

Ethnic boundaries and territorial borders: on the place of Lezgin irredentism in the construction of national identity in Azerbaijan

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Abstract:	<p>Lezgin irredentist movement is one of the less studied national movements in the post-Soviet space, despite affecting the strategically important Russian-Azerbaijani borderlands and the bordering process between the two post-Soviet states. This article aims to fill this gap and to examine the impact of Lezgin national movement on the development of territorial nationalism in early post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Based on the analysis of media publications in three Azerbaijani newspapers between 1992-1996, I argue that the movement contributed to consolidating of the territorial vision of Azerbaijani nation as incorporating all groups historically settled in this territory. While media coverage stressed friendship between ethnic Azerbaijanis and Lezgins, the responsibility for secessionist claims was placed on external forces, particularly Russia and Armenia. In the long term, this framing led to the securitization of ethnic minority activism as a major threat to Azerbaijani statehood.</p>

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7 construction of national identity in Azerbaijan
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13 Lezgin irredentist movement is one of the less studied national movements in the post-
14 Soviet space, despite affecting the strategically important Russian-Azerbaijani
15 borderlands and the bordering process between the two post-Soviet states. This article
16 aims to fill this gap and to examine the impact of Lezgin national movement on the
17 development of territorial nationalism in early post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Based on the
18 analysis of media publications in three Azerbaijani newspapers between 1992-1996, I
19 argue that the movement contributed to consolidating of the territorial vision of
20 Azerbaijani nation as incorporating all groups historically settled in this territory. While
21 media coverage stressed friendship between ethnic Azerbaijanis and Lezgins, the
22 responsibility for secessionist claims was placed on external forces, particularly Russia
23 and Armenia. In the long term, this framing led to the securitization of ethnic minority
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34 Keywords: boundaries, territorial nationalism, irredentism, Azerbaijan, Lezgins
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36 Word count:10,603
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40 **Introduction**
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43 The impact of Lezgin irredentism on nationalism in Azerbaijan is rarely considered in scholarly
44 discussions of the subject. The rise of nationalism in late Soviet and early post-Soviet
45 Azerbaijan is usually linked to the violent conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh,
46 which unfolded in late 1980s and remains unresolved to this day. While the impact of this
47 conflict on Azerbaijan's post-Soviet development indeed can hardly be overstated, the focus
48 on Armenia and Armenians as Azerbaijan's pre-eminent "Other" has overshadowed the role of
49 relations with other minorities in the developing of Azerbaijani nationhood. In this article, I
50 examine the perceptions of early post-Soviet Lezgin irredentism in Azerbaijan and argue that
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3 unlike the conflict with Armenians, it has contributed to the development of the territorial,
4 rather than ethnic view of Azerbaijani nation.
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8 Emerging in the late 1980s, the Lezgin national movement became most active after the
9 dissolution of the Soviet Union, when it opposed the division of its ethnic ‘homeland’ by the
10 new state border between Azerbaijan and Russia. Headed by the organization entitled ‘Sadval’
11 (Unity), the movement demanded unification of all Lezgin-populated areas into one political
12 entity. It thus put forward direct territorial claims towards Azerbaijan – the claims that were
13 perceived as an exaggerated threat to both the state and the nation in the context of the ongoing
14 violence in Karabakh. On yet another front, these claims challenged the territorial bases of
15 Azerbaijani nationhood, the bases that have been central for the construction of Soviet
16 Azerbaijani identity (Yılmaz 2013). Some scholars note that Sadval’s territorial demands,
17 along with the conflict with the Iranian-speaking Talysh minority in the South, played a role in
18 the turn from ethnic to territorial nationalism in Azerbaijan (Tabachnik 2018, Tokluoglu 2005).
19 Yet, this impact of the Lezgin national movement on the process of construction of post-Soviet
20 national identity in Azerbaijan remains little understood, as the scholarship on nationalism in
21 Azerbaijan remains strongly focused on the Karabakh conflict.
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41 Despite the growing recognition of the importance of territory for Azerbaijani nationhood
42 (Broers and Mahmudov 2020; Tabachnik 2018, 2019a, 2019b), territoriality plays relatively
43 little role in the current analyses of nationalism in Azerbaijan. In this article, I attempt to extend
44 and refine our understanding of the role of territoriality and minority relations in Azerbaijani
45 nationalism by exploring the representations of Lezgin national movement in Azerbaijani
46 media narratives. This movement is a particularly visible case from which to examine these
47 issues. At the heart of Sadval’s activities and the mobilization it initiated is the process of
48 border-making, both in its territorial and symbolic sense. The majority of Lezgins live in the
49 borderlands between Azerbaijan and Russia; furthermore, the new border between two states
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3 was the direct object of the movement. Symbolically however, Lezgins occupy a rather
4 contradictory position in Azerbaijan: they are at the same time a distinct group, with its own
5 distinctive language , and yet are culturally and religiously close and share the same
6 ‘Caucasian’ identity with Azerbaijanis. Most Lezgins in Azerbaijan are also fluent in
7 Azerbaijani and often are so well integrated that Lezgin nationalists accuse Azerbaijan of
8 assimilation (Matveeva and McCartney 1998).

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18 In order to understand the role of Lezgin national movement in the discourses on nation in
19 Azerbaijan, I examine the narratives on Lezgins as an ethnic group and on Sadval’s claims and
20 activities presented in Azerbaijani print media in 1990s. This period is especially important
21 because it was formational for the development of two competing national ideological projects
22 in Azerbaijan: ‘Turkism’ and ‘Azerbaijanism’. The analysis allows to observe the mechanisms
23 of discursive ‘interiorization and exteriorization’ (Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006), or inclusion
24 and exclusion of Lezgins, in the context of the debate on civic/territorial and ethnic nationhood
25 in Azerbaijan, expressed in the concepts of ‘Azerbaijanis’ and ‘Azerbaijani/Azeri Turks’
26 respectively. The analysis presented here suggests that while the differences between the two
27 national ideologies in Azerbaijan are exaggerated, the territory plays an important role in the
28 construction of belonging and exclusion of minorities, Lezgins in particular. The border
29 between Azerbaijan and Russia has both practical and symbolic importance in distinguishing
30 between those Lezgins who belong to Azerbaijan and those who do not.

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48 The article is structured as follows. I begin by outlining the conceptual framework of the study
49 and briefly describe the data and the method used. This is followed by background information
50 on the border between Azerbaijan and Russia, the Lezgin national movement, and national
51 identity debates in Azerbaijan. The next section presents the results of the analysis of the
52 newspaper publications and is followed by a conclusion.

Conceptual framework and method

Borders play an important role in the making of both states and nations. In their most traditional sense, borders delimit the territory of a state and indicate the extent of its sovereign power (Popescu 2011). At the same time, borders are a part of the construction of the national identity: Newman and Paasi even claimed that the two are “the sides of the same coin” (1998: 194). At the core of both border-making and identity construction lies the process of separation of Self and the Other, and categorization of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Paasi 1996). Territorial borders lend spatial dimension to this process, and can thus be described as differences that are institutionalized in space (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002). Established state borders also assume symbolic power in the national discourses, and their representations are transmitted through a variety of institutions, such as media, education, etc. (Paasi 1996).

Although the terms ‘borders’ and ‘boundaries’ are often used interchangeably, I find it useful to distinguish between the two. In doing so, I draw on Eder’s (2006) distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ borders and on Scuzzarello and Kinvall’s (2013: 92-93) understanding of borders as institutional and of boundaries as narrative phenomena. Thus, in this study, “border” refers to the newly established state border between Azerbaijan and Russia, which is fixed in legal texts and accompanied by various state-supported instruments that regulate entry and exit. On the other hand, boundaries are largely symbolic and indicate criteria of inclusion and exclusion into various social groups (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Boundaries can also be spatial, such as representations of ethnic homelands (Kaiser 2002). Furthermore, borders are also usually boundaries, as lines on the map and institutional mechanisms of regulating flows of goods and people at the same time have symbolic meaning and play a role in social construction of communities and identities. In this sense, I understand Soviet administrative boundaries

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3 between republics as primarily symbolic boundaries while recognizing their partial
4 institutionalization in determining access to social services, the extent of different language
5 policies and so on.
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11 The nation-state ideal, which has become the main normative principle of modern statehood,
12 is based on the principle of congruence between state borders and cultural boundaries, most
13 often understood as ethnic boundaries. While this ideal remains unattainable in most states, it
14 has given rise to multitude of national movements aimed at creating states for ethnic groups
15 that do not yet have statehood on the one hand, and multiple nationalizing policies aimed at
16 engendering cultural integration within the borders of existing states, known as nation building.
17 Although in post-Soviet states most nation-building was based on the idea that there is a core,
18 state-forming ethnocultural nation (Brubaker 1996), in recent years there has been a more
19 diverse set of practices based on either ethnic or territorial nationalism (Tabachnik 2019c). I
20 draw on Tabachnik (2019b, 2019c) in using the term territorial rather than civic nationalism,
21 as it better reflects the case of Azerbaijan.
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37 Transborder ethnic groups can pose significant challenges to the nation-state ideal. Their
38 members who live in two or more different states, often have different or multiple citizenship,
39 are subject to different nationalizing processes and policies, and can be variously integrated or
40 excluded from the states where they live. Often, such groups form minorities in one state, but
41 have also a 'kin-state', or an 'external homeland', where their co-ethnics form a core nation
42 (King and Melvin 2000, Liebich 2017, Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006). Transborder ethnic groups
43 can be found all over the world, but the phenomenon has become particularly politicized, and
44 at times securitized, in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where the state borders
45 that emerged after the disintegration of empires and multinational states often aspired to
46 represent ethnic distributions of populations, but generally failed to do so (Liebich 2017). As a
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3 result, many borderlands in the region are populated with such groups, who often have
4 competing national narratives and images of homeland with the core nation. In some cases, the
5 complex relations between transborder groups and the states where they live can lead to
6 irredentism – movements and policies aimed at changes of the existing borders and uniting co-
7 ethnic populations residing in different states. The dissolution of the Soviet Union gave rise to
8 several irredentist projects, most of which were not realized (Diener 2015; Sato 2008; Ter-
9 Matevosyan and Currie 2019; Zabarah 2012). In fact, contrary to initial expectations and until
10 the annexation of Crimea, irredentism in post-Soviet space gave way to various forms of
11 diaspora politics (Waterbury 2009).

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25 In contrast to much of the recent research on transborder groups, which focused on international
26 and transnational dimensions of this phenomenon (Liebich 2017, Kaiser and Nikiforova 2016),
27 in this article I focus on the national scale of identity construction and examine the impact of
28 irredentism on nationalism in the state of residence. I build on Paasi's (1996) analytical
29 approach which identified four dimensions of border-related discourses: "we/here" which
30 underlines social integration within boundaries, i.e. nation-state; "we/there", which refers to
31 social integration across boundaries, i.e. in the case of diasporas; "other/here", which indicates
32 othering processes and separation within a given territory, for example, in relations with ethnic
33 minorities, and "other/there", which refers to cultural difference beyond the borders. These will
34 be used to evaluate the extent to which Lezgins are seen as belonging to or excluded from
35 Azerbaijani nation.

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51 The study analyses the public narratives (Somers 1994) on Azerbaijani nation and Lezgi
52 national movement presented in Azerbaijani print media in early to mid-1990s. Narrativity has
53 long been recognized as a fundamental social process and an "ontological condition of social
54 life" (Somers 1994). In particular, it is a basic process of construction of identity. Somers
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(1994) identifies four features of narratives: (1) relationality of parts, (2) causal employment, and (3) location in time and (4) in space. The making of identity through narratives takes place both at the individual (ontological narratives) and collective (public narratives) levels. Public narratives, or stories “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual” (Somers 1994: 619), such as nations, are the focus of this study. Narratives on borders are also a part of this process of the construction of national identity (Newman and Paasi 1998, Paasi 1996, Scuzzarello and Kinnvall 2013, Zhurzhenko 2010).

The time frame of the analysis is from 1992 to 1996. 1992 was chosen as the year when the problem of the border dividing Lezgins came to the political agenda; 1996 is the year of the trial of the members of the Lezgin nationalist organization Sadval accused of perpetrating a terrorist attack in the Baku metro in 1994. This period allows to trace the evolution of the narratives on border and Lezgins and to map them onto the political change in Azerbaijan itself, including the transition from the nationalist government of Ebulfez Elchibey to the restoration of Heydar Aliyev, Soviet-time strongman, to power in 1993.

Three newspapers were chosen for the analysis: *Azərbaycan*, *Azadlıq* and *Zerkalo*. The selection of the newspapers aims to address the political and linguistic diversity of the narratives. Two of the newspapers belong to opposing political orientations, with *Azərbaycan* being an official newspaper of the Azerbaijani Parliament (*Milli Məclis*) and *Azadlıq* associated with the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), which became the main opposition party in June 1993¹. Technically speaking, in 1992 and early 1993, when PFA was in power, both of these newspapers were official newspapers. Yet, the differences between the two newspapers began to emerge early in 1993, when the Azerbaijani parliament, dominated by ex-communists, became less supportive of President Elchibey and instead lobbied for the return of Heydar

¹ [Azadlıq's print edition was stopped in 2016 and it is now an online media; Azərbaycan is still published both in print and online.](#)

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3 Aliyev, who was at the time exiled to his home in Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, to Baku.
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5 From June 1993, the political positions of the two newspapers were clearly defined.
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9 *Zerkalo* was a major Russian-language independent newspaper that was published
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11 between 1992-2014. In 1990s, Russian was still a major language used in the media and in
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13 public debate. At the same time, Russian speakers have been consistently criticized in
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15 Azerbaijan for their lack of patriotism and insufficient devotion to national values and aims
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17 (Garibova 2009). As an independent newspaper, *Zerkalo* was chosen to present views that
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19 would not be necessarily influenced by the political orientations of the editorial teams.
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24 The material was collected by monitoring physical copies of the newspapers held by
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26 Azerbaijani National Library (ANL). There is some asymmetry in availability of newspapers.
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28 For the covered period, all issues of *Azərbaycan* were available, often in multiple copies; most
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30 of the issues are also available electronically. In contrast, *Azadlıq* and *Zerkalo* are only
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32 available in hard copies, and some issues were missing. In addition, in 1993-1994 state
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34 censorship of media was imposed, and some of the issues are printed with gray squares in place
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36 of articles that did not pass the censorship. Furthermore, *Azərbaycan* is a daily newspaper that
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38 has had a stable publishing history. In contrast, *Zerkalo* was initially a weekly newspaper; in
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40 1994 it began to be published 2-3 times a week, and became daily in 1996. *Azadlıq*, although
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42 formally a daily newspaper, had some financial problems and had to disrupt printing on several
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44 occasions. The biggest limitation of the study is the missing issues of *Azadlıq* between March
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46 and May 1996, which includes the period when the results of the investigation of the
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48 underground attack were announced.
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54 In total, 87 articles were selected from the three newspapers based on the keywords “Lezgin”,
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56 “Sadval” and “border”. Of these, emplotted narratives were mostly found in longer pieces, such
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58 as interviews, statements by state officials, and analytical/opinion pieces. Shorter pieces such
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3 as news reports and press releases rarely contain full narratives, but many common tropes are
4 present. (Table 1 about here)
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10 Lezgin irredentism and Azerbaijani nationalism

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14 The border between Azerbaijan and Russia became international in 1991, with the dissolution
15 of the Soviet Union. The border, which follows the bed of the Samur river until its delta, used
16 to divide Dagestan, Derbent and Kuba khanates prior to the incorporation of the East Caucasus
17 in Russia in 1813 (Kolossof and Sebentsov 2015). After some administrative reshuffling, in
18 1860 the territory of the former Kuba khanate was incorporated into Baku province, while the
19 territory of Derbent khanate was merged with Dagestan Oblast (Mostashari 2006: 53-64). The
20 boundary between Baku province and Dagestan oblast has been the basis for all subsequent
21 border-making in the region. From 1918 to 1920, the boundary briefly served as an
22 international border between the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR)² and Dagestan, albeit
23 a highly transparent one. It was also the basis for the boundary- between Azerbaijan SSR and
24 RSFSR during Soviet years.
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40 The border between Azerbaijan and Dagestan has never coincided with the ethnic distribution
41 of population. Besides Lezgins, several other transborder groups live on both sides of the
42 border. Dagestani Avars, Rutuls, Tabasarans also have small minorities in Azerbaijan, while
43 the ethnic Azerbaijani minority also lives in southern Dagestan, particularly in the city of
44 Derbent, where they form a third of the city's population (reference). Yet Lezgins are the
45 largest of these groups, divided by the border almost in half. According to the last Soviet
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58 ² For the purposes of convenience, I use the conventional term "Azerbaijan Democratic Republic" used in
59 English to denote "Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyəti", although a more correct translation would be "Azerbaijan
60 People Republic". I thank anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out this inconsistency.

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3 census, 171395 Lezgins lived in Azerbaijan and 204370 in Dagestan [in 1989](#) (Goskomstat
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5 SSSR; Goskomstat Rossii).
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8 Lezgins are an ethnic group that is considered indigenous to the North-East Caucasus
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10 (Shnirelman 2018). Their language, which has 3 distinct, but mutually intelligible dialects,
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12 belongs to the Caucasian group of languages, and differs sharply from Turkic Azerbaijani.
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14 Lezgins were among the first Dagestani peoples to adopt Islam at the end of the 7th century
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16 (Ware and Kisriev 2010: 5). Currently, the majority of Lezgins identify as Sunni Muslims.
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18 They thus differ from ethnic Azerbaijanis in both linguistic and religious senses, since the
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20 majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis identify as Shia (Balci and Goyushev 2010). Lezgins also have
21
22 [a](#) tradition of multilingualism which predates Soviet period, with Azerbaijani (Turkic) language
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24 serving as a *lingua franca* in what is now Southern Dagestan until 20th century (Johanson 2006,
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26 [Tabachnik 2019c: 146](#)).
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32 In the hierarchical Soviet ethno-federalist system the status of titular nation was crucial for
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34 securing resources for cultural development. Lezgins have never held titular status, and thus
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36 their language and culture received less state support. Yet in institutionally multi-ethnic
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38 Dagestan, Lezgins occupy a middle ground between minority and titularity, being the fourth
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40 largest group in the Republic and one of the officially recognized indigenous groups (Ware and
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42 Kisriev 2010: 39). In Dagestan, Lezgins had relatively more access to education in their native
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44 language, although Russian is still more widely used in education. In Azerbaijan, Lezgin as the
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46 language of instruction in primary schools was abolished in 1938 (Goff, 2015: 29). Currently,
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48 Lezgin is taught twice a week in primary and secondary schools only in one district ([Qusar](#));
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50 in other Lezgin-populated areas some primary schools offer Lezgin language classes (Gerber
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52 2007: 31). Lezgins have also been better represented in Dagestan's complex ethnic power-
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54 sharing arrangements than in Azerbaijan's political elite (Ware and Kisriev 2010: 39-87;
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56 Kotecha 2006: 42). This has led to recurrent grievances and complains about Lezgins' rights
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3 in Azerbaijan. Lezgin national protests have been documented since 1936 (Goff 2015).
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5 Language rights have been the main issue of concern in the protests and petitions organized in
6
7 the Khrushchev period as well (Goff 2015: 32-35; Zisserman-Brodsky 2003: 126-127).
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9 Although most of the petitions appealed to the laws of the AzSSR and avoided confrontational
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11 language, the idea of an autonomous Lezgin region, Lezgistan, was voiced as early as 1936
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13 (Goff 2015: 30).
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17 The Lezgin national movement was revived with perestroika, along with many other national
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19 movements that sprung up across the Soviet Union. Sadval ('Unity'), the most vocal
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21 organization of the movement, was officially established in July 1990. Between 1992 and 1994
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23 they organized a number of mass protests in various locations along the Azerbaijani-Russian
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25 border. Yet, the numbers of the people involved in these protests and the extent of mobilization
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27 remain questionable.
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31 Organizationally, Sadval was organized in a multi-level structure. The lowest level of
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33 organization was the primary organization. In regions with three or more primary organizations
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35 they could unite in a regional organization, with its own regional committee. Congress,
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37 comprised of regional delegates and called once a year, was Sadval's main governing body. In-
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39 between congresses general management was to be carried out by the Board, elected at the
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41 Congress. (Article 2.5, Sadval Charter). There is no available data on actual numbers of
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43 members.
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49 According to Article 1.2 of Sadval's Charter, the unification of Lezgins and the 'restoration
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51 of national statehood of Lezgin people in the boundaries of a unified Lezgin state entity' was
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53 its main objective. In the Resolution of 1991 Sadval Congress, the issue is put forward even
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55 more strongly, and the term 'Lezgistan', referring to the Lezgins' homeland, is first used
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57 (Resolution 1991). In addition to its irredentist agenda, Sadval was also particularly critical of
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3 the situation of Lezgins in Azerbaijan: Azerbaijani authorities were accused of systematic
4 discrimination against Lezgins and of pursuing assimilation policies, leading to underreporting
5 of true numbers of Lezgins by as much as two thirds (Hill 1995: 86-87). For example, Nagiyev,
6 one of Sadval's founders claims that the true number of Lezgins in Azerbaijan in 1989 should
7 have been 800,000 (Nagiev 2013).
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12 Although Sadval's official documents call for restoration of statehood, at times their demands
13 were more moderate and the organization considered confederation of Lezgistan within
14 Dagestan. Some sources also claimed that in mid-1990s a cleavage emerged in Sadval
15 leadership, with radical wing, headed by General Muhiddin Kahrmanov seeking independent
16 Lezgistan, and moderate wing, headed by Ali Ashuraliyev opting for territorial autonomy
17 within Russia and Azerbaijan (Kazenin 2006; "Council for all Lezgins", Novoye Delo,
18 01.03.1996). Sadval's claims received no official support. In Dagestan they were unpopular,
19 as they held the potential of strengthening Lezgins and thus upsetting the delicate ethnic
20 balance in this multi-ethnic region. Moscow also never officially endorsed any of Sadval's
21 claims. Yet, Sadval continued to receive official registration in Russia³, which in Azerbaijan
22 was interpreted as tacit support of its irredentism ("Bomb in the tunnel", Azərbaycan,
23 27.06.1996). Only in 1996, at the 6th congress of Sadval in Makhachkala, the movement
24 officially abandoned irredentism and recognized that its claims led to the deterioration of
25 relations between Azerbaijani and Lezgin people (Matveeva and McCartney 1998: 233). From
26 the late 1990s the organization became rather dormant. The combination of rather modest
27 levels of mobilization, lack of autonomous administrative structures, cleavages within the
28 leadership and lack of external support were the reasons for movement's eventual decline,
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³ According to Russian Federal Tax Registry, Lezgin People's Movement 'Sadval' was registered between 1993 and 2011, reg. number 1060500002122.

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3 [similar to other ‘conflicts that did not happen’ in the former Soviet Union \(Ter-Matevosyan](#)
4 [and Currie 2019; Sato 2007\).](#)

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8 In Azerbaijan, [an](#) alternative Lezgin organization “Samur” emphasizing peaceful relations and
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10 friendship between Lezgins and Azerbaijanis was established in Baku in 1990 with state
11 support (Matveeva and McCartney 1998: 238; Samur.org.az). The perception of Sadval as an
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13 extremist organization was confirmed after the investigation of a terrorist attack on the Baku
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15 metro in March 1994, which killed 14 people and injured 49 people. In 1996, the Supreme
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17 Court of Azerbaijan convicted 12 Sadval activists for carrying out the attack on the Baku metro
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19 (“In the Supreme Court”, 1996). The investigation also claimed that the perpetrators
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21 cooperated with Armenian special forces in preparation of the attack. Although the Sadval
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23 leadership denied any involvement in the attack, it was afterwards declared a ‘terrorist
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25 organization’ and banned in Baku.
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32 Lezgin [irredentist](#) claims took place in the context of the heated debates on national identity in
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34 Azerbaijan itself. During the late 1980s, ethno-linguistic Turkish nationalism gained popularity
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36 in Azerbaijan, as a reaction to both Armenian territorial claims and Russian/Soviet domination.
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38 Azerbaijani Turkish nationalists define the dominant nation in Azerbaijan as ‘Turks’, often
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40 with a geographical qualifier Azerbaijani/Azeri, and emphasize kinship links with other Turkic
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42 nations, most importantly with the Turks of Turkey as the culturally and linguistically closest
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44 nation⁴. The adherents of Turkish nationalism [in Azerbaijan](#) have sought to recover the pre-
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46 Soviet [pan-Turkist](#) notions of nation [articulated by early 20th century intellectuals Ali-Bek](#)
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48 [Huseyn-Zade and Mammad Emin Rasul-Zade. These intellectuals defined the dominant nation](#)
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50 [in Azerbaijan as Caucasian or Azerbaijani Turks \(Balayev, 2017\).](#) [This strand of ethnic](#)
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58 ⁴ On the early debates about the use of ethnonyms ‘Turk’ and ‘Azerbaijani’ see Altstadt (2016: 14-15) and
59 Yilmaz (2013). For the post-Soviet rift between pro-Turkist and Azerbaijani nationalists, see Tokluoglu (2005). It
60 is important to note that in Azerbaijani language there is no distinction between ‘Turkish’ and ‘Turkic’.

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3 Turkish nationalism was endorsed and promoted [by the Popular Front movement \(PFA\) and](#)
4 [its leader,](#) President Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993). In 1992 the Popular Front government
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6 adopted a law on national language, where it was called ‘Turkish (Turkic) Language’ (*Türk*
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8 *dili*) (Garibova 2009: 16). Although supporters of PFA often point out that their [Turkism](#) does
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10 not infringe on the rights of other ethnic groups and that PFA was determined to guarantee the
11
12 protection of minority rights in Azerbaijan, Turkish nationalism is often blamed for the
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14 aggravation of inter-ethnic relations in Azerbaijan, particularly with regards to Armenians,
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16 Lezgins and Talysh (Tokluoglu 2005; Tabachnik 2018). Turkish nationalists in Azerbaijan thus
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18 distinguish clearly between ethnic and territorial dimensions of nationhood, and use
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20 ‘Azerbaijani’ (*Azərbaycanlı*) in the strictly territorial sense to refer to all citizens of Azerbaijan,
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22 and ‘Turks’ to refer to the majority ethnic group in Azerbaijan (Garibova 2009; Tokluoglu
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24 2005).

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27 In their attempt to recover pre-Soviet national identity, [Azerbaijani](#) Turkish nationalists also
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29 sought to deconstruct the Soviet Azerbaijani identity, which they consider imposed by the
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31 Soviet authorities with the aim to separate Azerbaijani Turks from their ethnic kin, particularly
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33 in Turkey (Tokluoglu 2005; Altstadt 2016: 2002). The Soviet Azerbaijani identity was based
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35 on the historical narrative which claimed that Azerbaijanis are not really Turks, but rather an
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37 amalgamation of indigenous groups who resided in historical Azerbaijan (including the parts
38
39 that are now located in the South Caucasus and in the Northern Iran). These groups are believed
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41 to have adopted the Turkic language beginning from the 11th century onwards, with the
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43 invasions of Turkic tribes such as Seljuks, Timurids, etc. (Yilmaz 2013) This view was
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45 developed in the 1920s, and it became the basis for the change of the ethnonym ‘Turk’ to
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47 ‘Azerbaijani’ in [the Republican](#) constitution of 1937 (Yilmaz 2013). This re-definition of the
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49 dominant ethnic group in Azerbaijan served to assert the indigenous status of Azerbaijanis in
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51 a context where indigenusness was perceived as a basis for territorial nationhood, e.g. among
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3 Armenians and Georgians. This explicitly territorial redefinition also opened way for Soviet
4 assimilationist policies, when many minorities were coerced into identifying themselves as
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8 ‘Azerbaijanis’ (Hadji-Zade 1997).
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11 This Soviet Azerbaijani identity which stressed territoriality served as the basis for the second
12 major national [ideological project](#) in post-independence Azerbaijan, namely ‘Azerbaijanism’.
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15 Azerbaijanism was introduced by Heydar Aliiev, Soviet-time leader of Azerbaijan, when he
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18 returned to power in 1993 (Hadji-Zade 1997). [This concept](#) was aimed at overcoming “the
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20 chauvinistic nationalism and ethnic separatism” of the early 1990s and offered an integrative
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23 alternative based on common adherence to statehood, territory, and shared traditions acquired
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26 through centuries of cohabitation in the same territory (Mehdiyev 2003, 93). In the explanation
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29 provided by Ramiz Mehdiyev, chief ideologue of Aliyev’s regime, Azerbaijanism is in essence
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32 a neo-conservative [ideological project](#) which underlines the importance of the state as the final
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35 integrative force of the nation. While adherents of Azerbaijanism do not deny kinship with
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38 other Turks, they emphasize the inclusiveness of Azerbaijanis and openness to influences from
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41 other cultures, e.g. Persian and Russian (Tokluoglu 2005). The adoption of this [framework as](#)
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44 [state](#) ideology has led to important policy implications, such as the re-naming of the state
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47 language as ‘Azerbaijani’ by President Heydar Aliyev [in 1995](#) and the removal of ethnicity
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50 (nationality) from identity documents (Garibova 2009, Tabachnik 2018).
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55 Azerbaijanism and the policy changes that it generated aimed to encourage the development of
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58 civic/[territorial](#) nationalism, but the results of these policies have been ambiguous. Some
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61 research shows that the efforts to create overarching Azerbaijani national identity have been
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64 successful, particularly among the younger generation (Luscombe and Kazdal 2014; Siroky
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66
67 and Mahmudlu 2016). However, the process is ridden with many problems and controversies.
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70 Despite the proclamation of multi-culturalism and national unity, the question of what, or
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72
73 rather, who constitutes the territorial Azerbaijani nation lacks clarity. It appears that citizenship

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3 and membership in the nation do not completely coincide (Brubaker 2010). Secondary school
4 textbooks on history of Azerbaijan, for example, mostly teach the history of Muslim Turks
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6 (Huseynova 2012). Huseynova (2012: 131) further shows that in practice the proclaimed unity
7
8 of the Azerbaijani people means adopting the ‘tribal’ customs of Oghuz Turks by other ethnic
9
10 groups. The deemphasizing of ethnic difference, even if it was intended to serve the aims of
11
12 integrating the population, in practice turned into blurring of the boundaries between ethnic
13
14 and territorial understandings of nation. With no official means to prove one’s ethnic identity,
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16 the demands for native language education may be undermined. One of the consequences of
17
18 this policy has been the shrinking of state support for minority languages (Ulasiuk 2013: 32).
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24 Given the contested nature of terms denoting nation and ethnicity in Azerbaijan, a clarification
25 is in order. In this article, I use the term ‘Azerbaijani’ rather than ‘Azeri’ or ‘Turk’. Because
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27 of the existing blurring between territorial and ethnic understandings of the term, for the sake
28
29 of clarity, I specify whether I refer to the territorial or ethnic sense.
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34 Analysis

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37 In the coverage of the Lezgin problems and the Azerbaijani-Russian border, three main themes
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39 can be identified: ethnic and national boundaries between Azerbaijanis and Lezgins, the new
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41 state border, and the external threats impacting the border region. All of these themes are
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43 already present at the beginning of the period under analysis, in 1992. Despite some changes,
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45 all three remain relevant until 1996, and converge in the coverage of the 1994 explosion,
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47 particularly after Lezgin involvement in it was uncovered in 1996.
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53 *Ethnic and national boundaries*

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56 The boundary drawn between Lezgins and ethnic Azerbaijanis in the newspaper publications
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58 is relatively clear and unproblematic. It is based on the primordial understanding of ethnicity,
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3 where Lezgins are perceived and represented as a distinctive group based on their origin and
4 language. It is in fact more problematic to define Azerbaijanis than Lezgins: in 1992-1993
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6 journalists of both *Azərbaycan* and *Azadlıq* use the term ‘Azerbaijani Turks’ (*Azərbaycan*
7
8 *Türkləri*) to distinguish ethnic Azerbaijanis; the territorial nation is usually expressed with the
9
10 term ‘Azerbaijani people’ (*Azərbaycan xalqı*). These terms are also used by Lezgin
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12 intellectuals residing in Baku, but not by local Lezgin population in the border area. In the
13
14 border areas, the term ‘Azerbaijani’ retains ethnic connotations. Thus, a local Lezgin elder in
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16 Qusar district complained that Lezgins and members of other minorities who gave their lives
17
18 for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity in the Karabakh war, are given a title of ‘Azerbaijani
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20 national hero’ rather than ‘People’s hero’, thus implying that the title strips them of their own
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22 national identity (“How should the Lezgin card be played”, *Azərbaycan*, 5.5.1993).
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29 While Lezgins’ ethnic distinctiveness is recognized, they are seen as a part of ‘Azerbaijani
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31 people’, both in *Azərbaycan* and *Azadlıq*. As the author of one of the articles put it, ‘the Lezgin
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33 world is a part of the Azerbaijani world’ (“Our Lezgins, who are you?” *Azadlıq*, 1.5.1993).
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35 Along with Lezgins, two other minority groups were named recurrently as part of the
36
37 ‘Azerbaijani people’: Kurds and Talysh (“Azerbaijan: Turkification, Kurdization...” *Azadlıq*,
38
39 30.1.1993; “How should the Lezgin card be played”, *Azərbaycan* 5.5.1993). In one case,
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41 Tabasaran is also included in this listing (“The North Gate,” *Azadlıq*, 2.3.1993). The inclusion
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43 of these particular groups in the Azerbaijani people, and exclusion of other, even larger
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45 minorities (I.e. Russians, Georgians, and most conspicuously, Armenians) indicates important
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47 criteria for inclusion into the territorial nation.
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53 First, religion appears to be of greater importance for the construction of territorial nationhood
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55 in Azerbaijan than is usually accorded. Although many contemporary scholars underline the
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57 secular character of nationalism in Azerbaijan (Cornell et al. 2016; Motika 2009, Ergun and
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59 Citak 2019), Muslim identity appears to be an important criterion for inclusion into the nation.
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3 All of the groups listed as parts of ‘Azerbaijani people’ are traditionally Muslim. Common
4 religion is often evoked as an important unifying factor between ethnic Azerbaijanis and
5 Lezgins. In a letter addressed to the Lezgin people, the Democratic Congress of Azerbaijan, an
6 umbrella organization consisting of several parties that were formed after the end of
7 Communist Party monopoly, states “Even if we come from different ethnic roots, we are united
8 by a thousand of years of common culture. We have one God, one Prophet, one religion.”
9 (“Democratic Congress,” *Azadlıq* 28.04.1993) Similarly, in an open letter to *Azərbaycan*
10 newspaper, an ethnic Lezgin professor of chemistry from Baku State University underlines the
11 ties of “blood, religion and heart” (*qanı bir, dini bir, canı bir*) between Lezgins and ethnic
12 Azerbaijanis (“Lezgin card,” *Azərbaycan*, 22.04.1993).

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27 Historical rootedness, rather than current residence in the territory of Azerbaijan, is the second
28 criteria of belonging to the Azerbaijani nation. As an article in *Azərbaycan* (5.5.1993) makes
29 clear, the Azerbaijani people includes all those ethnic groups who ‘historically lived on these
30 lands and consider them their homeland’ . Indeed, all of the included minorities are indigenous.
31 Russians, for example, who are not included in the list despite being the largest minority in
32 1989, are both non-Muslim and recently settled. Similar logic is likely applied to Armenians,
33 the second largest minority in 1989, whose claims to indigenoussness in the territory of
34 Azerbaijan are strongly denied (Tokluoglu 2011). At the same time, included minorities do not
35 have an ‘external homeland’, unlike Russians, Georgians, Armenians and even Jews, including
36 the tiny Mountainous Jews community indigenous to northern Azerbaijan. Belonging to the
37 Azerbaijani nation is therefore seen as exclusive and not compatible with belonging to some
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3 other nation⁵. Representatives of other minorities may be included in the ‘Azerbaijani people’
4 in the constitutional sense, as individuals, but not as sub-groups within the larger nation.

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8 A final criterion for belonging is the participation in the Karabakh war. Fighting in Azerbaijani
9 army is seen as evidence of loyalty to the nation and the state; this trope can be found in various
10 texts, including analytical articles and interviews, expressed by both ethnic Azerbaijanis and
11 Lezgins (“Those waiting for the "Caucasus pot" to boil...” *Azərbaycan*, 31.10.1992; “How
12 should the Lezgin card be played” *Azərbaycan*, 5.5.1993). Consequently, draft evasion by
13 Lezgins is either denied as foreign-instigated lies (“Those waiting for the "Caucasus pot" to
14 boil...” *Azərbaycan*, 31.10.1992) or interpreted as betrayal (“Azerbaijan: "turkification,
15 kurdization,...” *Azadlıq*, 30.1.1993)

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27 These findings suggest important correctives to the generally accepted view of territorial
28 nationalism in Azerbaijan. While territory is clearly of utmost importance, residence per se
29 does not guarantee membership in the nation, to borrow Brubaker’s (2010) term. A degree of
30 cultural proximity, with Islam serving as its proxy, and pre-modern history of co-habitation in
31 the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, are other important factors. The two criteria of
32 inclusion which I identified (cultural proximity based on religion and a history of co-habitation
33 which pre-dates Russian conquest) suggest an implicit view of the nation as basically a pre-
34 modern formation. In this, it aligns with the Soviet conceptualization of nation.

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46 Overall, the narratives on Lezgin-Azerbaijani relations emphasize inclusiveness, friendship
47 and strong neighborhood ties. Most publications deny the existence of problems that are
48 specific to Lezgins (“Lezgins’ rights are not violated”, *Zerkalo* 10.10.1992). An article tellingly
49 entitled “There is no Lezgin problem in Khachmaz, only problems of Lezgins” claims that

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⁵ Similar observations have been made by Goff (2015), who notes that Soviet Azerbaijani authorities applied
59 more assimilationist language policies to the Muslim Georgian minority (Ingilo), while Christian Georgians were
60 to some extent protected by having Georgia as a ‘patron’.

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3 Lezgins have problems that “are common to the whole country” (*Azərbaycan*, 25.2.1993). In a
4 similar vein, an article in *Azadlıq* claims that it is not Lezgins per se, but rather individuals who
5 have problems, just like ‘Turks, Tabasarans, Kurds, etc.’ (“The North Gate” *Azadlıq* 2.3.1993).
6 In a few articles, some problems related to the exercise of cultural rights are recognized, such
7 as insufficiency of instruction in Lezgin language in schools, lack of textbooks (“On the
8 teaching of minority languages in Azerbaijan.” *Azərbaycan*, 31.10.1992). Publications of the
9 first period are adamant that these problems are the legacy of Soviet ‘imperialism’, and that the
10 democratic government will eventually resolve them (“Those waiting for the “Caucasus pot”
11 to boil...” *Azərbaycan*, 31.10.1992 “How come Lezgis have no idea that Samur is boiling?”
12 *Azərbaycan* 11.2.1993; “Azerbaijan: “turkification, kurdization,...”. *Azadlıq*, 30.1.1993). In
13 several publications in 1992, President Elchibey’s Decree on National minorities (adopted in
14 1992) is seen as the first step for resolving these problems and creating conditions for the
15 development of minority cultures (“In the name of the unity...” *Azərbaycan* 25.9.1992;
16 “‘Samur’ members resist... “ *Azərbaycan*, 23.01.1993, “Azerbaijan: “turkification,
17 kurdization,...”. *Azadlıq*, 30.1.1993). Yet, in 1993 in one publication it is recognized that the
18 Decree only exists on paper and is not implemented in practice (“How should the Lezgin card
19 be played”, *Azərbaycan* 5.5.1993).

State border

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46 In 1992-1993 the new state border, while still open, nevertheless plays an important symbolic
47 role in determining belonging and exclusion. Many publications distinguish between Lezgins
48 living in Azerbaijan and outside of it. It is thus ‘Azerbaijani Lezgins’, often described as “our
49 Lezgins” (“Our Lezgins, who are you?” *Azadlıq*, 1.5.1993) and “brothers” (“Those waiting for
50 the “Caucasus pot” to boil...” *Azərbaycan*, 31.10.1992), who are seen as part of the territorial
51 Azerbaijani nation. From their side, Lezgin authors and interviewees, both in Baku and in the
52 border areas, describe Azerbaijan as their ‘homeland’ (*Vətən*), (“‘Samur’ members resist... “
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3 *Azərbaycan*, 23.01.1993; “Our Lezgins, who are you?” *Azadlıq*, 1.5.1993). While “our
4 Lezgins” are “brothers”, the attitudes towards Dagestani Lezgins are more ambivalent. In some
5 articles, they are also considered ‘friends’ and ‘neighbors’ (but not brothers), along with other
6 Dagestanis (Elçibəy, “To the first summit of Dagestan's Azerbaijanis” *Azərbaycan*, 30.10.92).
7 But many publications underline that the territorial claims, protest activities, and the
8 individuals who organize them often referred to as “provocateurs” (“An attempt of
9 destabilization” *Azərbaycan* 23.03.1993) come from the other side of the border ; “The North
10 Wind” *Azadlıq* 20.6.92; “Who will play the Lezgin Card?” *Azadlıq*, 8.4.93; “Lezgins’ rights
11 will be protected” *Zerkalo* 20.6.1992; “Lezgins protesting in front of Russian Embassy”
12 *Azərbaycan* 8.01.1994). In some articles it is even claimed that the participants in the protests
13 on Azerbaijani side are brought over by buses across the still open and unguarded border (“The
14 North Wind” *Azadlıq* 20.06.1992).

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This depiction of state border is in line with Paasi’s (1996) discourse of integration, where Lezgins on Azerbaijani side of the border are part of ‘We/here’. In contrast, Lezgins from Dagestan belong to ‘Other/There’. It is also an example of the classical opposition between the outside as the space of danger and chaos and inside as the space of peace and order (Agnew 1994: 69; Megoran 2005). But in this case, the emergence of this representation so soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has interesting implications for our understanding of the role of Soviet interrepublican boundaries. Contrary to the common understanding that Soviet boundaries were just formal or “virtual” lines on maps (Zhurzhenko 2010: 137) the narrative juxtaposition of Lezgins in Azerbaijan and Dagestan suggests that these ‘lines’ played a more important role in the symbolic delineation and territorializing of at least some Soviet nations than is usually recognized. Lezgin populations from the two sides of the border have been subject to different nationalizing policies, and were engaged in different ways in the processes of construction of nations in Soviet Azerbaijan and Dagestan. These processes were taking

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3 place alongside continuing kinship relations and communication across the fully open and
4 transparent boundary.

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8 In this respect, it is interesting to note that it is not Azerbaijan that seeks strengthening of the
9 border, but Russia. From the point of view of traditional state security, where border marks the
10 extent of sovereign control, it would be logical to expect the government of a newly established
11 state to seek strengthening its control over its territory. This is especially so in a situation when
12 the bordering state (Russia) is seen a source of threats, as I detail below . Yet, in practice, it
13 was Russia, not Azerbaijan, which sought strengthening of the border. For Azerbaijan, the
14 economic benefits of maintaining open border and reducing the risks of unrest among Lezgins
15 were at the time more pressing concerns, trumping sovereign control (“Those waiting for the
16 "Caucasus pot" to boil..."Azərbaycan, 31.10.1992; “How should the Lezgin card be played.”
17 Azərbaycan, 5.5.1993; “Lezgistan issue is raised again” Zerkalo, 10.12.1992). The rights of
18 transborder national minority to cross the border freely was even stipulated in Presidential
19 Decree on national minorities (1992, article 4). At the same time, security concerns cited by
20 the Russian side, such as the entry of third country nationals to Russia via the Azerbaijani-
21 Iranian border, are dismissed as exaggerated (“Our borders” Azərbaycan, 21.5.1993).

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41 After 1993 the border and Lezgin issues gradually become decoupled. In 1994, the Lezgin issue
42 disappears from the agenda, with the decline of protest activities organized by Sadval. At the
43 same time, the border with Russia remains a problematic issue, especially when it becomes
44 closed by Russia in connection with the conflict in Chechnya in December 1994 (Hill 1995:
45 76; Matveeva and McCartney 1998: 223). But it is now more of an inter-governmental issue
46 between Azerbaijan and Russia, and no longer the problem of nationhood challenged by
47 irredentism. For example, the extensive coverage of the negotiations between President Heydar
48 Aliyev and the administration of the Russian Federal Border Service in Azərbaycan newspaper
49 (26.1.1996 and 15.2.1996) contains no references to Lezgin issues whatsoever, but plenty of
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3 references to the Chechen conflict and Russian accusations of Azerbaijan's presumed
4 cooperation with Chechen rebels. Still, the hardening of the border regime, and the closure of
5 the border in December 1994 continue to be seen as Russia's instrument of political pressure
6 on Azerbaijan in oppositional *Azadlıq* and independent *Zerkalo* ("Closing of the border..."
7 *Azadlıq* 27.12.1994, "The threat from the South or to the South?" *Zerkalo* 20.1.1996). The issue
8 of the border dividing an ethnic group is raised only once, referring not to Lezgins but ethnic
9 Azerbaijanis. In an article with a telling title 'The Samur became worse than the Araxes', thus
10 referring to the division of Southern and Northern Azerbaijan in 1828, the author laments the
11 difficulties that ethnic Azerbaijanis (called in the article 'Azerbaijani Turks') face in trying to
12 communicate with their kin in Derbent and claims that these difficulties are the result of
13 intentional actions of unnamed forces (*Azadlıq* 09.01.1996)

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17 Beyond the familiar trope of Russia's attempt to maintain its general influence in Azerbaijan,
18 *Azadlıq* mentions the concrete issue of the choice of the Main Export Pipeline Route for
19 carrying Azerbaijan's oil to the world market ("Closing of the border..." *Azadlıq* 27.12.1994).
20 Russia lobbied the so-called "Northern route" through Dagestan and Chechnya, while Western
21 governments supported the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route which was finally chosen in 1999 (Hill
22 2004). The official *Azərbaycan* is much more cautious in its commentary on relations with
23 Russia. This indicates a beginning divergence of governmental and oppositional narratives on
24 Russia: while the government began to pursue a more balanced foreign policy that considered
25 Russia's regional interests, the opposition remained critical and distrustful of Russia's
26 intentions towards Azerbaijan

External threat

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32 The portrayal of relations between Lezgins and Azerbaijanis as friendly and harmonious is in
33 obvious contradiction with the protests organized by Sadval and rising tensions in the
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3 borderlands. This contradiction is resolved in the media by projecting responsibility for the
4 protest activity outside of the territory of Azerbaijan. Such projection comes in two main forms:
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6 the attribution of responsibility to Lezgins from Dagestan, discussed above, and plotting by
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8 foreign powers, in this case Russia and Armenia. This narrative can be found in the statements
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10 by various officials, analytical essays and op-eds, as well as opinions of a few interviewed
11
12 locals. The perceived Russian involvement comes in two forms. First, the very idea of
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14 strengthening border control is often presented as Russia's instrument of pressure on
15
16 Azerbaijan, particularly in the context when Azerbaijan refused to join the CIS and pursued an
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18 independent foreign policy. Second, the specific demands of the Lezgin movement and
19
20 Sadval's protests are presented as instigated by external forces, in particular some groups in
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22 Russia and Armenia. These groups have specific aims of 'destabilizing' Azerbaijan and
23
24 creating 'cleavage and conflicts between Azerbaijani Turks and minorities who live in
25
26 Azerbaijan" ("Hidayat Orujev: 'There are many unclear issues ...'" *Azərbaycan* 10.10.92).
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28 According to this narrative, Russia's main objective in creating these conflicts is 'to maintain
29
30 its influence in the republics that were gaining independence" ("Those waiting for the
31
32 "Caucasus pot" to boil..." *Azərbaycan*, 31.10.1992). The external plotting, albeit without a
33
34 clear attribution of blame, is implied even in a text by President Elçibəy himself. In a
35
36 congratulatory letter to the first summit of Dagestan's Azerbaijanis, President Elçibəy
37
38 expressed 'hope that the malevolent intentions of those who try to create confusion and conflict
39
40 will not stand in the way of the wisdom of a thousand years of next-door neighborhood" ("To
41
42 the first summit of Dagestan's Azerbaijanis" *Azərbaycan*, 30.10.92)

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52 The media publications present Armenia and "the Armenian lobby" in Russia as another party
53
54 interested in destabilizing ethnic relations in Azerbaijan ("Hidayat Orujev: 'There are many
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56 unclear issues ...'" *Azərbaycan* 10.10.92). "The Armenian lobby" includes ethnic Armenians
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58 within Russian political elite and various Armenian sympathizers who have an influence on
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3 political decision making. A prominent example of the former is Andranik Migranyan, a
4 political scientist and a former advisor to Boris Yeltsin, who is cited as the author of the
5 proposal to create a two-chamber parliament in Azerbaijan – a measure which is seen as a step
6 towards the federalization and eventual disintegration of the Azerbaijani state (“SOS! The
7 danger of federal state” *Azadlıq* 5.5.1993). Yet the most often mentioned representative of the
8 Armenian lobby is Galina Starovoytova (1946-1998), a Russian ethnographer and an active
9 champion of the Armenian cause in Karabakh (“Lezgins’ rights will be protected” *Zerkalo*
10 20.6.1992). An article in *Azərbaycan* (“Those waiting for the "Caucasus pot" to boil”,
11 31.10.1992) suggests that it was upon her advice that President Yeltsin proposed to harden the
12 border, after she held a meeting with Sadval leadership.

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27 The narratives on foreign masterminding of the Lezgin issues in Azerbaijan are an example of
28 conspiracy theorizing widely spread in the former Soviet Union. Conspiracy theorizing does
29 not necessarily imply that there is no truth behind such scenarios – for example, it is likely that
30 Russia was indeed interested in destabilizing Azerbaijan prior to return of Heydar Aliyev to
31 power in 1993. Yet, more important for the purposes of the current study is the idea that
32 conspiracy theories indicate loss of agency (Orthmann and Heathershaw 2012). In Azerbaijan
33 and other countries of the post-Soviet periphery, the narratives of Russian masterminding
34 reflect the structural position of subordination and weakness vis-à-vis the former Union center
35 (Heathershaw 2012, Radnitz 2019). As the narratives presented here demonstrate, in
36 Azerbaijan Russia is perceived as “the omnipotent external Other” which pulls all the strings
37 (Orthmann and Heathershaw 2012, 560). Yet in this case, it is not only the Azerbaijani state
38 and nation that are presented as lacking in agency, but also Lezgins. At best, Lezgins are
39 presented as potential victims of this foreign conspiracy; at worst, they are seen as the
40 instruments in this Russian/Armenian game against Azerbaijan.

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59 *1994 underground attack, Sadval, and the “Armenian hand”*
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When the explosion in the Baku underground took place on March 23, 1994, initially the media did not link it to the Lezgin issue or Sadval. Although it was generally accepted that the explosion was caused by a terrorist attack, it was usually linked to Armenian terrorism⁶ and the Karabakh conflict. In terms of attribution of blame, however, the coverage in two main newspapers, *Azərbaycan* and *Azadlıq*, diverged somewhat. *Azərbaycan* published only one analytical article in 1994 indirectly linking the attack to the ongoing war which avoided speculations on attribution of blame (“The tragedy at the 20 January station or how to prevent terrorist attacks,” *Azərbaycan* 23.3.1994). In contrast, *Azadlıq* published two analytical pieces, as well as a statement from the Popular Front Party, immediately after the attack. All these publications claim that the attack was perpetrated by foreign forces (“The latest terror attack”; “Another terrorist attack...”; “Popular Front Address...”, *Azadlıq*, 24.03.1994). One article provides an extensive account of the history of Armenian terrorism against Turkey and Azerbaijan and places the explosion of March 1994 in this context. These themes are repeated in several articles published after another explosion in the underground, on 7 July 1994, which was officially recognized as caused by technical problems. One of the articles (“Cheap deaths in the underground, useless investigations outside”, *Azadlıq*, 5.7.1994) expands the circle of ‘foreign forces’ involved in this terrorist activities also to include Iran.

Lezgin issues re-emerge in the discussions of national security only after the release of the results of the investigation of the March 1994 explosion, which began in late March 1996.⁷ The first reports from the Supreme Court hearings mentioned ‘Sadval activists’ and the involvement

⁶ This refers to transnational terrorist campaign involving attacks on Turkish diplomats and some civilians by several Armenian terrorist organizations such as Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) and the Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA) (Gunter 2007). The aim of this campaign was to draw international attention to the killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in 1915. Armenian terrorism is believed to have ended by mid 1980s; yet in Azerbaijan, the Karabakh violence is often seen as part of the continuing Armenian terrorism (see, for example, “The Crimes of Armenian terrorist and bandit organizations, from 19th to 21st century”, Baku, Elm, 2002, available online at: <http://elibrary.bsu.az/yenii/ebookspdf/qt6NULbx.pdf>)

⁷ Issues of *Azadlıq* published between 05.03.1996 and 14.05.1996 are not available

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3 of Armenian special forces (“In the Supreme Court”, Zerkalo, 30.3.1996, 13.4.1996; “The
4 Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan. Press release”, *Azərbaycan*, 1.04.1996).
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6 Analytical articles that were published after the announcement of the verdict on 08.05.1996
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8 further stressed the involvement of Armenian special forces in the recruitment and training of
9
10 the perpetrators.

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15 At about the same time that the results of the investigation became publicized, *Azərbaycan*
16 published two articles discussing relations with Lezgins. They reiterate familiar tropes from
17 the earlier period about the ‘unbreakable ties of friendship, ... tested by hundreds of years’ (“A
18 coward cannot become a close friend,” *Azərbaycan* 24.4.1996) and about Azerbaijan being the
19 homeland of Lezgins (“A coward cannot become a close friend,” *Azərbaycan* 24.4.1996,
20 “Summit of Samur Lezgi national center” *Azərbaycan* 22.5.1996). In a meeting with Lezgin
21 leaders, President Heydar Aliyev also mentions Lezgin heroes who fought against Armenian
22 aggression (“A coward cannot become a close friend,” *Azərbaycan* 24.4.1996). It is interesting
23 to note that two facts from the investigation materials undermine the dominant narratives of
24 internal unity and external threat. First, all the perpetrators were Azerbaijani citizens rather
25 than outsiders from Dagestan. Second, one of the perpetrators was recruited by Armenian
26 special forces while serving in the Azerbaijani army. However, none of these facts is elaborated
27 upon in the articles examined in this study.

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46 The release of the results of the investigation of 1994 attack re-activate two narratives from the
47 1992-1993 period, namely on relations with Lezgins and external threat. All three newspapers
48 make very clear that they separate Sadval terrorism from the Lezgin people. Narratives on
49 ethnic boundaries retain the dual emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness of Lezgins and their
50 inclusion into territorial Azerbaijani nation. The narrative of external threat is reconfirmed in
51 the framing of the attack as an incident of Armenian, rather than Lezgin terrorism. Once again,
52 Sadval is presented as a puppet organization coordinated by the enemies of Azerbaijan and not
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3 [a genuine Lezgin movement. However, in contrast with earlier representations of Sadval, the](#)
4 [role of Russia as a mastermind behind the movement is not as prominent. Although Russia's](#)
5 [tacit support in the form of registration is still recognized \(Bomb in the tunnel, Azerbaijan\),](#)
6 [Armenia rather than Russia is the culprit behind the attack. At the same time, terrorism becomes](#)
7 [strongly linked to secessionism and irredentism . This linkage has important and long-lasting](#)
8 [consequences, as it contributes to securitization not only of secessionism, but also of any ethnic](#)
9 [activism beyond the state sponsored ethnic organizations \(“Editor-in-Chief...” 1news.az, 2012;](#)
10 [Kotecha 2006\). In the long run, the link between secessionism and terrorism contributed also](#)
11 [to the securitization of Islam particularly in the Sunni regions along the Russian-Azerbaijani](#)
12 [border \(Wilhelmsen 2009\). Thus, a discursive connection linking Lezgins, Islamists and](#)
13 [terrorists was created.](#)

34 35 **Conclusion**

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38 This article examined the impact of Lezgin [irredentism on](#) the re-territorialization of state and
39 nation in Azerbaijan [in the context of post-Soviet border-making between Azerbaijan and](#)
40 [Russia](#). Similar to the Karabakh conflict, with which the movement coincided in time, it
41 challenged the territorial integrity of the young post-Soviet Azerbaijani state and highlighted
42 the inter-ethnic tensions between the titular majority and non-titular minority groups. But in
43 contrast to the Karabakh conflict, which gave rise to ethnic nationalism and the revival of
44 Turkism, the challenge to the state border presented by the Lezgin national movement
45 contributed to the strengthening of the alternative, territorial vision of the Azerbaijani nation.
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47 Although far from the all-inclusive civic-territorial ideal spelled out in the Constitution, this
48 vision includes minorities which are recognized as indigenous, such as Lezgins. This
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3 inclusiveness however comes at a price of dividing the Lezgin people, who are seen as either
4 part of ‘us’ or part of ‘them’, depending on the side of the border on which they find themselves.
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6 While such a vision may be at odds with Lezgins’ own views of their ethnic kin across the
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8 border, it points to the importance of the state border in nation-building, as both a practical and
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10 symbolic boundary of belonging and exclusion.
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15 The research also showed that there is little difference in the attitudes towards Lezgin minority
16 between the proponents of Turkism and Azerbaijanism. [Under both approaches Lezgins are](#)
17 [seen as a part of Azerbaijani territorial nation, or Azerbaijani people.](#) Early responses (I.e.
18 before 1994) were virtually indistinguishable, and the publications of both [Azərbaycan](#) and
19 [Azadlıq](#) emphasized the rights of indigenous minorities and harmonious relations between
20 Lezgins and ethnic Azerbaijanis. More differences can be seen in the approaches [to titular](#)
21 [majority, which Turkists distinguish as state-forming nation. There are also differences in](#)
22 [approaches](#) towards ethnic kin outside of Azerbaijan, such as ethnic Azerbaijanis in Dagestan.
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24 The publications on Lezgins presented here show that the public master narratives of ‘Turkism’
25 and ‘Azerbaijanism’ converge in their [approach to territoriality](#) as [the](#) pillar of Azerbaijan’s
26 nationhood.
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41 The analysis of the publications on the Lezgin issue also suggests that despite the importance
42 of territorial integrity and the securitization of secessionism, in the early post-Soviet period
43 Lezgins did not constitute a significant ‘Other’ against which the Azerbaijani nation defines
44 itself. Rather, the threat is perceived to emanate from the usual suspects – Armenia and
45 Armenians, including those in diaspora, and Russia. The role of Armenia was made especially
46 visible in the coverage of the attack on the Baku underground in 1996. Yet the invisible, but
47 powerful hand of Russia had been a persistent trope in the coverage of Azerbaijani-Lezgin
48 relations. This points to Russia’s important role of ‘Other’ for Azerbaijani nation-building, a
49 role that has been obscured by the trauma of the Karabakh conflict on the one hand and the
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official discourses of Aliyevs' regime which emphasize historical partnership with Russia. Yet it is important to differentiate between narratives presented by different groups, both in the elite and the society at large. This study helps to trace the earlier sources of this rift, as after 1994 the Russian conspiracy narratives dominated oppositional *Azadlıq* but disappeared from the official *Azərbaycan*. Interestingly, Russian conspiracy narratives were almost absent from the Russian-language *Zerkalo*. While the material collected from *Zerkalo* for this study is limited, the low number of such narratives may suggest lesser relevance of narratives on Russian conspiracy for the Russian-speaking audience.

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Table 1.

Newspaper	News reports/ press releases	Interviews	official statements	analytical/ opinion	Total No. of articles
<i>Azadlıq</i>	15	2	3	12	32
<i>Azərbaycan</i>	16	4	4	10	34
Zerkalo	17	0	0	4	21
Total:	48	6	7	26	87

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