

# INSPIRED FROM ABROAD: THE EXTERNAL SOURCES OF SEPARATISM IN AZERBAIJAN

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## Abstract

*This article examines the external sources of separatism in Azerbaijan. The author claims that in the case of Azerbaijan many separatist movements are fed by outside powers rather than caused by inside sources. This article does not intend to review the situation with regard to the political, economic and cultural rights of ethnic minorities. Azerbaijan, like many other post-Soviet republics, went through a transition period characterized by sharp economic decline, dissolution of social institutions, change of values, etc. Quite rightfully, some claims of leaders of ethnic minorities about discrimination might be reasonable and justifiable. In the circumstances of post-Soviet transition, no country escaped from injustices, disorders and social turbulences. However, in many cases separatist movements were used by regional powers and countries concerned, particularly so-called kin-states to advance their political agenda. The author argues that in Azerbaijan most separatist sentiments are instigated and directed mainly from abroad.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, Iran, South Caucasus, Separatism, Irredentism, Ethnic Minority

## Introduction

When Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the country had already been drawn into conflict with neighboring Armenia. This conflict later turned into a full scale interstate war around Mountainous (Nagorno)<sup>1</sup> Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Mountainous Karabakh was an autonomous region with a majority Armenian population, where the ultra-nationalist leadership of Armenia backed a strong separatist movement. In addition to an Armenian irredentist project Azerbaijan faced other separatist movements.

Separatism wrecked havoc in many other post-Soviet states. Ethnic minorities demanded more rights from central governments and their leaders claimed that the authorities conducted a policy of discrimination and oppression. Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan – all these

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<sup>1</sup> "Nagorno" in Russian means Mountainous. In the 1920s, when Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was established within the USSR, the term "Nagorno" was invented to separate this region from the rest historical Karabakh and put Armenian population in majority position.

former Soviet republics encountered separatism in various forms and to various extents. Azerbaijan was among those republics.

This article does not intend to review whether such claims on the part of ethnic minorities were right or wrong. Azerbaijan, as many other post-Soviet republics, went through a transition period characterized by sharp economic decline, dissolution of social institutions, change of values, etc. Quite rightfully, some claims of leaders of ethnic minorities might be reasonable and justifiable. In the circumstances of post-Soviet transition, no country escaped from injustices, disorders and social turbulences.

However, in many cases separatist movements were used by regional powers and countries concerned, particularly so-called kin-states to advance their political agenda. This article examines the foreign involvement in separatist movements on the territory of Azerbaijan.

## Academic Viewpoint on the Role of External Factors

The importance of the external support of separatism is acknowledged and investigated in the work of several experts.<sup>2</sup> Ostap Odushkin maintained that in case of Ukraine many separatist movements, such as in Crimea and Donbas, had strong foreign support.<sup>3</sup> He stresses:

*“Support (both political and financial) for separatists usually comes either from a kin-state of the national minority (Crimea), or diaspora (Northern Ireland) or from countries which are rivals of the state from which separatists want to secede. It is rarely backed and financed exclusively by locals (either businesses or ordinary people).”<sup>4</sup>*

Odushkin further maintains that separatist movements in Ukraine employed and fictionalized historical rhetoric for ideological purposes and distorted real history. When needed the historical memories and myths are forged. *“Thus, we can state that all history is modern history, since contemporary development and circumstances play the most crucial role.”<sup>5</sup>*

Odushkin opposes the well-accepted viewpoint that separatism is caused by domestic factors.

*“After the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the appearance of weak new states with nascent institutions and authorities, it is obvious that external factors (international factors) are of decisive importance as well. The separatist question became a factor which can be traded off by some*

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<sup>2</sup> Wardhani, Baig, “External Support for Liberation Movements in Aceh and Papua”, Paper presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Canberra, 29 June-2 July 2004. <http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASAA/biennial-conference/2004/Wardhani-B-ASAA2004.pdf>; Griffiths, Ryan, “Globalization, Development and Separatism: The Influence of External and Internal Economic Factors on the Strategy of Separatism”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA's 49th Annual Convention, Bridging Multiple Divides, Hilton San Francisco, San Francisco, 26 March, 2008, [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p252789\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p252789_index.html);

<sup>3</sup> Odushkin, Ostap, “Problem of Separatism in the Post-Communist Space: Internal and External Sources. The Case of Ukraine”, in: *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Issue II, 2003, pp. 30-54.

<sup>4</sup> Odushkin, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Odushkin, p. 49.

*governments to get better treatment for those states' diasporas or to expand their geopolitical influence.”<sup>6</sup>*

Separatism can be encouraged in many ways: direct and indirect military assistance, financial contributions, media promotion (which is becoming a more and more important factor), hosting separatist leaders, promising recognition, and some others. The cases illustrated below in subsequent sections fall under these categories.

## Players

In the military campaign of 1992-1994, Armenia was successful in occupying Mountainous Karabakh and seven other adjacent regions of Azerbaijan. Armenia has not been recognized as the occupying power by international organizations<sup>7</sup>, mainly the UN Security Council. As Thomas Ambrosio states, “Armenia encountered a highly permissive or tolerant international environment that allowed its annexation of some 15 percent of Azerbaijani territories.”<sup>8</sup> However, the fact of occupation was reflected in the language of relevant resolutions of the UNSC. Other organizations such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe pointed to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and called for the withdrawal of occupying armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

Armenia and separatists in Mountainous Karabakh, which started the irredentist campaign under the slogan of unification, gradually changed their tactics, and put forward the issue of self-determination. The Armenian population of Mountainous Karabakh claimed that they were successful in getting control of the territories under question, and establishing “government” to rule there. Armenia became a key player in advancing in international fora the issue of self-determination of the Mountainous Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

While seeking independent status for this region, the Armenian political and security establishments promoted the idea of independence for other regions of Azerbaijan populated by ethnic minorities. As it will be illustrated below, Armenia had a direct interest in propelling inter-ethnic tensions in other parts of Azerbaijan in order to justify self-determination for Mountainous Karabakh.

Other regional powers had a stake in Azerbaijan’s domestic political situation and its foreign policy orientation. Azerbaijan, possessing enormous energy resources and occupying an important geostrategic space at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, was subjected to the struggle between regional and global powers. Therefore, separatist movements received a fair amount of support from neighboring countries. Several political and “academic” conferences and seminars were organized in Yerevan and Moscow. Ethnic minority leaders were invited to Armenia, Russia, and some other countries and were received at an official level. Azerbaijan intelligence agencies claimed that they seized political activists, associated with ethnic minorities’ political movements, who had acknowledged their links with the foreign intelligence services of Armenia, Russia and Iran.

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<sup>6</sup> Odushkin, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the Organization of Islamic Conference.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrosio, Thomas, “Irredentism. Ethnic Conflict and International Politics”, (Connecticut: Praeger Publisher, 2001), p.146.

<sup>9</sup> Resolution of UNSC 822, 853, 874, 884, CoE PACE resolution 1416.

## Azerbaijani Separatists on the Agenda of Third Countries

### *1. Mountainous Karabakh*

So-called separatism in Mountainous Karabakh is, as a matter of fact, an irredentist movement, and de-facto controlled by Armenia, as it was acknowledged by many international organizations and foreign governments. Therefore, Armenia is not considered in the article as the external source of separatism, as its government is directly and openly involved in administration of the occupied territories. However, separatist leaders from Mountainous Karabakh from time to time are welcomed abroad, and certain circles in third countries actively promote the issue of independence of this region.

Many observers stated that Russia had a direct stake in the conflict over Mountainous Karabakh. In the 1990s a scandal erupted around the alleged transfer of illegal military supplies from Russia to Armenia. During that period the office of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” functioned in Moscow. The relations between Azerbaijan and Russia were characterized as tense. However, after the departure of president Yeltsin and the rise to power of president Putin the relations between the two countries significantly warmed up, and they have resolved many outstanding issues. The office of “NKR” in Moscow was shut down. Currently the “NKR Office” functions within the Armenian Embassy in Moscow, which once more proves the fact of direct control of Armenia over Mountainous Karabakh.

However, certain circles in Moscow maintained and supported separatists in the South Caucasus, including those from Mountainous Karabakh. They inspired leaders of the breakaway regions of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova to combine their efforts in self-promotion. On March 16, 2005 the leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Mountainous Karabakh met in Moscow “to discuss combining efforts to ensure each region's individual independence.”<sup>10</sup>

Seven months later, on September 13-14, 2005, Russia's CIS Affairs Institute, a government-sponsored think tank, organized a conference entitled “A Parallel CIS: Abkhazia, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh as Realities of post-Soviet Space”. Delegations from the self-proclaimed republics, Russian parliamentarians, academics, and prominent political scientists attended the conference. Modest Kolerov, head of the Russian Presidential Administration's Directorate for Interregional and External Ties, was the keynote speaker. It is obvious that without official blessing, such a conference would not have been possible in Moscow.

In February 2007, the leader of Mountainous Karabakh Arkady Gukasian was invited to Moscow by a Russian military think tank. He met with “high-ranking diplomats” in Moscow and was also awarded the Peter the Great Medal for promoting Russian-Armenian friendship.<sup>11</sup> Recently,

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<sup>10</sup> Stratfor. “FSU: Mutual Aid Efforts Too Little, Too Late?” March 18, 2005, [http://www.stratfor.com/fsu\\_mutual\\_aid\\_efforts\\_too\\_little\\_too\\_late](http://www.stratfor.com/fsu_mutual_aid_efforts_too_little_too_late). See also: Socor, Vladimir, “Secessionist Leaders Parade in Moscow”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 2, Issue 54, March 18, 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=407&issue\\_id=3268&article\\_id=2369447](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=407&issue_id=3268&article_id=2369447)

<sup>11</sup> Socor, Vladimir, “Secessionist Leaders Coordinate Activities in Moscow”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 4, Issue 38, February 23, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2371943](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371943)

separatists were invited to a conference dedicated to the problem of Kosovo recognition by the above-mentioned institute in April 2008.

In most cases, separatists from Mountainous Karabakh have no access to officials of foreign countries. Their visits are organized by Armenian diaspora organizations with no linkage to the authorities of host countries. For example, when representatives from Mountainous Karabakh travel to the United States to raise funds for their cause, no American officials will meet with them. However, it should be noted that while US authorities introduced a ban for travel and money transfers for separatist leaders in Transdnestria, Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia, no such restriction exists for Armenian separatists. The latter freely conduct donation campaigns across the US. Double standards clearly exhibited in this case show that American authorities regard differently separatist movements which are similar in nature. In the case of Mountainous Karabakh a strong Armenian lobby in the US plays an important role in the country's foreign policy towards the region.

The Armenian government and diaspora make every effort to promote “NKR” abroad, but without much success. However, every small event such as an exhibition, conference participation, etc. is widely promoted in Armenian media. The major players in the conflict – the US, Russia and to a lesser extent the EU - are not inclined to accept separatists from Mountainous Karabakh. As a result, their self-promotion at the moment is basically confined to the Armenian communities abroad.

## 2. *Talysh*

Talyshs represent the Iranian-speaking minority in the south of Azerbaijan. According to official figures of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 76,000 Talyshs live within the country.<sup>12</sup> Talysh nationalists (and interestingly some Armenian scholars<sup>13</sup>) however argue that their number is significantly reduced by the official census, and they reach 400,000 and some even speak about 800,000.<sup>14</sup>

In 1993 the nationalist leaders of the Talyshs, amid the chaos and political turmoil in Baku during the change of power, announced the establishment of the “Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic”. This brought the issue of Talysh separatism to the political agenda of Azerbaijan. Local leader Alikram Humbatov seized power in Lankaran, the regional centre in the southern part of the country, but failed to sustain it for more than three months. After the political situation was stabilized in the country and the new president Heydar Aliyev strengthened his position, the “Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic”, having no significant public support, fell.<sup>15</sup>

The Talysh issue, unlike Mountainous Karabakh and even the Lezgi one (discussed below), has never had a visible impact on political life in the country despite the creation of a short-lived self-proclaimed autonomous entity. The nationalist leaders failed to recruit more than dozens of

<sup>12</sup> “Azeri Paper Publishes Report on Country's Ethnic Composition”, in: *Azerbaijan Daily Digest*, Eurasianet.org, March 23, 2001, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200103/0062.html>

<sup>13</sup> Astrian, G., “Talyshi”, in G. Astrian, “Etudes on Iranian ethnology”, Yerevan, 1998, pp. 3-11

<sup>14</sup> “Talysh”, in: Ethnologue.com, [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=tly](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=tly)

<sup>15</sup> Kotecha, Hema, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging Trends and Tensions”, OSCE Report, Baku, July 2006, [http://www.osce.org/documents/ob/2006/08/23087\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/ob/2006/08/23087_en.pdf)

supporters. As OSCE expert Kotecha notes, “the attitude towards any separatist tendencies seems predominantly negative” among Talyshs. However, Kotecha and some other observers, at the same time, mention that there are some problems with social issues and ethnic identity expression.

According to Asim Oku, “the Talysh movement was Russian-oriented from the beginning of the last century. However, receiving no support from Moscow in 1993, a number of activists of Talysh movement have changed their alliance to Iran.”<sup>16</sup>

Proximity with Iran creates a favorable condition for propaganda through various mediums – TV, radio and newspapers. Kotecha further points to an active Iranian presence in the south. In her view, Iranian state media tries to propagate a religious lifestyle and an Iranian identity. However, most Talyshs prefer secular Azerbaijan to theocratic Iran.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of airing Iranian TV over the territory of Azerbaijan was on the agenda of bilateral negotiations between Azerbaijan and Iran for several years. In February 2007 the two countries’ telecommunication ministries signed a memorandum, which, *inter alia*, envisaged cooperation with the purpose of regulation of TV and radio transmissions in border regions. More specifically the problem was related to Iranian *Sahar TV*, which aired onto the territory of Lankaran and adjacent areas of Azerbaijan. It should be noted that, in general, during past 4-5 years Azerbaijan and Iran managed to settle many disputed issues peacefully.

Azerbaijani national security agencies occasionally report on the illegal activities of Iranian intelligence services in Azerbaijan. In October 2007, 16 members of the so-called Northern Mahdi Army, an underground group, went on trial in Azerbaijan. The media reported that this group was “organized, trained and supplied by Iran’s Republican Guard in order to overthrow the current Azerbaijani government and impose an Islamic state on the Iranian model there.”<sup>18</sup> In July 2008, Novruzali Mamedov, editor of the local newspaper, Talysh Voice, and another top official at the newspaper, Elman Guliyev, were sentenced by an Azerbaijani court. “According to prosecutors, Guliyev said during questioning that he received Iranian funding for the publication of the newspaper and the acquisition of historical and religious books.”<sup>19</sup>

Except for a few incidents, for the most part since 1993 the Talysh issue was dormant in Azerbaijan. In May 2005, Armenia made an attempt to rekindle the Talysh issue by organizing the “First International Conference on Talysh Studies”. The event was hosted by the Yerevan State University’s Iranian Studies Department and the Yerevan-based Center for Iranian Studies. According to Vladimir Socor:

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<sup>16</sup> Oku, Asim, “Iran Can Blow Up Azerbaijan From Within”, Axis Global Challenge Research, June 30, 2006. <http://www.axisglobe.com/article.asp?article=201>

<sup>17</sup> Kotecha, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Goble, Paul, “Window on Eurasia: Iranians Said Seeking to Promote Islamic Revolution in Azerbaijan”, October 9, 2007, <http://windowoneurasia.blogspot.com/2007/10/window-on-eurasia-iranians-said-seeking.html>

<sup>19</sup> “Azerbaijan Tries 2 From Ethnic Group Centered Near Iran On Treason Charges”, International Herald Tribune, December 14, 2007, <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/12/13/europe/EU-GEN-Azerbaijan-Trial.php>

*“Almost certainly, some political circles in Armenia were behind this initiative. The conference appeared designed at least in part to resurrect the issue of autonomy for the Talysh ethnic group in Azerbaijan. Such intentions draw inspiration from the would-be “Talysh-Mugan Republic”... [T] heir rebellion was correlated with a massive Armenian offensive on the Karabakh front and seizure of territories deep inside western Azerbaijan by Armenian forces. The Talysh rebels proclaimed the independence of a seven-district area in southeastern Azerbaijan, but did not elicit significant support among their own ethnic group.”<sup>20</sup>*

However, this conference did not receive wide support either, even from the Talysh diaspora abroad. While one of its leaders, Fahraddin Abbas-Zoda, chairman of Talysh National Movement and several members arrived from Russia to participate in the conference, another Talysh community group - the Party for Equality of the Peoples of Azerbaijan, chaired by Hilal Mammadov, which operates in Moscow (formerly the Talysh People's Party) - condemned the conference.

Armenia enjoys very close and friendly relations with Iran. Through this connection Armenia also tries to reach out regarding the Talysh issue. After the above-mentioned conference, Armenian academicians organized several undertakings related to Iranian studies. The last one was organized on June 6, 2008 in Yerevan under a title “Iran and the Caucasus: Unity and Diversity”.

### **3. Lezgis**

According to official census of 1999 about 178,000 Lezgis are living in Azerbaijan, mainly in its northern part, though Lezgi nationalists claim that the number is 2-3 times higher.<sup>21</sup> Many experts emphasize that Lezgis, the largest ethnic minority in Azerbaijan, face no discrimination at the personal level and the Lezgi nationalist movement has no wide support among the public.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Lezgi nationalists accuse Azerbaijani authorities of discriminatory practices. Despite such allegation no serious violent incident occurred in the Lezgi populated area between the authorities and nationalists since the declaration of Azerbaijan's independence. Lezgis are well represented in the government, and media. Education in Lezgi language exists in the country.

The lack of public support did not prevent Lezgi nationalists from forming an organized group. Sadval, established in 1989, is an active organization operating mainly from Russia where it is also the subject of concern for Russian security agencies. However, the members of Sadval openly gather in Dagestan, and in Moscow as well.<sup>23</sup> The main goal of Sadval is to unite Lezgis in Russian Dagestan and Azerbaijan. This caused a fear that Sadval can be turned into something similar to the

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<sup>20</sup> Socor, Vladimir, “Talysh Issue, Dormant in Azerbaijan, Reopened in Armenia”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 27, 2005, [http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2369811](http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2369811)

<sup>21</sup> Cornell, Svante, “Small Nations and Great Powers : A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus” (Richmond: Curzon Press Limited, 2000), p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> “Minorities at Risk: Assessment for Lezgins in Azerbaijan”, University of Maryland Center for International Development and Conflict Management., Online Report, 2004, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=37302>

<sup>23</sup> Гахраманов, Мухиддин: “Россия считает «Садвал» организацией, ведущей борьбу за права разделенного на две части лезгинского народа” (Gahramanov Muhiddin: “Russia regards “Sadval” as an organization fighting for the rights of the Lezgin people divided into two parts”), Azeri Press Agency, June 22, 2006, [http://southru.info/2006/06/23/mukhiddin\\_gakhramanov\\_rossija\\_schitaet\\_sadval\\_organizaciejj\\_vedushhejj\\_borbu\\_za\\_p\\_rava\\_razdelenogo\\_na\\_dve\\_chasti\\_lezginskogo\\_naroda.html](http://southru.info/2006/06/23/mukhiddin_gakhramanov_rossija_schitaet_sadval_organizaciejj_vedushhejj_borbu_za_p_rava_razdelenogo_na_dve_chasti_lezginskogo_naroda.html)

separatist movement in South Ossetia, which aspires to reunification with North Ossetia under the Russian umbrella or other irredentist claims.

In 1992, the Russian Justice Department registered Sadval; later, for a short period of time in 1993, Sadval's license was suspended, and then again resumed after they removed a territorial claim to Russia. Sadval was split into two factions - radical, demanding full independence, and moderate, advocating cultural autonomy in Russia and Azerbaijan.

In the 1990s, while Azerbaijan faced a series of security challenges, Sadval was active in the country. In April 1996, Azerbaijan's National Security Ministry arrested several members of this organization and accused them of organizing a terrorist act in a Baku subway in May 1994, which claimed the lives of 14 people. The Azerbaijani authorities revealed the linkage between Sadval and Armenian intelligence services.<sup>24</sup> Hema Kotecha reports:

*“It is frequently stated by the media and many local observers that both Armenia and Russia have interests in maintaining Sadval: the organisation is labeled as a ‘game’ used by Russia, Azerbaijan and internal Dagestani politics. It is suggested by local political players that Azerbaijan needs to pay more attention to this game and its mechanics and, indeed, to “play it as ‘Russia’ would”... [T] here is no particular leader for the Lezgins who might head a movement and that only outside organisations and people can channel their interests through Lezgins; Sadval have no particular source of financial support other than through external interests.”<sup>25</sup>*

In May 2008, Lezgis gathered for an academic conference in Moscow dedicated to the history and culture of the Lezgi people. The sponsors of the conference were the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Regional Development Ministry, and the Russian State Duma. Conference participants received a brochure published jointly by the Federal National-Cultural Autonomy of the Lezgis and the State Duma's Committee for Nationality Affairs, in which the author called “for official condemnation of the division and “ethnocide” of the Lezgin people in the 1920s. He further slams the current border between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan as “illegitimate” and demands it be redrawn to incorporate the northern districts of Azerbaijan into Daghestan.”<sup>26</sup>

Alexander Melikishvili notes in this regard:

*Upon closer examination of the conference proceedings, however, it appears that the event was designed to be a propaganda platform for advocating the creation of an independent Lezgin state or Lezgistan with accompanying territorial claims on the Lezgin-populated areas of northern Azerbaijan, something that Moscow has used many times in the late 1990s, when the Kremlin fomented secessionist sentiment among Azerbaijan’s ethnic minorities.”<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> “Armenia and Russia Supporting Separatists in Azerbaijan, Azeri Paper Says”, in: *Azerbaijan Daily Digest*, Eurasianet.org, February 8, 2000, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200002/0017.html>; Fuller, Liz, “Azerbaijan: Baku Implicates Armenian Intelligence In Alleged Coup Bid”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 5, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060460.html>

<sup>25</sup> Kotecha, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Fuller, Liz, “Analysis: Does Azerbaijan Face A New Irredentist Threat?” *RFE/RL*, May 15, 2008 <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/05/993754A7-DB54-451B-ACAE-C059B6D974B4.html>

<sup>27</sup> Melikishvili, Alexander, “Russia Resurrects The Lezgin Issue In Azerbaijan At Moscow Conference”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5, Number 135, July 16, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2373231](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2373231)



Lezgi nationalists maintain several anti-Azerbaijani websites, such as <http://05.moy.su>. One Eldar Beybutov wrote on this website that Iran and Armenia are natural allies of the Lezgi people. He further claimed that the West is strengthening its position in the South Caucasus through Azerbaijan. Therefore, to oppose such advancement, Lezgis should destroy “Western plans by the act of sabotage and military activity on those territories of Azerbaijan which host transportation lines”.<sup>28</sup>

Armenian web forums and Armenia-related websites often feature articles instigating a separatist mood among Lezgis in Azerbaijan. In September 2007, Armenia hosted an “academic” conference dedicated to the history of Caucasian Albania, an ancient state that existed on the territory of the modern day Republic of Azerbaijan.

While mainstream scholars maintain that Caucasian Albania consisted mainly of indigenous ethnic groups, including Udins, Lezgis and others, extreme Lezgi nationalists claim that this was a purely Lezgi state. Contrary to that, some academicians in Azerbaijan opine that Caucasian Albania was a Turkic state. Further, Armenian historians view this ancient state as Armenian-influenced and ruled.

The conference in Armenia advanced the idea of Lezgi nationalists that Caucasian Albania belonged to this ethnic group, and therefore, justified relevant territorial claim to Azerbaijan. No Azerbaijani expert was invited to this conference, while Armenian, Russian, and experts from Dagestan predominated at the meeting.<sup>29</sup>

Besides the Lezgi-related issue, the conference in Yerevan spared space for promoting the idea of autonomy for another ethnic minority in Azerbaijan – Avars. Timur Aytberov, a scholar from Dagestan, stated at the conference that Avars should seek autonomy status in Azerbaijan.<sup>30</sup> Conferences in Yerevan in September 2007, and in Moscow in May 2008, were formally dedicated to purely academic problems but their political agenda was obvious in the light of the conclusions and slogans voiced there.

Fortunately, despite outside attempts to instigate Lezgi separatism, peace has prevailed thus far. However, a potential danger still exists due to a number of factors, mainly external interests. Certainly, much will be dependant on the ability of Azerbaijani authorities to handle the situation in a manner which entails the combination of law enforcement measures and economic incentives. Not least, Azerbaijan should continue to pay attention to the social well-being of Lezgi populated area, as Lezgis will always look at their brethren in the north, in Dagestan, to compare the situation there with their own. Lezgi nationalists refer to economic hardship and corruption to justify their respective claims while overlooking the fact that Dagestan is one of the poorest and corrupt regions in Russia. Overall, Lezgis prefer a peaceful existence within Azerbaijan, particularly in view of the

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<sup>28</sup> Бейбутов, Эльдар, “Естественные союзники лезгин: кто же они?” (Beybudov, Eldar, “Natural allies of the Lezgis: Who are they?”) <http://05.moy.su/news/2007-02-03-23>

<sup>29</sup> Arif Yunusov, an Azerbaijani opposition (I emphasize, opposition, not pro-government) expert, gave his comment on this conference to Armenian News Agency Regnum ([www.regnum.ru/news/882797.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/882797.html)).

<sup>30</sup> “Аварцы убедились в необходимости своей автономии в составе Азербайджана, - считает дагестанский историк” (Avars were convinced of the importance of seeking an autonomy within Azerbaijan – an historian from Dagestan opines), Alazan-Info, <http://www.alazan.moy.su/news/2007-09-04-140>

many interethnic marriages and their well-integrated status. However if there were external support, violence might erupt on the part of some nationalist elements.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Kurds

Kurds are one of the best-integrated ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. Many Kurds have high positions in the Azerbaijani government. The extent of their integration in Azerbaijani society and elite even leads some opposition parties to accuse them of controlling certain areas of Azerbaijani politics and the economy.<sup>32</sup> Official statistics report that about 13,000 Kurds live in the country, while independent experts estimate their number around 50-60,000<sup>33</sup> and nationalists around 200,000. The geographical areas of concentration of the Kurdish population included Kelbejar, Lachin, Gubadli and Zangilan districts – all currently occupied by Armenia. Perhaps because of this factor the close ties between Kurds and Azerbaijanis have been strengthened.

Armenians, having occupied Azerbaijani territories, including those where Kurds lived and having expelled all the population from there, later came to the idea of the creation of a “Kurdish state” in Lachin and some other adjacent areas – Gubadli and Kelbejar. Lachin district, located outside Mountainous Karabakh is extremely important for Armenians as a transportation link between Armenia and Mountainous Karabakh. In the framework of peaceful negotiation with Azerbaijan, the Armenians declared several times that they would surrender back neither Lachin, nor Kelbejar.

The idea of a Kurdish state came out of “Red Kurdistan”, or more precisely the Kurdish district (“uyezd” in Russian) which existed in 1923-1929 within Azerbaijan. However, since almost all Kurds fled from these regions because of Armenian offensives, this Armenian propagandist gesture failed, even though it was aimed to gain outside support from Kurdish communities in Turkey, Iran, Russia and Europe.

In 2008, Armenia tried to resurrect this idea by inviting Kurds from Iran and Turkey. Media in Azerbaijan and Turkey reported that Armenian authorities started settling active members of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a nationalist guerrilla movement operating in Turkey which is listed as a terrorist organization by many countries, in the occupied areas of Azerbaijan. However, Armenian authorities denied this allegation as merely a propagandistic campaign on the part of Azerbaijan and Turkey. American military expert Stephen Blank notes in this regard that “dismissing Turkish and Azerbaijani assertions and concerns could prove dangerous. They require further investigation.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See also for similar opinion: Kotecha, p. 45; Cornell, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Veliyev, Anar, “Kurds In Azerbaijan: A Threat Or A Game That Power Plays?”, in: *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (8), 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Юнусов, Ариф, “Этнический состав Азербайджана (по переписи 1999 г.)” (Yunusov, Arif, “Ethnic composition of Azerbaijan according to the census of 1999”), Сеть этнологического мониторинга и раннего предупреждения конфликтов (Network of Ethnological Monitoring and Early Conflict Prevention), 12 марта 2001.

[http://www.iea.ras.ru/topic/census/mon/yunus\\_mon2001.htm](http://www.iea.ras.ru/topic/census/mon/yunus_mon2001.htm)

<sup>34</sup> Blank, Stephen, “Kurdish Issue and Nagorno Karabakh”, Eurasianet.org, May 28, 2008, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav052708a.shtml>

## 5. Others

Some other ethnic minorities populate Azerbaijan; however, separatist tendencies among them are even less than observed above. Some incidents occurred in Balaken and Zagatala districts populated by Avars, however, they were caused by the activities of criminal gangs rather than by separatist aspiration.<sup>35</sup> Many Avars refer to Sheikh Shamil as the pride of their ancestry. Shamil was a famous religious leader in the North Caucasus who led the anti-Russian resistance in the nineteenth century. Maybe for this reason, separatist anti-Azerbaijani sentiments had no ground among Avars. Certainly, Russian nationalists would fail to instigate anything serious there since Avar nationalism has two main elements – Islam and Sheikh Shamil, neither of which would work to foster a pro-Russian mood. At the same time, no guarantee can be given with regard to the possibility of minor provocations, which might lead to more serious problems in the future.

Georgians, who live in close proximity with Avars, generally are in good relations with the central authorities. A considerable Russian population in Azerbaijan, mainly in Baku, the small but strong Jewish community in the north of Azerbaijan and some other ethnic groups enjoy stable relations with and fair treatment from the central government of Azerbaijan.

Many international organizations point out that as a whole Azerbaijan provides the necessary conditions for ensuring the rights of ethnic minorities. The UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, upon consideration of Azerbaijan's report, concluded that the country ensured anti-discriminatory legislation.<sup>36</sup> The Council of Europe noted "Azerbaijan has made particularly commendable efforts in opening up the personal scope of application of the Framework Convention to a wide range of minorities. In Azerbaijan, the importance of the protection and promotion of cultures of national minorities is recognized and the long history of cultural diversity of the country is largely valued."<sup>37</sup> In 2007, the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), commented, "ECRI notes the general view that national minorities are well represented in public and political life and particularly in parliament."<sup>38</sup> The NATO Parliamentary Assembly stressed that "overall, minorities in Azerbaijan are relatively well integrated, but some areas offer a mixed picture."<sup>39</sup> Other organizations generally commend the country's policy with regard to national minorities. In the meantime, the same reports indicate that further steps should be taken to improve the well-being of ethnic groups and protect their linguistic and cultural rights.

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<sup>35</sup> Kotecha, p.46-49

<sup>36</sup> "Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination Concludes Sixty-Sixth Session", United Nations Information Service Press-Release, March 14, 2005, <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2005/rd987.html>

<sup>37</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, "Resolution ResCMN-2004-8 on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Azerbaijan", Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 13 July 2004 at the 893rd meeting of the Ministers Deputies.

<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=761919&BackColorInternet=9999CC&BackColorIntranet=&BackColorLogged=FD864>

<sup>38</sup> European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), "Second Report on Azerbaijan", CRI(2007)22, May 24, 2007, [http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/ecri/1%2Decri/2%2Dcountry%2Dby%2Dcountry\\_approach/azerbaijan/azerbaijan\\_cbc\\_3.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/ecri/1%2Decri/2%2Dcountry%2Dby%2Dcountry_approach/azerbaijan/azerbaijan_cbc_3.asp)

<sup>39</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "Minorities In The South Caucasus: Factor Of Instability?", Rapporteur Bert Middel, 2005. <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=683>

## Conclusion

By no means is Azerbaijan free from problems related to the protection of national minorities<sup>40</sup>; however, the country does provide the necessary conditions for the development of ethnic minorities' culture and identity, as outlined by many international organizations. As I argue and illustrate above, most separatist sentiments are instigated and directed from abroad, mainly from Armenia.

A so-called “kin-State” has a direct interest in the protection of minorities in neighboring states, however, Armenia's open military occupation and also undeniable links with other separatist groups in Azerbaijan went well beyond accepted norms. The OSCE High Commissioner in his statement on protection of minorities and citizens abroad pointed out “the presence of one's citizens or "ethnic kin" abroad must not be used as a justification for undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other States.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite a difficult socio-economic situation, good neighborly relations between countries in the region can prevent violence and separatism, which is so frequently observed in the post-Soviet space. For example, Azerbaijanis in Georgia frequently complain about their difficult economic existence; however, Azerbaijanis never rose to demand secession. Azerbaijani and Georgian governments, always in a friendly manner, discussed all issues related to their respective minorities in each others states, as well as border issues. This further proves that separatism in post-Soviet area has at large external sources and is caused by the situation in which a neighboring state tries to stir the domestic situation in another by abetting separatism.

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

At the same time, as depicted above, the external forces have played a major role in abetting separatism among some ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. Continuation of such practices against Azerbaijan and other countries of the region could endanger security and stability in the whole region.

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<sup>40</sup> For criticism see: Popjanevski, Johanna, “Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan”, Silk Road Paper, September 2006, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0609Popjanevski.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> OSCE Press-Release, “OSCE High Commissioner Issues Statement On Protection Of Minorities And Citizens Abroad”, August 25, 2008. <http://www.osce.org/item/32663.html>