

Minorities in Azerbaijan

The Sociolinguistic Situation of Lezgis, Udis,
Georgians (Ingiloyts) and Talyshs in Azerbaijan -
with a Particular Focus on Education



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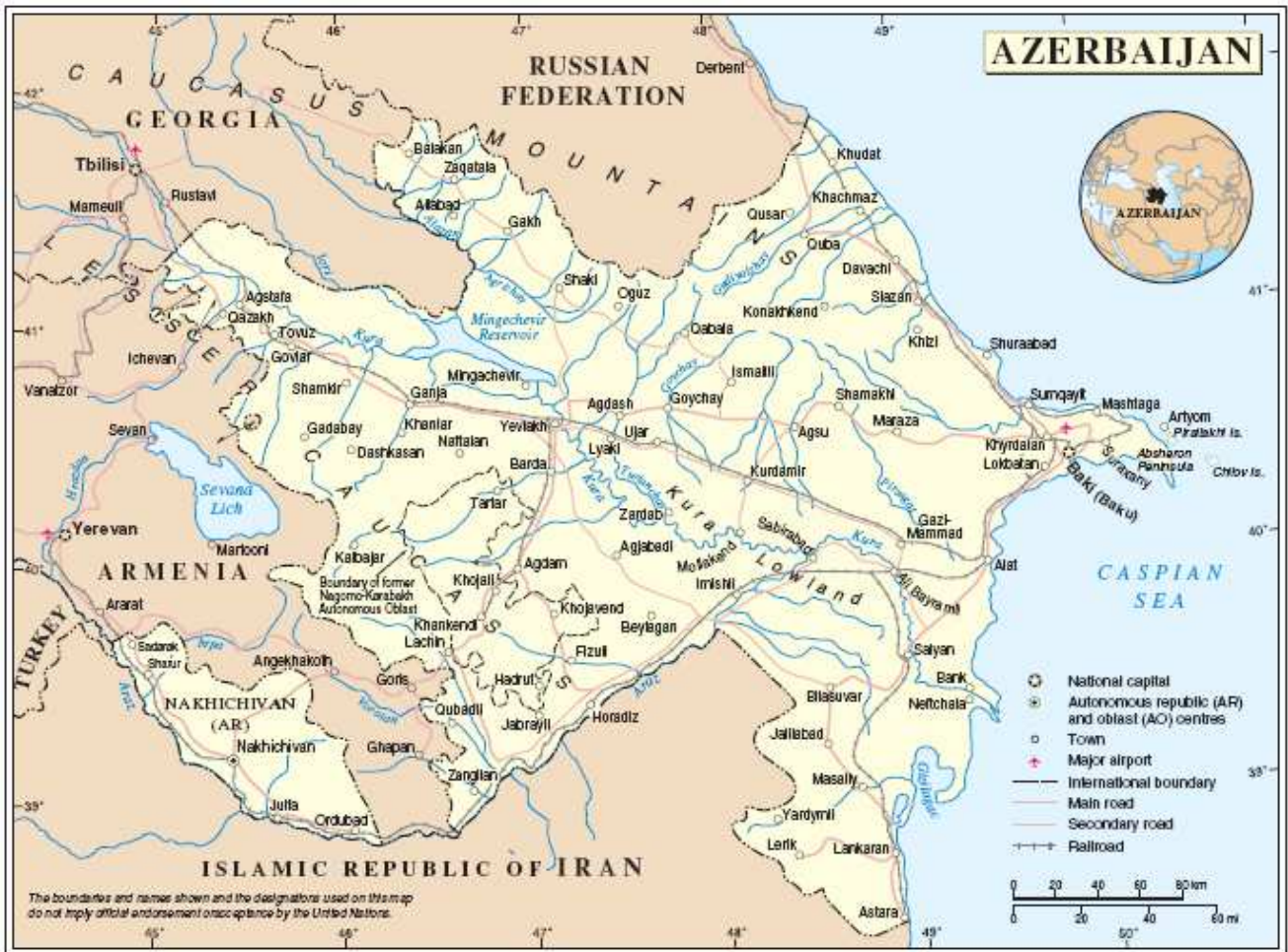
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Map of Azerbaijan

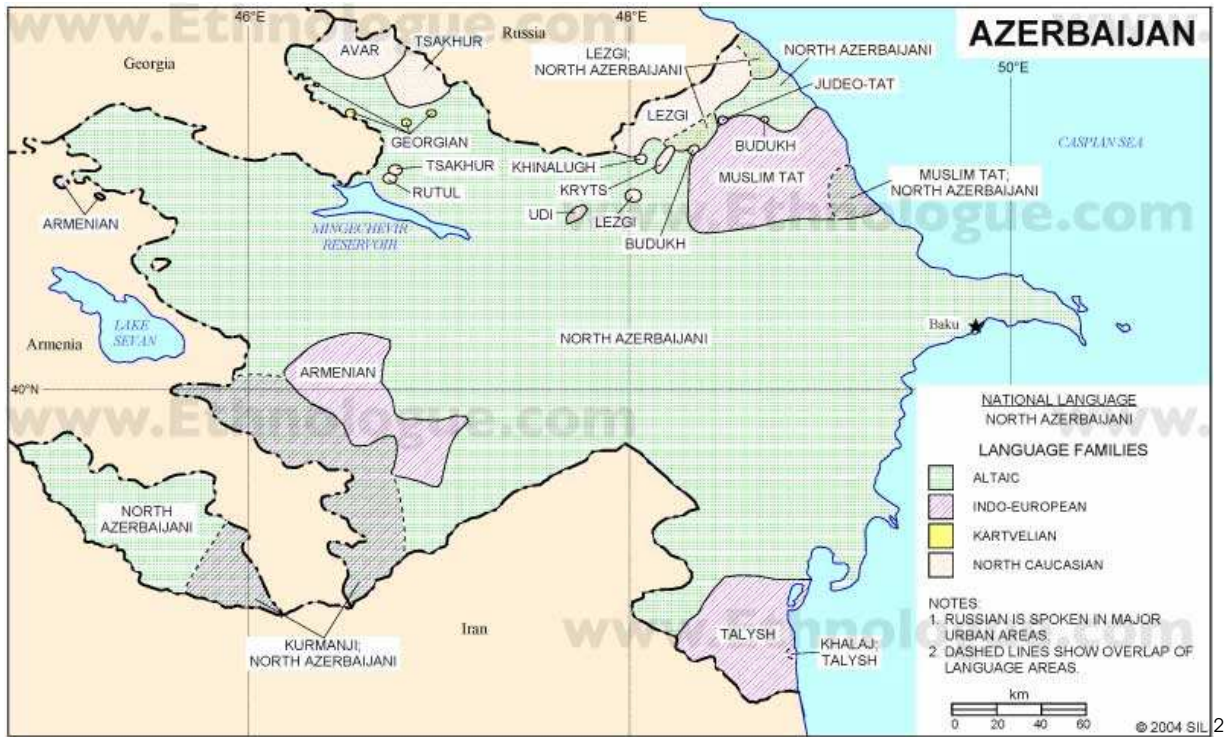


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¹ <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/azerbaij.pdf>

Map of Language Families in Azerbaijan



² http://www.ethnologue.com/show_map.asp?name=AZ&seq=10

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a socio-linguistic research conducted from March to May 2007 among four minority communities in Azerbaijan, namely the Lezgis, the Udis, the Georgians (Ingiloy) and the Talyshs. The goals of the research were to investigate current possibilities for the instruction of minority languages and minority histories at school as well as attitudes of teachers and parents towards instruction in the state language respectively in minority languages.

In a first part, the paper studies the development of interethnic relations in Azerbaijan and the state policy towards minorities after 1991 independence. The findings of the research are presented in the chapters on language use and attitudes, on modalities of minority language education and history teaching as well as on minority media. The paper concludes with a short overview over the international and local organizations active in minority issues in Azerbaijan.

This report is based on interviews and observations conducted both in Baku and in the regions of compact settlement of the investigated minority communities. Among our interviewees in Baku figured education policy and minority researchers, policy analysts, historians, Human Rights and minority rights activists, editors-in-chief of minority newspapers as well as representatives from the Ministry of Education. In the regions, we mainly interviewed teachers, school directors, parents and Human Rights activists as well as representatives from the District Education Department and from the local government. Due to a lack of time, only a relatively restricted number of persons could be interviewed. Therefore, the findings of this research may not be representative for the whole population. Furthermore, in some regions we faced serious restrictions on our work from the official side.

Acknowledgements

In this place, I would like to thank Arzu Abdullayeva from the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA) in Baku, Fasil Mahmudov from the local Gusar HCA branch, Esmira Turhide from the Southern Resource Center on Human Rights in Lenkoran and Nazli Aghayeva from the HCA office in Gebele for their support. Further, I would like to express special gratitude to Ramila Aslanova, who assisted me in the research for this paper with her excellent translation skills, and who was at my side as a dear friend during this time.

1. Interethnic Relations in Azerbaijan

1.1 Ethnic Profile and Regional Distribution of Minorities

The latest population census conducted by the authorities of Azerbaijan dates from 1999. According to this census, Azerbaijan has a population of 7'953'400 people, 91 per cent of which are ethnic Azeris. The main ethnic minorities are Lezgis (178 thousand or 2.2 per cents), Russians (141,7 thousand or 1.8 per cents), Talyshs (76,8 thousand or 1.0 per cents), Avars (50,9 thousand or 0.6 per cents), Turks-Meskhetians (43,4 thousand or 0.5 per cents), Tatars (30 thousand or 0.4 per cents), Ukrainians (29 thousand or 0.4 per cents), Georgians (14,9 thousand or 0.2 per cents), Kurds (13,1 thousand or 0.2 per cents), Tats (10,9 thousand or 0.1 per cents), and Jews (8,9 thousand or 0.1 per cents, which are divided into European (Ashkenazi), Mountainous and Georgian Jews).³

The North Caucasian subgroup includes Lezgis, Avars, Tsakhurs, Udis, Ingiloy, Kryzs, Budugs and Khinaligs, with the Lezgis playing a leading role in this group. They have lived on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan since ancient times. They mainly live in the northeast of Azerbaijan in the basin of the Samur river, as well as on the eastern slopes of the Greater Caucasus range. A group of ethnicities known as "Shakhdags" comprises the Khinaligs, Budugs and Kryzs – which are essentially the residents of three remote mountain villages named after these ethnic communities. None of the population census ever counted them. However, their number is estimated at 10'000 people.⁴ At present, a part of them moved from their initial mountainous settlements to the plains.⁵

1.1.1 Lezgis

In independent Azerbaijan⁶, Lezgis make up the second largest group after the ethnic Azeris. They live in the northern part of Azerbaijan along the border with Russia. According to the 1999 census, the Lezgi population is 178'000 and constitutes 2.2 per cents of Azerbaijan's population. However, ethnographic research conducted by the Institute of Peace and Democracy between 1994 to 1998 in the north-eastern regions of the country showed that a more realistic number of Lezgis in Azerbaijan ranges between 250'000 and 260'000 people. 40 per cent of all Lezgis in Azerbaijan live in Gusar district, where they constitute the absolute majority of the district's population (90 per cent). Further, they compactly live in a number of villages in Quba and Xacmaz district in the northeast, and in Gebele and Sheki district in the

³ Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan
http://www.mfa.gov.az/eng/foreign_policy/inter_affairs/human/ethnic.shtml

⁴ Yunus, Arif, "Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan", in *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, Vol 4, 2004/5, p. 488

⁵ Izmailova, Attiga, "The Population of Azerbaijan", Working Paper for the Commission on Ethnic Minorities of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, Baku, 2005

⁶ Independence refers to the 1991 independence after the fall of the Soviet Union

centre-north of Azerbaijan. 15 per cent live in the capital Baku, while the majority resides in rural regions.⁷

The Lezgi language is part of the Dagestan branch of the Caucasian languages and includes three distinct dialects. Most Lezgis in Azerbaijan are bi- or trilingual, speaking Lezgi, Azerbaijani and Russian.⁸ A Latin-based script was developed for the Lezgi language in 1928, using a dialect spoken in Dagestan as the literacy standard. In 1938, this script was abandoned in favor of a modified Cyrillic script that is still in use now.⁹ Lezgis adhere to Sunni Islam, whereas the majority of the Azeris are Shiite. Politically, Lezgis never formed a large confederation, preferring through most of their history to maintain their tribal loyalties.¹⁰

Some 250'000 Lezgis live in southern Dagestan, a republic in the south of Russia bordering Azerbaijan. The Lezgi people has been split up since 1860 between the territories of Russia and Azerbaijan, but only after the break-up of the Soviet Union, when the border between Russia and Azerbaijan became international, they found themselves in the position of a truly divided people.

The Lezgis from Azerbaijan have close relations to Dagestan. These ties affect their relation to their official nation-state Azerbaijan. While Lezgis in Azerbaijan are considered an ethnic minority, in Dagestan they form one of the constituting groups of the republic. Dagestan has clearly a multi-ethnic character, while Azerbaijan promotes a unitary state structure. In Dagestan, Lezgi language ranks as a state language along with Russian and other languages spoken in the republic. Lezgis can learn their language in schools and institutions of higher education, hear it spoken on television and radio, and read books and magazines printed in their mother tongue.¹¹ Dagestan's two million inhabitants are divided into approximately 36 different nationalities and speak more than two-dozen different languages. However, the Lezgi are among the most disadvantaged groups in Dagestan, especially in the labor market.¹²

1.1.2 Udis

Besides Lezgi, another member of the North Caucasian language family is the Udi language. The Udis live in the north of Azerbaijan, in Gabala and Oguz district, where they compactly live in the villages of Nidzh and Oguz. In the 1989 census, 8'000 Udis were counted in the USSR, 6'100 of whom lived in Azerbaijan, with their majority (4'500) residing in the village of

⁷ Yunus, Arif, "Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan", p.486

⁸ Matveeva, Anna, "Minorities in the South Caucasus", paper submitted to the Working Group on Minorities in 2003, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sub-regional Seminar on Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia, Bishkek, October 2004, p.17

⁹ Clifton, John M. and others; "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Lezgi in Azerbaijan", *SIL International*, 2005, p. 3

¹⁰ "The Lezgins of Azerbaijan", *Minorities at Risk*, University of Maryland, 2001

¹¹ "Azerbaijan: Voices Falling Silent", *Transitions Online*, 24 August 2006

¹² For more info, see "The Lezgins of Russia", *Minorities at Risk*, University of Maryland, 2001

Nidzh in Gabala district. The 1999 census registered 4'200 Udis in the village of Nidzh and 104 Udis in Oguz. The majority of the Udis are rural residents.

The Udi church can be traced back to the historic church of Old Albania. According to Farida Mammadova, an Azerbaijani historian and head of the Caucasus Albania Research Center, after the Arabian conquest of Caucasus Albania in the eighth century, most of its population, including many Udis, adopted Islam and assimilated with Turkic tribes. But some of them, who lived in the mountainous parts of Caucasus Albania – the Karabakh and the Sheki-Zagkatala districts of modern Azerbaijan – managed to preserve their beliefs and language through the centuries. Despite the collapse of Caucasus Albania in 705, the Albanian Church existed until the 19th century and had its own places of worship, attended by Udis.¹³ In 1836 Tsar Nicholas I forced the Udi people to give up the Albanian tradition. The Udis in Oguz joined the Georgian Orthodox Church, whereas the Udis in Nidzh joined the Armenian Church. Because of this affiliation, a lot of surnames of the Udis in Nidzh were modified to resemble Armenian surnames. During the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, this led to a fear of reprisals from neighbors against them. The fear of association with Armenians, as well as economic hardship, accounted for the emigration of many Udis from Nidzh to Russia. However, in the second half of the 90s, the Udi people received permission to change their surnames back to the traditional forms. According to our interviewees in Nidzh, this has entirely eliminated the animosity of their neighbors towards them.

The vast majority of the Udis from Oguz - who joined the Georgian Orthodox church - have moved to the village of Oktomberi in western Georgia, which was established between 1919 and 1922 by a group of Udis from Oguz. Nowadays, only about 30 families still live in Oguz.¹⁴

1.1.3 Georgians (Ingiloy)s¹⁵

According to the 1999 census, 14'900 Georgians live in Azerbaijan (0.2 per cent). With the exception of about 2'500 Georgians residing in Baku and Ganja, all Georgians live in provinces, namely in the districts of Gakh (7'500 people), Zakatala (3'000 people) and Belakan (2'000 people).

The specifics of origin of the Ingiloy)s are still debated by researchers and much remains unclear. They are considered to be one of the oldest local ethnicities who, in early medieval times, accepted Christianity, more particularly its Georgian branch. With time, they started to speak Georgian. Later on, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, local Georgian-speaking populations converted to Islam. After the conquering of Azerbaijan by the Russian

¹³ “Christian Udins preserve rich heritage”, *BakuSun*

¹⁴ Clifton, John M. and others, “The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Udi in Azerbaijan”, *SIL International*, 2005, p.3

¹⁵ Christian Ingiloy)s in Azerbaijan call themselves Georgians, whereas in Georgia, they are referred to as Ingiloy)s.

Empire, many Ingiloyts reconverted to Christianity. Today's Muslim part of the Ingiloyts identifies themselves as Azeris, while the Christians claim they are Georgians.

The Ingiloyts did not count as a separate ethnicity during the Soviet period and, therefore, were constantly neglected by the population censuses.¹⁶

1.1.4 Talysh

The Talysh are an Iranian people who are settled in the south-eastern part of Azerbaijan, mainly in the Lenkeran, Yardimli, Masalli, Lerik and Astara districts. The 1999 census registered 76'800 Talyshs in Azerbaijan. Primarily, they are rural residents (97 per cent). The latest census however indicates their presence also in the cities of Sumgayit and Baku. The 1999 census data undoubtedly under-represents the actual number of the Talysh population. A more realistic number seems to be between 200'000 and 250'000 Talysh living in Azerbaijan.¹⁷

Some of the Soviet censuses ignored the existence of Talyshs in Azerbaijan: the 1926 census counted 77'039 Talyshs living in Soviet Azerbaijan (3.3 per cent). In the 1959, 1970 and 1979 censuses they simply disappeared from the list of Soviet ethnicities. Only in the 1989 census the Talysh had again the possibility to indicate their ethnicity. However, only 21'200 people registered as Talysh, which corresponds to 0.3 per cent of the population of Soviet Azerbaijan.

Their language of communication is Talysh, relating to the Iranian group of the Indo-European linguistic family. Talysh has three major dialects — Northern (in Azerbaijan and Iran), Central (in Iran), and Southern (in Iran), regarded by some linguists as separate languages. These dialects also have a number of sub-dialects. Most Talysh are bi-lingual, speaking Talysh and Azerbaijani. Talysh adhere to Shi'a Islam. Historically, the Talysh came under Turkish influence during the Middle-Ages, but established their own khanate in the 17th century, with the capital first in Astara and later in Lenkeran. At the 1828 peace treaty of Turkmenchay, the Talysh lands were divided between Russia and Iran.¹⁸ According to data from 1983, nearly 100'000 Talysh live in Iran.¹⁹

1.2 The Ethno-linguistic Situation in Soviet Azerbaijan

Before Stalin built up his authoritarian regime, Soviet policies were rather supportive of cultural diversity and ethnic identity. In the 1920s, many minor ethnic groups had their own schools and issued numerous magazines and newspapers. All these activities were coordinated

¹⁶ Yunus, Arif, "Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan", p.487

¹⁷ Ibid, p.489

¹⁸ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) – Talysh
http://www.unpo.org/member_profile.php?id=65

¹⁹ Kotecha, Hema, "Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions", A Discussion Paper, OSCE, July 2006, p.34

by special governmental structures. During the same period, alphabets were created for those ethnic communities that did not have written languages.²⁰ However, by the 1930s, when Stalin tightened his regime, Soviet ethnic policies underwent radical changes.

From the thirties till the perestroika, the expression of nationalist sentiment and political demands based on ethnicity were suppressed. Ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union were subjected to rigid constraints beyond which national expression was not allowed to expand. Demands for administrative autonomy were not tolerated.²¹

All Soviet population censuses deliberately understated the numbers of minor ethnic populations or, rather, they were classified as parts of bigger ethnicities, while some of them simply vanished from the Soviet ethnic map. As a result, serious inconsistencies occurred between the official statistical data and the actual numbers of people in such minor ethnic groups as the Lezgis, Kurds, Tats, Talyshs, Tsakhurs and others. Arif Yunus, an ethnographic researcher from the Baku-based Institute of Peace and Democracy, stated in this context: “However, in addition to the USSR’s malicious ethnic policies, these deliberate distortions were caused by other factors as well. As early as in the nineteenth century, a process of rather intensive ethnic identity changes was taking place among many Muslim ethnicities. In the official Russian statistics, the Kurds, Tats Talyshs, Tsakhurs and Lezgis were often referred to as “Turks” or “Azerbaijani Tatars.” According to Yunus, this was a “natural process” of assimilation of minor ethnic groups in the regions of Azeri ethnic predominance. Yunus continued that “contrary processes started to occur by 1989 when some of the communities began to reemphasize their ethnic identity.”²²

1.3 The Development of Interethnic Relations in Azerbaijan after 1991 Independence

Two powerful currents – towards depopulation and mono-ethnicity – have become distinctive features of the post-independence period, as minorities are more prone to emigrate than Azeris. Most of the Armenians, many Russians, Jew and Greeks have already left Azerbaijan. According to the 1999 census, the Russian population in Azerbaijan fell to a third of its 1979 level, with 141’700 officially registered. The current estimates are even lower, at about 100’000 Russians actually living in the country.²³ The same trend affects smaller indigenous groups, such as the Udis, Avars, Laz, Tats and Tsakhurs. As state support for their languages and culture diminishes, there is an intensification of the fear among minority groups that they might disappear altogether as distinct communities. The authorities, continuing the Soviet

²⁰ Yunus, Arif, “Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan”, p.484

²¹ Matveeva, Anna, “The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities”, *Minority Rights Group International*, May 2002, p.8

²² Interview with Arif Yunus, Head of the Department of Conflict and Migration Studies, Institute of Peace and Democracy, in Baku in April 2007

²³ Interview with Arif Yunus in Baku in April 2007

practice of registering some representatives of minority groups as members of the titular groups, diminish even more their official proportion; this is regarded by the state as an important aspect of nation-building.²⁴

The Nagorno-Karabakh war has deeply affected inter-ethnic relations in Azerbaijan. The Azeri government, fearing further secessionist forces, is wary of recognizing any level of ethnic demands. It is widely believed that if emerging secessionist tendencies had been suppressed from the beginning, it might have been possible to prevent separatism in Karabakh. The Azeri authorities adopted the position that the Karabakh situation must be resolved before other minority issues can be tackled.²⁵

Moreover, minorities are seen as susceptible to manipulation by outsiders, since many of them live in the border areas next to their kin states.²⁶

1.3.1 Ethnic Minorities' Search for Identity after 1991 Independence

According to Arif Yunus, in the early 90s many Lezgis, Talyshs and other minority representatives considered themselves Azeri. Yunus continued: "In the mid 90s, a process of search for the ethnic identity began, in part reinforced by the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. The intelligentsia of the different national minorities raised questions about their background, and they started to print their own newspapers. Their claims were however minor. This process was a "normal" process, there was no reason to be afraid, but the regime in Baku was frightened. This comes from the Soviet mentality; most of all, they fear the word "problem".²⁷

1.3.2 Lezgi Activism since Independence

Tensions between Lezgis and Azeris began in 1992, but reached a peak in mid-1994. Baku's policy of forcibly drafting Lezgi men into the army for deployment in the war in Karabakh resulted in a high mobilization of the Lezgis around this issue.²⁸ A considerable degree of collective identity was forged during mass demonstrations against the draft, many of which turned violent. With the end of armed conflict in 1994, the protest and mobilizations has subsided. The collective identity of Lezgis has not proven to be as strong in the absence of a concrete issue around which to organize collective political action.²⁹

²⁴ Matveeva, Anna, "The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities", p. 15

²⁵ Ibid, p.17

²⁶ Ibid, p.15

²⁷ Interview with Arif Yunus in Baku in April 2007

²⁸ Interview with Fazil Mahmudov, head of the local Helsinki Committee branch in Gusar, in April 2007

²⁹ "The Lezgins of Azerbaijan", *Minorities at Risk*, University of Maryland, 2001

In 1989, the “Sadval” (Unity) movement was founded. In Dagestan, Sadval called in 1991 for the creation of an independent Lezgistan, made up by Lezgi territories in Dagestan and Azerbaijan. In 1991, another Lezgi movement, “Samur”, was formed, that does not push for unification but for the development of mechanisms to improve cross-border relations. The more moderate view represented by Samur is having greater support among Lezgis in Azerbaijan. In 1994, the Azeri authorities banned Sadval after accusing group members of having carried out a bomb attack on the Baku metro. Sadval remained active in Dagestan, but Azerbaijan’s Lezgis grew leery of public activism and even public celebrations of their culture.³⁰ The claim of an independent Lezgistan was officially rejected by Sadval in 1996.

By far the largest grievance that the Lezgis have against the government in Moscow and Baku is what they see as the artificial division of their lands that occurred when the Soviet Union collapsed. Becoming international in 1991, the border was still more or less free to pass until 1994, when the Russian government tightened border controls after the outbreak of hostilities in Chechnya in order to stop Islamic guerillas from reaching the break-away republic. The border reopened in 1996, but the issue of division continues to cause anger. Sadval now has shifted its focus and presses for a less tight border control and the creation of a tax-free zone. Dagestan acknowledges the problem of division, but Azerbaijan does not, because of the implications for the issue of Azeris divided between Iran and Azerbaijan.³¹

The younger generation of Lezgis has left northern Azerbaijan for Baku in large numbers and seems to prefer the status quo. They believe that their interests are best served by integrating into Azeri society. The growing reality of statehood has dampened secessionist expressions and marginalized any hard-line nationalists.³² Nowadays, Lezgis in northern Azerbaijan clearly seem to be concerned with cultural protections rather than political autonomy. For instance, in the November 2005 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, the Lezgi language was reportedly the main electoral issue for candidates from Lezgi-populated areas.³³ The most frequent complaints by Azerbaijan’s Lezgis include the negligence of Lezgi language education and Lezgi media.

Increasingly, Lezgis in Azerbaijan are accused of Wahhabist activities. It is believed that radical Islam is gaining influence in particular among the Lezgins, Avars and Chechens. In 2000 it was reported that Wahhabi and Sadval organizations were cooperating: this argument was used to show the involvement of Armenia and Russia in manipulating various groupings in the north of the country for putting pressure on Baku when necessary.³⁴ A Lezgi activist in Baku voiced concern about Lezgi nationalists being accused either of cooperating with Wahhabi or Dagestani (linked to Sadval) terrorist movements. According to her, Sadval is used as a

³⁰ “Azerbaijan: Voices Falling Silent”, *Transitions Online*, 24 August 2006

³¹ Matveeva, Anna, “The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities”, p. 17

For further information on the Azeri minority in Iran, see: “Iranian Azeris: A Giant Minority”, The Washington Institute for near East Policy, Policy Watch #1111, 6 June 2006

³² Kotecha, Hema, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions”, p.39

³³ “Azerbaijan: Lezgins Pessimistic About Election”, *IWPR*, CRS No. 307, 6 October 2005

³⁴ Kotecha, Hema, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions”, pp.44-45

“threat” to which Baku can refer as a justification for restrictions. The police can use this alleged threat to persecute, harass and extort bribes.

Before our trip to the Lezgi-populated north of Azerbaijan, we were warned by Arzu Abdullayeva, chairwoman of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, and Arif Yunus in Baku that we might put into danger the people we would interview. They underlined that the state practices a policy of strong repression against the Lezgi. Further, they warned us that the Lezgi population is afraid of speaking to anyone who is coming from Baku, and even more to a foreigner. They predicted that interviewees would simply say what the authorities want to hear: that there are no problems. However, the situation on place seemed more relaxed. The chairman of the local HCA branch explained that the times of strict control of all activities belong to the past. According to him, the easing of the situation took place with the change of the local government in 2004.

1.3.3 Talysh Activism since Independence

In June 1993, at the time of general turmoil in Azerbaijan which ended the short rule of the Azeri Popular Front, ethnic Talysh Alikram Humbatov, a former commander of a military unit in southern Azerbaijan, proclaimed himself leader of the “Talysh-Mugan Republic”. He ordered a group of officers to establish a break-away republic of seven districts of south-east Azerbaijan, which lasted two month. The local population, however, did not support him. Humbatov’s plan to take advantage of the general political turmoil was miscalculated, and his uprising was easily crushed by the regime of Heidar Aliev. Azeris widely consider this ‘coup’ as being planned and supported by the Russian KGB, Russia seeking to keep the Caucasus under its influence. Humbatov now lives in the Netherlands, after being pardoned in 2004 from a life prison sentence.³⁵

Nowadays, the issue of a realistic assessment of the size of the Talysh community is still to be resolved. The suppression of Talysh identity and their inability to promulgate their culture and language during the Soviet period has left its traces. In addition, the brief period of separatism in 1993 has caused a deep-rooted fear of being accused of colluding with Armenia or Russia.³⁶ These two factors have caused a deep reluctance of voicing any kind of national expressions. Official statistics, as stated above, indicate the number of Talysh living in Azerbaijan at 76’800 people. Talysh activists however claim that up to a million Talysh live on the territory of Azerbaijan.³⁷

³⁵ Interview with Arzu Abdullayeva, chairwoman of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Azerbaijan, in Baku in March 2007

³⁶ Accusations of Talysh making agreements with the Armenians have been repeated, for example in 2005, when the Azeri Presidential Consultant on Minorities brought up this issue.

³⁷ Interview with Talysh activists in Lenkeran and Baku in March/April 2007

Arif Yunus stated in this regard that “significant changes have occurred in Talysh self-identification over the last 10 years”³⁸. “Nowadays, Azerbaijan’s Talysh community cannot be easily characterized. The group”, Yunus said, “is roughly divided between those who seek to obtain independence from Azerbaijan, those who want cultural autonomy within Azerbaijan, and those who want to promote Talysh language and culture, but also to establish warmer ties with ethnic Azeris”.³⁹

Hema Kotecha, a development researcher and anthropologist who wrote a discussion paper on *Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan* in 2006, stated that “Talysh identity” was fairly nebulous and that during her research it was virtually impossible to tell the level of support for any form of the Talysh movement. Kotecha notes that the main difficulty to assess the nature of Talysh identity and the extent of its potential politicization or possibility of bringing it to the public sphere is the intense public-private divide. She argues that the lack of interest by many in their ethnicity and the dislike of the ethnic question can be explained to a large extent by the historical suppression. Further, according to Kotecha the lack of interest is also due to pragmatism – that it is not professionally useful to be Talysh – and to a certain dislike of non-conformism in society in general. Last, she notes that parts of the Talysh movement are terrified of the police.⁴⁰

The experiences we made during our research in the southern regions of Azerbaijan go in line with the above statements. The people we interviewed could be classified into two groups: on the one hand Talysh activists who usually went very far in their statements and claims; on the other hand people who were completely disinterested in Talysh issues and usually answered inconsistently to the question whether they are Talysh or Azeri and whether their mother tongue is Talysh or Azerbaijani. Zahir Amanov, editor-in-chief of the independent regional newspaper “South News”, thinks that there is a serious problem in the present day self-perception of the Talysh people. “People here don’t know who they are, Talysh or Azeri. When they meet some Talysh nationalists, those nationalists make them say “I’m Talysh”, but in many other occasions they say “I’m Azeri””.⁴¹ Ella Alibekova, a historian from the Academy of Sciences in Baku, mentioned that “for a large number of Talysh, their being Talysh is restricted to the family sphere and the Talysh-speaking community. Towards the outside world, they deny their ethnic belonging.”⁴² The editor-in-chief of the “South News” independent newspaper further mentioned that “in a poll conducted among the people in the south of Azerbaijan, in which everybody could indicate which are his or her biggest concerns, the issue of promoting Talysh language did not even occupy the 10th place. Economic hardship, especially the large

³⁸ Yunus, Arif, “Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan”, p.489

³⁹ “Azerbaijan: US-Iran Tensions Cause for Minority Arrests?”, *Eurasianet*, 5. March 2007

⁴⁰ Kotecha, Hema, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions”, pp.34-35

⁴¹ Interview with Zahir Amanov, editor in chief of the “South News” independent newspaper, in Lenkeran in April 2007

⁴² Interview with Ella Alibekova, Historian at the Academy of Science in Baku, in April 2007

number of unemployed people in the southern regions, and concerns of every-day life are much more pressing to the people.”⁴³

Talysh activists, in turn, are highly concerned with the fate of the Talysh culture, history and language. Their major claims are to open a faculty for Talysh language in the Lenkeran State University, to broadcast Talysh-language TV programs on state TV for several hours a week, and to get some state funding for organizing Talysh cultural activities like for example folkloric dance. Talysh activists stated further that they would like Talysh to be an official state language, among Azeri and other minority languages as for example Lezgi language.⁴⁴ Some of the Talysh activists we met went as far as saying that Azerbaijani language developed out of the Talysh language. Arif Yunus explains this by what he calls “the psychology of minorities”, “which makes them exaggerate facts and overestimate the role that their community played. For instance, the population figures they give concerning the Talysh population in Azerbaijan are out of any relations.”⁴⁵

During our research trip in Lenkeran, our interviewees indicated very different numbers when asked about the percentages of the Talysh population living in the Lenkoran district. The Chairman of the Department of Public Relations of the local authorities indicated that 82 per cent of the population were Azeri, and 12 per cent were Talysh. Later on, he said that in fact 90 per cent of the population have Talysh roots, but they consider themselves Azeri. About himself he told us: “My roots are Talysh, my ethnic belonging is Talysh, but I consider myself Azeri.” Further he explained: “I was Talysh, but today we are members of Azerbaijan, that’s why today I am Azeri.” When asked about his mother tongue, he said Azeri. He prolonged: “Talyshs are a small nation. When I go to Europe, and people ask me who I am, and I answer Talysh, they will not know who I am. But when I say Azeri, they will immediately know where I am coming from”.

Talysh people hold a lot of official posts in Lenkeran. However, they very often deny their ethnic background, pretending that they are Azeri. Arif Yunus describes them as being “more Azeri than a real Azeri”. (Arif Yunus explains: “Who was putting forward the russification in Soviet Azerbaijan? Not the Russians, but the Azeris themselves!”) Indeed, one Talysh activist complained that with the change of the rector of the university three years ago from an Azeri to a Talysh, he buried all his hopes that there will ever be a faculty for Talysh language studies opened.

At the time we were in Lenkeran, the situation was especially tense due to the recent arrest of a prominent member of the Talysh minority. In February 2007, Novruzali Mammadov, head of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan’s Institute of Philology, editor-in-chief of the Talysh-language newspaper Tolyshi Sado (Voice of the Talysh) and head of the Talysh Cultural Center,

⁴³ Interview with Zahir Amanov

⁴⁴ Interview with Talysh activists in Lenkeran and Baku in March/April 2007

⁴⁵ Interview with Arif Yunus in Baku

was arrested in Baku and charged with high treason.⁴⁶ Some Azeri analysts believe that growing tensions between the United States and Iran have prompted his arrest. Arif Yunus characterizes the arrests as part of a campaign to give the “appearance of fighting against terrorism, a demonstration which the Azeri authorities, from time to time, make to the United States and the West”.⁴⁷

Increasingly, minorities in Azerbaijan are associated with the growing religious activism in the country. Currently, it is claimed that Iranian influence is growing in the Lenkeran area, which affirms more and more a Muslim identity with new mosques and madrassas being built with financial backing from Iran. The proximity of the Talysh people in southern Azerbaijan to the Iranian border is believed to reinforce Iran’s religious influence.⁴⁸ The Turan news agency distributed a report claiming that Iranian intelligence services usually look among the Talysh minority when recruiting Azerbaijan-based agents.

We perceived the atmosphere in Lenkeran to be very tense. We did not get permission by the local authorities to go to schools or to any other official institution. When we approached people in official positions, for example at the District Education Department, they were very reluctant to give us any information, saying that they were not allowed to answer any question without the permission of the head of the department. Some Talysh activists were afraid to meet with us or told us not to mention to anybody about our meeting. In a discussion with one Talysh activist and several Azeri human rights activists, we asked the Talysh activist about the activities of his Talysh cultural centre. He underlined that he does not conduct any political activities. The person next to him laughed and said: “You are Talysh, that’s already enough political.” All the Human Rights activists we met in Lenkeran sharply criticized the authoritarian rule of the Head of the local authorities (executive power) in Lenkeran. We had a chance to meet him, and to assure ourselves of his tyrannical rule.

2. State Policy towards Ethnic Minorities in Azerbaijan

The experience of secessionist forces in the early 90s deeply curved the state’s approach towards national minorities. The fear of further separatism and the belief that secessionist trends can only be prevented by suppressing any claims in their emergence characterized the rule of the former president Heidar Aliev. When he accessed to power in 1993, he sent out a clear signal of non-tolerance to separatist claims. During his authoritarian and highly personalized regime, Heidar Aliev firmly held the reins of power. Aliev’s approach to minority issues was in essence a variant of the Soviet pattern of recognizing the importance of ethnic

⁴⁶ In addition were arrested Elman Quliyev, a senior assistant at Tolyshi Sado, and Ali Nasirov, deputy chairman of the Talysh Cultural Center and executive editor of Talyshi Sado.

⁴⁷ “Azerbaijan: US-Iran Tensions Cause for Minority Arrests?”, *Eurasianet*, 5. March 2007

⁴⁸ Matveeva, Anna, “The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities”, pp. 16-17

identity, but suppressing political demands for autonomy. On the one hand, the state practiced detention and prosecution of real or alleged separatists, such as Talysh and Lezgi, who were given long jail sentences for their “terrorist activities”. On the other hand, many people belonging to ethnic minorities occupied senior positions in the civil service, army and parliament. The constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan stipulates the unitary state structure, resisting any suggestion of autonomous arrangements for its minorities. The heads of local administrations are centrally nominated, while the president keeps a close eye on personnel appointments in the minority-populated areas.⁴⁹ The municipalities, whose members are elected by the people, have very little power compared to the local authorities (executive power) nominated by the president.

His son and successor Ilham Aliev has not changed the approach to minority issues. Pursuing this policy line, the current administration continues to promote a state-defined rather than an ethnically defined identity.⁵⁰ However, this increasing tendency to moderate the relevance of ethnic identity and instead promote “Azerbaijanism” makes it difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the ethnic composition of the country.⁵¹

2.1 Minority Protection in Azerbaijan: National Laws and Implementation of International Minority Rights Instruments

According to the Azeri constitution, every person has the right to preserve its national or ethnic identity.⁵² Azerbaijan became a Member of the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2001. It signed and ratified the *Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM)* already in 2000. Seven years later, however, Azerbaijan has still not set up a special legal framework addressing the rights of national minorities.

2.1.1 Language Rights

The Azeri constitution states that Azerbaijani is the state language of the country, but that everyone has the right to use his or her mother tongue, to work and to receive education in any language.⁵³ However, a new *Law on the State Language* has been adopted by the parliament in 2002, stipulating that all services and procedures in state and non-government agencies must be in Azerbaijani or with translation into Azerbaijani. No provisions in the new law ensure the

⁴⁹ Matveeva, Anna, “Minorities in the South Caucasus”, p.17

⁵⁰ For instance, the current passport regime does not mention the ethnic belonging of the citizens of Azerbaijan.

⁵¹ Popjanevski, Johanna, “Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, September 2006, p.59

⁵² Article 44

⁵³ Articles 21 and 45

right for national minorities to use their native languages in public life. The *FCNM*, however, states that minorities, when appropriate, should have the right to use their native languages in dealing with the authorities.⁵⁴

The right for minorities to use their native language in public life may however be restricted if more important interests are threatened. The *Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities*⁵⁵ emphasize the necessity of maintaining a balance between the protection of minority languages and the objective of full participation of national minorities in the wider society. This may only be possible if minorities have sufficient knowledge of the state language.⁵⁶ Thus, promoting the use of the official language of a state, for instance through teaching in the state language, is not incompatible with international standards.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Azerbaijan has signed but not yet ratified the *European Language Charter*.

2.1.2 Education Rights

Article 45 of the Constitution of Azerbaijan provides that everyone shall have the right to receive education in his or her native language. The possibility to introduce education in a minority language is also envisaged in general terms in Article 6 of the 1992 *Law on Education*. The legal guarantees for persons belonging to national minorities to receive such education have, however, recently been reduced. Whereas the previously applicable 1992 *Law on the State Language* provided in its Article 3 that national minorities residing compactly on the territory of Azerbaijan had the right to separate schools, classes or groups in their language, Article 5 of the new 2002 *Law on the State Language* states that the functioning of educational institutions in languages other than Azerbaijani is conducted “in accordance with the legislation”, without providing any guarantees in this respect. The Advisory Committee of the *FCNM* urged Azerbaijan to provide a clear legal framework and more detailed guarantees for the implementation of the right contained in Article 14 of the Framework Convention. It further stated that in the absence of such additional guarantees, the legal status of minority languages in the educational system remains relatively weak.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Article 10 of the *FCNM*

⁵⁵ The *Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities* were elaborated by the working group comprising international experts on international minority rights law, appointed by the *OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities and Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations* in 1995. The document is available at http://osce.org/documents/hcnm/1998/02/2699_en.pdf

⁵⁶ Popjanevski, Johanna, “Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan”, p.18

⁵⁷ see Article 14(3) of the *FCNM*

⁵⁸ ACFC/INF/OP/I(2004)001, Advisory Committee on the *FCNM*. Opinion on Azerbaijan, 22 May 2003, par.115-117

The concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2005 go in line with the above statements of the Advisory Committee of the *FCNM*.⁵⁹

2.2 Civic Integration into the Azeri Society

According to Arif Yunus, there is no state program for the integration of minorities into the Azeri society.⁶⁰ “The government of Azerbaijan has taken obligations through its membership in the Council of Europe. It is the only country of the South Caucasus in which the parliament ratified the *FCNM* (in 2000). But when the Advisory Committee of the *FCNM* came to Azerbaijan to investigate the developments undertaken since the ratification of the *FCNM*, it was reported that the Azeri parliament asked: which document? That means, they signed the *FCNM*, and forgot about it. In Azerbaijan there is the following situation: the government has taken obligations, but nobody knows about these laws, least of all the national minorities themselves. When I carried out seminars on the rights of national minorities in 2002/03, and read out loud the text of the *FCNM*, I got in trouble with the local authorities, which thought I am distributing separatist literature.” Arif Yunus explains this attitude by the fact that the leaders of the country are basically old communists, with the mentality of Soviet persons who are afraid to address any kind of problem.

In public life, minorities are relatively well-integrated into the society. Mixed marriages are common. Many persons belonging to an ethnic minority occupy senior positions in the civil service, army and parliament. Arif Yunus explains his view: “When there is still a high level of participation by minorities in the public life of Azerbaijan, this is only due to personal success of some talented people. There is a process of natural integration taking place. People belonging to national minorities come to Baku and take a post, and take part in the designing of the country. But there is no state program or state support for such aims as participation of national minorities in the state.”

With regard to the knowledge of the state language, minorities in Azerbaijan have since Soviet times achieved a much better proficiency in the majority language than minorities in the neighboring countries. Russian is also more widely used in Baku and receives some state attention, when also decreasing.

3. Language Use and Attitudes

Azerbaijan hosts a variety of linguistic minorities. In total, it is estimated that more than two million people in Azerbaijan use a language other than Azerbaijani, including ethnic Azeris

⁵⁹ The Committee invites the State party to facilitate the participation of ethnic minorities in the elaboration of cultural and educational policies. The Committee also recommends to the State party that it takes the necessary measures to create favourable conditions that will enable persons belonging to minorities to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs, and to learn or to have instruction in their mother tongue.

14/04/2005, CERD/C/AZE/CO/4

⁶⁰ For instance, the post of Presidential Advisor on National Minorities is vacant already since early 2006.

who bilingually use Russian and Azerbaijani. The dominating foreign language in the country is Russian, and the amount of schools using Russian as the language of instruction has in recent years increased, giving upraise to controversies between those in favor of protecting the use of the Azerbaijani language and those in favor of recognizing Russian as a second state language.⁶¹

In 2001, the president of Azerbaijan ordered the transition from Cyrillic to Latin script, in order to bring it into line with the Turkish alphabet. This quick transfer created some problems: Many elderly persons are not able to read in Latin, while schoolchildren are not able to read Azerbaijani classic and scientific literature in Cyrillic. Many textbooks are still not available in the Latin script.

The transformation of the script of Azerbaijani in 2001 from Cyrillic to Latin has created uncertainty concerning the fate of the graphics of minority alphabets which were in Cyrillic. In time with Azerbaijani, the Talysh also changed the alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin, and now has the same problem of lack of reprints of old literature in the new graphics. However, only the Azerbaijani reprints in Latin script benefit from state support.⁶²

Lezgis resisted the transfer to the Latin script enacted by Aliev since 2001, claiming that the relationship with their ethnic kin in Dagestan would suffer, as the latter continue to use the Cyrillic script. The written script for the Lezgi language was designed in late 19th century, only to be changed from Arabic to Latin in the 1920s after the October Revolution. In 1938 it was changed again from Latin into Cyrillic.

3.1 The Respective Role of Azerbaijani and Russian

Although Azerbaijani is the official state language, it cannot be stated that it has become the dominant language in *all* spheres. More than two million residents are estimated to speak Russian at home and at work. Especially among the intelligentsia, Russian is more popular than Azerbaijani. In addition to an estimated 100'000 Russians, ethnic minorities such as Lezgis, Avars, Kurds, Talyshs, Tats, Belarusians or Ukrainians use Russian as a lingua franca. Moreover, a significant number of ethnic Azeris use Russian as their first language. These so called 'Rus dillier' (Russian speakers in Azerbaijani) form a significant language minority in Azerbaijan. There are no official statistics on the use of Russian in Azerbaijan. But experts

⁶¹ Popjanevski, Johanna, "Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan", p.64

⁶² The argument that a lot of Azerbaijani books have to be reprinted in Latin characters is very often used to explain why the textbook printing for minority languages advances so slowly.

generally believe that between 50 and 70 percent of all citizens are familiar with the language, although not all of them use it on a daily basis.⁶³

Still a lot of people are experiencing problems with the Azerbaijani language, first and foremost because they changed the alphabet to the Latin script in 2001.⁶⁴ However, a significant part of the population who speaks Russian as the first language expressed the view that everybody should have a good command of Azerbaijani.⁶⁵

The competence of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijani is generally satisfying. Azerbaijani is the main language of instruction in Baku, and even more in the regions of Azerbaijan. In Baku, many of the public and private high schools have Russian departments. At the university entrance exams, the ratio of applicants from Azerbaijani schools and Russian schools is six to one.⁶⁶

In 2002, the Parliament passed a *Law on the State Language*. According to that law, the total amount of programs in non-Azerbaijani languages in electronic media has not to exceed 1/6 of on-air broadcasting time. It provides for the impossibility to create public or private local TV and radio stations broadcasting wholly or partly in minority languages. The *Alternative Report on the Compliance of the Azerbaijan Republic with the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination* of the Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan comments: "Taking into consideration an official figure of 90.6% of ethnic Azeris, the campaign on the protection of Azerbaijani language looks exaggerated. Azerbaijani cannot be considered a 'threatened' language."⁶⁷

Many factors contribute to Russian still being of significant importance in Azerbaijan: free access to Russian schools, broadcasting of Russian-language programs on national television, and a large number of Russian-language newspapers with a relatively high print run. However, the broadcasting of the two Russian channels RTR and ORT on national TV will be stopped in June 2007, which causes a lot of anger among the Russian-speaking community of Azerbaijan.

Another reason for the important status of Russian is labor migration to Russia. A large number of young men go to Russia to work in order to send money back to their families. The last census conducted in Russia showed that there were around 2.16 million Azeris in Russia in

⁶³ "Azerbaijan: Moscow Seeks Official Status for Russian Language, but will Baku Agree?", *Eurasianet*, Eurasia Insight, 22. September 2003

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Interviews in Baku

⁶⁶ "Azerbaijan: Moscow Seeks Official Status for Russian Language, but will Baku Agree?", *Eurasianet*, Eurasia Insight, 22. September 2003. The data is from 2002; the number is of children studying in Russian departments has slightly increased in the last few years.

⁶⁷ "Alternative Report on the Compliance of the Azerbaijan Republic with The Convention on Elimination of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination", *Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan*, 2005, p.27

2002.⁶⁸ The actual number of Azeris living and working in Russia is however likely to be much higher than the official figures.

The 2002 *Law on the State Language* promoting the Azerbaijani language has angered the country's Russian minority. They claim that the augmentation of Azerbaijani is done at the expense of Russian. The law requires all official documents to be written in Azerbaijani. Representatives of the Russian community in Baku expressed concern that Russian education is under threat. Outside of Baku, Azerbaijani is clearly becoming increasingly more common as the medium of instruction in the schools. In Azerbaijani-medium schools, the hours of instruction of Russian language are sometimes less than the hours of English instruction. In some schools, Russian has even become an optional subject.

3.2 The Use of Languages in Minority-populated Regions

The linguistic situation of national minorities in Azerbaijan is very different from that of the minorities in neighboring countries. Whereas for instance minorities in Georgia generally have a poor command of the state language, Azerbaijan's minorities' command of the majority language is in general satisfying. As a result, the linguistic situation in Georgia is considered an obstacle for integration. In Azerbaijan, international monitoring bodies are in contrast concerned with the diminishing importance of minority languages and the lack of state support for promoting them.⁶⁹

Minority representatives frequently refer to a decree made in 1992 by the then president Elchibey. By this decree, the state took the obligation to develop minority languages, for instance by supporting the publication of minority-language newspapers and offering education in minority languages. This decree foresaw the opening of special faculties for the preparation of specialists in minority languages. However, this decree has never been put into practice, and no special support has been granted to the development of minority languages.⁷⁰

The current reality is that a large part of the minority population has accepted the linguistic dominance of Azerbaijani in the public sphere. The knowledge of the state language is seen as important and valuable for participating in society. The downside of this development is clear: the linguistic variety will diminish in the future. For instance, currently 15 different languages are spoken only in the district of Quba. The numbers of speakers of some languages are very low: 6'000 speakers for Khinalig, 2'000 for Budug, 1'800 for Kryz, 1'500 for Elik and Aput each,

⁶⁸ "Azerbaijan: Moscow Seeks Official Status for Russian Language, but will Baku Agree?", *Eurasianet*, Eurasia Insight, 22. September 2003.

⁶⁹ See ACFC/INF/OP/I(2004)001, Advisory Committee on the *FCNM*. Opinion on Azerbaijan, 22 May 2003

⁷⁰ Interview with Sadegat Karimova, the editor in chief of the Lezgi newspaper "Samur", and Arif Yunus in Baku

1'300 for Djek, and 1'000 for Yerguj.⁷¹ Some of these languages are in real danger of becoming extinct in the near future.⁷²

With regard to the use of minority languages, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) research papers are of particular interest. In the late 90s and the early 2000, SIL - together with the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Linguistics - has conducted research on minority languages in nine regions of Azerbaijan. Their research had three basic objectives: The representation of the various national minorities in Azerbaijan, their use of their own language, and their attitudes towards the Azerbaijani language as well as towards their minority language.⁷³

This report is based on interviews and observations conducted both in Baku and in three regions in the north-east, the north-west and the south-east of Azerbaijan where the investigated minority communities live compactly. Among our interviewees in Baku figured education policy and minority researchers, policy analysts, historians, Human Rights and minority rights activists, editors-in-chief of minority newspapers as well as representatives from the Ministry of Education. In the regions, we mainly interviewed teachers, school directors, parents and Human Rights activists as well as representatives from the District Education Department and from the local government. Due to a lack of time, we could only interview a relatively restricted number of persons. Therefore, the findings of this research may not be representative for the whole population. In some regions, we faced serious restrictions on our work from the official side. In a mainly Talysh-populated region for instance we were not given access to schools or any other official institution. In many places, people were afraid to answer our question, stating that they could get into problems with the local authorities if they did so.

3.2.1 The Role of Lezgi, Azerbaijani and Russian in Lezgi-populated areas

During the interviews for the present research all Lezgi respondents indicated Lezgi language to be their mother tongue. We were told that in Lezgi-populated areas, all adults are able to understand and speak Lezgi perfectly. Lezgi is commonly used in the home and within the Lezgi-speaking community. Interviewees in Gusar usually use Lezgi language in the street and with their neighbors. The same is valid for Lezgi villages in other districts.

All the Lezgis we came across had a good command of Azerbaijani. Interviewees stated that Azerbaijani is the main language used at work and the only language used for communicating with the authorities. Moreover, Azerbaijani is often used for communication with Azerbaijani-speaking neighbors (except in Gusar district, where 90 per cent of the population is Lezgi) and for communicating with relatives. Inter-ethnic marriages are very common, and therefore

⁷¹ Most of them belong to the Dagestani branch of the Caucasian languages

⁷² "Azerbaijan: Languages Under Threat", *IWPR*, CRS No, 202, 31. October 2003

⁷³ The SIL research papers are available under www.sil.org

almost every Lezgi has Azeri relatives. A great number of interviewees underlined that Azerbaijani language allows them to participate in the public life of the republic.

Concerning Russian language proficiency, our interviewees usually understood Russian, but they often preferred to answer in Azerbaijani. Azerbaijani proficiency is significantly higher than Russian proficiency among Lezgis in all regions. Some interviewees indicated that they watch Russian TV channels in order to learn about world events. Russian was moreover valued as a symbol of higher education.

Russian language keeps playing a big role for labor migration to Russia. The director of the Gusar branch of the NGO “Institute for Women’s Problems” told us that in 40 per cent of all families in Gusar the husband is working in Russia, where he often founds a new family.

Azerbaijani language has only recently gained importance. In Soviet times, Azerbaijani played a far less important role than Russian. During the Soviet period, the majority of the schools were in Russian, although there were also Azerbaijani schools. In the last six years, many Russian schools closed down, and nowadays Azerbaijani schools make up about 80 to 90 per cent of all schools in the region. In the villages, there are exclusively Azerbaijani schools. When asked about the reasons of sending their children to Azerbaijani-medium schools, parents usually stated that Azerbaijani is the state language and therefore has priority. Another reason often mentioned was the necessity to know Azerbaijani to find a job in Azerbaijan.

Concerning literacy, most adults write and read in Azerbaijani or Russian. Among young adults who finish school, only those from Gusar who have attended 11 years of Lezgi language classes have a satisfying command of literacy in Lezgi. In all other districts of Azerbaijan, literacy in Lezgi is generally poor. However, literacy in Lezgi is on the rise in Gusar district. The efforts of educators and publishers in Gusar district to promote Lezgi literacy could encourage similar interest within other districts as well.

According to our interviewees and to our own observations, Russian and Azeri children who live in Gusar usually understand and speak Lezgi language and attend the Lezgi classes at school as well.

The large number of Lezgis living in Baku shows very different language use patterns. The majority of the Lezgis in the capital are Russian-educated, and Russian is their main language of wider communication. Concerning the use of Lezgi language, most Lezgis who are married to other Lezgis use Lezgi in the home, and their children learn the language as well. While middle-aged and older Lezgis tend to use Lezgi with each other, young adults most frequently use a mixture of Lezgi and Russian. Language use patterns depend on age, ethnic composition of the family, contact with Lezgis outside of the capital, and length of time in the city. Lezgis who are third- or fourth-generation urban residents, who have little or no contact with Lezgis

outside the capital, and who intermarry with other ethnic groups have little or no proficiency in Lezgi. This group constitutes however only about 20 per cent of the Baku Lezgi community.⁷⁴

In conclusion, high language vitality for Lezgi is predicted by the fact that it is used widely in the home throughout much of the northern districts of Azerbaijan, and among the majority of Lezgis in Baku.⁷⁵

3.2.2 The Role of Udi, Azerbaijani and Russian in Udi-populated areas

Our interviewees in Nidzh indicated that all Udis in the village of Nidzh consider their mother tongue to be Udi. Ethnic Udis in Nidzh speak Udi as their first language, which results in a high vitality of Udi language in this village. Udi is the language of communication at home and in the street. Children generally use Udi even at school during breaks and before and after classes.

Azerbaijani is frequently spoken with Azeri neighbors, and people watch Azerbaijani TV and read Azerbaijani newspapers. For communication with the authorities, people use Azerbaijani.

Udi parents generally send their children to Russian-medium schools. However, Russian-language education is relatively recent in Nidzh: the first Russian school was opened in 1953. Before this, everyone in Nidzh studied in Azerbaijani-medium schools.

The majority of the Udi people speak Russian as a second language. Over 50 per cent speak Russian as their second language, and many Udis speak Azerbaijani as a third or fourth language.⁷⁶ Evident outmigration of Nidzh villagers to Russia partly explains the importance given to the Russian language. In the 1970s, the population of Nidzh was 7'200, of which 5'000 were Udi. The 1999 census registered 4'200 Udis in Nidzh.

One interviewee expressed her dissatisfaction about the fact that Russian is not given the status of a second state language. She stated that a lot of problems which Azerbaijan has been facing since independence would not have arisen if Russian was kept as an official language in Azerbaijan.

One third of the population of Nidzh is Azeri. According to our interviewees and to our own observations, most Azeris living in Nidzh have some knowledge of Udi language. Azeri children at school also take part in the Udi language classes.

⁷⁴ Clifton, John M. and others, "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Lezgi in Azerbaijan", *SIL International*, 2005, p.13

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.16

⁷⁶ Clifton, John M. and others, "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Udi in Azerbaijan", *SIL International*, 2005

All the interviewees in Nidzh underlined the special character of their village, where Udi language is still overwhelmingly used in the private sphere. They regretted that in all other places where Udis lived or emigrated to, they assimilated and lost the Udi language. “In families which moved to Russia, the parents among themselves still speak in Udi, but with their children they already speak in Russian. The language gets therefore lost very quickly”, complained a history teacher at a Russian-medium school.

Since Udi was not developed as a literary language and was not taught in the schools until the early 90s, it is not surprising that all reading and writing is in either in Azerbaijani or Russian.

3.2.3 The Role of Georgian, Azerbaijani and Russian in Georgian-populated areas

In Gakh, the Georgians (Ingiloy) make up 12 per cent of the population. In the family and in the Georgian-speaking community, the language of communication is Georgian. Georgian parents in Azerbaijan generally send their children to Georgian-medium schools. In Gakh district, there are six Georgian schools in which all subjects are taught in Georgian language. In rare cases, parents are reported to send their children to Russian schools. The education system providing education in Georgian language dates back to the Soviet times.

Georgians are reported to have generally a sufficient knowledge of Azerbaijani language. All our interviewees spoke freely in Azerbaijani. Azerbaijani is frequently used for communication with the Azeri neighbors. Intermarriages are reported to be common. Our interviewees pointed out the friendly relations between Azeris and Georgians. “We are Gakh people” said the deputy director of District Education Department in Gakh. Georgian children in Azerbaijan have however generally very limited knowledge in Azerbaijani before they start school, a fact that questions the frequent exchange between the two ethnic groups.

Georgians in Azerbaijan have strong ties to Georgia. They usually have relatives living in Georgia and frequently travel between the two countries. Double Azeri/Georgian citizenship is possible under some circumstances.

3.2.4 The Role of Talysh, Azerbaijani and Russian in Talysh-populated areas

The Talysh interviewees in Lenkeran gave very different and sometimes controversial answers when questioned about their mother tongue. They often switched between Azerbaijani and Talysh being their mother tongue. All of our interviewees in Lenkeran had a very good command of Azerbaijani.

Talysh language is used in the family as well as in informal situations, when only local people are present. In the mountain communities, where the Talyshs live in mono-ethnic villages, Talysh is still widely used. In lowland communities, a relatively high level of intermarriage and the fact that lowland communities that were once homogenous are becoming increasingly

ethnically mixed results in Azerbaijani becoming more and more the language of wider communication in all spheres. Even in the home, parents increasingly use Azerbaijani with their children in order to prepare them for school. Azerbaijani is generally perceived to be the key to future success in education, business, politics and communication. In ethnically mixed villages, the use of Talysh is reported to be generally low, except among elderly people. In particular children's proficiency in Talysh is decreasing rapidly, except in remote Talysh villages.

Russian plays a far less important role than Azerbaijani as a language of wider communication in the Talysh region. Much of this is due to the fact that the Talysh region is physically isolated from Russia. In the census of 1989, less than five per cent of the Talysh population reported that Russian was their first or second language. This trend seems to be continuing in spite of the fact that as many as 25 per cent of men under the age of 35 from the Talysh region are currently working in Russia.⁷⁷

Development of literacy in Talysh occurred in two periods in the last century. The first was in the 1930s when the Soviets developed a large number of languages as literary languages. The second was in the 1990s after Azerbaijan became an independent country. A small body of literature in Talysh language has been prepared during these two periods. The most significant development of the 1990s was the publication of two Talysh newspapers and a set of Talysh literacy books for grades one to four.⁷⁸ However, Talysh people have been significantly influenced by Azerbaijani language in the fields of education and media. For at least the last century, education for the Talysh has been in Azerbaijani. TV, radio and printed media have also been primarily in Azerbaijani.

⁷⁷ Clifton, John M. and others, "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Talysh in Azerbaijan", *SIL International*, 2005, p.4

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.4

4. Education

4.1 Minority Language Education

The Azeri constitution guarantees that every child has the right to receive education in his or her mother tongue (article 45). However, only the Russian minority has a complete system of education in its mother tongue: primary and secondary schools as well as higher education institutions. According to the data of the Ministry of Education, there are 22 schools which offer Russian-language education in Azerbaijan (6'581 pupils) and 356 schools which have Russian sectors (110'000 pupils)⁷⁹. Furthermore, 2'000 students study at 18 higher education institutions and secondary special educational institutions in Russian language. The number of pupils in Russian-speaking schools and sectors (nearly 117'000) obviously exceeds the number of Russian children, as there are in total only about 100'000 Russians left in Azerbaijan.

As far as other languages of national minorities are concerned, the general principle is that in places of compact settlement of national minorities pupils may have lessons of their mother tongue two hours per week from the first to the fourth grade. The main problems regarding the teaching of the minority languages are the limited availability of textbooks and qualified teachers. Shortcomings with respect to up-dated textbooks in minority languages like Lezgi or Talysh languages have hampered the development of education for the minorities concerned.⁸⁰ There are few possibilities offered for the preparation of specialized teachers for minority languages.⁸¹ The Advisory Committee of the *FCNM* expressed the opinion that the authorities should consider an increase in the volume of minority language teaching and its extension beyond the fourth grade, taking into account the existing demand.⁸²

With regard to special measures taken for non-native Azeri pupils who study in Azerbaijani schools, there are no such measures as for instance textbooks with a special methodology for teaching Azerbaijani as a second language. The textbooks used in Azerbaijani schools in minority-populated areas are the same as the textbooks used in all other Azerbaijani schools.

The textbooks used in Russian schools are partly published in Azerbaijan, but to a larger extent come from Russia. In the preparatory school, where children get in touch with the Russian language for the first time, they also use books from Russia with no special methodology for Russian as a second language. To learn Azerbaijani, they use a book with Azerbaijani as a second language methodology that is used in all Russian schools throughout the country.

⁷⁹ "Alternative Report on the Compliance of the Azerbaijan Republic with the Convention on Elimination of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination", Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan, report prepared for the 66th session of the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2005

⁸⁰ ACFC/INF/OP/I(2004)001, Advisory Committee on the *FCNM*. Opinion on Azerbaijan, 22 May 2003, par.115-117

⁸¹ For comparison, in the Dagestan province of Russia, teachers for Lezgi, Avar, Tsakhur or Tat languages, all taught at school in Dagestan, are prepared by the State University.

⁸² ACFC/INF/OP/I(2004)001, Advisory Committee on the *FCNM*. Opinion on Azerbaijan, 22 May 2003

The decisions concerning education in minority languages are all taken centrally by the Ministry of Education in Baku. The District Education Departments do not have any leeway or any weight in the decision-making process.

4.2 The Situation of Lezgi Language Education in Lezgi-populated Areas

For our research, we traveled to Gusar, Quba and Xacmaz in the north-east of Azerbaijan, and to Gebele in the centre-north of Azerbaijan. In Gusar, Lezgis make up 90 per cent of the population. In all other districts, Lezgis form a minority in the district, where they mainly live in compact settlements.

4.2.1 The Situation of Lezgi Language Education in the Soviet Times

According to the deputy director of the District Education Department (DED) in Gusar, Lezgis in Gusar were permitted to study their mother tongue for the first time in 1964. By 1973, Lezgi language was taught two hours a week from the first grade up to the ninth grade. However, in all other districts except Gusar, Lezgis did not have the opportunity to study their mother tongue during the Soviet period.

The main language of instruction was Russian. According to the director of the pedagogical college (*technikum*), Azerbaijani language played a less important role in the Gusar region than today.

4.2.2 Current Possibilities Offered by the State to Study Lezgi, Khinalig, Jewish and Tat Languages at School

According to the deputy director of the DED in Gusar, Lezgi is currently taught in 88 schools, where a total number of 18'000 students have the opportunity to learn their mother tongue as a separate subject.

In Gusar, where Lezgis make up 90 per cent of the population, pupils have Lezgi lessons from the first to the eleventh grade. They study their mother tongue two times a week during one lesson. We observed that in Gusar, even Azeri and Russian children attend the Lezgi language classes and usually do not have any comprehension problems.

According to the director of the Quba District Education Department (DED), there are eight villages in Quba district which are predominantly Lezgi. In all eight villages, Lezgi children have the opportunity to study their mother tongue two lessons a week. However, Lezgi is only taught during primary school (from grade one to four). When asked about the reason for not

providing Lezgi language classes in secondary school, the director of the DED pointed out that he does not see any sense in teaching Lezgi language at secondary level given the fact that there are no textbooks available for the secondary level. Whereas in Gusar, Lezgi language has been taught since Soviet times, in Quba they started teaching Lezgi only about six years ago.

Lezgi is not the only minority language that is taught at school in the Quba district. The Jewish community has the opportunity to teach Jewish language in two primary schools, and in Khinalig, a remote mountain village, Khinalig language is taught in the primary school. However, no textbooks exist for teaching Khinalig language.

Tats live compactly in about 40 villages in Quba district. According to the director of the DED, Tats have been refusing the offer to provide Tat language classes. "They claim that they want to fully concentrate on learning Azerbaijani language, given the fact that they are not directly in touch with Azeris due to the mono-ethnic character of their villages." The director of the DED further explained that the DED repeatedly carried out polls, and that the Tat population clearly did not show any wish to have Tat language taught at school.

However, no minority language classes are taught at schools in the town of Quba itself. According to the director of the DED, it is not possible to offer minority language instruction in the city, as in every class there are a number of different ethnic groups represented.

In Xacmaz, a city close to the Caspian Sea, the director of the DED explained that in six villages in the district children are taught Lezgi language from the first to the eleventh grade. In the town of Xacmaz itself, Lezgi children do not have the possibility to study their mother tongue at school, as they are just one of the 22 nationalities living in this city.

In the Gebele district in the center-north of the country, pupils can learn Lezgi language in primary school two hours a week in five Lezgi-populated villages.

With regard to Lezgi language instruction in the Sheki-Zaqatala districts, currently no mother-tongue classes are provided. The Lezgi dialect that is spoken in these regions differs from the one spoken in Gusar, Quba or Gebele. Their dialect is only spoken; no alphabet has ever been attributed to it. According to the local education department, there is no wish from the side of the parents to have the mother-tongue taught at school. In Gakh, we were told that during the 90s, the spoken Lezgi dialect was taught at schools, but that Lezgi parents themselves asked to remove these hours. The deputy director of the DED in Gakh does not see any good in the Lezgi classes as there is no possibility to continue education in Lezgi language after secondary school.

4.2.3 The Actual Situation of Schools as regards Qualified Teachers and Teaching Materials

According to the deputy director of the Gusar Education Department, the conditions for teaching Lezgi language are not satisfying. The most pressing problem is the lack of qualified Lezgi language teachers. As a result, some schools do not have any qualified Lezgi teachers at

all. In these schools, Lezgi language is taught by other teachers, for example by Russian teachers or history teachers.

With regard to Lezgi language textbooks, there is a significant lack of school materials. However, the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan has started to address this situation. A textbook for the first grade has been published in 2004, and a textbook for the second grade followed in 2006. However, the Lezgi language teachers we interviewed in Gusar have never seen these textbooks and have not even heard about their existence. For grade three to eleven, no textbooks have ever been published in Azerbaijan. Currently, Lezgi teachers use textbooks from Dagestan, which they usually buy themselves in Dagestan. More often than not, they have just two or three textbooks for the whole class. Furthermore, these textbooks reflect the context of Lezgis living in Dagestan, and are not adapted to Lezgi children living in Azerbaijan.⁸³ In an interview with Lezgi newspaper publisher and poet Sadegat Karimova, she underlined that the textbooks from Dagestan are far from reflecting the heritage of the Lezgis living in Azerbaijan. She further informed us that in 2005, a private author prepared a textbook for the third grade, but that its quality was not satisfying and therefore specialists reacted negatively to it. We have been told by several teachers that they use Lezgi language newspapers for readings in class.

The deputy director of the DED in Gusar expressed a certain disappointment with the Ministry of Education about the lack of attention to Lezgi textbook development. He claims that “the Ministry of Education has not even made any investigation on the situation of Lezgi teaching”. He further points out that it is high time to increase the level of Lezgi language. The fact that pupils have to study Lezgi language without any textbook decreases their interest in the language. Also among teachers, the interest in teaching Lezgi language is low due to the lack of teaching materials.

The Deputy Governor of the local Executive Government told us that there is indeed a lack of teachers. However, he insisted on the fact that there are enough Lezgi language teachers.

The director of the pedagogical college (*technikum*) in Gusar claimed that the problem of insufficient Lezgi language teachers has been resolved in the last years. The pedagogical college has been preparing Lezgi language teachers for primary and secondary school since 1990.

The new textbook for the second grade published in 2006 was prepared by a teacher from this pedagogical college. We asked the director about the reason why teachers at primary schools in Gusar do not know about the existence of this book. He stated that there is a big queue of books waiting to be reprinted. Therefore, this book could not yet be printed on a big scale and widely distributed. The transfer from Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin script caused an enormous need for the reprinting of books and textbooks in Azerbaijani language.

⁸³ “Azerbaijan: Voices Falling Silent”, *Transitions Online*, 24 August 2006

We had the chance to look at the newly produced Lezgi textbook for the second grade. The book is in colors and with a lot of images. It includes short texts for reading, grammar and poems. The textbook is adapted to the local context of northern Azerbaijan, with texts on the mountains close to Gusar, on famous Lezgi poets and local historical persons. The director of the pedagogical college pointed out the importance of producing Azerbaijan's own Lezgi textbooks. Lezgi language in Dagestan uses a lot of words from Russian, whereas the Lezgi dialect spoken in Azerbaijan uses a lot of words with Turkish or Persian roots. For instance, in Dagestani dialect, school means *shkola* (from Russian), while in the dialect spoken in Gusar, school means *mekteb* (from Persian). Nevertheless, in the field of Lezgi language education there is a fruitful cooperation between Azerbaijan and Dagestan.

According to the director of the pedagogical college in Gusar, future Lezgi teachers study among others the following topics: Lezgi language and literature, pedagogy, methodology, psychology, cultural studies, sociology, children's literature, and on a facultative basis Lezgi culture and folklore. About ten per cent of the students choose to become a Lezgi language teacher. Forty per cent choose to become primary school teacher, where they will teach Lezgi language among other subjects.

Currently there are no possibilities to study Lezgi language at a state university. The only higher education institution offering Lezgi language studies is the Baku branch of the Dagestan State University. According to the editor-in-chief of the Lezgi newspaper "Samur" Sadegat Karimova, this branch is currently working informally, as the Azeri authorities have not renewed its accreditation since 2005. Moreover, the diplomas issued by the Baku branch of the Dagestan State University are not recognized in Azerbaijan. A large number of our Lezgi interviewees claimed that Lezgis should have the possibility to study Lezgi at one of the state universities. In their view, the State Pedagogical University should open a branch for Lezgi language.

4.2.4 Lezgi Children's Language Proficiency before and after School and Access to Higher Education

In Gusar district, children usually do not know Azerbaijani or Russian before going to school, as Lezgi is spoken consistently in the home. Pre-school children in the villages of the Gusar district rarely have direct contact with first-language Azerbaijani speakers, although they are exposed to some Azerbaijani language through television and radio. In Qusar, Lezgi children usually start school one year earlier than Azeri children in order to go to preparatory classes.

Children start in their first school year with four different languages. The main language of instruction is either Azerbaijani or Russian. Then, they have several hours a week of either Russian or Azerbaijani classes. In addition, they start from the first grade with English and Lezgi classes. Lezgi language classes focus on learning the Lezgi alphabet that is based on the Cyrillic script. The director of the pedagogical college touched on the downside of this dense program. According to him, half of the children cannot deal with such a lot of requirements, and

stay behind. “They develop an anti-reaction. One has to be very careful not to overburden the children.”

Elementary school teachers in Gusar said that children in the first grades still have low Azerbaijani proficiency. They report that up to the fourth or fifth grade it is typically necessary for teachers to supplement Azerbaijani-medium instruction with explanations in Lezgi in order for students to fully understand. However, all the teachers we interviewed believed that children usually know Azerbaijani well by the time they finish the eleventh grade. We had the opportunity to speak to a bunch of twelve years old pupils from Gusar and we were astonished by their fluency in Azerbaijani and Russian language.

In Quba and Xacmaz district, where the percentage of the Lezgi population is significantly lower, children usually learn Azerbaijani before they begin school through contact with their Azerbaijani-speaking neighbors. Students in these districts were reported to have no great difficulties with the Azerbaijani language. Teachers in these districts indicated that all the children who attend the school speak Azerbaijani equally well, regardless of their mother tongue.

With regard to Russian language proficiency, children who attend Russian-medium schools acquire a good command of Russian by the time they finish school. Children who finish Azerbaijan-medium schools do usually have limited proficiency in Russian.

Concerning literacy, significant levels of literacy in Lezgi were attested only in the Gusar district, where Lezgi language classes are offered throughout eleven years and where Lezgi language has been taught since Soviet times. After finishing school, adults continue to read the regional newspaper “Gusar”, which contains articles both in Azerbaijani and Lezgi. However, middle-aged and older people’s reading skills are often relatively lower. Several of our interviewees in Gusar told us that they can only poorly read Lezgi language. In all other regions apart from Gusar, literacy in Lezgi is limited.

With regard to access to higher education, we have been assured by all interviewees that the level of instruction is relatively high in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, and that a lot of pupils enter university in Baku. In a small village school outside Gusar, the director of an Azerbaijani-medium school was proud to tell us that every year six or seven pupils from his school enter university in Baku.

4.2.5 Attitudes towards Instruction in Azerbaijani, Russian and Lezgi Language

All our interviewees insisted on the importance of knowing one’s mother tongue and expressed their support for the current system of Lezgi instruction at school. In the words of the Deputy Governor of Gusar, “Azeri children do also have Azerbaijani classes, even though they know their language. It is very important to learn the grammar and the literary language. «All our interviewees focused on the importance of learning to read in Lezgi and pointed out the different nature of spoken and literary language.

The deputy director of the District Education Department explained that he gets a lot of complaints from parents about the lack of textbooks and qualified teachers for Lezgi language classes, and underlined that parents give high importance to the mother tongue instruction.

None of our interviewees expressed the view that the number of Lezgi language lessons should be increased. They complained however about the bad quality of teaching. There seems to be a general agreement that the issue is how to increase the level of the existing hours. In addition, none of the interviewees expressed the wish to have the whole primary school curriculum taught in Lezgi language like it is the case in neighboring Dagestan. Interviewees frequently stated that they see no sense in increasing the number of Lezgi lessons because there are no higher education institutions in Lezgi language. However, some of the interviewees expressed the view that they would like to have facultative courses on Lezgi history and culture.

All our interviewees expressed the view that it is both the responsibility of the state and the responsibility of the parents to promote the Lezgi language. According to them, parents should teach their children Lezgi language at home, and the state should offer the children the possibility to gain literacy in Lezgi. The general feeling of our Lezgi interviewees was that the state neglects its duty to promote the minority languages. In the words of one interviewee: “The government has to help all parts of his population. A state is like a family, and in a family people take care of all members of the family. A person who does not know his language and his history is forcibly an unhappy person.”

All interviewees however insisted on the fact that their children have to be fluent both in Azerbaijani and in Russian, and, as English is gaining in importance, they also want them to study English.

Interviewees generally do not perceive the predominantly Azerbaijani or Russian education as a threat to their culture. In the words of an interviewee: “In Soviet times, Russian was very important and russification policies were strong, and we kept our language. Now Azerbaijani language is important, but we still keep our language.”

4.3 The Situation of Udi Language Education in Nidzh

The majority of the Udis live compactly in a village in north-central Azerbaijan called Nidzh. We traveled to this village, where we visited a Russian school and carried out interviews with the headmaster and teachers.

4.3.1 The Situation of Udi Language Education in the Soviet Times

During the Soviet period, the Udis did not have any possibility to study Udi at school. A history teacher of the Russian school we visited in Nidzh explained that during the Soviet Union, no one questioned oneself about one’s ethnic belonging. “There was only one form of human being,

the Soviet human being (*soujetski chelovek*). Nobody paid attention to minority languages or cultures.” In her view, the Soviet policy of suppressing the nationalistic feelings that exist inside every person were right. The statements of the headmaster of that school go in line with those of the history teacher: “It was only after the breakup of the Soviet Union that people started to ask themselves questions about who they are, and what their background is.”

4.3.2 Current Possibilities Offered by the State to Study Udi Language at School

Udi language classes in primary school started in 1992. According to the director of the District Education Department (DED) in Gebele, Udi language is currently taught in three schools, which are all situated in the village of Nidzh. These three schools are Russian-medium schools. Pupils have Udi lessons from the first to the fourth grade two times a week during one lesson. The director of one of the Russian schools told us that even Azeri children attend the Udi language classes and do usually not have problems in following them.⁸⁴ During the breaks, Udi pupils speak in Udi together. Besides, there are two Azerbaijani-medium schools in Nidzh, where no Udi classes are provided.

According to the director of the DED in Gebele, the Udis are satisfied with the current possibilities to study their mother tongue. He did not receive any complains or claims for change from the population of Nidzh. Indeed, the headmaster and the teachers of the Russian school we visited did not voice any claims for improving the language lessons or developing further textbooks. They seemed satisfied with the current situation.

We asked the teachers about the reason why no Udi classes are provided in secondary school. They pointed out that there are no textbooks available for secondary level teaching. Jora Kechaari, a famous representative of the Udis in Nidzh who has produced numerous literary works in the Udi language (including the two textbooks for the primary school Udi teaching), passed away in 2006.

4.3.3 The Actual Situation of Schools as regards Qualified Teachers and Teaching Materials

According to the director of the Gebele Education Department, there are enough teachers for Udi classes. These teachers are however not specialists. Usually, literature teachers with a good command of the Udi language teach Udi at school. In the school we visited, the Udi classes were taught by primary class teachers.

There are two textbooks for Udi language, both of them prepared by Jora Kechaari and published in 1996. One of them is for the alphabet learning; the other consists of poems and short texts for practicing the reading. Udi classes focus on learning the Udi alphabet, which is

⁸⁴ He indicated that 30 per cent of the pupils of his school are Azeri and 70 per cent are Udi.

based on the Latin alphabet, but has 52 letters. Some Cyrillic letters are also used in the current Roman-based alphabet.

When we visited an Udi language class, pupils in the fourth grade were still going through the alphabet. The teacher explained us that they already know the whole alphabet, but that they don't have enough reading materials, and therefore go over the same alphabet book several times.

According to the director of the DED, the textbooks used in the Russian schools in Gebele district are entirely published in Azerbaijan. For the teaching of Azerbaijani, they use a book that has Azerbaijani as a second language methodology and that is used in all Russian schools throughout the country.

4.3.4 Udi Children's Language Proficiency before and after School and Access to Higher Education

According to the headmaster, Udi children have only very basic knowledge of Russian before they go to school. Their parents usually know Russian well, as they were educated during the Soviet times. But in the family, the language of communication is exclusively Udi.

School teachers indicated that the children who go to Russian-medium schools generally have difficulties with the Russian language. Their command of Azerbaijani is usually better than their command of Russian. The headmasters as well as the teachers think that children's language skills are generally more developed now compared to the past, especially in the case of Azerbaijani language. In large part, they deduce the improvement in Azerbaijani language skills from Azerbaijani television and radio broadcasts. The headmaster assured us that graduates from his school have a good command both in Russian and Azerbaijani.

The teachers said that in general, children face no difficulties with studying several languages at the same time. The main language of instruction being Russian, there are classes in Azerbaijani, Udi and English from the first grade onwards. Most of the teachers at the three Russian-medium schools know Udi. In the early grades, teachers use Udi for explanations. There are also preparatory classes for teaching Russian to pre-school children since most children entering school do not understand Russian.

With regard to access of Udi children to higher education, we have been assured by the headmaster and by the teachers that the level of instruction is high in all the schools in Nidzh, and that a relatively high number of pupils enter university in Azerbaijan.

4.3.5 Attitudes towards Instruction in Azerbaijani, Russian and Udi Language

There was unanimous agreement that children should master Udi language and that Udi should be taught as a subject in school. One Udi teacher commented that the children love the

Udi language classes, because it's the only subject that is easy for them. All our interviewees showed an overwhelming commitment to passing on the Udi language to the next generation. In the words of a teacher: "If we don't keep our own language and culture, we will melt into the Azeri culture. To know its own language is never an obstacle". While all respondents specified that children should be able to speak Udi, Russian and Azerbaijani, there was unanimity in the feeling that mothers should speak Udi to children and that the child's first language should be Udi.

All our interviewees wanted to have Udi taught in school, but all of them said they would send their children to Russian-medium schools as opposed to Udi-medium schools. Respondents pointed out that there is no possibility to get higher education in Udi. Therefore, there is no sense in having the whole curriculum in Udi language. On the contrary, education in Udi would deprive the children of higher education in any country. The majority of our interviewees do not wish to continue Udi language classes throughout secondary school because there are no universities or other institutions of higher education in Udi language.

Our interviewees do not perceive the education in Russian language as a threat to their culture. They are proud not to have assimilated into the Azeri society. A history teacher claimed that in Nidzh, there is a strong will not to assimilate. She pointed out that hundred years ago, 42 villages were Udi, and now only one remained. She explains that this development was not due to forced assimilation; Udis themselves chose to adapt and stopped speaking their own language. Further, the history teacher expressed her discontent with the eradication of the Russian language. She expresses that if Russian was kept as a second state language in Azerbaijan, a lot of problems that the state currently faces would not have arisen.

All interviewees stated that they perceive government attention towards Udis very high. The government supports for instance the translation of books from Azeri and Russian authors into Udi language as well as the staging of spectacles in Udi language at schools. Moreover, in the early 2000s the Udi church in Nidzh has been renovated with the help of the Norwegian Humanitarian Enterprise.

In conclusion, the development of literacy materials in Udi and the introduction of Udi classes in school help keeping the language alive. The attitude of Udi people towards their language seems to ensure its survival.⁸⁵

4.4 The Situation of Georgian Language Education in Gakh

For our research, we further traveled to Gakh district in the north-west of Azerbaijan. According to the deputy director of the District Education Department, the population of the

⁸⁵ Clifton, John M. and others, "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Udi in Azerbaijan", *SIL International*, 2005

city of Gakh is to 12 per cent Georgian (Ingiloy)⁸⁶ and to 85 per cent Azeri.

4.4.1 The Situation of Georgian-medium Education in the Soviet Times

Georgians in Azerbaijan have had the possibility to study in Georgian language since the early Soviet times.

4.4.2 Current Possibilities Offered by the State to Study in Georgian-medium Schools

In the Gakh district, there are six Georgian-medium secondary schools. One of the schools, which is situated in the center of the town, is a so-called international school consisting of three sectors: an Azerbaijani sector, a Russian sector and a Georgian sector.

In the Georgian schools, the entire curriculum is taught in Georgian language. Children learn Azerbaijani language two hours a week. According to the deputy director of the District Education Department, about ten hours a week are dedicated to Georgian language and literature.

The majority of the Georgian parents send their children to Georgian schools. However, in a few occasions Georgian parents send their children to Russian schools in Gakh.

4.4.3 The Actual Situation of Schools as regards Qualified Teachers and Teaching Materials

Currently, the majority of the textbooks used in the Georgian schools come from Georgia and are free of charge. According to the director of one school, the quantity of these textbooks is abundant.

In 2005, Azerbaijan has started to print its own textbooks for the Georgian schools on its territory. In 2005 and 2006, first and second grade books for subjects like Georgian language, mathematics and other primary school subjects have been published in Baku. The idea is to publish every year the whole set of books for the next grade, up to the eleventh grade. The content of these books is similar to the books published in Georgia, but adapted to the Azeri reality. For instance, information on Azeri poets was added to the second grade textbook of Georgian language and literature. The information on Georgian poets was left unchanged. The headmaster of the Georgian school we visited welcomed the initiative taken by the Ministry of

⁸⁶ In the literature, the Georgians in Azerbaijan are often mentioned as “Ingiloy”. However, our interviewees in Gakh more often referred to the term “Georgians”.

Education in Baku to publish the books in Azerbaijan and stated that the changes added in Azerbaijan to the textbooks were welcomed by the teachers of her school.

Concerning history textbooks, there is no translated textbook on Azeri history available yet. However, the deputy director of the DED assured us that translation work is being conducted and that by autumn 2007, a translation of the Azeri history textbooks to Georgian language will be ready. The translation is being conducted by a District Commission of Georgian and Azeri history teachers, with instructions from the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan. The head of this commission is a representative of the Georgian community in Azerbaijan who studied history at the Baku State University. The work of the Commission is however restricted to pure translation of the existing Azeri history textbooks into Georgian language.

With regard to qualified teachers, the deputy director of the DED as well as the director of one Georgian school told us that there are too many Georgian teachers in Gakh. This exceeding offer of Georgian teachers can be explained by the fact that a lot of students who go to university in Tbilisi choose to study at the pedagogical institute.

Azerbaijani language teachers in Georgian schools are mostly ethnic Azeris. In the school we visited, the teacher of Azerbaijani, who was ethnically Azeri, surprisingly had a fairly good level of Georgian language and used explanations in Georgian with the children.

4.4.4 Georgian Children's Language Proficiency before and after School and Access to Higher Education

Before the children begin school, only a few of them have basic knowledge of Azerbaijani. In the class we visited, first grade pupils had relatively little notion of Azerbaijani. The headmaster of one Georgian school assured us that by the time of finishing school, Georgian children have no difficulties with the Azerbaijani language. Also the deputy director of the DED confirmed that pupils speak well Azerbaijani because they live in close contact with Azeris.

However, when we asked about the reason why none of the pupils enter university in Azerbaijan, the headmaster explained that there is a problem concerning the terminology in Azerbaijani. As all the subjects are taught in Georgian language, the pupils do not know the subject-specific terminology in Azerbaijani. This means that the Georgian pupils have a good oral knowledge of Azerbaijani used in everyday life, but not enough language competences to pass the university entrance test.

In consequence, the vast majority of the pupils who enter university pass the university exams in Georgia. Currently, there is no Georgian student from the Gakh district studying at university in Azerbaijan. According to the deputy director of the DED in Gakh, in 2006 two pupils tried to pass the university entrance exam in Azerbaijan, but with no success.

In the Georgian school we visited, out of 35 students who finished the eleventh grade in 2006, 19 students tried to pass the entrance test in Tbilisi, and 11 entered. Most of them entered the pedagogical or the medical faculty.

The university entrance exams in Georgia require from the student knowledge in Georgian history. However, the history of Georgia is not taught in the Georgian schools in Azerbaijan. The pupils who attempt to go to university have to learn it by themselves. Often, they learn it with the help of private teachers in Tbilisi.

During the Soviet Union and up to the mid 90s, there was a system of privileges for Georgians in Azerbaijan: a certain quota was fixed for Georgian pupils to enter Azeri universities. The headmaster of the Georgian school we visited looks back with nostalgia to these times. She would be glad if this opportunity was still available nowadays for her pupils. She argues that there are a lot of difficulties for Georgian youngsters who go to Tbilisi to study, and that not every family can afford this.

According to the headmaster of one of the Georgian schools in Gakh, most of the students who finish university in Tbilisi come back after their studies to live and work in Azerbaijan. People in Gakh indicated that usually these university absolvents are able to find a job in Azerbaijan. Our interviewees expressed the view that higher education in Georgian language is no obstacle to finding work in Azerbaijan.

Interestingly, an interview with the Member of Parliament Duniamin Halilov printed in the Russian-language newspaper *Zerkalo* on 24 February 2007 draws a completely different picture of the situation in the Georgian-populated areas. Halilov goes as far as accusing the Georgian population of separatist movements. He is outraged that in Georgian-medium schools, subjects like “History of Georgia”, “Georgian literature” or “Georgian language” are taught, all of which are not part of the official curriculum in Azerbaijan. He complains that with their education being in Georgian language, it is clear that they cannot find a job in Azerbaijan. In his opinion, the Georgians are getting a privileged treatment by the local power when it comes to finding work. Concerning the system of quotas for entering university in Azerbaijan, he is glad that it has been abandoned in the mid 90s. In his opinion, regardless to whether education is being provided in Georgian or in Azerbaijani language, every citizen who lives in Azerbaijan has to know the state language, and the Georgians “have to give one part of their attention to the learning of the state language”. He continues that once they will know the state language, they will not have any problems to enter university in Azerbaijan.⁸⁷

When we confronted our interviewees with the opinion of this deputy, they were surprised and said this opinion would not represent the opinion of the majority of the people living in Gakh, and that this must be some sort of provocation.

⁸⁷“....., (How to cut the ground under the feet of those who are spreading elements of separatism in the northern regions of Azerbaijan), *Zerkalo*, No. 35, 24 February 2007

4.5 The Situation of Talysh Language Education in Talysh-populated Areas

For our research, we further traveled to Lenkeran in the south of the country. The district of Lenkeran is the second largest of the Talysh districts in terms of population. According to the 1999 census, 33 per cent of the Talysh reside in Lenkeran, whereas 48 per cent live in Masally district, bordering Lenkeran district in the north.⁸⁸ With regard to the percentage that the Talysh population makes up in Lenkeran district, there is outstanding controversy (see Chapter 1.3.3 on Talysh Activism Since Independence). Researchers of the SIL-Study on the Sociolinguistic Situation of the Talysh in Azerbaijan state in their report that 90 per cent of the total population of Lenkeran district is ethnically and linguistically Talysh.⁸⁹

We faced considerable restriction in our work in Lenkeran. We were not given permission by the local authorities to go to schools or to any other official institution. When we approached people in official positions, for example at the District Education Department, they were very reluctant to give us any information, saying that they were not allowed to answer any question without the permission of the head of the department. Some Talysh activists were afraid to meet with us or told us not to mention to anybody about our meeting.

4.5.1 The Situation of Talysh Language Education in the Soviet Times

In the early Soviet period, the Talysh experienced a revival of their culture. Schools taught the entire curriculum in Talysh language, a newspaper in Talysh language was established and more than 500 books were published in Talysh language.⁹⁰ In the 1930s however, repression against the Talysh population grew stronger and in the end of the decade the Talysh language schools were closed. Since the 1930s, the medium of instruction has been Azerbaijani.

4.5.2 The Current Possibilities Offered by the State to Study Talysh Language at School

Since 1992, Talysh classes have been offered in homogenous Talysh communities. A Talysh language program has been developed for the grades one to four (two hours a week). However, there are no Talysh language classes offered in ethnically mixed communities. The teaching of Talysh language is therefore restricted to villages, which are mostly settled in the mountainous regions. According to the director of the pedagogical college in Lenkeran, between 20 and 25 schools out of a total of 88 schools in Lenkeran district offer Talysh language classes.

⁸⁸ Yunus, Arif, "Ethnic Profile of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan", p.489

⁸⁹ Clifton, John M. and others, "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Talysh in Azerbaijan", *SIL International*, 2005, p. 10

⁹⁰ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) – Talysh
http://www.unpo.org/member_profile.php?id=65

4.5.3 The Actual Situation of Schools as regards Qualified Teachers and Teaching Materials

According to a methodologist working at the District Education Department (DED) in Lenkeran, two textbooks - for the second and the third grade - have been published in 2006. The textbooks for the first and the fourth grade have been published in 1997. Talysh activists expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of the books. They explained the bad quality by the fact that the authors did not yet have any practice in preparing Talysh language textbooks. According to the methodologist working at the DED, a teacher's guide book for instructing Talysh language has been published in 1991. According to Talysh activists, there is a general lack of textbooks for the Talysh language classes.

The director of the pedagogical college in Lenkeran informed us that from 1992 to 1996, his institution prepared teachers for Talysh language instruction. In 1996 they stopped "because there was no more need for the preparation of Talysh language teachers". However, according to Talysh activists, the teachers of Talysh language are not qualified, and the level of teaching is very low. Often, Talysh classes are used for teaching other subjects.

There is no possibility to study Talysh language at the Lenkeran State University. The introduction of Talysh language as a subject in the Lenkeran branch of the State University is one of the most pressing claims of the Talysh activists.

To the dissatisfaction of our Talysh interviewees, the deputy director of the District Education Department, who is a specialist of Talysh language, was dismissed in March 2007. They expressed fear that from now on, there will be even less attention paid to the instruction of Talysh language.

4.5.4 Talysh Children's Language Proficiency before and after School and Access to Higher Education

In Talysh villages, children do not know Azerbaijani language before going to school. In the first grades, the teachers generally use Talysh language to explain the pupils the Azerbaijani words which they don't understand. Talysh children from lowland communities have greater contact with Azerbaijani-speakers and therefore usually know Azerbaijani well before they start school. More and more, parents in ethnically mixed communities speak in Azerbaijani with their children in order to prepare them for school. According to our Talysh interviewees, children who grow up in cities cannot speak Talysh language properly.

By the time of finishing school, Talysh children who live in ethnically mixed communities are reported to speak Azerbaijani as fluently as their Azeri classmates. They are generally more

proficient in Azerbaijani than in Talysh. Even children who live in remote mountain villages are reported to have a high level of Azerbaijani by the end of the eleventh grade.⁹¹

Concerning literacy, it was reported that all individuals who speak Talysh could read and write Talysh, but most rarely do either.

With regard to access to higher education, Talysh children were reported to have the same chances as Azeri children as they have equal proficiency in Azerbaijani.

4.5.5 Attitudes towards Instruction in Azerbaijani, Russian and Talysh Language

It was very difficult for us to get a grip of the attitudes towards the Azerbaijani-medium instruction. The Chairman of the Department of Public Relations of the local government, who is ethnically Talysh but considers himself Azeri, stated: "All my knowledge entered my brain through the Azerbaijani language, as all the education I got was in Azerbaijani language. The Azerbaijani language was for me the gate to the world." However, he wants his children to know Talysh language, but he does not consider it the duty of the school to teach it to them. At home, he speaks in Azerbaijani with his children. He showed himself upset about the claims of some Talysh people with regard to the insufficiency of Talysh language classes at school. "The Talysh are very patriotic. They say that what is done for them (he means the two hours a week of Talysh language instruction during primary school) is very little. I do not know what they want more." He further finds it very nearsighted to increase the hours of Talysh teaching, because there is no literature available in Talysh language.

The director of the pedagogical college stated: "Now we focus on English language. We need English to integrate into the world. What can we do with Talysh language?" According to Azeri interviewees, Talysh people choose more and more Azerbaijani language in order to have access to all possibilities available in Azerbaijan. They gave the example of some Azeris in Baku who speak Russian as their first language in order to have access to Russian information or education.

Talysh activists however see the situation differently: they claim that the state practices a policy of forced assimilation by sabotaging the teaching of the Talysh language and by not supporting the publication of Talysh-language books.

Arzu Abdullayeva, Chairwoman of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Baku, stated the following. "In the early 90s, some Talysh representatives came to my office and claimed that they want their schools to be entirely in Talysh language. I took note of their claim and promised to lobby for it. Sometime later, another group of Talysh came to me and voiced their deep dissatisfaction with the idea of having the whole curriculum in Talysh language. They argued that this would result in the whole Talysh nation being stuck at a low level of education,

⁹¹ Clifton, John M. and others, "The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Talysh in Azerbaijan"

because there are no universities where they could continue higher education in Talysh. I understood the argumentation of the later, and stopped lobbying for a curriculum entirely in the minority language.”

Most of the Talysh activists nowadays do not want the whole curriculum to be in Talysh language. Their claims focus on increasing the quality of the classes, first of all by preparing qualified Talysh language teachers. Other Talysh activists claimed to increase the number of Talysh lessons to around five hours a week, from the first grade to the eleventh grade. They argue that speaking Talysh is not enough, and learning the literary language requires much more time and efforts.

The director of the Cultural Centre in Lenkeran confirms that at home, more and more parents speak in Azerbaijani with their children, because they are afraid that their children otherwise will not be able to succeed at school. But in his view, only low-educated parents neglect to pass on the mother tongue to their children.

4.6 History Teaching

Currently, there is only one set of history textbooks that is in use in all schools in Azerbaijan. It is translated into Russian language. Moreover, by autumn 2007, the translation into Georgian language should be completed. The years of publication are 2005/2006. However, the textbooks look old-fashioned. The history books contain a lot of text and a few pictures. No sources are cited; no exercises for critical thinking, group games or invitation for consultation of further information are included.

History teachers have to follow a strict curriculum. There is, as stated above, no free choice of textbooks. Furthermore, no provisions are made for some extra hours on the local history. Several interviewees said they were convinced that teachers who would give some lessons on the history of their ethnic community would get into troubles with the local secret service.

Arif Yunus stated: “It would be more honest to call the textbooks “history of the Azeri people” (like the textbooks in Armenia are called), because there is very little place attributed to national minorities. He explains this fact by the psychology of the titular nations – a leftover from the Soviet times.

4.6.1 The Representation of the Lezgi people in History Teaching

The deputy director of the Gusar Education Department regrets that in the Azeri history textbooks, no reference is made to the Lezgi people. He indicated though that the history books cover Sheikh Shamil, who is ethnically Avar (like Lezgis, Avars also belong to the North Caucasian group of peoples).

“In the old textbooks which were in use until the breakdown of the Soviet Union, national minorities in Azerbaijan were covered, although not in depth. After independence, their names were systematically taken out of the history textbooks”, regrets the editor-in-chief of the Lezgi-language newspaper “Samur” Sadegat Karimova. She is convinced that the absence of the word “Lezgi” in the Azeri history textbooks is linked to the Sadval movement and to the fear of the government, which sees in everything the root of separatist activities. A significant number of our interviewees regretted that since independence, the history of Azerbaijan has been rewritten. Lezgis are not the only group which sees its history removed from the mainstream Azeri history.

The director of the pedagogical college in Qusar however is satisfied with the recent history curriculum and textbooks. He thinks that it is necessary to write a history that is putting aside national minorities. “Every people sings its own song. The populations understand the facts in their own way. Every author has his own variant of history, and that’s not good.”⁹² Other interviewees answered similarly by pointing out that the Lezgis are not the only ethnic minority in Azerbaijan and that it would not be possible to cover them all.

The director of the cultural centre of Qusar regrets that the youth knows little about Lezgi history. “Who is to blame? It is their parents. But the parents themselves do not know it. During the Soviet times they also could not learn Lezgi history at school.”

The editor-in-chief of the Lezgi newspaper “Samur” points out that “Lezgi history and culture has a strong oral tradition. The most popular songs and historical legends were never written down. They were carefully handed down to future generations. Today this has become a practically impossible task as there is no one in the current generation to take them and pass them on.”⁹³

The few interviewees who stated that they have a solid knowledge about their own history told us that they themselves made efforts to find out about it. They mainly took their knowledge from books published in the 60s or 70s covering the history of the Caucasian peoples.

4.6.2 The Representation of the Udi people in History Teaching

A history teacher from a Russian school in Nidzh indicated that at several occasions, the Udis are explicitly mentioned in the history textbooks of Azerbaijan. However, she would like to see more information on the Udis and their role in the Azeri history. She told us that when she considers some important material missing in the history textbooks, she tells it herself to the pupils: “For example, nothing is mentioned about how Nagorno-Karabakh got Armenian. So I

⁹² However, his dream is to open a filial of local studies in his college, where pupils will learn about the local history, geography, fauna and flora etc. These regional studies shall prepare the pupils to work in tourism.

⁹³ “Lezgins Pessimistic About Election“, *IWPR* Article CRS no. 307, 06 October 05

myself tell the children how this happened. The Udis who lived in Nagorno-Karabakh freely chose to assimilate to the Armenian culture and to speak in Armenian language. Nobody forced them.” She calls the Udis a “strange people” (*stranni narod*) for the fact that they freely assimilated to the culture of other people around them.

According to the director of the District Education Department in Gebele, the Udi language classes also serve to hand over the culture and traditions of the Udis. The headmaster of a Russian school in Nidzh underlined that the Udis generally know their history well. “After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, people started to ask themselves about who they are. Everybody started to be interested in his or her own history.” According to the teachers of that school, the majority of the parents knows Udi folk stories and tells them to their children.

4.6.3 The Representation of Georgians (Ingiloyis) in History Teaching

A Georgian history teacher indicated that in the sixth and in the history textbooks for the eleventh grade some information is given on the Ingiloyis. The information furnished is however restricted to mentioning that they live in the north-west of Azerbaijan. The history teacher stated that he is not allowed to deviate from the program. However, he expressed that “there is no need for telling our own history; we live here.”

The history teacher stated further that generally there is an interest in the history of Georgia. He would welcome the teaching of Azeri history in Georgia and of Georgian history in Azerbaijan, and he regrets that currently this is not possible.

4.6.4 The Representation of the Talysh people in History Teaching

In an interview in Baku, a Talysh activist told us that in the history textbooks published since 1991 independence, there is no reference made to the Talysh people. “The word “Talysh” has been systematically replaced by the word “Lenkeran”, for example the word “Talysh khanate” is replaced by the “Lenkeran khanate”.” He thinks that this development is related to the short period of separatism in 1993.

A Talysh historian and ethnographer who works as a professor at the history department of the Lenkeran university stated in an interview that the ethnography of the Talysh is included in the Azeri ethnography. However, it is not mentioned that it is Talysh, and therefore perceived to be part of the Azeri cultural heritage. He specified that only in specialized scientific books, the name “Talysh” is mentioned.

In contrast, the chairman of the Department of Public Relations of the local government in Lenkeran stated that one has to learn “first the history of the people, and then the history of his own court”. In his view, every person has to know the history of his ancestors, but is not the duty of the school to provide this information.

4.7 Education Reform in Azerbaijan

The main decision-making body in education policy is the President's Apparatus, which operates in consultation with the Ministry of Education (MoE). The MoE has primary responsibility for the implementation of education policies.

The World Bank is currently funding an education reform project in Azerbaijan. The first period from 1999 to 2004 has been evaluated by the Bank in a report.⁹⁴ The Curriculum Development component has been implemented during 4.5 years with the aid of an international consultancy firm, which has later been rejected by the government. The World Bank evaluated this component as "unsatisfactory".

The Teacher Training component was mainly implemented by international bodies like the British Council, the US Embassy (US State Department), the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation and others. This component of the Education Reform Project was rated as "satisfactory" by the World Bank.

The current step of the Azerbaijan Education Reform Project (from 2003 to 2007) is focusing on the development of the education sector. Among the main components figure the quality of education and its compliance to real needs, with their subcomponents of curriculum reform, teacher training and textbooks and reading materials.⁹⁵

The Open Society Soros Foundation (OSI) in Azerbaijan is involved in the reform process as a partner organisation. The OSI specifically provides technical expertise in three components of the Education Reform Project: Textbooks and other reading materials, improving equity and access of the poor to education and ICT application in schools.

The Center for Innovative Education (CIE) is a spin-off from the OSI-Azerbaijan. Its main aim is to assist educational experts, institutions, policy-makers, advocacy groups and the general public in improving the quality and efficiency of education in Azerbaijan. The activities of the CIE range from capacity building to policy advice, including technical assistance to education professionals and advocacy work.⁹⁶

The Education Problems Institute was founded by the state in 2005 in order to support the educational reforms in Azerbaijan. The center developed the first framework for a new national curriculum. A document with the content and the expected results was established and approved by the government last year.

We had a chance to speak to Enver Abbasov, Head of the Curriculum Center, and Ramiz Huseynov, responsible for the reformed history curriculum, about the foreseen reforms of the

⁹⁴ World Bank, Azerbaijan Education Reform Project, Implementation completion report

⁹⁵ See website of the World Bank in Azerbaijan

⁹⁶ See <http://www.educationforward.net/>

history curriculum. The major changes in the history curriculum, according to Abbasov, are that it will not be so overloaded anymore; “only the important parts of the history will be kept”. Another important development is the removal of any kind of enemy image. “For instance, only the Armenian government, not the Armenian people will be accused for the horrible events during the Nagorno-Karabakh war». They plan to produce a variety of history textbooks which will all include sources. The new curriculum will encourage pupils to freely express their opinion, to make connections between events and to develop the ability to think critically. According to Huseynov, “the history curriculum will be to a lesser degree based on chronological info, but on the cultural development of civilizations”. In his opinion, the history should only give information, and not analytical opinions. “History should be written the way it is.” He is against the inclusion of several differing or even conflicting views.

5. The Situation of Minority Media in Azerbaijan

In the 1920s, when minority communities experienced a period of official support for the development of their culture, a lot of them started to print their own newspapers in their mother tongue. With the build-up of the Stalinist regime however, some of the newspapers had to close down.⁹⁷ After the breakup of the Soviet Union, in particular after the publication of the presidential decree on developing minority languages (written by the then president Elchibey in 1992), hopes of national minorities for a revival of their cultures grew. Minority representatives resumed the printing of minority language newspapers, counting on state support for their activities. However, until now they did not get any official funding and therefore face strong financial hardship.

There are two newspapers in Lezgi language, “Samur” and “Gusar”. We had the opportunity to speak to both editors-in-chief. The “Gusar” newspaper has been published since 1932. Currently, only one of the eight pages is in Lezgi language, the rest is in Azerbaijani. Socio-political issues as well as local and international news are in Azerbaijani. Lezgi specific issues like culture, ethnography and literature are in Lezgi language. Until the 90ies, the paper was to eighty per cent in Lezgi. During Soviet times, the paper was published three times a week. Nowadays, it is only printed twice a month due to missing financial means. According to the editor-in-chief of the “Gusar” newspaper, the main public of his newspaper is teachers and local officials. The main problems of his newspaper are of financial nature, as the newspaper does not get any governmental funding. Further, according to the editor-in-chief it is difficult to find contributors to the newspaper without offering payment. From time to time however, historians write for “Gusar” articles on historically significant events for the Lezgi people. When asked about censorship, he told us that he has never had any problems with the local authorities. “We

⁹⁷ The Talysh language newspaper “Red Talysh“ was shut down, whereas the Lezgi language newspaper “Red Gusar“ could continue working throughout the whole Soviet period.

apply self-censure. We know very well what we can write and what we cannot write. As journalists we are further bound by an ethical code for journalists.”

“Samur” has been published since 1992. Four to five pages of the total eight pages are in Lezgi language. The articles in Lezgi are on Lezgi literature, poetry, culture and history, whereas the articles in Azerbaijani and Russian cover news. Sadegat Karimova, editor-in-chief, is a famous Lezgi poet and writer. She has published a number of children’s books, novels and poetry books in the last few years. The major aim of her dedication is the preservation of the Lezgi language. Two times a month 2000 exemplars of “Samur” are printed. The editor-in-chief drives herself to the regions in order to distribute them. The major public of “Samur” is intellectuals in Baku and the northern regions, teachers, students and pensioners. “Samur” faces financial hardship, as it does not receive any funding from the state. Sadegat Karimova insists that in the presidential decree from 1992, it is stated that minority languages shall be developed and that money shall be allocated for it. However, she has never received a cent.

Sadegat Karimova pointed out the fact that one page of her newspaper is destined to Lezgi teachers. “I’m familiar with the lack of teaching materials for Lezgi language teaching. Therefore, I design a page for classroom use in every number of “Samur”. The material is usually on a famous Lezgi writer or a historical person. I give background information, and then I ask some questions to be answered during class and some proposals for further activities”.

The biggest feeling of discrimination among Lezgis in Gusar comes from the fact that they do not have their own TV station in Gusar, from where they could broadcast programs in Lezgi language. In neighboring Quba, there are two local TV stations, but both of them broadcast only Azerbaijani language programs. The Gusar Radio station was closed down three years ago for unknown reasons. Before its closure, it sent out two times a week a 15-minute program in Lezgi language.

Concerning newspapers in Talysh language, the only Talysh-medium newspaper “Tolyshi Sado” (Voice of the Talysh) closed down with the arrest of its editor-in-chief and two of his co-workers in February 2007. The independent Azerbaijani newspaper “South News” however covers issues that are of particular interest to Talysh people, for instance the lack of Talysh language textbooks.

Talysh language programs are aired twice a week half an hour on “Araz” radio station.

6. International Organizations and Local NGOs

6.1 The Role of International Organizations

The role of International Organizations in the field of minority issues in Azerbaijan is minor. The Council of Europe (CoE) Advisory Committee on the *FCNM* monitors the implementation of the *Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM)* by the state. In December 2005, a “Follow-up Meeting on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities” was held in Baku.

The OSCE does currently not have carry out any activities related to minority issues in Azerbaijan. In July 2006, it had a discussion paper prepared by a development researcher on “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan, Emerging trends and tensions”⁹⁸.

IRES has an Internet Access and Training Program that provides free internet access and training (also in minority languages, for instance in Lezgi). It is aimed at developing community oriented networks. According to the chairman of the Gusar HCA branch, there is an IRES program which supports the publication of existing Lezgi literature and poetry online.⁹⁹

The Media Diversity Institute conducted a project called “Training the media, empowering minorities: a project for improved media coverage of ethnic and minority issues in the South Caucasus” from 2003-2006.¹⁰⁰

6.2 The Work of Local NGOs

Up to now, the role of civil society organizations in the field of minority issues has been modest. Most Azerbaijani NGOs are based in the capital and few have regional branches. The Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (HCA), however, has a very dense system of regional branches. However, they focus on other topics and do only marginally deal with minority issues. The Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan published an “Alternative Report on the Compliance of the Azerbaijan Republic with The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination” in 2005. The Institute of Peace and Democracy seems to be one of the most active NGOs in the field of minority issues. The Resource Center of National Minorities appears not to have conducted any activities at all in the last years.

⁹⁸ Kotecha, Hema, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging trends and tensions”, A Discussion Paper, OSCE, July 2006

⁹⁹ <http://epd.irex.az/>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.media-diversity.org/our%20projects%20and%20programs/Active/Training%20the%20media.htm>

7. Conclusion

Nationalist expression has been suppressed throughout most of the Soviet period, but gained momentum after Azerbaijan's independence in the early 90s. The period of separatism, in particular among the Lezgi and the Talysh populations, has however been brief, as the separatist movements did not gain the support of a large part of their communities. The long history of repression has, in particular among the Talyshs, caused a profound disinterest in questions related to ethnic identity and discouraged the voicing of any kind of nationalist expressions.

The current state policy towards minorities is essentially a variant of the Soviet pattern of recognizing the importance of ethnicity, but suppressing political demands for autonomy. Increasingly, the administration tends to moderate the relevance of ethnic identity and instead promotes a state-defined Azeri identity.

Minorities generally have a satisfying knowledge of the state language. Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union and in a period 16 years, they have achieved a much better proficiency in the state language than minorities in the neighboring countries. Outside of Baku, Azerbaijani is clearly becoming the main medium of instruction in the schools - at the expense of Russian language. As a result, Azerbaijani proficiency is considerably higher than Russian proficiency among all minorities outside of Baku.

Minority representatives as well as international monitoring bodies are, in contrast, concerned with the diminishing importance of minority languages and the lack of state support for their promotion. The findings of our research reflect that for Lezgi, Udi and Georgian, high language vitality is guaranteed by the fact that these languages are still widely used in the home and within the respective communities. On the opposite, the Talysh community nowadays extensively uses Azerbaijani language even for informal communication at home and on the street - except in remote mountainous villages.

The Azeri state offers the possibility for pupils belonging to an ethnic minority to study their mother tongue at school. Georgian children in western Azerbaijan go to Georgian-medium schools with the whole curriculum being in Georgian. For Lezgis, Udis and Talyshs the general principle is that pupils have lessons of their mother tongue two hours per week from the first to the fourth grade. This opportunity is however exclusively available in mono-ethnic, or nearly mono-ethnic, settlements. Shortcomings with respect to qualified teachers and up-to-date textbooks in minority languages have however hampered the development of language education for the minorities concerned. The findings of our research indicate that parents and teachers are generally satisfied with the amount of hours attributed to minority-language instruction, but would like to see the quality of teaching improve. The most frequent claims of our interviewees were, on the one hand, that the Azerbaijan University of Languages, the Baku State University or the Pedagogical University should open faculties for minority languages and prepare qualified teachers and specialists for those languages. On the other hand, more attention should be given to the creation of a sufficient number of teaching materials for the

instruction of minority languages. Furthermore, in particular members of the Lezgi community expressed the strong desire to get some state support for the organization of minority languages courses in Baku, Sumgait and other large cities.

As for the proficiency in the state language, ethnic minority pupils generally have a good command of Azerbaijani after finishing school and do not face any problem to access higher education in this regard. Georgian children, in contrast, most frequently move to Georgia to enter university in Tbilisi.

The attitude of parents and teachers towards instruction in the state language is definitely positive. Minority communities have broadly accepted the linguistic dominance of Azerbaijani and feel that their interests are best served by achieving a good command of the state language. None of our respondents indicated that he or she perceives education in the state language as a threat to his or her own culture. Also, none of our Lezgi, Talysh or Udi interviewees advocated the adoption of minority language-medium education with some or all subjects being taught in the minority language. In their views, minority language-medium teaching would only make sense if pupils could get higher education in that language (for instance Georgian pupils living in Azerbaijan can go to university in Tbilisi).

Since the independence, the history of Azerbaijan has been rewritten. In mainstream history teaching very little place is attributed to national minorities. A significant part of our Lezgi, Talysh and Georgian interviewees regretted that they see the names of their communities, and thus their history, being removed from mainstream Azeri history.

Media in minority languages are mostly inexistent, had to close down or face enormous financial hardship. The few minority newspapers or radio stations currently working generally diffuse cultural information, literature or poetry in minority languages. Due to a lack of teaching materials, minority language teachers often use minority language newspapers as reading materials in the class.

In the last few years, International Organizations have been conducting very few activities in the field of minority issues in Azerbaijan. Likewise, the role of local NGOs –except for a few – has been mostly insignificant.

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