154.1 provides for various sentences in cases of discrimination based on race, nationality, creeds, language, origin, affiliation to a political party, a trade union or a public association: a fine of hundred up to five hundred of nominal financial unit or corrective works for the term of up to one year.

Article 283 criminalizes offences perpetrated with the purpose of inciting national, racial, social or religious hatred or hostility, degrading national dignity, as well as the acts directed towards restriction of rights or defining the superiority of citizens based on their national, racial, or religious affiliation.

Presidential Decree on National Minorities

On 16th September 1992, a few months before the adoption of the CoE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, a “Presidential Decree on the protection of the rights and freedoms and on state support for the promotion of the languages and cultures of national minorities, numerically small peoples and ethnic groups living in the Republic of Azerbaijan” was signed by the then President of Azerbaijan.

In the “Presidential Decree of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 16 September 1992 “On State Assistance to Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, Minority Nations and Ethnic Groups, and Development of their Language and Cultures” it has been envisaged to provide state assistance in the following fields:

- 1) protection, preservation and development of cultural, religious and language specific features of national minorities, minority nations and ethnic groups;
- 2) freedom of being loyal to national traditions, exercising religious rituals and ceremonies, preservation and use of the places of prayer (religious services); free development of national handicrafts, vocational and amateur talent activities, folk arts; protection of historical monuments of all nations; preservation and protection of places, which are of public importance, reserves, parks and other nature facilities.

Law on Culture

Under Article 6.3 of the 2012 *Law on Culture* the State grants its minorities equal rights as well as the right to preserve their culture, determine their cultural identity, restore, strengthen and develop their cultural resources.

National Action Plan for the Promotion of Human Rights⁸⁵

A first National Action Plan was adopted in 2006 and a second one in 2011.

In its article 2.2, the 2012 Action Plan provides for the preservation of the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities and lists the state organs that are responsible for the implementation of this policy:

⁸⁵ The official name is: National Program for Action to Raise Effectiveness of the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

2.2. Continuation of the activities to preserve and develop the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities.

Implementing institutions: Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ministries of Culture and Tourism, Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Time-limit: this activity shall be implemented permanently.

State Management of Diversity

The management of the multinational and multi-confessional nature of the Azerbaijan population is a challenge for the state. It is also an opportunity to establish mechanisms which aim towards achieving and preserving peaceful co-existence between the various ethnic groups which share the same living space or are divided by a border with another country.

Inter-regional issues in Azerbaijan, due to its geographical situation, social-political aspirations and historical-cultural traditions, have contributed to making this region a part of the East and the West, Europe and Asia, South and North. Historical, economic and cultural characteristics of the country have forged a population that is generally tolerant and respectful of cultural diversity and national minorities.

Intercultural dialogue is a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's national policy. The basic spirit of this policy is safeguarded by the Constitution, which proclaims all citizens equal, regardless of ethnic or racial origin, by the *Law on Culture (1998)* and by other relevant legal structures which reflect the provisions of the *International Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1996)*. On 15th May 2014, President Ilham Aliyev adopted a decree establishing an International Center for Multiculturalism.

So far the multi-ethnic character of Azerbaijan has not caused serious problems.

The main public actors responsible for implementing programs and policies to promote intercultural dialogue in Azerbaijan, at national and local levels, are the Department for National Minorities for the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Education, the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations and the Council on State Support to NGOs.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has interviewed representatives of these institutions about their policies and activities.

Department for National Minorities for the Presidential Administration

Interview with Muzaffar Talibli

In early March, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* interviewed Mr Muzaffar Talibli, the Head of the Department for National Minorities of the Presidential Administration, about the role of his institution in the protection of national minorities in Azerbaijan.

Q: What is the definition of a national minority?

A: There is no official definition of national or ethnic minorities; however, this is not an obstacle to their protection or promotion. They can be identified as any group with a language or culture that is different from the majority. In all, we estimate that there are more than 80 minorities. The territory of Azerbaijan has always had national minorities and over the centuries minority populations have come to our regions to find safe haven. Since independence, there has been no record of a national minority leaving the country because they did not feel secure.

Q: What sort of assistance does your department provide to national minorities?

A: The state is supporting the national minorities through the Council on State Support to NGOs. National minorities account for about 9% of the population - Lezgis, Russians, Talysh, Avars and Tatars being the most organised groups.

From the 1st to the 4th grade, the languages of various ethnic minorities are taught in the schools of regions or villages where they have a majority.

All ethnic minorities have at least one organisation representing their interests. More than 15 newspapers are published by minority groups in their own language: Talysh, Lezgi, Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Kurdish, etc. A number of ethnic groups have had a program in their own language on the state radio since 1992.

On 16th September 1992 there was a state declaration on the protection of national minorities, the first of its kind by a former Soviet country. This declaration was similar to the declaration made by the United Nations that same year.

There was also a National Action Plan in 2006 and in 2011 on improving human conditions and human rights in the country with specific provisions for the protection of national minorities in both plans.

Over the last three years there has been a state program to support non-Muslim minorities, dispersing 1.2 million euros to 18 non-Muslim minorities.

Q: What sort of relations are there between state institutions and national minorities?

A: There are relations with 50 entities and there is support from the government to such ethnic groups. In the Ministry of Culture, there is a working group on the cultures of ethnic groups.

Q: What is the total budget that your department has for funding ethnic minorities?

A: There is no specific budget. Funding is given on a case-by-case basis. For example, financial support was granted to a Russian NGO for a big event the Russian community was recently organising.

Q: In 1992, a coordination council for national minorities was set up, but it no longer exists. Why was it cancelled?

A: We are now in a period of transition. A state advisor on national minorities, Mr Kamal Mehdi Abdullayev⁸⁶, the rector of Baku Slavic University, was appointed a few days ago to increase the state support to national minorities. We will see what the future will bring.

Q: Are there any reports of the government's activities on its work for minorities?

A: There is an internal report, but the government also publishes an annual report for regional and international organisations.

Q: Is there a threat of separatism by some ethnic minorities?

A: In 1992, at the time of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, there was an attempt by a Talysh movement with the support of Russia, Iran and Armenia to secede.

⁸⁶ Kamal Mehdi Abdullayev was born in Baku in 1950 into a family of intellectuals. His father was a teacher and his mother a doctor. From 1968 to 1973 he studied literature and linguistics in the faculty of Philology at Baku State University. In 1977 he obtained a PhD in the Department of Turkic languages of the Institute of Linguistics at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. From 1977 to 1984 he worked at the Department of Comparative Research of Turkic Languages of the Institute of Linguistics at Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, holding successively the positions of junior researcher, senior researcher and head of the Department.

From 1984 to 1987 he worked at the department of General and Azerbaijani Linguistics at the Institute of Foreign Languages, what is now the Azerbaijan University of Languages, rising to the position of professor and head of department. During 1988-1990 he was the vice-chairman of the Azerbaijan Culture Fund. In 1990 he was elected head of the department of General and Russian Linguistics at the Institute of Russian Language and Literature, now Baku Slavic University; from 1993 to 2000 he was the head of the department General and Azerbaijan linguistics at the Institute of Foreign Languages. In May 2000 he was appointed Rector of the Institute of Russian Language and Literature. In June 2000, he was appointed Rector of the newly organised Baku Slavic University.

See more about his career, awards and works at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamal_Mehdi_Abdullayev

Q: Azerbaijan has not ratified or implemented certain international instruments that it had signed. What is the position of the government in this regard?

A: In my own opinion, signing the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages may lead to problems concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. As soon as the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh is over, Azerbaijan will ratify it. Several EU member states have not ratified the Charter either.

The Ministry of Culture & Tourism

The cultural policy system in Azerbaijan is very state-supportive. The state makes decisions, provides financial support and coordinates the activities of the various partners involved in culture, chiefly regional and local authorities and professional organisations. Due to the fast growing economy, the state cultural budget has increased over the years. Private actors have also contributed additional funds.⁸⁷

In December 2013, the Council of Europe published a 64-page report⁸⁸ on the cultural policy of Azerbaijan, including sections devoted to national minorities. The report notes the peculiar circumstances of Azerbaijan which produced tolerance and respect for other cultures within the country. It also notes the on-going inclusion and participation of Muslims, Christians and Jews in state initiatives and events.

The Law on Culture and National Minorities

As outlined in the *Law on Culture* of 2012, national cultural policy is based on the principles of equal opportunity to reference cultural values and to preserve the cultural heritage of Azerbaijan, irrespective of one's social and material status, nationality, race, religion or gender.

Article 1 describes culture is "a set of features that defines material, moral, intellectual and emotional peculiarities, including literature and arts, of society or social groups and covers the lifestyle of the people, the co-existence rules and a system of moral values."

Article 8 on "the right to cultural identity" states that "each person has a right to keep his national-cultural identity and to choose his own moral, aesthetic and other values." The state guarantees this right through the protection of cultural identities which are independent of any racial, ethnic or national distinction.

Other international instruments signed and ratified by Azerbaijan have pursued the same objectives.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ A declaration, adopted at the scientific conference "Cultural Diversity in Azerbaijan" (June 2002, Baku), affirms the necessity of having regular interaction and partnership between the state sector, private sector and civil society and to monitor periodically the situation in respect to preservation and support for cultural diversity.

⁸⁸ Standard Reference: Council of Europe/ERICarts: "Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe", 15th edition 2014. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.culturalpolicies.net>>. ISSN: 2222-7334. See http://www.culturalpolicies.net/download/azerbaijan_122013.pdf. The Compendium Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe is an organ of the Council of Europe aiming to include all 50 member states co-operating within the context of the European Cultural Convention.

⁸⁹ *Article 48 on International Cooperation in the Cultural Sphere, Article 49 on International Exchange in the Cultural Sphere and Article 50 on Cooperation in the Sphere of Conservation of Cultural Values* provide for the development and progression of international contacts of cultural minorities with their historical motherlands.

The Ministry of Culture & Tourism and National Minorities

The promotion and preservation of the culture of national minorities in Azerbaijan – traditional culture, art, traditions and languages – falls under the mandate of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The Ministry has executive authority over state policy concerning the development and safeguarding of cultural values of national minorities and ethnic groups living in the country. This includes cooperation with cultural communities and centres of ethnic minorities; organising art performances of amateur groups in regions where ethnic minorities are concentrated; exhibitions about ethnography, art and traditions of ethnic minorities; travel excursions of ethnic groups in the country and abroad; promotion of customs and traditions of ethnic groups; and supplying amateur groups with traditional clothes and musical instruments.

The Ministry has implemented a project on "Cultural Diversity in Azerbaijan," which involved cultural associations of the various national minorities. The project has contributed to the development and support of intercultural dialogue.

In November 2006, October 2008 and November 2010, the Ministry organised the festival *Azerbaijan – my Motherland*. Conferences, photo exhibitions and concerts, held in the framework of the festival, have attracted thousands of participants from different regions of the country, representing practically all national minorities and ethnic groups .

Over the years, projects concerning Akhiska Turks, Talysh, Avars, Udis, Tats, Tsakhurs and others have been co-financed by the Ministry.

Financial Support of National Minorities

A number of folk groups representing several ethnic minorities have been financially helped by the Ministry:

- "Neneler", a Talysh folk song and dance ensemble of the city of Lenkaran,
- "Adıgun", a Turkish folk collective of Saatly district,
- "Samur", a Tsakhurs folk group of Gakh district,
- "Khinayakhdy", a Tat folk group of Shabran district,
- "Djahan", an Avar folk group of Balaken district,
- "Lahij", a folklore group of Lahij village cultural house of Ismailly district and "Ivanovo" folklore group of Ivanovo village cultural house,
- " Halay ", a Talysh folk song and dance ensemble of Masally district,
- "Jangi", an Udi folk ensemble of Gabala district,
- "Rutul ", a folk group of Shorsu village cultural house of the city of Shaki,
- "Ateshghah", a Tat song and dance ensemble of Guba district,
- "Uzunomurluler-refti", a Talysh folk dance group of Lerik district,

- "Evesor", a Talysh folk group of Astara district,
- "Inci gizlar", a Lezghi dance troupe of Gusar district,
- "Ingiloy", a folk group of Eliabat village cultural house,
- "Djeyranim", a Tsakhur folk group and
- "Hudulki", an Avar dance troupe of Zagatala district.

The celebration of *Sabantuy*, Tatar national holiday,⁹⁰ in Baku regularly receives the financial assistance of the Ministry.

With the support of Masally District, new groups have emerged: "Hajar" ensemble, "Halay" an older women's dance group and the "Masally" dance ensemble. The city of Masally, in the Talysh region near the border with Iran, was declared in 2012 Azerbaijan's "Capital of Folklore" and hosted the International Folklore Festival.

Due to the professional level of their performances in international and local festivals, several artistic groups representing national minorities have been awarded the title of "national group" by the Ministry. These include "Suvar," a Lezgi song and dance ensemble in Baku, "Hudulki," an Avar dance troupe of Zaqatala District, "Djahan," an Avar folk group of Balaken District, "Uzunomurluler-refti" a Talysh folk dance group of Lerik District and "Ivanovka" folk group of Ismailly District.

Participation in National Festivals and Other Events

A number of events organized by the cultural centres of minorities are supported by the Ministry. The Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall, the Azerbaijan State Theatre of Musical Comedy, the Opera and Ballet Theatre, the R. Behbudov Theater of Song and other stages in 15 districts of the country have been used by some 40 artistic groups comprising more than 800 participants belonging to various ethnic groups and minorities.

Every two years, the Art Festival of Ethnic Minorities is held under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and with the support of the Ministry. Over four days the participating cultural centres compete for prizes. The festival is widely covered by the country's mass media, including Public Television. In 2013, the title of the festival was "Azerbaijan is my native land."

⁹⁰ Sabantuy is a Tatar and Idel-Uralian summer festival that dates back to the Volga Bulgarian epoch. Sabantuyar do not have a set date. The festivities take place approximately from June 15 to July 1, and usually fall on a Sunday. At first Sabantuy was a festival of farmers in rural areas, but it later became a national holiday and now is widely celebrated in the cities.

Sabantuy traces its origins to the pre-Islamic epoch, when it was celebrated before the sowing season. The presence of Sabantuy was noticed by ibn Fadlan as early as in 921. Traditional songs and other customs of the Sabantuy probably had a religious connotation at that time.

Later on, with the spread of Islam among Tatars and Bashkirs and Christianity among Chuvashs, it became a secular holiday. In each region, villages took turns to celebrate the holiday.

Throughout the festivals, round table discussions are organised on various topics, such as "The Cultural Heritage of National Minorities and Modernity," "Protection of the Cultural Heritage of National Minorities," and "Ethnic Culture in Azerbaijan during the Era of Globalization." The cultural centres also organise lectures and photo exhibitions in Baku museums.

Participation in International Events

Azerbaijan actively takes part in the program and activities of UNESCO and the Council of Europe on the promotion of international intercultural dialogue.

Over the past five years "Halay," the Talysh folk song and dance ensemble of Masally District, has earned a wide reputation in the country and abroad. The group has toured different regions of Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Hungary and other countries.

From 13 to 17 October 2011, "Uzunomurluler-refti", a 15-member Talysh folk group from Lerik District, participated in a cultural event in Turkey with the support of the International Organization of Turkic Culture.

"Suvar," a Lezgi song and dance ensemble from Baku, has participated numerous times in folk music festivals in Russia and Turkey.

"Hudulki" Avar, a folk group of Zaqatala District, participated in the 11th "Friendship Wreath," an International Folk Art Festival held in Bobruisk, Belarus from 27 June to 1st July 2013.

Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education plays a major role in the preservation of minority languages by organizing language classes in areas with compact settlements of specific ethnic groups (See tables hereafter).

In regions largely populated by Russians, 12 schools have a full curriculum in Russian, 450 schools have a Russian department and 50 pilot schools teach Russian from first grade on.

A community of ethnic Georgians lives in three districts of Azerbaijan and their children can enjoy education in their own language in secondary schools. In Zakatala district, 236 ethnic Georgians were enrolled in several Azerbaijani-Georgian schools; in Gakh district, 831 students in six Georgian schools and one tri-lingual school (Azerbaijani, Russian, Georgian); and in Balaken district, 13 students in Azerbaijani-Georgian schools.

Several agreements between Azerbaijan and Georgia provide a legal framework for the training and exchange of teachers for their respective minorities, the distribution of textbooks and joint seminars:

- agreement between the Government of Georgia and the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan on cooperation in the field of education (18.02.1997),
- agreement between the Government of Georgia and the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan on "certification of highly qualified scientific and pedagogical staff" (12.12.1997)
- agreement between the Ministries of Education of the GUAM⁹¹ member states on cooperation in the field of education (04.07.2003)
- agreement between the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Education of Georgia and the Ministry of Science of Georgia on cooperation in the field of education (04.03.2004).

According to the Protocol signed by the Joint Azerbaijan-Georgia Intergovernmental Commission on economic cooperation on 20th December 2011 in Tbilisi, pupils studying the Azerbaijani language in Georgia and pupils studying the Georgian language in Azerbaijan are provided with free language and literature textbooks.

In 2012- 2013 textbooks were distributed with the participation of representatives of the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan as well as of Georgia to the Georgian-speaking schools in the districts of Gakh, Balakan and Zakatala. During the same schoolyear textbooks were distributed to the Azerbaijani-speaking schools in Georgia⁹².

⁹¹Organization for Democracy and Economic Development ,which is a regional organization of four post-Soviet states: Georgia, Ukraine,Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

⁹² . Currently, 275 ethnic Azerbaijani students with Georgian citizenship study in Azerbaijan.

The universities of Azerbaijan cooperate with several Georgian universities. For instance: the Azerbaijan Architecture and Construction University and Tbilisi State Academy of Arts; Ganja State University and Akaki Tsereteli State University; Azerbaijan Teachers' Institute and Caucasus International University of Georgia; Khazar University and Caucasus International University of Georgia, University of Georgia, Kutaisi University etc..

№	District (city)	Talysh			Avar			Lezgi			
		Number of schools	Number of pupils		Number of schools	Number of pupils		Number of schools	Number of pupils		
			I-IV	Total		I-IV	Total		I-IV	V-IX	Total
1	Baku										
2	Lenkaran	69	7142	7142							
3	Astara	63	6119	6119							
4	Baklaken				11	890	890				
5	Oghuz							2	90	84	174
6	Quba							5	292	112	404
7	Qusar							87	4349	5078	9427
8	Qabala							6	616	717	1333
9	Zaqatala				11	644	644				
10	Ismayily							2	175	80	255
11	Lerik	55	1299	1299							
12	Masally	38	3454	3454							
13	Samux										
14	Khachmaz							6	591	764	1355
Total:		225	18014	18014	22	1534	1534	108	6113	6835	12948

No	District (city)	Hebrew			Tsakhur		Khinalug		Udin		Kurd						
		Number of schools	Number of pupils		Number of schools	Number of pupils	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Number of schools	Number of pupils		Nr of schools	Number of pupils				
			I-IV	V-IX						Total	I-IV		Total	I-IV	Total	I-IV	Total
1	Baku	1	18	40	58												
2	Lenkaran																
3	Astara																
4	Baklaken																
5	Oghuz																
6	Quba						1	124	124								
7	Qusar																
8	Qabala								3	206	206						
9	Zaqatala				5	411	411										
10	ismayilly																
11	Lerik																
12	Masally																
13	Samux											2	40	40			
14	Khachmaz																
Total:		1	18	40	58	5	411	411	1	124	124	3	206	206	2	40	40

**Information about Georgian-language schools and students in Gakh, Zaqatala and Balaken districts
2013-2014**

№	The name of school	Section	Total number of pupils	Including Georgians	The number of pupils per Georgian class										
					I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI
Zaqatala district															
1	Aliabad sett., secondary school N#1	Azerbaijan-Georgian	364	98	10	6	7	6	8	10	11	5	10	11	14
2	Aliabad sett., secondary school N#4	Azerbaijan-Georgian	182	4								4			
3	Mosul village secondary school	Azerbaijan-Georgian	400	134	18	22	10	3	10	12	10	12	10	16	11
Total:			946	236	28	28	17	9	18	22	21	21	20	27	25
Gakh district															
1	City school-lyceum N# 2	Azerbaijan-Georgian-Russian	874	112	10	6	11	10	11	9	9	14	10	11	11
2	Gakh-Ingiloy village secondary school	Georgian	159	159	12	14	12	14	19	13	12	13	12	15	23
3	Alibeyli village secondary school	Georgian	204	204	19	18	18	15	11	19	16	16	25	16	31
4	Gakhabash village secondary school N#1	Georgian	86	86	7	9	5	10	5	8	10	8	7	10	7
5	Alatamir village secondary school	Georgian	113	113	7	12	5	12	12	6	11	9	12	13	14
6	Ingiloy Kotuklu village secondary school	Georgian	129	129	11	14	11	12	12	10	17	12	12	9	9
7	Meshabash village secondary school	Georgian	28	28	2	4	4	2	2	2	6	3	3		
Total:			1593	831	68	77	66	75	72	67	81	75	81	74	95
Balaken district															
1	Ititala village secondary school	Azerbaijan-Georgian	368	107	13	10	11	11	7	7	6	8	15	14	5
Total:			368	107	13	10	11	11	7	7	6	8	15	14	5
The total number for 3 districts:			2907	1174	109	115	94	95	97	96	108	104	116	115	125

Azerbaijan-Georgian 4 (1314-368)

Azerbaijan-Georgian-Russian 1 (658-112-104)

Georgian 6 (719)

Training-Zaqatala (Aliabad - 1) -1/9

(Source: Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan)

Council on State Support to NGOs

According to the Ministry of Justice, there are more than 2 700 registered non-governmental organizations in Azerbaijan, but many remain unregistered. As most NGOs suffer from a shortage of funds, organisational skills, research potential and members, a state agency has been created to help them carry out their projects.

On 13th December 2007, a presidential decree established the Council on State Support to NGOs (CSSN) to encourage civil society initiatives, promote activities for the protection of national interests, involve NGOs in the solution of social problems and finance programs and projects contributing to state and social development. Every year the CSSN issues calls for the financing of the projects of the NGOs operating in Azerbaijan. Information sessions are organised for NGO leaders on each tender for these grants.

During the call for the tender of projects in 2013, the development of the culture of Azerbaijani nationalities and accenting regional NGOs initiatives were identified as priority fields. The budget envisaged for financing these priority spheres equalled one third of the overall budget allocated.

The CSSN website identifies a number of state-registered NGOs dealing with diverse issues, including refugees, internally displaced persons, disabled persons and veterans (73); legal protection (121); children and youth (191); gender issues (79); health (68); environment (77); economic issues (218); entrepreneurship (63); science and technology (176); problems of journalists (43); and arts and culture. Registered NGOs are eligible for state financial and other support.

The CSSN has also supported projects aiming to preserve the ethnic diversity and cultural legacy of ethnic groups. In 2008, it financed nine projects for an overall amount of 62,150 manats, in 2009 five projects for 42,460 manats, in 2010 two projects for 9000 manats, in 2011 three projects for 15,500 manats, in 2012 three projects for 18,000 manats and in 2013 six projects for 33,000 manats.

From 2008 to 2013, the CSSN allocated 180,110 manats to 28 minority-related projects, including:

- Shahdaq historical heritage
- Support to ethnic minorities about their voting rights
- Preservation of the cultural legacy of the ethnic Bulgarians in Azerbaijan
- Study of cultural values of Akhiska Turks in Azerbaijan and publication about their folklore
- Development of the legacy of the Kurdish culture
- Third Forum of the Russian Community
- Analysis of ethnically mixed marriages in terms of cultural and moral values
- Support for the culture of minorities living in Qakh, Zaqatala and Balakan

- Preservation of and support to ethnic cultures in Azerbaijan
- Digitalizing an literature anthology of minorities in Azerbaijan
- Preservation and development of cultural diversity in Azerbaijan
- Investigation of Udi people and their culture
- Initiatives for the development of Shahdaq people living in Guba
- and so on.

More than 20 different organisations have received state financial support, including the Public Union for Azerbaijani-Bulgarian Friendship, the Vaten Society of Akhiska Turks in Azerbaijan, the Rohani Kurdish Cultural Centre, the Russian Community in Azerbaijan, the Public Union of the Avar National Cultural Centre, the Azerbaijani-Polish International Scientific Cultural Society and others.

Institute of the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsperson)

The desire to establish an Institute of the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsperson) first appeared in a 1998 presidential decree, “On the Actions in Provision of Human Rights and Freedoms.” It was subsequently enshrined in the “State Program on Protection of Human Rights,” approved by the president on 18th June 1998.

On 28th December 2001 the Constitutional Law “On the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Azerbaijan” was adopted by the *Milli Majlis*. The decree on the implementation of the law was signed on 5th March 2002.

The Office of the Commissioner is under the direct authority of the Cabinet of Ministers⁹³ and is comprised of five departments, one of which is in charge of the protection of human rights. The Commissioner may submit motions to the President of Azerbaijan and to the Parliament in regard to the adoption or review of laws.

The first Commissioner, Elmira Suleymanova, was elected in 2002 with the overwhelming support of the *Milli Majlis*. Suleymanova is still occupying this post⁹⁴. The Office of the Commissioner has 58 staff members as well as four regional branch offices with three staff each.

Structures

Apart from the central office in Baku, regional offices were established in 2007 with the financial help of the UN Department of Public Information:

- Shaki Regional Centre (covering six districts and Mingachavir city)
- Jalilabad Regional Centre (covering nine districts)
- Guba Regional Centre (six districts)
- Ganja Regional Centre (twelve districts)

These centres liaise with the capital to facilitate contact with rural populations. They simplify the process of appeal to the Commissioner, save citizens from coming over long distances and paying for post and transport. This also reduces the period of investigation of complaints.

An office was also set up in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in 2006.

⁹³ In its Third Opinion adopted on 12th October 2012, the CoE Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities noted: “31. The Advisory Committee further notes that the Ombudsperson continues to pursue her mandate as an independent human rights protection agency. This mandate was expanded in December 2011 to include leading the working group on coordination of the implementation of the ‘National Program for Action to Raise Effectiveness of the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in the Republic of Azerbaijan.’”

⁹⁴ Suleymanova is a doctor of chemistry and a member of the New York Academy of Sciences since 1997. She has been a member of the International Ombudsman Institute and the European Ombudsmen Institute since 2003. See her full biography at <http://www.ombudsman.gov.az/view.php?lang=en&menu=6>

Procedures for the Complaints

In cases of alleged violations of their rights, members of national minorities or their associations can send their complaints directly to the Commissioner for Human Rights in Baku or to one of the regional centres.

A complaint can be lodged with the Commissioner within a period of one year from the date on which an alleged violation occurred or from when the victim became aware of the violation. Upon a request of the applicant, the Commissioner will keep the personal data of the complainant in confidence. If the full name and address of an applicant are not indicated, the complaint will be considered to be anonymous and not be pursued unless the circumstances indicated are attested by sufficient evidence and substantiated facts. In such cases, the Commissioner may admit the complaint for examination.

With the consent of the person whose human rights have been violated, the Commissioner may carry out investigations on his or her own initiative in cases of special public importance.

The mandate provides that while an issue is under investigation the Commissioner can have access, without hindrance and without prior notification, to any governmental and municipal body, military units, penitentiary institutions and detention centres; be received without delay by heads and other officials of state bodies; receive necessary information, documents and materials within 10 days from any official state body; obtain court decisions; receive written explanations from officials during the investigation of a complaint; give fact-finding tasks to relevant state bodies; charge relevant government bodies and organisations with a task of preparing an expert opinion.

Complaints are to be investigated over a period of 30 days. If additional investigation or materials are required, this term may be extended for another 30 days.

According to the Ombudsperson's 2010 Annual Report, 11,660 appeals were received in 2010 and 8,800 in 2009, bringing the total of applications since 2002 to 62,770.

Follow up of the Complaints

If as a result of an investigation the Commissioner finds a violation of the rights and freedoms of an applicant, he or she may take the following measures:

To demand from the state body, whose decision or act (omission) violated the human rights and freedoms, to remedy those violations. The appropriate bodies and officials shall within ten days submit to the Commissioner written information about the measures taken in respect of those violations.

To apply to relevant bodies in cases where certain conduct appears to be a criminal offence.

To submit proposals to relevant bodies on instituting disciplinary proceedings against the officials whose decision or act (omission) violated human rights and freedoms.

To apply to the President or the Parliament in cases violations of human rights take on special public importance.

To apply to a court of justice in order to protect the rights and freedoms violated by decision or act (omission) of a state body or an official.

To apply to the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Azerbaijan in cases the rights and freedoms of a person are violated by legislative acts in force.

The Ombudsperson, the UPR and ECRI

The Institute of the Commissioner told *Human Rights Without Frontiers* that their office had not received any specific complaint about human rights issues from persons belonging to national minorities prior to the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance process (ECRI), although consultations of civil society had been organised by the Commissioner's Office in Baku and by its local branches in the various regions of the country. Only general complaints about social and economic issues were registered but not as claims affecting or emanating from a specific national minority which would allegedly be discriminated against.

UPR

In compliance with *Item 2* (the preparation of the second periodic report for the UPR in cooperation with civil society institutions) of the Presidential Decree 2366 of 13 July 2012, the draft of the second periodic report of Azerbaijan for the UPR was also placed on the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for reflection of the views of civil society as well as non-governmental organisations on the report.

After Azerbaijan's first UPR on 4th February 2009, the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman), whose position had been created one month earlier as an independent monitoring mechanism, was charged with supervising the implementation of recommendations of the UPR report. Before Azerbaijan's second UPR on 30th April 2013, the Commissioner organised the participation of civil society institutions, local NGOs and communities by holding public hearings in all cities and districts of the country. The objective was to monitor the promotion and implementation of the National Action Plan as well as to educate people on the national and international mechanisms that are available for the protection of their individual and collective rights.

Notably, no national minority made a submission to the UPR process of Azerbaijan. Only the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan raised a question on the Talysh under two different headings: Human Rights Defenders and National Minorities.

During the interactive debate, four countries sent written questions to the delegation of Azerbaijan. One of them, Mexico, asked: “Which measures have been adopted in the education system to integrate the cultural values and participation of different ethnic groups?”

No issue related to national minorities was raised during the interactive debate and no Human Rights Council member state made any recommendation concerning national minorities in Azerbaijan.

ECRI

In its Third Opinion adopted on 12th October 2012 (Par. 31), the Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities noted: “While no disaggregated data concerning the background of complainants or the nature of their allegations is collected, the Advisory Committee was informed that no complaint had been received based on racial or ethnic discrimination. This contradicts the reports received by the Advisory Committee and noted also by other monitoring bodies of continued discrimination and intolerance against persons belonging to some national minorities, notably ethnic Armenians.⁹⁵”

⁹⁵ Among others, see Third ECRI Report on Azerbaijan, 23 March 2011.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Azerbaijan is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious state.

In Baku there are more than 20 different cultural communities: Russians, Ukrainians, Kurds, Laks, Lezgis, Slavyans, Tats, Tatars, Georgians, Ingiloyts, Talysh, Avars, Akhiska Turks, Jews, Germans, Greeks etc.

Many ethnic groups live side by side in the same regions, especially in the north of the country. However, there is no inter-ethnic conflict or tension although some groups do not share the same or the dominant religion. If the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of Azerbaijan has not caused serious problems so far, it is due to the culture of tolerance that prevails in the country and that is strengthened by a number of political mechanisms (See the section "National Legal Framework and International Instruments on Minorities").

Supporting and safeguarding cultural diversity is reflected in the state policy of Azerbaijan.

State Policy and Minorities

Cultural Heritage

The Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 16 September 1992 "On State Assistance to Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, Minority Nations and Ethnic Groups, and Development of their Language and Cultures" guarantees state assistance in the following fields: "1) protection, preservation and development of cultural, religious and language specific features of national minorities, minority nations and ethnic groups; 2) freedom of being loyal to national traditions, exercising religious rituals and ceremonies, preservation and use of the places of prayer (religious services); 3) free development of national handcrafts, vocational and amateur talent activities, folk arts; 4) protection of historical monuments of all nations; 5) preservation and protection of places, which are of public importance, reserves, parks and other nature facilities."

In the "National Action Plan on Increasing Efficiency of the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in the Republic of Azerbaijan" approved by the Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated 27 December 2011 it has also been indicated that "continuation of activities in the field of protection and development of the cultural heritage of national minorities" has been chosen as one of the major directions for activities.

Economic Development

In Azerbaijan's Comment on the Third Opinion of the Advisory Committee on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (September 2013), there was a specific focus on the economic development projects carried out in regions populated by minorities:

“The two State Programs on social and economic development of the regions of Azerbaijan, adopted in 2004 and 2009 respectively, played significant role in the overall development of our country. The second State Program on regional development is being successfully implemented at present. As a result of this Program, more than 1 100 000 jobs were created in the country, with 30 000 jobs in the first quarter of this year.

The ‘State Program on social and economic development of the regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan for the years 2009-2013’ also defines major directions of the governmental activities at the next stages in the regions with compact residence of national minorities.

In course of last seven years more than 35,000 new enterprises were created in Azerbaijan, significant portion of them created in the regions with compact settlement of national minorities.

More than 77% of the new jobs were created in the regions, with more than 20% of them in the regions with compact settlement of national minorities.”

Regional Diplomacy

Despite a complex socio-economic situation, good relations between Azerbaijan and Russia or Iran have prevented cross-border violence and separatism, which is not the case everywhere in the post-Soviet space.

Azerbaijan, so far, has succeeded in balancing its foreign policy and developing good neighborly relations, which has contributed to the stabilization of its internal situation. Successful implementation of economic reforms, oil and transportation projects have improved the lives of peoples in various parts of the country. Violent ethnic conflicts in other parts of the Caucasus persuaded people that inter-ethnic clashes have no military solution except the gloomy prospect of destroyed settlements and the emergence of refugees. Yet, many other measures can still be undertaken to ensure that the rights of minorities are not neglected, but, on the contrary, ensured and developed in Azerbaijan.

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommendations to Azerbaijan

To ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages;

To create a common platform of minorities for a permanent dialogue with the state;

To increase the visibility of the Ombudsperson, who combats all forms of discrimination in society;

To stimulate academic research about the minorities and to promote research on or in minority languages and cultures at school or in university;

Funding

To increase the funding for projects aiming at safeguarding and developing inclusive policies concerning minorities;

To provide long-term funding as well as appropriate premises to carry out activities aimed at the preservation of their language and culture;

To widely publicize the available funding sources among minority communities;

School Education

To include information on the minorities' specific languages, traditions or history in the general curriculum;

To develop bilingualism (Azerbaijani – minority language) among minority children;

To provide more opportunities for minority children to have adequate and sufficient minority language classes;

To go on developing and improving textbooks in minority languages for the lower grades;

To organize adequate training for teachers in minority languages;

Media

To encourage and support the development of more radio and TV programs for minorities, according to the needs;

To support minority language print media;

Unemployment

To redouble their efforts in order to curb the substantial levels of unemployment in the country, focusing their attention in particular on remoter areas of the country where national minority communities are living;

Tolerance

To make sure no harmful images against minorities be spread via the media;

To prosecute all manifestations of intolerance and prejudice against persons belonging to some minority groups;

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommendations to the EU

The EU and Azerbaijan have developed intense cooperation in a number of areas in the last decade. This cooperation constitutes an open door for constructive engagement in other areas.

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

- Considering that the peaceful co-existence of ethnic and ethno-religious groups in Azerbaijan is a valuable achievement contributing to domestic and regional peace;
- Considering that the ethnic diversity of Azerbaijan and its successful management is totally unknown in the European Union;
- Considering that social hostility toward ethnic groups is practically non-existent in the country;
- Considering that Azerbaijan can be seen as a model of tolerance for neighbouring countries and a model of multiculturalism;

recommends to the EU

- To deepen strategic relations with Azerbaijan in the interest of both parties;
- To facilitate academic exchanges between scholars and students of Azerbaijan and EU countries in order to stimulate exchanges of expertise;
- To provide grants to researchers, students and scholars from various cultural backgrounds in the EU who want to study the Azerbaijani language and the state management of ethnic diversity;
- To cooperate with Azerbaijan in sharing its experience of peaceful co-existence between ethnic groups in countries impacted by ethnic tensions or conflicts through international conferences and seminars;
- To help the Azerbaijani government preserve, improve and consolidate its good relations with its neighbours;
- To perceive the multi-ethnic diversity in Azerbaijan as a proof for the possibility of peaceful co-existence in the South Caucasus and encourage a comprehensive solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in line with this perspective.
- To utilize the newly established National Tolerance Center in regional projects.

ANNEX I: Censuses

The table hereafter covers all the censuses from 1926 to 2009⁹⁶.

Population of Azerbaijan according to ethnic group 1926–2009																
Ethnic group	Census 1926		Census 1939		Census 1959		Census 1970		Census 1979		Census 1989		Census 1999		Census 2009	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Azerbaijanis	1,437,977	62.1	1,870,471	58.4	2,494,381	67.5	3,776,778	73.8	4,708,832	78.1	5,804,980	82.7	7,205,464	90.6	8,172,800	91.6
Lezgins	37,263	1.6	111,666	3.5	98,211	2.7	137,250	2.7	158,057	2.6	171,395	2.4	178,021	2.2	180,300	2.02
Armenians	282,004	12.2	388,025	12.1	442,089	12.0	483,520	9.4	475,486	7.9	390,505	5.6	120,745*	1.5	120,300*	1.35
Russians	220,545	9.5	528,318	16.5	501,282	13.6	510,059	10.0	475,255	7.9	392,304	5.6	141,687	1.8	119,300	1.35
Talysh	77,323	3.3	87,510	2.7	85	0.0					21,169	0.3	76,841	1.0	112,000	1.26
Avars	19,104	0.8	15,740	0.5	17,254	0.5	30,735	0.6	35,991	0.6	44,072	0.6	50,871	0.6	49,800	0.56
Turks	95	0.0	600	0.0	202	0.0	8,491	0.2	7,926	0.1	17,705	0.3	43,454	0.5	38,000	0.43
Tatars	9,948	0.4	27,591	0.9	29,370	0.8	31,353	0.6	31,204	0.5	28,019	0.4	30,011	0.4	25,900	0.29
Tat	28,443	1.2	2,289	0.1	5,887	0.2	7,769	0.2	8,848	0.1	10,239	0.1	10,922	0.1	25,200	0.28
Ukrainians	18,241	0.8	23,643	0.7	25,778	0.7	29,160	0.6	26,402	0.4	32,345	0.5	28,984	0.4	21,500	0.24
Tsakhurs	15,552	0.7	6,464	0.2	2,876	0.1	6,208	0.1	8,546	0.1	13,318	0.2	15,877	0.2	12,300	0.14
Udins	2,445	0.1			3,202	0.1	5,492	0.1	5,841	0.1	6,125	0.1	4,152	0.1	3,800	0.04
Georgians	9,500	0.4	10,196	0.3	9,526	0.3	13,595	0.3	11,412	0.2	14,197	0.2	14,877	0.2	9,900	0.11
Jews	20,578	0.9	41,245	1.3	40,198	1.1	48,652	1.0	35,487	0.6	30,792	0.4	8,916	0.1	9,100	0.1
Kurds	41,193	1.8	6,005	0.2	1,487	0.0	5,488	0.1	5,676	0.1	12,226	0.2	13,075	0.2	6,100	0.07
Others	94,360	4.1	85,387	2.7	25,889	0.7	22,531	0.4	31,552	0.5	31,787	0.5	9,541	0.1	9,500	0.11
Total	2,314,571		3,205,150		3,697,717		5,117,081		6,026,515		7,021,178		7,953,438		8,922,400	

(*) Almost all Armenians live in the break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh since the early 1990s.

⁹⁶For more details, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_minorities_in_Azerbaijan.

ANNEX II: Use of Languages and National Minorities⁹⁷

Programs in languages of national minorities living in the Republic of Azerbaijan are entered into the program schedule of public services according to the Article 12.3 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan No.767-IIQ dated 28th September 2008 on “Public Television and Radio Broadcasting”.

Media

On AZTV channel daily at 18.00 is being broadcasted news program in Russian with duration of 20 minutes, on Ictimai (Public) Channel daily at 14.00 is being broadcasted news program in Russian with duration of 12 minutes, and also different programs in Russian, Georgian, Talysh, Lezghi languages are being transmitted on satellite channel ATV INT and on short and medium waves of radio REPUBLIC. Regional channels – KAPAZ TV (Gandja), KANAL S (Sheki), JANUB TV (Lenkeran), REGION TV (Khachmaz) GUTB TV (Guba), TURKEL TV (Tovuz), EL TV (Yevlakh) are transmitting documentary “National Minorities” in different times.

Public Services

According to Article 27 of the 2005 Law on Administrative Proceedings, administrative proceedings are performed in the official language of the Republic of Azerbaijan, or in the language of the majority of a specific area, also documents and information are provided to the participants of this process in the language that the proceedings take place.

Also, under the Article 11.3 of the 2002 Law “On Official Language in the Republic of Azerbaijan” in accordance with the Law “On Notaries” if the person requesting notary acts does not speak the official language or asks notary acts to be prepared in another language, then the notary may notarize the documents in the requested language or the text may be translated by an official translator.

⁹⁷ Source : Comments of the Government of Azerbaijan on the Third Opinion of the CoE Advisory Committee on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Azerbaijan (Strasbourg, 3rd September 2013)

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