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**Cultural Policy and Specificity of Institutionalization of Ethnic Communities in Azerbaijan
research project**

By

**Abbasov Ilgam
(name of the primary researcher)**

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Introduction

It should be realized that there are certain specifics pertaining to the national policy in Azerbaijan which is formed partially under influence of foreign policy led by the country's leadership. These specifics predefine the space where ethnical identity is constructed. Above all, it should be stated that official statistics serves as a ground to present the country as homogenous to its maximum in regard to ethnic structure of the population (90.7% of the population are Azerbaijanis). However, ethnic activists often question data of the last population census (1999), and claim that the real number of a national minority has been decreased.

At the same time mass media, as well as analytical expertise have tendency to assess the role of an ethnic minority not only on the basis of its number, but habitat too. For instance, **Lezgis** who are one of the biggest ethnic groups of the North Caucasian language family (official number is 178.000) populate the North of the country that is the border land with the Russian Federation (Gusar and other districts). The border with Russia divides Lezgis into two unequal parts (the bulk live in Russia). Such compact inhabitation in border lands is considered by Azerbaijani experts as unsafe for the country's integrity.

Meanwhile, it needs to be noted that Lezgis are highly integrated into the Azerbaijani society. Almost all of them speak Azerbaijani and the Lezgi language is mostly used in everyday life and is currently being replaced by dominating Azerbaijani despite the fact that it is possible to learn native language in primary school. Likewise Azerbaijanis, Lezgis are Muslims and are traditionally ascribed to Sunni Muslims. The beginning of 1990s saw the establishment of the movement of "Sadval" among the Lezgi nationalists who are accused of perpetrating terrorist acts in Baku's underground. At present this movement is not active in Azerbaijan any more, but exists in the Russian Federation. However, the official power in the Republic recognizes the Lezgi national cultural society; the latter is not fully active.

Such discourse is also related towards the one of the biggest ethnic minority of Azerbaijan – **Talyshis (Talish)** who belong to the Iranian Language Family (official number is 76.000). They populate the Southern parts of the country bordering with Iran (Masally, Lankaran and other districts). As in case of Lezgis, Talyshis might be considered as a divided ethnic group (the bulk live in Iran). As the majority of Azerbaijanis, Talyshis are also ascribed to Shiite Muslims.

Russians (official number is 141.700 people) are one of the biggest ethnic minorities. This population is ever decreasing likewise Jews who make about 8.900 people

in Azerbaijan. The reason of such decrease is intensive emigration out of the country. Nevertheless, official Russian and Jewish national communities (meaning organizations) are of the viable ones. There are compact settlements outside Baku (Jews in Red Quarter in Guba city; Russians in the village of Ivanovka of the district of Ismayilly). The population of the latter settlement is ethnic group in itself – Molokans. This is one of the most popular villages in the Republic (the last kolkhoz or collective farm, in the South Caucasus) with approximate population of 2000/2500 people. Moreover, in the village live about 500 Lezgis.

Kin State. It should be stated that the context of historic motherland might be considered in regard to almost all of the mentioned ethnic groups. For some of them the present habitat is considered as historic motherland (Lezgis, Talyshis, etc.). But at the same time for Lezgis there is an “external motherland” – part of Dagestan, where ethnic activists have much more freedom and possibilities to construct ethnic myths. It may seem that the context of historic motherland would be more interesting in this case rather than with Russians.

Confession. In order to depict construction mechanisms of identity it is important to cast a look at activities of religious organizations. Such direction is particularly important in regard to identity research, e. g. of Lezgis and Avars from one side and Talyshis from the other. In general it is thought that religious organizations often described as Wahhabi have been establishing themselves among the former ones. Hereby there is strong influence of Turkey, Arab countries, etc. At the same time it is thought that the influence of Shiite Iran is quite strong among Talyshis (the Southern regions populated by them are considered as one of the most conservative).

Definition of research focus. As we think the most interesting research area would be related to Lezgis and Talyshis. In this case it would be possible to comparatively analyze identity construction mechanisms. What about Russians, among the latter Molokans should be distinguished, as in accordance with our survey this very group has particularly interesting process concerning identity transformation. Meanwhile, the community of Kazaks is also interesting in the context of identity construction which is developed apparently in compliance with voluntary participation. At present there is an official community of Kazaks (the Kazak circle) which seems to concentrate the ethnic activists around.

At the same time, it is within the context of construction of identity that the community of Cossacks, which is formed on the basis of the principle of voluntary

participation, is of considerable interest too. Cossacks currently have an official community (Cossack circle) in the republic, around which ethnic activists are concentrated.

A rich academic literature has tackled the question of how to improve ethnic relations in the South Caucasus. In an attempt to both build on existing research and complement it, the aim of the present project is to focus on how the interaction between minority elites, masses and titular governments has affected the construction of ethnic organizations in the post soviet period.

The **research methodology** included conducting 20 biographical problem-oriented interviews with representatives of three ethnic groups – the Lezgis, the Talish, and the Avars. Among the informants surveyed were both ethnic activists (including community leaders) and those who do not think of themselves as activists. An exception was made for the Russians – 30 interviews - considering the specific features of the group: 10 with ethnic activists, 10 with those who do not visit the community, and 10 with Molokans and Cossacks (research into construction of ethnic boundaries).

Some difficulty arose during the conduct of the research using the method of participating observation. As for the Russians (including Molokans and Cossacks), there are structured and permanently functioning institutions where observation was conducted throughout the research. At the same time, these kinds of institutions of the Lezgis and Talish are not operational. They do not have permanent premises and therefore do not carry out permanent activity (celebration of special dates, etc). The organizations are only represented by ethnic activists who, effectively, are getting increasingly farther from all community activity. As for the Avars, they lack any nominal institution altogether, and heads of respected kins are effectively their ethnic activists. Therefore, it was very complicated to conduct research using the observation method in the latter three cases.

At the same time, there was no problem with conducting problem-oriented interviews with experts. These were political analysts, sociologists, and other specialists (the focus of the interviews was: expert assessment of the specific features of the institutionalization and the level of functionality of ethnic communities, and their place and role in the present-day Azerbaijani society).

Interview Guide

Interview Guide (Biographical approach) including several blocks of questions:

A. Biographical questions:

1. Where and when are you born, get the education;
2. Where do you work;

3. Origin of the family (when and where informants father, mother, grandfather, grandmother had been born, education, work and etc.);
 4. Memory of the family (ethnic relations in the memory of the close relatives and etc.)
 5. Questions about informant family (husband, children, their work, education and etc.)
- B. Relations with the ethnic organizations
1. For ethnic activists: when, how and why do you work in the organization (start working);
 2. What kind of work do you do;
 3. What is the programme of the organization activity (politics, cultural, educational, religious aspects and etc.);
 4. The history of the organization;
 5. The resources of the financial support;
 6. For the non-ethnic activists: have you ever heard about the national community (organization);
 7. Have you ever attend or not the organization and why;
 8. What do you think about these kind of organization (is it important to take part in this kind of activity or not and etc.);
- C. Kin state
1. Does somebody want to emigrate;
 2. About the politics of the home country towards "compatriots" and etc.

Analysis of field materials

1. The Russian community in Azerbaijan (Russians/Molokans/Cossacks).

A). Russians. I should immediately note that the singling out of the three groups described as one "Russian community"¹ is, naturally, conditional in nature. According to my observations and information obtained from interviews, most Molokans and Cossacks also consider themselves as ethnic Russians. However, the singling out of the latter two

¹ I should note that I, naturally, am well aware of how complicated it is to apply the notions of "community" or "diaspora" to the Russians in Azerbaijan. According to the fair remark by Natalya Kosmarskaya, the "Semantic connection between the studied definitions for Russian speakers is quite obvious – these are rigidly unifying and consolidating terms (in addition, with a touch of antiquity), which comb the 'compatriots' using one comb, in the spirit of communal collectivism and like-mindedness". Космарская Н. «Русские Диаспоры»: Политические мифологии и реалии массового сознания, М., Диаспоры, № 2, 2002, р. 110-156, p. 114.

When in the text I describe the community researched as "Russian community", I mean the generally accepted and official definition for this ethnic group in Azerbaijan and I do not put into it any ideas about some sort of a society consolidated and united by common interests.

groups is still justified by the fact that they have their own special institutions, and rules of membership in the three groups singled out depend on different criteria.

As for Russians proper, I first of all should note that almost all analysts (experts) agree that the official number of Russians in Azerbaijan is rather overestimated as their gradual outflow from the republic is continuing. My field materials lead me to believe that the number of Russians will sharply decrease in the next 20-30 years. The thing is that a considerable part of representatives of this ethnic minority are women who are married to Azerbaijanis, Talish and Lezgis. Children born to mixed marriages believe, as a rule, that they are of the same ethnicity as their father. In addition, most women are in the middle and senior age groups.

In fact, all of the foregoing is an indication to the fact that the ethnic group "Russians" (even without mention of Molokans and Cossacks) cannot be viewed as homogenous. It consists of actors who are in different situations. These situations determine their social status, attitude to kin state, disposition for emigration from the country, etc². For example, for the category of women who are married to Azerbaijanis, largely typical is the lack of disposition for participation in the activity of the "Russian community":

I do not happen to have contacts with the Russian community or with the Russian embassy. Somehow I cannot make it. No, not that I cannot make it, I just do not feel the need or the desire to, I don't know. I know that very many people go to those events, meet others, everything. <> If I needed that, I would go, I think (woman, 56 years old).

For many, the lack of disposition for return also involves the gradual loss of the status of "motherland" (as an image of importance for identity) in relation to Russia. "Motherland" is a country (town) in which the woman, informant, was born and lived her whole life, i.e. Azerbaijan. As for the political "motherland":

Moscow - I will tell you about it now. That was the Soviet Union. It was the capital of the USSR, the capital of our motherland. We wrote so, said so, and there was some kind of awe, yes. Very many wanted, me included, to go to see it, so I did go when I

² What is more, this lack of homogeneity should also be applied to all other Russian communities in the CIS as a whole. "The Russian minorities in the former Soviet republic are very dissimilar one to another, therefore it is absolutely incorrect to talk about Russian diaspora or a new Russian diaspora (in singular). Apparently, it would be more productive to view them 14 difference diasporas, each with its own specific features that has formed under the influence of lots of factors. Among these are the number (absolute and as compared to the number of the population in a country), ethnic solidarity, social structure, cultural originality (cultural distance towards the dominant ethnic environment), and finally, the duration of habitation and the degree of rootedness in a given area". Колсто П. Укореняющиеся диаспоры: русские в бывших советских республиках, М., Диаспоры, № 1, 2001, p. 6-38, p. 16.

was a student. <> Certainly, I do not feel that awe now as I did then. It is certainly not perceived as the capital of our country anymore (woman, 52 years old).

At the same time, the "Russian community", on the contrary, is oriented to cooperation with the political motherland whose chief local representative is the Russian Federation Embassy in Azerbaijan. The community formed as an institution in 1993, splitting off from the "Commonwealth" in which most ethnic communities of Azerbaijan were united in the early post-Soviet period. The permanent leader of the community is Mikhail Zabelin who has represented Russians as an ethnic minority in the Milli Majlis since then.

There is the chairman of the community (M. Zabelin). There are members of the council and deputy chairs. <> Those are deputies Mayorov, Yakunina, Vasilchenko (chair of the educational commission). Voronin is on the organizational committee. Then, Voronin was first deputy chair. <> They are in all towns and districts in Azerbaijan, in Guba District, in Lankaran. <> In the districts, besides the chair there are also members of the council and of the community. There is also the legal commission, Tikhonova, I think, Lidiya Vasilyevna. She is a nice person, former judge, I cannot remember well now. There is the council of elders. Tatarenko used to be in charge of it, and now Anatoliy Yefimovich Nichipurenko, first-rank captain. <> There is a youth (organization) <> journalist <> Roman Temnikov (man, 58 years old).

Thus, it is the Russian community that is one of the most structured ones and has lots of branches. However, the activists of the community and/or participants in its activity to one or another extent are the few Russians permanently living in Azerbaijan. No more than 150-200 people participate in pan-community events, according to my observations. As for the district (Baku) and regional meetings, in each case only several dozens of people who need a Russian-speaking environment or some help are involved.

B). Molokans Molokans, as a rule, are regarded as Russians. As for the history of their appearance in Azerbaijan, the very "Resettlement of Russians into the Trans-Caucasus territory effectively starts from the expulsion in the 1830s of dissenters and sectarians which was done exclusively for judicial and punitive purposes"³. Most of the sectarians who were resettled to the Trans-Caucasus at that time were Dukhobors and Molokans. Currently there are a number of centres around which the Molokan community is preserved. These are praying houses in Baku and Sumgait in which members of the community of "Spiritual Molokans", i.e. of those actively sticking to religious rules and

³ Исмаил-Заде Д. И., Русское крестьянство в Закавказье (30-е годы XIX начало XX в.), М.: Наука, 1982, р. 34

norms of conduct, can always get together. Along with these praying houses, the village of Ivanovka (in Ismayilli District) is some kind of a centre for Molokans in the republic.

Currently there are few parishioners of Molokan praying houses in towns and villages. In each case those are only several dozens of people (up to 70-80) in Baku, Sumgait and the village of Ivanovka. Most of the permanent parishioners are people in senior age groups (50 and older) and most of them are women.

The chief religious leaders are the so-called "aged men". Effectively, these are the actors who, as is commonly believed, preserve the identity of the Molokans and retranslate it to the new generation. Certainly, this retranslation can be viewed as operating only with a certain level of success. The Soviet secularization, apparently, led to most of those - whom Azerbaijanis, Lezgis and others (i.e. Molokans' neighbours in the residence area) traditionally regard as Molokans - not being active parishioners of the praying houses.

Our aged men gather there in the praying house, and they are actually the Molokans. And me, if I am not going to the prayers and am not observing the rules, then what kind of a Molokan am I? (man, 52 years old)

The spiritual head of the Molokan community in Ivanovka (man aged 70 – Vasiliy Terentyevich Prokofyev, Presbyterian of the church of spiritual Molokan Christians) says:

There is no icon anywhere in our church. All there is is the Bible and God's Word. And in their Orthodox Church, there is a man-made man and they bow to him. That is the difference. They only bow to a man-made thing, i.e. the icon. But we do not acknowledge the icon, we only acknowledge the Bible.

Some food restrictions and other specific features in the decoration in the praying houses can be added to this (and also the very fact that they are not called Molokans, like churches)

The situation in Baku causes certain fears, and ideas of modernizing the Molokans' religious practices are appearing already now. Thus, one of the leaders the Baku Molokans notes that a new experience of attracting people into the praying house is needed and the Molokan church needs to be modernized.

I myself always go everywhere. I am interested in everything. I have visited the Baptists and the Witnesses of Jehovah. Generally, when I am invited somewhere, I always go. I go there in order to see how things are there. This is very useful. Here, say, the Baptists. Hundreds of people come to them for prayers. After all, they know how to attract people. Because they create conditions for young people. They take them to various events, create communication. But we do everything in old ways.

Everything is dying out now. If things go on this way then sometime in the future there will no longer be any Molokans left at all (man, 75 years old).

According to my observations, currently people of middle age and especially young people, natives of the Molokan villages in Baku and Sumgait, likewise those who are still continuing to live in villages such as Ivanovka, often show no noticeable interest not only in the religious aspect of the life of the community but in the specific features of its history either. They habitually describe themselves as Russians.

This is just a talk that everyone is a Molokan. In fact, Molokans are a religion, while we ourselves are Russians. One thing does not contradict another. And now, only elderly people go to the praying house. We do not go there anymore, and our children are far from that altogether. (woman, 52 years old).

An active Molokan man, one of the seven aged men of the praying house of permanent Molokans in Baku without whom prayers are not held, also stresses that:

The traditions are a little different, but what matters is that everyone should believe in God, the way they want and the way they can. <> Otherwise, we are regular Russian peoples. We are no different from Russians, only our religion is Molokan (man, 68 years old).

The observations fit in the thesis by Fredrick Barth who said that no mutual unacceptance or lack of social interaction is supposed for the preservation of the boundaries of a group. Molokan communities which apparently used to be quite self-contained (like in Ivanovka) have long been open to external influence (Soviet secularization, war, migration, etc). But the Molokan community is still preserved in Azerbaijan, and only "belonging to the group", according to Barth, is identified by those "who are not part of it", that is to say, it is ascriptively attributed by the external environment - Azerbaijanis, Lezgis, etc.⁴

C). Cossacks. Taking into account the fact that the chairman of the Russian community – Mikhail Zabelin – has been a member of the Milli Majlis for years now and, besides, the Russian community is receiving more financial and symbolic aid from Russia, there is a certain element of rivalry with the Russian community. The title of member of parliament represents not only a material interest for the community leader – the ataman, Cossack major-general - but also an important symbolic status, both for the ataman and the community as a whole. This is a status that allows one to hope for greater accessibility of supreme power, and therefore for an opportunity to receive some preferences.

⁴ Этнические группы и социальные границы, под ред. Фредерика Барта, М., Новое Издательство, 2006, р. 10, 11

According to the leaders, there are about 1,500 people registered in the community. At that, one should think that the community preserves its attractiveness up until today. During almost each of my visit, I came across people who either had just joined the community or were joining it while I was there.

I myself am Russian but my grandmother was a Cossack. But this does not matter here. Cossacks were a class in the tsar's times. That is not an ethnicity. They just never were serfs, they were only free and were on compulsory military service. Today is peace time, and ordinary men are in the field, at the plough. But if suddenly war starts, he immediately takes up the saber and gets on the horse.
(man, 45 years old)

I should say that Cossacks, within the boundaries of the community, are perceived as a class which they are actually trying to restore within the boundaries of the community.

Ethnicity does not matter here. I myself, for example, am an Ossetian, but there is no difference from others. There are Azerbaijanis and Lezgis here. You just join, and that's it, if you like it, the community will accept you too. Only desire is needed, and also two letters of reference from other Cossacks. You fill in an application form and if you are all right, then you are admitted to the community. Religion does not matter either. I am a Muslim myself. (man, 42 years old.)

At the same time, most members of the community are still ethnic Russians, and the resource of replenishing the ranks is to a considerable extent based on Cossacks' children. This can be explained by several reasons. First of all, being a Cossack is attractive for parents and they want to cultivate in their children what they think is right for the children too. Most of the children are boys – the organization seems to be "right" primarily for boys. Strife for strict order, respect for older people and other "traditional" values make the communities also a space for the right upbringing of the children.

Apparently, some members of the community put their children into it not only to get them to have the right leisure and involve them in community networks with Russian-speakers, of whom there have remained noticeably fewer in the post-soviet Azerbaijan. A woman brings her children also because she thinks of herself as a Cossack by birth. But still, most bring their children because they believe that in such a community their children will receive the right guidelines in life – discipline, respect for older people, etc. The community primarily consists of former members of the Defence Ministry and the Interior Ministry. In a way this is a reason for the special status of the community.

It is important exactly into which Cossack context Cossacks in Azerbaijan should be placed. For example, S. Markedonov notes: "how fair is it actually to unite different groups

of Cossacks within one construction 'Cossack community'⁵. Markedonov, however, talks more about the historical aspect against the background of which "Cossacks" appear as communities which are very heterogeneous in terms of their composition, origins, goals, etc.

"When scientists are talking about Cossacks and Cossack community, they also mean Don Cossacks of the epoch of the late Middle Ages ("free people"), and the Ussuri, trans-Baikal Cossack community at the turn of the two last centuries (formations which can hardly be identified as "free" or "wandering"), and the Zaporozhskoye "knights", and the Ukrainian registered Cossacks, and the Cossacks of Muscovite Russia who are from the category of «those who serve by conscription», and "thief Cossacks" of Ivashka Zarutski, and Cossacks of ataman P. N. Krasnov and commander F. K. Mironov, and finally, the "Soviet Cossacks" and participation in collaborationists units and formations of World War II. <> Former Soviet engineers and teachers have now declared themselves Cossacks, as well as their children and grandchildren born after the collapse of the USSR. The impossibility of a unique interpretation of the history of various communities united by one common word "Cossacks" is obvious. »⁶

However, it was more important for me to identify the modern specific features of the re-actualization of the identity Cossack, the specific features of the institutionalization of the community in Azerbaijan and the way all this is connected with the construction of boundaries between the Cossacks and the Russians. Here, for instance, there are special particularities to it. Thus, I should say that the issue of the origins of the Cossacks has long interested researchers, historians, ethnologists, etc. Discussions on the "autochthonic" or "migrational" concepts of the origins of the Cossacks are unlikely to subside in the near future⁷. But these discussions will have no impact on the situation in the Cossack community in Azerbaijan, at least on the ideology of the project "The community of the Cossacks of Azerbaijan". The Cossacks in the Azerbaijani Republic are primarily a class. The question of how a class can be restored in the present-day modernized society remains open. It would seem that members of the community do not reflect on the paradoxical situation of the construction of a feudal social group –class. And this is a normal situation. I think a community is a "club of interests" which mainly unites the fans of

⁵ Маркедонов С. Казачество: единство или многообразие? *Ab Imperio*, 2/2004, p. 521-528, p. 521

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 522

⁷ S. Markedonov considers the history of development of these concepts in detail in his article. See: Основной вопрос казаковедения: российская историография в поисках «древнего» казачества, *Ab Imperio*, 2/2004, p. 529-568

the "military", in all its manifestations. Identity as ethnicity is not actualized. In fact, it is not actualized locally in the Kuban troops themselves either.

Thus, B. Boeck says that most representatives of the Kuban Cossacks - and Azerbaijan's Cossacks view themselves as part of them - prefer not to politicize the identity "Cossack" and prefer to correlate their Cossack identity rather with the decorative, folklore, and de-politicized representation of differences between Russians and Cossacks⁸.

I think that the context into which the specific features of the situation of the Russian community in the Azerbaijani Republic should be put should imply differences in the situations across the CIS. Russians outside Russia in CIS countries are also presented in the official Russian discourse as a single community. But at the same time, their consideration within a larger space of Russian-speakers is always important.

Thus, K. Grigorichev considers Russians in Kazakhstan within the space of a larger array of Russian-speakers (for him, these also include Ukrainians and Belarusians). He also points out that this is "a large and quite a blurred group" which should be considered as a heterogeneous entity the various segments of which can select various strategies of interaction with the state where they live, with the ethnic majority that dominates in it, and also with "the historical motherland". He thinks that the criterion through which the heterogeneity of this community can be seen is the "generational" one⁹. And it is hard not to agree with this.

Another important criterion can also be the fact that the bulk of Russians/Russian speakers live in towns and especially in Baku. This criterion is referred to by, e.g., E. Abdullayev, who to a considerable extent links the specific features of the situation of Russians in Uzbekistan with the idea that Russians are mainly urban residents. He talks about "alienation from town" which is connected with the renaming of many previous urban names of streets, avenues, etc, reconstruction and replanning, and also the problem of planting trees. He, however, fairly calls for the situation not to be absolutized, and says that the negative changes in town also cause "alienation" in some urban Uzbeks¹⁰. And in Azerbaijanis, I should add. Incidentally, some Azerbaijanis who are Russian speakers sometimes also attend events organized by the Russian community and are members of the Cossack circle.

⁸ Boeck B. From the verge of extinction to ethnic distinction: Cossack identity and ethnicity in the Kuban' region, 1991-2002, *Ab Imperio*, 2/2004, pp. 617-645, p. 644-645

⁹ Григоричев К. Русскоязычное население центрального Казахстана: возрастные особенности формирования идентичности и жизненных стратегий, *Дiasпоры*, № 2, 2006, p. 56-157.

¹⁰ Абдуллаев Е. Русские в Узбекистане 2000-х гг.: идентичность в условиях демодернизации, *Дiasпоры*, № 2, 2006, p. 6-33, p. 28-32

The overall conclusion is that the Russian community in Azerbaijan is a very heterogeneous entity of citizens whose background supposes socialization in a Russian-speaking environment. Effectively, this supposes also two resources of mobilization of actors for participation in the activity of the community. These are the Russians proper, and in a wide sense, Russian speaking citizens of the republic. At that, institutions do not always appeal to ethnicity. The boundaries within the community run along the religion (Russians - Molokans) or constructs of belonging to "class" (Russians - Cossacks). However, these boundaries are not impenetrable.

2. The Lezgi community in Azerbaijan

Moving over to the Lezgi community, I should immediately note that there is also some kind of union towards the political motherland. It is understandable that most Lezgis, likewise Avars, live in Russia's Dagestan (i.e. in the Russian Federation) and therefore there is some kind of a common council ("Commonwealth") of representatives of minorities for whom ties with Russia play a considerable role, to different degrees though. Naturally, representatives of the "Russian community" are members of the council, too, along with Lezgis and Avars.

The Lezgi community was institutionalized in the early 1990s. However, the community is actually very under-structured and unites only a very small group of activists. Thus, by the definition by Shair Hasanov (member of the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, currently a pensioner, 73), who is the chairman of the Lezgi ethnic centre "Samur":

This society propagates the culture, national traditions, folklore, songs, and the language. To some extent, it certainly preserves the Lezgi language. <> We are a public organization, there are five of us, we publish the newspaper "Samur", our editor is an honored culture figure, Sadagat Karimova. She edits the newspaper (deputy editor is Muzaffar Malikmammadov). She also leads the folklore ensemble called "Suvar", which means holiday in Lezgi. On 5 May, a concert was given on the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the birth of Heydar Aliyev at the Azerbaijani Drama Theatre. The concert was very interesting, full house, free entrance, lots of people, dancing, singing. They are actually similar to Azerbaijani ones but the staging was folklore-dance oriented.

I should say that the activity of the society is on the whole not very noticeable and there is very little activity there. And this is considering the fact that unlike with the Russians in Azerbaijan, there are areas populated by Lezgis and the town of Gusar which is perceived by ordinary people as a Lezgi town. According to my observations, on the one hand, the

weak activity of the organization has largely to do with the noticeable politicized nature of the so-called Lezgi issue in Azerbaijan. This politicized nature¹¹ is caused by an external factor – the presence of actively operating groups of radical Lezgi nationalists in Dagestan¹².

On the other hand, unlike radicalism and the politicized nature of the Lezgi ethno-national discourse and the radicalism of Lezgi ethno-nationalists, most ordinary people are not affected by this discourse in any way. Effectively, for most Lezgis in Azerbaijan in everyday life there are no mechanisms of not only discrimination but generally of any kind of actualization of ethnicity at all.

I do not like dividing at all. Maybe people do actually need to be divided into Azerbaijanis, Lezgis, Russians, or, say, Japanese, or something else. Well, we are just humans. Humans, people. If people are so chained to ethnicity, religion, then every religion says that we are first of all humans. And that originally was like that. Well, I would very much like this kind of talk not to be there. This is all a nation. Nation means human. <> No, I feel myself... No, no, I am not saying that these holidays or some traditions should not be maintained, no, for God's sake. Every nation has something of its own, something beautiful, something so nice, national. I am against division. (man, 34).

This disposition is also supported by activists who are united within the "Samur" organization. At the same time, taking into account the fact that the organization does not have its own permanent premises, there just can be no talk about its permanent activity. At the same time, in every-day life, the difference between the every-day practices, the national traditions between Lezgis, the Talish or the dominant Azerbaijanis are minimal. For most Lezgis, unlike Russians, there is simply no need for a linguistic space of communication. For those having this need, such a linguistic space is easily to be found in the village from which their family/kin comes from or in Gusar.

In our village – yes – others (non-Lezgis) will simply not get along. There are, for example, a couple of people who married someone else, a Russian, and brought her here. There are some who married a Talish woman and brought her here. But they have already accepted the language; they speak Lezgi, that's it... I myself was

¹¹ I should note that this is a problem of researchers too. Most researchers concentrate their attention precisely on the "political fate of ethnic minorities". In the same way as the authors of one of the latest pieces of work on this topic. See: Алексеев М., Казенин К., Сулейманов М. Дагестанские народы Азербайджана: политика, история, культура, М., Изд-во «Европа», 2006

¹² Here, I primarily mean "Sadval". However, one can judge about the radicalism of ethno-nationalists in Dagestan by numerous texts posted on Lezgi web sites. See, for example, the site of "Kabal news agency". Its online address is: <http://www.khabal.info/?l=rus&act=region>

surprised; they are Talish and Russian but are fluent in Lezgi and have accepted our traditions. That is the way it should be and it is fine. <> Well, customs. They go and get some water, bake bread, and do things that are normally done in the village. We bake bread like this (shows using gestures). We have our own traditions of baking bread. We make round loafs of bread, well, kara chorayi. <> Only we bake it this way, it is not done this way in other places (man, 32).

The overall conclusion: most Lezgis in Azerbaijan lack the need for ethnic organization. The institutionalization of such an organization had to do with counteraction to the radical organization "Sadval" and the general disposition for the "right" policy regarding minorities. The establishment of the organization "Samur" became possible only at the initiative of and with support from the authorities of the republic. Its existence represents a liberal policy regarding the Lezgi minority. However, in fact, there is practically no demand for its operation.

You know, people are born, grow up in the village, finish school, leave for Russia, and are away for 10 to 15 years. Then they come back, buy land, build a house and leave again. But they have a house, so they arrive in summer, have a rest. This is how the village has dispersed. Well, again, everyone goes, but they still do come back. And there is also a peculiar tradition – they leave for Russia, but come back to the village to get married. Here, today I am invited to a wedding party. <> They are seven brothers, they live in Kazan. Every time it is time for one of them to get married, they arrive together, get married in the village to someone local and go back. People seem to have money and live fine but they come back to the village. They do what their parents tell them to do and leave. That's it. (man, 46).

It is local identity (town/village) which is rather topical for Lezgis in Azerbaijan, actually just like for representatives of the dominant nation too. The small motherland, as a space of reproduction of behavioural stereotypes, Lezgi language skills, traditions, etc, effectively deprives ethnic organizations of topicality for everyone except partners of the authorities and ethno-nationalists.

2. The Talish community in Azerbaijan

It should be stressed immediately that almost all of what has been said about Lezgis goes for the Talish in Azerbaijan. The main town in the Talish-populated area in the south of the country is Lankaran. Lankaran is the official location of the Centre for Talish History, Culture and Ethnography which is headed by Barat Gasimov.

However, in the case of the Talish, the politicized nature of ethnicity looks somewhat more actualized than with Lezgis. First of all, in the case with the Talish, the

areas which they populate are adjacent to Iran with which Azerbaijan has very complicated relations. At the same time, the only post-Soviet attempt of declaring a new autonomy in the Azerbaijani Republic also took place in these districts. Aliakram Humbatov (head of the Talish-Mugan republic) was released last year. He is effectively stripped of Azerbaijani citizenship and has found refuge in the Netherlands. It is in the case with the Talish that natives of Azerbaijan make attempts to set up organizations abroad propagating ethno-nationalism under the Talish scenario. Finally, a special situation is also created by the arrest of the editor of the newspaper "Tolishi Sado" which took place in early February 2007 in Baku. That was the head of the department of the institute of language studies of the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, chairman of the Talish culture centre (and also the editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Tolishi Sado" ("Voice of Talish"), Novruzali Mammadov.

In the beginning he was charged with putting up resistance to police but already on 17 February he and another member of the Academy of Science Elman Guliyev were charged with high treason. I should note that the newspaper "Tolishi Sado" declaratively is the organ of the Talish community in Azerbaijan. As far as I learnt, the paper itself was published in Moscow (or Minsk). Mammadov's arrest caused a negative reaction among Talish intellectuals and aggravated the already-extremely politicized "Talish issue". The "separatist" (the former political prisoner) Aliakram Humbatov links these arrests to US-Iranian relations and describes those arrested as quite loyal to the Azerbaijani authorities ("the authorities want to intimidate all the Talish, a certain part of whom protest against Azerbaijan being used against Iran"). On 27 February arrests continued, this time it was deputy chairman of the Talish culture centre Ali Nasirov (Ali Nasir) arrested.

The arrested are accused of ties with Iranian intelligence and receiving financing for the newspaper in Iran. The accusation also includes a count on "anti-Azerbaijani propaganda" conducted by the arrested. The propaganda involves advertizing the Talish language via materials published in the paper, and attributing Azerbaijani culture figures to the Talish (for example. poet Nizami, etc).

Considering the spy scandals and very strict measures towards stopping the operation of the Talish culture centre, it was very difficult to conduct any major research work with ethnic activists from among the Talish. At the same time, according to my research materials, I can conclude that the issue, as is mentioned above, is excessively politicized.

In the village, in the region there are now some villages which are considered to be purely indigenous Talish. And there are some villages which are known to have a more or less mixed population. Thus, my father's village is known for the fact that

the population there is mixed, and there are even historical neighbourhoods there, they say "Turk oba", i.e. that is a neighborhood where historically newcomers settled. And even when they speak Talish they have an accent that is not typical of other regions. They are recognized by their accent, it does not sound quite Talish. There are the villages north of Lankaran. Those closer to, say, Masalli, closer to the border, are more mixed. The more southwards, the more, sort of, a purely Talish percentage of the population. And closer to Lerik, in the mountain regions, the population is believed to be less mixed. (man, 32)

It would be a major exaggeration to talk about any serious threat of separatism considering the tradition of long-standing joint habitation, when even ethnic activists can hardly tell "the Talish component" from the "non-Talish". The mother tongue for most Talish is primarily Azerbaijani.

Azerbaijani was always the dominant language for my mother's relatives. Why – because it was believed to be the language of education, a more elite language, and it was believed to be fashionable. Elite families preferred to speak Azerbaijani, neglecting the Talish language. My mother's family was considered to be one of the elite families in the village. And their father did not like to mix the languages and made them speak one language, and that was Azerbaijani. Well, because of that they all entered universities and received education and everything. And the neighbours, ordinary people, they spoke Talish. I remember, when I was a kid, my grandmother's neighbours often spoke Talish among themselves, or they themselves spoke it, but again, their language was mixed (man, 47)

In addition, at least, a considerable part of the Talish does not see noticeable differences in the customs, traditions, etc between Azerbaijanis and themselves. There, naturally, are differences, but they do not actualize the boundary between the Talish and the dominant ethnic group.

Today they go asking someone in marriage and tomorrow they get them engaged so that the man and the girl can date, so that everything is done according to the law, to have the right to hold her by her hand. Otherwise, there is no difference in the roots of the customs. Only, on Novruz holiday we must have seven meals on the table. There is no such thing in Baku. There must be fish on the table, and there is no such thing in Baku. (man, 38).

The overall conclusion: the situation, considering the recent arrests of ethnic activists, completely levels the significance of ethnic organization. If before the series of arrests it did play an insignificant role, too, and united a small group of ethnic activists,

then as a result of recent pressure even intellectuals prefer to distance themselves from any contacts with representatives of the culture centre. It is natural that the new head of the community in these conditions plays a purely nominal role and mainly tries to focus as little attention as possible on himself.

4. The Avar community in Azerbaijan

I should note that although there is nominally a society of Avars of Azerbaijan named after Imam Shamil, actually the talk is about some kind of a union of elders/aksakals, who are especially respected people among the Avars. Some of the elderly are, for example, the late Ali Antsukhskiy and Mukhammad Jandarov, and also Gushan Gushanov who is alive. In addition, there is common belief that MP Rabiya Aslanova has been representing the Avars during several convocations of parliament. However, it would be an exaggeration to receive the heads of kin/the elderly as authorities for all Avars in Azerbaijan. At the same time, the very presence of such persons who are to one or another degree charismatic and the strength of traditional institutions of leadership apparently determine the weakness of ethnic organizations.

Thus, even Avar ethno-nationalists often have no idea of the existence of any official ethnic organizations. In the case with Avars their significance and activity is almost far lower than in the case with Lezgis.

At that, for most Avars the extent of politicized nature is not high, just like for Lezgis or Talish, and no strict boundaries with Azerbaijanis, Lezgis and other neighbors are produced.

Well, what can I say? I am an ethnic Avar and I remember this and feel it within myself. I speak the language, do not read or write very well. When my parents went to school, primary education was in Avar. The language of instruction in school was Avar. However, afterwards there were fewer people going to those schools and they went to Azerbaijani- and Russian-language institutions. Maybe the school was closed for this reason or maybe for another. In my time there was no school in Avar. I know the spoken language; in my family we spoke Avar. Because I received education and read, I think in Azerbaijani. Even when I went to secondary school in Zagatala, my classmates were of various ethnicities.<> There is the tradition in Azerbaijan to describe all representatives of Dagestani peoples as Lezgis. All are called Lezgis although they are different and their languages are different. They generalize. They call all of them Dagestanis, Lezgis. I have repeatedly corrected them – Lezgis are one thing, Dargis are another, and Tsakhurs are another. In Soviet times, Makhmud Isayev was a regional representative of the newspaper

Kommunist. He was a very literate person, a Tsakhur. Why am I saying this? You are asking what language we spoke at home. We spoke Avar and when my classmates were visiting us I spoke Avar to my mom, brother and relatives, and they were very surprised - do you know the language?! I know the language from childhood (laughing). We, I and mom are fluent in Azerbaijani, speaking Avar among ourselves, and my girl friends were surprised. Normally Avar speakers, speak Azerbaijani with an accent. What I mean is that although I am an Avar, my family members never felt difference from Azerbaijanis in attitudes. Our attitude and the attitude towards us was the attitude of one nation, without ethnic difference (woman, about 70).

One can assume that the significance of command of language for Avars is somewhat higher. However, it remains only the language of every-day life but Azerbaijani is undoubtedly the language of carrier, as it is in all cases.

Perhaps, any ethnicity is like that. Only Azerbaijanis are an exception. I think they (Avars) love their language. You know, they sometimes visit us in the evening. They say – "I wonder if there such a sweet language like ours in the world?" and I think - yea, with our guttural sounds (laughing) – it is sweet to us, but not to everyone. Therefore they speak Avar, they speak Avar in the families (woman, 42).

However, like for Lezgis or the Talish, the level of command of the language is far lower for those who was born and socialized in the capital.

We have lots of customs but the boundaries with Azerbaijanis are certainly eroding. But there are lots of customs in Dagestan. For example, sometimes we have wedding parties at the girl's home and the bridegroom does not come to that wedding party. Yes, the bridegroom is not supposed to come to the girl's wedding party. We have lots of things that are different. There are quite a few of them; I, honestly speaking, do not remember them well. Yes, a lot. The food is very (different). We have khingals there. Avar khingals are very different by their size. For example, there are four pieces of dough in them. The meat in them is separate from the bouillon. That is, there is the dough, meat on top of it, and the bouillon. Other differences are with our jamaats, the Jaro-Balakan ones. The Avars did not almost have khans (man, 33).

It should be noted that these few ethnographic differences in the every-day practices of making food, relations between the sexes, etc, are, in the opinion of most informants, quite similar to the practices of the dominant ethnicity, and this also facilitates the transparency of the boundaries among all the ethnic groups studied. This circumstance facilitates the

feeling of comfortable life in Azerbaijan and I think it is also the reason for the low interest in the activity of ethnic organizations on the part of members of ethnic minorities.

Research conclusions

Production of ethnic organizations has long seen its peak and in modern conditions one should not expect new institutions of ethnic minorities/communities to appear. This should not be expected also because the number and "quality" of organizations is toughly controlled by the country's authorities which have long identified their "partners" to whom the powers of representing one or another minority have actually been delegated.

However, the state, controlling the number and policy of ethnic organizations does not become their sponsor. The lack of real money which would allow institutionalizing the structure of one or another ethnic community becomes the reason for the weakness of these organizations. Their low significance has also do with the low political activity of most actors regarded as representatives of the said ethnic minority/community. The absolute majority is not ready to participate in their activity, nor are they ready to support them financially which would allow alternative resources to be found for development.

In this sense, the "Russian community" definitely has the most developed structure. This happens owing to the community's diverse nature (Russians proper/Molokans/Cossacks/ and Russian speakers as a whole), some support from the political motherland, and also owing to the need for the production of a space for everyday communication for actors involved in its activity (mainly for urban Russian speaking actors). The Lezgis/Avars/Talish do not need such a space and this is also the reason for the lack of their interest in the activity of ethnic organizations.

However, despite the low extent of the politicized nature of representatives of minorities/communities, the issue ("Talish", "Lezgi" or "Avar") is politicized by the presence of external motherlands, and also, I think, quite often by an excessive pressure from the Azerbaijani authorities, and by exaggerated attention from the media and all possible sorts of experts to problems facing minorities/communities which actually produce the danger discourse.