



Democracy and Minority Rights in Azerbaijan **in light of the 2013 presidential elections**

Report on Fact-Finding Mission to Dagestan and Azerbaijan

September 2013

Summary

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in the wake of the Chechen war, the border between Azerbaijan and Russia was closed. The Lezghin people, an ethnic group indigenous to the Caucasus, found itself split between two states. The fact-finding mission to Dagestan and Azerbaijan aimed at examining the situation of the Lezghin, and other ethnic and religious groups, in light of the Azeri Presidential elections of 9 October 2013.

Political Representation, Socio-Economic Conditions and Culture and Language were the three key thematics on which the mission gathered data and testimonies.

Due to the political make-up and geographical location of the Republic of Dagestan, the distribution of wealth and resources doesn't target the Lezghin as major beneficiaries. Even though 14 nationalities are officially represented and protected, the lack of official quota for public offices, and unwritten rules about ethnic representation, constitute a threat to the political representation of the Lezghin. Protection and support to native languages is provided by local administrations, and attempts are made to reinvigorate the use of local languages. The dominance of Russian in administration does pose a threat to the indigenous languages. Artistic expression typical for ethnic traditions are encouraged and aim at connecting different ethnic and religious groups. The fate of evicted villagers of former Russian exclaves in Azerbaijan, such as the village of Hrah-Uba, remains worrying.

Examining the same thematics and the same ethnic group right across the border in Azerbaijan raised major concerns. There is no possibility for Lezghins to express their ethnic identity, be it through culture, politics or business. The central government is not investing in the infrastructure and economy of the major Lezghin areas, thus enhancing a further division and assimilation of this ethnic group. There is little education in Lezghin language, and overall there are no initiatives to keep the language alive. Arbitrary arrests on bogus charges, mainly through drug planting, target ethnic dissidents within the context of a wider crackdown prior to the Presidential elections. Lezghins are not effectively represented in local, regional or national governments.

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Introduction

On a recent visit to Brussels, Members of the European Parliament, European officials, political advisors and others repeatedly informed the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) that they were unaware of the existence of Lezghin people. Indeed, many had never heard of this Caucasian ethnic group and its plight, being a people divided by the border between Russia and Azerbaijan.

As such, the many violations of the rights of the Lezghins, and other ethnic minorities of the Caucasus have been going unnoticed by the European Union, which is pursuing closer relations with Azerbaijan. The upcoming Presidential elections in Azerbaijan, which will most likely extend the rule of the Aliyev family who have held power since the 1960s, make 2013 a very important year for those who value human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus.

Ever since its foundation, UNPO led fact-finding missions to numerous places at crucial times, to Abkhazia in 1991 and Rwanda in 1994 amongst many others, in order to assess the human rights situation of ethnic and religious groups. Drawing upon this expertise, and in coordination with the Federal Lezghin National and Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA), UNPO embarked on a mission to Dagestan and Azerbaijan, aimed at gathering facts in order to inform policy makers, politicians, activists and academics about the current situation of the Lezghin in Azerbaijan and Dagestan.

In light of the Azeri Presidential elections, the timing of the mission is particularly relevant, considering the pre-electoral crackdown on Azeri civil society, including the arbitrary arrests of many FLNCA affiliates.

Mission Methodology

The fact-finding mission was composed of nine individuals representing expertise in the academic, legal, parliamentary, media and non-governmental fields.

Participants brought together several years’ experience of in-country work in the Caucasus region, conducting fact-finding missions in areas of conflict, and first-hand understanding of the issues surrounding cross-border national minorities.

Before departure, mission participants were briefed by UNPO on the prevailing situation in Dagestan and Azerbaijan, including security and cultural awareness. In advance of the fact-finding team’s departure and based on the timeframe of the mission, meetings were organized to provide the mission with an overview of the political, cultural and socio-economic issues affecting Lezghin communities in Daghestan and Azerbaijan.

Consequently, over the course of three days interviews were conducted in Dagestan with representatives of regional and city level authorities, members of the FLNCA, re-settled villagers from Lezghin communities in Azerbaijan, and representatives of Lezghin academia, culture and media. A further two days of meetings were held in Azerbaijan with Lezghin community representatives, civil society activists, and members of the legal teams representing Lezghin individuals detained in Azeri prisons.

As a means of comparing evidence and providing contest to testimony, meetings were conducted across rural and urban areas in both the Dagestani regions of Makhachkala, Derbent, Suleiman-Stalski and the Azerbaijani regions of Qusar and Baku. Travel was conducted by road and provided the mission with the opportunity to both view and



1 Moscow
Meeting with FLNCA representatives, and president of the Talysh Movement in Azerbaijan
MOSCOW AIRPORT • 27/08/13

2 Makhachkala
Press conference with villagers from Hrah-Uba, community leaders and Lezghin civil society
HOTEL LORD • 28/08/13

3 Derbent
Meeting with the Mayor of Derbent - Visit to the local synagogue and mosque
TOWN HALL • 28/08/13

4 Kasumkent
Meeting with the Head of Administration of the Suleyman Stalski region
DISTRICT OFFICE • 29/08/13

5 Nova Aul
Meeting with Hrah-Uba villagers
VILLAGE HALL • 29/08/13

6 Qusar
Meeting with Lezghin activists and minority representatives (Talysh)
CENTRAL QUSAR • 30/08/13

7 Baku
Meeting with Lezghin activists
CASPIAN PLAZA HOTEL • 30/08/13

Meeting with Khadija Ismailova
CENTRAL BAKU • 30/08/13

Meeting with Azeri and Lezghin lawyers
CASPIAN PLAZA HOTEL • 31/08/13

assess the physical environment in which many Lezghin communities were located. It also permitted team members to confer on insights from meetings and identify areas for further inquiry or corroboration.

To ensure the safety of interviewees and the transparency of the mission as a whole, public locations were chosen for all meetings and interviewees were made aware that audio, and in some cases video, recordings were being made. Interviewees were permitted at any time to cease an interview and attribution has been made only in those cases where interviewees were happy for this to be done.

This report is therefore based upon preparatory mission research but remains principally a record of the interviews held with Lezghin community members and the fears, concerns, and hopes expressed in those interviews.

Background to the Current Situation in Azerbaijan

On 9 October 2013, the citizens of Azerbaijan will go to the polls to elect the man or woman who will lead them for the next 5 years. The most likely outcome appears to be the re-election of incumbent President Ilham Aliyev. The month of October will mark 10 years since Aliyev took over from his father as President of Azerbaijan; an important milestone in the recent history of the country. Aliyev’s presidency has seen Azerbaijan draw ever closer to Europe and rapid economic growth built on the country’s wealth of natural resources. At the same time, Aliyev has been criticised for his authoritarian style, corruption, nepotism and poor human rights record.

With the European Union maintaining close links with Azerbaijan through a variety of instruments, including the Eastern Partnership, the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the European Neighbourhood Policy, various EU assistance programmes and the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, it is clear that Azerbaijan is of growing importance and interest to EU policy-makers. With this in mind, both the upcoming elections and a decade under Ilham Aliyev, provide a useful opportunity to objectively assess the progress that Azerbaijan has made in recent years, both generally and towards the ideals that the EU was founded on “respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights”.

Azerbaijan is often credited as being the first democratic and secular Muslim country in the world. The short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920) granted women the right to vote, the first Muslim country to do so and also predating many Western countries including the United Kingdom and the United States. Its constitution “[guaranteed] to all its citizens within its borders full civil and political rights, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, class, profession, or sex” and “[encouraged] the free development of all nationalities inhabiting its territory”. This progressive state was soon reabsorbed into the Soviet Union and only regained its independence in 1991. Whilst 71 years of authoritarian Soviet rule has left a lasting imprint on Azeri politics, the Aliyev family, that has ruled Azerbaijan almost continuously since 1969, has increasingly looked to the West and in particular towards Europe.

Political Climate

The Rise of Ilham Aliyev and the 2003 Elections

The health of President Heydar Aliyev was rapidly deteriorating by 2003 as illustrated by his collapse on live national television in April of that year. Aliyev started grooming his son Ilham to take over, appointing him as Prime Minister two months before the October 2003 elections, in which he controversially made his son the only candidate for the ruling party. In 1994, his father appointed him Vice-President of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR). He later became a member of the National Assembly of Azerbaijan and head of both the National Olympic Committee and the country’s delegation to the Council of Europe.

In October 2003, Ilham Aliyev won highly disputed elections to succeed his father as President. Official results state that Aliyev received 76.8% of the vote with his nearest rival Isa Gambar of the Musavat party (a member of ALDE) receiving 14.0%. Human Rights Watch research “found that the government has heavily intervened in the campaigning process in favour of Prime Minister Ilham Aliyev, son of current President Heydar Aliyev. The government has stacked the Central Election Commission and local election commission with its supporters, and banned local non-governmental organizations from monitoring the vote. As the elections draw nearer, government officials have openly sided with the campaign of Ilham Aliyev, constantly obstructing opposition rallies and attempting to limit public participation in opposition events”. Azerbaijan last held presidential elections in 2008. Ilham Aliyev was re-elected with 87.34% of the vote. Of Aliyev’s six competitors, his nearest challenger was Igbal Aghazade of the Hope Party who managed just 2.82% of the votes. Many of Azerbaijan’s main opposition parties, including Musavat and the Azerbaijan Liberal Party, boycotted the elections because of government oppression of political opponents and allegations of poll fixing. More than 500 external observers, including representatives from the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, observed the election and concluded that the elections did not meet international standards. The OSCE did, however, acknowledge that the government had made progress when compared to previous elections. In 2009, President Aliyev controversially signed into law a constitutional amendment that overturned Azerbaijan’s limit to two consecutive terms for Presidents. Some have argued that given President Aliyev was inaugurated for his second term in 2008, and took the presidential oath on the country’s constitution as it was then, potentially makes his standing for president in 2013 illegal.

Background to 2013 Presidential Elections

The Azerbaijani Central Election Commission rejected the application of Rustam Ibragimbekov as the main opposition candidate for the upcoming Presidential elections of 9 October. The reasoning of the rejection is based on Ibragimbekov’s dual citizenship (he also holds a Russian passport) and on its assertion that he is not a permanent resident of Azerbaijan. The 74-year-old intellectual and dramatist who wrote the Oscar-winning 1994 Russian film, *Burnt by the Sun*, was running as the candidate for the newly-created National Council of Democratic Forces, an umbrella group pulling together the country’s main opposition parties. The National Council put forward prominent historian, Jamil Hasanli, as its new candidate for the Presidential elections. Hasanli is a 61-year-old former parliamentarian and deputy chairperson of one of the oldest opposition forces, the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan. He is known as a professor at Baku State University and for being the author of several books on foreign policy under the pre-Soviet Azerbaijani Democratic Republic and on the Cold War.

Transparency and Corruption

In Transparency International’s 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index, Azerbaijan ranks 139th out of 176 countries with a score of just 27, well below the global average of 43.27 and the EU average of 63.04. Azerbaijan’s reputation for corruption stems largely from the activities of President Ilham Aliyev and his family and friends, who have amassed a vast private fortune and hold many of the most important roles within the Republic. A leaked 2009 diplomatic cable from the American Embassy in Baku compared Aliyev to a mafia boss and in 2012 he was named “Person of the Year” by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) for his corrupt and criminal activities. The Guardian (UK) recently revealed that the Aliyev family holds millions of dollars in offshore accounts.

Human Rights

Azerbaijan is a member of a number of important human rights bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council and the Council of Europe and, as such, has theoretically made many commitments to protect human rights. However, the government of President Aliyev has been criticised by a variety of different organisations for widespread human rights violations and for running the country in an authoritarian or dictatorial style. In 2002, the position of Human Rights Commissioner was created in Azerbaijan, but this office is generally seen as ineffective due to the unwillingness of this office to pursue any cases of a political nature or that implicate the President or his allies in business and politics.

Freedom of Press

The 2013 Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, which measures the freedom of journalists, news organisations and bloggers in a given country, ranked Azerbaijan as 156th out of 179. Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press Survey for 2013 categorises Azerbaijan’s press as “Not Free” and notes that the situation is deteriorating. Journalists who are critical of the government or bodies close to the government are frequently attacked, harassed, intimidated and obstructed. There is also a culture of impunity for those who commit these crimes against dissenting journalists.

Political Prisoners

Azerbaijan has released many political prisoners since the early 2000s, but many more still remain in jail. A disproportionate number of political prisoners are members of national, ethnic and religious minorities. In early 2013, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) controversially voted to reject a report on political prisoners in Azerbaijan. The report was heavily criticised by members of the assembly for having inconsistencies and inaccuracies, and there were claims of personal bias against Azerbaijan from the Rapporteur Christoph Strässer, an MP from the German Bundestag. The Azerbaijani authorities also criticised Strässer for filing a report without ever having been to Azerbaijan. However, it should be noted that Strässer was repeatedly denied entry to Azerbaijan and thus the report had to be written without access to the country. At a press conference with President José Manuel Barroso in Brussels in June 2013, President Aliyev stated the following: “First of all, I’d like to say that none of my political opponents are in prison. This is absolutely wrong information... At the same time, I’d like to tell you that there are no political prisoners in Azerbaijan, if you read carefully the comments after the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe this January, which rejected the report about political prisoners of Azerbaijan. I think that this chapter is closed”. As stated by the recent HRW report ‘Tightening the Screws’, there has been an increase in civil society crackdown since mid-2012 through arresting and imprisoning political activists on false charges. According to HRW, the crackdown started in response to youth groups’ attempts to organize protests in Baku in the wake of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The crackdown intensifies even more at this very moment in light of the upcoming elections.

Freedom of Assembly

In 2005, the Azerbaijani government lifted a blanket ban on opposition gatherings following public pressure. Whilst this in theory finally gave the citizens of Azerbaijan the right of freedom of assembly, the reality is that permission to hold such gatherings is often denied and when they do take place they are often broken up, sometimes using excessive and disproportionate force. No protests have been sanctioned in Baku since 2006 and maximum fines for participating in unsanctioned protests rose from €955 to €7,600 in 2012. Furthermore, laws adopted in May 2013 have further impacted on the right of Azerbaijani citizens to peacefully assemble, as the penalty for “organising an unauthorised demonstration has now increased from 15 to 60 days, and the penalty for “disobeying the police” has risen from 15 to 30 days.

Minority Rights

The rights of minorities and indigenous peoples in Azerbaijan are poorly protected. Efforts were made to address this problem in 1992 when a presidential decree was issued that would have protected the rights and freedoms and also given state support to promote the language and cultures of minorities. However, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh prevented the implementation of this law and since the Aliyev family took power again in 1993, little has been done on the issue. Disagreement over the size of minority populations is one of the key issues for minority rights in Azerbaijan. According to the latest census of Azerbaijan, in 2009, 91.6% of the population, 8.17 million people, are Azerbaijanis. The largest minority are the Lezghin (also spelt Lezgin, Lezgi, Lezgian), an indigenous Caucasian ethnic group divided between northern Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan, a republic of the Russian Federation. The 2009 Census puts the Lezghin population at 180,300 or 2.02% of the population. However, this figure is highly disputed with other figures from Lezghin and independent sources putting the figure at between 600,000 and 800,000. The disparity between these two figures can largely be explained by the success of Azeri assimilation policies which have forced many Lezghins to denounce their Lezghin identity to avoid discrimination and poverty. The Lezghin are also predominantly Sunni Muslims and so also

represent a religious minority in Shia-majority Azerbaijan. Minority groups, including the Lezghin, the Farsi-speaking Talysh and the Avars, share a variety of problems caused by the aforementioned assimilation policy of the Azeri government. The promotion of Azeri culture and language at the expense of minorities has intensified in recent years. Officially, Azerbaijan is committed to the protection of minority rights; the linguistic rights of minorities are enshrined in the country’s constitution (both Article 21, Section II, and Article 45, Section III) and Azerbaijan has both signed and ratified the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM). However, the FCNM significantly uses the phrase “as much as possible” many times, allowing flexibility on the part of signatories. In 2002, a law on State language was adopted which significantly reduces the language rights of minorities. This law, which made Azerbaijani the official language of Azerbaijan, imposed further limitations on the use of minority languages. For example, members of linguistic minorities no longer have the right to communicate with the local government in their own language. The dominance of the Azeri language and culture has caused further assimilation, particularly of young people. The State language law was accompanied by the transition, in the previous year, from Cyrillic to Latin script in the Azeri language. Some minority languages followed suit, but others such as Lezghins retained the Cyrillic script. However, young people in Azerbaijan are no longer taught how to read the Cyrillic alphabet, leading to alienation of younger generations from their native culture. In 2005, a law was passed which allowed public broadcasting in minority languages. However, the few newspapers and radio stations that do publish or broadcast in these languages have such limited circulation or broadcast range that very few, if any, of the target communities are aware of their existence. Certain minorities have, however, received better protection from the Azerbaijani authorities than others. The government has, for example, taken steps to reduce anti-Semitism and the number of attacks on the country’s Jewish population has decreased. The country’s Russian population also experiences fewer problems than other communities with many Russian-language schools being present. Since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan’s sizeable Armenian community has left Azerbaijan, and hate-speech against Armenians is common in state media. Even civil society groups within Azerbaijan tending to promote reconciliation between ethnic Azeris and Armenians have been targeted with violence and intimidation. Armenians and nationals from other countries with obvious Armenian heritage, for example with a surname ending in the suffix ‘yan’, are banned from entering Azerbaijan.

EU - Azerbaijan Relations

The relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan has been described as “inconsistent” and even “schizophrenic”. This split approach to Azerbaijan could be characterised as a conflict between European interests on the one hand, in the form of Azerbaijan’s natural resources, and European ideals on the other, in the form of liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Overall, the European Union and the Republic of Azerbaijan have a positive relationship, which has grown closer in recent years. The current government is pro-Western and in favour of further European integration. President Aliyev stated in April 2004 that Azerbaijan’s “current strategic choice is integration in Europe, European family and institutions. We are strongly committed to this policy. We will do our utmost so that Azerbaijan meets all standards and criteria peculiar to Europe. Our policy is such and we have been pursuing it for a long time”. Azerbaijan’s desire to be seen as part of the European community stretches beyond its membership and cooperation with European organisations. The government is also keen to ensure that Azerbaijan becomes an integral part of European cultural institutions as can be seen by the enthusiasm for the Eurovision Song contest and bid to host the Euro 2020 football championships. The government has even gone as far as to sponsor

top Spanish football team Atlético Madrid in a \$16 million deal. The first milestone in relations between the European Union and Azerbaijan was the signing of the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) which was signed in 1996 and entered into force in 1999. This agreement strengthened political and economic ties with Azerbaijan, for instance creating parliamentary cooperation committees, and remains in place until a more comprehensive document is signed and takes its place. The European Neighbourhood Policy grew out of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership of 1995 and Azerbaijan joined in 2006 along with Armenia and Georgia. The aim of the policy is to bring the EU’s near neighbours closer to the European Union, both politically and economically. Azerbaijan is an active participant in the ENP and therefore cooperates even more closely with the European Union than previously. As a member of the ENP, there is the possibility of an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, which is among the closest agreements that the EU can have with a non-member state.

Energy Cooperation

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, inaugurated in May 2005, has been seen as a key development in EU-Azerbaijan relations, as it transports crude oil from Azerbaijan’s Caspian oil fields to the Turkish city of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean coast. This makes oil accessible to the European Union without going through the territory of the Russian Federation or its allies (the pipeline loops around Armenia). In addition to this, companies from EU countries have a large interest in the venture. The pipeline is owned and operated by a consortium of companies, or which BP (British Petroleum) has the largest share (30.1%), compared to just 25% for the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR). Total from France and Eni from Italy each have a 5% share of the pipeline. Energy has become one of the major issues in the Azerbaijan-EU relationship. In June 2013, President Ilham Aliyev held meetings with the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, Herman Van Rompuy and José Manuel Barroso respectively, in Brussels. The focus of these talks was oil and gas, including the planned Southern Gas Corridor which would take gas from the Caspian Sea and the Middle East to Europe. This is an initiative of the European Commission and Azerbaijan is seen as a key partner in this endeavour. Another European Commission energy programme that involves Azerbaijan is INOGATE.

Background to the Lezghin People

Ever since the fourth century BC, the Lezghin people were a part of the Eastern Caucasus state of Caucasian Albania, which was a union of 26 tribes. Due to numerous foreign invasions and the division of their country in the following centuries, little is known about this early period in the history of the Lezghin people. What is known, however, is that in the sixth century the Kingdom of Lakz was formed, which continued as a separate entity following the collapse of Caucasian Albania. This kingdom was divided into East and West Lakz in the eleventh century, which in turn were then broken up into several smaller entities. Several of these entities appeared from the sixteenth century as separate Lezghin societies: Akhty-para, Dokuz-para, Alti-para, Rutul. These societies existed up until their entry into Russia in the early nineteenth century. Lezghins also lived in areas of the Quba, Shirvan and Shaki Khanates, and in the Kyurinsky Khanate, which would later also become a part of Russia. Early in the eighteenth century Shirvan was an independent state for a while, which was recognized by both the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. But by 1813 almost all Lezghins were under nominal Russian rule, even though many of them fought against the Russians in the Great Caucasian War. Russia did not manage to consolidate its rule over the Lezghins until 1859. The area known as ‘Lezgistan’ was divided between the tsarist districts of Derbent and Baku in 1860, a division that has continued up until the present day. In the time of the USSR, the Lezghins were

Mission Outcomes

spread over two different Soviet Republics. The Northern Lezgins lived in the Kyurinsky and Samursky districts and the city of Derbent, which are located in present day Dagestan, while the Southern Lezgins lived in areas that were a part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.

Since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the two areas continue to be divided. The area known as Dagestan became the Republic of Dagestan, which is one of the constituent republics of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, the southern Lezgins were divided from their ethnic kin by the border separating the Russian Federation and the newly formed Azerbaijan Republic. This led to campaigns to redraw the border within the Lezgin communities on both the Russian and the Azerbaijani side, especially since the 1994 war in Chechnya led to the closure of the border between the two countries.

Nowadays, apart from the Lezgin ethnic group itself, the Lezgin community includes a range of other subgroup ethnicities, namely Aghuls, Rutuls, Tabasarans and Tsakhurs.



Disclaimer: All the statistical data on the number of Lezgin people are taken from the official electronic databases of 2009 census in Azerbaijan and 2010 census in the Russian Federation.



Political Representation

Background

Historically, Lezghin communities have governed themselves on the basis of jamaat, a system whereby local mountain communities elected members to positions of political and judicial responsibility. Jamaat reflects the social and physical topography of the Northern Caucasus and was an important form of governance and administration in Lezghin areas following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Under the Soviet Union Lezghin communities in Dagestan were governed as part of the Dagestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic formed in 1921 with their compatriots having already become part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic established in 1920. In both republics power was wielded by the Communist Party but with differing governance structures.

Today Lezghins are caught between two states, with a legacy of the Soviet Union being that many Lezghin in Azerbaijan are dependent on Communist-era pensions which they can only obtain as Russian citizens. Lezghins therefore face many of the limitations confronting civil society and political activists in Azerbaijan without the formulae for representation that have evolved over time in Dagestan.

Representation

In Dagestan, the Lezghin are represented in state and local bodies but not at a level that reflects the size of their community. A revised form of governance had emerged in Dagestan termed by some as “quasi-ethnic consocialism (Petrov). However the administration of Vladimir Putin has seen significant shifts in power. Autonomy has been reduced and from 8 September 2013 senior government officials in Dagestan have been indirectly appointed by Moscow with Ramazan Abdulatipov, an ethnic-Avar, looking set to be confirmed as President of Dagestan.

Since 1996, minority groups in Russia have the right to be represented at the federal level by a non-territorial autonomy organization, named ‘national cultural autonomy’ (NCA). There are two interpretations according to Russian legislation for NCA’s. The first establishes a certain mechanism, on the basis of which representatives of ethnic minorities collectively pursue their rights and interests related to their ethnic origin, language, and culture. This explanation of NCA as a general principle of extraterritorial ethnic accommodation appeared in the 1996 Conception of State National Policy of the Russian Federation. The second interpretation considers NCA as a specific type of ethnicity-based organization. This approach appears in the 1996 NCA Law.

The Azerbaijan SSR contained no provision for ethnic minority protection and many Lezghins registered themselves as Azeris in official papers to align themselves to the predominant ethnic group and the benefits associated with that. With the fall of the Soviet Union the new Azerbaijan republic established the Consultative Council of Small Nations but today, Lezghin communities in Dagestan and Azerbaijan live in very different political circumstances.

In Azerbaijan, public bodies such as the parliament, or Milli Meclis, rank lowly in public opinion and against the backdrop of Azerbaijan’s extremely strong presidential system. Currently, of the 125 elected deputies in the Milli Meclis, none is felt to represent Lezghin interests or issues.

Moreover, during the 2008 presidential and 2010 parliamentary elections, ethnic minorities did not feature in any of the political parties contesting seats nor did their issues appear. A climate exists where Lezghin political activism in Azerbaijan carries negative connotations, with one activist noting that his children had chosen to leave Azerbaijan and seek opportunities abroad because they believed their father’s political activities had hampered their chances for employment. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar).*

Over the course of recent years official offices in Lezghin areas of Azerbaijan have been removed or centralised. Appointees from Baku fill many of the local positions in the local administration of Lezghin area, despite Lezghin complaints that such positions should be occupied by representatives of the local Lezghin community. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)* Formally Azerbaijan authorities are willing to offer Lezghins dual Azeri-Russian citizenship but in reality this was rarely reported.

Civil Society

In Azerbaijan civil society and non-governmental organisations must register grants they have won with the state. Amid what many see as burdensome registration requirements, activists operate organisations unofficially. There is as a consequence limited space for oversight by non-governmental organisations. Efforts to establish organisations monitoring human rights were reported to have their registration requests

with the Azeri Ministry of Justice refused *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar).*

As a result of intimidation there is no political organisation in Azerbaijan representing the Lezghin community. Consequently many activists are forced to campaign from Russia or Dagestan although this carries negative associations for wider Azeri civil society that can hamper such activism.

Interviewees felt that international organisations could be in a position to operate more freely than local organisations, particularly if they were to establish local offices in Baku. However it should be noted that such offices have themselves come under pressure with the National Democratic Institute being barred from Azerbaijan for several months in 2011.

Freedom of expression in Azerbaijan continues to be constrained. Monitoring of online activity continues and calls for public protests communicated via Facebook have been used to arrest a number of activists and as a pretext for the arrest of individuals unconnected to the protests. Specifically the ‘Harlem Shake’ incident was touched upon by Lezghin respondents in Baku, referring to the case of Ilkin Rustemzade, who was arrested on charges of hooliganism for uploading a clip on YouTube. Apart from the fact that the clip is apolitical, Rustemzade himself was not involved in shooting or acting in the video, and was arrested because of his activism for the Free Youth Organization.

Journalists receive threats and many have resorted to personal protection as a safeguard. The Azeri authorities continue a smear campaign against Khadija Ismayilova, in the wake of the release of the controversial sex-tape, by accusing her mother of being Armenian, and her sisters to be a child trafficker and a prostitute. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Baku)*

Azerbaijan continues to limit the freedom of its citizens to assemble, with Khadija Ismayilova confirming testimony heard by the mission that the Azeri authorities “claim there is freedom of assembly [...] as we hear it’s not the case.

Rule of Law

In Azerbaijan citizens technically are able to report ethical infractions to bodies that include the Ethic Commissioner or the Civil Service Commission but at local levels decision-making is heavily influenced by personal friendships and bribe-taking. Thus although Lezghins in Azerbaijan may enjoy equal civil rights the experience continues to be that official institutions are unresponsive or unhelpful in their response to queries. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)*

Evictions in advance of the May 2012 Eurovision Song Contest in Baku revealed the inability of citizens to appeal and protect property rights. Individuals with business interests and influence are thus able to circumvent legal protections and have led many to see international actors as important channels through which to voice discontent.

In this context, recourse has been made to the European Court of Human Right in a number of instances but plaintiffs and their legal teams consistently complain of the length of time cases take to judgement. In one instance the plaintiff served their term before the ECHR could rule on their case. Similarly, while prison conditions in Azerbaijan have improved following attention from the international community, the process by which suspects are arrested, tried and sentenced remains unfair because of a judiciary that is still “corrupt, inefficient, and subservient to the executive branch” (Freedom House, 2013).

Azeri authorities are sensitive to the profile of local activists, with younger or relatively low-profile activists typically fearing more for their rights. Interviewing such activists, it was noted that although international observers have been present to observe court cases against individuals such as Navrusali Maniedev, the failure of observers to question inconsistencies in the case damage civil society activists’ views of international actors. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar).*

In recent years the use of drug trafficking or possession charges against human rights and civic activists has risen dramatically. In the public at large there is deepening mistrust of law enforcement bodies and officers, to the extent that interviewees noted that even when charges are accurate, lack of credibility means many consider them to be made up by police officials. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)*

During an interview with a Lezghin lawyer who defended the case of a Lezghin who had been arrested on the 9th of August 2013, the practicalities of such bogus arrest became clear. Important to note is that lawyers appointed by the state are paid around two euros per hour. According to the lawyer the mission spoke to, this leads to them being willing to sign anything. *(Interviewed on 31/08/2013 in Baku)*

My client was asked to come to the police station. Upon his arrival, the police officers discovered 8 grams of heroin in his pocket. They started to threaten him verbally, saying that things would get even worse for him and his family if he didn't sign a written deposition, implying a confession from his side.

He signed. During his first interrogation a lawyer was present. However, at the moment of the signing of the deposition there was no lawyer, nor an interpreter present. On the 10th of August 2013 my client was presented with 17 criminal procedures, which is impossible to come up with in just one day.

However, formally all documents are in order – there is even a signature of an interpreter who was never present. The fact that my client signed the deposition makes things complicated, so now I will try to reduce the sentence by proving that the code of the criminal procedure was violated. Luckily the prison conditions in Azerbaijan improved quite a bit over the past years due to European pressure.

(Lawyer, Interviewed on 31/08/2013 in Baku)

Azerbaijan Elections 2013

The fact-finding mission heard that Lezghin candidates have tried to nominate themselves for candidature in elections but have been prevented from doing so, noting that Azeri authorities do not wish to promote Lezghin personalities to positions of influence.

(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)

Freedom of assembly continues to be restricted ahead of the October 2013 elections with no rallies permitted in central Baku. The ability of opposition candidates to travel throughout Azerbaijan was also reported to be restricted with unknown groups known to attack cars in an effort to prevent them from campaigning. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Baku)*

Media coverage of the election remains limited. Editors of opposition papers have been detained and the government has been accused of encouraging 'supportive' opposition groups as a means of reducing the airtime available to candidates on public broadcasters. Additionally, inquiries into the funding of election candidates regularly meet with obfuscation or dismissal.

(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)

Past elections in Azerbaijan have been characterised by carousel voting, bribing of voters, stuffing of ballot boxes, inflated turnout figures, and coercion of state employees and military personnel to cast ballots for particular candidates. Original polling station tabulations are rarely publicised and are widely believed to be tampered with. The instance of malpractice in the recording the ballots of visually impaired voters was also noted. In areas of minority ethnic populations, the use of military personnel is widely felt to be basis for manipulation of the electoral process.

(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Baku)

Interviewees therefore believed that the October 2013 elections would be a foregone conclusion with victory falling to the ruling party on the basis of vote tampering and irregularities in the vote count.



Socio-Economic Conditions

With the Republic of Dagestan being located far from Russia's economic centres, and Azerbaijan making little investment in Lezghin areas of the country, economic opportunities for this ethnic group are particularly limited. An exceptional situation can be found in former Russian villages - mainly inhabited by Lezghin - that were handed over to Azerbaijan as part of a border agreement following the collapse of the USSR.

Resettlements

One of the major concerns of the Lezghins is the fate of the former Lezghin inhabitants of Russian exclaves, such as Hrah-Uba and Uryan-Uba, that were handed over to Azerbaijan within the context of a border agreement.

Since 2002, talks between Russia and Azerbaijan had been taking place aimed at strengthening and fixing the 284 kilometre long border, from the point where Russia, Azerbaijan and Georgia converge all the way to the Caspian Sea. In April 2006, 90% of the border between the two countries was fixed during the 11th round of talks. After several more rounds and the establishment of a special working group, Russia and Azerbaijan came to an agreement on the 3rd of September 2010, in what is considered to be a historic move for Russia - signing a border treaty with another country for the first time.

Border cooperation is crucial for Russo-Azerbaijani relations, especially considering the situation in the north Caucasus and within the context of fighting terrorism. The border is not, however, totally new, since it corresponds with the Soviet-era administrative division between the Dagestani Soviet Republic and the Azeri Soviet Republic.

One of the former Russian exclaves right across the border with Azerbaijan is the village of Hrah-Uba, which

was mainly inhabited by Lezghins. Ever since the signing of the border agreement between Russia and Azerbaijan, the inhabitants of the village of Hrah-Uba have been forced to sell their property when refusing to accept Azeri citizenship. People travelling to Dagestan after 3 September 2010 for personal or professional reasons were stopped at the border with Azerbaijan upon their return, unable to cross the frontier and see their families. The fact-finding mission twice had the opportunity to talk with the evicted villagers of Hrah-Uba, the first time in Makhachkala on 28 August 2013 and a second time in Nova-Aul on 29 August 2013.

One of the respondents explained that most of Hrah-Uba's inhabitants did not want to accept Azeri citizenship, especially not after they found out that the initial promise of granting dual citizenship was false; people accepting this arrangement were stripped off their Russian citizenship as soon as

they agreed to accept the Azeri one. Apart from this option, the villagers could become Azeri citizens, or accept a compensation and start a new life Dagestan. However, this compensation turned out to be much less than initially agreed upon, and would be insufficient to re-establish a family across the border.

"I lived in Baku from 1972 to 1996. After the collapse of the Soviet Union I decided that I would be Russian, so I obtained Russian citizenship and a passport. I don't want Azeri citizenship. My children and grandchildren were attending Russian schools. We don't know Azeri [language]. Every family from Hrah-Uba has the same or similar reasons to refuse Azeri citizenship."

(Interviewed on 29/82013 in Nova Aul)



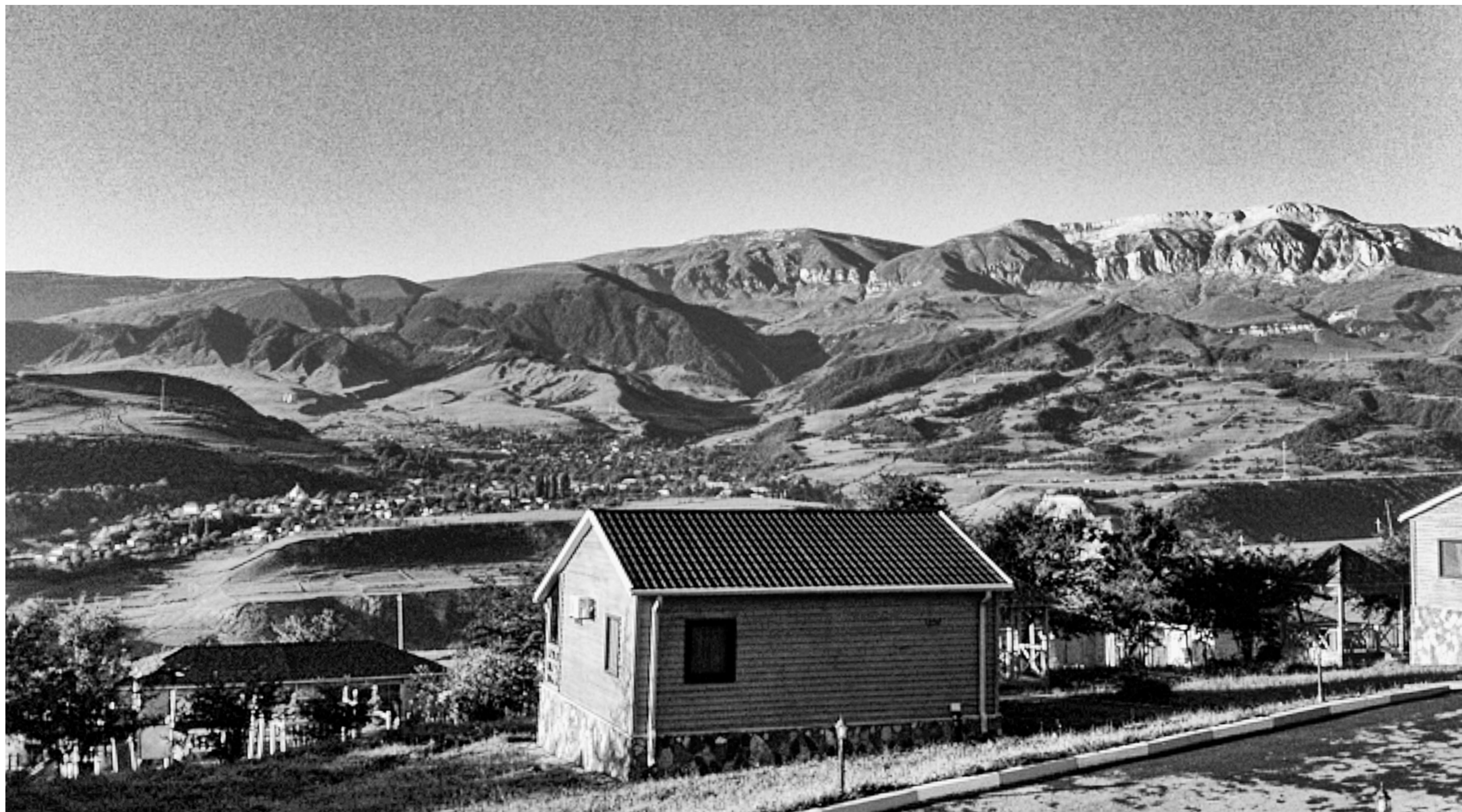
"On the 28th of April 2011 I was sent to Dagestan for a business trip. When I finished my work, they didn't allow me to return to Azerbaijan. The border police said, 'Your entry is prohibited. It is not allowed for you to go to Azerbaijan, and we are not obliged to give you any reason why.' The school in Hrah-Uba was closed and no children could attend classes anymore. I was forced to sell my house and the land for the price they offered me, which was three times less than the average. The total surface was 2500 square metres and the land had walnut and persimmon trees."

(Interviewed on 29/82013 in Nova Aul)



According to the respondents, the majority of families from Hrah-Uba are currently split, with women and children residing in Azerbaijan while the men are forced to remain in Dagestan. According to one respondent, 300 villagers from 130 Hrah-Uba families have fallen victim to the repercussions of the border agreement. What became clear from the discussion with the Hrah-Uba villagers is that the eviction process is aimed at separating heads of families and important members of the community from the others, thus eroding the very fabric of their society. Currently, the village of Hrah-Uba is empty, except for around 15 houses that are occupied by labourers

who are working on cottage construction in the area. According to several respondents, officials from the Azeri migration department went around to present people with eviction papers. Other respondents claim it was a private businessman who bought the houses in Hrah-Uba. The beautiful and fertile lands of the region are seen as an excellent investment, especially for tourism. In Qusar (Azerbaijan), the mission delegates stayed in a newly-established holiday resort. Lezghin contacts informed the mission that this very location used to be Lezghin land, and many Lezghin villages in the area had to be razed in order for the lucrative tourist project to be able to take off.



New tourist project in Qusar, on former Lezghin lands

Several villagers of Hrah-Uba appealed to the Supreme Court of Dagestan. Up until today, these legal proceedings have borne little fruit. The increasing crackdown by the Azeri authorities on dissidents, mainly through arbitrary arrests on bogus charges, scares the people of Hrah-Uba and makes them reluctant to jointly bring their case to court. The local Head of Administration – who was formerly in charge of Hrah-Uba – stated that the Russian government is looking at accommodating the villagers in Nova Aul, Dagestan, where the meeting with the mission members took place.

The mission was informed that upon the appointment of the new president of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov, the people of Hrah-Uba had high expectations of him. However, despite several promises on his part to resettle and accommodate the villagers, no effective measures have been taken although the mission was informed recently that FLNCA received a written statement from President Putin regarding compensation for the villagers of Hrah-Uba and Uryan-Uba.

I was born in 1960 and lived with my wife, daughter and grandson in the village of Hrah-Uba. We lived off our land. In March 2013, right after dinner, four officials from the migration department of Azerbaijan came to our house.

They asked if I wanted to sell my house – only the house, not the adjacent lands going with it. I refused to sell it, upon which the officials presented me with a document that stated I was being evicted from my house. I protested, and the officials tied my hands to my back and pushed me into a blue car. They assured me that, if my wife would bring my passport to their office, all necessary arrangements would be made for me and my family to make it legal for us to reside in Azerbaijan. However, they pulled over in the neutral zone between Dagestan and Azerbaijan and left me there. I was not granted permission by the Azeri authorities to cross the border to Azerbaijan again, so I was forced to stay separated from my family and reside in Makhachkala[U3] [Dagestan]. My wife stayed in our house, but the officials were persistent and she was forced to sell it. We received 55.000 dollars [43.000 manat] for the house, although the original document stated that we would receive 85.000 manat. Twice, I was granted permission to go back, to pick up my belongings. My family joined me back to Dagestan on the second visit. When we made a third attempt to go back to, what by then was Azerbaijan, to visit the graves of our family members, we weren't allowed to cross the border. I am currently renting a two-bedroom apartment in Makhachkala where I live with six family members. We didn't receive support from any government, be it the Azeri, Dagestani or Russian. I consider the events that happened then, and fell upon all of us in Hrah-Uba, to be a form of ethnic cleansing in the wake of the agreement between Russia and Azerbaijan. I just wish I could visit the graves of my relatives.

(Interviewed on 28/8/2013 in Makhachkala)





Hrah-Uba villagers - Nova Aul, Dagestan - 29 August 2013

Economic Climate

One of the most famous Lezghin businessmen is Suleyman Kerimov. As an oligarch, investor and owner of FC Anzhi Makhachkala, Suleyman Kerimov is the 19th wealthiest man in Russia. "He's a great Dagestani. He's a great Caucasian male. Even if he had done nothing for the Caucasus, we would still be proud of him, because his existence itself contributes a lot to the pride of Lezghins. He's not only Lezghin now. He's Russian. He doesn't belong only to Dagestan. I think he now belongs to the world." (Head of administration of Suleyman-Stalski district, 29/8/2013, Kasumkent)

Suleyman Kerimov is an exception however. The political landscape of Dagestan influences the economic prosperity of the different ethnic groups to a large extent. Three positions in the Dagestani government are of major importance: the president, the prime minister and the speaker of parliament. Currently, these posts are held by Ramazan Abdulatipov (Avar), Abdusamad Gamidov (Darghin) and Khizri Shikhsaidov (Kumyk). When asking the heads of local administrations in Dagestan how ethnicity is linked to socio-economic status, it became clear that ethnic groups with representatives in the ruling establishment have a clear advantage in this field. According to them, no Lezghin has been allowed to hold any of the three crucial posts in Dagestan since 1951, when the last Lezghin prime minister was removed from his post, and an unwritten rule was put into force whereby the three major posts would be granted to representatives from the Avar, Darghin and Kumy ethnic groups. Ever since, the Lezghin have found themselves far from power, with obvious economic repercussions for their community. In Azerbaijan, economic opportunities for Lezghin are even more limited, especially when economic activity is so clearly linked to ethnicity.

The mission delegation was informed about an incident whereby a local businessman in a neighbouring town of Qusar owned a little shop on a market square where he was selling t-shirts. Some t-shirts had a design featuring the words 'Dagestan' or 'Lezghin' on them. In March 2013, the vendor was told by a police officer in charge of patrolling the local market that it was forbidden to sell these t-shirts, and if he wanted to do so, "He should go to his Dagestan." (Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)

Another case reported to the mission was that of a local Lezghin businessman who wanted to open a shop in Qusar. When ordering the banner for his store, which he wanted to name 'Eagle' in the Lezghin language, he was told by the owner of banner store that he was not allowed to have anything printed in



any other language than Azeri. He was unable to provide our respondent with any official order from the government, but explained that these were indirect orders he had received. When driving around Qusar, our respondent pointed at several shops that had had Lezghin names in the past. (Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)



Culture and Language

“How can you say someone who doesn’t even have a textbook in their native language is free?” Former inhabitant of Hrah-Uba

Lezghin Cultural Traditions

The Republic of Dagestan officially represents fourteen ethnicities, and is home to over thirty languages. It is often claimed that this ethnic and linguistic diversity is the Republic’s major strength.

The Lezghin people have a rich artistic heritage and intellectual tradition in Dagestan. Lezghin culture is first and foremost, most easily identified by the oral folk arts, preserving and transmitting historical events. The heroic epic ‘Sharvili’ is a record of the complicated history of the Lezghin people. The hero of the story,



Lezghin carpet market in Gyanja (Azerbaijan), end of 19th century

‘Sharvili’, is a collective character who represents the Lezghin people, and was responsible for protecting their lands from conquerors. In honor of ‘Sharvili’, an annual celebration is held in the Akhtynsky District of Dagestan. This annual celebration of Lezghin culture has over the years gained popularity and national recognition. In terms of religious beliefs, the Lezghin are predominately Sunni Muslims, with a small Shia minority. The ancient Juma mosque of Derbent is one of the rare mosques in the world where Sunni and Shia Muslims pray together. The Lezghin have been

successful in maintaining their pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions as well. Yaran Suvar, the day of vernal equinox, which is celebrated on 21 March, is one of the most popular holidays in the Lezghin calendar, representing one of the most important symbols of the Lezghin people. Other celebrations are the holidays of ‘flowers’ or ‘bird cherry’. The celebration of these festivals and indeed their popularity, demonstrates that the Lezghin are very committed to the preservation of their unique cultural identity.

The Lezghin also have a very rich and diversified musical and dance heritage. The “Lezginka” is a famous dance, practiced and spread by the Lezghin all over the Caucasus. Traditional crafts, going from sumakhi carpets, knives and jewellery to ceramics, also form a crucial part of Lezghin culture.

Cultural Policies in Dagestan

The mission visited the ancient city of Derbent, which is set to celebrate its 2000-year anniversary in 2015, and had the opportunity to meet the mayor, Mr. Imam Yarialiev.

According to him, *there are opportunities for everybody in their native language [in Derbent]. Education is usually conducted in Russian, but 50% of the students can choose to study in their native language. There are four theatres in Derbent where plays are conducted in native languages, as well as newspapers and freedom of broadcasting. Any individual representing an ethnic group has the right to start broadcasting. These days, there is this opportunity. 14 nationalities are included and protected according to the Constitution [of Dagestan]. This means that people can write and be informed in their native language when engaging with*

The mayor of Derbent, Imam Yarialiev

the local administration. The state pays for translation in court proceedings. (Interviewed on 28/08/2013 in Derbent)

During a meeting with the Head of Administration of the Suleiman-Stalski region, the mission members were informed of specific initiatives to support local traditions.

Every year, for over 15 years now, we created a folkloric Lezghin festival. It is good for the development of the language and culture. However, it is not just for Lezghins, but for other ethnic minorities that have close kinship with them. We also published a book on the history of the Lezghin people in Lezghin language and Russian, and we are planning



Head of Suleiman-Stalski region, Nariman Shamsudinovich Abdulmutalibov, holding a painting of Suleiman Stalski, a Lezghin poet (1869-1937).

to have an edition in English soon. It will be something like the epos of Beowulf, showing the courageous history of the Lezghin people. (Interviewed on 29/08/2013 in Kasumkent)

When touching upon Lezghin language in specific, the Head of Administration informed the mission about several initiatives. One programme aimed at printing colorful textbooks in Lezghin, which were distributed amongst the local kindergartens. An interregional conference on Lezghin language development was also organized, whereby teachers from the region and professors were invited. Currently, they are working on a Lezghin television show and on the preparations for an interregional festival, in order to unite people from different regions.

Sometimes we organize staff meetings in Lezghin language.

Head of Administration,
Suleiman-Stalski Region

***You can speak English, Russian, Azeri, anything!
You just can't speak Lezghin.***

Lezghin from Qusar, majority Lezghin town

Lezghin Culture in Azerbaijan

Despite being one of the largest minorities in Azerbaijan, the Lezghin have been faced with both direct and indirect assimilation policies threatening Lezghin identity in Azerbaijan. Many Lezghin cultural achievements are misinterpreted as being Azeri, with names of cultural and historical monuments being distorted. In Baku, the name of the Lezgi mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site dating back to the 12th Century, has been changed to ‘Ashurbek’.

In 2001 the transition from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet for both the Azeri and Lezghin languages raised great concerns. This transition prompted widespread protest from the Lezghin in Azerbaijan, who feared that cross-border contact with their Lezghin kinship in Russia would be further complicated. Furthermore, the closing of the border between Russia and Azerbaijan for many Lezghin, thus cutting trade routes and family ties, impacted the Lezghin traditional way of life.

The mission visited Qusar, a town in northern Azerbaijan mainly inhabited by Lezghins. When asking a local about the Lezghin language, he replied: *You can study Lezghin as a second language, but only a few hours a week until 9th grade. You cannot speak Lezghin in any official setting. Everything is written in Azeri. Although Qusar's population is 95% Lezghin, all important posts are taken by Azeris. The police chief is Azeri, the attorney is Azeri, the judge is Azeri, the head of state security is Azeri, the head of the local army is Azeri. The only Lezghin is the head of the executive, but that's only a formality. He doesn't speak Lezghin. (Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)*

When asked about media in Lezghin language, the respondent replied that it is extremely difficult due to the repressive measures from the Azeri government, and the lack of a regional network. According to him, the head of the Azeri radio and television committee stated that there are no regions in Azerbaijan with compact ethnic communities, in a response to pressure to have broadcasting in Lezghin language. Locals do interact in Lezghin, according to the respondent, but it is not unusual for Azeri people hearing the conversation to show their dissatisfaction with this.

In Baku, where the majority is Azeri, people passing by [and hearing Lezghin language] show their discontent and tell us not to speak it. Lezghins living in Baku don't speak Lezghin in the presence of Azeris, but try to speak Azeri. That is the way assimilation continues. (Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)

Every year celebrations take place on a central square in Qusar whereby Lezghin people sing and dance. Since five years, representatives from the local administration told the locals that they should play Azeri music. *(Interviewed on 30/08/2013 in Qusar)* The mission delegates experienced how sensitive displaying Lezghin culture is in public spaces. A local Lezghin activist accompanied the delegates for lunch to a restaurant that was owned by a good friend of his, who also happened to be a great musician. He was asked to perform a Lezghin piece of music on his clarinet, and was visibly emotional when doing so. After he left, the local contact informed the delegation about the fact that what they had just heard was Azeri music, not Lezghin music.

Conclusion

The situation of the Lezghin in Azerbaijan differs substantially from that of the Lezghin living in Dagestan. Where in Dagestan there is the opportunity for individuals and groups to organize activities around Lezghin culture and identity, this is discouraged or outlawed in Azerbaijan.

The Lezghin in Dagestan are disadvantaged because of the Republic's geographical location far from the heart of power. In addition to this, the lack of officially established quota for positions in public offices, and an unwritten rule to exclude Lezghin representatives from holding any of the three major posts in Dagestan, clearly affects the Lezghin community as a whole.

Despite this, there is significant protection on local, regional and national level in terms of language preservation and cultural expression. Whilst there are concerns over the vanishing of Lezghin language, taking into account the dominance of the Russian language, the Lezghin language is however still used in many domains of society.

The situation for Lezghins in Azerbaijan is particularly worrying. Lezghins are underrepresented, even in towns with a majority Lezghin population where important posts are held by Azeri's. Fear amongst Lezghin communities for the central government's repressive measures is widespread, which suppresses initiatives to publicly question policy and campaign for their rights. Economic investment and infrastructure are poor in Lezghin areas, enhancing division and assimilation of the Lezghin community even further. Little education is possible in indigenous languages, and no real media outlets in Lezghin language are available. In the run-up to the Azeri Presidential elections, arbitrary arrests targeting minority rights activists increased, further increasing the fear amongst vulnerable communities to speak out. Interviewees believed that the October 2013 elections would be a foregone conclusion with victory falling to the ruling party on the basis of vote tampering and irregularities in the vote count.

Recommendations

To the Government of Azerbaijan:

- To immediately release all prisoners of conscience and cease arbitrary arrests on unfounded charges.
- To elaborate and adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and to ensure that any public authority will respect the right of freedom of expression of persons belonging to a national minority, as Article 9 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities establishes.
- To take the 1996 NCA Law of the Russian Federation as an example and apply its basic ideas to minorities in Azerbaijan.
- Investments in Lezghin areas of the country should be encouraged, as well as the broadening of economic opportunities for ethnic and religious communities.
- To guarantee the right of national minorities to be taught in their minority language, complying with Article 14 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM).
- To encourage investment in the development of new textbooks for studying the Lezghin language, as a means of improving the ability to learn, teach, and communicate across the Lezghin communities and diaspora.
- To promote the establishment of national minority and civil society organisations as a means of supporting existing and wider attempts to open the space for civil society in the country.
- To clarify procedural scheme for the allocation of public funds not only for the preservation of the Lezghin culture, but also to encourage new expressions of Lezghin identity and to help develop this culture and the talents associated with it for a new generation of Lezghin.

To the Republic of Dagestan of the Russian Federation:

- To adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation on all six grounds (gender, disability, sex, age, race/ethnicity, religion) with the aim of adequately protecting the religious and ethnic minorities in the country.
- To simplify procedural rules for registration and, in general, functioning of NGOs and NCAs in the country.
- To engage in wider consultation with Lezghin communities awaiting resettlement as a means of building confidence and helping to avoid uncertainty and scope for rumour-mongering.
- To facilitate and encourage cross-border exchanges between Dagestan and Azerbaijan as a means of laying the foundations for social stability, cultural exchange, and opportunities for economic development.
- To give attention to the role and symbolism of the city of Derbent as a centre of nonviolence and tolerance in the region, as recognised by UNESCO but sadly largely overlooked by the international community at large.

To the international community:

- For European and international human rights and civil society institutions, to establish regional offices based in Baku as a means of supporting and giving appropriate visibility to local civil society organisations.
- For European political parties, to visit and gain insights on the situation facing national minorities in Dagestan and Azerbaijan as a first step to promoting international exchanges to encourage dialogue and debate on models of representation.
- For European and international agencies promoting democracy, civil society, media, good governance, to make every effort to build the capacity of local organisations representing Lezghin academia, media, youth and local communities to promote peaceful grassroots activism.
- For international observers to trials and judicial proceedings in Azerbaijan, to communicate their reasons for undertaking such observations and both manage the expectations of civil society activists and act more concretely in raising concerns about poor jurisprudence that stands to see Lezghin and other activists jailed on grounds that are all too often circumstantial or questionable.
- To encourage wider understanding of the Lezghin culture and that of the Caucasus as a whole, as a means of changing many of the currently negative perceptions of the region and as a means of bringing greater understanding of the region's complexity.
- To study and promote the system of jamaat as a model of a successful indigenous means of governance that has been shown to cut across ethnic divides and which works for the benefit of a community.

About UNPO

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognised or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

Although the aspirations of UNPO Members differ greatly, they are all united by one shared condition - they are not adequately represented at major international fora, such as the United Nations. As a consequence, their opportunity to participate on the international stage is significantly limited, as is their ability to access and draw upon the support of the global bodies mandated to defend their rights, protect their environments, and mitigate the effects of conflict. In today's world where over 90 percent of conflicts are intra-state, UNPO has been established to fill this gap, providing an international forum through which its Members can become effective participants and contributors to the international community. In an increasingly interdependent world it is ever more important that those who continue to be denied their rights or remain excluded be given an opportunity to present their case. UNPO works therefore to address the consequences of marginalisation, working with its Members to promote their democratic causes, to provide information, and to articulate creative and nonviolent strategies for progress, above all however, UNPO works to ensure their voices are heard.

Founded in 1991 at the Peace Palace in The Hague, UNPO is unique as an international organisation in that it is built entirely by its Members, who remain committed to respecting the five principles enshrined in the UNPO Covenant: nonviolence, human rights, democracy and self-determination, environmental protection, and tolerance.



About FLNCA

The Federal Lezghin National and Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA) is the representative of the Lezghin people in the UNPO, and a full representative of the Lezghin people before the State authorities of the Russian Federation. The core objectives and tasks of the FLNCA are the protection, preservation and development of the national and cultural interests of the Lezghins. To fulfill its intentions the FLNCA cooperates closely with political and public organizations of the Russian Federation, including the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the Administration of the President, the Government of the Russian Federation and the United Russia political party. The purposes of the FLNCA's foundation are to solve issues and restrictions surrounding the status of the Lezghins, to preserve the uniqueness of the Lezghin people, as well as to develop their language, education and national culture.



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